

Civilians massacred in central Syria

AGENCIES

Syrian activists said yesterday that pro-government gunmen have killed at least a dozen people - including children - in the latest violence in the embattled central city of Homs.

State media in Damascus confirmed the deaths but blamed "armed terrorists."

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 12 people were killed Sunday night while the Local Coordination Committees said 45 were "murdered." Both groups said children were among the dead, reports AP.

UN-Arab League peace envoy on Syria, Kofi Annan, held talks with top Qatari officials yesterday after a weekend trip to Damascus where he urged leaders to end the bloodshed there, the official Qatari news agency reported.

Annan, who arrived in Doha on Sunday, met with the emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani to "review the developments in Syria," according to a state-

ment released by the QNA news agency.

He also held talks with foreign minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani, during which "a way out of the current crisis" was discussed, the statement said.

Homs has been one of the hardest hit cities in violence since an uprising against President Bashar Assad's regime began in March last year. Several Homs neighbourhoods, including Karm el-Zeytoun where Sunday's deaths occurred, were controlled by rebels and retaken by government forces earlier this month.

Pictures posted online by activists showed the bodies of five children who were disfigured after being apparently hit with sharp objects. At least six dead adults were covered with sheets.

The LCC and the Observatory said the attack was carried out by gunmen known as "shabiha" who have been playing a major role in crushing the year-old uprising.

The Observatory called on the United Nations to form an independ-

ent investigative committee to find "those committing massacres and have them face justice."

Syria's state-run media quoted an unnamed official as saying that armed groups in some area in Homs are kidnapping people, then killing and disfiguring them in order to bring international condemnation to the regime.

Assad's regime blames the uprising on armed groups and terrorists acting out a foreign conspiracy.

The bloody conflict in Syria is likely to dominate public and private talks yesterday when key ministers meet at the United Nations on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and challenges from the Arab Spring.

US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will hold bilateral talks as ministers from the 15 council nations attend an open Security Council meeting to look ahead after last year's Arab uprisings.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian man is restrained as he grieves during the funeral of Hamada Suleiman Abu Mutlaq, 24-year-old, a member of the Islamic Jihad's armed wing, the Al-Quds Brigades, in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Mutlaq and fellow militant Raafat Abu Eid were both killed in one of eight overnight Israeli air strikes bringing the death toll of Palestinians to 21 as the bloodshed entered its fourth day.

Iraq robbery, attacks kill 14

AP, Baghdad

Attacks against al-Qaeda's favourite targets in Iraq killed 14 people yesterday as insurgents struck security forces, a government office and jewellery stores, demonstrating a continued threat from armed groups as the country prepares to host a meeting of the Arab world's top leaders.

Security officials expect al-Qaeda to ramp up violence over the next few weeks as Baghdad prepares to host the annual Arab League summit at the end of the month.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for yesterday's strikes, and numerous armed groups in Iraq have mixed attacks on political targets with money-making criminal operations. But al-Qaeda in Iraq for years has been believed to fund itself in part with cash and gold stolen from jewellery stores.

Obama poll rating drops in boost for Republican rivals

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama's approval rating has plunged below 50 percent and he would be beaten by Republican frontrunner Mitt Romney if November's US election were held today, a poll showed yesterday.

The survey, by ABC News and The Washington Post, indicated that only 46 percent of Americans now approved of the way Obama is handling his job and 50 percent disapproved as he took a hit from rising gas prices.

The situation was a reversal from early February when 50 percent approved of the president's performance and 46 percent disapproved.

The survey was released as the battleground for the Republican presidential nomination moved to the deep South for Tuesday's primaries in Alabama and Mississippi.

If the presidential election were held



Barack Obama

today, the poll found that Romney would beat Obama 49 percent to 47 percent.

The president was barely ahead of former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum, who is running second in the Republican pack -- 49 percent to 46 percent.

Previously, Obama held significant advantages over both.

According to the survey, the drop was attributed to soaring gas prices threatening to crimp America's slow recovery from a recession.

The American Automobile Association (AAA) predicts gasoline prices across the United States could average \$4.25 a gallon by May, up from over \$3.60 today.

Between 1998 and 2004, prices ranged from \$1 to \$2.

Prices vary wildly between regions, however, and last week, gasbuddy.com, a website that tracks prices in all 50 states, reported \$5.09 a gallon at one Mobil and two Chevron stations in greater Los Angeles.

UK govt sued for helping drone strikes

AP, London

A human rights group and a law firm took legal action yesterday against the British government, accusing it of passing on intelligence to assist US covert drone attacks in Pakistan.

The London-based charity Reprieve and the law firm Leigh Day & Co are filing papers to the High Court claiming that civilian staff at Britain's electronic listening agency, GCHQ, could be liable as "secondary parties to murder" for providing "locational intelligence" to the CIA in directing its drone attack program.

The two are acting on behalf of Noor Khan, 27, a Pakistani whose father was killed by a drone strike in northwest Pakistan in March 2011 while attending a gathering of elders.

Nine vie to head ILO

AFP, Geneva

Nine candidates are vying to succeed Juan Somavia as director-general of the International Labour Organization, the UN body said yesterday after nominations closed.

It named them as Charles Dan from Benin, Britain's Guy Ryder, Angelino Garzon of Colombia, Gilles de Robien from France, Ad Melkert from the Netherlands, Jomo Kwame Sundaram of Malaysia, Niger's Ibrahim Assane Mayaki, Senegalese Assane Diop and Mona Sahlin from Sweden.

Somavia's successor will be chosen on May 28 by the ILO's governing body, comprising 28 government representatives and 14 each from the employers' and workers' side.

Businesses bear

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and BNP in the afternoon.

Witnesses said the AL men equipped with sticks, rods and machetes brought out a procession on the road and chased the opposition activists away.

The retailers at Dhanmondi Hawkers Market, Goushia Market and Elephant Road markets pulled down their shutters instantly.

"All the hopes for good sales are gone now," said salesman Abdul Rahim at a cloth store at Dhanmondi Hawkers Market.

Ali Ahmed, a vegetable trader at Hatirpool kitchen market, said his sales had slumped since Sunday. "We had some buyers last night [Sunday night], but today there are only a few. Sales even on a hartal day are much higher."

People are afraid to come out of their houses, he noted.

The city's major shopping malls including Bashundhara City also saw a few customers.

"I had no option but to come here and buy some items urgently," said Asaduzzaman Emon. His baby is admitted to Square Hospital.

"It's an unusual environment. That's why our product distribution was almost suspended today [yesterday]," said an official of Pran-RFL Group, a leading agro-industrial company, seeking to remain unnamed.

Mohammad Kamal Hossain, manager of a grocery store at Karwan Bazar, said there has been no supply of consumer goods such as edible oil and flour since Sunday.

The supply of vegetables from the northern and north-western districts was disrupted for the second straight day yesterday, mentioned Abdul Jalil, owner of a vegetable wholesale depot in the market.

He mentioned that truckers do not want to come to Dhaka due to obstacles along the way and risk of hijacking on the highways.

Pakistan govt 'revising' list of banned terror groups

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday invited Islamist militant groups including the Taliban for peace talks and said banned organisations would be delisted if they "closed down their militant wings".

Pakistan has banned more than 30 militant outfits, including al-Qaeda, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the group blamed by New Delhi and Washington for the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

"If the proscribed organisations assure us that they have closed down their militant wings and abandoned extremism, then we would like to meet them in next few days," Interior Minister Rehman Malik told reporters.

Pakistan has faced heavy criticism for not doing more to clampdown on the groups, many of which are allowed to operate freely under new names, such as Jamaat-ud-Dawa, a UN blacklisted charity considered a front for LeT.

"We have been contacted by several banned organisations that want to sit and talk. If they want to give up militancy we will talk to them as we are revising the list of proscribed organisations," Malik said.

Pakistan is finished

FROM PAGE 1

Telegraph noted that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman appears to have declared the independence of East Pakistan.

In its editorial comment on the day, the newspaper had this to say about the unfolding events in the province, "Already we hear the putative name of the separate state that East Pakistan could become -- Bangladesh, Bengali land. The flag has been devised."

For its part, Time magazine in its March 15 issue acquainted its readers with the latest situation before drawing the conclusion, "Pakistan as it stands today is finished."

Within Bangladesh, the media consistently urged a speedy transfer of power to

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Where before the March 7 rally newspapers had called for a quick negotiated solution to the crisis, after Bangabandhu's declaration of March 7 they made it clear that nothing less than a transfer of power to the Awami League chief would be acceptable to the people.

It was a demand echoed by progressive political quarters in West Pakistan. They asked General Yahya Khan to accede to Mujib's demands in the overall interest of a united Pakistan. Politicians like Khan Abdul Wali Khan and Baluchistan's Abdus Samad Achakzai publicly endorsed Mujib's demands.

West Pakistani newspa-

pers, which had so long toed the establishment line of opposing the Awami League's Six-Point plan for regional autonomy, now went public with their comments that if Pakistan was to be saved, it was a job that could be done on the basis of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's four demands placed at the Dhaka rally of March 7.

On March 13, the martial law authorities in Dhaka issued an order asking all civilian employees working at military establishments to rejoin their duties. It was made clear that those who failed to comply with the order would have their services terminated and would be tried by the regime as absconders.

Flew in home

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man was plunged into deep uncertainty.

"Travelling a long way, I am still so away from home. We send our hard-earned money from abroad but find ourselves as political hostages when return home. This is unacceptable," said the man in furious mood.

The suffering of outbound passengers and their relatives was no less than the ones returned home like Lebu Mian.

Many such people, mostly workers heading towards the Middle-East, came to the airport two days before their schedules fearing they might miss flights due to restrictions on vehicular movement from outside the capital.

They with their relatives had to pass almost sleepless night with limited food and unbearable mosquito bites at the airport.

"We came to Dhaka Saturday afternoon apprehending no vehicular movement. Since then we have

been staying at the airport," said Abdul Latif from Sreepur upazila of Tangail.

"My wife and other family members usually see me off but this time I did not dare to bring them with me," he said.

Latif was scheduled to go to Saudi Arabia today at 2:00am.

The Daily Star found Latif and his elder brother Abdul Hamid lying under a small banyan tree on the airport premises around 4:00pm.

Hamid said since his brother was a passenger he was allowed to pass the night under the canopy along the airport driveway but Hamid had to spend the night outside.

"There are several hundred more like us," he added.

Meanwhile, no international flight was cancelled at Shahjalal International Airport. Officials of local and foreign airlines said they did not have any reports of passengers missing flights.

"We have got all passengers on board," said an official of state-owned Biman preferring anonymity.

Ghulam Azam's lawyers

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Tribunal Chairman Justice Nizamul Huq and its member Justice ATM Fazle Kabir said it was probably because of the risk of "political disturbance" the defence counsels were absent from the court.

They should be given a chance to place their arguments, the two judges added.

Another judge of the tribunal AKM Zaheer Ahmed accepted their order but disagreed with their opinions.

He said the defence counsels had failed to show minimum courtesy to submit their adjournment application before the tribunal, so his view was to reject the application summarily.

Zaheer, however, said that as the other two judges decided to allow the defence to make their arguments, he

accepted the majority view.

"But by that order we have opened a new window for the prosecutors also. In future, it may happen that after filing applications all the prosecutors may refrain themselves from appearing before the tribunal and then we will have to allow them like today without prejudicing them. So, before passing an order we shall think about the future consequences also," the judge continued.

The court yesterday rejected another petition filed by the defence seeking directives on the authorities concerned to give a copy of the war crimes investigation report to Ghulam Azam.

Earlier in the day, prosecutor Zeal Al Malum prayed to the court for framing charges against Ghulam Azam, saying they had already placed charges against him.

Blame it on opposition

FROM PAGE 1

The government did not disrupt communication or gave orders to close city hotels, they said. Transport owners themselves kept their vehicles off the streets and hotel owners closed their hotels, fearing attacks by the opposition.

However, many transport leaders and hoteliers told The Daily Star that law enforcers and ruling party leaders had commanded them not to operate their vehicles and keep their hotels open.

"It is the opposition party who is responsible for today's [yesterday] public suffering," said State Minister for Home Shamsul Haque Tuku while talking to reporters at his secretariat office.

He said people had lost confidence in the BNP as it had on many occasions created anarchy in the name of political programmes by torching vehicles, killing people and damaging public property.

So, the government this

time beefed up security measures to protect its citizens, he added.

He also suggested that the main opposition should not hold such a huge political programme in the capital as the densely populated city does not have enough space for that.

Meanwhile, Awami League Joint General Secretary Mahbub U Alam Hanif said the ruling party was cooperating with the opposition in holding its programme.

"We said repeatedly that our support and cooperation will be there for a peaceful programme," he said at a meeting at the party office in the city's Bangabandhu Avenue yesterday.

City AL General Secretary Mofazzol Hossain Chowdhury Maya, who was also present in the meeting, said programmes by the BNP lead to anarchy through killing people, torching vehicles and looting business establishments.

That was why leaders and activists of the ruling Awami League were alert so that BNP could not create any untoward situation, he added.

Hanif said his party activists helped law enforcers contain any sort of anarchy.

Earlier on Sunday, Home Minister Shahara Khatun at her secretariat office said the government had neither ordered law enforcers to prevent city hoteliers from receiving guests nor had it asked transport owners to withdraw their vehicles.

"Police were simply checking hotels and restaurants as part of their regular duties," she added.

Arms recovery: State Minister Tuku, meanwhile, told reporters that the government had tightened security in the capital as several opposition activists, who were heading to the March 12 grand rally, were caught with arms in different parts of the country.

He, however, did not give details of the arrests.

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