

Efforts towards

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The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for both attacks in regime-held areas, which a monitor said killed 120 people near the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab and at least 59 in the Al-Zahraa district of Homs. The bombings near the shrine marked the deadliest jihadist attack since Syria's conflict erupted in March 2011, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitoring group. Kerry said the US and Russian leaders were to speak "in the next days or so" on the terms of implementing the agreement, which would apply to fighting between non-jihadist rebel forces and regime troops backed by Moscow and Tehran.

The partial ceasefire would not extend to international efforts to combat IS and other jihadist groups in Syria, complicating its implementation. Announced by top diplomats in Munich earlier this month, the ceasefire failed to take hold by last Friday as initially planned.

OPPOSITION TALKS IN RIYADH
Part of a plan that also included expanded humanitarian access, the proposal aims to pave the way for a resumption of peace talks that collapsed earlier this month in Geneva. The talks had been scheduled to resume on February 25, but the UN Syria envoy has already acknowledged that date is no longer realistic.

Syria's main opposition umbrella group, the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), was meeting in the Saudi capital Riyadh yesterday for talks on the ceasefire and peace talks efforts. Spokesman Monzer Makhous told AFP the meeting was expected to continue for two or three days. **KEY SUPPLY ROUTE CUT**
Assad's forces have been making important gains since the start of Russian air strikes, with particularly heavy fighting in recent weeks around the second city of Aleppo that has sent tens of thousands fleeing to the Turkish border.

But their efforts to take Aleppo city -- long divided into regime- and rebel-held areas -- were dealt a setback yesterday. IS and other jihadists cut a vital supply route linking the west of Aleppo with other government-held territory, the Observatory said. The road between Aleppo and the town of Khanasser to the southeast was the only way regime forces and civilians living in government-controlled neighbourhoods of the city could travel to surrounding provinces. The first of Sunday's attacks saw suicide bombers drive explosives-laden cars into crowds of residents in the Homs district of Al-Zahraa, whose residents are mostly from the same Alawite offshoot of Shia Islam as Syria's ruling clan.

The second and deadliest saw a car bombing followed by two consecutive suicide attacks rip through the area of the revered Shia shrine, which contains the grave of a granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). **He didn't**
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president of Supreme Court Bar Association, and Jayanti Roy, president, and Preo Bala Biswas, general secretary, of the women unit of Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Oikya Parishad, among others, also spoke. Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad declared to form a human chain across the country on February 27 to protest the killing.

Shun blind faith

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He also underscored the need for rooting out terrorism and militancy from the country and waging a social movement against drug abuse. Stressing the need for turning educational institutions into real hubs for practicing knowledge, he said the objective of education is not to distribute certificates through a traditional education system but rather to build up skilled manpower with knowledge-based education and progressive outlook. About different demands sought at the programme for the district, the president said he would extend all-out cooperation in fulfilling the demands of the people of Jamalpur.

Shakila Farjana

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Yesterday, the bench of Justice Farid Ahmed and Justice AKM Zahurul Hoque granted bail to Shakila until the trial court frames charges in the cases against her. There is no legal bar to Shakila's release from jail following the HC verdict, her lawyer Sagir Hossain Leon told The Daily Star.

AL faced

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Of the books, "Rukhe Darao Lelihan" has been edited by Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan while "Shajahan Khan at Parliament" by Benazir Ahmed Tipu. The minister, Dhaka University Vice Chancellor Prof AAMS Abedin Siddique and journalist Aref Khan also spoke.

Bolivia's Morales hopes late ballots will result in vote victory

AFP, La Paz

President Evo Morales held out hope yesterday that late returns from a referendum on changing Bolivia's constitution would turn in his favor despite media projections to the contrary.

Voters on Sunday had their say on a constitutional amendment that would let the leftist president seek another five-year term in office when his current one ends in 2020. He has been in power since 2006.

According to media projections, Morales lost the referendum: unofficial figures cited on private ATB television said that the "No" vote had 52.3 percent to 47.7 percent, while Unitel television gave the "No" vote as 51 percent to 49 percent.

However Vice President Alvaro Garcia said that count was based on returns in urban areas, and votes were still trickling in from rural areas where Morales has strong support.

Ballots cast by Bolivians living abroad -- especially those in Argentina and Brazil -- also needed to be counted.

"We are forging a very clear technical tie, and it is highly probable that these figures will drastically change" as the official count proceeds, Garcia said, signaling that media projections could be wrong.

"So it would be better to hold your enthusiasm and calmly wait for results," Garcia told reporters. "All your celebration may well turn into weeping."

Garcia said that Morales was closely monitoring the outcome.

Opposition figures however were celebrating based on the media projections.

"Bolivia said no!" declared Santa Cruz Governor Ruben Costas.

Samuel Doria Medina -- defeated twice by Morales in presidential elections -- said the vote "buried" plans to have single party rule in Bolivia.

Analyst Jorge Komadina noted that, while Morales may be losing support, his political opposition remains divided.

"They do not have a single candidate," Komadina said. As a group they have "disparate leaderships and political ideologies."

In January Morales became the longest serving president since Bolivia's independence from Spain in 1825 -- a rare accomplishment in a country known for military coups and shaky, short-lived governments.

Now 56, Morales is also Bolivia's first democratically elected president of indigenous heritage.

He has overseen robust economic growth in Bolivia, but opponents accuse him of presiding over corruption and investing in flashy infrastructure projects at the expense of health and education.

Since first taking office, he has been handily re-elected twice, most recently in 2014 to a five-year term that ends in 2020.

Under the current constitution adopted in 2009, sitting presidents can only seek re-election once.

But Bolivia's Supreme Court ruled that Morales's first term was exempt from the rule, allowing him to run again in 2014.

Morales's politics blend the indigenous power movement with environmentalism and the "21st-century socialism" preached by other Latin American leftist leaders.

He has nationalized the oil, gas, mining and telecommunications sectors and rolled out welfare grants for the elderly, children, and expecting mothers.

Bolivia's mineral- and gas-rich economy has more than tripled in size during his decade in office.

Despite plunging prices for its oil and gas, Bolivia's economy grew 4.8 percent last year, one of the strongest rates in Latin America.

Morales's popularity took a recent hit when he faced charges of favoritism towards CAMC, a Chinese engineering company that won the bid for a major railroad expansion project.

One of the top managers at CAMC's La Paz office is Gabriela Zapata, 28 -- Morales's ex-girlfriend.

BPC to purchase

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Trading of Thailand, Trafigura Pte Ltd of the Netherlands, Swiss Singapore Pte Ltd, Vitol Asia of Singapore, SK Energy of South Korea, Petco Trading Laguan Ltd of Malaysia, Glencore Singapore, and Peakom Essar of Switzerland.

In Group A, the lowest premium price was at \$2.37 per barrel for gas oil and \$3.54 per barrel for jet fuel and it was offered by Emirates National.

In Group B, the lowest premium price was at \$2.57 per barrel for gas oil and \$3.06 per barrel for jet fuel. It was offered by Unipac.

The premium is the price the BPC has to pay to suppliers, in addition to oil prices, to ensure the oil reaches its storage safely.

"We will now evaluate and verify the proposals. The proposals will have to be approved by the BPC board and the cabinet committee on purchase," said Mosleh Uddin, a director of BPC for operations and planning.

The work order might be awarded in May if everything goes as per schedule, he told The Daily Star.

This was the first time the BPC is buying petroleum products through international tenders since 2003.

Since then the state-owned agency has been purchasing oil from 13 enlisted international companies through government-to-government contracts.

According to the representatives of the bidding firms, BPC would be able to procure the petroleum products at cheaper rates through international tender.

The move also aims to see whether it is cheaper to buy through tenders than those of government-to-government deals, which have been questioned by different quarters and experts.

BPC negotiated the prices at \$4.4 per barrel for gas oil and \$5.4 per barrel for jet fuel for procuring the products for 2016.

Due to a fall in the price of petroleum products in the international market, the government instructed the BPC to purchase 50 percent of the country's total oil requirement through international tenders and the rest through G2G basis.

Bidders, however, have complained about the time they got to submit the proposals.

The last date of purchasing the tender document was February 18.

In the past, BPC used to give minimum 30 days time for such tenders, said one representative of a bidder.

Bidders were asked to submit a bond for an amount of \$2 million along with the quotation.

"Arranging the bid bond within this short period of time for such big amount is very difficult for overseas bidder," said another representative.

Nomination filing ends

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In Doihari UP, AL men reportedly assaulted the brother of a BNP leader. In, Sarekathi UP, supporters of an AL rebel candidate attacked an independent aspirant.

Independent chairman aspirant in Tikikata UP under Mothbaria upazila of Pirojpur Hossain Mosharrif Saku alleged that AL men held him for three hours so that he could not file his nomination.

However, he managed to escape and submit his nomination papers.

In Satkhira, some AL rebel candidates and BNP aspirants alleged that they were obstructed from filing nominations by ruling AL men.

Local BNP leader Shahidul Islam, chairman aspirant for Sonabaria UP, alleged that he could not submit his nominations fearing attack by AL men.

Ibrahim Hossain, a BNP leader and incumbent chairman of Deyara UP, said AL men snatched the nomination documents of his wife Nazma Parveen, who wanted to run for chairman in the same UP.

Similar incidents took place in some UPs of Jhalakathi as well.

"I could not submit my candidature paper as it was torn by my rival candidate Abdus Salam who got the nomination from the Awami League," claimed Abdul Hamed, an AL rebel candidate in Ranapasha UP.

In Jhalakathi, some candidates showed off their muscle power while submitting nomination papers violating electoral rules.

Siddikur Raham, chairman of Satura UP, led a motorcade to file his nomination. Abul Kalam, chairman aspirant for Suktagar UP, went to the office of the returning officer concerned in a procession.

Meanwhile, Election Commissioner Zabeed Ali yesterday warned that stern action would be taken against those who would try to act against the holding of a free and fair election.

He was addressing an election preparation meeting at the conference room of the deputy commissioner of Bagerhat.

EC Secretary Sirazul Islam talking to reporters at his office said the EC would take necessary steps if anyone came up with specific allegations.

NZ remembers victims of 2011 Christchurch quake

BBC ONLINE

A public memorial service has been held in New Zealand to remember victims of a powerful earthquake that struck the city of Christchurch five years ago.

A total of 185 people died in what was considered to be the country's worst natural disaster in more than 80 years.

It left the centre of Christchurch in ruins, with thousands of homes destroyed.

The city is slowly being rebuilt, but many residents are still waiting for insurance claims to be settled.

Governor General Sir Jerry Mateparae spoke at the public ceremony in Christchurch yesterday. Prime Minister John Key was also among the dignitaries taking part in the commemorations.

After the service, a protester poured a brown substance from an ice cream container over the head of the minister overseeing the recovery, according to local reports.

Minister Gerry Brownlee told radio programme Newstalk ZB: "It was just a guy who just walked up at the end of the memorial service and said 'this is for you'."

He would not speculate on what the substance was but said it "didn't smell too good".

Brownlee and Key were quickly whisked away by security.

Local media reported that Brownlee had also been heckled earlier in the day while doing a live interview on television by a man saying "Gerry Brownlee you suck, you've done a bad job".

The magnitude 6.3 earthquake caused widespread damage on 22 February 2011 as it occurred at a shallow depth of 5km (3.1 miles) during lunchtime when Christchurch was at its busiest.

Nine burnt

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accident occurred around 11:10am when the gas cylinder of the bus blasted.

The vehicle was heading for Paturia ferry ghat in Manikganj from Dhaka. Vehicular movement on the highway came to a halt for over an hour for the accident.

On information, police and firefighters rushed to the spot and rescued the passengers, the police official added.

Police vehicle

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Agitating locals blocked the road for a while and vandalised the bus. Later, police brought the situation under control.

No remand

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On February 15, Mahmudur was shown arrested in the blast case a day after the Supreme Court upheld a High Court bail granted to him in a seditious case.

The former energy adviser to a BNP government was expecting to be released from jail as he secured bail in all 74 criminal cases filed against him with police stations and courts across the country since December 2012.

In the petition, police also sought a seven-day remand for Mahmudur to quiz him in connection with the blast case although he was not named in the first information report of the case.

The case was lodged on January 28, 2013, with Shahbagh Police Station against 44 leaders and activists of the BNP-led 20-party alliance for their alleged involvement in exploding crude bombs in front of Dhaka University central playground.

On April 11, 2013, Mahmudur was picked up from his newspaper office in the capital's Karwan Bazar.

The newspaper stopped printing in mid-April that year.

Chocolate

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function "irrespective of other dietary habits".

More frequent chocolate consumption was "significantly associated with better performance on [cognitive tests including] visual-spatial memory and organisation, working memory, scanning and tracking, abstract reasoning, and the minimal state examination".

Cocoa flavanols, a subgroup of flavonoids, which are found in chocolate, are associated with the positive cognitive function.

High levels of flavanols are found in dark chocolate but less so in milk or white chocolate. High levels of flavanols are also found in tea, red wine and certain fruits such as grapes and apples.

The researchers also stated the findings supported recent clinical trials that suggest "regular intake of cocoa flavanols may have a beneficial effect on cognitive function, and possibly protect against normal age-related cognitive decline".

Police still clueless

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suspected members of banned militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) -- Khalilur Rahman, 45, and Jahangir Hossain, 30, -- and Jamaat activist Babul Hossain, 31, in connection with the killing.

Asked if the arrestees confessed to their involvement, the SP refused to disclose anything, saying the investigation was underway.

Local police sources, however, said the arrestees were accused in criminal cases in the past.

Meanwhile, several hundred people yesterday formed a human chain at Bijoy Chattar in Debiganj Sadar, demanding exemplary punishment of the real culprits. Members of different socio-political organisations and religious groups joined in.

Unidentified assailants attacked priest Jogeswar Dasadhikari, 50, of Sri Sonto Gaurio temple Sunday morning when he was preparing his offerings for the morning puja at the temple, about half a kilometre from the upazila headquarters.

They first hacked him indiscriminately in front of the temple and chased him to a house in the backyard where they slit his throat, leaving him dead on the spot, said police.

The attackers shot devotee Gopal Chandra Das, who tried to save the priest, and also hurt another devotee Nitai Das by hurling a homemade bomb while escaping.

Locals said they saw three people fleeing the scene on a motorbike.

Jogeswar's brother Rabindranath Roy filed a murder case with Debiganj Police Station, accusing three unknown people, Sunday evening. Police also filed an illegal arms and explosive case.

SP Giasuddin said an eight-member team led by Additional SP Nur Muhammad was helping investigating officer of the case Aiyub Ali, an inspector of the police station.

SITE, an intelligence group, on its website news.siteintelgroup.com said Islamic State (IS) has claimed responsibility for killing Jogeswar but this paper could not independently verify the claim.

A top official of Panchagarh police denied that there was any presence of the terror outfit in the district. "Yet, we will verify the claim."

The Hindu priest became the latest victim of a string of attacks on leaders and establishments of religious minorities in the country in recent times.

Pastor Luke Sarker of Pabna and Italian pastor Piero Parolari, who lives in Dinajpur, were attacked in their homes on October 5 and November 18. Law enforcers claimed that JMB men had carried out the attacks.

Meanwhile, arrestee Khalilur's wife

Shilpi Akhter told this correspondent that police picked up her husband at Bhalaganj Bazar area in Debiganj while he was going to his in-law's house.

Amena Khatun, 50, mother of another arrestee Jahangir, claimed that her son was at home when the killing took place.

PROTESTS ON

Under the banner of "Debiganj Upazilabashi", leaders and activists of Hindu Buddha Christian Oikya Parishad, Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad, Bangladesh Khoitro Samity and Jago Hindu Parishad, among others, formed the human chain yesterday morning.

They demanded arrest of the killers within 24 hours and ensure their punishment.

They also demanded that a special tribunal be formed for trying the killers.

EU CONDEMNS PRIEST KILLING

The European Union strongly condemned the murder of Jogeswar and attack on Gopal Chandra Das in Panchagarh and urged all relevant authorities to ensure thorough investigation into the incident and bring the perpetrators to justice.

"An attack on any religion is an attack against all religions," said EU Ambassador to Bangladesh Pierre Mayaudon in a statement yesterday.

Meanwhile, British High Commissioner to Bangladesh Alison Blake in a twitter message said, "I am horrified at the savage attack on J Roy & G C Roy. Nothing can justify attacks on people because of their faith or beliefs."

"Freedom of religion is a universal right. The UK stands alongside the people of Bangladesh and against all forms of extremism."

'NO TRUE GROUND'

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal yesterday told the BBC Bangla Service that the IS claim for killing the priest has "no true ground" and that the killing was part of a "conspiracy" to create an unstable situation in the country.

"One or two incidents happened in the past. Whatever happened, announcement was made from an anonymous place that IS committed it. We have told earlier that such announcement has no true ground. A conspiracy is going on," he said.

Additional Commissioner Monirul Islam of Dhaka Metropolitan Police told the BBC Bangla Service that law enforcers arrested suspects in connection with almost each incidents that happened since October last year.

"At least 30 people were arrested from across the country. During interrogation, they admitted their involvement. We could learn that they were members of home-grown terror outfits like JMB. None of them admitted that they were members of IS," he said.

Deal to end

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"The government has promised to meet our demands and we have promised our full cooperation," Ramesh Dalal, convener of the Jat Arakshian Andolan (Jat Reservation Movement), told Reuters.

Dalal said he had appealed to the entire Jat community, which makes up around a quarter of the population of Haryana, to return home after staging state-wide protests to demand more government jobs and college places.

A senior police officer said that state leaders had persuaded the Jats to call off their protests. "Our challenge is to keep the law and order situation under control," the officer said, requesting anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter.

Earlier, rural Indian protesters paralysed the northern state despite the deal giving them more government jobs, but there was relief for New Delhi's 20 million residents as the army retook control of their main water source.

The army retook control of a canal that supplies three-fifths of the capital's water. Delhi's chief minister, Arvind Kejriwal, said the army had reopened the sluice gates of the Munak canal to the north of the city. Water was expected to reach the metropolis by early today.

In Bahadurgarh, to the west of Delhi, Jat protesters were out in force, expressing their anger against Modi and demanding written assurances of more jobs for their community, which makes up a quarter of Haryana's population.

Many Jats, who number more than 80 million across north India, are farmers whose livelihoods have suffered as families divide farms among their children while two years of drought have harmed their crops.

As a social group they are experiencing downward mobility and missing out on urban job opportunities, explaining their demand for government jobs and student places under affirmative action policies that are typically reserved for deprived groups.

Ramcharan Dekhara, a 52-year-old father of four, has sold his land to pay for his daughter's marriage and now runs a tea shop near National Highway 10.

"I am fighting for my sons' future. The boys are sitting at home and there is nothing they can do at the tea shop," Dekhara told Reuters. "They studied hard to make a new life but now they

are wasting time and watching TV all day."

The gulf is most striking on the frontier of Gurgaon, one of Delhi's burgeoning satellite cities, where offices, factories and residential apartments give way suddenly to farmers' fields - many of them tilled by Jats.

The Jats predominantly voted for Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in the 2014 general election, when he won the biggest parliamentary majority in three decades. Months later the BJP won an outright majority in Haryana for the first time.

Although many of the state's chief ministers have been Jats, the current minister is not. Commentators have faulted him and other BJP leaders for failing to read the social mood and devoting too much attention to issues like cow protection that are a core part of the party's pro-Hindu agenda.

In a familiar pattern, Modi completely ignored the protests, instead launching a broadside on Sunday against unnamed conspirators he accused of trying to undermine his government.

Mashrafe

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and that a number of meetings regarding the issue had been conducted. The player was extremely excited to receive the opportunity.

Mashrafe has been selected as the UN considers him to be an inspirational figure for the youth of Bangladesh. The skipper played leading roles in a number of historical wins for the Bangladesh national cricket team last year.

The UN has enlisted the volunteer services and support of prominent personalities from the worlds of art, music, film, sport and literature to highlight key issues and to draw attention to its activities.

Over the years, many Olympians, World Champions, elite athletes and sports personalities have lent their names and time to support the UN family. Their mass appeal especially helps in motivating people to act in the interest of improving their own lives and those of their fellow citizens. These individuals are given the title of Goodwill Ambassador, Messenger of Peace, Special Representative, Champion for Sport or other status depending on the UN entity who has appointed them.