

Recovery delayed

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The massive hunt for 162 people who vanished Sunday aboard the Airbus A320 traveling from Surabaya, Indonesia, to Singapore, was severely limited due to heavy rain, wind and thick clouds.

Seven bodies, including a flight attendant in her red AirAsia uniform, have been recovered, said Indonesian Search and Rescue Agency chief Henry Bambang Soelistyo yesterday.

A navy spokesman told AFP on Tuesday that more than 40 bodies had been recovered, but he later said that report was a miscommunication by his staff.

Sonar images also identified what appeared to be large parts of the plane, but strong currents were moving the debris.

Conditions prevented divers from entering the choppy Java Sea, and helicopters were largely grounded. But 18 ships continued to scour the narrowed search area, and four of the seven corpses were recovered yesterday.

Indonesia's Meteorology and Geophysics Agency predicted conditions would worsen, with more intense rains, through tomorrow.

"It seems all the wreckage found has drifted more than 50 kilometres from yesterday's location," said Vice Air Marshal Sunarbowo Sandi, search and rescue coordinator in Pangkalan Bun on Borneo island, the closest town to the site. "We are expecting those bodies will end up on beaches."

The airliner's disappearance half-way through the two-hour flight triggered an international search involving dozens of planes, ships and heli-

copters from numerous countries. It is still unclear what brought the plane down.

Its last communication indicated the pilots were worried about bad weather. They sought permission to climb above threatening clouds but were denied because of heavy air traffic. Four minutes later, the jet disappeared from the radar without issuing a distress signal.

The aircraft's cockpit voice and flight data recorders, or black boxes, must be recovered before officials can start determining what caused the crash. Items recovered so far include a life jacket, an emergency exit window, children's shoes, a blue suitcase and backpacks filled with food.

Simple wooden coffins - numbered 001 and 002 - with purple flowers on top contained the first two bodies, which were sent from Pangkalan Bun to Surabaya for autopsies. The two victims were a woman wearing blue jeans and a boy. The other five bodies - three male and two female - will remain on a warship until the weather clears.

Nearly all the passengers were Indonesian, and a large portion were Christians of Chinese descent, reports AP.

Around 100 relatives yesterday gathered for the airport prayer service where Mantofa urged them to hold onto their faith, despite their pain.

"Some things do not make sense to us, but God is bigger than all this," he said. "Our God is not evil."

Before breaking up, those gathered

stood together and sang with their hands reaching upward. "I surrender all. I surrender all," they repeated. "I surrender all to God our savior. I surrender all."

Many family members had planned to travel to Pangkalan Bun, 160 kilometres from the area where bodies were first spotted, to start identifying their loved ones. However, Surabaya airport general manager Trikora Hardjo later said the trip was cancelled after authorities suggested their presence could slow down the operation.

Instead, some relatives gave blood for DNA tests in Surabaya, where the bodies will be transported, and submitted photos of their loved ones along with identifying information such as tattoos or birthmarks that could help make the process easier.

Nearly all the passengers from Indonesia were frequent visitors to Singapore, particularly on holidays.

It was 13-year-old Adrian Fernando's first trip to the city-state and was supposed to be a fun vacation with his aunt, uncle and cousin before school resumed.

"He is my only son," said his emotional mother Linca Gonimasela, 39, who could not accompany him because she had to work. "At first, he didn't want to go, but later on he was persuaded to join them for the New Year holiday."

A number of Indonesian cities have opted to cancel or tone down their planned New Year's Eve celebrations. However, a giant street bash was still in the works for the capital, Jakarta.

In Surabaya, hundreds stood in a drizzle holding candles in a park.

Hold dialogue

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proposals or it will face a movement," Khaleda said at an emergency press conference called at her Gulshan office on New Year's Eve.

The ruling Awami League, however, ruled out any possibility of talks later in the night. Party publicity and publication affairs secretary Hasan Mahamud said the next parliament elections would be in 2019.

"There is no scope for talking about any midterm elections. Talks could be held to move the country forward. But the Awami League will not sit with any political parties which have links with war criminals and militants," he said at his party chief's Dhanmondi office.

Khaleda's seven-point proposal include creating a level playing field for all political parties, reconstitution of the Election Commission with impartial, competent and honest people before the election schedule is announced, making the voter list error free, dissolving parliament and cabinet before the election schedule is announced, handing over power to an impartial, non-party administration through consensus among all political parties, and deploying members of the armed forces with magistracy power to ensure a peaceful atmosphere conducive to fair polls soon after announcement of the election schedule.

She also proposed conducting a special drive to arrest criminals and recover illegal arms before election campaign begins, withdrawing controversial, partisan officials from the administration and law enforcement agencies, release of all "political prisoners", withdrawing of "false cases" against political leaders and

reopening all print and electronic outlets shut down during the Awami League-led rule.

Asked whether she demands release of Jamaat leaders convicted of war crimes, she replied those who have committed crimes must be punished. "But the trial must be impartial having international standards ... We have noticed that many people are being implicated in false charges," she said without mentioning any name.

Asked whether her party would take part in elections arranged according to the rules laid down by this constitution, Khaleda said we have clearly stated the next polls must be held under a non-party administration.

She also urged all democratic parties, forces and individuals to unite for waging a national movement to establish a government of the people.

As her attention was drawn to the ruling party leaders' remarks that the next national election would not be held before 2019, the BNP chief said the government which does not represent people is illegal.

"Despite that we have given them one year's time. Now we want a free, fair and inclusive election as soon as possible," she added.

Reiterating her party-led alliance's stance on a free and fair election, Khaleda said the government has to hold an election with the participation of all political parties, no matter what they say.

Asked whether her party thinks the international community, including the UN, should play a role to end the ongoing political standoff, the former premier replied in the negative.

Replying to a question whether her

party has the organisational strength to wage a movement, she said, "BNP is a well organised party and it is completely ready to hit the streets with a tough action programme."

Khaleda said they would observe January 5 as "democracy killing day" with rallies, black flag processions and demonstrations across the country.

"We want to hold a rally on January 5 and we hope we will be allowed to do that peacefully. We will gradually come up with our action programmes. No one will be able to subdue people's movement by creating obstacles and unleashing attacks on them."

On her son Tarique Rahman's recent remarks that Bangabandhu was a Razzakar, she said Tarique had no said it in that way. She, however, claimed that what Tarique had said was based on facts and documents.

Khaleda

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the higher authorities.

Zakir also said he requested the police to give Khaleda 24 hours security everywhere.

Around 200 Chhatra League men, equipped with iron rods and sticks, swooped on the activists of BNP and its front organisations on December 24, turning Bakshibazar into a battle ground. At least 45 people were injured in the fight that lasted for over half an hour.

On that day, the Special Judge's Court-3 of Dhaka fixed January 7 for further proceedings of the cases and asked Khaleda and other accused to remain present at the court.

Floods kill 21 in Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

At least 21 people have been killed and eight others are missing after the worst flooding in decades across Malaysia's northeast, police said yesterday, with almost a quarter of a million people displaced.

They said 14 of the deaths were recorded in the worst-hit state of Kelantan, where some 158,476 people were displaced.

Four people died in Terengganu and three in Pahang state. There are also reports of outbreaks of flu and diarrhoea.

The number forced from their homes in the other affected states -- Pahang, Perak, Terengganu and Johor -- totalled 83,570.

Forecasters yesterday predicted clear skies for the next three days.

"But we are still in the northeast monsoon period until March. We could expect heavy showers later in the week," a meteorological department official said.

Floodwaters have begun to subside in many areas but authorities are bracing for possible disease outbreaks.

Noor Hisham Abdullah, health ministry director-general, said there was no major rise in flood-related diseases at the moment.

"We anticipate that flood victims will come in masses seeking care once the floodwaters start to recede," he said in a Facebook posting.

Senior Chinese official dismissed

AFP, Beijing

A senior Chinese Communist Party official who was a close aide to former President Hu Jintao has been removed from his post, state media said yesterday, amid a corruption investigation.

Ling Jihua was dismissed as the head of the United Front Work Department of the party's Central Committee, the People's Daily said in a one-line report.

Anti-corruption authorities have opened an investigation into Ling for "suspected serious disciplinary violations" -- normally a euphemism for corruption -- the official Xinhua News Agency reported last week.

He is also vice chairman of the national committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Halt vessel movement

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week-long visit to the world's largest mangrove forest to assess the impact of the recent oil spill.

"It is an initial report over the oil spill in the Sundarbans and the final one will be made public after two weeks," she said.

Regarding the fallout of the accident, Wahlstrom said, the immediate visible impact of the spill was "limited", thanks to some circumstantial factors.

Timely tidal variations and the decision to ban tanker traffic in the Shela river minimised the penetration of oil into the ecosystem, the team observed.

However, the accident must be considered serious as it occurred in a wildlife sanctuary and world heritage site -- treasured for its unique biodiversity, they added.

Wahlstrom said it is not possible to determine the actual impact from a single sample testing.

"We need to continue the monitoring to find long-term impact of the incident

on the Sundarbans," she added.

Environment and Forest Minister Anwar Hossain Manju; his deputy Abdullah Al Islam Jacob; Nazibor Rahman, secretary of the ministry; and Beatrice Kaldune, acting UN resident coordinator, were also present at the briefing.

Claiming that the government was placing the highest importance on the issue, Manju said, "We are discussing different options for carrying goods to the Mongla port without using the Shela river."

The government would work as per the recommendations of experts to minimise the damage and protect the Sundarbans, the minister said.

The Southern Star-7 sank in the Shela with 3.58 lakh litres of furnace oil on December 9.

Besides studying the environment and wildlife, the joint team of 25 experts from home and abroad studied the impact of the oil spill on human health as well.

Third border

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The work for setting up of necessary infrastructure of the haat at Srinagar was completed over a couple of months ago, and it was ready to be opened, said sources at the commerce and foreign ministries of Bangladesh.

Sources in Tripura said roads costing Rs 2.4 crore were built on the Indian side and commerce ministers of the two countries are invited to the inauguration programme likely to be on January 13.

The haat will remain open only a day every week from 10:00am to 4:00pm. People living within 5 kilometre radius of the haat will be allowed to sell and buy locally produced goods.

Initially, 16 items, including agricultural and horticultural crops, spices, minor forest products excluding timber, fish and dry fish, have been short-listed.

The sources added that the work on another border haat at Kamalagar in Tripura was underway and the haat would be ready to be open "very soon".

Indian Lok Sabha member Jitendra Chaudhury recently told a seminar in Kolkata that more than 100 border haats were required currently along Bangladesh's boundary with the Indian state of Tripura.

"Our people are used to open border with Bangladesh and now with the barbed wire fencing, trade and exchanges are suffering. So people want border haats for local trade at all possible places," he said.

Diplomatic sources say India intends to set up 70 border markets along its frontier with Bangladesh and after discussion with Dhaka, it has identified 70 locations in its four border states.

Stray incidents

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Confirming the incident, the constable told The Daily Star that he had received treatment for the injury.

The Rapid Action Battalion recovered 25 petrol bombs from Boalia in Gobindaganj upazila of Gaibandha, said Ashraf Ali, commanding officer of Gaibandha Rab-13.

The bombs had been gathered to carry out subversive activities in the area, he added.

The police arrested six Shibir activists in Rangpur, 30 Jamaat-Shibir men in Jhenidah, one Shibir man in Moulvibazar and 19 Jamaat, Shibir and BNP activists in Satkhira, suspecting that they might carry out destructive activities, report our district correspondents.

Only Rajshahi and Khulna districts

witnessed mass demonstrations. In other parts of the country, not too many hartal processions or rallies were sighted.

A lesser number of private vehicles plied the streets in the capital yesterday compared to other days but public transport was available as additional policemen had been deployed at important points to prevent attacks.

However, no long-route buses left oriented the city.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police chief Benazir Ahmed, meanwhile, launched a new technology to ensure the accountability of police sergeants for their activities on roads. They will be wearing body cameras to record their activities during the duty hours.

The sergeants will also be able to record vehicular and pedestrian movement.

Muggers

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held my hands and another, brandishing a knife, threatened to kill me if I shouted for help," Nazmul told The Daily Star.

"They took away the money and pushed me off the train," said Nazmul who commutes by train between his Motijheel shop and home for the last seven years.

Nazmul also sustained severe injuries in the head.

Later, Shahidul Islam and Sukur Ali, tea vendors at Banani, took him to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where he was undergoing treatment.

Abdul Majid, officer-in-charge of Dhaka Railway Police Station, said they were trying to nab the culprits. He went to see the victim at the hospital.

Textbook festival

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intent to destroy the country's education system and the new generations.

"Everyone knows we distribute textbooks on the first day of the calendar year. Still they are enforcing the hartal, but we will hold the festival anyway," he said and urged the Jamaat-e-Islami to call off the strike.

The government has printed around 32.63 crore copies of textbooks to distribute among students of primary and secondary schools, ebtadai and dakhil madrasahs and technical institutions.

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board officials said they had dispatched almost all textbooks to the upazila headquarters.

However, insiders said there were some upazilas in a few districts like Patuakhali, Shariatpur and Tangail where

schools had not received all textbooks.

The delay was caused by some tendering complexities, said a source.

Primary and mass education ministry officials, however, insisted that there would be no problem.

Against the backdrop of a failed track record, the government started distributing free textbooks in 2010. Before that, the government used to provide free textbooks only for primary students, while secondary students had to buy their books.

An artificial crisis used to be created by a syndicate of printers and government officials, forcing secondary-level students to buy books well into the first quarter of the academic session. Free distribution of textbooks has contributed to increasing the number of students over the past five years.

Body formed to review report

UNB, Dhaka

The government yesterday formed a six-member committee, headed by Cabinet Secretary M Musharraf Hossain Bhuiyan, to review the Pay and Services Commission report recommending increasing salary of public servants.

The committee will submit its report to the government within the next six weeks while the finance division will give secretarial assistance to the committee.

On December 21, the Pay and Services Commission submitted the report to the government recommending almost a hundred per cent salary hike for about 13 lakh public servants.

No admission

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An official of the ministry, wishing anonymity, said the government had given the directives only. But since, the universities are run according to their own laws, it's up to the university authorities to decide whether they would follow it.

In 2010, the government decided in principle to introduce "cluster system" in enrolment at public universities to ease admission seekers' hassle and help candidates get out of the grip of coaching centres. But that decision could not be implemented due to opposition from some public universities.

Good, bad and ugly of 2014

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The year was politically significant for the Awami League because, for the first time, it has been re-elected to office for a second term in a row. Despite controversy over the January 5 election, it gave the AL government a unique opportunity to continue its good efforts and revise and restart the efforts that failed in the first term.

But the first few months saw no big efforts from the private or the public sectors because some feared the government would not be stable. The fears were dispelled, but the government refrained from doing what any new government should be doing -- restoring good governance and investors' confidence.

But like in the first term, the government continued to drag its feet on what it had been promising since 2009: going ahead with mega projects. One of the first decisions the prime minister made in January 2014 was identifying six important power and infrastructure projects as fast-track ones, to ensure their quick implementation. They are the \$2.9 billion Padma bridge project, \$2.7b metro rail project, \$5b deep-sea port project, \$1.7b Rampal coal power plant project, \$2b Rooppur nuclear

power plant project and a \$300m LNG terminal project.

However, their top priority on papers had no reflections on the ground. Of these, the government signed contracts for the construction of the Padma bridge and secure Japanese finance for the metro rail project. The government has also secured Japanese funding for an over-priced \$4.5b coal power plant in Matarbari, although it is not on the priority list. The Rooppur nuclear power project, which has received half a billion dollars in Russian funds for techno-feasibility studies, is making slow progress.

But there is no headway of the deep-sea port project. Officials are still preparing tender documents for the Rampal power project. An unsolicited deal for the LNG terminal project, floated in 2010, could not be sealed either.

Poor implementation is evident in all other power and infrastructure projects as well. The widening of Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Mymensingh highways has seen no major breakthrough. The private sector power projects too did not see any significant advance.

All these are clear signs that the government is actually lacking focus

on implementation.

Side by side, the level of foreign direct investment (FDI) was not that encouraging. Between January and June, the FDI stood at just \$829.43 million, down 11 percent year-on-year.

Luckily, the country did not have to depend entirely on the government's project implementation. Farmers presented the government with so good a food production that inflation came down.

Bangladesh has increased food grain production in the year and ensured relatively stable prices of food.

Farmers celebrated good yields. As a result, the countrymen got rice and vegetables at steady prices almost throughout the year.

Production of Boro rice, the principal crop, hit 1.9 crore tonnes. Yields of potato, maize and wheat also went up, thanks to favourable weather and government support.

In 2014, the country is likely to harvest 5.6 crore tonnes of paddy and wheat, up 1.6 percent year-on-year.

months.

Non-food inflation, however, was on the rise. It reached 5.84 percent in November from 5.74 percent in the previous month, due to a rise in house rent, transport costs, education and medical expenses and prices of non-food items.

If oil prices in the local market are adjusted in line with the slump in the global market, it is likely to ease inflation further.

Remittance staged a strong comeback in 2014 after a fall in the previous year. It grew by 11.42 percent to \$6.2 billion during the July-November period against \$5.56 billion in the corresponding period a year ago.

Exports are showing signs of recovery, propelled by a pick-up in garment shipments.

Bangladesh exported garments and other goods worth \$27.56 billion between January and November in 2014, up 4.51 percent year-on-year.

Of the sum, garment export stood at \$22.26 billion during the period. In November alone, it fetched \$1.94 billion, a 10.22 percent rise from the same time a year ago.

follow international standards that ensure better quality, according to Bangladesh Association of Pharmaceutical Industries.

It was manifested in the 15.65 percent year-on-year export growth of pharmaceuticals in 2013-14.

In recent times, the leather industry has transformed itself from the low-value tanning activities to become a producer of export-quality leather footwear and leather goods along with the high-value crust and finished leather. For the first time, annual leather exports crossed \$1 billion mark, showing the path for Bangladesh to diversify its export items.

But bad loans have become the worst headache for the banking sector, particularly because of large loans.

The top 20 borrowers owe the banks around Tk 43,000 crore as of September, which was 8.7 percent of the total loans. In financial terms, there can hardly be a more dreadful scenario than this.

Overall, stability in the banking sector has remained under threats because of the lingering impacts of a series of financial scams at state-run banks.