



Police ask a youth over a megaphone to pull up his shirt to check whether he is carrying any arms or explosives in Sylhet city's Shibbari area yesterday. Law enforcers have stepped up security and restricted movement of people within one-kilometre radius of Atia Mahal. Top right, people of the neighbourhood bring in food from their relatives' houses as the authorities cut power and gas connections in the area during the raid. Bottom right, a primary school there remains closed.

4-DAY RAID IN SYLHET Locals face hard times

SHAHEEN MOLLAH and MINTU DESHWARA

People living in the surrounding areas of the militant den at "Atia Mahal" in Sylhet city were passing hard days after authorities cut off power and gas connections there to facilitate the raid on the hideout. Restriction on movement also put low-income people, especially the day labourers, in some of the areas in great trouble as they could not look for work outside. Not sure when the situation would improve, many people were seen leaving the areas with their belongings yesterday, looking for shelter. "We live from hand to mouth. We can't live this way. We need to survive," rickshaw puller Rajab Ali who was heading for his village home in Sunamganj along with his family members told The Daily Star while leaving his home in Jainpur area. "My children would have to starve if we stay here any longer. We had to buy food from outside as there has been no gas for the last two days. But we can't afford this anymore," he

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'It felt like I was reborn' Man evacuated from Atia Mahal speaks about his horrifying ordeal

SHAHEEN MOLLAH from Sylhet

It was nothing less than a new lease of life for Ujjwal Chakraborty and for his wife Kanta Bhattacharya, who had been trapped inside Atia Mahal in Sylhet city. "When the army men escorted us to the next building on Saturday morning, it was my second birth," said Ujjwal, 36. The couple was living in one of the six flats on the fourth floor of Atia Mahal where at least four militants had holed up. They were killed in an operation by the army. Since early hours of Friday, 78 residents spent over a day before they were rescued by the army men. Ujjwal, a fireman at the Fire Service and Civil Defence in Sylhet, and his wife Kanta, a schoolteacher, went to bed as usual on Thursday night, thinking they would have a quiet weekend. Kanta woke up around 7:00am on Friday and started doing her household chores, but suddenly heard an announcement. She called Ujjwal hurriedly. "There are militants in the building. Please do not get out of your rooms

and keep the doors and windows closed," they heard. The police announcement also asked the militants to surrender. They hurriedly closed all the windows and then started panicking. They then called their relatives over the phone and heard more about the events unfolding there. Advised by some relatives, they took shelter in the toilet and stayed there since Friday morning. "Every moment during our stay in the toilet, we were afraid that the militants would come and kill us," Ujjwal told The Daily Star over the phone. They were afraid to prepare food in the kitchen. Starving, they crawled to the kitchen from the toilet and had some puffed rice on Friday afternoon. They often felt claustrophobic in the toilet and his wife fainted several times on Friday night, Ujjwal said. "It was a horrific night," he said. The next morning came with even more danger. It was raining heavily, he said. They kept their phones off to save battery and only turned them on for a few minutes at a time. Around 9:00am on Saturday, the

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2 more militants dead in hideout

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But it wasn't clear whether the two were among the dead. "We saw the two bodies [recovered by army personnel]. Their faces are partially burnt. We have collected fingerprints and DNA samples from the bodies to verify their identification," said a top police official, seeking anonymity. The standoff with the militants began around 1:30am on Friday when police cordoned off the building in the city's Shibbari area barely a week after busting a militant den in Chittagong. The army took over the charge of the operation from police on Saturday morning, and evacuated 78 residents from the building. During the raid that evening, two powerful bombs went off at two places near the hideout, killing two police officials and four civilians. At least 40 others, including law enforcers and journalists, were injured. Global terror group Islamic State claimed credit for the twin bomb attacks, US-based SITE Intelligence reported, citing the militant outfit's Amaq news agency. As on the previous two days, gunshots rang out yesterday morning and continued to be heard till 8:00am with a pause. Two huge explosions took place around 10:30am. About an hour later, a burst of gunfire was heard again, followed by another blast around 12:00pm. Shooting started again around 12:45pm and continued for at least 15 minutes. A fire broke out at the building following an explosion around 3:15pm. From a distance, The Daily Star correspondent saw a plume of smoke rising from the building. Law enforcers didn't allow journalists to go near the building for security reasons. Later, fire-fighters went to the spot and doused the flame. Police sources said army Para Commandos entered the flat on the ground floor, breaking two of its doors. FAKHRUL'S BRIEFING At the briefing, the army official said they found the body of one of the militants lying in a room with four to

five IED devices around the body. A part of the building might collapse if the explosives stored in the building explode. "We are moving cautiously as the whole building is risky," he said. Giving an idea of how powerful the explosives are, Fakhrul said the militants had kept a bucket containing explosives in front of a collapsible gate of the building. When the explosives went off, the entire building jolted and its collapsible gate was blown off to an adjacent building. There might be more explosives in the building. Asked what types of weapons the militants had used, he said the terrorists fired small arms, charged grenades and exploded IEDs. The whole building had been inspected "more or less." "If necessary, we will inspect it again," he said, adding that they think nobody alive was inside the building. According to intelligence sources, four militants -- three men and a woman -- were inside the building. The commandos also found the same, Fakhrul pointed out. "The four were well trained. It's a great success for us, for the army to have tracked down and killed them [the militants]." The army official said the situation was always under their control. "None could sneak out of the place." "Commandos conducted the drive risking their lives. We are proud of them. You also can feel proud of them..." About the fire at the building, Fakhrul said it could have been caused by explosions of suicide vests, shooting, detonation of grenades or tear gas canisters. CASE FILED Police on Sunday night filed a case with Moglabazar Police Station against some unknown persons over Saturday's twin blasts near the militant den. In the case statement, Sub-inspector Shiplu Chowdhury, plaintiff of the case, said one or more militants or terrorists carried out two explosions in Shibbari area during the operation. He also mentioned the names of the dead and some of the injured.

Yesterday, police handed over the bodies of Shahidul Islam and Khadem Shah -- two of the six killed in the blasts -- to their families around 2:00pm after collecting their fingerprints and samples of their clothes. Though the bodies of the other four were given to their families on Sunday, police took a day to hand over the two bodies for gathering information on them. Rokon Uddin, additional commissioner of Sylhet Metropolitan Police, said they are checking the backgrounds of the two and why they went to the spot on that day. Shahidul's brother Saiful Islam told The Daily Star that his brother, proprietor of Prime Lightings, started a decoration and catering business in Sylhet in 2003, and that he had never been involved in any criminal activities. Talking to reporters about Saturday's blasts, Rokon Uddin said the attackers didn't throw the bombs, rather they left abandoned a bag containing two bombs. Police were yet to find out how the bombs went off, as it was dark at that time and a large number of curious onlookers had gathered there, he said. Replying to a query, the police official said they seized five motorbikes from the spot and identified the owners of all but one. "We asked the BRTA to give us information on the other motorbike. We will get it soon." In response to another question, he claimed the attackers reached the spot not by breaching police barricade, rather by mingling with onlookers. Asked whether lax surveillance allowed the militants to transport and store explosives at the hideout, the police official said there was no loophole in police surveillance. "All the roads of the city are not under the coverage of CCTV cameras... They [the militants] didn't carry the elements at a time. They might have brought those to the den at different times, he said. Rokon Uddin said they were looking into whether there was any other militant hideout in the city.

Questions raised about defence deal

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They also said Bangladesh defence had developed on a certain system which was not at all compatible with the Indian system and its hardware. Any defence deal would create unnecessary and extra burden on our armed forces. The discussants were sceptical of any positive breakthrough in the PM's upcoming visit and said they think India would not deliver on any promise, including the Teesta water sharing agreement, a core issue of Bangladesh. Speakers were also highly critical of the border killing despite assurance from the highest level of the Indian government that it would be stopped. Editor of Prothom Alo Matiur Rahman moderated the roundtable. Former foreign secretaries Hemayetuddin and Touhid Hossain, former ambassador to China Ashfaq Rahman, former high commissioner to Pakistan Shamim Ahmad, former diplomat Mahmud Hasan, defence expert Maj Gen (retd) ANM Muniruzzaman, former ambassador Maj Gen (retd) Jamil D Ahsan, Prof Amena Mohsin and Prof Laifur Yasmin of International Relations Department of Dhaka University spoke on the occasion. Taking part in the discussion, Ashfaq Rahman said relations between Bangladesh and India have to be fair and equal but the problem is most Indians think Bangladesh would not have achieved independence without the support of India. He said, "India, as our best friend and worst enemy, should ensure water flow in the lean period and not flood us during the rainy season." Ashfaq said a tie with China was beneficial as "it provided duty-free market access of over 4,000 items and was not a hypocrite." Maj Gen Muniruzzaman said Bangladesh's relations with India had become very imbalanced in various sectors, including trade, and that Bangladesh had not gained anything from India with the only exception being the Land Boundary Agreement, in which India also benefited.

Expressing concern about the proposed defence deal, he said nobody knows anything about the pact and said it was essential to check each and every clause of the entire pact. He said Indian defence hardware was not up to international standards and that all concerned must be cautious of defence purchases from India with the line of credit it offered. Prof Amena Mohsin said India should know the needs of its friend and must not impose anything like a defence deal on Bangladesh because the proposed agreement would further increase trust deficit with India. She apprehended that this defence deal would increase anti-Indian sentiment as well as increase radicalisation of people. "How can India be our friend if it fences us from all sides," she said, adding, "Bangladesh needs China for its defence development considering Bangladesh's strategic interest." Shamim Ahmad said he did not see any prospect of the Teesta deal being signed during the upcoming visit of the PM, which would upset the people of Bangladesh and have a negative impact on their perception of India. "If we are excellent friends and if our relationship is so deep, then why do we need a defence agreement? We need detailed discussions and need to know each and everything about the deal before it is signed. This deal is very suspicious..." said Maj Gen Jamil. Former diplomat Mahmud Hasan said Bangladesh needs to proceed with India very carefully, considering its geo-political situation. "One must remember that a Muslim country is surrounded by a non-Muslim country on three sides." "The more agreements we sign with India, the more our sovereignty will be eroded. Bangladesh is not a threat to India, so why does it need a defence pact? ... the aim of it is to isolate Bangladesh from China absolutely," he said, adding that India was taking advantage of the political division in Bangladesh and weakness as there is no visible opposition in parlia-

ment. Hemayetuddin said India got a lot of benefits from Bangladesh and thus there is high expectation as to what the PM would bring home from India. The Indian side has said that the visit would be a landmark but "I have no idea how it could be. Does India want to mean it would be a landmark visit because of the signing of the defence deal or by inking water sharing agreement?" he said. Touhid Hossain raised questions about the necessity of the defence deal since there was no possibility of a war with India. "Is there any possibility of a war with Myanmar, and will India take the side of Bangladesh if there is really a war with Myanmar?" He mentioned a recent position India had taken at the UN when India refrained from voting against Myanmar on the Rohingya issue. "To me, defence deal with India is absolutely unnecessary. If we sign it, it would be completely to please India." Prothom Alo Editor in his introductory speech said there was no alternative to Bangladesh-India relationship. He said there was a huge hype about transit and transshipment and an idea was disseminated that Bangladesh would earn billions of dollars, but there has been no interest from the Indian side in the last six months, despite very low transit fees. He said it was also said about railway connectivity with Akhaura-Agartala but there was no significant progress. He, however, said there was progress in the energy sector since Bangladesh was importing electricity from India. Although India has repeatedly assured Bangladesh about bringing the border killing to zero level, killings are still going on and it remains a serious concern for Bangladesh. He also highlighted the proposed defence pact, purchase of submarines and \$24 billion agreement with China, efforts to add Bangladesh in the anti-China alliance, water sharing issue.

Dhaka hosts IPU meet on Apr 1-5

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parliamentary dialogue, and it works to establish democracy, peace and co-operation among people. It also works to strengthen parliaments. Currently, it has 170 members and 11 associate members. Bangladesh got the membership in 1972, but its membership was stripped off thrice for martial law and emergency regimes. In 2003, Bangladesh parliament hosted a conference of the 54-member Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). It is consisted of only commonwealth countries' national and state parliaments. Around 1,500 delegates of 130 national parliaments of the same number of sovereign states will join the upcoming IPU conference which will focus on democracy, security and ways to redress inequality. "Speakers and Deputy Speakers will lead a number of delegations. Some former ministers are among the participants. Those who are MPs will be ministers in future. So, our MPs can develop a good network with them

during the conference," Sabers said. For example, he said, in Latin and South America, Bangladesh has missions only in Brazil and Mexico. But MPs of many Latin and South American countries will join the conference. "If our parliamentarians develop network with MPs of those countries, it will help our country maintain good relations with those countries." Bangladesh can get support on many international issues if its lawmakers maintain network with parliamentarians of other countries, he said. For this, Sabers suggested, a core number of MPs and strategic partners should be identified and parliamentary friendship groups should be formed to maintain network with MPs of other parliaments. He spoke for strengthening parliament as he said a stronger parliament and a better democracy are required for achieving sustainable development goals. "Parliament should not be viewed as an extension of the government." Asked about the debate on the priority to development over democ-

racy, Sabers said governance is fundamental to development. Development will not be sustainable if there is a lack of governance. "Development is accelerated and made sustainable by governance. There is no alternative to democracy, governance and fundamental rights." For example, he said, if Dhaka city corporation carries out massive development work spending thousands of crores of taka and if quality of its service is not improved and people do not get good service, this work will have no value to them. "People must be impressed and people must own the development. Governance is an absolute pre-requisite in case of ownership. Development will not be sustainable if it does not have people's support," he noted. "Those who say development is first, not democracy, we tell them that this development will not sustain. Democracy and governance are the integral parts of development, he said, adding: "This is why IPU has been focusing on stronger parliament and better democracy."