

19TH DAY OF BLOCKADE

Arson attack on two launches

STAR REPORT

Sporadic incidents of violence marked the 19th day of the indefinite blockade enforced by the BNP-led 20-party alliance with alleged blockaders targeting launches again.

Two launches came under arson attacks while at least 11 vehicles were torched across the country yesterday. Dozens of BNP-Jamaat men were arrested in several districts as well.

Meanwhile, the alliance has called 36-hour hartal from 6:00am today protesting a proposal to increase power tariff, "government's conspiracy to carry out subversive activities" and arrest of its "10,000 leaders and activists".

Alleged blockaders yesterday set fire to an anchored three-decker launch, belonging to Golam Kibria Tipu, a former Awami League lawmaker from Barisal, at Sadarghat in Dhaka, burning down its nine cabins and injuring one person.

MV Bangalee, a passenger-carrying vessel of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation plying on Morelganj-Dhaka route, came under arson attack in the afternoon.

Abdul Hai, master of the vessel, said alleged blockaders hurled petrol bombs at the vessel when it was crossing Gabbhan Bridge in Jhalakathi, but there

was no casualty.

Gopal Chandra Majumdar, assistant general manager of BIWTC Barisal station, said air-conditioning system of eight cabins was damaged in that attack.

On January 20, two launches were set on fire at Barisal Launch Terminal, the first of its kind.

In Narayanganj, locals beat up three Shibir arsonists while they were trying to hurl petrol bombs at a bus on the Dhaka-Narayanganj road, and handed them over to police.

In Chapainawabganj, a trucker and his helper were injured as blockaders hurled crude bombs at their vehicle at Nayanagar of Sadar Upazila on Friday night.

On information, firefighters rushed to the spot and took the injured to Chapainawabganj Sadar Hospital.

In Jamalpur, alleged blockaders vandalised at least 10 easy-bikes and two billboards of Awami League leaders yesterday. In retaliation, aggrieved Jubo League men set fire to a BNP office at Shafi Miar Bazar in the town.

A CNG-run three-wheelers' driver suffered burns as alleged blockaders set his vehicle on fire at Chandra in Chandpur yesterday. Driver Anwar Hossain was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.



Tipu-6 burns at Sadarghat Launch Terminal in Dhaka yesterday evening after criminals set fire to the vessel on day-19 of the BNP-led 20-party alliance's nationwide blockade.

PHOTO: BANGLAR CHOKH

AIRASIA FLIGHT TRAGEDY Team fails to float jet's main body

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian salvage teams failed to raise the fuselage of AirAsia Flight 8501 from the sea bed yesterday, but recovered four more bodies from the wreckage of the crashed jet.

The bid to raise the fuselage came a day after divers were able to enter the main section of the plane, which crashed in the Java Sea last month, for the first time.

Difficult weather conditions for the past week had stopped rescuers reaching the main part of the Airbus A320-200 since it was spotted on the seabed by a military vessel earlier this month.

"We were not successful today. The slings snapped off so the main body fell back to the sea floor," SB Supriyadi, a rescue agency official, told AFP, adding several bodies fell from the fuselage when the piece of wreckage sunk once again.

The operation to lift the main body will resume today.

Rare gesture, late response

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The BNP chief made the comment after she woke up, he told journalists around 11:40pm.

Earlier, accompanied by senior Awami League leaders Amir Hossain Amu and Tofail Ahmed and her aides, Hasina went to the Gulshan office at 8:36pm.

As she got down from the car, her special assistant Mahbulul Hoque Shakil approached the gate and found it locked. He asked security personnel, who were inside the gate, to open it. But nobody responded or came out and the PM's convoy left at 8:43pm.

PM's Information Adviser Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, who had reached there before Hasina, then talked to reporters in front of the Gulshan office. He said it was unfortunate that the PM was not allowed to get inside. Keeping the gate locked was not courteous.

"Leaving aside all the protocols, the prime minister came here to console the BNP chairperson on the

death of her son. She came here as a mother to another mother. There was no political motive behind it," he added.

Around 9:10pm, BNP standing committee members Moudud Ahmed and Sarwari Rahman emerged from the Gulshan office. But they declined to make any comment on this.

The PM's initiative came at a time when the country's political situation has heated up over Khaleda's confinement to her Gulshan office for more than two weeks until January 18 and the BNP's enforcing nonstop blockade.

Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, who have been governing the country in turns since restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991, barely talked to each other.

But in May 2009, Khaleda went to Hasina's residence Sudha Sadhan to offer her condolences at the death of the latter's husband MA Wazed Miah.

Around 8:20pm yesterday,

while Hasina was on her way from the Gono Bhaban to Gulshan, Shimul told reporters, "Khaleda Zia is feeling unwell. She is asleep after being administered a sedative to cope with the shock. Therefore, she is unable to meet the prime minister."

Shimul claimed he had informed PM's assistant private secretary Shaifuzzaman Shikhor around 7:10pm that the BNP chief was too ill to meet the PM and was kept asleep on doctor's prescription.

Except for Shimul, no BNP leader knew about this communication until Shimul talked to the media and members of the Special Security Force were deployed in front of Khaleda's office, party insiders said.

Later around 9:20pm, Shimul again talked to the media. This time he called upon all not to do "dirty politics" over the PM's visit.

"Some staff of the Prime Minister Office have been alleging that we did not open the gate and did not allow

the prime minister to call on Khaleda Zia is not true."

He claimed soon after the PM reached the Gulshan office, he rushed from the first floor with a condolence book. As he came outside the gate, Sheikh Hasina left by then.

Talking to The Daily Star, Shikhor said the Prime Minister's Office in the evening had informed Shimul about Hasina's willingness to visit Khaleda.

Shimul just said he was trying to contact Khaleda. "But he [Shimul] did not tell me anything about Khaleda's getting asleep," Shikhor added.

Talking to a private TV channel around 10:00pm, PM's aide Mahbulul Hoque Shakil said Shimul didn't come out of the BNP chief's office when Sheikh Hasina went there.

Earlier from 7:30pm, additional number of law enforcement agencies and members of President Guard Regiments were deployed around

Khaleda's office, and people's movement in the area was restricted as soon as the news spread that PM was to visit Khaleda.

Earlier around 5:45pm, Col (ret) Oli Ahmed met the BNP chief and expressed condolences over the death of her younger son Arafat Rahman Koko.

Contacted for comments over these events, Transparency International Bangladesh Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said the PM's initiative was very much logical.

"Although in the context of a family set back for Begum Zia, the prime minister's decision to go to meet her opponent had a political significance because of the timing," he said in a text message.

"The prime ministers decision reflected political maturity and acumen which BNP failed to meet. BNP's decision was wrong from social and human relations point of view; it was also politically incorrect."

Arson terrors beyond arrest

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Rab announced reward in eight categories ranging from Tk 10,000 to Tk one lakh for helping the elite force in arresting the anarchists while Police Headquarters would give Tk five lakh as bounty for specific information about the people who torched a bus at Jatrabari Friday night.

The government on Wednesday had announced Tk one lakh as bounty for help in arresting the people involved in bomb attacks, apparently to engage people in its fight to check the attacks.

There was, however, no clear directive regarding where to give the information and whether or not the identity of the informers would be kept secret, creating confusion among people and discouraging them to come forward.

However, Police Headquarters and Rab yesterday provided mobile phone numbers and stated that the identities of the informers would be kept confidential.

According to police, most attacks are being carried out by hired youths, which

is making it difficult for the law enforcers to catch them. They said youths from one area were being hired to carry out attacks in other areas.

A senior police official said identifying the attackers was one of the biggest challenges they were facing.

Checking the hit-and-run attacks is very difficult unless people come forward to help, he added.

Inspector General of Police (IGP) AKM Shahidul Haque, however, is relying on his forces to stop the menace.

"Police are working round-the-lock to arrest the perpetrators. We are arresting them. I hope that the attacks will be stopped," he told The Daily Star.

However, a police officer at the Police Headquarters said law enforcers were being given additional duties to prevent the attacks but "it was not possible to guard every spot day and night."

Asked what else the government could do to contain the arson attacks, State Minister for Home Asaduzzaman Khan said they were forming "resistance com-

mittees" in each village and community across the country to stop it.

"The people started catching the attackers red-handed," he said, referring to the incident where three attackers were caught after they hurled a petrol bomb at a bus in Narayanganj yesterday.

He also called on people to help resist such attacks.

The ruling party also announced to form the "resistance committees" a week ago. The committees, however, are yet to be formed.

Meanwhile, Rab boss Benazir Ahmed, at a press conference in the Rab headquarters, said petrol bombs were hurled on peace-loving people and vehicles as per instigation from a vested quarter. "A large number of the attackers were hired," he added.

Some 321 vehicles were torched across the country, taking death toll to 30 since the BNP-led alliance announced the countrywide blockade on January 5. A total of 900 others were also injured during the ongoing blockade.

Air thick with tears

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shop in the capital's Kathalbagan. He had no other options; He needed the money to feed the family.

Salma's fear came true. Abul received 30 percent body burns when blockaders hurled two petrol bombs at a bus in Jatrabari Friday night. Abul was on that bus returning to his Ruppangj home in Narayanganj.

Abul's condition was critical considering injuries to his respiratory organs, said DMCH doctors.

A total of 28 people injured in Friday's attack on the bus were taken to the burn unit.

Abul is among nine victims who sustained critical injuries, from 20 to 48 percent body burns.

Of the Jatrabari victims, Nur Alam received 48 percent burns, the worst of the lot.

Nur's relative Mintu Mian said, "Who enforce hartals and blockades and for what purpose? We, the common people, have no benefit from hartals or blockades. We need to go out of our homes and live our lives."

A fuming Mintu said after hearing the news the victims' wife fainted several times.

While talking to The Daily Star, victim Salauddin Bhuiyan's brother Al Amin said he requested his brother not to go out. But Salauddin did not listen saying, if he did not join work who would feed him.

Salauddin was returning home from his work on Elephant Road.

Fifteen of the Jatrabari victims

received inhalation injuries and they needed treatment at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), said Partha Sankar Pal, resident medical officer of the burn unit.

"But the 10-bed ICU has already been occupied by other critical patients," he told The Daily Star.

The DMCH authorities released seven of the Jatrabari victims yesterday. As many as 83 burnt people from across the country were taken to the DMCH burn unit for treatment during this spell of political violence, according to hospital sources.

As of yesterday, 51 were still taking treatment. Five died.

They were additions to the already overcrowded 300-bed unit that caters to around 500 regular patients.

Amid such a situation, the DMCH authorities yesterday limited visitors to the burn unit to prevent infection of patients.

Excessive people are rushing into the unit every day to see the victims, defying the existing restriction on visitors, said Samanta Lal Sen, adviser to the unit.

"Considering the sufferings of the burn victims, the authorities reimposed the restriction," he said.

Meanwhile, Health Minister Mohammad Nasim yesterday visited the victims at the burn unit.

During his visit, the health minister termed the prevailing political violence as stray incidents and said the government was taking measures to stop such crimes.



Wife and child of Abul Hossain try to comfort him at the burn unit of the DMCH. He was on the bus that got torched Friday night at Jatrabari.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN