

Bomb blast near HC judge's house

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Unidentified criminals exploded a crude bomb near the residence of High Court Judge Abu Taher Md Saifur Rahman in the city's Dhanmondi area last night. This is the second time crude bombs were blasted targeting the judge's residence in a span of 12 days. Two crude bombs were hurled at Justice Rahman's residence on January 8, a day after he and Justice Quazi Reza-Ul Hoque directed the government to take steps to stop publishing BNP Senior Vice-Chairman Tarique Rahman's statements in the media.

Justice Reza-Ul's village home in Feni also came under an arson attack the same day. Around 9:30pm yesterday, criminals set off a crude bomb near the main gate of Justice Rahman's residence on road 7/A in Dhanmondi, and fled the scene, Rezaul Karim, assistant commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, told The Daily Star.

Several policemen were on guard at the house when the blast took place.

Sri Lanka finds arms cache after Rajapakse downfall

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan police yesterday seized weapons from a conference centre visited by the pope during his visit to the island after receiving a tip-off that the former president's family allowed arms to be stored there.

Police said the family of Mahinda Rajapakse had allowed a private security firm to keep the weapons at the high-security complex in central Colombo where the pope met leaders of other faiths last week.

They received complaints that the weapons, which were imported by the government, had been used to intimidate political rivals in the run-up to elections earlier this month in which Rajapakse lost power.

Ecne okays

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The meeting also gave the go-ahead for five other projects. Under one of the revised projects, 11 secondary schools and six colleges will be built in Dhaka metropolitan city at a cost of Tk 295 crore.

The project cost has been slashed by 28 percent. The deadline for completion of the scheme has been extended to June 2016 from June 2014.

The secondary schools will be built at Hazaribagh, Uttara, Rupnagar, Demra, Kafrul, Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Uttarkhan, Jurain, Moghbazar and Kamrangirchar. Six new colleges will be set up at Sabujbagh, Hazaribagh, Uttara, Kafrul, Pallabi and Mohammadpur.

The planning ministry statement said the construction work of the schools and colleges are at the final stage.

The total costs of the six projects, two new and four revised ones, have been estimated at Tk 1031.67 crore.

Save people

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Sultana Kamal, executive committee convener of the platform, referred to BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's announcement on Monday to continue with the blockade and asked whom she was imposing the blockade on.

Citing incidents of violence where students, bus drivers, helpers and labourers were burnt in petrol bomb attacks when they were going about their regular works, Kamal asked if the blockade was enforced against them. She urged the political parties not to impose their politics on common people, using "heinous and violent" methods, to assume power.

Speakers also said the blockade had received no public support as there was no mass movement involving national support.

Referring to the ordeals students have been going through, Manusher Jonno Foundation Executive Director Shaheen Anam said the government must ensure security to children who wanted to study and attend their educational institutes.

"We do not care whether political parties are going to stop this violence through a discussion or a dialogue, but this has to stop," she said.

Eminent journalist Abed Khan called for a dialogue to solve the political crisis. He said if any constitutional or non-political party appeared in the scene taking advantage of the current situation then both the party enforcing the blockade and the government would be responsible for any untoward happenings.

He also warned that such a restive situation often proved to be conducive to carrying out terrorist attacks.

Liberation War Museum trustee Sarwar Ali and war crimes tribunal prosecutor Rana Dasgupta, among others, also spoke at the programme.

Visiting US senators see new era in historic Cuba talks

AFP, Havana

US lawmakers visiting Havana voiced hope Monday that historic talks between US and Cuban officials this week will mark a "new era" of relations, ending decades of Cold War-era hostility.

The six-member delegation of congressional Democrats, led by Senator Patrick Leahy, met Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez as well as dissidents and Cardinal Jaime Ortega during their two-day visit.

Their trip preceded talks today and tomorrow between Cuban officials and the highest-ranking US delegation to visit Havana since the 1980s.

The meeting will be the first since the historic announcements in December by US President Barack Obama and Cuban leader Raul Castro that their countries will normalize ties that broke off in 1961.

As the two nations get closer, one person has been noticeably quiet: the 88-year-old retired leader Fidel Castro has not reacted publicly to the rapprochement, sparking speculation about his health.

"This is historic. We were frozen in the same foreign policy with Cuba for over 50 years," Democratic Senator Dick Durbin said at the end of the two-day visit.

"Finally this president came to the realization that that policy wasn't serving the best interests of the United States, of Cuba, or of the world," he said. "Now we are moving toward a new era."

The first day of the talks will center on migration -- an issue that has vexed both nations for decades, with Cubans hopping on rickety boats to traverse 145 kilometers (90 miles) of shark-infested waters to reach Florida.

Khaleda to be tried

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Speaking in parliament, the premier also described the BNP's movement as a terror act, and asked the ruling Awami League lawmakers to form committees at all districts and upazilas to resist the ongoing "violence and anarchy".

"It's not a big deal to find out those who are involved in terror acts in a country like Bangladesh," said Hasina, adding that general people should assist law enforcement agencies in identifying and detaining the perpetrators.

She also said those who would help

arrest these criminals would be rewarded.

During an unscheduled discussion in the House, she reasserted her firm stance against militancy.

"As long as I am alive, I won't allow militancy in the country," Hasina said.

Pointing to international powers, the PM said some quarters are creating troubles in every Muslim-dominated part of the world and they tried the same in Bangladesh too.

Attempts have been made to create militancy in Bangladesh but her government under no circumstances would allow it to happen, she added.

What was his fault?

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surgery unit of the capital's City Hospital.

He was whimpering, writhing in pain with a pipe in his nose for supplying liquid food. Barely could he open his eyes. But when he could, he was looking for the warmth of his parents.

"I cannot think of anything else right now. Just pray for my son. I have no more words to say," said his shell-shocked father Saiful Islam, himself a physician.

Prof Shahidul Bari, head of the hospital's burn and plastic surgery unit, said Saifur's condition was better yesterday than the previous two days.

"Hopefully, we will shift him from HDU to a general cabin in a day or two," he told The Daily Star over the phone last night.

Saiful and his wife Sharmin Siddique, also a physician, were also receiving treatment at the same hospital. Saiful suffered five percent burns in his hands and his wife had injuries to her left hand and forehead.

The mindless arson incident took place at Narayanganj's Chashara intersection around 9:00pm.

Family sources said after dressing Saifur's burnt leg from the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, his parents were taking him to his maternal grandfather's house.

The couple live in the capital's Khilgaon. They were going to Narayanganj on a bus as they had left

their four-month-old second child with Sharmin's mother.

When the bus reached Chashara, pro-blockaders hurled a petrol bomb at it, said Faruque Hossain, one of their relatives, quoting the victims.

Sensing danger, Saiful pushed Sharmin through the window and ran for the gate with Saifur in his lap. But the child fell from his lap and got burnt in the fire caused by the bomb.

Saiful was injured while saving his son and Sharmin broke her left hand and suffered injuries to her forehead while jumping through the vehicle's window.

Few other passengers were wounded while escaping the arson scene but none other than Saifur and his father received any burn injuries, said Manzur Quader, officer-in-charge, Narayanganj police station.

Relatives took them to the DMCH. Later they were shifted to the City Hospital in Lalmatia.

Saifur's parents were crying ever since they were admitted at the hospital, worrying about their son, said Faruque who blamed all this on the country's abominable political culture which put common people's lives in extreme danger.

"Our political leaders will never change their policies which are obviously not for common people. We are only to suffer due to their whims and selfish ways of fulfilling their political goals," said a frustrated Faruque.

Egypt envoy for ban

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Palestinian Ambassador Shaher Mohammad, however, would not corroborate what Ali said.

The foreign minister also said the diplomats at the briefing condemned the ongoing violence, including arson attacks, and loss of lives and property.

The diplomats also sought initiatives to resolve the crisis but did not raise any issue with the January 5 elections, Ali claimed.

According to a press release of the foreign ministry, the diplomats from the OIC countries expressed their unequivocal support for the people of Bangladesh in their progress towards development.

They also underlined that the BNP did not listen to an Arab Group proposal when Khaleda Zia was advised to take part in the last year's general elections.

They condemned the ongoing violence and called for introducing a tougher law to protect the civilians and police members.

"Some of them also voiced their support for banning Jamaat-e-Islami, if the government considers doing so," said the press release.

According to diplomatic sources, the foreign diplomats from Saarc, Asean and OIC called for calm and restraint to sustain peace and stability in Bangladesh.

The diplomats also expressed their concern over security around the diplomatic enclave in Gulshan-Baridhara areas following recent incidents of arson attacks on vehicles and shootings.

The minister assured the diplomats that the government was determined

to thwart any threat to public security and stability of the state, added sources.

The briefing was part of the foreign minister's regular consultations with the ambassadors or High Commissioners and heads of foreign missions based in Dhaka.

Diplomats from OIC countries, including Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq, Pakistan, Egypt, Bahrain and Palestine, participated in yesterday's briefing that continued from 3:00pm to 4:15pm.

Later, Ali briefed the envoys of Saarc and Asean countries, including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Singapore, Myanmar, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia at the same venue for about an hour.

On January 14, the minister briefed the envoys of European Union and other European countries.

The USA, Australia, Japan, China, South Korea and North Korea and UN diplomats were briefed on January 19.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam, Foreign Secretary Md. Shahidul Haque and senior officials were also present at the briefing yesterday.

Sources said the foreign diplomats expressed their satisfaction at the additional security measures taken in the diplomatic zones.

They said the OIC member states were not critical of the government as they usually did not get involved in domestic politics of any of the other member countries.

Solar plane set for landmark round-the-world flight

AFP, Abu Dhabi

A plane with the top speed of a homing pigeon is set to embark on a landmark round-the-world flight powered only by the sun's energy, organisers said yesterday.

Solar Impulse 2, the first solar-powered plane to be able to fly for several days and nights, will land 12 times along its roughly 35,000 kilometre trip -- including a five-day stretch above the Pacific Ocean without a drop of fuel.

"We want to demonstrate that clean technology and renewable energy can achieve the impossible," said Solar Impulse chairman Bertrand Picard, the scion of a dynasty of Swiss scientists-cum-adventurers.

"Renewable energy can become an integral part of our lives, and together we can help save our planet's natural resources."

The plane's route was unveiled yesterday in Abu Dhabi, where it will begin the journey in late February or early March.

It will first stop at Muscat in Oman, to benefit from the Gulf's low-cloud conditions, before crossing the Arabian Sea to India and heading on to Myanmar, China, Hawaii and New York.

Jamal Uddin

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with a gold smuggling case in November last year.

All other members of the previous board which was dissolved last month on completion of its one-year tenure have also been reinstated.

Following approval by the Prime Minister's Office, the civil aviation and tourism ministry on Monday issued an order naming the board of directors for the next one year.

The members of the present board are secretaries of the civil aviation and tourism and finance ministries; chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, principal secretary of the PMO, chief of the army engineering corps, a teacher of Dhaka University, advocate Mesbahuddin, SM Zakaria and deputy chief of staff of Bangladesh Air Force.

Jamal Uddin faced severe criticism even from the civil aviation minister after detectives nabbed Captain Abu Mohammad Aslam Shaheed, chief of planning and scheduling; Emdad Hossain, deputy general manager (flight services); Tozammel Hossain, manager (scheduling); and two others -- Mahmudul Haque Palash and Harunur Rashid.

Palash, a contractor, used to identify himself as the godson of Jamal Uddin and influenced other Biman officials to get his jobs done, detectives said earlier.

Jamal Uddin has been serving as the Biman chairman since 2009. Ever since, Biman has been in the red.

The national carrier in the last four fiscal years has incurred losses of Tk 1,264 crore although four newly purchased Boeing 777-300 ER aircraft have joined its fleet.

Winter chill

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Biting cold coupled with wind and dense fog has almost paralysed normal life in Thakurgaon and Panchagarh since Sunday, reports our Thakurgaon correspondent.

Our Kurigram correspondent adds: Many children and elderly people were admitted to Kurigram Sadar Hospital with cold-related diseases, said Dr Nazrul Islam, resident medical officer of the hospital.

Can ants

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Institute of Space Science and Technology told NPR.

There are three main reasons that ants don't get into pile-ups, according to Nagar.

First, they don't show off by driving past people because they don't have egos. Secondly, they don't mind a few small crashes -- unless there's a big pile-up, they just keep walking.

And third, ants become more uniform when their pathways get more crowded. They begin to run in more straight lines and stick with a steadier speed. They're also less likely to make unexpected manoeuvres -- the ant equivalent of jumping out into a lane without warning on a motorway.

In those ways, they walk more like a computer driving a car than a human driving one. And Nagar hopes to be able to explain that behaviour through a mathematical formula that will help regulate human's motorways in the future.

He has studied the movement and developed a model that will predict how ants move in real life.

It's unclear how much the formula will be able to help people driving motorways for humans. Cars, for example, are less able to withstand bumping into each other than ants are.

Sisi acknowledges rights abuses in Egypt

AFP, Cairo

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi acknowledged yesterday that police committed rights abuses after the overthrow of his Islamist predecessor, but said they were expected given the "exceptional" security threats faced by Egypt.

A crackdown overseen by Sisi against supporters of his predecessor Mohamed Morsi has left hundreds dead since the then army chief toppled the Islamist in July 2013.

Thousands of Morsi backers have also been imprisoned, and dozens sentenced to death after speedy trials which the United Nations says is "unprecedented in recent history".

Several youth activists who spearheaded the 2011 revolt against former autocratic president Hosni Mubarak are also serving jail terms for protesting illegally.

"Nobody is against human rights... but today Egypt is in an exceptional condition... is it possible that there will be no violations?" asked Sisi.

"There will be violations. But do we approve them? No," he said in an address to police officers and ministers ahead of the annual police day on January 25.

On police day in 2011, millions launched protests against Mubarak, expressing their anger against the then reviled police force.

Since Morsi's ouster, the police have been back on the streets in full force amid accusations that Sisi's regime is even more authoritarian than that of Mubarak, who quit after an 18-day uprising.

Sisi has repeatedly said that ensuring stability in politically tumultuous Egypt is a top priority rather than promoting democratic freedoms.

Stop violence

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director of TIB, in a statement.

The corruption watchdog called upon the political parties to refrain from any violence and undemocratic behaviour and find out a peaceful solution to the crisis.

"Having locked themselves in a zero-sum game of power, our political parties and leaders are not only exposing their political bankruptcy, but also expanding their distance from the people and public interest on a daily basis" mentioned Ifekharuzzaman.

He added: "Independence and professionalism of key institutions of rule of law and democratic accountability, particularly the law enforcement agencies, are being severely compromised."

Political freedoms such as right of assembly, rallies, human chains are fundamental to democracy and democratic practice. However, violent programmes in the name of movement putting people's life and living at risk are absolutely unacceptable in any democratic society, said the statement.

"The way the law enforcement

agencies like police, Rab and BGB have threatened use of disproportionate force and are apparently acquiring licence to become law-breakers is inconsistent with the spirit of our independence achieved thanks to highest sacrifice of millions of martyrs. These also expose the political space to militant and undemocratic forces to gain ground."

The graft watchdog stressed the need for making efforts to reach a mutual understanding between the two top political leaders. "The key to overcoming the crisis and restore normalcy in public life are in the hands of the two top leaders. At the same time senior leaders in both the camps must also shun the confrontational path and practice restraint," read the statement.

Meanwhile, terming the ongoing violence crimes against humanity, Sector Commanders Forum, Liberation War '71 in a press release called upon every quarter to exercise democratic restraint.

There is no place of destructive programmes in democratic politics, the forum observed.

Fear, threats trigger

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Talking to this correspondent on Saturday, some Adivasi people of Bottoli and Shialipara said the Bangalee settlers do not allow them to play drums, intimidate them during their rituals and often threaten to grab their land.

Sudeb Shaw of Bottoli village took this correspondent to nearby Chhatrapukur where the Munda families have long been using a roadside abandoned land to bury their dead.

The settlers recently set up a makeshift toilet on the graveyard and are using the land as a temporary cow barn, Sudeb said, adding they even kept haystacks right on the graves of his parents.

Narayan Murari, a freedom fighter, said there are graves of three indigenous war heroes at the site.

Anisur Rahman, a new settler, admitted that "it was wrong to set up the toilet" and said they would remove it soon. He claimed the land belonged to him and indigenous people were using it without his knowledge.

The number of indigenous students in local schools has also drastically decreased as their families are sending the children first.

Saidur Rahman, headmaster of Bottoli Adivasi Government Primary School, said about 75 percent of his students were from indigenous families in 2009. Last year, the number came down to only 41 out of 412 students. It is likely to decline further this year.

A rough study shows around 250 Munda, Santal and Urao families from Birganj, Sadar and Ghoraghat upazilas

of Dinajpur, Panchbibi of Joypurhat, Dhamurhat and Potnitola of Naogaon and Godagari of Rajshahi migrated to India in the last two years.

Of them, over 150 are from villages of Godagari said Rabindranath Soren, president of Jatiya Adivasi Parishad. The villages are Bottoli, Shialipara, Notun Shialipara, Gopalpur, Kurbaria, Gogram, Adarpara, Chouduar, Basantapur, Nigigram, Agolpur, Sahanapara and Dighipara.

"Adivasis are living in constant fear amid the ongoing political violence across the country. They feel insecure also for not getting justice following incidents of murder, rape and land grab. So they choose to leave the country," he said.

Chitto Ranjan Sardar, convener of Barind Human Rights Defenders Foundation, said the ethnic displacement began in the '80s. After a decade's interval, it started again in 2001 and rose after the political unrest intensified in 2013.

The authorities, however, trash reports of Adivasi displacement from Godagari.

Acting UNO of Godagari Alamgir Kabir said, "We have no reports of indigenous migration to India. Some of them might have left due to personal reasons. No such situation has arisen in the country that indigenous people have to leave."

Echoing his view, SM Abu Forhad, officer-in-charge of Godagari Police Station, said, "We are highly sensitive to the rights of indigenous people. There is no threat to them, why would they leave country?"

Investigation focuses

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His comments came after Indonesian investigators said they were focusing on the possibility of human error or problems with the plane having caused the crash, following an initial analysis of the cockpit voice recorder.

"We didn't hear any other person, no explosion," investigator Nurcahyo Utomo told reporters, explaining why terrorism had been ruled out.

Earlier at a parliamentary hearing, he said radar data showed the Airbus A320-200 appeared at one point to be climbing at a rate of 6,000 feet a minute before the crash. There were several other planes in the area at the time.

"I think it is rare even for a fighter jet to be able to climb 6,000 feet per minute," he said. "For a commercial flight, climbing around 1,000 to 2,000 (feet) is maybe already considered extraordinary, because it is not meant to climb that fast."

Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Committee were now looking at the "possibility of plane damage and human factors", he said, without giving further details.

As well as the cockpit voice recorder, the committee is also examining a wealth of information in the flight data recorder, which monitors every major part of the plane. A preliminary report will be released on January 28.

There was a huge international hunt for the crashed plane, involving ships from several countries including the US and China.

Indonesian search and rescue teams have so far recovered just 53 bodies from the sea.

But last week a Singapore navy ship located the jet's main body, with the AirAsia motto "Now Everyone Can Fly" painted on the side. Rescue teams hope they will be able to find many of the passengers and crew inside.

However, divers have not succeeded in reaching the fuselage despite several attempts due to bad weather, high waves and strong underwater currents.

All but seven of those on board the flight were Indonesian. The foreign nationals were from South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Britain and France.