

Taliban scrap peace talks

Karzai calls for Nato troops withdrawal to bases

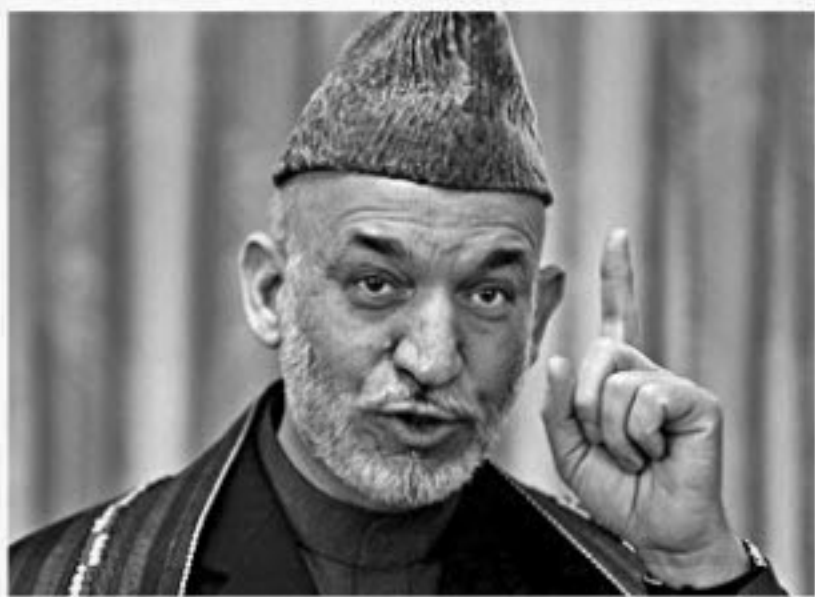
REUTERS, Kabul

Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai called for Nato troops to leave Afghan villages after 16 civilians died in a shooting rampage by a US soldier, underscoring Afghan fury over the massacre and clouding US exit plans.

In a near-simultaneous statement, the Taliban said they were suspending nascent peace talks with the United States seen as a strong chance of ending the country's decade-long war, blaming "shaky, erratic and vague" US statements.

Karzai, in a statement from his office after meeting US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, said as a result of the weekend massacre, "international security forces have to be taken out of Afghan village outposts and return to (larger) bases".

The soldier accused of carrying out the shooting was based at a small special forces compound similar to others around the country which underpin Nato's counter-insurgency strategy ahead of a 2014 deadline for most



Western combat forces to pull out.

Karzai said the incident had harmed relations between Afghanistan and the United States and said "all efforts have to be done to avoid such incidents in the future", warning it also had hurt the trust Afghans had in foreign forces.

The killings in Kandahar province on Sunday have raised questions about Western strategy in Afghanistan and intensified calls for the withdrawal of foreign combat troops.

The Taliban statement -- delivered in English as Panetta left the country -- was another blow to Nato hopes of a negotiated settlement to the war.

US and Taliban negotiators were

believed to have had preliminary contacts aimed at establishing an office for the Taliban in the Gulf state of Qatar to launch peace negotiations.

"The Islamic Emirate has decided to suspend all talks with Americans taking place in Qatar from (Thursday) onwards until the Americans clarify their stance on the issues concerned and until they show willingness in carrying out their promises instead of wasting time," the group said in a statement.

The Taliban also said talks with the government of Karzai's government were pointless and none had taken place.

Earlier on Thursday, a senior US commander defended moving the American soldier accused of the Kandahar village killings to a military detention centre in Kuwait, saying it would help ensure a proper investigation and trial.

Furious Afghan civilians and members of parliament have demanded the staff sergeant be tried in Afghanistan over the shooting, one of the worst of its kind since US-backed Afghan forces toppled the Taliban in late 2001.

Egypt charges 75 over football riot

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's prosecutor general yesterday referred 75 people to criminal court in connection with football riots last month that left over 70 people dead.

The defendants include nine members of the police and three officials from the Al-Masry football club. Two minors will be sent to a children's court, the prosecutor's office said in a statement.

On February 1, clashes in the northern city of Port Said between fans of home team Al-Masry and Cairo's Al-Ahly, erupted at the final whistle of the match.

The violence marked one of the deadliest incidents in football history, and came amid claims by witnesses the security forces did little to prevent the rioting.

Pro-Assad show, 'massacre' mark Syria anniversary

AFP, Damascus

Huge rallies played up support for Syria's president yesterday despite a new "massacre" report and a refugee exodus to Turkey as a deadly revolt against his autocratic rule entered a second year.

International peace envoy Kofi Annan, meanwhile, demanded answers from President Bashar al-Assad's regime before the UN Security Council re-enters the fray in a conflict which monitors now say has cost more than 9,100 lives.

State television showed tens of thousands of people waving Syrian flags and Assad's portrait in squares in Damascus, the northern city of Aleppo, Latakia on the Mediterranean coast, Suweida to the south and Hasaka in the northeast.

The cities have been relatively unscathed by the deadly crackdown on dissent.

The authorities, which have blamed the bloodshed on foreign-backed "terrorist gangs," announced a "global march for Syria" to counter anti-regime demonstrations being organised this week by the opposition across the world.

"We are not scared of death. We are ready to sacrifice ourselves for you, oh Syria," the demonstrators chanted, many of them singing and dancing, and shouting: "Long live the army!"

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on Thursday gave a breakdown of 9,113 deaths for the past 12 months: apart from 6,645 civilians, it said the toll included 1,991

members of Assad's security forces and 471 rebels.

In Aleppo and on the outskirts of Damascus, security forces broke up scattered anti-regime protests, according to the Local Coordination Committees, which organise demonstrations on the ground.

The Observatory, meanwhile, said 23 mutilated corpses were found near the protest city of Idlib in northwest Syria that was seized by regime forces earlier this week.

It said the victims had been blindfolded and handcuffed before being shot dead and the bodies dumped outside Idlib, in an apparent repeat of a "massacre" of dozens of women and children in the flashpoint city of Homs last weekend.

It also said at least five others were killed in raids by security forces across the province of Idlib.

Human Rights Watch stepped in to demand an end to the "scorched earth methods" being deployed by Assad, and insist that China and Russia stop blocking UN efforts to take tough action.

In neighbouring Turkey, the foreign ministry said about 1,000 Syrian refugees, including a defecting general, had crossed into the country in the past 24 hours.

Ankara accused the Syrian leadership of planting landmines near its border with Turkey along routes used by refugees.

Turkey's Red Crescent chief, Ahmet Lutfi Akar, warned that up to 500,000 Syrians may cross into the country seeking refuge from the bloodshed.



Senior China leader sacked in rare scandal

AFP, Beijing

China's ruling Communist Party yesterday fired Bo Xilai, a charismatic leader famed for pushing a "red revival", in a move that exposes ideological rifts during a generational power handover.

In a highly unusual public rebuke, Bo's removal as party chief of the metropolis of Chongqing was announced a day after Premier Wen Jiabao delivered his strongest call yet for political reform in the country of 1.3 billion people.

Bo's removal was announced in a brief dispatch on the official Xinhua news agency that said he had been replaced as Chongqing party secretary by vice-premier Zhang Dejiang, and gave no reason for his dismissal.

But analysts said that Bo had alienated liberals in the party with his headline crackdown on corruption in Chongqing, a southwestern city of more than 30 million people.

The 62-year-old former commerce minister had been seen as one of the leading contenders to join the Communist Party's Politburo Standing Committee -- the nine-membered body which effectively runs China -- later this year.

Bo's political future was plunged into doubt last month when Wang Lijun, the former Chongqing police chief who ran the corruption crackdown, visited a US consulate and reportedly asked for asylum.

27 more bodies

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but survivors and relatives said around 100 people were unaccounted for.

Contacted, the DC yesterday did not give any number of the missing people, but said the rescue efforts would continue today.

Shahidul Islam, officer-in-charge of Gazaria Police Station, said five people were still missing as per their list.

But Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan told reporters yesterday that he had no information of anyone still missing.

MV Shariatpur-1, on its way to Dhaka from Shariatpur, sank with around 300 passengers around 2:30am on Tuesday after being hit by a large cargo vessel, according to survivors.

M Mahbubul Alam, secretary of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), yesterday said they were yet to trace the cargo vessel.

Meanwhile, Gazaria police yesterday filed a case against seven people, including the owner and master of the passenger

launch and the master of the cargo vessel that hit it.

The accused persons face charges of overloading and reckless driving and thereby killing people.

Of the 27 bodies recovered yesterday, 24 were found floating around the accident scene, two near Matlab Uttar upazila of Chandpur, which is around 10-km from the spot, while the other from the deck of MV Shariatpur-1.

Earlier, 76 bodies were recovered on Wednesday and 36 on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, survivors and relatives of the missing people expressed frustration over the slow rescue operation. Some said they had "no trust" in the official figure of the missing people.

Many were seen searching for bodies of their relatives on trawlers.

Salvage vessels Rustom and Hamza pulled up the sunken launch from the riverbed on Wednesday afternoon.

The launch was handed over to Gazaria police yesterday after rescuers declared there were no more bodies in it.

Israel security cabinet backs Iran strike

AFP, Jerusalem

A majority of Israel's security cabinet now supports an attack on Iran in a bid to end its nuclear programme, an Israeli newspaper reported yesterday, citing political sources it did not identify.

Writing in the Maariv daily, influential columnist Ben Caspit said most of the 14-member security cabinet was now leaning in favour of a pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, a move which he said was supported by both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak.

"According to the most recent assessments, at this point eight ministers tend to support Netanyahu and Barak's position, while six object to it," Caspit wrote.

Caspit noted that Netanyahu has convened neither his security cabinet, nor the more intimate Forum of Eight -- a consultative body of his closest ministers -- since returning from talks about Iran with US President Barack Obama.

"The longer the silence

from Netanyahu and Barak's direction continues, the more concerned the opponents of an attack on Iran become," Caspit said.

Meanwhile, Israel's Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Benny Gantz began a trip to the United States and Canada yesterday, the military said, for talks expected to focus on Iran.

The military refused to say how long the trip would last or how many days Gantz would spend in each country.

The trip comes shortly after visits to Washington by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak and following a trip to Israel by US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey.

Show proof of ISI money

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He said it is Awami League who has the record for going into power through 'back door'.

"Our leader [BNP chief] never received money from abroad. The allegation about it is absolutely false and we are looking into it. We will give our reply in time," Mirza Alamgir said while talking to reporters at the party's central office in Nayapalton.

He said the prime minister herself was living in India in the past. The Economist wrote that Awami League took bags of money prior to the 2008 general election while Indian newspaper Anandabazar wrote that

India would always stand beside Hasina.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Wednesday said that Khaled Zia received money from ISI before the 1991 election and asked Khaleda to leave Bangladesh and go to Pakistan. She further said that the constitution has been amended so that none can seize power illegally.

"She (PM) made such statements several times in the past. Bangladesh is not the property of anyone's father and people don't expect such statements from a prime minister," Mirza Alamgir said.

Reiterating the demand of restoring caretaker gov-

ernment system, he said the ruling party has created political crisis in the country by scrapping caretaker government system and they have to resolve the problem by passing a bill in the parliament to reinstate the non-party neutral government.

Alamgir also said the ruling party came into power with the help of Fakhruddin-Moinuddin government.

Criticising the government for interfering in media freedom, he said all TV channels broadcasted the ruling alliance rally while they were forced not to broadcast the March 12 rally of the opposition.

Alim faces 74 charges

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against humanity in the Liberation War of 1971.

Prosecutor Rana Dasgupta submitted the formal charges to the International Crimes Tribunal and prayed to the court to take the charges against Alim into cognisance.

The former Joypurhat lawmaker who has been charged with 74 crimes which include genocide, murder, looting, arson and rape appeared before the court in a wheelchair.

The three-judge tribunal headed by Justice Md Nizamul Huq fixed March 22 to decide whether it will take the charges into cognisance.

The tribunal also directed Alim to appear before the court on that day, after extending his bail till March 22.

Earlier on January 17, the tribunal had extended Alim's bail till yesterday. Dasgupta opposed the

bail extension saying the situation has changed after the investigations on Alim's alleged crimes against humanity. He also said that Alim would receive proper treatment in jail.

Arrested on March 27 last year in Joypurhat, Alim was granted conditional bail four days later.

The investigators of the tribunal have found the involvement of former BNP lawmaker in 17 incidents of war crimes during the Liberation War, Dasgupta told The Daily Star.

Alim, who was the chairman of sub-division peace committee and the commander of Razakar Bahini (an anti-liberation force) was involved in the massacre of 337 people at Kadirpur area in Joypur, he said.

"He has to take the responsibility for the atrocities committed by the collaborator forces under his lead," added Dasgupta.

Launch wasn't overloaded

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extortion on river routes at his office in the capital.

Following the launch capsizing in Meghna early Tuesday, shipping ministry, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority and Department of Shipping formed three separate committees to probe the incident.

They were asked to submit their reports within five to seven days.

The rights activists and eminent personalities think that such comment from a minister might influence the probe activities.

"Not to speak of the minister but government officials should refrain from making such comment when the activities of government-formed probe committees are in progress," said Dr Akbar Ali Khan, former adviser to a caretaker government.

Terming the minister's comment "motivated", Transparency International Bangladesh Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman said such comment creates scope for

influencing the probe.

"We expect more responsible comment from a minister," he added.

Noted columnist Syed Abul Maksud said the minister has already given a message to the probe committees by making such comment.

Meanwhile, AK Azad, president of the country's apex trade body Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, yesterday at a seminar criticised the shipping minister for not issuing any statement from his ministry to express shock over deaths in the launch tragedy.

Different organisations and individuals yesterday observed several programmes including human chain demanding removal of the shipping minister and ensuring safe travel on river routes.

MV Shariatpur-1, the double-decker launch, capsized in Meghna with over 250 passengers at Char Kishori under Gazaria upazila of Munshiganj after a collision with a cargo vessel.

RE-OPENING GRAFT CASES AGAINST ZARDARI Gilani would prefer jail

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's embattled Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani yesterday said he would rather go to jail than obey a court order and ask Switzerland to re-open graft cases against the president.

Gilani's remarks revive speculation that he would rather risk losing his job than capitulate in a two-year showdown with the judiciary that culminated last month with him being charged with contempt by the Supreme Court.

He has always insisted that President Asif Ali Zardari is immune from prosecution as president and says the cases against him are politi-



cally motivated.

"If I write a letter it will be a violation of the constitution, which is treason and which carries the death sentence," Gilani told PhD students in central Punjab province, with a few in the audience shouting "do not write, do not write".

"If I don't write, I will be convicted for contempt, the punishment for which is six months' imprisonment," Gilani said.

"It's better to face six months' imprisonment than face the death sentence."

Pakistan's top court last week ordered Gilani to ask Switzerland to reopen corruption cases against Zardari by March 21.

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