

'Jihadists' attack Syria oil refinery, gas plants

AFP, Damascus

Near-simultaneous attacks believed to have been carried out with drones targeted three government-run oil and gas facilities in central Syria at dawn yesterday, the oil ministry said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the triple attack but Britain-based war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said sleeper cells of the Islamic State group were probably responsible.

The ministry said that the targets included the oil refinery in Homs, one of only two in Syria, and two gas facilities, one south of the city and one in the desert to its east.

The ministry said that several production units had been damaged and repair teams were working alongside firefighters to try to restore output as quickly as possible.

Government-held areas of Syria suffer from a chronic shortage of fuel, partly because of Western sanctions on crude imports and partly because the largest oil and gas fields lie in the east, which remains under the control of US-backed Kurdish forces.

Observatory director Rami Abdel Rahman said he believed the attacks were the work of IS, which has proved it remains capable of operating in both government- and Kurdish-held areas despite its loss of the last redoubt of its self-proclaimed caliphate to Kurdish forces in March.

Macron looks to give 'new force' to Sahel anti-jihadist campaign

AFP, Port-Bouet

French President Emmanuel Macron arrived in Ivory Coast on Friday to celebrate Christmas with French troops, saying Paris would work to give "new force" to the regional fight against Islamist militants.

The jihadist insurgency in several poor Sahel nations will be a top item on Macron's agenda in 48-hour stay in the region where attacks have spread since the Islamist militancy began seven years ago in Mali.

Away from weeks of protest strikes gripping France, Macron's personal chef travelled with him to cook dinner for around 1,000 troops at the military base in Port-Bouet, near Abidjan's airport.

"I hope we can give new depth, new commitments, a new force to this operation and win a fight that is key to the stability and security of the Sahel," the French leader said addressing troops at Port-Bouet.

"We will keep up the fight against jihadist terrorists. We will continue to do so with our African partners and with our European and international partners," he said. "Because if we let the threat flourish, it will impact us too."

Earlier Macron and his wife Brigitte were met at the airport with his Ivorian counterpart Alassane Ouattara.

Despite some 4,500 French troops in the Sahel region, alongside a 13,000-strong UN peacekeeping force in Mali, the conflict has engulfed the centre of the country and spread to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.

The leaders of five Sahel nations are due to attend a summit in Paris on January 13, when Macron said they would clarify the "political and strategic framework" of the operation against the militants.

Rangpur

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balls to spare. Gregory was unbeaten for a 37-ball 76 while Fazle scored an unbeaten 21-ball 38.

In the day's first game, opener Andre Fletcher became the first centurion of the Bangladesh Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) as his explosive unbeaten 57-ball 103 and another 38-ball 90 from Jhonsor Charles helped Sylhet post a mammoth 232 for five.

In reply, Khulna, who were unbeaten in four matches, were bundled out for 152 in 18.3 overs while Sylhet jumped a place up from the bottom following their first victory in the tournament.

2 Rohingya men

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the group of criminals opened fire, forcing the BGB men to retaliate. At one point of the "gunfight", the duo was found lying on the ground with bullet wounds. They were then sent to Ukhaia Upazila Health Complex where doctors declared them dead, the BGB official claimed.

BGB also claimed to have recovered 40,000 yaba pills and a locally made pistol from the spot.

The Daily Star, however, could not independently verify the BGB claims. Two cases were filed with Ukhaia Police Station in connection with the incident.



Police officers stop demonstrators during a protest against a new citizenship law, in Chennai, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Protesters defy crackdown

FROM PAGE 16

Critics say the law discriminates against Muslims and is part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist agenda, a claim his political party has denied. Critics of the law say it discriminates against Muslims and threatens India's secular ethos because it makes religion a criteria for citizenship.

Authorities have scrambled to contain the situation -- imposing emergency laws, blocking internet access, and shutting down shops in sensitive areas across the country.

Demonstrators have vowed to keep up their fight until the law is revoked.

Hundreds of protesters and police have been injured in the protests, the strongest show of dissent against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government since he was first elected in 2014.

Modi met his council of ministers yesterday to discuss security measures related to the protests, government sources said without revealing any details.

Protests were held yesterday in numerous states, including in the cities of Chennai, Gurgaon and Guwahati.

As day broke in the capital New Delhi, demonstrators held up their mobile phones as torches at India's biggest mosque Jama Masjid in a show of dissent.

In Patna in the eastern state of Bihar, three demonstrators suffered bullet wounds and six were hurt from stone-pelting after clashing with counter-protesters, police said.

At an all-women protest in Assam state's Guwahati city in the northeast -- where the wave of protests started amid fears the immigrants would dilute their local cultures --

participants said it was time to speak up.

"We came out to fight for our motherland, we came to fight without any arms and ammunition, we will fight peacefully," Lily Dutta told AFP.

Since being re-elected this year Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party have stripped Muslim-majority Kashmir of its autonomy and carried out a register of citizens in Assam.

The BJP has said it wants to conduct the National Register of Citizens (NRC) nationwide, fuelling fears Muslims -- a 200-million minority in India -- were being disenfranchised.

BJP's general secretary Bhupender Yadav yesterday told reporters the party would "launch an awareness campaign" and hold 1,000 rallies to dispel "lies" about the law.

In northern Uttar Pradesh, Muslims make up almost 20 percent of the 200-million population. The state's police spokesman Shirish Chandra told AFP 10 people died Friday after being shot.

The boy also died Friday in a "stampede-like situation" when 2,500 people including children joined a rally in the holy city of Varanasi, district police chief Prabhakar Chaudhary told AFP.

Rights activists in the state said police had raided their houses and offices to prevent them from planning fresh demonstrations. Authorities also shut schools across the state as fresh protests erupted yesterday.

The unrest had already seen one death in Uttar Pradesh, two in the southwestern state of Karnataka and six in Assam.

Yesterday, police erected barricades along Delhi's Jantar Mantar, an avenue that in recent years has been a hotspot for protests.

It came after street battles broke out on Friday evening in Delhi with police firing a water cannon and baton-charging protesters, who chanted anti-Modi slogans and threw stones.

An AFP reporter at the scene saw protesters, including children, being detained and beaten by police.

Critics of the law say it has struck a blow to a country that has long taken pride in its secular constitution. India has a population of 1.3 billion, with a majority of Hindus, a large minority of Muslims and several other smaller faiths.

"This piece of legislation strikes at the heart of the Constitution, seeking to make India another country altogether," prominent historian Ramachandra Guha wrote in The Telegraph.

He was released from police custody on Thursday after being detained for protesting against the law in the southern city of Bengaluru.

Political opposition against the law has included state leaders from regional parties saying they will prevent its implementation in their states. The government has said there is no chance the law will be repealed.

The Congress stepped up its anti-CAA campaign in Kerala whose Marxist government became the second state authority after West Bengal to put on hold all activities relating to preparation of a pan-India National Population Register which is considered as a precursor to controversial National Register of Citizens (NRC) across the country.

Assam's NRC excluded 1.9 million people who now face possible statelessness, detention in camps or even deportation, although that is not feasible.

Senior Congress leaders including

Ramesh Chennithala, Mullappally Ramachandran, Shashi Tharoor, Benny Behanan and M M Hassan participated in the campaign and courted arrest, reported out New Delhi correspondent.

After West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday, Bahujan Samajwadi Party President Mayawati yesterday joined the chorus urging Modi government to give up its "stubborn stand" on the new citizenship law and NRC and withdraw the law.

"Now that voices opposed to the CAA and NRC have started coming from within the NDA, the central government should give up its stubborn stand and withdraw its decisions," she tweeted a day after BJP ally in Bihar Janata Dal (U) and Lok Janashakti Party (LJP) came out against the proposed NRC. However, both Janata Dal (U) and LJP lawmakers voted for CAA in parliament last week.

Bihar is the eighth state to oppose NRC. Seven non-BJP states—Kerala, West Bengal, Odisha, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan—have already ruled out implementing NRC.

Meanwhile, right-wing Hindu organizations and academicians yesterday expressed support for the law. Over 1,000 professors and scholars congratulated the parliament and government for what they said was a progressive law standing up for forgotten minorities.

"We also note with deep anguish that an atmosphere of fear and paranoia is being created in the country through deliberate obfuscation and fear-mongering, leading to violence in several parts of the country," they said in a statement.

'I have to work'

FROM J4

No matter how strong our desire to work was, we could not continue for long without money. Therefore, our main task became raising funds.

I had a small flat in London. When I was working for Bangladesh on foreign soil, I didn't have a job. I had sold the flat to run my own expenses. I had obtained 6800 pounds from the sale and kept the money in a bank in London, thinking I would use this for the next three or four years.

In order to start Brac's work, I withdrew the money from the bank in London and brought it home. The first operation of Brac started with the 25,000 Indian Rupees from Vikarul Islam Chowdhury's account in Calcutta and the 6,800 British pound from the proceed of my flat's sale. I started a 'Relief and Rehabilitation' program for the people of Shalla. From that perspective, I, myself, was the first 'donor' of Brac.

I have to work for people, this was the only thought when I started Brac. I never thought that Brac would be the largest NGO in the world, nor did I think that it would spread its programmes beyond the country's border into the international arena.

I've always tried to be aware of one thing. I didn't want to do anything that I couldn't do properly. Whatever I do, I'll do well, that is my motto.

This was in my head even when I started Brac.

I started Brac's operation with my own money. Our money wasn't much, but we started to work with it in a very planned manner. That is why we have achieved success. Subsequently, foreign donors provided funding for our activities. As a result, it became easier to work.

The first foreign organisation to provide fund to Brac was Oxfam-GB. Oxfam gave about two hundred thousand pounds. We did a lot of work with this money.

In October 1972, I went to London. I met Oxfam officials. I noticed that they were very happy with our work. They said we have about seven hundred projects all over the world.

Brac is one of the projects that are doing the best. In a short time, BRAC has done a lot of work, which was very crucial in saving people's lives. The high-ups of Oxfam had good reason for this satisfaction. Actually, we did a lot of work in a short period of time.

I still remember the difficult situation of the first day I went to Shalla in March. There was no place to stay. I did not know where I could sleep. I had to sleep on a bench of a shop in the local market. It rained heavily at night. The rain dripped on the bench all night. I could not sleep. The next day I stayed at the rest house.

I was thirty-six then. I walked seventeen miles. I considered everything as a part of life. I never thought of backing out after facing obstacles.

A lot of people supported us in our work. Many freedom fighters joined our work upon their return. Together, we worked hard. We worked for people. BRAC is the result of that hard labour.

(Excerpts from the book 'Fazle Hasan Abed and Brac')

Switzerland resumes UN's Palestinian aid agency funding

AFP, Geneva

Switzerland said Friday it had resumed payments to the UN's embattled agency for Palestinian refugees after a UN probe cleared the organisation of allegations of mismanaging funds.

Switzerland was among a number of countries that halted their contributions to UNRWA earlier this year amid suspicions that the organisation had misused donor funds.

The organisation also faced allegations of "serious ethical abuses" by the management, including its then chief, Pierre Krahenbuhl, a Swiss citizen who resigned last month.

In early November, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres released a statement saying the preliminary findings of an internal UN probe found no "fraud or misappropriation of operational funds" by Krahenbuhl.

"There are, however, managerial issues that need to be addressed," his statement said.

The Swiss foreign ministry told AFP in an email Friday that Guterres had confirmed in a letter sent to Bern on December 3 that "the probe uncovered no evidence of misappropriation of funds".

The ministry also highlighted reforms put in place by UNRWA to better manage donor funds.

"Taking into account the measures taken and the confirmation from the UN Secretary-General that no donor funds had been misappropriated, (Switzerland) has decided to resume its payments to UNRWA," it said.

Before halting its payments to the agency, Switzerland had already dished out 25 million Swiss francs (\$25.4 million, 23 million euros) in 2019.

In 2018, the wealthy Alpine nation provided the organisation with funds of 26 million francs.

Tributes shower on Abed

FROM PAGE 1

message, former US president Bill Clinton said Sir Fazle Abed's life was a great gift to humanity.

"His nearly 50 years of visionary leadership at Brac transformed millions of lives in Bangladesh and beyond, and changed the way the world thinks about development. Driven by an unwavering belief in the inherent dignity of all people, he empowered those in extreme poverty to build better futures for themselves and their families," Clinton said.

Nobel Prize-awarded couple Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, in their message, said, "How often do we see people like Sir Fazle Hasan Abed? His absence has left a great sense of loss in all of us."

Melinda Gates, co-founder of Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, recalled Sir Fazle Abed's contribution in her message saying, "We were saddened to hear of his passing and will forever draw inspiration from his work, as will the rest of the world, which he left so much better than he found."

Former World Bank President Jim Yong Kim said, "The scale and impact of what he has done, and yet the utter humility with which he has done everything, is a lesson for every single one of us."

WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Sir Fazle Abed's passion and work in alleviating poverty and empowering the poor inspired many.

"My thoughts are with him and his family and friends," he added.

Unicef Executive Director Henrietta H Fore said, "All of us at Unicef will miss his ideas and advice. We will

never forget the example he set."

Pulitzer Prize winner Nicholas Kristof, Save the Children UK Chief Executive Kevin Watkins, UK's Department for International Development and the Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade also mourned the passing of the visionary leader.

Brac Bangladesh Chairperson Hossain Zillur Rahman said Sir Fazle Abed succeeded in establishing the world's largest development organisation with a simple conviction that a person, even in his most disadvantaged situation, has the potential to change his fate.

"At this painful moment of departure, his warm smile still gives us the confidence that we must tread further ahead, holding on to his values of empathy, responsibility and labour. Adieu in respect and love," he said.

Wahiduddin Mahmud, a renowned economist of Bangladesh, said he was deeply saddened at the demise of Sir Fazle Abed.

"I had once the privilege of sitting beside him at a dinner event and we were discussing about some public health and poverty issues. At one point I remarked that good development ideas in Bangladesh travel fast because of population density, and he immediately quipped: so does diarrhoea; such was his presence of mind and awareness of development issues!"

"Incidentally, one of his important contributions was to spread the idea of home-made oral saline through Brac's one of many effective social campaigns."

"Today, Bangladesh is a global leader in reducing child mortality, which is to

a great extent due to the reduction of child death from diarrhoea through the widespread adoption of the oral saline technology. This is just one example of his so many innovative development ideas," Wahiduddin said.

Ahrar Ahmad, director general of Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation, said, "While he [Sir Fazle Abed] had distinguished himself, and was internationally acknowledged, for his life-long devotion to the principles of fairness and inclusiveness, and his compassionate, determined and innovative approaches to improving the quality of life of people with particular attention to the 'left behind', the marginalised, the 'others', he was no less an imaginative entrepreneur of education pursuing his vision of excellence in pedagogy, research, and the development of an enlightened citizenry."

Former caretaker government adviser CM Shafi Sami, former Bangladesh Bank governor Salehuddin Ahmed, Unicef Representative in Bangladesh Tomoo Hozumi, ASA president Shafiqul Haque Choudhury, cricketer Shakib Al Hasan, expressed grief at the death of the development champion.

Different political and socio-economic organisations, NGOs also mourned the death of Sir Fazle Abed. Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Inu), Oikya Nap, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Ain o Salish Kendra, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Gonoshasthaya Kendra, Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh, Sammilita Samajik Andolan, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University also mourned the death.