

India suffers

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Hundreds of soldiers raided villages and fired warning shots at a suspected militant hideout, unleashing the fire fight in the village of Pinglan. Some militants were believed to have escaped, police said, and government forces cordoned off other villages as they gave chase.

Government forces have launched a massive hunt since an explosives-packed van struck the convoy transporting 2,500 security men close to Pinglan on Thursday.

A video on social media purportedly shows a pre-recorded message by the 20-year-old Kashmiri suicide bomber warning of more attacks.

Pakistan has denied any role in the attack.

As Islamabad recalled its envoy to New Delhi for "consultations", India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday called for greater international action against "terrorism".

"The cruel terrorist attack in Pulwana shows that time for talks is over," Modi told reporters after meeting with Argentina's President Mauricio Macri in New Delhi.

MOB ATTACKS

Thousands of demonstrators staged angry rallies in several Indian cities over the weekend, with attacks on Kashmiris reported in different towns.

Protesters in New Delhi on Sunday burned effigies of Pakistani and JeM leaders.

Many small businesses were closed yesterday following a call for a nationwide shutdown.

In the capital, a Kashmiri man was beaten by a mob that accused him of chanting anti-India slogans. He was later detained by police.

A curfew remained in force for a fourth day in Jammu city, in the Hindu-majority part of Kashmir, where mobs attacked and set fire to properties belonging to Kashmiri Muslims.

Thousands of residents in the city have fled to Muslim-majority areas. The government faces increased pressure because of an upcoming national election.

New Delhi has withdrawn trade privileges for Pakistan and ended police protection for four Kashmiri separatist leaders.

Some commentators have called for military action against Pakistan however.

India launched what it called 'surgical strikes' on targets in Pakistani Kashmir in September 2016, 11 days after a militant attack on an Indian army base in Kashmir which left 19 soldiers dead. Pakistan denies the strikes took place.

But experts say India has limited options for action now.

"Whatever retaliation India takes will be symbolic. It won't have any real impact," Ajay Sahni, executive director of the New Delhi based Institute for Conflict Management, told AFP.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeiri said during a visit to Islamabad that his country "will try to de-escalate tensions" between India and Pakistan. He is due to visit New Delhi with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman today.

JeM is one of several militant groups fighting Indian troops in Kashmir, which has been split between India and Pakistan since independence from Britain in 1947. Both claim the Himalayan region and have fought two wars over the territory.

Kashmir is the world's most militarised zone with some 500,000 Indian troops deployed to fight a rebellion that broke out in 1989.

Tens of thousands of people, mainly civilians, have died in the conflict. Violence has spiked since 2016 with almost 600 killed last year, the highest toll in a decade.

Exposed

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Feroz Salah Uddin, secretary general of the Bangladesh Red Crescent, said, "Our trained technicians are helping camp residents improve their own shelters. This is especially important for people with disabilities, the elderly as well as female and child-headed households."

Ahead of the cyclone season in April and May, the Bangladesh Red Crescent and the government agencies are also training thousands of volunteers from the Rakhine community in cyclone preparedness.

However, all the cyclone preparedness training, well-rehearsed emergency drills and necessary equipment in the world would fail if a deadly tropical cyclone barrels up the Bay of Bengal like in the past, Feroz observed.

Azmat Ulla of the IFRC said, "The fact remains that these people have nowhere to evacuate to."

"The pitiful state of people's shelters illustrates how utterly unsustainable and unsafe this life is. We continue to call for an urgent political solution to this crisis. But in the meantime, more is needed to at least provide people with basic comfort and dignity."

Shajahan-led body

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comment that a driver can be given a licence if he can differentiate between a cow and a goat."

His smile (over deaths of two students) also created a "dangerous situation" in the country, he said. "How much of the government commitment can be kept by appointing a person like him?" Imam questioned.

Bodi, a former MP from Cox's Bazar-4, was named as a yaba godfather in reports of the Department of Narcotics Control alongside several intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

A DNC report mentioned him as a patron of yaba trade in Ukhiya-Teknaf, the gateway of smuggling the crazy drug from Myanmar.

Shajahan, also a former shipping minister, slammed Imam when it was his turn to take the floor under section 274 of the rules of procedure of parliament minutes.

"Fakhrul Imam made a remark about me in which he connected illegal drug peddling with road accidents. It is very regrettable and condemnable," Shajahan said.

He demanded that the opposition MP withdraw his remarks.

Shajahan, also the executive president Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation, then requested the remarks be expunged.

Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, who was presiding over the sitting, said she would look into the matter.

Road Transports and Bridge Minister Obaidul Quader also spoke on the issue in parliament.

He said they convened an emergency meeting of the National Road Safety Council (NRSC) on Sunday as the road safety situation has deteriorated recently.

He said the home minister, the transport sector's experts and leaders, columnist Syed Abdul Maksud, road safety activist Ilias Kanchan, and police officials were present at the meeting.

Quader said Shajahan's name was proposed as the head of the committee but no one at the meeting opposed it.

"There're 14 more members at the committee under him [Shahjahan]. We'll not give importance to any person here...we'll focus on the report to be made by the committee on bringing back discipline to the transport sector,

and we'll decide on the next course of action in this regard," Quader said.

He also said the report would be prepared by the committee members, not by any individual. "His [Shajahan's] name was proposed as he is an experienced person."

The government formed the committee at an NRSC meeting on Sunday. Shahajan's name in the body surprised many.

Experts, road safety campaigners and family members of accident victims termed the government's decision "hilarious" and a "mockery".

Follow rules

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especially for the press and journalists working in the print media, have helped prevent yellow journalism in the country. The application of these policies and codes of conduct has to be considered for other media organisations," he added.

The President said highly-educated students are joining journalism every year. "I firmly believe that their involvement in the media will increase the dignity and development of this profession further."

He urged the tech-savvy young journalists to utilise their talent, skill, honesty and neutrality and give priority to the interests of their beloved motherland.

"You'll have to be the models of a militancy and terrorism free non-communal Bangladesh. You hold the key to Bangladesh's development," the President said.

The Press Council was established on February 14, 1974 by enacting the Bangladesh Press Council Act by Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to protect press freedom and improve its standard.

A total of seven awards were distributed among five personalities and two institutions.

The awardees are -- Golam Sarwar (lifetime), former editor of Samakal; Jasim Uddin Harun (development journalism) from The Financial Express; Murshid Alam (rural journalism) from Dainik Mukta Barta; Ayesha Siddiqa Akashi (women journalism) from Kaler Kontho; Sony Ramani (photography) from Daily New Age, Daily Ittefaq and Dainik Azadi.

Zia, 5 Ansar al Islam men

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Rahman Farabi, 27.

All the accused, except for Farabi, were either leaders or operatives of banned militant outfit Ansar al Islam, previously known as Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), Monirul said, adding that Ziaul and Akram were still on the run while Mozammel, Soheli and Arafat gave confessional statements before the magistrates.

Though investigators found involvement of 12 people in the killing, six were left out of the charge sheet as details of the five could not be known while another was killed earlier.

The five, who were dropped from the charge sheet, are Selim, Hasan, Ali alias Khalil, Anik and Antu. Investigator could not find out their details except for their organisational names, CITC officials said.

Another prime accused, Mukul Rana, who was the operation commander of the murder, was killed in a "shootout" with detectives in the capital's Khilgaon area on June 19, 2016.

Seven arrested by Rab not involved Interestingly, seven of the eight people Rab arrested earlier and claimed who had direct involvement in the murder were exempted from charges.

They are -- Towhidur Rahman, Sadekur Rahman Mithu, Aminul Mallik, Abul Bashar, Julhaj Biswas, Jafraan Al Hasan and Manna Yahiya alias Mannan Rahi.

Among the eight, only Farabi was named in the charge sheet as he had published several posts on social media, instigating the killing of Avijit, said Monirul.

"Their names have been dropped as the investigators did not find their involvement in the murder," he added.

Avijit, a Bangladesh-born US citizen, was stabbed to death on Dhaka University campus when he, along with his wife Rafida Ahmed Bonya, was returning from the book fair on February 26, 2015. Bonya survived the attack.

Avijit's father Prof Ajay Roy filed the murder case against unidentified assailants with Shahbagh Police Station.

Monirul said the outfit targeted Avijit for his writings, especially for his two books -- Obishshaher Dorshon (The Philosophy of Disbelief) and Biswasher Virus (The Virus of Faith).

According to CITC officials, the intelligence wing of the militant outfit collected information from Avijit's friends, publishing houses and other sources about his possible date of return from abroad.

After Avijit came to Dhaka during the book fair in 2015, they planned the killing and rented a flat in Elephant Road to execute it.

The militants followed Avijit for several days before killing him on Dhaka University campus on February 26. Four people directly took part in the killing while others were staying nearby. Zia himself was present on the

Two killed in shipyard blast

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An oil tanker of MTS Warrior, weighing around 38,000 tonnes, exploded when 17 workers were cutting the tanker around 8:30am at Sagorika Shipyard, said Proddut Ghosh Chowdhury, sub-inspector of Sitakunda Police Station.

Earlier, four workers died in two incidents there in 2012 and 2013.

Mostafijur Rahman, inspector of Chattogram directorate of environment, said the shipyard did not follow the guideline for safety, causing the accident.

The explosion happened when sparks came into contact with the oil of the tanker, he added.

However, Shamsul Alam, owner of the shipyard, claimed that they ensured utmost safety for workers. This was an accident. "Two-thirds of the ship have already been dismantled."

Some 27 workers were killed and nine others wounded in different incidents at shipyards in Sitakunda in the last three years since 2016, according to a report of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela).

Jahirul Islam, inspector of Chattogram Medical College Hospital police outpost, told The Daily Star that Jalil was admitted to the hospital in the morning and Bipul in the afternoon. Both died soon after their admission.

After the incident, the shipyard

North Korea faces 'historic turning point': state media

AFP, Seoul

North Korea is facing a "significant, historic turning point", state media said yesterday, ahead of a highly-anticipated second summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un.

The meeting between the two leaders -- which will be the second time the pair have come together following their Singapore summit in June -- is scheduled for Hanoi, Vietnam on February 27-28.

Attention has been focused on whether the US team will offer to lift some economic sanctions on North Korea, in return for Pyongyang taking concrete steps toward denuclearisation.

"It is time for us to tighten our shoe strings and run fast, looking for a higher goal as we face this decisive moment," the Rodong Sinmun newspaper said in an editorial.

"Our country is facing a significant, historic turning point," it added, without explicitly referencing the summit.

Earlier this month, US President Trump tweeted that North Korea will become a "great Economic Powerhouse" under Kim.

"He may surprise some but he won't surprise me, because I have gotten to know him & fully understand how capable he is," said Trump.

The Rodong Sinmun commentary called on North Koreans to make greater efforts to boost the country's economy.

UAE to consider

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and business between Dhaka and Dubai.

The Dubai ruler said the UAE identified Bangladesh as a big and new sector for their investment.

"He also said his country will consider the manpower issue openly," the foreign secretary said.

At the meeting, the PM gifted Maktoum a translated version of her book "My Dream".

Badal slams

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leader Fakhrul Imam -- in parliament demanded a statement from the foreign minister on the "defence pact".

The same day, Bangladesh had signed a memorandum of understanding with Saudi Arabia, aiming at enhancing military cooperation between the two countries.

Principal Staff Officer Lt Gen Md Mahfuzur Rahman of the Armed Forces Division of Bangladesh and Deputy Chief of Staff of Saudi Armed Forces Lt Gen Mutlaqbin Salim Al-azaima signed the MoU on behalf of their respective sides at the Saudi Ministry of Defence in Riyadh, says Bangladesh Embassy in the KSA.

Under the MoU, the two countries will help each other in military training, practice and education, military information and intelligence, defence industry, supply and maintenance, visit and exchange of experiences, military treatment and research, sports, social and cultural activities, science and technology, exchange of military members, marine security and cooperation to stop piracy, according to media reports.

An untoward

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as soon as possible.

Replying to a query about extending support to the injured people, the BGB chief said they were thinking of it. "We will extend support to the victims' families after the completion of the investigation."

About withdrawing BGB's cases against villagers, he said they discussed the issue with the Thakurgaon deputy commissioner and the super-intendent of police.

Asked whether the BGB could have avoided opening fire on innocent people, he said he would not make a comment on the matter as it was under investigation.

In this connection, the BGB chief said the paramilitary force carries out its duties to protect 4,427 km border by maintaining congenial relationship with the people.

BGB Thakurgaon Battalion Sector Commander Col Shamsul Arefin, BGB 50 Battalion Commanding Officer Lt Col Tuhin Mohammad Masud, Thakurgaon DC KM Kamruzzaman Selim and SP Md Moniruzzaman were present, among others.

Earlier on February 12, the BGB in a statement said one of its patrol teams went to Baharampur village that day to seize "smuggled" cattle.

As the BGB men were taking those to Betna camp, cattle smugglers intercepted them and tried to snatch away the animals.

At one stage, the BGB personnel got into an altercation with the villagers, who encircled them. Failing to calm down the villagers, the BGB men opened fire in self-defence, the statement added.

The paramilitary force on February 14 filed two cases against some 275 people, including two deceased, from Baharampur village in connection with the incident.

GP subscribers suffer

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Telecommunication Union have set 3 percent as the limit.

The call drop rate of Robi, the second largest operator, was 1.35 percent, Banglalink 0.58 percent, and state-run TeleTalk was 1.58 percent.

The report said Grameenphone took an average 10.14 seconds to connect phone users, Robi took 6.15 seconds, Banglalink 7.69 seconds, and TeleTalk 7.11.

The BTRC has set 7 seconds as benchmark for connecting time.

It also found that 99 percent calls of all carriers were successfully connected, which was above the BTRC standard of 97 percent.

Among all the carriers, Robi's voice call quality was found below par.

The tests also checked 4G speeds being delivered by the carriers and found all three top operators were giving below 7Mbps, the minimum 4G speed set by BTRC.

Grameenphone's average downlink speed was 5.88 megabits per second (Mbps), Robi's 5.91Mbps, and Banglalink's 5.18Mbps.

TeleTalk had no 4G coverage at the time of the test.

The BTRC said they had run similar tests in Chattogram and other cities and the reports would be revealed gradually.

Contacted, Grameenphone in a written statement to The Daily Star said it maintains the best network in the country and conduct drive tests on a regular basis to ensure that its "network superiority" is maintained.

"In November and December last year the call drop rate was 0.31 percent in Dhaka. With respect to BTRC drive test results in question, a meeting was called by the BTRC last week, in the presence of all the MNOs [mobile

network operators], to discuss the result and to identify a proper drive test modality for an accurate network quality and performance analysis.

"After checking the logs of the BTRC drive test, several abnormalities were found and accepted by the regulator."

"Moreover," it added, "if those abnormalities were taken into account we have shared information with the BTRC that the actual call drop rate for GP would be 0.49 percent."

The BTRC had agreed to consider the recommendations on the drive test modality and hold off releasing their report, said Grameenphone.

"In the circumstances we question the motivation on releasing a disputable report that does not make accurate representation of the network service quality."

Shahed Alam, head of corporate and regulatory affairs at Robi Axiata Ltd, said, "We need to keep in mind that a drive test doesn't give a definitive picture of the overall state of quality of service. It gives an indication of a service at a specific time at a specific place. It may be noted that we conduct similar tests regularly to assess our QoS. Since the regulator hadn't shared the detailed data of the drive test, it is difficult for us to make a conclusion on our QoS based on their test results."

The Daily Star did not get comments from Banglalink and TeleTalk despite several attempts.

A senior official of a carrier said the BTRC had carried out the service quality test outdoors. Service quality indoors could be different.

Carriers had earlier mentioned that they could not properly cover at least eight spots in the capital and that they even faced restrictions in setting up their networks.

Record be kept

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Besides, newspapers and other media houses should make comprehensive documentation over the polls, he said.

Prof Anu also said previous polls that were held under non-partisan governments were not flawless.

"But what happened during the 2018 election was unprecedented," he said, alleging that the ruling party "controlled all institutions to arrange the election."

Eminent jurist Dr Shahdeen Malik said the extent of rigging during the polls has destroyed the country's election system and also put the state structure in a vulnerable position.

He called for holding a "meaningful election" and for this stressed the need for holding discussions among political parties.

He also said the country's political parties should practise democracy within the parties in all activities, including choosing new leadership through councils.

Serious evidence of rigging and some unprecedented incidents during electioneering made the polls hardly credible, said Prof Asif Nazrul of Dhaka University law department.

This also harmed the possibility of a representative parliament as per the constitution, rebuilding of democracy and ensuring political stability, he said, while reading out a written state-

ment.

The whole process also seriously questioned the EC's will and capacity for holding peaceful election under a partisan government, he said.

"There is no alternative to holding a free, fair and neutral election soon for the sake of the constitution, democracy and people's rights," he said.

Renowned photographer Shahidul Alam said the country's constitution guarantees freedom of speech for every citizen.

People should raise their voice rightfully although this may seem problematic to others, he said.

Despite a shrinking space, a small number of people are raising their voice, he said, adding others should create scope for them.

Moderating the discussion, women rights activist Shireen Haq said the EC has announced that the upcoming upazila elections would be held in the manner of the parliamentary polls.

It left little to expect from the EC, she said.

Prof CR Abrar of DU International Relations department said irregularities centring on the 11th parliamentary polls have taken place as the election itself was a "farce".

A fair election was necessary to overcome the present situation, he said.

Why it could drive

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losses in a battle with Kashmir militants that left at least seven dead.

Claimed in its entirety by both, Kashmir has been a constant source of tension between the two nuclear armed neighbours, who've fought three wars since independence from British colonial rule in 1947.

Past attacks in the Kashmir region -- and beyond, including the terrorist raid on Mumbai in 2008 that India blamed on Pakistani gunmen -- have periodically brought the two to the brink of renewed conflict.

Pakistan says it rejects "any insinuation" that it had a role in Thursday's attack, for which India has blamed Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Pakistan-based group listed by the US State Department as a foreign terrorist organisation.

This as India promises retaliation, including commercial and diplomatic steps to, as one top minister put it on Friday, "isolate" Pakistan internationally. India withdrew trade privileges for Pakistan and imposed a 200 percent customs duty on all imports from its neighbour. Delhi has also left the door open for military action.

"At this time, the hopes the country has to respond are natural. Our security forces have been given full freedom. We have complete confidence in the courage and bravery of our soldiers," Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Friday morning.

While we wait to find out more about India's response, one thing is clear: the timing of the attack will only add to the pressure on Modi and his lieutenants to act.

GENERAL ELECTIONS

India is only months away from general elections, due to be held by May. Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept to power with a stunning victory in the last elections in 2014.

Defying even the most optimistic

predictions, the BJP won the biggest parliamentary majority by any party in three decades. Modi, until then a controversial state level leader, became the country's most consequential politician — powerful and immensely popular.

He was widely seen as invincible, a charismatic presence on the stump who promised to overhaul India's economy and generate jobs. A populist nationalist, he also vowed to stand up to India's foes, individuals or countries that threatened its security.

In 2016, following a deadly attack on an Indian military installation in Kashmir also blamed on Pakistan-based gunmen, Delhi said it had struck across its de facto border with its neighbour to take out terrorist targets. The "surgical strikes," as they were described, have since been referred to numerous times by Modi and his allies as proof that his government has been stronger on security issues than its predecessors.

But ahead of the elections, the economic backdrop has been darkening. Although growth has remained robust, evidence suggests the jobs shortage has only worsened in recent years. The rural picture is also discouraging, with India's farmers facing falling incomes.

And in December, in a surprise result, Modi's BJP suffered heavier than expected defeats in a series of key state elections, seen by many as a leading indicator of sentiment ahead of the national poll this year.

Modi, as a result, no longer appears as politically invincible as he did only months ago -- a fact that could add to the pressure on the government as it weighs its response to the attack.

As the leading Indian Express newspaper put it in an editorial published Friday, "with the parliamentary elections only weeks away, the timing of the attack is a fraught one."