

Houthi missile hits Israel airport area

Six hurt, flights halted; Hamas praises 'precision' strike; Israeli defence minister threatens retaliation

AFP, TEL AVIV

A missile landed inside the perimeter of Israel's main airport yesterday, wounding six people, halting flights and gouging a wide crater, in an attack claimed by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

The Israeli military said "several attempts were made to intercept" the missile that was launched from Yemen, a rare Houthi attack that penetrated Israel's air defences.

-  Israeli strikes kill 16, including 3 children in Gaza
-  Israel calls up tens of thousands of reservists for offensive
-  Netanyahu calls on Qatar to 'stop playing both sides' in talks



Palestinians line up for a hot meal at a charity kitchen in the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

a kilometre (0.6 miles) away from the closest tarmac. Germany's Lufthansa, Air India suspended flights to and from Tel Aviv until May 6.

The armed wing of Palestinian group Hamas praised the missile attack.

"Yemen... escalates its attacks on the heart of the illegitimate Zionist entity, surpassing the most advanced defence systems in the world and striking its targets with precision," Abu Obeida, spokesman for the Ezzedine al-Qassam

Brigades, said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Gaza's civil defence agency yesterday said Israeli strikes on the Palestinian territory killed 16 people, including at least three children.

Israel was issuing orders to call up tens of thousands of reservists ahead of an expanded offensive in Gaza, Israeli media reported later on Saturday, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attacked truce mediator Qatar.

Netanyahu accused the gas-rich Gulf

state of "playing both sides with its double talk". Posting on X, he said Qatar had to "decide if it's on the side of civilization or if it's on the side of Hamas barbarism".

Several news outlets reported the military had begun sending the orders for reservists to replace conscripts and active-duty soldiers in Israel and the occupied West Bank so they can be redeployed to Gaza.

A military spokesperson neither confirmed nor denied the reports, but relatives of AFP journalists were among those who received mobilisation orders.

Hamas on Saturday released footage of an apparently wounded Israeli-Russian hostage held in Gaza as 11 Palestinians, including three infants, were killed in a strike on the territory, its civil defence agency said.

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said at least 2,396 people had been killed since Israel resumed its campaign in Gaza, bringing the overall death toll from the war to 52,495.

Israel halted aid deliveries to Gaza, saying Hamas had diverted supplies. Israel says the blockade is meant to pressure Hamas members into releasing hostages held in the Palestinian territory.

UN agencies have urged Israel to lift restrictions, saying Gazans have been experiencing a humanitarian catastrophe and warning of famine.

The Houthis, who control swathes of Yemen, have launched missiles and drones targeting Israel and Red Sea shipping throughout the Gaza war.

NCP leader Hasnat attacked in Gazipur; two held

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

Criminals attacked a vehicle carrying Hasnat Abdullah, chief coordinator (South) of the National Citizen Party, at the Chandana intersection in Gazipur yesterday.

Police detained two people in connection with the attack.

Hasnat's hand was bleeding after the car window was broken in the attack around 7:00pm, said Md Sarjis Alam, chief coordinator (North) of the party, in a Facebook post.

Sarjis also posted photos of Hasnat's hand and the damaged car, urging supporters in the vicinity to help him.

Shaheen Khan, officer in charge of Bason Police Station, said unidentified attackers on three to four motorcycles tried to stop the car near the Ulka Cinema Hall when Hasnat was returning to Dhaka after visiting Gazipur Agricultural University.

The attackers threw bricks and stones at the vehicle. The car then rushed to the Boardbazar area near the Islamic University of Technology. Police then escorted Hasnat towards Dhaka, Shaheen added.

The OC identified one of the detainees as Nizam Uddin Tushar without giving further details, but the other person's name was not revealed.

The Gazipur Metropolitan Unit of Islami Chhatra Shibir organised a demonstration at Gazipur Chowrasta at 8:30pm in protest against the attack on Hasnat.

The Gazipur district and metropolitan branches of the National Citizen Party called for another protest at 9:00pm.

In Dhaka, leaders and activists of the NCP took out a procession outside their Banglamotor office around 10:00pm and marched to the Shahbagh intersection and then back to Banglamotor.

They demanded the arrest of those responsible, and also called for a ban on the Awami League.



Democracy can't do without a free press

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Fakhrul also pointed out that it was the BNP that first paved the way for press freedom in 1975, when all but four newspapers were shut down under the one-party rule of BAKSAL.

He acknowledged his party's shortcomings but emphasised its contributions to press freedom, noting that numerous media outlets were established during its tenure and that journalists faced considerably less oppression compared to the previous government.

However, Fakhrul expressed concern about how his words might be interpreted by specific outlets, how they would be published, or how social media would portray them. "For those of us in politics, this is a matter of concern, especially with the rising trend of character assassination on social media; it's difficult not to be worried."

Regarding this trend and mob attacks, he noted, "If I assume that only my views are correct, then we will never succeed in democratic practices."

He added that, likewise, if one believes that it is only acceptable when a media outlet says positive things about them and unacceptable when it does not, such mindsets will also hinder democracy.

Refuting the narrative that the BNP rejects reforms and only demands elections, he stated, "The truth is, reforms began with us. We were the ones who transitioned from a one-party system to a multi-party system. We enabled the shift from a presidential to a parliamentary democracy. Despite opposition, we introduced the caretaker government provision in the constitution."

Fakhrul emphasised that the 1971 Liberation War remains central to the BNP's ideology and that the party will never compromise on this issue.

"Through the uprising against 15 years of authoritarian rule, there is now an opportunity to begin a democratic system, but democracy needs to be practised, just like a tree needs regular care to grow," he added.

Nagorik Oikya Chairman Mahmudur Rahman Manna called the interim government "the most media-friendly government" since Bangladesh's independence, but questioned why it had not withdrawn cases against journalists filed by the previous government under the Digital Security Act.

Convener of the National Citizen Party Nahid Islam, in his speech, said Bangladesh had improved its global ranking on press freedom this year, but it still remains in the lower tiers.

He pointed out that during the last 16 years under the Hasina regime, there had been legal and cultural interventions by

the media. "We need to move away from a media environment where the Awami League's ideological influence and authoritarian control have taken hold ... Media institutions themselves should propose and uphold principles of good governance."

Nahid also called for transparency in media ownership and investments, as the media itself has demanded clarity on the income sources of political activists.

He added that his party believes in free press, as the July movement grew from restrictions on freedom of speech.

Nahid said that during his tenure as information adviser there was no government pressure on the media. "There were some social pressures on certain media outlets, but we always supported the media houses. Sometimes we criticised their roles in the previous regime ... but nothing was done to shut down any media houses."

Chief Coordinator of Ganosamhati Andolon Zonayed Saki said a free press is the most basic requirement for a democratic state.

"We need to create a situation where people trust the media more than the courts, even when justice is denied," he said, adding that his party is committed to building a society free from fear.

Saki further stated that a democratic system cannot function without media freedom.

"The laws that silence the media must be revoked," he said, while also calling for media accountability to prevent arbitrary practices.

"Some business groups have created media organisations to serve their own or their business interests. Media owners must also be held accountable," he said, suggesting that there should be a clear policy on ownership.

He also highlighted mob attacks as a new phenomenon, where certain individuals achieve their goals by issuing threats. "If these are not stopped, the existence of the state will be under threat."

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star and president of the Editors' Council, said it was a matter of disgrace that 266 journalists have been charged in cases related to alleged murder or violence.

Despite Bangladesh rising 16 places to rank 149th out of 180 countries in the latest World Press Freedom Index, such mass cases against journalists remain a serious concern and contradict the principles of media freedom, he opined.

"This does not mean that no one has committed any wrongdoing. If someone has done wrong, they should be properly charged and punished, and we [the Editors' Council] will not stand by

them.... But it's been over seven months since some journalists have been caught up in these cases, yet there has been no progress in the investigations. As a result, the accused face reputational harm and live in fear of mob attacks," he added.

"At this moment, 13 journalists are in jail, not getting bail, and no legal process is ongoing. People do have the right to file cases, but the question is whether the government will act when the law is abused by some quarters."

"People hope the current government will reform and strengthen democracy, and reinforce freedom of speech. However, harassing journalists is not only disheartening but also tarnishes Bangladesh's image globally," he said, urging the government to review the cases against journalists.

Manabzamin Editor Matiur Rahman Chowdhury noted how World Press Freedom Day was being celebrated while journalists in Bangladesh are losing their jobs for asking questions.

"The situation, however, has improved compared to last year."

He also highlighted divisions within the media, which are causing significant damage to the industry. "Such divisions must end."

New Age Editor Nurul Kabir stated that a free press does not depend on journalists alone, but largely on lawmakers, politicians, and the state of democracy. "Bangladesh is still in the lowest global position for press freedom, which is shameful for journalists, harmful for the people, and dishonourable for the politicians ... They [politicians] are responsible for the laws that prevent the press from doing its job properly."

Kabir acknowledged the interim government's move to carry out reforms in various sectors, including the media, but said it was unnecessary to wait for the commission's report to eliminate some controversial laws. "I am glad that the government initiated a declaration based on national consensus, but it seems deceptive when it speaks of minimum consensus among political parties."

"It seems the government has no philosophical stance... There are different political parties with different views."

He added that some parties don't even recognise December 16 as Bangladesh's Victory Day.

Kabir concluded that the consensus should be based on the core values of the proclamation of independence: equality, democracy, and the protection of the rights of all citizens.

Jatiya Press Club President Hasan Hafiz also spoke at the event, which was moderated by Dewan Hanif Mahmud, editor of Bonik Barta and general secretary of the Editors' Council.



Information and Broadcasting Adviser Mahfuj Alam addresses an event titled "Brave New Bangladesh: Reform Roadmap for Press Freedom", jointly organised by Unesco Dhaka, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), and the Embassy of Sweden at the TIB office in Dhanmondi yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Journo protection law at review stage

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He said that due to politicisation of the media, journalists often suffer within the industry.

"We need a fact-finding investigation into the activities of the media outlets during 15 years of the autocratic regime. Accountability is essential in our media sector."

The adviser added that the Journalist Protection Law, which at the review stage, is feasible and necessary. "We're trying to implement it. We want to adopt every positive approach for the betterment of journalists."

Expressing concern about the financial practices of many outlets, Mahfuj said, "You'll be surprised – one or two media offices at most pay taxes. Many of them operate through political understanding, and there's no policy for them to contribute to the state through taxation."

He also stressed the need for reassessing media licence and advertisement policies.

"We've formed a task force with the Department of Films and Publications to revise newspaper advertisement rates and licences. Government advertisement rates should reflect current inflation," he said.

Regarding the state-run media offices, the adviser supported merging of Bangladesh Betar (radio), BTV (television), and BSS (news agency) into a single National Broadcasting Corporation.

He also emphasised the importance of ensuring independence of broadcast media.

Addressing the challenges faced by journalists based outside Dhaka, Mahfuj said, "We must sit for discussion on what should be standard practices for them. At the same time, we don't need 30 to 40 local newspapers in an area. Protection of local journalists is important."

He further mentioned that the government is evaluating how licences were issued to television and online news outlets and is working to finalise a comprehensive broadcast policy.

Additionally, a proposal for forming an Information Commission is being considered.

He underlined that press freedom cannot be ensured without political consensus.

"We may enact 10 good laws, but if the political leadership doesn't continue or implement them, these will not be effective. We're trying to address issues such as harassment and legal actions

against journalists."

The adviser said the government is in an embarrassing situation over murder and false cases filed against journalists.

Various groups are filing such cases out of personal resentment, Mahfuj said.

He said the government is working to streamline the system by bringing everything from the law ministry to the home ministry under a common framework to stop false cases. Efforts are being made to ensure that no one is arrested or harassed based on such false charges, he added.

The adviser further said anyone can file a case, but there should be discussions on the action the government is taking.

"Cases are often filed against unknown persons. There will be arbitrary arrests under fabricated charges. Not just journalists – you or I could also fall victim to this. We oppose this," he added.

Mahfuj said the government is not restricting people from writing. "People can write freely. The government isn't stopping anyone."

Presenting the keynote paper at the event, Kamal Ahmed, chief of the Media Reform Commission, said journalists in Bangladesh continue to face abuse and even murder charges, an unacceptable reality.

He stressed that fair remuneration and principled institutional support are essential to ensuring press freedom and independent journalism. Both journalists and media houses are experiencing financial insecurity, which is forcing them to make compromises.

"Some have claimed that our commission's proposal to transform media outlets into public limited companies is unrealistic, arguing that most outlets are either non-profitable or failing enterprises. However, financial reports obtained from the Office of the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies reveal that over a dozen media companies are making profits. This demonstrates that their proposal is not only realistic but also feasible."

Kamal said, "Too many media outlets are operating haphazardly in the market. Many rely on political patronage or vested groups. Even if they fail to attract audiences, they continue operating by offering unreasonably low advertisement rates, harming the entire sector."

He added that self-censorship among the media houses and threats against journalists are increasingly driven by social media intimidation and so-called "mob violence". Although the

government is expected to control these strictly, little effort is visible in this regard.

Speaking at the programme, Swedish Ambassador Niclas Linus Ragnar Weeks remarked that artificial intelligence (AI) could be used to combat misinformation and propaganda online. "Even today, journalists are saying they have to filter their reporting and cannot work freely."

Acknowledging Bangladesh's slight improvement in global media freedom rankings, the diplomat stressed the need for ensuring safe and equitable workplaces for women in media.

"Human rights cannot be guaranteed without a free press," he said, adding, "When a journalist's freedom of expression is taken away, the general public loses their voice too."

AK Azad, president of the Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (NOAB), criticised the deteriorating state of press freedom in Bangladesh, saying, "The condition of free media and independent journalism is worsening by the day."

Pointing out that Bangladesh's improvement in the World Press Freedom Index was during the interim government, Azad said, "There was hardly any space to speak freely before. We've moved up 16 steps. But who can guarantee that we won't fall 32 steps once a political government comes to power?"

He also criticised the Press Council, calling it a "crippled and paralysed organisation".

Azad, also the managing director of Times Media Ltd, said, "Who will ensure our safety? Why should a journalist who makes an error be imprisoned under the Digital Security Act? Why did Mushtaq Ahmed have to die in jail? What was his crime? Has anyone ever dared to ask these questions? There was no space for such questions."

Azad also alleged that government's "secret agencies" interfere in news reporting and said journalists based outside Dhaka work under constant fear.

He mentioned the killings of two local correspondents of Samakal for their reporting.

Other speakers at the seminar include Susan Vize, head of office and Unesco representative to Bangladesh; Sheikh Sabiha Alam, AFP Bureau chief; Rejoanul Haq Raza, chairman of Broadcast Journalist Centre; and TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman, who moderated the event.



BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir speaks at a discussion organised by the Editors' Council at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday, marking World Press Freedom Day 2025.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN