

NONSTOP BLOCKADE

Hospital running out of oxygen

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU, Pabna

Pabna Medical College Hospital is bearing the brunt of the ongoing blockade by the BNP-led 20-party alliance.

Doctors say the 250-bed hospital has a very limited reserve of oxygen now, and they are not being able to bring new cylinders to the hospital due to the opposition programme.

"There are only seven oxygen cylinders in our reserve and bringing new cylinders by truck can be quite risky amid the blockade," Dr Monwarul Aziz, assistant director of the hospital, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"An arson attack on the vehicle can cause a massive explosion," he explained.

On average, the hospital needs at least eight oxygen cylinders every day, added Aziz.

The hospital had brought 100 oxygen cylinders from Rajshahi.

Seventy eight of the oxygen cylinders are now totally empty, while 15 others have a very low amount of the gas, said Abdul Mazid, head of the hospital's pharmacy department.

Patients are suffering immensely under the circumstances. Many critical patients are being shifted to Rajshahi

Medical College Hospital for proper treatment.

This correspondent saw a very few patients in the Pabna Medical College Hospital yesterday.

"We are advising many patients to get admitted to the Rajshahi hospital as we don't have enough reserve of oxygen," said Mita Mazumdar, a nurse.

Rawshana Begum said her son, Abdul Aziz, was taken to the hospital with a heart disease a couple of days ago.

"My son is very sick and he needs oxygen consistently. But there is only one oxygen cylinder in his ward. I don't know what will happen when the reserve will run out," added a worried Rawshana.

Mohammad Ruhul, office assistant of the hospital's administrative unit, said health services there would be "massively" affected if the oxygen supply did not become normal within today.

Dr Aziz said the hospital was planning to get some new oxygen cylinders from Rajshahi on an ambulance.

"The blockaders usually don't attack ambulances. Three or four oxygen cylinders at this moment would be quite handy," added the physician.



Only a few patients at a ward in Pabna Medical College Hospital. Lifesaving oxygen is not being supplied to the hospital due to the ongoing nationwide blockade, forcing the authorities concerned to transfer and refer critical patients elsewhere. Inset, empty oxygen cylinders at the hospital.

PHOTO: STAR



Stop violence

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The western powers were prompted to make statements following the ongoing violence and disruption in the country which resulted in many deaths and destruction of properties. Just on Tuesday, former top diplomat and BNP chairperson's adviser Reaz Rahman was shot.

The political situation in Bangladesh deteriorated after the one-sided general election of January 5, 2014. The BNP-led alliance announced nationwide blockade for an indefinite period after the government did not allow it to hold public rallies and confined BNP chief Khaleda Zia to her Gulshan office since January 3 this year.

The US State Department in its statement said the US was shocked and saddened by the attack on former foreign secretary Reaz Rahman and urged the Bangladesh government to investigate and hold accountable those responsible for the attack.

"There is no justification for such outrageous and cowardly acts in a democratic Bangladesh; we condemn the use of violence for political objectives," Marie Harf, deputy spokesperson of the State Department,

said in Washington, DC.

The heads of mission of the EU including Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Spain, the UK, France, the Netherlands, EU delegation to Bangladesh, and envoys of Vatican, Switzerland, Norway and Russia called on the foreign minister at state guesthouse Padma yesterday afternoon.

In response to the EU statement at the meeting, the minister gave a lengthy description of the happenings of the pre- and post-January 5 general election and the last one year.

According to meeting sources, Mahmood Ali told the envoys of 12 European countries that the government was being forced to go for actions to restore peace and stability.

He blamed the BNP and its allies for resorting to violence and arson and said the government would stop its action if they refrained from violence.

Diplomatic sources said the EU heads of mission regretted the ongoing violence and disruptions in the country, including the attack on Reaz Rahman.

They advocated that refraining from violence and engaging in

genuine dialogue between all stakeholders would open the way forward to strengthening democracy.

Meanwhile, British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Robert Gibson in a press statement expressed deep sadness and concern at the attack on Reaz Rahman, and continuing reports of violence from across Bangladesh.

"I deplore the horrific attack against the former minister of state for foreign affairs Reaz Rahman, and am deeply saddened by the news of the attack on a bus in Rangpur ...," he said.

The UK continues to call for all parties to exercise restraint and moderation, respect the rule of law, and to come together in a dialogue to break the cycle of violence and disruption, said the envoy.

At a press briefing, the foreign minister expressed sadness at the shooting of Reaz Rahman. He said the government would ensure thorough investigations into the incident.

The US embassy in a statement yesterday said it was saddened by reports of deaths and injuries across the country.

5 burnt to death

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death toll was the highest in a single day in the ongoing blockade.

Arson attacks on vehicles have become a common feature of the blockade. At least 189 vehicles were torched across the country in the last 10 days, according to fire service.

But the number is believed to be much higher, as fire service counts only those its members douse. Yesterday, a night coach, "Khalil Special", came under arson attack around five hours after it left Ulipur of Kurigram for the capital with 40-45 passengers at about 9:00pm on Tuesday.

As the bus reached Jaigirhat area in Mithapukur upazila around 2:00am, several blockaders threw brick chips at the vehicle, said Al Amin, who was in the bus.

"At one stage, they hurled a petrol bomb that fell just behind the driver, and burst into a flame immediately," said the 22-year-old from Lakharpur village of Ulipur.

Al-Amin managed to get his mother and sister out of the bus through a window. But he broke his right leg while trying to jump out through the window.

His aunts Tasiran Bawa and Minara Khatun got trapped inside and suffered severe burns.

The two were brought to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared Tasiran dead around 11:00pm. She had suffered 96 percent burns.

Minara's condition was stated to be critical.

Another passenger of the bus, Rashed Khan Menon, also gave an account of his harrowing experience.

Fire engulfed the bus within moments. "Everyone tried to get out through windows ... some managed but others couldn't ...," he said.

Later, firefighters from Mithapukur put out the flame and recovered the bodies of two women, a man and a child.

Rangpur Police Superintendent Abdur Razzak told The Daily Star last night that the bus came under attack as it fell far behind the other buses in the convoy, as it waited for a passenger in

Mithapukur.

Two of the five dead are Rahima Begum, 65, and her son Rahim Badshah, 45, of Ulipur upazila. The bodies were handed over to their family after identification.

One Abdul Jabbar claimed the third victim to be his daughter. But police are not sure about the identification of the third victim, who was burned beyond recognition.

The fourth victim, a child, too remains unidentified. No one claimed the body either.

These two bodies were kept at Rangpur Medical College Hospital for DNA test, said Md Rabiul Alam, officer-in-charge of Mithapukur Police Station.

A case was filed against 120 Jamaat-Shibir men for their alleged involvement in the arson attack.

Rabiul said they arrested eight Jamaat-Shibir men from areas close to the spot.

Voicing concern over the incident, the BNP yesterday claimed the government again resorted to its old game of carrying out acts of sabotage by its agents and shifting the blame onto the opposition.

Meanwhile, 12 vehicles were torched in the capital and 19 more in other parts of the country yesterday, said fire service officials.

Pro-blockade pickets blasted crude bombs in the capital and elsewhere.

At the city's Khilkhet, at least five people, including a police constable and two Ansar members, were injured in a crude bomb attack. Suspected blockaders first blasted a bomb in the area around 10:45pm. When police arrived at the scene to catch the attackers, they blasted several other cocktails, injuring the five.

At Bangabazar, two people were wounded as miscreants hurled two crude bombs around 8:00pm.

Ovi, 19, a first-year student of Kabi Nazrul Govt College, and Jibon, an employee at a shop, were under treatment at the DMCH.

A portion of Ovi's face was blown away when a cocktail hit him, witnesses said.

Amid such a situation, the BNP-led

20-party combine observes a 12-hour countrywide hartal today, protesting the gun attack on BNP chairperson's adviser Reaz Rahman on Monday night.

In Feni, a Jubo League man was beaten to death allegedly by pro-blockade pickets in Sonagazi upazila on Tuesday night.

Police, accompanied by some Jubo League activists, chased a group of blockaders after they vandalised three auto-rickshaws near Bhairab Chowdhury Bazar around 9:00pm, said witnesses.

As the law enforcers left the spot, the blockaders swooped on Jubo League activists Belal Hossain, 24, and Mobarak Hossain. They beat them up with sticks and left the spot when locals rushed to rescue the two.

The two were taken to Feni Sadar Hospital. As Belal's condition deteriorated, doctors referred him to Chittagong Medical College Hospital. But he died on way to the CMCH.

In Chittagong, an activist of Islami Chhatra Shibir, student wing of Jamaat, was crushed to death by a truck which he allegedly tried to torch on Chittagong-Cox's Bazar Highway in Lohagara upazila early yesterday.

Md Jubayer, 21, was run over by the Chittagong-bound truck from Cox's Bazar when he and a few other Shibir men tried to torch it in Chunati Forest Gate area around 3:00am, said Md Shahjahan, officer-in-charge of Lohagara Police Station.

Two other Shibir men were also injured, said the OC.

Meanwhile, police detained 19 BNP and Jamaat-Shibir men from different upazilas in Chittagong.

In Bogra, pro-blockade pickets on motorbikes blasted four crude bombs targeting Bogra SA Paribahan and SA TV offices near Yakubia School intersection around noon.

In Chapainawabganj, at least two truck drivers were seriously injured when blockade supporters hurled bombs at their vehicles in Rasulpur area of Shibganj upazila.

The two trucks along with several other trucks were being guarded by law enforcers, said Moinul Islam, officer-in-charge of Shibganj Police Station.

Where are we heading to?

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There was strong opposition from the western powers to an election without participation of all political parties.

There were speculations what the relationship between the AL government and the West would be. But once the new government was formed, the West had also shifted its position.

Economy started rolling after the violence and mayhem. Big projects got off the ground. There were no major political disruptions from the opposition that looked so tattered and weak after it boycotted the election. Its leaders were in the blues.

But all that now looks like a distant vision.

None of the top leaders of the BNP

and the Jamaat-e-Islami are in the field. BNP Chief Khaleda Zia is under virtual "house arrest" in her Gulshan office.

Yet violence is spiralling out with the shooting of BNP chief's adviser and former diplomat Reaz Rahman being the latest turn in the game. The West that was silent for so long stirred up again and issued quite a few strong statements condemning it.

Meantime, freedom of speech seems to be under tremendous test. Any dissenting views are critically looked upon and media houses which spread news disliked by the government are being persecuted.

The question that now comes to the fore is why the AL suddenly felt so

nervous when the BNP wanted to hold a rally and detained its leader? What was the AL to lose if a rally was held on January 5?

The answer may lie in the January 5 election that was boycotted by the BNP. This one-sided election put the AL in power again but left it vulnerable to the core of its base. It felt nervous because it knew people didn't like such an election, and the BNP might bank on it to intensify its movement.

AL leaders have little idea how the situation would be tackled. But they have been asked to keep vigil in their locality against "the misdeeds of the opposition". This might further aggravate violence and the whole country would suffer.

Double blow for a family

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injuring six more of the family.

"As I was trying to overcome the loss of my grandmother, it [the incident] came as a double blow.

Now two of my aunts are fighting for their lives," Al-Amin, a second-year BBA student of Gazipur Bhawal Badre Alam Government College, told The Daily Star at Rangpur Medical College Hospital (RMCH) in the afternoon.

However, one of the two aunts, Tasiran Bawa, who had sustained 96 percent burn injuries, was declared dead when she was brought to the Burn Unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) late last night.

Minara Khatun, the other aunt, was also brought to the DMCH from Rangpur last night in a critical condition.

Al-Amin with his family members had got on a night coach to Dhaka from Kurigram's Ulipur upazila around 9:00pm on Tuesday. As the bus reached Jaygirhat area around 2:00am, alleged blockaders hurled a petrol bomb.

Four people, including two

women and a child, were burnt to death on the spot.

"There were flames all around. We were being burnt inside," Al-Amin said.

"Everyone was trying to get out of the bus through the windows which were closed due to the chilly wind outside. I could open a window and pushed my mother and sister out. But I could not bear to stay in the heat anymore and jumped out," said the 22-year-old, who fractured his leg after jumping off the bus.

Al-Amin said her mother Aliya Begum and sister Afsana Mimi, a second year student of his college, had taken first aid.

His maternal aunt Monowara Begum and cousins Nusrat and Nadia were admitted to Rangpur Combined Military Hospital.

"We don't do politics. We are common people. Why should we be the victims?" Al-Amin said.

"If they wanted to torch the bus for political reasons, they could have done that after getting the passengers out of the bus. Why did they attack common people like us?" he added.

US couple go on trial over Bali suitcase murder

AFP, Denpasar

An American man and his teenage girlfriend went on trial on Indonesia's resort island of Bali yesterday charged with murdering the woman's mother and stuffing her body into a suitcase outside an exclusive hotel.

Heather Mack, who is pregnant, and Tommy Schaefer could face the death penalty if found guilty of the premeditated murder of Sheila von Wiese Mack, 62, whose body was found in the case in the boot of a taxi in August.

Prosecutors alleged that Schaefer, who wept as he entered court, "blindly hit" Von Wiese Mack with a bowl in a fit of rage after she directed a racial slur at him during an argument. Schaefer is black.

"The defendant, overwhelmed with emotion and anger, picked up the glass fruit bowl and swung it at her face," prosecutor Eddy Arta Wijaya told the district court in the Balinese capital Denpasar, as he read out the 21-year-old's indictment.

PM warns

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killing and arson attacks.

"I would like to tell them [BNP-Jamaat] one thing, you must refrain from carrying out such activities [blockade, killing people and arson attacks], or else, we'll have to take even harsher actions for stopping these," she asserted.

The PM came up with the warning while delivering her speech at the inaugural programme of the National Primary Education Week 2015 at Osmani Memorial Auditorium.

She also said it is the duty of the government to provide security to the lives and property of the people of the country.

Hasina mentioned: "The hooligans of the BNP-Jamaat-Shibir nexus are killing people by setting fire to buses and other vehicles. This is not politics, this is militant and terrorist act, BNP-Jamaat has unleashed terrorist activities in the name of movement."

She requested the countrymen to resist these evil activities of the BNP-Jamaat clique. "I'm urging all to resist these militancy and terrorism," she said.

Reiterating that Khaleda Zia's deci-

sion not to participate in the January 5 election was her own political mistake, Hasina questioned why the country, the nation and people should pay the price for her mistake.

"It was not the responsibility of people. Then why are you killing people by setting fire to public buses?"

Hasina also mentioned that the BNP-Jamaat activists set fire to a bus early yesterday and killed four children. "I don't have any word to express my condemnation, what is the logic behind this killing. What is the reason behind being angry with the general people, what is the fault of the mass people?"

She said the government recently procured 1,000 buses for the BRTC fleet. "Some one hundred of the buses have been burned already," she added.

The premier said the politicians do politics for the welfare of the country and its people. "If people are killed and affected, then what is the purpose this politics?" she questioned.

She also said the BNP-Jamaat alliance enforced hartal and blockade during Eid-e-Miladunnabi and Biswa Ijtema. "This is very unfortunate, we don't want such activities," she said.

Nigerian troops 'repel Boko Haram attack'

AFP, Kano

Nigeria's military yesterday said that soldiers had repelled a new Boko Haram attack after a two-hour gun battle in the restive northeast.

The country's defence headquarters said in a series of tweets that the militants had been pushed back from Biu, in Borno State, and two anti-aircraft guns had been captured.

"Troops in pursuit of fleeing terrorists as mopping up operation is ongoing. Five terrorists have so far been captured," it said.

Residents in town, about 200 kilometers southwest of the state capital, Maiduguri, told AFP scores of militant fighters stormed the town in 10 pick-up trucks at about 7:30 am.

But they were intercepted by soldiers from a nearby barracks, leading to a two-hour gunfight.

"Soldiers opened fire on three pick-up vans carrying the gunmen that came as an advance party while the rest remained at a fuel station in Kigir village," said resident Babagana Haruna.