

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,"

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 Mohakhali 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 Jhenidaha.

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 Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal, Jamaat-e-Islami and its student front Islami Chhatra Shibir brought out a procession at Kandirpar around 9:30pm protesting the announcement of the election sched-

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 Marij, 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.

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.

Make final efforts

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There was no alternative for the Election Commission but to announce the polls schedule, as it is constitutionally bound to hold the elections within a timeframe, she said.

A level playing field must be ensured to gain the trust of all for the sake of holding the elections peacefully, said Sultana, adding "I would like to urge all concerned not to do anything that might put public lives in danger."

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.

"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.

Reach consensus

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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."

"I hope we will be able to present a peaceful, fair and credible election to the nation with everyone's help."

He asked the voters to choose on their own their representatives for the next parliament. "It is not just your constitutional right; it is your duty and responsibility."

On the enforcement of the electoral code of conduct, the CEC said, "I want to say categori-

cally that no leniency will be shown in applying the electoral code of conduct."

"It will not matter who holds what post. Stern action will be taken against the violator."

He mentioned that the EC appointed monitoring teams in all districts to look into any violations and take prompt action.

Rakibuddin also said the success of an election largely depends on the conduct of the candidates.

The EC wouldn't tolerate showdowns such as bringing out processions during the submission of nomination papers, and this type of violation of the electoral code may jeopardise one's candidacy, said the CEC.

He explained the electoral laws and called upon candidates and leaders of all political parties to comply with those.

More than a million seek China government jobs

AFP, Beijing

More than one million people took China's national civil service exam at the weekend in a modern version of an age-old rite, but faced huge odds against clinching one of the few government jobs available.

A total of 1.12 million took the National Public Servant Exam, according to figures from the State Administration of Civil Service figures.

But only 19,000 positions were available, the state-run Global Times newspaper said, meaning that fewer than 1 in 50 candidates will be successful.

The most competitive role was with the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, where 14,384 candidates were vying for just two jobs, it added.

Domestic reports said it was so popular because the application process appeared to be less arduous than for other positions.

Duties on newsprint

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The move came two months after the government agreed to reduce the duties on the imported newsprint following a tripartite meeting with the owners of the newspapers and leaders of the media community after the Eighth Wage Board was approved.

Following the meeting in September, the cabinet approved the decision and instructed the NBR to implement the decision.

The information ministry also recommended the reduction of the import duties.

Sources at the NBR said the value-added taxes and advance income tax for the newspaper industry would remain the same.

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.

Newsprint 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 to 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.

Schoolgirl burned

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Abdul Hamid, father of the victim, alleged that his nephew Dollar Sardar, 16, a student of class ten, had been offering Hasina, a class-seven student of a local girls' school, to enter into a relationship with him for the last one year.

"Disturbed by his behaviour, we had arranged for my daughter's marriage," he said.

Hearing the news, Dollar a month ago had threatened to harm Hasina if she did not marry him.

"Dollar threw acid at Hasina through holes in the corrugated iron sheet of her room on Sunday around 10:00pm when she was studying in the room, leaving her injured," Hamid alleged.

Abdul Hai Sarkar, officer-in-charge of Belkuchi Police Station, said on information, police rushed to Laxmipur, but both Dollar and his parents managed to flee.

The victim's family did not file any case in this connection till yesterday afternoon.

As there is no specialised treatment at Sirajganj General Hospital, Hasina was brought to Dhaka and admitted to ASE.

"Hasina suffered about two percent burns to her body," said on-duty doctor of ASE.

SC asks Rajuk

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challenging the legality of the project.

A five-member bench of the Appellate Division headed by Chief Justice Md Muzammel Hossain also asked the HC bench, led by Justice M Moazzam Husain, to dispose of the writ petition through holding its hearings in three months.

The apex court passed the order after hearing a petition collectively filed by Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association, Ain o Salish Kendra and five other rights organisations, saying that the two moujas, which have wetlands and forests, cannot be filled up without environmental clearance certificate.

Petitioners' lawyer Iqbal Kabir Lytton told The Daily Star that Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) cannot continue the construction work there following the SC order.

During yesterday's hearing, Deputy Attorney General Motaher Hossain Saju, also counsel for Rajuk, told the SC that the Rajuk has already filled up around 80 percent of the two areas for the construction of the project.

As there is sufficient reserve of forests in the two places, the housing project is not harmful to the environment, the lawyer mentioned.

He also prayed to the court to stay the HC's August 1 order that had asked the Rajuk to suspend its land development or financial activities for the project until it obtains clearance certificate from the Department of Environment in response to a writ petition filed by the same rights organisations.

On August 20, the chamber judge of the SC stayed the HC order upon a Rajuk petition.

The writ petitioners then filed the petition with the SC for vacating the chamber judge's order.

British women can check for partner's violent past

AFP, London

Women in England and Wales will be able to check police records to see if their partner has a history of domestic violence, the government said yesterday.

The "Clare's Law" scheme -- named after 36-year-old Clare Wood who was murdered by her ex-boyfriend in 2009 -- is expected to come into force in March following a year-long pilot in several parts of Britain.

Wood, a mother-of-one, had met George Appleton on Facebook and was unaware of his history of violence against women, including the kidnapping of another girlfriend at knife-point.

He strangled Wood and set her body on fire before hanging himself.

Work to ensure big turnout

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ruled out the BNP's demand for stepping down as head of the polls-time administration, they said.

"If I quit as chief of the polls-time government to meet the BNP's demand, it will not be a solution. To reach a consensus, both sides must come forward with a compromising attitude," a minister quoted Hasina as saying.

The premier said the Election Commission is an independent body and is running its affairs without any interference.

"I wanted the election to be held in December but it didn't, which means the election commission is working independently," she was quoted as saying by the minister, who talked to The Daily Star on condition of anonymity.

At the meeting, AL General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam briefed the premier about the outcome of talks with his BNP counterpart Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir in the capital's Banani on Saturday night.

Non-partisan polls-time government without Hasina, immediate release of all senior leaders and making the Naya Paltan central office free from confinement were the pre-conditions of the BNP to participate in the election, Ashraf told the PM.

Hasina also told the meeting that so many attempts on her life were made. "There were grenade and bomb attacks, but it is the Almighty Allah who saved me every time," the minister quoted Hasina as saying.

The premier asked the ministers and state ministers to play effective roles so that all

Home Secretary Theresa May said 88 British women had been killed by a violent partner or ex-partner last year, and that there was "considerable confusion" about whether police could share information on someone's violent past with the public.

"Domestic abuse shatters lives -- Clare's Law provides people with the information they need to escape an abusive situation before it ends in tragedy," she told The Sun newspaper.

"The national scheme will ensure that more people can make informed decisions about their relationship and escape if necessary.

"This is an important step towards ensuring we do better by women like Clare Wood in the future."

political parties could take part in the election.

She, however, said if BNP finally boycotts the election, it would be held according to the schedule.

"The dialogues are going on with all political parties except Jamaat," AL presidium member and Agricultural Minister Matia Chowdhury told The Daily Star.

She said the AL general secretary had already talked with BNP's acting secretary general and more such talks would take place as part of the effort to bring BNP to election.

Talking with a private TV channel at the Secretariat yesterday, Syed Ashraf said dialogue was not only going on at the general secretary-level but also at multiple levels in line with the desire of the PM.

The contents of the much-talked-about meeting with Fakhru would be disclosed through a press briefing within a day or two, he said.

"Prime Minister is very keen about the dialogue as she wants the participation of all in the election," he added.

On Sunday, some of the newly appointed ministers said the acceptability of the election would depend on how many voters cast their votes.

Addressing an inaugural ceremony of the newly constructed Dhaka Bar Association building at Dhaka court premises yesterday, Hasina reiterated her call upon the BNP to join the "all-party" polls-time government so that no confusion arises about the fairness of the election.

BGB's turn this time

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post of headmasters to second class officers and increase the existing pay of assistant teachers of 65,000 primary schools, said education ministry sources.

It is also going to implement separate pay scales for the central bank and four state-owned commercial bank employees.

On Sunday it formed a pay commission for 13 lakh government employees, even though the next government would be the one to implement it.

The jacking up of civil servant and servicemen's retirement age and perks would increase government spending putting pressure on the budget.

The government's total spending in July and August increased by eight percent from the same period of 2012. In July and August 2012,

it had only spent 0.2 percent more than it did in the same two months of 2011.

The government currently spends Tk 23,000 crore in salaries to civil servants and Tk 4,500 crore more would be needed just to pay 20 percent dearness allowance for civil servants, which was made effective since July.

Mirza Azizul Islam, a former finance adviser to a caretaker government, said, "The government's revenue earning growth is slow, and so the budget deficit will increase," he said.

Azizul said the government's bank borrowing would increase and have a negative impact on inflation. "These will create pressure on macro-economy," he claimed.

He said, "The government should increase its revenue collection to match the expenditure."

Seven advisers asked to quit

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Gowher Rizvi; and security adviser major gen (ret'd) Tarique Ahmed Siddique.

Party sources said one of these advisers might be in the end allowed to retain his post.

Earlier in the day, none of the prime minister's advisers was invited to the cabinet meeting though advisers used to attend such meetings during the tenure of the grand alliance government.

Cabinet Division sources said the advisers were not invited on instructions from the prime minister.

In January 2009, Hasina appointed seven advisers when she formed the alliance government. She allowed them to attend cabinet meetings, which drew severe criticism even from the ruling Awami League's rank and file.

Some senior AL leaders including Tofail Ahmed criticised in parliament the presence of unelected persons in cabinet meetings.

Contacted last night, Cabinet Secretary M Musharraf Hossain Bhuiyan said, "As per Rules of Business, only the ministers are provided folders (containing agenda and other documents of cabinet meeting). It is the prime minister's discretion whom she would invite, in addition."

He went on, "I wanted to know from her [PM] if the advisers should be invited, and she said that's not needed."

The PM recently made two cabinet members

-- Shafique Ahmed and Dilip Barua -- her advisers with the status of minister.

ErsHAD-led Jatiya Party's Ziauddin Bablu and Anwar Hossain Manju of Jatiya Party (Manju) were also made advisers as part of the PM's bid to bring as many political parties as possible in her polls-time government.

Asked, AL presidium member and Agricultural Minister Matia Chowdhury said, "The advisers are unelected, so they did not attend the cabinet meeting."

"They [advisers] will soon become busy with election-related activities," she said in reply to a question.

Contacted, Dilip Barua said, "When I was a minister, I used to get invitation with a folder. The Cabinet Division did not inform me anything about the meeting. I don't know the reasons behind this."

A senior Cabinet Division official said the advisers were not invited to cabinet meeting, as it would go against the spirit of the PM's announcement that no unelected person would be included in the polls-time administration.

All the 28 ministers and state ministers were present at yesterday's meeting held at the secretariat with Hasina in the chair.

Talking to journalists later, Musharraf quoted the PM as saying, "It is an all-party polls-time government as we offered all the political parties to join the new cabinet."

Govt goes for TV galore

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Former state minister for liberation war affairs AB Tajul Islam recommended approving "Titas TV" of Millennium Media Ltd.

Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, information adviser to the prime minister, is on the list as the managing director of "Dhaka Bangla Television" of Dhaka Bangla Media and Communication Ltd.

Sayem Sobhan, son of Bashundhara Group's Ahmed Akbar Sobhan, is the managing director of East-West Media Group's "News 24".

Mumtaj Begum, a lawmaker from reserved seats for women, has backed "Millennium TV" of Millennium Multimedia Pvt Ltd.

Munshiganj lawmaker Sukumar Ranjan made recommendation for "New Vision TV" of News and Image. Shah Alamgir is on the list as the chief executive officer of the channel.

Another lawmaker Shahriar Alam has been named as the chairman of "Renaissance TV" of

Barinda Media Ltd while AL lawmaker Khalid Mahmud has backed Rangdhanu Media's "Rangdhanu TV".

The government approved Independent Television, Ekattor TV, Mohona Television, Channel 9, GTV, Somoy TV, Maasranga TV, ATN News, My TV, Bijoy TV, Channel 24, and SATV in 2009 and 2010.

Meanwhile, those who were allowed to set up radio stations include top business groups Pran-RFL, Square and East-West Property Development (Bashundhara) group. A ruling party leader also got a licence, said an official of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

Sunil Kanti Bose, chairman of BTRC, said the regulator has received a list of newly approved radio stations on Sunday. The commission will soon discuss spectrum allocation with the radio stations.

He, however, could not say anything about the new TV stations.