



Rescuers pull out a sniffer dog at the site of a collapsed residential building on the outskirts of Mumbai, India, yesterday. At least nine people were killed when a three-storey building collapsed in heavy rains in a Mumbai suburb yesterday, state media reported, and officials said 32 people were killed by lightning a day earlier in India's eastern state of Odisha.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Palestinians urge timeframe for Mideast peace talks

AFP, Paris

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas on Saturday said any reboot of peace talks with Israel should happen within a clear timeframe and under international supervision, after meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry in Paris.

Abbas also held talks with French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault on the prospects of achieving a two-state solution, senior Palestinian official Saeb Erakat said, describing both discussions as "very constructive".

"We need a timeline for the negotiations, we need a timeline for the implementation, and we need an international framework that will ensure the implementation of any agreement reached," Erakat told reporters.

France has been leading a fresh initiative to revive the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, after the last round of negotiations collapsed in 2014.

But while Palestinians have welcomed the French push, Israel has said it favours direct negotiations.

Abbas "reiterated our full support to the French initiative that aims to convene an international conference before the end of the year," Erakat said.

The Palestinian negotiator added that there was "no contradiction" between the French, US and more recently Egyptian efforts to break the deadlock and move the peace talks forward.

"All these efforts aim to revive the peace process, to achieve the two-state solution (based) on the 1967 lines. They are complementary," he said.

The diplomatic initiatives showed that the "status quo can't be sustained", he added, reiterating the need for Israel to "stop all settlement activities" in order to give "credibility to a peace process".

The Middle East diplomatic quarter -- the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States -- urged Israel to stop building settlements and Palestinians to cease incitement to violence in a July report that drew a frosty response from both sides.

While in Paris, Kerry also held talks with his French counterpart on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"They agreed that strong leadership was required by all parties to help reduce the violence and take practical steps that can lead to meaningful discussions," the US State Department said in a statement.

Home boss to 'skip' Saarc home ministers' meet

UNB, Dhaka

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal is going to "skip" the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) home ministers' meeting, scheduled to be held in Islamabad in Pakistan on August 3 and 4.

Bangladesh High Commissioner in Islamabad Tarik Ahsan would lead the Bangladesh delegation at the meeting instead, a diplomatic source told UNB yesterday.

Though Pakistan and India recently witnessed tension over Kashmir issue, Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh would join the Saarc home ministers' meeting, the source said.

Home ministry officials cited Kamal's preoccupations at home for reasons behind it though relations between Dhaka and Islamabad went through a diplomatic row following war crimes trials and expulsion of each other's diplomats in a tit-for-tat reply in the past months.

The home ministers of Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Maldives will also represent their respective countries.

However, Finance Minister AMA Muhith would attend the 8th Saarc finance ministers' meeting, which will be held in Islamabad on August 26.

Thousands protest attack on low-caste Indians

AFP, Ahmedabad

Thousands of low-caste Dalits formerly known as "untouchables" protested in western India yesterday against an attack on their members by cow protection vigilantes.

Police surrounded the protesters in Ahmedabad, the main city in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat, to prevent any violence, as anger among Dalits mounts over the attack.

Protest organiser Jignesh Mevani said Dalit youths were trying to kill themselves to protest attacks committed against their caste, which lies at the bottom of India's complex and entrenched social hierarchy system.

"Neither the BJP nor Congress will come to our help," Mevani said of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and main opposition party.

"Only our united strength will help us fight the age-old oppression," the Dalit activist told the crowd which police put at 5,000-strong.

Violent protests erupted this month after video footage emerged of an attack on four Dalit villagers who were taking a dead cow to be skinned.

Cows are considered sacred by Hindus and killing them is banned in Gujarat, but the villagers said the animal had died of natural causes.

Dalits are commonly tasked with removing the corpses of dead cows from the streets of India, where the animals often roam freely.

Dalit leaders told the rally a 24-year-old man who had drunk poison to protest against the attack died of his injuries in hospital on Sunday.

A senior hospital official in Ahmedabad confirmed the death to AFP.

Mevani said such suicides were signs of deep despair among low-caste Indians after years of discrimination and violence by those from higher castes who often went unpunished.

France unites

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Bordeaux also welcomed a Muslim delegation, led by the city's top imam Tareq Oubrou.

"It's an occasion to show (Muslims) that we do not confuse Islam with Islamism, Muslim with jihadist," said Reverend Jean Rouet.

The Muslims were responding to a call by the French Muslim council CFCM to show their "solidarity and compassion" over the priest's murder on Tuesday.

"I'm a practising Muslim and I came to share my sorrow and tell you that we are brothers and sisters," said a woman wearing a beige headscarf who sat in a back pew at a church in central Paris.

Giving her name only as Sadia, she added softly; "What happened is beyond comprehension."

The most poignant moment of yesterday's mass in Rouen was the sign of peace, a regular part of the liturgy when the faithful turn to greet each other in the pews, either shaking hands or kissing.

Archbishop Lebrun used the moment to step into the congregation and greet Muslim leaders attending, as well as three nuns who were at the church in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray when Hamel was murdered.

Outside the Rouen cathedral a few policemen and soldiers stood guard but did not conduct searches, seeking to reassure a jittery population after the second jihadist attack in less than a fortnight.

In addition to prompting fears of fanning religious tensions in the officially secular country, Father Hamel's murder sparked renewed recriminations over perceived security lapses.

Both of the 19-year-olds attackers -- Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitjean -- had been on intelligence services' radar and had tried to go to Syria.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls yesterday called for a new "pact" with the Muslim community in France, Europe's largest with around five million members.

"Islam has found its place in France... contrary to the repeated attacks of populists on the right and far-right," he said, condemning "this intolerable rejection of Islam and Muslims".

Also yesterday, dozens of prominent Muslims published a joint letter warn-

ing that "the risk of fracturing among the French is growing every day."

The signatories, who included academics as well as medical professionals, artists and business leaders, pledged: "We, French and Muslim, are ready to assume our responsibilities."

Meanwhile a Syrian refugee who was taken in for questioning after a photocopy of his passport was found at Kermiche's house has been released, a source close to the investigation said.

"Nothing suggests he had any involvement" in the attack, the source said.

However Petitjean's 30-year-old cousin was to appear before an anti-terrorist judge later in the day.

Prosecutors said they have asked that the suspect, named as Farid K., be charged with "criminal association in connection with terrorism".

The suspect "was fully aware of his cousin's imminent violent action, even if he did not know the precise place or day," the Paris prosecutor said in a statement.

Media reports meanwhile said investigators had established that Petitjean and Kermiche met through the encrypted messaging app Telegram.

Kermiche described the modus operandi of the attack on the priest in an audio posted on Telegram just a few days beforehand.

Education

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"Mother says we have to stay here permanently. How will I go to my school so far away," wondered Amina Begum, a fifth grader at Tapur Char Government Primary School.

Despite all odds, four of the affected young learners -- first grader Momin, second grader Zohurul, third grader Yasmin and fourth grader Santi Akhtar -- said they would continue their studies at any cost.

Many of these students, full of resilience, said they held onto their textbooks although they had to leave many of their belongings behind when they hurriedly packed everything and rushed to the flood shelters.

Afabbuddin Sarker, local lawmaker and president of upazila coordination committee, said, "I've directed the upazila education officer to arrange makeshift schools for the displaced children on the flood control dam and engage teachers of the damaged schools there."

North grapples

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1,200 tonnes of fish, according to the district agriculture and fisheries officers.

The flood situation in Gaibandha remained unchanged, reports our Gaibandha correspondent.

Around 100 metres of the Sonail embankment collapsed due to the onrush of water at Sigria in Fulchhari upazila, flooding a vast area.

Fulchhari Upazila Parishad at Kalirbazar and the Upazila Health Complex went under knee-deep water. Road communications between the district headquarters and the upazila headquarters were also snapped, as the roads went under knee-to-waist-deep water at many points.

The victims who thronged the flood control embankment are facing acute shortage of food and drinking water. Besides, a serious crisis of fodder for the cattle prevails in the areas.

Fresh areas have meanwhile been inundated in Tangail, Munshiganj, Faridpur, Sherpur and Manikganj due to onrush of water from the upstream rivers.

Our correspondents from Lalmonirhat, Jamalpur, Gaibandha, Manikganj, Munshiganj, and Tangail have contributed to the story.

Some respite

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Dhanmondi where I have access to all the modern amenities," he said at a discussion at The Daily Star Centre in the capital yesterday.

He said the land development work of the 31.61-crore project was underway.

The complex will have 196 units for families, 32 dormitories for males and 73 for females, including physically-challenged people.

For the project, Mohammadi Group has received Tk 19 crore at 1.5 percent interest rate from the government's housing fund managed by the central bank.

The residential area would have solar power and water harvesting systems to generate electricity and have own water supply.

The potential owners will pay about Tk 1,600 for every square foot of space inside an apartment. But Habib said they were trying to bring down the cost further.

He added the real estate companies could use this business model and be commercially viable. "They won't have to run after rich buyers. If they plan for the lower-income groups, they will be flooded with projects."

Mohammed Farashuddin, a former governor of Bangladesh Bank, while moderating the discussion, praised the initiative, saying: "Nothing could be better than this."

The model could be followed in areas such as Savar and Keraniganj, he said.

Mahmud Hasan Khan, vice president of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said 56 companies had applied for the housing fund, and the BGMEA forwarded 26 of them to the central bank.

"But only two of them were accepted by the central bank," he said.

Replying to a query, BB Deputy Governor SK Sur Chowdhury said the central bank had not said the other applicants would not get fund for housing projects.

Road 79

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flowers, some old and some new. Heavy rains in the last few days washed away flowers and wreaths that people had laid here in tribute, but then the place was quickly re-occupied by fresh ones.

People come here with flowers almost every day, said one of the security personnel at the road.

"People mostly come in the evenings. Some take photos, some place garlands, spend a minute and then leave."

"Some even want to walk down the road towards the restaurant. But we obviously can't allow that," he said with a smile.

It might have been a good long month since the horrific attack at the cafe, but if anyone tries to visit the place, a feeling of unease would take over him, almost akin to the sentiment that a majority of Dhaka dwellers felt on July 1.

It was an emotion that was quite obvious on many fronts. Even the journalists who were present there yesterday went about their business quietly and quickly.

There have been several positive steps taken in the last one month. The security checks have been strengthened and many militants' dens busted. But that hasn't dispelled the uncanny feeling one has when he is on road-79.

UGC wants power

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the Private University Division of the UGC, and Shahin Siraj, its deputy secretary, will act as members of the monitoring team, said Prof Mannan.

The committee would make surprise visits to the universities any time. It would report to the education ministry and law enforcement agencies for taking action if it finds proof of militant activities in any university, added the UGC chairman.

About the allegations of militant activities at some higher educational institutions, Prof Mannan, quoting recent media reports, said the problem appears to be more serious in public universities than in private universities.

Formed in 1973, the primary objectives of the UGC are to supervise, promote and coordinate university education. It now has five members.

The UGC is also responsible for maintaining the standard and quality in all public and private universities across the country.

The issue of alleged militant activities at educational institutions, especially at the universities, came into the spotlight following the July 1 terror attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in the city's Gulshan area. Twenty-two

Erdogan

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Anadolu meanwhile said Turkey's deputy prime ministers and the ministers for justice, interior and foreign affairs have all become members of the Supreme Military Council, which determines the armed forces' agenda.

More than 50,000 people have lost their jobs nationwide and almost 19,000 have been detained since the coup, in which rebel soldiers came up against loyal supporters of the president.

The Turkish government also cancelled the passports of around 50,000 people to prevent them leaving the country.

In Germany, home to the biggest Turkish diaspora, tens of thousands of Erdogan's followers rallied yesterday in the city of Cologne, where tensions over the coup have put authorities on edge.

Several smaller counter-demonstrations were also planned, including one billed "Stop Erdogan" and another called by far-right activists, raising concern the demonstrators could clash.

Tokyo gets its first

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minister was some 700,000 votes ahead of her nearest rival with almost two thirds of ballots counted.

Koike claimed victory and addressed supporters in the sprawling metropolis of 13.6 million people shortly after media exit polls declared her the winner at 8 pm (1100 GMT).

"I will lead Tokyo politics in an unprecedented manner, a Tokyo you have never seen," she said in a voice made mildly hoarse after two weeks of campaigning.

The election, contested by a record field of 21 candidates, was called after previous governor Yoichi Masuzoe resigned over a financial scandal involving the lavish use of public funds on hotels and spa trips -- the second successive Tokyo leader to quit.

Koike largely played down her achievement of becoming the capital's first woman governor in a male-dominated society but said she will push female-friendly policies "so that both women and men can shine in Tokyo".

A key task will be smoothing the city's troubled road to the 2020 Olympics, hit by a series of embarrass-

ing scandals and soaring costs.

Koike's four-year term will extend until just after the summer Games start and her performance in the run-up will be closely watched.

A key challenge will be getting a grip on swelling costs, seen as possibly double or triple the reported original forecast of 730 billion yen (\$7.14 billion).

Koike, long a fixture in Japanese media and politics, speaks fluent English and Arabic.

She graduated from Cairo University in 1976 in sociology and worked as an Arabic interpreter before going into journalism.

In 1978, she interviewed then-Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and Palestine Liberation Organisation chairman Yasser Arafat for a Japanese broadcaster.

She has compared herself to Hillary Clinton and was once seen as having the best chance to be Japan's first female prime minister. But she was defeated when running in 2008 for leadership of the LDP.

"Hillary used the phrase 'glass ceiling'. It's often a sheet of steel in Japan," Koike once told a television talk show.