



Malian security forces evacuate a man from an area surrounding the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako yesterday. Gunmen went on a shooting rampage at the luxury hotel in Mali's capital Bamako, seizing 170 people.

PHOTO: AFP

27 killed as gunmen siege

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foreigners. A body lay under a brown blanket at the bottom of a flight of stairs.

Peacekeepers saw 12 dead bodies in the basement of the hotel and another 15 on the second floor, the UN official told Reuters on condition of anonymity. He added that the UN troops were still helping Malian authorities search the hotel.

A man who worked for a Belgian regional parliament was among the dead, the assembly said.

Minister of Internal Security Colonel Salif Traoré said the gunmen had burst through a security barrier at 7:00am, spraying the area with gunfire and shouting "Allahu Akbar", or "God is great" in Arabic.

The attacks are a slap in the face for France, which has stationed 3,500 troops in northern Mali to try to restore stability after a 2012 Tuareg rebellion which was later hijacked by al-Qaeda-linked jihadists.

Bursts of gunfire were heard as the

assailants went through the hotel room by room and floor by floor, one senior security source and a witness told Reuters.

Some people were freed by the attackers after showing they could recite verses from the Quran, while others managed to escape or were brought out by security forces.

One of the rescued hostages, celebrated Guinean singer Sékouba "Bambino" Diabaté, said he had overheard two of the assailants speaking English as they searched an adjacent room.

The raid on the hotel, which lies just west of the city centre near government ministries and diplomatic offices, came a week after Islamic State militants killed 130 people in Paris, raising fears that French nationals were being specifically targeted.

Twelve Air France flight crew were in the hotel but all were brought out safely, the French national carrier said.

A Turkish official said five of seven Turkish Airlines staff had also man-

aged to flee. The Chinese state news agency Xinhua said three of 10 Chinese tourists caught inside had been rescued.

Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita cut short a trip to a regional summit in Chad, his office said.

Northern Mali was occupied by Islamist fighters, some with links to al-Qaeda, for most of 2012. They were driven out by a French-led military operation, but sporadic violence has continued in Mali's central belt on the southern reaches of the Sahara, and in Bamako.

One security source said as many as 10 gunmen had stormed the building, although the company that runs the hotel, Rezidor Group, said it understood that there were only two attackers.

Al Mourabitoun has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks, including an assault on a hotel in the town of Sevare, 600 km northeast of Bamako, in August in which 17 people including five UN staff were killed.

UNSC resolution

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slaughtered citizens of all five permanent Security Council members.

French officials said they were formally submitting a draft resolution to the Security Council, pushing aside a competing draft offered by Russia earlier this week. It could be adopted as early as Friday or over the weekend.

The French manoeuvre reflected confidence that its resolution would not provoke Russian or Chinese vetoes and would thus win approval.

The text, shared with The Independent, calls on member states "with the capacity to do so" to "take all necessary measures, in compliance with international law, in particular international human rights, refugee and humanitarian law, on the territory under the control of Isil [Isis] in Syria and Iraq, to redouble and co-ordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by Isil... and to eradicate the safe haven they have established in Iraq and Syria".

The Russian version is only slightly amended from the one it submitted in September. At the time, it was spurned by London, Paris and Washington because it included provisions seeking the co-operation of governments in the region, including the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

There is still nothing to indicate that Moscow is about to cut Mr Assad loose. However, there was cautious optimism in the corridors of the UN that Russia could not contemplate blocking a resolution that condemned Isil, given the Paris attacks and the bombing of one of its own planes.

"There is a momentum to have a Security Council product that condemns the attacks not just in Paris but also Beirut and Sharm el-Sheikh and stresses the unity of the council and its desire to tackle the threat posed by Isil," one diplomat said.

Adding to the new sense of urgency were reports attributed to US and Iraqi intelligence that Isil is attempting to create a unit to develop and deploy chemical weapons.

The French President, François Hollande, is to visit Washington next week and thereafter Moscow in the hope of creating a common coalition of powers against Isil. Persuading presidents Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin to set aside their differences will still be a difficult task.

The US remains averse to joining hands with Russia in the light of its adventurism in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Free Golapbagh playground

Green activists urge authorities concerned

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Green activists and locals yesterday demanded that the Golapbagh playground in the capital's Saidabad area be freed from illegal occupation immediately.

At a "citizens' rally" in front of the Jatiya Press Club, they also called for handing over the playground to the local residents afterwards.

Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa), Green Voice and Golapbagh Math Rokhya Andolon organised the programme jointly.

Speakers pointed out that the playground at Golapbagh, like many others in the capital, has not been in shape for playing sports for the last several years as it is still filled with materials and equipment meant for building the Mayor Mohammad Hanif Flyover.

Although the construction work ended in 2013, "a section of people" is now trying to grab the land with those things, they alleged.

Bapa General Secretary Abdul Matin said the construction work

caused great damage to the playground which is full of historical importance, and demanded that the authorities concerned free it from the clutches of the grabbers without wasting any more time.

Mubassher Hussain, vice president of the same organisation, said without such playgrounds, it would not have been possible for the Bangladeshi sportsmen to make the nation proud.

The playground at Golapbagh is also necessary for the mental growth of the children in the area, he said.

Iqbal Habib, joint secretary of Bapa, said both the elected mayors before the recent city corporation polls had pledged that they would work to recover all the occupied parks and playgrounds in Dhaka.

Now, we hope that Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Sayeed Khokon will fulfill his promise, he added.

Moinul Hasan, a local, echoed the leaders and said they want their playground back at any cost.

Turning a swamp

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Twenty thousand taka profit when the first fish are sold later this month. Choosing indigenous fish species and carp has proved wise, with most fish already reaching one kilogram in weight.

"We never imagined such success in such a short time," several women participants say. "It's like a dream to us."

The group hopes the first fish harvest can earn eight to ten lakh taka, with plans afoot to expand the project in coming years to double or triple the earning.

As well as finance, BRAC has offered technical support to the new entrepreneurs. "We believe in the potential of fish and vegetable farming on disused water-

logged land to fulfil the locality's protein demands," says Farukuzzaman, BRAC manager in Jhalakathi.

Such has been the project's rapid success that much curiosity has been aroused, with visitors regularly arriving to inspect the fish multitude. "I'm from Jhalakathi town," says one sightseer, Badsha Bhuiyan. "I heard about this project but without seeing it I couldn't believe it. I've taken some photos of the fish. It's really nice to see the project firsthand."

Kajol Rani is excited by visitor interest. "People come from far and near everyday to see what we have done," she says, "I'm really happy to be a part of it."

BNP seeks

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Khaleda left for London for eye treatment and celebrating Eid-ul-Azha there with her family members.

At a press conference on Thursday,

Ripon claimed that the party chief decided to return home on Saturday without completing her treatment, considering the country's political crisis.

Halt execution of SQ Chy, Mojaheed

HRW urges govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has called upon the government to halt the executions of death row war criminals Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed and Salauddin Quader Chowdhury.

The US-based international rights watchdog made the call yesterday, two days after the Supreme Court dismissed their petitions for reviewing its verdict that upheld their death penalty given by two special tribunals in 2013.

The apex court's judgment has paved the way for putting the two war criminals to death.

"The authorities should immediately suspend the death sentences of Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed of the Jamaat-e-Islami and Salauddin Quader Chowdhury of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party pending an independent and impartial review of their cases," HRW said in a statement.

"Justice and accountability for the terrible crimes committed during Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence are crucial, but trials need to meet international fair trial standards," said Brad Adams, Asia director of HRW. "Unfair trials can't provide real justice, especially when the death penalty is imposed."

According to the HRW statement, Stephen Rapp, the former US ambassador for war crimes, who has long advised the government to make changes to ensure fair trials, "spoke out this week on the miscarriage of justice" in the cases of Mojaheed and Salauddin.

Human Rights Watch opposes the death penalty in all circumstances because of its inherent cruelty, the statement said.

In his reaction to HRW statement, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam said the government is not bothered by the statement issued by the HRW over the trial of death row war criminals Mojaheed and Salauddin.

He made the comment while responding to a reporter's query over the HRW statement after attending a seminar organised by Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee at Cirdap auditorium in the capital.

AL may face rebel trouble

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campaigns. In some areas, they promised to remain in the race even if they fail to get party support.

To make matters worse, some lawmakers and local influential leaders have sided with the candidates of their liking.

The party high-ups are worried. They think they would not get the desired results if they fail to field a single candidate for the post in each municipality. The party has not yet picked any candidate.

Contacted, AL Organising Secretary Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury admitted that having so many candidates is a major concern. "But we are hopeful that we can solve the problem organisationally."

He warned of "serious organisational actions" against dissidents.

The party will form committees in district and upazila levels to pick candidates in the respective areas for the mayoral posts. "Seven committees will be formed in the seven divisions to monitor the candidate-selection process."

An intelligence agency has already informed the government about the AL infighting over the upcoming polls. In several reports to the home ministry recently, the agency warned that the law and order may worsen in different parts of the country at any time due to the infighting.

A tense situation is prevailing in some municipalities, and tension may rise further after the announcement of

polls schedule, the reports said.

Take Gurudaspur municipality as an example.

A chase and counter-chase took place in October between two mayoral hopefuls -- Ariful Islam Biplob, general secretary of Gurudaspur municipal AL, and current mayor Shahnewaz Ali Molla, also general secretary of Gurudaspur thana AL, when they went to Chaitali market to "seek blessings" of the people.

An altercation broke out between the activists of the two groups, leading to the chase and counter chase. Police later controlled the situation, according to a report of the Special Branch of Police.

The report said Ariful was backed by

Natore-2 MP Shafiqul Islam Shimul

and Shahnewaz by Natore-4 MP Abdul Quddus.

"This unwanted incident took place as two top leaders are supporting two candidates," it said.

On average, three to four local leaders are campaigning for the elections in almost all the municipalities. They are also lobbying the district unit leaders hard to get party tickets, said insiders.

In Manikganj, for example, four mayoral hopefuls have entered the race already. In last year's elections to seven upazilas in Manikganj, all candidates backed by the AL lost mainly due to infighting.

Similarly, six mayoral aspirants from the AL have entered the race in Boalmari municipality of Faridpur

while three in Hajipur and five in Shaharasti of Chandpur, four each in Modhupur and Mirzapur of Tangail, and six in Jagganpur of Sunamganj municipality.

"I've been making preparation for this election for the last five years. And after coming such a long way, I cannot back off now," said Kamrul Huda Selim, former general secretary of Manikganj district AL.

Three more AL leaders, including current mayor Ramjan Ali, are also campaigning.

Kamrul says he has all the respect for his party. "But if my party does not give me nomination, I will contest the polls as an independent candidate."

Like him, several other hopefuls are preparing to do the same.

Arrests upset BNP hopefuls

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BNP senior leaders have already hinted that the 20-party alliance would take part in the municipality polls, likely to be held in late December.

However, the BNP-led coalition would make the final decision after its leader Khaleda Zia returns home, party sources said. The BNP chief, who has been staying in London since September 16, is scheduled to fly back home today.

Talking to The Daily Star, a BNP joint secretary general on Saturday said law enforcement agencies' wholesale arrest of the alliance men has put them in further trouble.

In the wake of arrests and party men

going into hiding, the BNP central leaders have become worried that the party men might not be active during the polls and not agree to work as polling agents of the BNP candidates.

According to BNP Assistant Office Secretary Asadul Karim Shahin, over 5,000 BNP men had been arrested in police drives since November 1.

Of them, more than 500 were prospective candidates in their respective municipalities while 280 were potential mayor aspirants, said sources at the BNP's central office.

"We have already directed the party men to take legal measures so that the arrested aspirants could get out of jails to contest the polls. If that does not

happen, we will instruct them to pick alternative candidates," a BNP central leader said.

However, BNP policymakers think the party would benefit even if the government "hijacked" the results of the municipality polls as the party would get people's sympathy and support from the international community.

"The people and the international community will not take it positively if we boycott the polls. Moreover, another election boycott will further frustrate the already demoralised grassroots," a BNP vice-chairman said, wishing anonymity.

The BNP along with some like-

minded parties boycotted the 10th parliamentary polls and ended up having no representation in parliament for the first time in the country's history of parliamentary democracy.

The BNP leader said despite various obstacles, the district committees and former lawmakers of the party have already started preparing lists of prospective mayoral and councillor candidates.

They would also leave some mayoral and councillor posts for candidates of their alliance partners to contest for.

BNP Joint Secretary General Mohammad Shahjahan said the party fears there might not be a level-playing field during the polls as the government

continues "wholesale arrest of BNP men".

He said they were taking necessary pre-election preparations so that they do not face any problems at the eleventh hour, if the party decides to join the race.

BNP Spokesperson Asaduzzaman Ripon alleged the government was not taking any steps to create a proper atmosphere for a fair election. "Rather, they're destroying the polls environment as they don't want the BNP to contest the polls."

Asked, BNP Vice-Chairman Abdurrahman Al Noman said, "The BNP is a large party and even if our prospective aspirants are arrested, we have alternative candidates."

Armed Forces Day today