

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 Adam 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 Sohel 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 Pivdennoukrainsk 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

FROM PAGE 1
 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

said he sought India's advice on how to import wheat and fuel from Russia, sidelining Western sanctions. This also drew criticism from different quarters.

In 2019, Momen compared the relationship between Bangladesh and India with that of husband wife, which sparked strong criticism.

AL insiders, wishing anonymity, said they were trying to find out the reasons why the foreign minister made such statements ahead of PM Sheikh Hasina's scheduled visit to India early next month.

Momen's comments regarding India gave rise to many new questions, the insiders said, adding that they were analysing if those statements came due to his "childishness or illness" or if he was directed by someone to embarrass the government deliberately.

Some AL leaders said the minister's latest statement was embarrassing for the PM. They also questioned Momen's political intelligence and self-esteem.

An AL central committee leader said they want actions taken against the foreign minister. "If things go on like this, it will be difficult for us to run the government smoothly..."

A few days ago, Momen was widely criticised for saying that the people of the country are "living in heaven". His comments came at a time when the people were facing harsh realities due to rise in prices of essentials. He later blamed the media for "twisting" his leader said preferring anonymity.

In May, Momen had met his Indian counterpart S Jaishankar in Guwahati. After returning to Dhaka, the minister

Terming the foreign minister's statement disgraceful,

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.

Former ambassador M Humayun Kabir said it created an awkward and embarrassing situation for the AL and the government. According to him, the minister's comment was beyond diplomatic norms.

Former ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad said Momen's statement weakened the minister's position and harmed the image of the PM and the government.

Momen made many improper statements previously and he should be extra careful about his comments, he said.

"If he regrets making the statement, the harm may be lessened to some extent," said Munshi, also former chairman of Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies.

Meanwhile, Jatiya Party Chairman GM Quader yesterday said the government cannot avoid the responsibility for the foreign minister's recent statement on seeking India's help to keep the PM in power, reports UNB.

"Such a statement has also embarrassed our neighbouring friendly country India. It has also called into question the sovereignty of the country," he told a programme at the party chief's Banani office.

In the meantime, the AL leaders

one of them. He refuted the allegation of torture.

Sohel Ahmed, a relative of Sumon,

Recounting the horror

FROM PAGE 1

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-terror 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 "Joj 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.

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 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.

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One dead after attack on Munda community

A CORRESPONDENT, Satkhira

An elderly man of the Munda community in Satkhira died yesterday after being injured in an attack on Friday.

The attack was allegedly carried out by an influential local and his cohorts to grab land.

Narendra Munda, 65, died while undergoing treatment at Satkhira Medical College Hospital around 3:30pm.

Three others -- Sulta Rani Munda, 35, Bilashi Rani Munda, 37, Rani Munda 35, were also injured in the attack.

Witnesses said Rashidul Islam Sardar, his brother Ebudul Islam Sardar, and over 100 others wielding sticks and iron rods went to Antakhali Mundapara in Satkhira's Shyamnagar around 9:00am on Friday to evict eight families of the ethnic group from their homes.

Contacted, Rashidul said he was trying to recover his ancestral land, but the allegations of assault were false.

Kazi Wahid Morshed, OC of Shyamnagar police, said a complaint was filed against Rashidul, Ebudul and 170 unnamed people.

Police arrested two alleged attackers, Noor Islam and Noor Mohammad, after the incident, he added.

100 Covid cases recorded

STAR REPORT

At least 100 new Covid-19 cases were recorded in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, said a press release by the DGHS.

No deaths were reported during this period, keeping the death toll at 29,315, while the death rate at the moment is 1.46 percent.

The current positivity rate is 4.42 percent while the total positivity