



PHOTO: STAR

The mighty Jamuna devouring vast tracts of land at Mahmudnagar of Tangail yesterday. Many have lost their homesteads, cropland and groves to the erosion.

Putin 'ignoring' Russia's long-term interests: Obama

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama called his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin Friday to urge him to resolve the Ukraine crisis diplomatically, but acknowledged that sometimes people don't "act rationally."

"I think that we have done everything that we can to support the Ukrainian government and to deter Russia from moving further into Ukraine," Obama told a surprise news conference.

"But short of going to war, there are going to be some constraints in terms of what we can do if President Putin and Russia are ignoring what should be their long-term interests."

The White House said in a statement that during the call the US leader had repeated his concern about Moscow's alleged breach of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, under which the United States and Russia agreed not to develop medium-range cruise missiles.

"The president reinforced his preference for a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Ukraine, and the two leaders agreed to keep open their channels of

communication," a White House statement said.

Dismissing what he called "skepticism" about Washington's ability to coordinate with its European allies, Obama pointed to the new round of European Union and US sanctions imposed on Moscow this week for fomenting the unrest in eastern Ukraine, and stressed "we can't control how Mr. Putin thinks."

"Right now what we've done is impose sufficient costs on Russia that, objectively speaking, they should -- President Putin should want to resolve this diplomatically, to get these sanctions lifted, get their economy growing again, and have good relations with Ukraine," Obama told reporters.

"But sometimes people don't always act rationally and they don't always act based on their medium- or long-term interests. That can't deter us, though. We've just got to stay at it."

Separately, the Kremlin said the two leaders had agreed that the current situation in Ukraine -- where pro-Russian separatists are battling the government -- was not in either country's interest.

Putin also, according to the Kremlin, told Obama that Western economic sanctions were "counterproductive, causing serious damage to bilateral cooperation and international stability overall."

Vice President Joe Biden, meanwhile, called Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to announce the US was giving Ukraine \$8 million in new aid for the nation's border guards, amid what they called "Russia's deeply destabilizing efforts to continue supplying weapons to its proxies in eastern Ukraine."

The funds would be used for "engineering equipment for improving infrastructure along Ukraine's borders, transport and patrol vehicles," as well as surveillance equipment and small boats for maritime patrols.

Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby said Russia was continuing to reinforce its military presence along the border with Ukraine.

"It continues to be north of 10,000, the numbers, but it fluctuates," Kirby told reporters, adding troops were "close to the border, within 50 kilometers of the border -- closer than what we saw back in the spring."

Experts scour MH17 site for more remains

AFP, Grabove

International experts yesterday pushed down with their painstaking probe at the vast crash site of downed flight MH17 in eastern Ukraine, deploying sniffer dogs to help find any remains still left at the scene.

Some 70 Dutch and Australian police investigators were back for a second day to scour through the wreckage, while those leading the hunt have warned the grim task could take some three weeks to complete.

An AFP journalist, asked by the probe team to remain a few hundred metres from the investigators, saw search crews fanning out across a field and occasionally bending down to collect and bag objects.

A refrigerated ambulance van was on site to store any remains found, while armed rebel fighters kept an eye on the gathered journalists.

The shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines plane more than two weeks ago, killing all 298 people on board, refocused world attention on the conflict in Ukraine and pushed the United States and European Union into imposing the toughest sanctions against Moscow since the Cold War.

Washington accuses insurgents of blowing the airliner out of the sky with a surface-to-air missile likely supplied

by Russia, while Moscow and the rebels have pointed the finger at the Ukrainian military.

In a telephone call with Russian leader Vladimir Putin on Friday, US President Barack Obama expressed his "deep concerns" about Moscow's increased support for separatists rebels waging a brutal conflict against Kiev that has claimed more than 1,150 lives since mid-April.

"Right now what we've done is impose sufficient costs on Russia that, objectively speaking... president Putin should want to resolve this diplomatically, to get these sanctions lifted, get their economy growing again, and have good relations with Ukraine," Obama told an impromptu news conference.

"But sometimes people don't always act rationally," he added.

The Kremlin said the two leaders had agreed that the standoff in Ukraine -- where pro-Russian rebels are battling government forces -- was "not in the interest of either country".

But Putin lashed out at the latest economic sanctions as "counterproductive, causing serious damage to bilateral cooperation and international stability overall," the Kremlin said.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott welcomed the recovery of more remains from the crash site after a bulk

of the investigators managed for the first time Friday to reach the site after being thwarted by days of clashes between government troops and rebel fighters.

More than 220 coffins have already been sent back to the Netherlands, which lost 193 citizens in the July 17 crash, but more body fragments remain lying out in the cornfields where the plane came down.

"It is good that... we've had, for the first time, large numbers of Australian and Dutch police on site, large numbers of investigators on site who have been able to begin a thorough, professional search," Abbott told reporters.

But he warned that the probe at the crash site covering 20 square kilometres (eight square miles) would be "a long and slow process".

Even as the international team managed to begin work at the site, the fighting that had impeded their probe continues to rage across eastern Ukraine.

Ukraine's military said its positions across the region came under heavy fire overnight and that separatists had hit an army drone with a missile similar to the one they say downed MH17.

No new casualties were reported but an ambush some 24 hours earlier in a town 25 kilometres (15 miles) from the MH17 site left 14 people dead, including at least 10 soldiers.

296 children killed so far

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"They have been informed it is safe for civilians to return to Beit Lahiya and Al-Atatra," a spokeswoman told AFP, in what was understood to be a confirmation that troops had stopped operating there.

Witnesses in the north confirmed seeing troops leaving the area as others were seen leaving another flashpoint area in southern Gaza.

It was the first time troops had been seen pulling back since the start of Israel's devastating 26-day operation, which has so far claimed more than 1,660 Palestinian lives and displaced up to a quarter of the territory's population.

The move came after an army spokesman told AFP Israel was "quite close to completing" the destruction of tunnels used for infiltrating southern Israel -- the main objective of the ground operation.

Despite the partial withdrawal, Israel's security cabinet decided against sending a delegation to ceasefire talks with the Palestinians in Cairo, media reports said.

With a 12-member Palestinian delegation due to arrive for truce talks in Cairo, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said his country's truce proposal offered a "real chance to find a solution to the crisis" but that it must be implemented quickly to stop the bloodshed.

Chances of achieving a more permanent ceasefire nosedived on Friday after Israel said it believed Hamas militants had captured a 23-year-old soldier in a Friday morning ambush near the southern Gaza city of Rafah.

Immediately afterwards, Israel bombarded the Rafah area in shelling that is still ongoing, with medics saying it killed 114 people in 24 hours.

The alleged capture of Second Lieutenant Hadar Goldin drew sharp condemnation from the United Nations and the White House, which jointly brokered the abortive 72-hour truce and demanded his immediate release.

Hamas's armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, acknowledged its militants had staged an ambush early Friday in which soldiers were killed, but denied holding the soldier, saying the attackers were missing and presumed dead.

Israel considers the capture of its soldiers a casus belli, launching a 34-day war on the Lebanon's Hezbollah in 2006 after it seized two soldiers.

Around the same time, Gaza militants captured conscript Gilad Shalit and held him for five years before freeing him in exchange for more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners.

Jihadists kill 14 Iraq Kurds in battle

AFP, Arbil

Kurdish troops fought off a jihadist attack on an oil facility and a dam near the Iraqi city of Mosul but lost 14 of their number in intense combat, Kurdish sources said yesterday.

The Islamic State (IS), which controls the northern city, "attacked a peshmerga post in Zumar (Friday) and a fierce battle erupted," an official in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan told AFP.

He said 14 peshmerga fighters were killed, a toll confirmed by a senior officer in the Kurdish force.

The PUK official said the peshmerga killed "around 100" IS fighters and captured 38 in a battle that lasted several hours.

Zumar is a small Kurdish-majority outpost northwest of Mosul, which used to be under federal government control but was taken over by the peshmerga in June.

IS fighters, who had already been running large swathes of neighbouring Syria, launched a blistering offensive on June 9 that saw them capture Mosul, Iraq's second city, and move into much of the country's Sunni heartland.

Many government forces retreated in the face of the onslaught, and peshmerga troops seized the opportunity to fill the vacuum and seize long-coveted areas the Kurds were in dispute with Baghdad over.

When tears

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Mishu Kumar Shaha, 28, who runs a small a jewellery shop at Fulhari, was in critical condition at the ICU of another hospital in the same area.

Amit Kumar Biswas, 34, a betel leaf peddler, was groaning in pain at the National Institute of Traumatology, Orthopaedics and Rehabilitation when our correspondent visited him last night.

"Both of his legs have been crushed. We borrowed Tk 30,000 and already half of it is spent in transport cost. We need a lot of money to save him. I don't know to whom we should go for compensation," said his brother Pronab Kumar Biswas.

Some 30 others have been undergoing treatment at Jessore Medical College and Hospital, 14 at Jhenidah Sadar Hospital and four at a health complex in Kaliganj upazila, according to Afzal Hossain, officer-in-charge of Khulna Railway Police Station.

A case has been filed against the bus driver in connection with Friday's incident, reports out Jhenidah correspondent.

According to the railway rules, vehicles or people are to be blamed for any accident on railway tracks if they show negligence in crossing those, the OC said.

Gatemen Humayan Kabir and Barobazar Railway Station master Turki Ahmed, who were suspended for their alleged negligence to duty, have been on the run since the accident took place at Barobazar of Kaliganj in Jhenidah.

Meanwhile, Deputy Commissioner Shafiqul Islam of Jhenidah said a probe committee has been formed and asked to submit its report tomorrow. Punitive actions will be taken after that.

No headway

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Anisul Huq also said the next meeting of the taskforce would be held on August 14 where the progress made would be discussed.

At the meeting held on November 21, 2012 with the then law minister Shafigue Ahmed in the chair, the taskforce decided to confiscate property of the fugitive killers.

The Directorate of Registration under the law ministry has already identified land worth around Tk 50 crore owned by some of the fugitive killers and their families in seven districts.

A high official who attended the meetings of the taskforce told The Daily Star that the government had been trying to arrest the killers through Interpol, but they could not be traced.

The absconding killers are Khandaker Abdur Rashid, Shariful Haque Dalim, Nur Chowdhury, Rashed Chowdhury, Abdul Mazed and Moslehuddin Khan.

The Interpol has issued warrants of arrest for the killers, who have reportedly been changing location to evade arrest.

The government has so far traced only two convicts -- Nur Chowdhury in Canada and Rashed Chowdhury in the USA.

The government had earlier thought both Mazed and Moslehuddin had been hiding in India, but the Indian government could not trace them. Rashid was reportedly running a construction business in Libya and Dalim had been living in Pakistan.

The trial in Bangabandhu assassination case started in Dhaka in 1997, 22 years after disgruntled army men mowed down him and most of his family members on August 15, 1975.

The Appellate Division of the Supreme Court on November 19, 2009 upheld the death penalty of 12 convicted ex-army officers for the assassination.

Five of the convicts -- Syed Farooq Rahman, Sultan Shahriar Rashid Khan, Bazul Huda, AKM Mohiuddin Ahmed, and Mohiuddin Ahmed -- were hanged on January 27, 2010, while a sixth convict, Aziz Pasha, died in Zimbabwe in 2001.

Australia launches 'Green Army' for environment

AFP, Sydney

Australia yesterday launched its 'Green Army' which plans to recruit up to 15,000 young people for projects to conserve and rehabilitate the environment.

Under the scheme, teams of young people will do work such as planting trees, restoring koala habitats, cleaning up creeks and rivers, conserving cultural heritage sites and monitoring threatened species.

"The Green Army is on the march from today," Prime Minister Tony Abbott told reporters at a site in Sydney which will be revitalised through the initiative.

"It's the largest environmental workforce Australia has ever mobilised for land care."

Abbott, who once described climate change science as "absolute crap" and whose government recently abolished a carbon tax aimed at reducing greenhouse emissions, said the Green Army would make a practical difference.

"I regard myself as a conservationist -- always have, always will," he said. "There can be no more practical conservation measure than this Green Army work here and, increasingly, right around our country."

Abbott urged young people between 17 and 24 with a passion for the environment to sign on to the scheme under which they will spend six months on a project and be paid a wage similar to that of a traineeship of

about Aus\$10-\$16 (US\$9.30-\$14.90) an hour.

Environmental groups have been critical of Abbott's government which last month gave the environmental go ahead for a massive coal mine in central Queensland.

In June, conservationists hailed a UNESCO decision to reject an Australian government bid to revoke World Heritage status for parts of the Tasmanian Wilderness.

The UN's cultural body has also said Australia's Great Barrier Reef could be put on a list of endangered World Heritage Sites if more is not done to protect it.

The reef is under growing pressure not just from climate change and the destructive coral-eating crown-of-thorns starfish, but agricultural runoff and rampant coastal development linked to mining.

Environment Minister Greg Hunt said the Green Army scheme would start with 196 projects but the government hopes that there will be 1,500 projects around the country over the next three years.

"It's about projects around Australia... which will help improve river banks, revegetate, encourage threatened species' recovery, shore up sand dunes, be engaged in the health and rehabilitation of both urban and rural landscapes," he said.

"Secondly, it's about ensuring that young people have training and work skills and opportunity."

Gaza strikes to continue

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quiet to Israel's citizens and we will continue to act until that aim is achieved. We will take as much time as necessary, and will exert as much force as needed," he said in a public address.

"All options are on the table to return peace to the citizens of Israel."

The Israeli prime minister also threatened yesterday to exact an "intolerable price" from the Gaza Strip's dominant Hamas Islamists should there be continued attacks from the Palestinian territory.

"We do not accept a continuation of the shooting," Netanyahu told reporters. "It [Hamas] will have to understand, however long that takes, that it will pay an intolerable price, from its perspective, for continuation of the shooting."

He said troops would complete the mission of destroying a complex network of tunnels used by militants to infiltrate southern Israel before deciding on its next security objectives.

"After the completion of our activity against the tunnels, the IDF (army) will prepare to continue our activities according to security needs, and only according to our security needs, until we achieve the objective of returning security to the citizens of Israel," he said.

He also pledged to do whatever necessary to bring home 23-year-old soldier Hadar Goldin, who Israel believes was captured by Palestinian militants during an ambush in southern Gaza early on Friday.

Following the quick collapse of the ceasefire in Gaza, Netanyahu told the White House not to force a truce with Palestinian militants.

Sources familiar with conversations between Netanyahu and senior US officials, including the secretary of state, John Kerry, say the Israeli leader advised the Obama administration "not to ever second-guess me again" on the matter.

The officials also said Netanyahu said he should be "trusted" on the issue and about the unwillingness of Hamas to enter into and follow through on ceasefire talks.

The Obama administration on Friday condemned "outrageous" violations of an internationally brokered Gaza ceasefire by Palestinian militants and called the apparent capture of an

Israeli soldier a "barbaric" action.

The strong reaction came as top Israeli officials questioned the effort to forge the truce, accusing the US and the United Nations of being naive in assuming Hamas would adhere to its terms. The officials also blamed the Gulf state of Qatar for not forcing the militants to comply.

Despite the collapse of the truce, Obama credited Kerry for his work with the United Nations to forge one. He lamented criticism and "nitpicking" of Kerry's attempts and said the effort would continue.

Kerry negotiated the truce with the UN secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, in a marathon session of phone calls over several days while he was in India on an official visit. Kerry had spent much of the past two weeks in Egypt, Israel, the West Bank and France trying to mediate a ceasefire, with Qatar and Turkey playing a major role because of their close ties with Hamas.

An Israeli official said the Netanyahu government viewed both Hamas and Qatar as having violated the commitment given to the US and the UN and that it expected the international community to take practical steps as part of a "strong and swift response", especially regarding the return of the abducted soldier.

In a phone call with US ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro, Netanyahu vented his anger, according to people familiar with the call.

Netanyahu told Shapiro the Obama administration was "not to ever second-guess me again" and that Washington should trust his judgment on how to deal with Hamas, according to the people.

Netanyahu added that he now "expected" the US and other countries to fully support Israel's offensive in Gaza, according to those familiar with the call. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to discuss the matter by name.

They said Netanyahu made similar points to Kerry, who himself denounced the attack as "outrageous," saying it was an affront to assurances to respect the ceasefire given to the United States and United Nations, which brokered the truce.

[Reports from AFP, Reuters, The Guardian]

Pistol found in car

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Officer-in-Charge Abdul Majid of Dhaka Railway Police Station said, "The Austrian-made pistol with 12 bullets was licensed to Nur Hossain."

Police could not find the weapon that was believed to be used for the other eight bullets.

Nur and his family had 11 licensed weapons. Nine had been seized by police after the murders on 27 April. The other two had remained missing ever since, according to Siddhirganj police of Narayanganj.

"There were lots of new clothes, including expensive saris, cosmetics and toiletries, and men's wear inside the car," said Sub-Inspector Arefin Imam of Dhaka Railway Police Station.

"Since Nur had told an Indian court that he would seek bail when his family members visited him in India, we believe that the passengers intended to go to India with the clothes and cosmetics as gifts," he said.

Police said they would be able to learn more from Nur's alleged associate Rahman once the latter's condition improved.

Dhaka railway police and Narayanganj police claimed that another reported passenger of the car, Nur-e-Alam Khan, is Nur Hossain's brother-in-law.

Alam had received treatment in another hospital in Panthapath on Friday and left before police reached there.

Police are yet to identify the three other occupants of the car.

Meanwhile, Shahidul Islam, father-in-law of one of the victims of the seven-murder Nazrul Islam, told The Daily Star that they would soon launch a movement demanding that Nur Hossain be brought back home to stand trial.

He alleged that the government was dillydallying over his repatriation, fearing Nur Hossain's confession would mention names of many political big shots.