

Syria demands guarantees to pull back troops

Dozens killed, wounded by Assad's loyalists

REUTERS, Beirut

Syria yesterday demanded written guarantees that insurgents will stop fighting before it pulls back troops under the terms of a peace plan, casting additional doubt over a truce due to start this week.

Escalating violence has already raised questions over the ceasefire. Opposition activists said dozens of people were killed and wounded yesterday when President Bashar al-Assad's loyalists shelled a rebellious area near the border with Turkey.

UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan, seeking to end the conflict that has killed more than 9,000 people in the past year, said the latest bloodshed violated the guarantees he had been given and urged Damascus to keep its promises.

The deal Annan brokered calls on Syria to begin the pullback of troops from around towns and cities by Tuesday for a truce to start 48 hours later.

While emphasizing that would happen, Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi said in a statement that Syria also wanted the written guarantees.

"Syria has a plan for military pullback already in place and being implemented, but completing and achieving the main goal would definitely require the guarantees from the other side and those supporting them to abide by the terms of calm," he said.

Syria also sought guarantees that Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey - outspoken in criticizing Assad - would not fund the armed groups.

Annan made no specific reference to the new Syrian demands in a statement from his office in Geneva.

He expressed shock at the "surge in violence and atrocities". Each side has accused the other of intensifying assaults in the run-up to the truce.

"As we get closer to the Tuesday 10 April deadline, I remind the Syrian government of the need for full implementa-

tion of its commitments and stress that the present escalation of violence is unacceptable," he said.

Dozens of people were killed and wounded when Assad's tanks shelled an area in the rebellious province of Idlib, near the border with Turkey, opposition activists said.

Fighters from the rebel Free Syrian Army were surrounded in the village of al-Bashiriya, activists said.

"The army is shelling al-Rouge with tanks, and helicopters are firing rockets at al-Bashiriya. Tens of people have fallen dead or injured but we cannot get to them because the bombardment is heavy," said activist Mahmoud Ali, with the sound of helicopters audible on the phone.

A major Syrian army offensive to seize back large swathes of Idlib that had fallen under rebel control has killed and wounded hundreds of people in the last 10 days. Thousands of Syrians have fled to Turkey.



Pope Benedict XVI delivers the "Urbi et Orbi" message and blessings to the faithful from the central loggia of St Peter's basilica after the Easter Holy Mass yesterday at The Vatican.

PHOTO: AFP

Govt's efficiency under question

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organisation for the delay in the fund utilisation but it actually happens due to setbacks in project preparation and tender and procurement process, Muhith added.

According to him, the problem lies in the bureaucratic and government structures and bringing changes in these areas is difficult.

Every year the government takes some initiatives for better utilisation of foreign aid but some of them never get implemented, he said.

As part of some fresh initiatives to this end, the development partners, the planning ministry and other ministries concerned and the Economic Relations Division will meet regularly

to discuss ways for speedy implementation of big projects.

At the pre-budget discussion, lawmakers also expressed concern over the spiralling prices of essentials and electricity shortages, Muhith said.

Performance of a government depends on three factors -- keeping essential

prices stable, ensuring uninterrupted power supply and repairing roads, he quoted the lawmakers.

The meeting also discussed the overall subsidy situation.

Muhith told the meeting that the government would soon introduce automated pricing formula for fuel to reduce subsidy.

No respite from jatka catching

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press conference at the fisheries department.

Meanwhile, this correspondent found four to five traders at Shoarighat selling Jatka, measuring 6 to 9 inches each, for Tk 150 to 500 per hali (four pieces).

Jahangir, a wholesale trader at Shoarighat, said the fish were caught from Bhola two or three days ago. He sold more than 240 pieces Jatka alongside normal-size Hilsha yesterday morning.

"Traders brought these Jatka to Shoarighat along with regular-size Hilsha. They bribe the monitoring

team whenever they get caught," he said.

"What should I do? I am a trader. I would not have bought the Jatka if they were not selling it," he said.

Some traders at the capital's big wholesale markets at Karwan Bazar and Jatrabari were found selling Jatka as Chapila fish.

Requesting anonymity, a wholesale trader said he could make more money if he sold Jatka as Chapila.

The government measures, including providing food grains, training and alternative employment opportunities, to prevent

fishermen from capturing Jatka have failed.

This year the government began distribution of 30 kg of food grains per month to 1,86,264 families of fishermen in 15 districts for the February-May period.

The programme has failed to achieve results as many genuine fishermen did not get the benefit for lack of an identification system, the minister said.

Local representatives play a lead role in card distribution to the fishermen, he said.

However, last month the government approved a Tk 85-crore project for putting

in place a proper system to identify fishermen, the minister added.

Many problems will be solved once the project is completed, he added.

The law enforcement agencies led 1,440 drives against illegal fishing in 2011-12 and realised about Tk 10 lakh in fine.

Although the number of drives and amount of fine has been increased, illegal catching of Jatka has not come down.

When his attention was drawn to this fact, the minister said, "It has become a habit with them [fishermen]."

Contempt rule issued

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The contemnors are Deputy Commissioner (Traffic) of DMP's East Zone Iqbal Hossain, its Additional Deputy Commissioner Moynul Hossain, Assistant Commissioner Mukta Dhar, Traffic Inspector Akhter Hossain and Sergeant Nayeem.

The HC bench of Justice Hoque issued the rule on a suo moto move, asking the officials to explain why a contempt proceeding should not be drawn against them for

"their wilful disregard and contempt of court".

In the order the judge said Sergeant Nayeem detained his driver Ekhlas Ukil as the car, with his wife Tahmina Khanom aboard, arrived near Rampura Bridge at 8:30am, alleging violation of traffic signal. The officer illegally confined the driver until 10:00am even though she disclosed her identity.

The judge said informed of the matter by his wife over the telephone, he immediately sent his gunman to resolve the

situation. Gunman Towhid went there at 9:00am and requested Nayeem to release the car but the latter did not pay any heed to it.

Rather the officer said he talked to his higher authorities (four other contemnors) who directed him to detain the car until they reach the spot.

"My gunman then gave his mobile phone to the sergeant and asked him to talk to me. But the sergeant with utter audacity and disregard denied talking to me," the

judge said.

"Waiting for half an hour, I contacted the DMP Deputy Commissioner Habibur Rahman at the headquarters. Upon his interference, ADC traffic of east zone helped release the car at 10:00am," the judge added.

The order said such illegal step taken by the contemnors has interfered with the dignity and sanctity of the Supreme Court, thus constituting contempt of court making them liable to be punished.

Fare hike suspended for now

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joint secretary (commercial) to draft a "rational" fare chart within the next 15 days, the minister said.

In the meeting also attended by transport workers and government offi-

cial, the owners strongly criticised BIWTC and ministry officials for deciding to increase the fares by 25 to 35 percent without discussing with them, a meeting source said.

In response to a question

regarding the transport owners' accusation, the minister said there was a discussion but the message could not be conveyed clearly to the stakeholders due to "miscommunication" and it was a "mistake".

Talking about bus owners' earlier move to call strike in protest of extortion and passenger harassment at Paturia-Daulatdia ferry terminal, the minister said a meeting would be held on April 17 in this regard.

The communications minister, home minister and state minister for home will also attend the meeting along with all stakeholders, he said.

Shajahan Khan also informed the journalists about some ministry initiatives, including purchase of new ferries, reconstruction of BIWTC building and setting up of four new passenger carrier steamers.

Shipping Secretary Abdul Mannan Howlader, BIWTC Chairman Golam Mostafa Kamal, Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Samity Secretary General Khandaker Enayetullah, Bangladesh Bus-Truck Owners Association President ASM Ali Khabir Chand, Bangladesh Truck-Covered Van Malik Samity General Secretary Rustom Ali and Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Sramik Federation General Secretary Osman Ali, among others, attended the meeting.

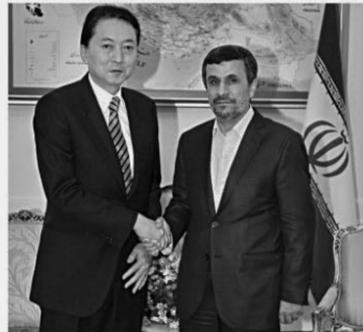
Iran opposes atomic bomb

Ahmadinejad tells Japan ex-PM

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stressed to visiting former Japanese premier Yukio Hatoyama yesterday that Tehran opposes nuclear weapons, his official website reported.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is fundamentally opposed to the atomic bomb and weapons of mass destruction," Ahmadinejad told Hatoyama.



Iranian President Ahmadinejad shakes hands with former Japanese PM during their meeting in Tehran yesterday.

"Iran and Japan can exert a common effort to create a world without atomic weapons ... Difficult but humanitarian efforts will win in the end," he said.

Meanwhile, Iran rejected demands the West is reportedly to submit at talks due to take place

in days, saying it will neither close its Frodo nuclear bunker nor give up higher-level uranium enrichment.

Those two demands, outlined by European and US diplomats to The New York Times newspaper, were "irrational," the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, Fereydoon Abbasi Davani, told ISNA news agency.

"If they do not threaten us and guarantee that no aggression will occur, then there would be no need for countries to build facilities underground. They should change their behaviour and language," he said.

Japan is the only country ever to have suffered a nuclear attack, its cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki being targeted by the United States at the end of World War II.

Hatoyama's presence in Iran was an issue of contention in Japan, after Japanese Foreign Minister Koichiro Genba reportedly requested he not make the trip.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Nodahe has also expressed concerns over Hatoyama's visit, fearing it could undermine the Japanese government's efforts for international coordination, Japanese media reported.

The visit came at a tense time, with Iran facing off against much of the West over its nuclear programme.

The United States and its allies fear Iran is seeking nuclear weapons capability, something Tehran denies.

Talks between Iran and the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany are due to be held starting Friday, in a country yet to be agreed.

NIGHT RAIDS US, Afghan govt strike deal

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan and the United States have struck a deal on special forces operations in the insurgency-wracked country that will see controversial night raids led by Afghans, Kabul said yesterday.

Kabul's foreign ministry invited journalists to a signing ceremony for the agreement later yesterday, and President Hamid Karzai's spokesman Aimal Faizi told AFP: "After the signing of this document all night raids become Afghan-led."

"The foreign forces, the US forces, will have a supporting role in the night raids, for instance intelligence sharing."

Night raids by international special forces against insurgent hideouts have triggered popular anger and long been a source of friction with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who has denounced the Nato operations as reckless.

But Western military commanders stress that they are extremely useful in the war against Taliban insurgents.

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