

Car bomb kills 4 in Assad clan's hometown

AFP, Damascus

Rebels took Syria's civil war to the ruling Assad clan's hometown for the first time yesterday, killing four people in a car bomb attack on a hospital, state television and a monitor said.

The attack came as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that troops had executed 48 people earlier this week in a northern village, among them 10 children.

"A terrorist car bomb attack in the parking of Qardaha hospital killed four citizens and wounded several others," the television said in a news flash, using the regime term for rebels.

Earlier, the Britain-based Observatory had reported the blast, saying it was not immediately clear if it had been caused by a car bomb or by rocket fire.

The blast, the first to hit the heart of the western town since the outbreak of Syria's civil war in 2011, killed a nurse, a hospital employee and two soldiers, said Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman.

The outskirts of Qardaha have previously come under rocket fire, while Latakia province -- where the town is located -- has seen several rounds of heavy fighting.

A mausoleum containing the graves of President Bashar al-Assad's father and predecessor, Hafez, and brother Bassil, is located in Qardaha.

The clan has ruled Syria with an iron fist for more than 40 years.

Syria's war began in March 2011 as a pro-democracy revolt seeking Assad's ouster. It morphed into a conflict after the regime unleashed a brutal crackdown on dissent.

Meanwhile, the Observatory said 10 children and 13 rebels were among 48 people executed by government forces in the northern village of Rityan earlier this week.

The killings took place after troops entered the town Tuesday, during an offensive aimed at cutting rebel supply lines to the Turkish border.

Abdel Rahman said all the dead were from six families.

"There was no resistance except in one house where a rebel opened fire at troops before being executed along with his family."

Tigers fans

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spirit. For one, Bangladesh's chances of progressing to the next round have received a slight boost with the extra point. They are now placed third, behind the hosts in Pool A. And as Bangladesh's fans would know best, if the Tigers get into a good rhythm they tend to make the most of it.

An Australian paper yesterday described skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's wish of playing the game at the Gabba as 'ridiculous'. However, Bangladesh's players, who spent most of their time watching the West Indies drub Pakistan by 150 runs at Christchurch on TV, were actually a bit disappointed with the wash out. They were looking forward to finally play at one of Australia's premier cricketing venues. They have only played at Canberra, Darwin and Cairns so far.

However, all that Mashrafe and co can do right now is look forward to their vital clash against Sri Lanka at Melbourne this Thursday and hope they can make the most of this additional point.

India struggles

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Health Minister JP Nadda attempted to rebuff reports of drug shortages.

"If any medicine store refuses to give medicines after showing a medical prescription, it should be reported to the authorities and action will be taken," he said.

He said there was no need to panic, and insisted the government was monitoring the situation closely. Experts investigating the cause of the outbreak say low winter temperatures are to blame.

Father-son

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of Enamul, 38, of Raozan upazila in Chittagong, said one correspondent who visited it.

The father of three had gone to Abu Dhabi 15 years back, but stayed for three years at home for treatment, before flying again three years ago, said his neighbours. He was supposed to be working as a shop assistant, they added.

No-one from his family agreed to speak.

However, Shakera Akhter, the wife of Selim, a 35 year old mason of Fatikchhari, probably has got a closure from Nurul Islam, the husband of Selim's sister, who also works in Abu Dhabi.

"He [Nurul] said my husband was burnt alive while asleep," Shakera said. "Since then, my two sons have been crying and haven't had any food."

40,000 attend Moscow pro-Putin rally

AFP, Moscow

Tens of thousands of strongman Vladimir Putin's supporters rallied yesterday near the Kremlin walls, a year after protests in neighbouring Ukraine led to the fall of its pro-Russian president.

The demonstrators, some dressed in fatigues, waved Russian flags and many sported the black and orange St George ribbon, a symbol of victory over Nazi Germany that pro-Russian Ukrainian separatists have adopted as their badge of honour.

Police said up to 40,000 people turned out with around 1,000 attending a similar rally in the second city of Saint Petersburg. Critics claimed many were paid to attend or bussed in.

"Yankee go home and take the Maidan with you," read one massive banner referring to Ukraine's pro-Western uprising that came to be known as the Maidan protests.

"We don't need Western ideology and gay parades," said another placard, while a column of Cossacks brandished a banner reading "The Maidan is a disease. We will treat it."

Established early this year, the umbrella movement that organised the rally, Anti-Maidan, includes several groups representing bikers, Cossacks, athletes and Russian veterans of the Afghan and Chechen wars, some of whom have fought alongside rebels in eastern Ukraine.

Members employed highly emotive, aggressive language to rouse the crowd at the apparently choreographed event in support of Putin, who has accused the West of stirring the Ukraine unrest.

"I am calling on you to rally around the Russian president at a time when all of Russia's enemies are mobilising," Alexander Zaldostanov, the leather-clad leader of biker gang the Night Wolves, told the rally.

One organiser, Nikolai Starikov, speaking from the stage, called the Kiev protests "a smile of an American ambassador" and an "embryo of Goebbels," referring to Hitler's propaganda minister.

"A Maidan will not take place in Russia," announced singer Victoria Tsyganova, dressed in a red coat and red kerchief.

The instantly recognisable strains of "The Holy War", a famous WWII-era song, emanated from loudspeakers.

Yemen's Hadi leaves Sanaa after weeks under house arrest

AFP, Aden

Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi, who resigned last month under pressure from Shiite militia, left Sanaa yesterday after weeks under effective house arrest, an aide told AFP.

Hadi arrived in the main southern city of Aden, where his supporters have refused to recognise the authority of the presidential council installed by the Huthi militia to replace him.

He travelled overland in a convoy of dozens of vehicles, passing through third city Taiz, which like Aden is outside Huthi control.

"He managed to leave his house this morning and his way is being secured to reach Aden," the aide said earlier.

A top security official in Aden told AFP that Hadi was staying in a presidential residence in the Khormaksar diplomatic district of the southern port city.

It was not immediately clear

A worker from UralVagonZavod, a maker of battle tanks in the Urals -- which publicly supported Putin during the height of winter protests in 2011-2012 -- accused the opposition of betraying Russia reeling from the effects of the economic crisis and Western sanctions.

"Now that the country is going through hardships the opposition are rubbing their hands," said Alexei Balyberdin.

"I fully support Putin's policies," said a 37-year-old demonstrator, Ivan Blagoi in St Petersburg. "I don't want the collapse of the country and a civil war brought on in Ukraine by the Maidan."

Critics say the Moscow event was organised with the help from authorities, with many participants brought in on buses or paid to be there. Organisers deny the claims.

After the Kiev uprising ousted Kremlin-backed president Viktor Yanukovich last February, Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine and has since backed a separatist insurgency in the east of the country.

Starikov said the march was the movement's first major rally aimed at discouraging the pro-Western opposition from plotting a coup in Russia.

"Don't even try. Don't make any attempts to rock the boat in Russia," he said in televised remarks.

State television gave ample coverage to yesterday's event and said similar rallies had been held across the country.

The opposition plans a protest on March 1 against the Ukraine conflict as well as Russia's economic crisis, which has been exacerbated by Western sanctions over Moscow's support for the separatists.

Earlier this week a court jailed top opposition activist Alexei Navalny for two weeks in a move that will most likely prevent him from leading next weekend's rally.

The protest is set to take place in southeastern Moscow, after authorities denied permission for the activists to march through the city centre.

Putin remains Russia's most popular politician despite hardships brought on by the economic crisis and Western sanctions.

Ukraine's ousted leader Yanukovich, who lives in Russia sheltered from prosecution back at home, said he would like to return to his country as soon as he can.

whether the Huthis had allowed him to leave in the face of demands by the UN Security Council for an immediate end to his house arrest.

The aide insisted that Hadi left "without an arrangement or even informing any of the political parties."

The Huthi militiamen, whose power base is in Yemen's mainly Shiite northern highlands, overran the capital unopposed in September.

Last month, they seized the presidential palace and laid siege to Hadi's residence, prompting him to tender his resignation.

The Huthis have pushed their advance into mainly Sunni areas south and west of Sanaa, where they have met with fierce resistance from armed tribesmen and Al-Qaeda militants.

But Taiz and some other parts of the north, as well as the whole of the south, remain beyond the militia's control.

Dating with danger

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usual Kushtia-Pabna highway, they took the alternative Kushtia-Rajbari highway.

"Our drivers were doing well. We had a brief stopover in Rajbari," he said.

The most difficult part of their journey began after sunset.

"We had already crossed the Paturia ferry ghat and it was dark," he said, adding that most of the arson attacks on vehicles had been carried out at night.

"I was driving at 40-45 kilometres an hour during the day. But even though it was night, I had to accelerate to 60 kilometres an hour to avert untoward incidents," he said.

"Panic consumed me when I reached Savar and saw two suspicious looking people standing beside the road," he added.

They were not arsonists. The convoy reached their destination safely.

"I was overwhelmed with relief as soon as I parked my truck," he told The Daily Star at Babubazar Tuesday night.

But Rashidul's relief was short lived. A few hours later, he had to start for Kushtia again. He is paid by how many trips he makes.

His income has significantly dropped because of the blockade. It was only his fifth trip since January 6.

During the journey, his worried family members called him repeatedly over the phone to know whether he was safe.

They have nothing to do except pray for his safe return as he is the only bread earner in the family.

Our Kushtia correspondent visited Rashidul's home at Ballabhpur.

"Every time my son goes out on a trip, I can neither eat nor sleep. I just keep on praying," Rashidul's mother Jahanara Begum said.

"My son is always nervous these days. He thinks his job is dangerous but he is helpless," she added.

Before leaving Kushtia on February 10, the trucker had said, "I have been driving a truck of Swarna Rice Mills for the last seven years but never felt so scared."

During his journey to Dhaka from Kushtia, he was on the phone with this paper several times answering queries like how he was feeling and what the situation was on the road. It was at Babubazar where The Daily Star staff correspondent finally met him before Rashidul left for Kushtia.

Australian FM calls Indonesia to ease tensions: reports

AFP, Sydney

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop called on Indonesia to give two Australians on death row an "indefinite stay of execution" as she clarified her Prime Minister's comments linking their fate to aid, media reports said yesterday.

Tensions between the two nations have grown after Indonesia confirmed Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, ringleaders of the so-called Bali Nine heroin trafficking group, were among the next group of prisoners to face the firing squad.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott last week denied threatening Indonesia when he said the country should remember the aid Australia contributed after the devastating 2004 tsunami.

Bishop said she called Vice President Jusuf Kalla to clarify Abbott's comments and emphasise Australia's close relationship with Indonesia.

"I have made it quite clear that the prime minister was simply illustrating the point that Australia has been and remains a supporter, a close friend of Indonesia," Bishop told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

"Certainly these comments were not any attempt to threaten Indonesia."

Relations between the neighbours are only just recovering from a damaging rift in 2014 over spying revelations and people-smuggling.

Kalla's office said Friday that the latest executions "will be delayed for between three weeks to a month from now due to technical reasons," without elaborating further.

Russian chocolates

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Putin in sunglasses, with the verse "To be king, when all are 'ifs' and 'buts'/You need a pair of rock-hard nuts".

And if that's not coarse enough for the lady in your life, Confael offers a Stalinist manager telling his comrade exactly how he disposed of an article by US State Department spokeswoman and regular Kremlin hate-figure, Jen Psaki: "I just read Psaki's latest gripe/It came in handy for a wipe".

The reaction on social media suggests the gifts left a bitter taste in most mouths.

"Shameful toilet humour" and "low politicking" are some of the more polite comments on Confael's Facebook page. Others mock the Soviet-nostalgia of the designs, suggesting chocolate-flavoured moonshine and pickled herring might better suit the company's new clientele, to be enjoyed in a "chocolate Gulag with toffee barbed wire".

Kamaruzzaman

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Central Jail and talked to him for 31 minutes.

Shishir said their client was "well mentally and physically" and "not worried" about the SC judgment that upheld the verdict of the International Crimes Tribunal-2.

Claiming innocence, Kamaruzzaman told his lawyers that he was not involved in any of the offences alleged against him, added Shishir.

The defence will file the review petition within 15 days from February 19, the day when Kamaruzzaman was informed about the release of the full text of the SC verdict, said the lawyer.

"Kamaruzzaman hoped he would be acquitted if he gets justice as he is innocent," lawyer Tajul Islam told this correspondent.

The five lawyers met the Jamaat leader two days after the ICT-2 had issued a death warrant against him.

Transport

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"We don't understand politics, don't know what it means. We just want to work hard and live peacefully," he added.

Trucker Abdur Rahim, 46, of Charmatha said he has already sold his only cow for Tk 12,000 to support his family. He has no idea on how to get through the next week.

Anwar Hossain, 61, of Thanthania said they feel embarrassed to seek help from others. He thought the poor should not be the victim of dirty politics.

Protesting sabotage, arson and murder of the transport workers, Rajshahi Road Transport Workers' Federation brought out a procession in Bogra town on February 14 and later held a rally at Shatmatha.

Speaking at the rally, workers' leaders said they would not sit back if another transport worker was killed or injured in arson during the blockade and hartals. The leaders threatened the arsonists of sending them to hospitals.

Nigerian residents return to 'ghost town' seized from Boko Haram

AFP, Kano

Residents of the northeast Nigerian town of Gamboru returned to their homes for the first time since Chadian forces retook it from Boko Haram, they said yesterday.

Scores of people crossed the 300-metre (yard) bridge that forms the border with Cameroon under military escort to survey the ravaged town and homes looted by the militants.

Boko Haram seized Gamboru in August last year, forcing thousands to flee across the frontier to the town of Fotokol, on the other bank of the river in northern Cameroon.

Chadian forces, who have joined the regional fight to crush the Islamist insurgency, retook Gamboru earlier this month, after intense fighting that left hundreds of insurgents dead.

"We met a ghost town strewn with burnt vehicles, destroyed buildings and emptied homes," Kachalla

Moduye told AFP by telephone from Fotokol after a two-hour tour of the town on Friday.

"Many homes were burnt in the Boko Haram invasion and in the fighting to reclaim it by Chadian soldiers. Those that were spared were looted by Boko Haram in the five months they stayed in the town."

Gamboru has been repeatedly targeted in the increasingly bitter conflict, which has left more than 13,000 people dead since 2009 and made more than one million homeless.

It was the first town recaptured in the regional fight-back by troops from Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, which was launched because of dawn-fears of Boko Haram's threat to regional security.

Gamboru residents who hoped to salvage personal effects were disappointed as they found their homes empty.

89 school children abducted by South Sudan militia: UNICEF

AFP, Juba

An unidentified South Sudan armed group has abducted at least 89 boys, some as young as 13, from their homes in the north of the country, UNICEF said yesterday.

"Eighty-nine children were abducted ...," a statement said, adding that "the actual number could be much higher."

The UN children's agency said the mass abduction happened at the start of the week in the town of Wau Shilluk.

Witnesses said that unidentified armed soldiers surrounded the community and went house-to-house taking away by force any boys thought to be over 12 years old.

"The recruitment and use of children by armed forces destroys families and communities," said Jonathan Veitch, the head of UNICEF in South Sudan.

"Children are exposed to incompressible levels of violence, they lose their families and their chance to go to school."

UNICEF estimates there are at least 12,000 children used by both sides in South Sudan's ongoing civil war.

Recruitment of children has increased since fighting began in

December 2013 when President Salva Kiir accused his former deputy, Riek Machar, of planning a coup.

War continues despite numerous ceasefire deals and with peace talks underway in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

Earlier this month advocacy group Human Rights Watch accused both rebel and government forces of "actively recruiting" child soldiers despite national laws prohibiting it and repeated promises to stop the practice.

Information minister Michael Makuei dismissed the report, saying the government did not use children in combat as there were plenty of men able to fight.

It was not clear which armed group was responsible for this week's mass abduction in Wau Shilluk, a riverside town in government-held territory within Upper Nile state.

It has grown dramatically with the arrival of tens of thousands of people forced from their homes during 14-months of war, many fleeing from the nearby city of Malakal, where fighting has been particularly fierce.

The area is under the control of government-aligned warlord Johnson Olony, who HRW accused of recruiting children in its February report.

Appeal hearing

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regarding war crimes-related cases had already been settled by the SC, and it might not take much time in disposing of other war crimes-related appeals. He hoped that the SC would dispose of the pending appeals within two years.

Asked, SC Registrar Syed Aminul Islam said it was the discretion of the SC to hear and dispose of any appeal. The SC will decide when it will hold the hearing on Mojaheed's appeal.

Mohammad Shishir Manir, one of the defence lawyers, told this correspondent that the SC might take at least two years for hearing and disposing of the seven war crimes appeals if it deals with them at the current pace.

The International Crimes Tribunals, on different dates, had convicted and sentenced the seven to death for their crimes against humanity during the country's Liberation War in 1971.

Overruling the judgment of the ICT-2 that had given Jamaat leader Abdul Quader Mollah life term imprisonment for his wartime offences, the SC sentenced Mollah to death on September 18, 2013. It also upheld the death penalty for Muhammad Kamaruzzaman. In the case of Jamaat

leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee, it commuted the death penalty and sentenced him to jail until death.

Mollah was executed on December 12, 2013.

The ICT-2 on July 17, 2013, found Mojaheed guilty on five war crimes charges and sentenced him to death on three of the charges.

Mojaheed filed the appeal with the SC on August 12, 2013, seeking acquittal of all the charges.

The SC was set to start hearing his appeal on January 14 this year, but it deferred the hearing following an adjournment prayer from the defence.

Since then the appeal has not been included in the list of the SC for hearing.

The appeals of former Jamaat chief Ghulam Azam, who was sentenced to 90 years in prison by the ICT-1, and BNP leader Abdul Alim, who was sentenced to imprisonment till death by the ICT-2, for committing war crimes have become ineffective after their deaths behind bars.

Convicted war criminals Chowdhury Mueen Uddin, Ashrafuzzaman Khan and Abul Kalam Azad, popularly known as Bachchu Razakar, are now on the run.

Police unearth plot

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of Dewan Bazar ward unit of the organisation in Chittagong, Shibir is the student body of Jamaat-e-Islami.

A Chittagong court placed the three on a five-day remand yesterday afternoon.

Acting on a tip-off, police raided a building at Bogar Beel in the port city around 1:30am and arrested the three, said Abdur Rauf, assistant commissioner of Chittagong Metropolitan Police (Kotwali Circle).

Enamul reached the port city by train on February 12. He came here on instructions of Shibir President Abdul Jabbar to carry out attacks on the depots of Padma, Meghna and Jamuna oil companies, according to police.

On February 14 and 15, Enamul held several meetings with the leaders of Shibir north and south units of Chittagong city in Foy's Lake and Chittagong College areas.

They planned subversive activities

in Chittagong port and attacks on the oil depots in the city's Patenga area, said Rauf.

Enamul's next plan was to meet former Jamaat lawmaker Shahjahan Chowdhury, he added.

Police were trying to detain Shahjahan, Shibir north unit President Nurul Amin and its south unit President HM Sohel, said police sources.

A case has been filed.

THREE ON 5-DAY REMAND

Chittagong Metropolitan Magistrate Syed Mashfiqul Islam sent the Shibir leaders on a five-day remand after they were produced before the court with a 10-day remand prayer, said Kazi Mottakim Minan, additional deputy commissioner (prosecution) of the CMP.

One of the arrestees, Mushfique, confessed before the court that they planned to attack the oil depots, said the police official.