

Syria rebels press advance around Damascus, Aleppo monitor

AFP, Beirut

Rebels pressed an offensive east of Damascus and in southeastern Aleppo, in an escalation that in the past three days has killed scores of fighters on both sides, a monitoring group said on yesterday.

Rebels in Eastern Ghouta east of Damascus are trying to break the army siege on opposition areas there, taking over several small villages and checkpoints, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

"In the past three days, the rebels have taken over small villages and checkpoints east of Damascus and southeast of Aleppo, after launching counter-offensives on those fronts,"

said Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman. Southeast of Aleppo, rebels also battled troops after a recent advance by the army, he added.

Troops loyal to Assad had for several weeks gained the upper hand against the rebels at key battle fronts across the war-ravaged country.

"Now the army is no longer advancing there," he added.

Fighting yesterday was focused around Marj, east of Damascus, and Khanasser, southeast of Aleppo, Abdel Rahman said.

Opposition activists have described the latest counter-offensive as a bid to break the siege, which has prevented weapons and humanitarian supplies from entering the Eastern Ghouta area.

Pre-blockade violence

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Bhola Munshiganj, Dinajpur and Cox's Bazar leaving several hundred passengers stranded.

At least eight vehicles were torched, around 30 others vandalised and over 100 bombs blasted at different parts of Dhaka, Gazipur and Manikganj.

In the capital, several bombs were exploded in front of the residence of chief election commissioner at Bashundhara.

Two persons, including a photojournalist, suffered injuries in two separate blasts at the city's Mohakali and Malibagh.

Unidentified persons threw a petrol bomb targeting a police car at Bijoy Sarani. However, none was hurt, police said.

BGB members were deployed in the capital as well as in Comilla, Bogra and Sylhet.

Shortly after the televised announcement of polls schedule, ruling and opposition activists got locked in clashes in different districts including Joydevpur, Pabna and Jhenidah.

Series of handmade bombs exploded in around eight spots of Brahmanbaria town, police said. A group of miscreants also set fire to a rail gatekeeper's room.

Opposition activists also hurled bombs at a police camps and attacked election offices in Rajshahi, leaving two police members injured.

The pro-BNP student body Jatiyatabdil Chhatri Dal, Jamaat-e-Islami and its student front Islami Chhatri Shibir brought out a procession at Kandirpar around 9:30pm protesting the announcement of the election sched-

ule, witnesses said.

As police intercepted the procession, the activists exploded around 30 crude bombs and threw brick chips triggering an hour-long clash injuring at least 10 persons.

Delwar, 35, who was among the injured, died at Comilla Medical College Hospital around 10:30.

The BNP-led 18-party alliance launched its movement after parliament scrapped the caretaker government provision through the 15th amendment in June 2011.

The main opposition party and its allies maintain they would not participate in polls if not held under a non-party caretaker administration.

Apart from the blockade, they mull a series of agitations, including weeks-long hartal and laying siege to government offices, according to their leaders.

At the final stage, when the election will be imminent, the opposition will form "Sangram Committees" to resist the elections at all polling centres and build strong resistance to the Election Commission's activities.

Talking to The Daily Star last night, Kazi Akram Uddin Ahmed, president of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, said a political programme like blockade hinders economic growth and ruin export prospects.

The supply chain of the country will be badly affected due to the blockade and, as a result, consumers will bear the brunt. It will also discourage foreign investors, he added.

As a result, the newspaper owners will have to pay 26 percent as duties for importing a tonne of newspaper, compared to 31 percent earlier.

The duties on imported printing plates will remain unchanged at 2 percent.

Newspaper is the key raw material for the newspaper printing industry, and the country relies heavily on imports.

While placing the budget for the fiscal 2013-14 in parliament, Finance Minister AMA Muhith had proposed raising the import duty on newsprint to 25 percent from 3 percent.

Following an outcry from the industry, the rate was fixed at 10 percent when the parliament approved the budget.

But industry people still saw the high import duty as a threat for the printing industry.

The government, however, agreed to halve the import duties after newspaper owners accepted the Eighth Wage Board for raising salaries and other benefits for journalists.

The government has also doubled the rates for newspaper advertisements.

"Sincere efforts from the parties' top notch are crucial to solve the problem. But the present situation does not give any hope," he added.

Prof Masud said when the opposition had already declared to resist the election unless it was held under a non-party caretaker government, the schedule announcement would make the politics even more violent.

Shantanu Majumder, teacher of political science at DU, believes that all doors have not been shut with the announcement of the election schedule.

"I am worried but not panicked because I still have faith in the abilities of our political leaders. I think they will be able to understand the will of people," he said, adding that the political leaders were aware of the possible damages if they failed to come to an understanding.

He emphasised discussion between the second- or third-level leaders of both the parties to find a way out, saying that the dialogue must not be held publicly.

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Reach consensus

FROM PAGE 1

with VDP, ansar, police, Rab, BGB and coastguard across the country to assist the commission in holding a fair and credible election as in the past.

"We are to hold polls in 300 constituencies across the country on a single day. The number of voters is also huge. It is really tough to hold such a big event maintaining law and order."

"But it is unfortunate that our main two political parties are at loggerheads over the elections," he said.

If the election is not held with participation of all parties, it would lose credibility, he added.

Prof Imtiaz Ahmed of international relations department at Dhaka University (DU) said more violence might take place after the schedule announcement, as main opposition BNP had been opposing it.

"I think the ruling party wants to check the opposition's strength to carry on with the movement. Further political developments may be seen after the ruling party understands opposition's power," he added.

Former cabinet secretary Ali Imam Majumder said there was nothing surprising in the EC's polls schedule announcement because they had a constitution-set deadline.

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