

Pedestrian killed

FROM PAGE 16

With the latest one, at least 76 lives perished and over 300 people were hurt in violence and arson attacks since the BNP-led 20-party alliance enforced an indefinite nationwide blockade on January 6.

The combine has also been enforcing countrywide hartals since February 1, except for weekends, demanding a fresh election under a non-partisan government.

ARSON ATTACKS

In Narayanganj, helper Yasin, 13, and conductor Shakil Ahmed, 18, suffered burns after alleged blockaders firebombed their bus in Rupganj early yesterday.

Critically injured, the two were undergoing treatment at the Burn and Plastic Surgery Unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Bus owner Sohrab Hossain said Yasin and Shakil were sleeping in the Ashiyan Paribahan bus parked in front of Bismillah CNG Filling Station on Dhaka-Sylhet highway at Sawghat of Rupganj around 3:30am when the attack was made.

The vehicle was completely burnt before fire fighters reached the spot.

Back in the capital, arsonists posing as passengers set alight a bus of Ananda Paribahan at Gendaria yesterday evening, police said.

All the passengers, however, managed to get off the bus unhurt.

Besides, a bus was torched in Chittagong's Bahaddarhat around 7:20pm, a truck in Rajshahi city around 8:45am and another in Bhola around 6:45am.

EIGHT HURT IN BLASTS

At least eight people were injured in separate crude bomb attacks in the capital yesterday evening, according to police.

Blockade pickets hurled a home-made bomb at a moving bus near Gulshan-1 intersection around 8:00pm, leaving at least three passengers injured.

A pedestrian was injured in a crude bomb blast in Uttara's House Building area around 10:00pm, another in the city's Nawabganj around 8:00pm, two more in Lalbagh around 8:30pm and another person was hurt in a similar attack at Paltan around 7:30pm.

Law enforcers in Jessore recovered 17 crude bombs at Kagojpukur village under Benapole Port Police Station on Tuesday night.

Though the traffic in the capital and other major cities is largely normal, inter-district bus and truck operators refrained from operating vehicles, fearing attacks.

The political stand-off is hurting businesses, their production and supply chains. According to an estimate by the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, businesses have lost over Tk 100,000 crore so far due to the blockade and hartals.

EXAMS PUT OFF AGAIN

The last extension of hartal from 6:00am yesterday to 6:00am tomorrow forced the education ministry to push yesterday's SSC and equivalent exams to March 7.

The exams will be held from 10:00am to 1:00pm, Education Secretary Nazrul Islam Khan told at a press briefing at the ministry yesterday.

The ministry has so far rescheduled eight day's exams this month.

Our correspondents in Chittagong, Narayanganj and Benapole contributed to this report.

Clocks that keep

FROM PAGE 16

"Cryogenic optical lattice clocks" are not pretty -- they look more like giant stripped-down desktop computers than ordinary wall clocks -- but they are so precise that current technology cannot even measure them.

The research team led by Hidetoshi Katori, a professor at the University of Tokyo, believes it has taken the technology way beyond the atomic clocks that are currently used to define the "second".

The new clock uses special lasers to trap strontium atoms in tiny grid-like structures, according to the team, which published the study this month in the journal Nature Photonics.

It then measures the frequency of the vibration of the atoms, using them like "the atomic pendulum," according to the study.

The system is so delicate that it must operate in a cold environment, around -180 Celsius (-292 Fahrenheit), to reduce the impact of the surrounding electromagnetic waves and to maintain the machine's accuracy, the team said.

Researchers connected the two clocks for a month, and estimated that it would take some 16 billion years for them to develop a one-second gap.

That is significantly more accurate than the caesium atom clock, used to define "one second", which can develop a one second error every 30 million years, they said.

The technology could be applied to satellite-based global positioning systems and communications networks, while also serving as a foundation for various precision technologies, the team said in a statement.

"Through improved precision, we hold high hopes for accelerated discussions on redefinition of the 'second'," the statement said.

Child killed in slum fire

FROM PAGE 16

nearby house, said family members.

"Hearing people shouting outside, Asif felt something bad had happened. He rushed outside, leaving Sajib inside. Once he went outside, he saw the raging blaze which quickly engulfed his house. Neither he nor anyone else could enter the room to rescue Sajib," said their aunt Parvin, who lived at a house in the same slum.

The parents, Tuhin Sheikh and Asma, were out at that time, she said.

It took 50 minutes for 12 fire engines to extinguish the blaze.

In an almost similar fire, a four-year girl was burnt alive and over 500 families lost their homes at Poolpar Battala slum in Mohammadpur on January 11.

The Shahidertek slum, set up on a

piece of government land 10-15 years ago, had around 120 houses, inhabited mostly by rickshaw-pullers, domestic helps, garment workers and small traders, according to the slum residents.

Most of these poor people, having lost almost everything, were left speechless.

"This is the fifth time in the last 12 years that a fire took away everything from me," said rickshaw-puller Abdur Rashid, 65, who jointly rented a room for Tk 1,200 a month.

"Each time a fire burnt my belongings, I had to move somewhere else and it took quite a long time for me to recover," said Rashid, who had been living at the Shahidertek slum for the last two years.

Journos, rights

FROM PAGE 1

"Of the documented cases of 20 people subjected to enforced disappearance between 2012 and 2014, nine people were subsequently found dead. Six had returned to their families after periods of captivity lasting from weeks to months, with no news of their whereabouts until their release. There were no news about the circumstances of the other five," the report said.

It said three Rab officers were detained and investigated for their alleged involvement in abductions and killings of seven people in Narayanganj last year. A total of 17 Rab members were arrested in this connection later on, it said.

"Amnesty International welcomed the investigation as a move towards holding law enforcement officials accountable for alleged human rights violations. However, concerns continued that the government might drop the cases if public pressure to bring them to justice lessened," it added.

The AI said the government's use of section-57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act severely restricted the right to freedom

of expression.

"Section-57 of the ICT Act criminalised a wide array of peaceful actions such as criticising Islamic religious views in a newspaper article or reporting on human rights violations," it said.

"More than a dozen media workers, including journalists, said that they had been threatened by security agencies for criticising the authorities. The threats were usually in phone calls directly to the journalists, or via messages to their editors. Many journalists and talk show participants said they exercised self-censorship as a result," it added.

"Torture and other ill-treatment was widespread and committed with impunity. Police routinely tortured detainees in their custody. Methods included beating, suspension from the ceiling, electric shocks to the genitals and, in some cases, shooting detainees' legs," it said.

At least nine people died in police custody between January and July 2014, allegedly as a result of torture, it said. Violence against women remained a major human rights concern, it added.

Tearful families

FROM PAGE 16

Like Momena, families of many other victims also want to see the killers executed soon as it would heal their wounds a bit.

A special court in November 2013 awarded death penalty to 150 BDR jawans and 2 civilians and different terms of imprisonment to 423 people in the Pilkhna carnage case. Almost all of those sentenced were BDR soldiers.

Appeals were made to the High Court challenging the verdicts.

Attorney General Mahbubey Alam recently told The Daily Star that it would take the higher courts at least two years to finish all the legal procedures to pave the way for the killers' execution.

Sanjana Sonia Jobaida, widow of Maj Momin, came with her only son Sadakat Sabri Bin Momin. Sadakat was born two months after his father had been killed.

Jobaida too wanted a quick execution of the killers within the tenure of this government.

"Sadakat knows his father only through his photographs," she said.

She however expressed her discontent saying, "We are yet to know who masterminded the heinous killings."

Kahinoor Khanam, 62, mother of

slain Maj Mizanur Rahman, said she wanted a quick execution of her son's killers.

"During the nine months of our Liberation War I had to hide behind wild undergrowth carrying Mizan in my womb while my husband went to fight against the Pakistan occupation forces," she said with her eyes filled with tears.

"My son has been killed on the very soil for which his father had fought risking his life," she said, adding the question whether if this was the reward for her husband's contribution as a freedom fighter.

Kahinoor said days into her son's death, her husband had fallen sick and died after nine months. Faced with a financial hardship, now she could not even manage Tk 6,000 required per month to buy her medicines.

Earlier in the morning, representatives of the president, the prime minister, the state minister for home along with chiefs of three defence services and the director general of BGM placed floral wreaths at the graveyard to pay tribute to the slain army personnel. JP Chairman HM Ershad also placed a wreath at their graveyard.

Syrian Christians

FROM PAGE 16

first of its kind in the war-torn country -- and demanded the release of the 90 hostages.

Nearly 1,000 Assyrian Christian families have fled their villages in the northeastern province of Hasakeh since Monday's kidnappings, said Osama Edward, director of the Sweden-based Assyrian Human Rights Network.

About 800 families have taken refuge in the city of Hasakeh and 150 in Qamishli, a Kurdish city on the border with Turkey, Edward said, adding that the number of displaced individuals came to about 5,000.

Most of the hostages were women, children or elderly, he added.

Edward told AFP he believed the mass abduction was linked to the jihadists' recent loss of ground in the face of US-led coalition air raids against ISIS that began in Syria in September.

"ISIS has been losing territory because of the international coalition's strikes and they took the hostages to use them as human shields," the activist said.

The jihadists, who are battling Kurdish fighters on the ground, may try to exchange the Assyrian Christians for ISIS prisoners, according to Edward.

He said the aim of the jihadists is to take over the Assyrian Christian village of Tal Tamer, which is located near a bridge over the Khabor river that links Syria to Iraq.

According to the Syrian

Observatory for Human Rights, Kurdish fighters battling the jihadists recaptured three Assyrian villages and a nearby Arab village yesterday.

"The (Kurdish) People's Protection Units (YPG) have reclaimed Tal Shamiran, Tal Masri, Tal Hermel and Ghbeish," said Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman.

But fighting continues in the area, he added.

In Tal Shamiran, the jihadists burned down part of a church.

And in the Arab village of Ghbeish, ISIS decapitated four men, and burned down several houses and a school. They accused the villagers of "collaborating" with the Kurdish fighters.

ISIS, which also holds swaths of Iraqi territory, last year declared an Islamic "caliphate" in areas under its control and has committed widespread atrocities.

Assyrian Christians, who are from one of the world's oldest Christian communities, have been under increasing threat since ISIS captured large parts of Syria.

Last week, the ISIS branch in Libya released a video showing the gruesome beheading of 21 Coptic Christians, mostly Egyptians.

The United States on Wednesday condemned the abductions as "brutal and inhumane".

There were 30,000 Assyrians in Syria before the country's conflict erupted in March 2011. At that point Syria had an estimated total Christian population of about 1.2 million people.

GCC reiterates support for Yemen's Hadi

AFP, Aden

The Gulf Cooperation Council yesterday reiterated its support for Yemen's beleaguered president against the Shiite militia that holds Sanaa, as militiamen opened fire to disperse thousands of his backers demonstrating in the capital.

Days after Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi escaped house arrest and fled to safety in the southern port of Aden, GCC secretary general Abdullahi al-Zayani met him at a palace there, a presidential aide said.

He "stressed the support of GCC members for... the Yemeni president," said a statement from bloc, which groups Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Outlaw killed

FROM PAGE 16

Police took him to Chhoto-Khalimpur village to recover arms following 'leads' extracted from him.

As the police team approached a field in Chhoto-Khalimpur village, Daud's accomplices opened fire on them forcing the law enforcers to retaliate. This prompted a gunfight between the gang and police, Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) in Magura Sudarshan Roy said.

Daud attempted to flee from the police van during the "shootout" and died on the spot after he was caught in a line of fire, the ASP added. Daud is a DB enlisted terrorist in Magura.

The ASP further said four policemen were wounded in the shootout during which three firearms and 21 bullets were recovered from the spot.

Daud was brought to Magura sadar hospital around 3:00am where the on duty doctor Rakibul Islam confirmed his death.

The body has been kept at the hospital for autopsy after which the body will be handed over to his family.

Info ministry

FROM PAGE 1

announced the Eighth Wage Board for the overall development, protection and welfare of the media and media persons, the statement read.

Moreover, it had taken a number of steps including constituting the Journalists' Welfare Trust for the benefit of working journalists.

The statement cited several steps including the Press Council Act and the National Broadcasting Commission as contributing to the general development of the media.

It also said that the Penal Code had been amended to give media person's clemency.

The statement said that under the current government the media had "boomed" and that there was double the number of publications than in the past.

Besides, 26 television channels were also permitted and 11 FM radios and 32 community radios were provided licences to operate during the tenure of the present government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The government also said that no media outlet or any stakeholder was taken to task for their media activities.

The statement further said that parliament had the right to discuss all issues pertaining to the nation.

It said that the government welcomes factual criticism and analysis as it improves its functioning through better transparency and accountability.

It reiterated the government's position that the media was an integral part of a democratic order.

Ransom

FROM PAGE 16

The dispute went to arbitration, but it could not bring any solution to the problem. The enmity between the two families deepened.

Abul Basher, Abu Naser and their mother Majeda Begum planned to kill Apan. They kidnapped the boy on Saturday afternoon when he came out of his house to play.

Failing to trace his son, Jahidul filed a general diary with the police station.

At one stage, the abductors phoned Jahidul and demanded the ransom for the release of his son. The hapless father paid the abductors Tk 32 lakh through bKash, a mobile phone-based payment switch.

But Apan never returned home. Tracing several calls on Jahidul's mobile phone, police nabbed Abul Basher, his wife Hamida Begum, Masum, his wife, and mother Majeda Begum.

Acting on the confession of the arrestees, police recovered the victim's body and sent it to Narayanganj Sadar Hospital morgue for an autopsy.

A pall of gloom descended on the area following the recovery of the body. Agitated locals also vandalised the houses of the alleged kidnappers.

Minority rights abuses threaten reforms

UN rights chief urges Myanmar to 'get back on track'

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations human rights chief yesterday warned that widespread abuses of minority rights in Myanmar threatened to undermine reforms in the country.

"Myanmar had promised to end the era of political prisoners, but now seems intent on creating a new generation by jailing people who seek to enjoy the democratic freedoms they have been promised," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a statement.

He said the world had hailed the transition in Myanmar since a quasi-civilian regime took power in 2011 after decades of military rule "as a story of promise and hope."

"But recent developments relating to the human rights of minorities, the freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest are calling into question the direction of that reform and even threatening to set it back," he said.

Zeid pointed to the case last week of 14 members of the Michaungkan community jailed for protesting peacefully against the military's alleged confiscation of their land.

And in 2014, he said, 10 journalists were jailed "under outdated defamation, trespassing and national security laws."

He also expressed concern related to upcoming elections.

"During an election year, it will be

tempting for some politicians to fan the flames of prejudice for electoral gain," he warned.

"But at a time when religious extremism is creating havoc in many parts of the world, the terrible consequences of appealing to or appeasing such sentiments should be all too clear."

Among the worrying developments was a government announcement last week that identity cards for people without full citizenship, including Muslim Rohingya, will expire within weeks.

"The decision appears designed to prevent 'white card' holders -- the majority believed to be members of Myanmar's stateless Rohingya Muslim minority -- from being eligible to vote," Zeid warned.

Many of Myanmar's roughly 1.3 million Rohingya are stateless and subject to restrictions that affect everything from their ability to travel and work to the permitted size of their families.

Zeid said the Myanmar government even opposes the use of the term "Rohingya", insisting that denying the group's right to self-identification "should sound a clear warning bell."

The UN rights chief also voiced alarm at escalating violence between the military and rebels in the remote Kokang region near the Chinese border, where more than 130 people have died since February 9 and tens of thousands have reportedly been displaced.

US astronauts step out on spacewalk

AFP, Miami

Two US astronauts transformed into spacewalking mechanics yesterday as they floated outside the International Space Station to grease a robotic arm and help prepare parking docks for commercial crew capsules.

Commander Barry "Butch" Wilmore and flight engineer Terry Virts began their six-and-a-half hour spacewalk at 6:51 am (12:51 GMT) when they placed their suits on internal battery power before emerging from the airlock, NASA said.

The astronauts are both wearing helmet cameras that allow viewers on Earth to see the spacewalkers' perspective, as part of a live broadcast on NASA television and on its website.

The team's goal for the spacewalk is to route two bundles of cable, lubricate latching parts of the space station's robotic arm and prepare for another operation later this year to move modules around the orbiting outpost.

Virts began greasing screws and bearings at the end of the 17-meter-long (56-foot) Canadian robotic arm, called Canadarm 2, about halfway through the spacewalk.

The whole robotic arm process will take about three hours, said NASA commentator Rob Navias.

Launched in 2001, the robotic arm is regularly used to move equipment and astronauts around the exterior of the space station.

It also reaches out to grab the arriving unmanned space capsules bringing supplies and science experiments to the space station.

Navias described the robotic arm as "the workhorse for the assembly of the space station," and said parts of it have "grown a bit arthritic."

Hartal, blockade

FROM PAGE 1

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and her son Tarique Rahman and the lawsuits against the alliance leaders.

In her scheduled question-answer session, Hasina termed these subversive activities grave crimes punishable with death.

The Awami League chief urged BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia to stop killing people, and warned of legal actions if sabotage and killings were not stopped immediately.

Replying to another lawmaker's query, Hasina, also leader of the House, said the persisting political instability would hamper the government's target of reducing poverty to 13.5 percent by 2021 from 31.5 percent in 2010.

The government has also started working on upgrading 13 important roads and highways to four lanes, she informed the House.

They are 225km Chittagong-Cox's Bazar-Teknaf road, 286km Dhaka-Sylhet-Tamabil road, 222 km Daulatdia-Magura-Jhenidah-Jessore road, 85km

A key part of the spacewalkers' mission is to set up additional docking ports -- which are essentially parking spots for space taxis -- at the ISS for the arrival of more crew-carrying spacecraft.

Boeing plans to send its first astronaut to space aboard the CST-100 spaceship in late 2017, followed by SpaceX soon after.

During the first outing by Wilmore and Virts on Saturday, the pair routed 364 feet (110 meters) of cable, with goal of setting up 700 feet by the end of the final spacewalk of this series on Sunday.

Several more spacewalks in the coming months will help the station get ready for the arrival of a pair of international docking adapters that will be delivered later this year.

Traffic to the ISS is expected to increase once private industries like SpaceX and Boeing get their crew capsules up and running.

The flights will restore US access to the orbiting lab where global crews of astronauts live together for six months at a time.

California-based SpaceX, with the creation of its Dragon cargo craft, became the first US commercial spaceship to begin supply missions to the ISS in 2012.

However, Boeing is expected to be the first to send astronauts to space when its CST-100 is ready for a crew flight in December 2017.

The retirement of the 30-year space shuttle program in 2011 left the United States without a spaceship that could send astronauts to low-Earth orbit.

In the meantime, the world's astronauts are riding aboard Russian Soyuz capsules at a price of \$70 million per seat.

Comilla-Brahmanbaria road, 40km Elenga-Hatikumrul road, 137km Hatikumrul-Rangpur highway, 157km Rangpur-Teesta-Burimari road, 194km Hatikumrul-Bonpara-Rajshahi-Sonamasjid road, 37km Khulna-Mongla road, 132km Faridpur-Barisal road, 109km Barisal-Kuakata road, 54km Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga highway and 13km Dharkhar-Akhaura highway.

Among these, Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga, Faridpur-Barisal and Barisal-Kuakata roads would get priority, considering the tourism potential of these areas, she noted.

Responding to another query, she said a rehabilitation centre for the autistic people with football and cricket fields, swimming pool and gymnasium, among other facilities, would be constructed on a 12-acre piece of land in Savar.

Foster family service would be introduced for the autistic people without family, and compulsory autistic school and toy library would be set up in all the 103 centres for autistic people across the country, added the PM.