

SOMALIA HOTEL SIEGE Thirteen killed, hostages held

AFP, Mogadishu

At least 13 civilians have been killed and dozens wounded in an Islamist militant attack on a hotel in the Somali capital, officials said yesterday, as security forces battled gunmen barricaded inside many hours after the siege began.

Fighters from the al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Shabaab stormed the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu on Friday evening in a hail of gunfire and bomb blasts.

Scores of people were trapped inside but officials said many including children have since been rescued.

Sporadic gunfire and loud explosions could be heard into yesterday afternoon, but details remain difficult to verify in the chaos.

It is the biggest attack in Mogadishu since Somalia's new president, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, was elected in May after many months of political instability.

Al-Shabaab, which has been waging a deadly insurgency for 15 years against the fragile government in the Horn of Africa nation, has claimed responsibility.

"We are getting information about five more victims confirmed dead and that makes 13 the overall number of civilians killed by the terrorists," security commander Mohamed Abdikadir told AFP.

"The security forces rescued dozens of civilians including children who were trapped in the building."

Police officer Ibrahim Duale confirmed that more than 10 people had been killed, but said updated information would be released once the siege had ended.

"The security forces will announce any moment that the siege is over, it took a long time because of the complexity of the rescue mission," Duale told AFP.

The director of Mogadishu's main trauma hospital, Mohamed Abdirahman Jama, said the facility was treating at least 40 people wounded in the hotel attack and a separate mortar strike on another area of the capital.

Dozens of people gathered outside the four-storey hotel to discover the fate of loved ones.

"We have been looking for a relative of mine who was trapped inside the hotel, she was confirmed dead together with six other people, two of them I know," said an anxious Muudey Ali.

Witnesses had reported at least two powerful explosions on Friday as gunmen stormed the hotel, a popular spot for government officials in a bustling area on the airport road.

Police spokesman Abdifatah Adan Hassan had told reporters Friday the initial blast was caused by a suicide bomber who forced his way into the hotel with other gunmen.

Witnesses said a second blast occurred just a few minutes later, inflicting more casualties as rescuers, security forces and civilians rushed to the scene.



Animal welfare activist Hossain Sohail puts himself in a cage at Dhaka University's TSC demanding the release of all caged birds and animals. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Russia foils new Crimea attack

Drone shot down at Black Sea fleet HQ; Putin allows
UN inspectors to visit Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant

AGENCIES

Russia yesterday said it has shot down a drone over the headquarters of Russia's Black Sea fleet in annexed Crimea, as President Vladimir Putin agreed to allow independent inspectors to travel to the Moscow-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant.

"The drone was shot down just above the fleet headquarters" in the city of Sevastopol, city governor Mikhail Razvojaev wrote on Telegram, blaming the attempt on Ukrainian forces.

No major damage or casualties were reported.

It was the second assault of its kind against the fleet headquarters in less than a month, after a drone attack on July 31 in its courtyard wounded five people and led to the cancellation of planned Fleet Day celebrations.

It was also the latest attack to target Russian military infrastructure in Crimea, a Black Sea peninsula that Moscow seized and annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

Russian forces on Thursday shot down a drone near an air base in Sevastopol, just two days after explosions ripped through a military base and ammunition depot in Crimea.

According to French President

Emmanuel Macron's office, Putin had "reconsidered" his demand that the International Atomic Energy Agency travel through Russia to the Zaporizhzhia nuclear site.

The UN nuclear watchdog's chief, Rafael Grossi "welcomed recent statements indicating that both Ukraine and Russia supported the IAEA's aim to send a mission to" the plant.

Meanwhile, UN chief Antonio Guterres on Friday urged Moscow's forces occupying Zaporizhzhia not to disconnect the facility from the grid and potentially cut supplies to millions of Ukrainians.

A flare-up in fighting around the Russian-controlled nuclear power station – with both sides blaming each other for attacks – has raised the spectre of a disaster worse than in Chernobyl.

Yesterday, according to Ukrainian officials, a Russian missile hit a residential area of a southern Ukrainian town not far from the nuclear power station, wounding 12 civilians.

Vitaliy Kim, governor of the Mykolaiv region, said on the Telegram messaging app that four children were among those wounded in an attack that damaged several private houses and a five-story apartment building in Voznesensk.

The town is about 30 km (19 miles)

from the Pivdenonukrainsk Nuclear Power Plant (PNPP), the second largest in Ukraine.

The developments came just a day after Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Guterres, meeting in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv, sounded the alarm over the fighting, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky urged the United Nations to secure the site.

Guterres visited Odessa as part of an effort to make more Ukrainian grain available to poor countries struggling with soaring food prices, after a landmark deal with Russia last month to allow its export.

The deal, the only significant agreement between Russia and Ukraine since Moscow invaded in February, has so far seen 25 boats carrying some 600,000 tonnes of agricultural products depart from three designated ports, Kyiv has said.

The grain deal has held, but brought little respite along the sprawling front lines after nearly six months of fighting between US-supplied Ukrainian forces and the Russian military.

The United States on Friday announced a new \$775 million arms package, including more precision-guided missiles for HIMARS systems that enable Ukraine to strike Russian targets far behind the front lines.

Tax hike on luxury items on the way

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which will be chaired by Ahmad Kaikaus, principal secretary to the PM.

The secretaries of ministries of commerce, power and energy, disaster management, agriculture and finance as well as for the bank and financial institutions division and the Bangladesh Bank governor have been asked to attend the meeting, where some important decisions are likely to be taken to weather the ongoing challenges.

The issues have already been discussed at a cabinet division meeting on Wednesday.

At that meeting, a number of secretaries stressed the need for cutting fuel prices and Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam assured them of doing so if the prices in the global market continue to decline, according to cabinet division

officials familiar with the discussions.

At the meeting, the concerned secretaries were asked to ensure the procurement of fertiliser to avoid any shortfall. The meeting also decided to monitor the market on a regular basis to prevent hoarding and price manipulation.

The government is also working on expanding food distribution at low prices, according to Shamsul Alam, the state minister for planning.

One crore family cardholders already can purchase rice, lentils, edible oil and sugar at fair prices.

"If inflation continues, we may increase an additional one crore family cards," he told The Daily Star.

Besides them, government is providing rice to 50 lakh families for Tk 15 a kg.

Responding to a question, Alam said, "A highly volatile situation is prevailing in the international fuel

market. While the prices are declining in the international market, it may jump."

The fuel prices are likely to be adjusted if the downward trend in prices in the global market continues for another two weeks, he added.

As part of an earlier decision, the NBR has taken initiatives to discourage imports by increasing the duty on 135 products, including flowers, fruits, furniture, and cosmetics by as much as 20 percent. The duty on the items was zero to 3 percent before.

In addition, the NBR will be taking a decision regarding the list of 300 luxury and non-essential items sent by the commerce ministry.

"We are not going for a blanket ban on the import of the non-essential items as that would send out a wrong message to the world about Bangladesh's financial condition," said a top official of the commerce ministry

on the condition of anonymity.

The measures are expected to conserve foreign currency reserves, which stood at \$39.5 billion on August 16 – enough to cover about five months' imports, according to data from the BB.

They are also expected to narrow the current account deficit, which hit \$18.7 billion at the end of June. A year earlier, it was \$4.6 billion.

Earlier, the BB and the commerce ministry took several measures to discourage the import of luxurious items.

The central bank instructed banks to impose a 100 percent margin on 27 types of luxurious non-essential items while opening letters of credit for their import.

For opening letters of credit for imports worth more than \$3 million, banks were instructed to inform the central bank 24 hours in advance.

Recounting the horror

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AL leaders Abdur Razzak, Amir Hossain Amu, Suranjit Sengupta, Ivy Rahman and Kazi Zafarullah, were injured critically.

Twenty-four people were killed, including AL Women Affairs Secretary Ivy Rahman, wife of late President Zillur Rahman, and over 400 were injured in the grisly attack many of them became crippled for life.

Today, the ruling Awami League is all set to observe the 18th anniversary of the gruesome grenade attack on the party's anti-terrorism rally.

After the attack, when the AL leaders and activists were busy trying to save themselves and others, the police charged the protest march fiercely with batons and tear shells. At the same time, all traces of the carnage were destroyed, BSS reported yesterday.

The BNP Jamaat coalition

government even staged the "Joi Mia" drama to cover up the incident with state sponsorship and direct support.

Marking the anniversary, the ruling AL, its front and associate bodies have chalked out elaborate programmes across the country.

A discussion will be held at 10:30am to recall the victims of the bloody attacks and before that at 10:00am, a wreath will be placed at the altar built in front of the AL central office at Bangabandhu Avenue.

Final justice has yet to be delivered over the August 21, 2004 grenade attack on the rally although a Dhaka court on October 10, 2018, sentenced 49 people after finding them guilty.

Among others, former state minister for home Lutfozzaman Babar was sentenced to death and BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman was given life imprisonment.

Man dies by suicide

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Rampura home around 4:30pm on Friday in a case filed for theft.

Talking to reporters, Tejgaon Division Deputy Commissioner HM Azmiul Haque said the deceased was accused in a case over theft of Tk 53 lakh from a company on August 15.

"We have recovered Tk 3.13 lakh from Sumon's home. After raids, he was brought to the police station around 11:30pm [on Friday] and kept in a separate lockup. At 3:32am, he hanged himself from the rod of the ventilator with his trousers, which was seen in the police station's CCTV [footage]," he said.

Hailing from Nawabganj, Sumon lived in Rampura with his wife Jannat Begum and six-year-old son.

Jannat alleged that police tortured her husband and tried to frame him and that's why he died by suicide.

She told The Daily Star that police planted the evidence and had demanded Tk 2 lakh bribe during the raid.

"I want the policemen involved in this incident punished," she added.

The DC said police arrested four people in the theft case. Sumon was

one of them. He refuted the allegation of torture.

Sohel Ahmed, a relative of Sumon, told reporters that the family was informed about his death around noon yesterday. He claimed this happened due to the negligence of police. Had the police performed their duties properly, Sumon would not have died, he said.

The DC said two policemen – Sub-inspector Hemayet Hossain and Constable Zakaria – in charge of looking after the lockup, were suspended over negligence in duty.

Sumon's body was taken to Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

Sujon Sheikh, a relative of the deceased, told The Daily Star that they would not receive the body until the officer in charge of the police station and others involved were suspended.

A three-member probe body led by Tejgaon Industrial Zone Additional Deputy Commissioner Hafiz Al Faruk was formed and given seven days to probe the incident.

According to rights group Ain o Salish Kendra, this year nine people died in the custody of law enforcement agencies until July.