

Netanyahu faces US backlash over 'ethnic cleansing' remark

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faced growing criticism yesterday after he called the Palestinian refusal to let Jews live in their future state "ethnic cleansing".

In a video released Friday, Netanyahu rejected the notion that West Bank settlements were "an obstacle to peace", drawing a rebuke from Washington.

Netanyahu noted "Israel's diversity" which manifests in "the nearly two million Arabs living" in the Jewish state and reflects its "openness and readiness for peace".

"Yet the Palestinian leadership actually demands a Palestinian state with one pre-condition: No Jews," he said.

"There's a phrase for that: It's called ethnic cleansing."

The US State Department called the video "unhelpful" and "inappropriate".

"We obviously strongly disagree with the characterisation that those who oppose settlement activity or view it as an obstacle to peace are somehow calling for ethnic cleansing of Jews from the West Bank," spokeswoman Elizabeth Trudeau said Friday.

"We believe that using that type of terminology is inappropriate and unhelpful," she said.

"Settlements are a final status issue that must be resolved in negotiations between the parties."

Israeli opposition member Tzipi Livni of the Zionist Union party accused Netanyahu of "trying to make political gains while creating diplomatic damage".

She said the video had caused the US position to change from accepting settlement blocs to rejecting the entire West Bank enterprise.

"After Netanyahu's video, the US is saying that all the settlements, including the blocs, are an obstacle, whereas in the past they were recognised," she said in remarks relayed by a spokesman.

China eyes closer military ties with Myanmar

AFP, Beijing

China's military wants to strengthen ties with neighbouring Myanmar by having more exchanges and greater cooperation, a top officer told Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi during a visit to the Southeast Asian country, state media said yesterday.

China has been on a diplomatic offensive ever since the Nobel Peace Prize laureate's government came to power in April, aiming to forge good ties with its resource-rich neighbour.

Last month Suu Kyi visited China, where President Xi Jinping told her he wanted to ensure the "correct direction" of relations.

Xu Qiliang, a vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, which controls the armed forces and is headed by Xi, told Suu Kyi that China "highly values the friendly cooperation between the two countries", state news agency Xinhua said.

"China firmly upholds a friendly policy towards Myanmar and supports Myanmar's national reconciliation process," Xu said during Friday's meeting in Naypyitaw, the capital of Myanmar.

"Xu mentioned Aung San Suu Kyi's recent trip to China, during which she reached consensus with the Chinese leadership on further enhancing the comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership between China and Myanmar," it added.

China will keep playing a constructive role in pushing forward Myanmar's peace process and hopes the two countries can work together to maintain peace and stability on their border, Xu said.

Suu Kyi last month launched a major push to end decades of fighting between the military and myriad rebel groups, which has at times spilled into China and seen refugees pushed across the border, to Beijing's anger.

Enhancing friendship, mutual understanding and trust is very important for both nations, Suu Kyi said, according to Xinhua, and thanked China for its role in Myanmar's peace process.

China had a close relationship with Myanmar's former military-run government, and has looked on with some nervousness at its democratisation process.

China has been pushing Myanmar to resume work on the Chinese-invested \$3.6-billion Myitsone dam project, 90 percent of whose power was originally planned to have gone to China.

In 2011, then President Thein Sein angered China when he suspended work on the dam, at the confluence of two northern rivers in the Aeyarwady river basin, over environmental protests.

RU teacher's death

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results to reach any concrete conclusion," he added.

Meanwhile, the victim's brother Kamrul Hasan Ratan yesterday filed a case with Motihar Police Station. Referring to a suicide note, he, in the case statement, said Akter committed suicide after being directly or indirectly instigated by someone.

In the statement, he also requested that the instigator(s) be caught and legal actions be taken against them.

Quoting the inquest report of the body, Rajshahi Metropolitan Police's (RMP) Deputy Commissioner Amir Jafar said Akter committed suicide.

He said a small bottle of "white liquid substance" and some sleeping pills were found in her room at Juberi Bhaban on campus. Police found her dead in room-303 of the Bhaban Friday afternoon.

Akter was an associate professor of mass communication and journalism department.

Police also found a suicide note in the room, which says, "No one is responsible for my death. I am committing suicide due to physical and mental stress."

DC Amir said the handwriting on the note matched that of Akter's.

In the note, she also requested that her body be donated to Rajshahi Medical College instead of taking it to Dhaka.

However, her family members took her body to Dhaka yesterday.

"The closest family members have

the legal authority to make the decision about anyone's body. Akter's mother and brother wanted to take her body to Dhaka," said the RMP DC.

After the post-mortem around 1:30pm, her body was handed over to her brother Kamrul and brother-in-law Shawkat Hossain who along with some other relatives went to Rajshahi from Dhaka to receive her mortal remains.

Later, the body was taken to RU campus where a namaj-e-janaza was held at the RU Central Mosque. Her family members left Rajshahi for Dhaka in the evening.

Talking to this correspondent, Akter's brother Kamrul said, "I am thunderstruck at her death. I do not know what to do."

"I need to wait for the autopsy report for making any decision," he said replying to a question on the suicide note.

Akter in the suicide note had made some accusations against her former husband Tanveer Ahmad and expressed her fear that he might kill their only son Sward or "force him (Sward) to die" anytime.

RMP DC Amir Jafar told this newspaper that police were scrutinising the suicide note. "We will take action if anyone instigated her to commit suicide."

Police also seized a notebook and Akter's mobile phone, he added.

Tanveer could not be reached for comments as he did not receive calls. In a Facebook status update, he said, "My love for my son is being questioned today."

Traffic chaos

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"I started from Dhaka around 8:00am. It took me around six hours to reach Bangabandhu Bridge, which is normally a trip of around three hours," said Solaiman Mia who was on his way to Pabna.

Police said an accident in Kandina area of the highway around 1:00pm worsened the traffic gridlock.

At Paturia ferry terminal in Manikganj, about 1,000 vehicles were waiting in queues to cross the river around 4:00pm, reports our Manikganj correspondent.

Garment worker Jesmin Akhter was travelling to Khulna in a bus. After reaching Paturia terminal around 3:00am, the bus was stranded for 12 hours. Jesmin had no idea when she would be able to board a ferry.

"We have been suffering like this over the years. The authorities concerned repeatedly claim to have taken initiatives to ease people's suffering, but the situation has remained unchanged," she said.

In the evening, the queues at the terminal were smaller.

Around a five-km long tailback was created at Daulatdia ferry terminal in Rajbari in the afternoon. Among the stranded vehicles at the terminal were some 100 cattle-laden trucks headed for Dhaka.

Abdus Sattar, manager (marine) of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation, said ferry services were delayed due to strong currents in the Padma.

Sixteen out of the 19 ferries were in operation on Daulatdia-Paturia route yesterday afternoon. The three others were under maintenance, he added.

The Daily Star found that most of the passengers were crossing the river by overcrowded launches.

However, traffic on Dhaka-Mawa highway was almost normal.

At Kawrakandi ferry terminal of

Madaripur, speedboat operators yesterday charged passengers Tk 200 each, up from the usual Tk 150, reports a correspondent from Madaripur.

Shabina Begum said she commutes to Khulna from Kawrakandi for Tk 200. But most of the buses were charging passengers Tk 500 each yesterday.

Our Pabna correspondent reports: Traffic moved slowly along the 32-km road from Bangabandhu Bridge to Hatikumrul area of Sirajganj. It took vehicles around two hours to cross the distance yesterday, which is usually about half an hour's trip.

KAMALAPUR STATION
All the trains left Kamalapur yesterday carrying additional passengers. Whenever a train arrived, hundreds of passengers rushed to coaches to get in.

"I bought a ticket in advance. I need to board the train soon to make sure my seat is not taken up by another passenger," said Shamsuzzaman.

Many passengers were seen travelling on roofs of trains defying a government ban. Railway officials asked passengers by megaphones to get down from the roofs.

SADARGHAT TERMINAL
Holidaymakers heading for southern districts thronged the launch terminal in the capital since early yesterday. Passengers were seen looking for launches at the terminal.

Tickets for cabin passengers were sold in advance. But those who travelled on decks bought tickets just before boarding vessels.

"We are facing a huge rush of passengers. The rush was even bigger in the afternoon as Eid holidays for many garment workers began today [yesterday]," said Badiuzzaman Badal, senior vice chairman of Bangladesh Inland Waterways (passenger carriers) Association.

FOILED PARIS TERROR ATTACK Woman suspect 'betrothed' to killers of police, priest

REUTERS, Paris

One of three women arrested over a failed Islamist attack in Paris had been "promised as a bride" to two men behind attacks on police officers and a priest earlier this year, the Paris prosecutor said on Friday.

The revelations highlight the close links between members of radical Islamist circles in France, even though they might live in different parts of the country.

Sarah H, a 23-year-old Frenchwoman, was taken into custody on Thursday along with the other two women after police launched a manhunt to find them, believing they were planning an imminent attack on the Gare de Lyon train station in Paris.

The three women were being tracked after a car loaded with gas cylinders was found near Notre Dame cathedral at the weekend. Sarah H allegedly stabbed a police officer when she was arrested; another of the women was shot and wounded. Neither the police officer nor the woman shot was seriously injured.

Sarah H "is known to intelligence services as being particularly linked to Islamist movements," the prosecutor, Francois Molins, said. "She was previously betrothed to Larossi Abballa, the man responsible for the attack in Magnanville, and Adel Kermiche, who was behind the attack in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray."

Abballa was killed by security services after murdering a police commander and his partner in June in Magnanville, an attack claimed by Islamic State. Kermiche and Abdel-Malik Nabir Petitjean were killed in July after slitting the throat of a French priest in a church in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray in the name of the group.

The three women were determined to carry out Islamic State's "deadly ideology", Molins said, and had been given direction by members of the militant group in Syria.

Another man, Mohamed Lamine A, who was due to marry Sarah H, was also arrested on Thursday. That man was also connected to the Abballa attack, according to Molins, who identified him as the brother of a friend of the police killer.

A tale

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gate of the factory building.

Taking the injured to safety, they rushed back and recovered eight dead bodies from the ground floor. By now, the fire that followed the sound of the explosion raged to the second and third floors and so they could not make further attempts to rescue the workers trapped inside.

Sharif, auto-rickshaw driver Mohammad Mostofa, and another local Md Jahid later took the injured to Tongi General Hospital. There they didn't find any doctor. They immediately made arrangements to send the injured to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) by an ambulance.

Sharif, aged 18, who works in a local factory in Tongi, was sharing this experience with The Daily Star at Dhaka Medical College Morgue.

He said, "Within two to three minutes [after the sound of the explosion], I reached the spot from the mosque and saw an inferno on the ground floor of the building."

"I think the injured workers were coming out as we found them lying near the entrance."

There was no other vehicle around at the time and so the three rescuers made several trips to and from the spot by the auto-rickshaw to take the injured to the Tongi hospital, Sharif said.

Within half an hour when "we came for the second time to take injured workers to the hospital, I saw a huge inferno all over the second and third floors."

Of the injured rescued by them, two died later at the DMCH, hospital sources said.

"Though we risked our lives, we couldn't save them. We could have saved their lives had doctors been available at the Tongi hospital," Sharif said.

Another injured worker Rasel Khan rescued by others said he had fallen unconscious while coming out of the building around 6:00am when the shift changed at the factory.

He had the night shift from 10:00pm to 6:00am. He finished his duty a little before 6:00am and moved out.

As he reached the front gate, he heard the huge sound inside the building.

"I saw bricks and plaster of the walls falling on me. I don't have any idea what happened later as I fell unconscious."

'Militant' killed

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"The girls rescued from the scene are our nieces," said Shila's brother Shahid Mazumder, adding that they were not sure whether Shila was among the three women.

The boy is likely to be the son of Karim, said ADC Abdul Mannan of DMP.

The IGP said they had information that the family of Jahidul and another militant had gone into hiding somewhere in Azimpur.

"Today [yesterday], we found their hideout through the raid," he told reporters.

Acting on a tip-off, a group of plainclothes police members raided the house near Azimpur graveyard around 7:00pm, said Masudur Rahman, additional deputy commissioner of DMP.

Sensing police presence, the militants attacked the law enforcers with sharp weapons and firearms, police said.

At one point, they hurled grenades at the law enforcers, leaving one militant dead and the others injured, Masudur told reporters in the evening.

Counterterrorism officials said Karim used to rent apartments in the capital for militants and that detectives had information of some of those apartments.

Briefing reporters around 10:00pm, the IGP said when police knocked at the door, the militants launched an attack by throwing grenades, bombs and chilli powders at the police members.

Police then fired back, resulting in the death of one militant and injuries of three female militants, he added.

Police said they recovered some firearms, laptops and chilli powders from the spot.

Members of Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime unit, Criminal Investigation Department and bomb disposal unit had been sweeping the scene around midnight last night.

A local said he heard sounds of blasts in the evening. When he came out of his home he saw a woman rushing towards BDR Gate-2 with a knife in her hand.

Police chased her, fired blank shots and caught her, said another local.

Several locals said a trader called Haji Mohammad Kawsar owns the six-storey building.

Talking about the inhabitants of the flat where the incident happened, a tenant said the family rented a flat on the first floor a couple of months ago, saying the father of the family was a trader.

Operators take advantage

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not fare chart. Cashing in on the opportunity, private bus operators charge excessive fare as per their wish describing their buses as "luxurious".

"I usually travel from Dhaka to Satkhira on AC buses of Eagle Paribahan at Tk 1,100. But now they are charging Tk 1,800 for the same route ahead of eid," said Mohammad Maksud, a private banker.

"Finding no other alternatives, I had to buy a ticket of September 11 of this company paying such abnormally high price," he told The Daily Star.

Apart from some reputed bus companies, most of the operators charge additional fares taking the chance of huge demand for tickets ahead of eid, said Bangladesh Passengers' Welfare Association Secretary General Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury.

The government monitoring is very crucial to prevent the hassle of the passengers, he noted.

Talking to The Daily Star, BRTA Chairman Nazrul Islam said they are working to formulate a draft fare chart for AC buses in the metropolis areas. After finalising the draft, it would be

sent to the road transport and bridges ministry for final approval.

However, BRTA Director Nurul Islam said it is not viable to fix a fare chart for intercity buses because the fare of long-route AC buses is set on the basis of services.

As per the existing rules, the better services are, the higher the fares will be, said Nurul Islam.

Luxurious services cannot be provided to the passengers if the government set fare chart for AC buses, said Khandaker Enayet Ullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association.

There are different sorts of AC buses. Some owners buy AC buses worth Tk 1 crore each, while others buy a bus worth Tk 1.5 crore to Tk 2 crore, he added.

So, how can the fare of both categories of these buses be the same, he asked. The more luxurious the buses are, the more comfortable the journey will be. So, the fare of luxurious buses will be higher than that of others, he observed.

There are around 1 lakh buses plying across the country. Of them, around 7,000 are AC buses, according to transport operators.

US-Russia truce plan agreed

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agreement, and a cessation of hostilities will begin in Aleppo for humanitarian reasons".

Citing "informed sources", it said "the entire agreement was reached with the knowledge of the Syrian government".

The opposition High Negotiations Committee said it had yet to receive the deal's "official text", however.

"We saw the agreement via the media -- we must receive an official copy," HNC spokesman Salem al-Meslet wrote on Twitter.

Leading HNC member Bassma Kodmani told AFP that her group "cautiously welcomed" the deal but was sceptical that Damascus would comply.

Both Kerry and Lavrov said the complex plan is the best chance to end the five-year war that has killed 290,000 people and seen millions flee to neighbouring countries.

Under the deal, fighting would halt across the country at sundown on Monday and Syria's air force would stop attacking rebel-held areas.

US special envoy to the Syrian crisis Michael Ratney appealed to rebel groups to commit to the deal, saying it was the "best way" to save lives.

In a letter, he said the initial truce would last 48 hours and could then be renewed, and that it would be "more effective than its predecessor" because it would halt Syrian strikes on "on civilians and the opposition".

To get aid into the battered second city of Aleppo, a "demilitarised zone" would be established around the Castello Road into the city.

In turn, Washington must get opposition groups it backs to separate themselves from the Fateh al-Sham Front, which changed its name from al-Nusra Front after renouncing its ties to al-Qaeda.

If a cessation of hostilities holds

for one week, the US and Russia -- which back opposing sides -- could start joint operations against those jihadists.

The HNC's Kodmani said the opposition would "do our part" to see that rebel groups break ranks with the jihadists if the truce held.

UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura said that the deal provided a "window of opportunity" and that he would begin consultations on relaunching peace talks.

But the deal faced some major obstacles.

The question of Assad's fate remains a key sticking point: the HNC repeated its demand this week that he leave power, but Russia continues to back him.

And Syria expert Charles Lister said mainstream opposition fighters had not indicated a willingness to break their alliance with powerful hardliners, which they see as "a military necessity".

Britain, France Germany welcomed the ceasefire deal.

Key rebel backer Turkey also backed the deal, adding that it was essential that the fighting stop and aid start flowing from day one of the ceasefire. But Iran, another key ally of the Assad regime, remained silent. There was also no comment from Saudi Arabia.

The rebel-jihadist alliance is most pronounced in Idlib province, site of yesterday's deadly air strikes.

The Observatory said 24 people were killed in raids on various neighbourhoods of Idlib city, but it was not immediately clear who carried out the strikes.

Another 11 civilians were killed in unidentified strikes on several neighbourhoods of Aleppo city, the Observatory said.

A UN-backed truce in February faltered after each side accused the other of repeated violations.

1.5m Muslims converge

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Last year's hajj stampede which killed roughly 2,300 people, many of them Iranians, magnified those frictions.

Masses of Iranian faithful held an alternative pilgrimage yesterday in the Shia holy city of Karbala, south of the Iraqi capital.

After preliminary rituals this week in Makkah at the Grand Mosque, the pilgrims in Saudi Arabia moved east yesterday to the tent city of Mina and then several kilometres (miles) further to Mount Arafat.

They are following in the footsteps of their prophet who performed the same rituals about 1,400 years ago.

"It's marvellous. I'm here closer to God. It's an indescribable feeling," said an Egyptian pilgrim who gave her name only as Louza, 45.

The hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam, which capable Muslims must perform at least once, marking the spiritual peak of their lives.

"People come from every country of the world, talk every language of the world, and meet here in one place under one banner, the profession of the Muslim faith," Ashraf Zalat, 43, from Egypt, said in Mecca.

Okaz newspaper reported that, for the first time in 35 years, Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia's top cleric, will not deliver a sermon to the Arafat crowd on Sunday.

The paper cited health reasons for the absence of the grand mufti, who has waded into the Saudi-Iranian row over the hajj.

After Makkah, Mina becomes the pilgrims' base, where an expanse of solidly built white fireproof tents can accommodate 2.6 million people in a valley beneath bare mountains.

Last September 24, Mina was the scene of the deadliest disaster in hajj

history, when the stampede broke out as pilgrims made their way to the Jamarat Bridge for a stoning ritual.

This year's "Stoning of the Devil" will start tomorrow.

Although Riyadh stuck with a stampede death toll of 769, figures compiled from foreign officials in more than 30 countries gave a tally almost three times higher -- at least 2,297.

Saudi Arabia announced an investigation but no results have ever been released, although a number of safety measures have been taken.

Among the changes, government facilities have been moved out of Mina to free up space, and roads in the Jamarat area expanded, Saudi newspapers reported.

Officials have also been issuing pilgrims with bracelets that digitally store their personal data.

Authorities aim to give bracelets to each of the 1.3 million faithful from abroad, who are joined by more than 100,000 Muslims residing in Saudi Arabia.

Interior ministry spokesman General Mansour al-Turki spoke of "great efforts being exerted by the kingdom, not only in maintaining the security and safety of the pilgrims, but in facilitating performance" of the rites in comfort.

Pilgrims appeared satisfied.

"Everything is well organised," Nasser Benfitah, 54, from Morocco, said in Makkah.

"We feel safe," added Nigerian pilgrim Hafsa Amina, 26.

Saudi Arabia has invested billions of dollars in hajj infrastructure and safety projects over the years.

The hajj draws rich and poor, whose common humanity is emphasised by the white garment that each man wears. Women wear loose dresses, typically also white.