



Workers of Chandpur Tea Estate in Chunarughat upazila of Habiganj gather at a rally at the estate yesterday protesting a planned Special Economic Zone on the land they use to grow rice. More photo on page 17.

PHOTO: STAR

Iraqi forces close in on key Ramadi district

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi forces battled the last jihadist fighters holed up in the centre of Ramadi city yesterday, slowed in their advance by stiff resistance, booby traps and fears for trapped civilians.

Fighting raged around the former government headquarters in Ramadi, a key position whose recapture by federal forces would mark another key step toward reclaiming the city they lost to the Islamic State group in May.

"The Iraqi forces are in Hoz neighbourhood... about 500 metres (yards) away from the governmental complex," an army lieutenant-colonel told AFP from Anbar province.

"They are advancing very cautiously" in the southern neighbourhood of Hoz, said Sabah Karhout, the head of Anbar provincial council.

He said the huge number of improvised explosive devices planted by IS fighters in the city and the possible presence of trapped civilians being used as human shields were the main impediments.

"There's stiff resistance, there's been fierce fighting over the last 24 hours in the southern part of Ramadi city," said the US-led coalition's spokesman, Colonel Steve Warren.

"They've established a strong defence using improvised explosive devices as mine fields, booby traps, rigging entire

houses to explode," he said.

IS had positioned around 100 fighters along the main approach to the government complex, he added.

"Because of the restrictive nature of the terrain, it's difficult to mass combat power. It's easy for a small number of people to hold a large number of people off," he said.

At least one government fighter was killed and seven others wounded in the latest hours of fighting in Hoz, the Iraqi army lieutenant colonel said.

And 22 wounded soldiers were brought in early on Thursday, said medic at Abu Ghraib hospital, west of Baghdad.

Statements issued by IS spoke of higher casualties among government forces, including in an attack it said carried out with five suicide bombers early Thursday west of Ramadi.

"Three of them advanced towards the main entrance... and managed, thanks to God, to kill all the guards with silenced weapons," the statement said.

"The other two entered by the back door and managed to kill several others and set fire to the armoury," it said.

Iraqi army officials gave a different account of the attack, saying the attackers were killed by police bullets or the detonation of their suicide vests before they could reach their target while only three members of the police

Protests go on at Chandpur tea estate

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chosen for setting up a special economic zone.

Gita Rani Kanu, president of Bangladesh Cha Samik Nari Forum, said, "Our predecessors made this land cultivable by cutting hills and forests hundreds of years ago. There is a graveyard of our forefathers. How could we give away the land? We will

rather die than leave it."

Avirot Bakti, convener of Chandpur Bhumi Rakshya Committee, said, "We get only Tk 69 a day for our job. Even after that we've been living happily because we have land to cultivate and reside in. But there is a conspiracy to grab our ancestral land in the name of setting up a special economic zone."

Bazlur Rashid Firoz, central committee member of BSD, urged the government to give the land back to the estate.

Criticising the government move, Joly Talukdar, central member of CPB, called upon the tea garden workers to wage a tough movement to force the government to abandon its plan.

Asean leaders accept Obama invitation to Sunnylands summit

REUTERS, Washington

Southeast Asian leaders have accepted an invitation from US President Barack Obama to meet for a summit in the Californian resort of Sunnylands early next year, a spokesman for the White House's National Security Council said on Wednesday.

Obama extended the invitation to the leaders of the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) during a visit to Asia last month.

"The President is pleased the leaders have accepted his invitation to gather at Sunnylands, in early 2016," Myles Caggins, an NSC spokesman, said.

Caggins declined to provide a specific timing for the summit.

Japan's Kyodo news agency on Monday quoted an Asean official source as saying the summit was expected to be held Feb. 15-16.

Diplomats from two Asean countries said they understood this to be the timing, but it had yet to be confirmed.

Not a single

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handed over to him by public.

Despite a huge public outcry following the incident, police kept denying that the women were sexually assaulted.

On April 18, police for the first time admitted that the women were indeed sexually harassed.

Later, they released photos of eight youths who allegedly carried out the assault and declared reward of Tk 1 lakh for information on each of them.

They were identified from the footage of CCTV cameras installed around the scene.

Initially police was investigating the case but it was transferred to the DB later.

Hollywood speaks out on migrant crisis

AFP, Los Angeles

As Europe grapples with its biggest migrant crisis in recent history, Hollywood celebrities are rallying to raise awareness about the issue and lashing out at calls to turn away refugees.

Oscar-winning actress Susan Sarandon this month became the latest star to arrive on the Greek island of Lesbos, a frontline for the crisis, where she is spending the Christmas holiday helping new arrivals and writing about her experience for the Huffington Post and RYOT.org, a virtual reality news company.

The 69-year-old actress, who is known for her support of humanitarian causes and is a goodwill ambassa-

dor for the UN Children's Fund (Unicef), said she was trying to raise awareness on the crisis to honour her grandparents, who were Italian immigrants.

"I hope that I can make it possible for them (the refugees) to have a voice so we can understand," she wrote in one posting. "Understand that 'these people' are just like us, wanting to keep their children safe. Wanting them to have a future."

The support by Sarandon and other celebrities comes against a backdrop of inflammatory remarks in the United States, where leading Republican presidential candidates and politicians have backed calls to prevent Muslims or Syrian refugees from entering the country.

Pakistan summons

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Pakistan high commission in Dhaka, was constantly being harassed by the Bangladeshi authorities."

It said the Pakistan government twice summoned the high commissioner of Bangladesh, and registered a strong protest against the treatment meted out to Farina Arshad.

"Lately, an incessant and orchestrated media campaign was launched against her on spurious charges linking her with so called terrorists. Our high commission in Dhaka issued a strong rebuttal against the baseless and fabricated charges against the diplomat."

"Following this protest, it was decided to withdraw her. She has since returned back," the press release said.

The Pakistan envoy's withdrawal came upon informal communications from Bangladesh, after Idris Sheikh, an

arrested operative of banned militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), told a Dhaka court on December 6 that he had links with her.

Arrested on November 29 in the capital, Idris told the court that he got a ride from the Pakistani diplomat in her car from Baitul Mukarram to Fakirerpool, and received Tk 30,000 from her.

Referring to Idris's judicial statement, an official of the Detective Branch of police said Idris had conversations with the diplomat several times over the mobile phones between June and July this year.

In the press release yesterday, the Pakistan government once again urged the Bangladesh government to demonstrate the spirit of reconciliation and forward looking approach enshrined in the 1974 Tripartite Agreement.

15-hour raid on 'JMB den'

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and chemicals were stockpiled in toilet, kitchen, trunks and sacks, according to police.

Joint Commissioner of Detective Branch of police Monirul Islam said the JMB had been using the den to make Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

But those who make the IEDs and train others to make explosives could not be arrested, he added.

Monirul also said the seized grenades were similar to that used at the Shia gathering at Hossaini Dalan in old Dhaka and those recovered from Kamrangirchar in the capital in October.

DB's Additional Deputy Commissioner Sanwar Hossain, who led the drive, told The Daily Star that they raided the building on information from a JMB man arrested on Wednesday night from the area.

Along with the arrested militant, a team of DB's bomb disposal unit raided the building (house no. 3) on Road-9 in Block A around 1:30am. As the team reached there, the arrested JMB man told the law enforcers that there was a huge stockpile of grenades and bomb-making materials there.

The team then called in a SWAT (Special Weapons And Tactics) squad and more uniformed force to prevent casualty and ensure a successful drive, Sanwar said.

Police cordoned off the building

during the operation. Rab members and a fire fighting unit were also called in. Tenants were evacuated before the raid began sometime after 9:00am.

Having received no response to their calls to open the door, law enforcers broke into the apartment, when the militants charged a grenade.

In response, a DB team went on the rooftop and blasted several sound grenades and blank shots to scare the militants. They also threw gas grenades inside the room where the two militants kept themselves locked.

After this, the law enforcers managed to enter the room and arrest the two JMB operatives. The four others were arrested from the opposite flat.

Locals identified the four as Nahid and Mamun, fourth semester students at a private university; Nahid's nephew Raj, an intermediate student at a city college; and Kamal, an employee at an online shopping company.

After the drive, detectives took away the explosives and other substances in three small plastic sacks in a microbus.

Journalists were not allowed to enter the flat or see what was in the sacks.

Later, the DB's bomb disposal unit defused 17 bombs at a nearby field close to local Sarangbari mosque. DB officials said most of the bombs were made with iron pipes between three and four inches long. One was made

with nearly a foot-long pipe.

Sanwar said the bombs contained power gel, other explosives, shrapnel and safety pins.

Asked about the vest, Sanwar said it was a jacket normally used to carry grenades, bombs and other equipment. "It was not a suicide vest," he added.

The raid ended around 4:30pm and police sealed the apartment from where the explosives were seized and two JMB men were said to be arrested.

Dozens of journalists and hundreds of locals were at the scene. The Daily Star spoke with many of them, but no one could say when the police took away the two. They only saw police to take away the four others arrested on suspicion.

Abul Hossain Bhuiyan, the house owner, said four youths rented the house about four months ago for Tk 9,000 a month, identifying themselves as students of Mirpur Bangla College. They were apparently modest and paid their rent regularly.

Around the same time, four other youths rented the opposite flat, added Abul.

Nasima Begum, a woman who lives in a tin-shed building close to the building, said, "There were a lot of policemen everywhere since the daybreak. Around 9:00am, I heard broken glass falling on our roof. Scared, I left my house with my chil-



Journalists, locals and members of law enforcement agencies in front of the building in Mirpur from where 16 improvised grenades and explosive materials were seized yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Tied to tree

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The victim's family members said he had no enmity with anyone.

Utsho's colleagues, however, said he might have been murdered for writing on drug peddling in the city. Following his reports, law enforcers busted some dens of drug peddlers and traders.

"He wrote regularly on drug peddling, mentioning names of some peddlers. This might have infuriated them," said Juger Alo Assistant News Editor Nazrul Mridha.

He said Utsho used to go home from office around 1:00am on workdays. On Wednesday, Utsho told them that he would go to a relative's house and left the office around 9:00pm.

Nazrul believed someone might have called him over the phone and took him to Dharmadas area as part

of a plot to kill him.

Rabiul Islam, staff reporter of the daily, said, "Whenever he [Utsho] saw irregularities, he wrote about that. He always took these issues very seriously."

Even yesterday, the newspaper ran Utsho's report on how the narcotics control department in Rangpur was struggling to check drug peddling with only 10 staff.

Utsho's family members identified his body at Rangpur Medical College Hospital yesterday morning.

His wife Tahmina Begum said she waited all night for her husband's phone call but it never came.

"My husband didn't have any enmity with anyone. Why would anyone kill him?" she cried.

Utsho's father Samsul Huda Mondal said he wants exemplary punishment of the killers.

The journalist had been the breadwinner of the family since his father, an employee of a private firm, became paralysed and lost job a few years ago.

Around 3:00pm yesterday, police picked up Utsho's friend Moklesur Rahman Mithu from a spot in the city to interrogate him.

Officer-in-Charge of Kotwali Police Station Abdul Quader Jilani said they were carrying out drives to arrest the killers.

Enraged by the killing, journalists in Rangpur formed a human chain in front of the office of superintendent of police in the afternoon, and demanded immediate arrest and punishment of the killers.

They will form another human chain in front of Rangpur Press Club tomorrow to press home the demand.

Miladunnabi

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programmes, including milad mahfil, discussion and Quranikhwani, to mark the day.

Islamic Foundation will hold various programmes, including a milad mahfil, on the occasion.

A milad mahfil will be arranged at the Bangabhaban after Asr prayers today.

Bangladesh Betar, Bangladesh Television and other satellite TV channels and radio stations will air special programmes highlighting the significance of the day.

President Abdul Hamid, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia have issued separate messages greeting the country's people and the Muslim Ummah across the world on the occasion.

Step up security

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Speaking at a press conference at Dhaka Reporters Unity, BHBCOP General Secretary Rana Dasgupta called upon the Election Commission to make sure that the candidates for December 30 municipal polls could not spread communal hatred during electioneering.

As many as 37 Christian religious and community leaders were threatened with life across the country in the last three months through SMSs, except for one in Rangpur through a letter, according to Bangladesh Christian Association (BCA).

On Tuesday, seven Christian leaders, including Bishop Bejoy D'Cruze and BCA Secretary General Nirmal Rozario, received death threats.

Rana said religious and ethnic minority people have been facing harassment and repression over the years. He demanded the government ensure security of Christians so that they can observe Christmas without fear.

Four decades have passed since the country's independence, but the participation of religious and ethnic minorities in the parliamentary and local body polls has not been ensured, he added.

"You will find that only a few people from the religious and ethnic minority communities have been nominated to contest the mayoral polls on December 30."

The ruling Awami League picked only eight, the BNP six and other political parties five from the religious and ethnic minority communities for municipality mayor, said the BHBCOP leader.

A total of 235 mayors will be elected in the next week's polls, mentioned Rana. "This means the religious minorities would be largely deprived of having their representatives in municipalities."

The oikya parishad will back those candidates who nurture the spirit of Liberation War and will play a role in protecting the rights of religious minorities, he added.