

N Korea threatens 'merciless' strike against US-South drill

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday warned of a possible "merciless" pre-emptive strike as it blasted an upcoming joint US-South Korean military exercise as a rehearsal for nuclear war.

South Korea vowed to go ahead from Monday with the annual Ulchi Freedom Guardian drill, which is aimed at testing readiness to combat any North Korean invasion.

Although largely played out on computers, the exercise involves tens of thousands of South Korean and US troops.

In a statement carried Sunday by the official Korean Central News Agency, the North's military accused Washington and Seoul of planning a "dangerous" rehearsal for nuclear war.

"We declare once again that we will mercilessly open the strongest... pre-emptive strike of our own style any time at our discretion," it said.

North Korean soldiers were ready to "turn the strongholds of aggression into a sea of fire and ashes", the statement said.

"Our troops will strongly retaliate against any provocations from North Korea," the South's joint chiefs of staff warned in a statement.

Tensions have been high on the Korean peninsula following an extended series of North Korean missile and rocket tests in recent months.

UN resolutions bar the North from any launches using ballistic missile technology.

The nuclear-armed communist country has defended the tests as a legitimate exercise in self-defence.

Seoul had proposed holding high-level talks with Pyongyang to discuss family reunions for those separated by the 1950-53 Korean War and other issues of "mutual interest".

But there has been no official response from Pyongyang.

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properly perform the functions of his office.

The current provision has to be scrapped to restore the parliament's authority.

If the cabinet approves the proposal, the law ministry will complete the procedure to place it as a bill in the upcoming parliament session scheduled to begin on September 1.

The 1972 constitution empowered parliament to impeach SC judges.

But the Awami League-led government in early 1975 conferred the power on the president through the fourth constitutional amendment.

Military ruler Gen Ziaur Rahman, who amended the constitution through martial law proclamation in 1978, scrapped the president's power and introduced the supreme judicial council system.

The AL-led government kept the system almost as it was, while passing the 15th amendment to the constitution in 2011.

The Supreme Judicial Council has so far probed allegations of misconduct brought against four SC judges in 38 years since its inception.

The president sacked only one judge as per recommendations of the council. Two other judges resigned before completion of the inquiry by the council and another was cleared off the charges.

Scientists get

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to the speed of light.

The light shining from the corona lit the part of the black hole that scientists were studying, which the agency described as almost as if a torch had been shone on the exact place they were looking at.

The black hole involved is known as Markarian 335, and is about 324 million light-years from Earth. The mass of around 10 million of our suns is packed into a space only 30 times as big, and the spinning black hole pulled space and time around with it.

Studying the blurring could help scientists to better understand black hole coronas, which until now have been mysterious.

It might also help demonstrate some of the effects described in Einstein's theory of relativity, because of the particles' speed.

"NuSTAR's unprecedented capability for observing this and similar events allows us to study the most extreme light-bending effects of general relativity," said Fiona Harrison, who is NuSTAR principal investigator and based at the California Institute of Technology.

Victims of Colombia's armed conflict testify

AFP, Havana

Victims of the decades-old conflict pitting FARC rebels against government forces testified at peace talks Saturday, pushing for "truth" to form the foundation of any accord.

The 12 victims, some of whom came face-to-face with representatives of the perpetrators for the first time, testified during a closed-door session that lasted nearly nine hours.

"During the day, we agreed that truth is the basis for peace," they said in a statement presented to the press by six of the victims.

They also said they stood against an "impunity exchange" in which military members and guerrillas who committed crimes during the half-century conflict would be granted immunity from punishment as a condition for peace.

A woman whose disabled son was kidnapped and murdered by soldiers was among a group of witnesses to testify at the peace talks.

"This is an unprecedented step of immense significance," President Juan Manuel Santos said in Bogota ahead of the testimony, the first time victims of Colombia's five-decade armed conflict have addressed the talks.

The closed-door hearing began at 9:00 am (1300 GMT) in a residential

complex in Havana that normally hosts visiting foreign dignitaries.

Reparations for victims is one of the most sensitive items on a six-point agenda for the talks in the Cuban capital because each side blames the other for violence that has killed 220,000 people and caused more than five million others to flee their homes.

The dozen witnesses -- the first of a group of 60 who will testify -- include people who have lost loved ones in some of the worst massacres that have rocked Colombia in recent years.

The massacres were committed by leftist rebels, police and soldiers, far-right paramilitary groups and drug traffickers, all related to the broader conflict between the Colombian government and the FARC, also known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

One of those who testified was Leyner Palacios, leader of a group of people whose relatives were slaughtered in the so-called Bojaya Massacre in 2002.

In the western town of Bojaya, "79 people who sought refuge in a church died. The FARC launched a cylinder bomb amid a clash with a paramilitary group," said the committee in charge of choosing witnesses.

Flood tightens grip

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LALMONIRHAT

People in the flood hit areas are yet to receive any relief materials from the government or any non-government organisation. Some have taken shelter in school and college buildings but most of the affected people are still at their homestead under knee to waist-deep water.

Water level of Teesta and Dharla rivers decreased yesterday, according to the Water Development Board (WDB) office of Lalmonirhat.

Nabir Hossain, 48, of Chander Char village in Aditmari upazila, said, "We have been suffering a lot since Friday night... We cannot cook as our houses are under water. So, we are living on dry foods like flattened rice and puffed rice".

Lalmonirhat Deputy Commissioner Habibur Rahman said relief materials would be distributed among the affected people of Patgram, Kaliganj, Hatibandha, Aditmari and Sadar upazilas who have been marooned for the last few days, today and tomorrow.

GAIBANDHA

Onrush of water from the upstream flooded vast tracts of shoals in the Teesta and the Jamuna basins, leaving over 5,000 people of char lands in Sundarganj and Phulchari upazilas stranded yesterday.

In the Teesta basin, over 3,000 flood-hit people shifted to locally built flood shelters and nearby high lands with their cattle and belongings while at least 2,000 people are marooned in four shoal unions along the Jamuna basin in Phulchari Upazila.

Recently planted Aman saplings in the low lying are damaged and jute plants stacked on the dried up tributaries washed away by the surging water.

NILPHAMARI

The flood situation in Dimla and Jaldhaka upazilas has improved as the Teesta waters have started receding.

Khaleda knew

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Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) claimed responsibility for the bombings.

"Khaleda Zia wanted to give rise to militant outfits like al-Qaeda, IS and Talibans in Bangladesh as in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, and August 21 grenade attack was the part of her plan," said Ashraf, also the LGRD minister.

He alleged that former president Ziaur Rahman was involved in the Bangabandhu assassination, saying Anthony Mascarenhas, ex-assistant editor of Karachi-based Morning News, wrote about the rise of Zia in a book.

He made mention of a report run by The Daily Star on Saturday, based on books including Mascarenhas' "Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood".

"Zia's aim was to create a political force by killing Bangabandhu and his family members. But it is unfortunate for Khaleda Zia that Zia's plan was not fully implemented as Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana [daughters of Bangabandhu] was abroad and escaped the massacre," the AL general secretary said.

AL leaders Matia Chowdhury, Sahara Khatun, Mahabubul Alam Hanif and Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya also addressed the event, while the city AL's acting president, MA Aziz, was in the chair.

At another programme yesterday, AL Presidium Member Mohammad Nasim alleged a section of "opportunists" have been using the party name for wrongdoing.

"Awami League organises its programmes with own fund. But there are some opportunists who use the party name for extortion targeting any special occasion," he said, responding to a query during the monthly "Meet the Press" of Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU).

Nasim, also spokesperson for AL-led 14-party alliance, turned down any possibility of midterm national election.

"There is no provision in the Constitution about midterm election and the next election will be held under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina in 2019," the AL leader said and hoped the BNP would join the 2019 national elections.

He also said BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia made a big mistake by not participating in the January 5 polls and she is paying for her mistake.

Nasim, also health and family welfare minister, said the government would assist BNP if they launch issue-based programme and hoped that the party would not create anarchy in name of movement.

Held at the DRU auditorium, the programme was also addressed by DRU President Shahed Chowdhury and General Secretary Elias Khan.

Pope pushes dialogue with Asian nations like China

AFP, Haemi

Pope Francis yesterday championed a "creative" Catholicism in Asia that reflects the region's diversity, and urged countries like China and North Korea to respond by fostering a proper dialogue with the Vatican.

In a speech to Catholic bishops from 22 Asian countries, the pope said the Church had no choice but to adapt when communicating its message across a region of dramatic contrasts.

"On this vast continent, which is home to a great variety of cultures, the Church is called to be versatile and creative," he told the bishops at a martyrs' shrine some 150 kilometres south of Seoul on the penultimate day of a visit to South Korea.

It is the first papal visit for 15 years to Asia -- a region the Vatican sees as having enormous growth potential to offset dwindling numbers in the United States and Europe.

But nearly a dozen Asian countries have no formal ties with the Holy See, including China -- the great elephant in the Vatican's Asian room -- which bars its Catholics from recognising the pope's authority.

In a "spirit of openness", Francis appealed for a fresh start based on mutual respect and cooperation.

"I honestly hope that those countries of your continent with whom the Holy See does not enjoy a full relationship, may not hesitate to further a dialogue for the benefit of all," he told the bishops.

Mohsin

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and journalists.

However, Mohsin regretted his words the next day.

Earlier, the minister came down hard on journalists on July 22, saying a law would be formulated to make sure the electronic media had no freedom.

'Chased

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into the river after reportedly being chased by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) on Friday evening, but failed to swim ashore, said Aminul Islam, camp commander of Dharmadah BGB in Meherpur.

Razzak, son of Shahidul Islam in Bahermadi village of Kushtia's Daulatpur upazila, along with five others of the village went to India through Kazipur border on June 2 in search of work there without legal documents, according to Gangni police.

Aminul Islam quoting Ashab Ali, who was with Razzak, said a BSF team from Shikarpur camp in Nadia district of Pashimbangla chased the Bangladeshis while they were returning home through the same border around 7:30pm on Friday.

The Bangladeshis ran fast and jumped into the river to avoid arrest. Of them, Razzak failed to swim ashore, he said.

BGB members recovered the body of Razzak after a search in the river around 10:30pm on Saturday.

The BSF of Shikarpur camp, however, denied chasing Bangladeshis when the BGB communicated with the BSF, the BGB official added.

BMET denies

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immigrants enter Hong Kong by boat in the past year.

"The migrants, most of them from Bangladesh or Pakistan, fly into cities across mainland China and head to Shenzhen, where they pay middlemen HK\$10,000 to HK\$12,000 to take them to Hong Kong by high-speed sampan, according to a number of migrants and people with a knowledge of the racket."

There had been a significant rise in the number of non-ethnic-Chinese illegal immigrants being arrested in Hong Kong, it added.

Kamal, a Bangladeshi living in Hong Kong, told the South China Morning Post that many South Asians had been trying to enter the region illegally since the visa restrictions were tightened in the last decade.

"Please stop them from coming here. It's ridiculous and horrible," said Kamal, who has seen a number of compatriots trapped in "seemingly endless cycles of incarceration" after their arrival in Hong Kong.

Visa-free access to Hong Kong for Bangladeshi nationals was withdrawn in 2006.

BMET DG Shamsun Nahar noted that Bangladeshi males usually do not go to Hong Kong to work but many females go there under legal agreements. Some 2,000 Bangladeshi females were legally working as maids in Hong Kong, she added.

Armed forces taken

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Having seized the presidency, Moshtaque in his address to the nation lauded the role of the "armed forces" in the changeover.

"The armed forces had to come forward since it was not possible to change the governance system as per [constitutional] provisions despite expectation from all quarters of the change," Moshtaque said. He added, "The armed forces have opened the golden gate of possibilities before the nation by performing their duties with utmost sincerity."

Moshtaque in fact was reading from the script prepared by the killers.

The presidential address set the tune. Propaganda was in full swing in the next day's daily newspapers, four in number, controlled by the killers and their men in the new government.

"The Bangladesh armed forces took over power under the leadership of President Khandaker Moshtaque Ahmed in the greater national interest on Friday by overthrowing former President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Sheikh Mujib was killed at his residence during the takeover by the armed forces," said the government-controlled daily Dainik Bangla in the first paragraph of its lead report on August 16.

The news report was released by the state-owned news agency Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS).

The daily had the eight-column banner headline: "Khandker Moshtaque new President." The shoulder of the lead report said: "Sheikh Mujib killed: martial law and curfew imposed: armed forces express allegiance."

It also published a special editorial on the front page under headline "Historic Step", welcoming and appreciating the new regime and its killers.

"A historic transition has begun in national life. The patriotic armed forces took over power under the leadership of seasoned people's leader Khandaker Moshtaque Ahmed. Brave soldiers, the custodians of independence, have performed their inevitable duties in the greater national interest," commented the editorial.

Likewise, the Dainik Bangla and the Bangladesh Times, both government-controlled newspapers, had identical first paragraphs: "The armed forces took over power in the greater national interest under the leadership of the President Khondaker Moshtaque Ahmed...."

The daily Ittefaq and the

Around 70,000

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Daily Star on Tuesday.

He said they would check the names that were not included in the Red Book or the Indian government's list.

Besides, after 43 years of the liberation, the government has also decided to finalise a definition of freedom fighters as the ministry has been facing problems to identify the war heroes in the absence of a clear definition of freedom fighters.

Former chairman of Muktiyoddha Sangsad central command council Ahad Chowdhury said the government initiatives were very good, but the scrutiny should be done by actual freedom fighters.

After scrutinising these 70,000 people, the ministry will also investigate the freedom fighters whose names were included in the Red Book. The ministry thinks that many fake freedom fighters were included in the Red Book, sources said.

The ministry has made the decision in efforts to prepare a final and authentic freedom fighters' list.

Over the past 43 years since liberation, successive governments have prepared five lists of freedom fighters, but every list was incomplete.

The number of freedom fighters on the first list made in 1987 during the rule of HM Ershad was 69,000, while the number shot up to 1.8 lakh in

Bangladesh Observer, the other state run media, ran the same reports on the August 15 gruesome murders and changeover of power.

Like the Dainik Bangla, Ittefaq also published a special editorial on the front page, terming the changeover a "historic new beginning."

The killers, however, were able to abuse the opportunity to control the media thanks to the Bangabandhu government's decision taken a few months before August 15, 1975.

After the formation of the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (Baksal), the Bangabandhu government had allowed only four newspapers and shut down the rest.

The Dainik Bangla and the Bangladesh Times were already state-owned and the government had nationalised in June 1975 the Ittefaq and the Bangladesh Observer.

There was no privately owned newspaper at that time to run independent news reports on the August 15 killings and changeover. And there were no media to tell people the truth.

The nation was, however, told the truth just once after the changeover led by Brig Gen Khaled Mosharraf on November 3. Khandaker Moshtaque was removed from the presidency and then Chief Justice Sayem took office as president on November 6.

In his address to the nation through state-run radio and television, Justice Sayem said: "Some retired and serving military officers killed the then president and his family members through a coup. Khandaker Moshtaque Ahmed took over the office of president and declared martial law. In fact, the armed forces had no link with the incident."

But things took a new turn with the November 7 counter coup staged by the followers of General Ziaur Rahman and the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal.

Gen Zia, who was removed from the post of chief of army staff on November 3, resumed his old job when Khaled Mosharraf's coup collapsed on November 7. Zia began consolidating his position through hectic measures. It was Zia who then led the army in grabbing power.

At the end of November, Gen Zia forced Justice Sayem to hand over to him the office of chief martial law administrator. And on April 21, 1977, army chief Gen Zia forced Justice Sayem to resign from the presidency and he himself became president. Thus, the army under the leadership of Gen Zia finally seized state power.

1988, only to slide to 83,000 in 1994.

In 1999, during the AL government, the count rose to 1.54 lakh. The number stood at 1.98 lakh in the list prepared by the BNP government in 2002. The number of freedom fighters is now 2.12 lakh.

Besides, 1.02 lakh applications for freedom fighters' certificates are pending.

A meeting of Jatiya Muktiyoddha Council on August 6 took the decision to finalise a definition of freedom fighters and formed a sub-committee with former Primary and Mass Education minister Motaheer Hossain as chief.

About the decision, Mozammel Haque said the ministry wanted to provide freedom fighters' certificates only to those who actively participated in the war and that their task would be easier after finalising the definition.

According to the Bangladesh (Freedom Fighters) Welfare Trust Order, 1972, a freedom fighter is a "person who served as a member of any force engaged in the war of liberation but shall not include the serving members of the defence services, police or the civil armed forces, or any government pensioner, or any other person having any regular source of income."

But the ministry thinks this definition is incomplete.

Water shortages add to Gaza misery

AFP, Gaza City

Feriel al-Zaaneen hasn't had a shower in more than a month. Like thousands of Palestinians, she doesn't have enough water to wash, adding to the miseries of life in war-battered Gaza.

In searing summer heat, where temperatures can reach 34 degrees Celsius, (93 Fahrenheit), Feriel is one of more than 218,000 refugees sheltering in 87 UN-run schools from a conflict that has killed at least 1,980 Palestinians and 67 on the Israeli side since July 8.

"There's no water here and the toilets are very dirty, this is no kind of life," she said.

Zaaneen, her children and grandchildren, some 50 people, fled the Israeli bombardment of their homes.

She says she faces a daily struggle to get water, a precious resource in the

Hamas-controlled enclave which has been under Israeli blockade since 2006.

The UN says that 365,000 Palestinians are still displaced in Gaza, like 37-year-old Faten al-Masri, who has to wash her children with bottles of drinking water.

As she sprinkles cold water on her two-year-old daughter, the toddler screams, her skin covered in angry red blotches.

"All my children got sick here because of the dirt and the lack of hygiene, they've all got skin infections and scabs," Faten said.

"There is no water in the bathrooms, and they were so dirty that we couldn't even go inside," she said.

"I have been bathing my sons every three days here in the classroom with bottles of water."