

Fragile Syria ceasefire holds

Annan hails pause in fighting; West, opposition skeptical

AGENCIES

Syrian troops yesterday mostly held their fire after a UN-backed ceasefire took effect at dawn, casting a silence over rebellious towns they had bombarded heavily in recent days.

UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan said the ceasefire appeared to beholding.

"I am encouraged by reports that the situation in Syria is relatively calm and that the cessation of hostilities appears to be holding," Annan said in a statement released as he briefed the UN Security Council on the crisis.

Annan added, however, that the Syrian government must carry out the entire agreed peace plan which includes a withdrawal of troops and heavy weapons from cities.

United Nations chief Ban Ki-moon, meanwhile, said plans were being drawn up to send observers to Syria, starting with the dispatch of a UN peacekeeping general as early as

today.

People contacted in the flashpoint provinces of Homs, Hama and Idlib, which saw sustained shelling by Assad's forces over the past week, reported calm. Damascus too seemed quiet.

However, renewed bloodshed killed at least four people, putting to the test the hard-won ceasefire plan.

State media charged that it was the opposition who were jeopardising the long-awaited truce, accusing rebel fighters of bombing a bus ferrying troops to their base in Syria's second-largest city Aleppo.

But the lull did little to convince opposition activists and Western powers of President Bashar al-Assad's good faith in observing a peace plan agreed with interna-



tional envoy Kofi Annan. In defiance of that deal, Syrian troops and tanks were still in position inside many towns, activists told Reuters.

The exile opposition, calling the truce "only partially observed" due to that failure to with-

draw, urged a renewal of mass protests today.

The Interior Ministry urged rebels to surrender, promising to free those who had not killed, and broadcast an appeal to the thousands who fled battered cities like Homs and Hama to return from the heavens they found in Turkey, Lebanon and within Syria.

Government spokesman Jihad Makdissi said Damascus was "fully committed" to Annan's success and, as there had been no attack on the troops, "There is no reason to break

the ceasefire."

China's Foreign Ministry called on the opposition to honor the truce, something the disparate rebel movements have said they are willing to do - although Western leaders and Annan's team have made clear the onus is on the government to act first.

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Among Syria's allies, China welcomed the regime's decision to uphold a "comprehensive ceasefire" describing it as a step towards a political solution. Russia called for more time.

Hours before the deadline expired, the military unleashed a lethal offensive against protest centres, killing 25 civilians on Wednesday, including 10 in the rebel stronghold of Rastan, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Tsunami boon

AFP, Banda Aceh

Indonesian authorities yesterday were hunting for 32 prisoners who were released temporarily during a tsunami alert triggered by a massive quake, a local police chief said.

Dumadi, police chief of Pidie district in Aceh province, said 63 prisoners left through an open gate after Wednesday's massive 8.6-magnitude quake that triggered a tsunami warning across the Indian Ocean, but that not all had returned.

Guards left the prison gate open during the alert to allow prisoners to try to save their lives if a tsunami struck, he said.

Fears of a tsunami run high in Aceh, which was virtually flattened during a 2004 tsunami that killed 170,000 people in the province.

Karzai may call early election

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai said yesterday he might call an early presidential election to leave enough time for the new government to handle a planned security transition from US forces to Afghans.

Karzai, re-elected in a second post-Taliban poll in 2009 amid allegations of widespread voting irregularities, will complete his term in 2014, which coincides with the transfer of security responsibilities from a US-led Nato force to Afghan troops.

"Bringing the presidential elections one year earlier to 2013. This is something I have been thinking about," he said.

Karzai said no final decision had been made but that there were "favourables" for both options.

18 Gujarat rioters sentenced to life

BBC ONLINE

A court in India yesterday sentenced 18 people to life imprisonment for the murder of Muslims in religious riots in Gujarat state 10 years ago.

Five others were given seven years and another 23 were acquitted earlier.

The group were found guilty of burning 23 Muslims to death in a house where they had taken shelter from rioting mobs in the village of Ode.

More than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, died when riots erupted after a train fire killed 60 Hindu pilgrims in 2002.

It was one of India's worst outbreaks of religious violence in recent years.

Muslims were blamed for starting the train fire, and Hindu mobs eager for revenge went on the rampage through Muslim neighbourhoods in towns and villages across Gujarat in three days of violence following the incident.

The case refers to killings that took place in Ode village on 1 March, 2002 a few days after the Godhra train deaths.

A mob of around 2,000 people went through the village targeting Muslim homes. A house where 23 Muslims, mostly women and children, had taken shelter was set alight.

The Ode massacre is one of 10 key incidents in the riots being probed by an independent Special Investigating Team (SIT) set up in 2008 after a Supreme Court directive.

Forty-seven people in Ode were charged with murder, conspiracy, rioting, unlawful assembly, attempt to murder and destruction of evidence by the SIT. One defendant died during the trial.

Maoists free Italian hostage in India

REUTERS, New Delhi

Maoist rebels freed Italian tour guide Paolo Bosusco yesterday, almost a month after kidnapping him in a remote part of Orissa in what was believed to be the first seizure of a foreigner by the leftist guerrillas.

Bosusco was handed to a mediator who had travelled to a remote camp where he was being held late on Wednesday. The Italian Foreign Ministry said Indian authorities had informed the ambassador of the release.

In response to rebel demands, the authorities freed a Maoist leader's wife from prison and promised to facilitate the release of several imprisoned rebels.

However, Jhina Hikaka, a state legislator, who was also kidnapped by another group of Maoists, was not freed.

Iran will not surrender atomic rights

Ahmadinejad on eve of nuke talks

REUTERS, Dubai

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad struck a defiant tone yesterday two days ahead of key atomic talks with major powers, saying the Islamic state would not surrender its nuclear rights "even under the most difficult pressure".

Talks between Iran and the United States, France, Germany, China, Russia and Britain are set to resume in Istanbul tomorrow with the major powers hoping Iran will give enough ground to continue negotiations and avert the threat of a Middle East war. They are the first such talks in more than a year.

Iran has promised to put forward "new initiatives" but has given no details.

"You should know that the Iranian nation is insisting on its fundamental rights and even under the most difficult pressure will not retreat even one iota from its rights," Ahmadinejad said of the upcoming talks,



Ahmadinejad

according to the official IRNA news agency.

While the substance of Ahmadinejad's comments on Thursday are not new - he has made similar defiant statements many times before - the timing is likely to be interpreted as a sign that Tehran may be unwilling to accept limits on its enrichment of uranium.

The head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili will represent Tehran at the talks.

But in comments on Wednesday he did not make it clear whether Iran would be willing to address its disputed uranium enrichment drive or not.

Previous rounds of talks between Iran and world powers have foundered, in part because of Tehran's refusal to negotiate on the scope of its enrichment work, with it instead floating general proposals for trade and security cooperation.

Runaway bus

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National Institute of Diseases of the Chest and Hospital (NIDCH), said police.

Two unidentified passengers of a CNG-run auto-rickshaw also sustained minor injuries.

A team of Mirpur police around 4:30am started chasing the bus in front of the fire brigade station at Mirpur-10 on information that a gang of thieves was coming to a market at Mirpur-11 to sell stolen cows, said Zakir Hossain Molla, officer-in-charge of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Police Station.

The bus passed through different roads in Pallabi, Mirpur-13, Mirpur-10, Old Airport Road at Tejgaon and Bijoy Sarani.

Another police team around 5:15am blocked Begum Rokeya Sarani near Sher-e-Bangla Nagar High School with a van, a bus and a CNG-run auto-rickshaw.

As the cops signalled the driver to stop, he sped up the vehicle further and hit the

auto-rickshaw in the barricade.

The auto-rickshaw skidded off on the cops, causing the casualties.

The fleeing bus managed to go past the barricade and travelled around half a kilometre more, until police on a chasing microbus fired four bullets at the gang to force the bus driver stop the vehicle near the Islamic Foundation office at Agargaon.

Law enforcers arrested the bus driver Mohammad Sentu, 26, but his five accomplices managed to escape.

Police seized the vehicle, recovered the cows and found some tools used to steal cows.

The driver admitted to stealing the cows from three houses at Mawa in Munshiganj.

Deceased ASI Belayet was born in Lohagara of Narail. He joined police department in 1991 and was posted at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Police Station two years back.

He is survived by his wife and their two children.

Democracy, Islam can flourish together

Says UK PM ; hints at easing Myanmar sanctions

AGENCIES

Democracy and Islam can flourish together, David Cameron yesterday declared as he gave a landmark speech in Indonesia to tell the Muslim world that it can reject a "dead-end choice" between extremism and dictatorship.

The British prime pinister held up Indonesia as a model for nations in transition after the Arab Spring, praising its moderate Islam.

Cameron was in Indonesia on a five-day tour of Asia, focused heavily on trade, and left for Malaysia yesterday morning.

He is scheduled to visit Myanmar today, marking the first visit by a top Western leader since decades of military rule ended last year.

He said extremists were trying to turn Islam into a "closed and warped ideology" opposed to democracy. He urged people not to confuse Islam with extremism.



David Cameron

David Cameron praised it's moves towards democracy and said the UK stood ready to respond by easing sanctions on the country.

He said events in Myanmar, including recent multi-party by-elections, were a "bright light". But he said he wanted to see conditions on the ground for himself to determine whether the change was "irreversible".

Cameron's first visit to Myanmar will conclude his week-long tour of east and south-east Asia, which has included stops in Japan, Indonesia and Malaysia.

PM, Turkish president

FROM PAGE 1

President Abdullah Gul said he has taken steps to block the way for any unconstitutional government taking over power in Ankara.

In response, Hasina said her government through the 15th amendment of the Constitution made such act illegal and punishable to sustain democracy.

The meeting between the two leaders took place at the Presidential Palace here in the afternoon.

"My party and I have struggled for a long time for democracy and we have taken steps so that democratic rule is not hampered," Hasina said, admiring President Gul for his leadership in strengthening democracy and discouraging unconstitutional takeover in Turkey.

Briefing reporters, PM's Press Secretary Abdul Kalam Azad said President Gul appreciated the progresses made by Bangladesh in different sectors under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Recalling his visit to Dhaka in February 2010, the Turkish president said it was a fruitful visit.

He hoped that bilateral cooperation between Dhaka and Ankara would be strengthened in future.

President Gul said his country is willing to invest in the power sector of Bangladesh.

On bilateral trade, Hasina said Turkey may remove duties imposed in July last on the import of Bangladeshi apparels as it reduced the export of Bangladeshi products to Turkey by 20 percent in the last eight months.

"We may not reach our trade target of \$3 billion by 2015 as agreed by the two countries during the Turkish premier's visit to Dhaka in November 2010," she observed.

The premier stressed more Turkish investment in Bangladesh.

She thanked President Gul for financing the con-

struction of 500 community clinics in Bangladesh.

Hasina described the Bangladesh-Turkey relationship as historic saying that Turkish father of the nation Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is immensely popular in Bangladesh.

Later, the prime minister called on Turkish National Assembly Speaker Cemil Cicek at the Turkish Parliament.

She said that her country attaches importance to the relations with Turkey and invited the Speaker to visit Bangladesh.

7 DEALS SIGNED Bangladesh and Turkey signed yesterday seven agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoUs) mainly to boost bilateral trade and investment.

The agreements were inked following the official talks between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan at the latter's office.

Both the prime ministers

Recast

FROM PAGE 1

personal secretary (APS) and two top railway officials on Monday night.

Despite reconstitution of the probe body, the spate of criticism continued since it is now headed by Railway Director General Abu Taleb, instead of an official not linked to the railway ministry.

Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) personnel on Monday night detained at their headquarters in the capital General Manager (East) of the railway Yusuf Ali Mridha and its Dhaka Division Security Commandant Enamul Huq, Railway Minister Suranjit Sengupta's APS Omar Faruq Talukder and his (Faruq) driver Ali Azam along with the money.

Sources said the four were on their way to Suranjit's Jhigatola residence by a microbus of the APS. The driver drove the vehicle into the BGB headquarters and shouted that there was illegal money in the vehicle. He did so as he was reportedly not paid Tk five lakh out of the amount.

On Tuesday, the railway ministry formed a one-member committee comprising its Joint Secretary Shashi Kumar Singha to probe Mridha's alleged involvement in the scandal and another one-member committee consisting of Suranjit's Personal Secretary Akhteruzzaman to probe Omar Faruq's involvement.

Contacted yesterday, Shashi Kumar said the probe body (comprising him) has been reformed with the railway DG as its head to probe the reported involvement of Mridha and Enamul Huq in the incident.

Replying to a query, he said the probe body has been reformed since Mridha also is an official of his (Shashi) rank.

It was recast at a meeting at the Railway Bhaban yesterday morning in presence of the railway minister and the secretary.

Shashi and Akhteruzzaman said Mridha and Faruq have been served separate letters asking them to appear before the probe committees at 10:00am on Sunday at the Railway Bhaban.

Evidence shown

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none of the cases was related to crimes against humanity or atrocities the Jamaat leader allegedly committed during the War.

The three-member tribunal headed by Justice Md Nizamul Huq yesterday recorded deposition of the investigation officer for the fifth day before adjourning the proceedings till April 17.

Sayedee, who is facing 20 charges of crimes against humanity, was hauled before the court yesterday.

The witness used a significant portion of his deposition focusing on the historical contexts since 1947 that led to the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971.

After giving 150-minute deposition, the prosecution insisted that the witness be given some time to rest.

The tribunal agreed and decided to put the deposition on hold. It then proceeded to the other item on the agenda -- hearing of applications from BNP leader Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, MP, who is also facing war crimes charges.

The defence of the BNP leader presented a number of applications before the court.

Having rejected most of the petitions, the tribunal has deferred hearing of three applications to Sunday.

One of the petitions, which was rejected, sought changes in the court's rules

of procedure, as, according to the application, the 1973 Act and the rule of procedures framed by the tribunal were not adequate to conduct a fair trial.

The tribunal however added that it would consider the suggestions from the defence if new rules are adopted in future.

Another application asked for a transcript of Salauddin Quader's statements to the investigation officer during an interrogation in a 'safe house'.

The tribunal said it was unnecessary, adding that what the BNP leader said there would not be allowed to be used against him during trial.

Another petition seeking legible copies of some unreadable documents the prosecution had provided the defence was allowed.

The three-judge panel then deferred to April 15 for hearing some review applications from Salauddin Quader. The applications include a discharge petition, one seeking withdrawal of the BNP leader's indictment order, and another dealing with his "arbitrary" detention.

Salauddin Quader was produced before the court yesterday.

Sayedee and Salauddin Quader are among six Jamaat and two BNP leaders who are facing war crimes charges at the tribunal.

witnessed the signing of the agreements and MoUs. These are: agreement on reciprocal promotion and protection of investment; agreement concerning mutual abolition of visas for holders of diplomatic, service/official, and special passports;

agreement on customs cooperation; MoUs on scientific and technical cooperation in the field of agriculture, and cultural, scientific and educational exchange programme.

The MoUs also include letter of intent to join International Jute Study Group (IJSG) and sister-city protocol between Sylhet and Konya, the resting places of two great Sufi philosophers and spiritual leaders -- Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) and Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (RA).

Industries Minister Dilip Barua, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni and Sylhet Mayor Badruddin Kamran signed the deals on behalf of Bangladesh.