

Mali junta battles 'terrorist groups'

AFP, Bamako

The army in junta-ruled Mali yesterday battled what it called "terrorist groups" that launched surprise attacks around the capital Bamako and other parts of the west African nation.

Helicopters buzzed over Bamako and around the international airport and fighting was reported at a nearby military base in what is one of the most complex attacks the military has faced since seizing power.

Witnesses reported intense fighting in a town near the capital where junta leader General Assimi Goita lives and other key cities in the nation, which has been stricken by more than a decade of jihadist conflict.

Tuareg rebels in the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA) coalition said they had seized the northern city of Kidal. AFP was not immediately able to verify the claim.

The Malian junta, which seized power in coups in 2020 and 2021, has labelled the FLA a "terrorist" group.

A Malian army statement said: "Terrorist groups, not yet identified, early this morning targeted certain points and barracks in the capital and the interior" of the country.



Prime Minister Tarique Rahman yesterday drove around in a go-kart on the Tejgaon Prime Minister's Office premises. The kart was built by a young innovator named Rizwan Rashid. The PM assured Rizwan of support in developing more advanced versions.

PHOTO: PID

Customs officer found dead beside highway

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

Police recovered the body of a customs officer from the Kotbari Bishwa Road area of Cumilla's Sadar South upazila yesterday, around six hours after he went missing while returning from Chattogram.

The victim, Bullet Bairagi, 35, of Gopalganj's Tungipara, served as an assistant revenue officer at the Customs, Excise, and VAT Commissionerate in Cumilla's Bibir Bazar Land Port, police said.

He had been living in a rented house in Cumilla city's Rajganj Panpotti area.

Touhidul Anwar, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, said the customs officer went missing early yesterday while returning to Cumilla after completing training in Chattogram.

He last spoke to his family around 2:25am and said he had reached the Tomchom bridge area of the city. His mobile phone was found switched off afterwards, said the OC, quoting family members.

His father filed a complaint with Kotwali Model Police Station in the morning.

Locals spotted Bullet's body beside the Dhaka-Chattogram highway in the Kotbari Bishwa Road area around 9:00am and informed police.

Law enforcers then recovered the body and sent it to Cumilla Medical College Hospital morgue for an autopsy, said the police official.

"The face was bloodied when the body was recovered," the OC said, adding that police have launched an investigation.

According to family members, Bullet joined the Dhaka Customs Office as a 41st BCS non-cadre officer. He had most recently been posted at Bibir Bazar Land Port. He travelled to Chattogram for training on April 11.

No measles let-up before mid-May

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In the last 24 hours, a total of 229 confirmed cases were recorded, the highest since April 2, when DGHS began publishing measles data. Total recorded confirmed cases so far are 4,460.

The DGHS also reported 1,058 suspected cases in the latest daily count, taking the total since March 15 to 30,607. The number of suspected cases in the 24-hour counts has remained above 1,000 since April 18.

As of yesterday, over 3,000 patients with suspected measles were still being treated at hospitals.

HOW LONG MAY THE SITUATION LAST?

An emergency vaccination campaign launched at 30 upazilas on April 5 was supposed to continue until yesterday. After the 30 upazilas, the government launched a month-long special vaccination drive in Dhaka South, Dhaka North, Mymensingh, and Sylhet city corporations on April 12.

Nationwide vaccination started on April 20 and is scheduled to continue in city corporation areas until May 20, and other parts until May 12, a DGHS official said.

Epidemiologist Prof Mahmudur Rahman said that after vaccination is completed in a given area, it takes about two to three weeks to have immunity.

So, a decline may be expected in the high-burden 30 upazilas from the second or third week of May, he said.

"If the vaccination drive runs for a month and you then add another two to three weeks, you might expect to see results.

"But in reality, it will not be uniform,

since the campaign is ongoing across the country at different phases," added Prof Mahmudur, also chairman of the National Verification Committee for Measles and Rubella Elimination.

Prof Mushtuq Husain, a public health expert, also said measles cases are likely to start declining in high-burden areas from the second week of May.

However, the situation in other areas may not change at that time as vaccination there started later, he said, adding that it would have been better if the campaign had been launched simultaneously.

He also said the number of deaths will not start to decline immediately with the fall in cases, as many patients may already have been infected and their condition may deteriorate later.

"It may take another month for deaths to decline, and in that case, a reduction in deaths may be seen in June," he told this correspondent yesterday.

Prof Mahmudur said that apart from vaccination, the government should conduct a major drive to raise awareness about measles.

He said families should be aware that a child should be placed in isolation whenever he or she catches a fever.

Because measles is highly infectious and can spread four days before and after rashes appear on the body, he explained.

The government has targeted to vaccinate 1.8 crore children from six months to under five years during this campaign. Around 62.7 lakh children were jabbed until April 23, according to the DGHS.

The coverage was 98 percent of the

targets till that day, it added.

TESTS, CONFIRMED CASES RISE

Suspected measles samples from across the country are sent to the Institute of Public Health in the capital, but it has been facing a shortage of testing kits.

As the number of tests was low, it was difficult to understand the real measles situation in the country.

Mominur Rahman, director of the institute, said they used to conduct around 250 to 300 tests daily due to the shortage of kits.

The institute increased the number of tests after receiving 60 kits from the World Health Organization recently, he told this correspondent yesterday.

Ninety tests can be carried out with one kit, according to him.

He said the number of confirmed cases has increased as testing has expanded.

He added that a total of 476 samples were tested on Thursday, of which 229 were positive, results that were reported yesterday.

He also said they would receive 100 more kits within two weeks and they would start testing around 700 samples daily from today.

WHO in a report on Thursday said it has assessed the national risk of the ongoing measles outbreak as high, citing continued transmission, a large pool of susceptible children, immunity gaps, and suspected measles-related deaths.

It added that continued spread of the disease is likely unless urgent measures are taken to strengthen surveillance, rapidly detect and respond to cases, and close immunity gaps through an integrated vaccination campaign.

had started to improve after the government raised fuel supply.

He said ample oil supply from depots on Thursday allowed many pumps to meet demand ahead of Friday's closure, easing Saturday's rush.

"This trend is a positive sign and suggests that if the government continues to maintain or further increase the supply, the long lines at petrol pumps will eventually disappear entirely," he added.

NO CROWDS OUTSIDE DHAKA

In Chattogram, filling stations saw no crowds yesterday, unlike last week when sales were capped at Tk 300-500 for motorcycles and up to Tk 1,000 for cars, with waits of one to four hours.

Motorcyclist Rubel Das said he had waited three and a half hours last week for Tk 500 worth of fuel. Yesterday, he said, "I've got my required amount in just 15 minutes!"

MA Masud, general manager of QC Trading Limited, said demand had declined in recent days, with motorists now getting fuel within minutes.

In Sylhet, supplies of petrol and octane improved over the last couple of days, with motorists reporting a near-normal situation.

Trader Debkalyan Dhar said, "I refuelled my motorcycle with five litres of octane in minutes."

Rent-a-car owner Iftakhar Irad added that earlier, many stations were out of petrol for days, forcing his vehicles to remain idle and long trips to be suspended. "Now, everything feels normal and we resumed our long-distance operation," he said.

In Khulna, queues that once stretched for over a kilometre were largely absent yesterday, with motorists getting fuel within 10 to 15 minutes.

At the Metropolitan Filling Station opposite New Market on the Khulna-Jashore highway, only a small number of motorcycles and cars were seen waiting.

In Rangpur and Lalmonirhat, pump operators said crowds of motorcyclists had fallen by 30-35 percent since Thursday, partly due to the Fuel Pass system and because many motorcycles had already refuelled earlier in the week.

Biker Zahir Ali said, "Before Thursday, we had to stand in line for almost five to six hours. Since then, we haven't had to wait more than two hours."

In Mymensingh, officials said the demand for diesel had eased as Boro paddy cultivation neared completion, though shortages of petrol and octane persisted.

As of Thursday, the country had a stock of 132,271 tonnes of diesel, 42,300 tonnes of octane and 18,440 tonnes of petrol, as per the latest data of Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC).

On April 20, BPC increased the daily diesel supply by 10 percent to 13,048 tonnes; petrol by 10 percent to 1,511 tonnes; and octane by 20 percent to 1,422 tonnes, compared to last year's supply.

However, compared to the first 17 days of April, the current daily supply of diesel has increased by 17.5 percent, petrol by 20.6 percent, and octane by 25.9 percent.

Between April 1-17 this year, amid uncertainties over import and increased global prices, the average daily supply of diesel was cut to 11,107 tonnes, octane 1,129 tonnes and petrol 1,253 tonnes, deepening the crisis at fuel pumps.

[Our correspondents in respective districts contributed to the report.]

A celebration of resilience

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government and added that identifying the attackers and bringing them to accountability is not "rocket science".

"It is only a matter of goodwill on the part of the relevant state institutions."

Researcher and political analyst Altaf Parvez said this year's celebration was different because The Daily Star had gone through a "firestorm".

"The fires at The Daily Star and Prothom Alo were not isolated incidents. They were planned acts by a specific political group, which is still powerful in society."

Explaining the obstacles to free media, he said Bangladesh remains politically backward. ".... We do not have democracy, though our electoral system sometimes succeeds and sometimes regresses."

Eminent media personality, theatre activist and actor Tariq Anam Khan said that he is "traumatised".

"We are artists, and perhaps it is our failure as artists that we have not been able to nurture or instil that sense of humanity. Day by day, we seem to be becoming more like animals; in many ways, animals are better than us. There may be protests, but there is a proper way to express them. One may disagree, but one cannot seek to silence or erase others."

Notable playwright, television drama and stage play director Masum Reza said, "It [the attack] was carried out in an organised manner. Prothom Alo, The Daily Star, and then Chhayanaout - all were targeted. We have seen many of those involved; some of them are known to us. If their punishment is not ensured, this would will never heal."

Veteran actor, director and scriptwriter Mamunur Rashid said a newspaper that is determined to tell the truth does not belong to any particular group. "The way The Daily Star and Prothom Alo were attacked reflects the fact that these newspapers take a strong stand against extremism. This role must be protected at any cost. Those responsible [for the attack] must not be given any form of support or encouragement."

Anisul Hoque, author and managing editor of Prothom Alo, said an attack on a media institution is not only an attempt to kill journalists or destroy an institution but also a conspiracy to reduce democracy to dust.

The programme began with the national anthem, followed by a one-

minute silence observed in memory of the martyrs of the 1971 Liberation War, the 1990 anti-autocracy movement, and the 2024 July uprising, and also the victims of the Rana Plaza tragedy.

It also featured a musical performance by Khayam Sanu Sandhi and his team, and concluded with a melodious presentation of "Gems of Nazrul" by Sadya Afreen Mallik and her group.

Members of the Bangladesh War Courses Foundation, including Maj Gen (ret'd) Jamil D Ahsan Bir Protik, who trained in India's West Bengal alongside Mahfuz Anam, attended the programme and presented a crest to the editor of The Daily Star as a mark of profound honour and respect.

Speaking on the concluding day of the celebrations, The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam said, "When independent newspapers are set on fire, it is democracy that burns, and it happened in our country."

Calling the parliament a "dawn of the new", he expressed hope that it would become the centre of all national debates.

"We have a new parliament borne out of proper elections. May they never forget that they were given power by the people. They may have been nominated by the party, but they were placed in the parliament by the people. It is more important that that is where their loyalty, commitment and devotion lie."

Anam said, "As an English newspaper, we have limitations when it comes to reaching the people in the grassroots. We are trying to ensure any and every way possible to reach them and tell their stories..."

He then urged his colleagues in the media to be inclusive and to speak for the classes who are underrepresented - those in rural areas, those from the lower economic classes, women and the "farmers and the general masses".

He also reminded journalists not to forget their duty.

The eminent personalities gracing the event included Zahed Ur Rahman, adviser to the prime minister on information and broadcasting; Rasheda K Choudhury, executive director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE); Badiul Alam Majumdar, secretary of SHUJAN; Dr Ainun Nishat, professor emeritus at BRAC University; Mohammad Azam, director general of Bangla Academy; Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation; and Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, executive director of the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies.

Brothers in arms, bound for life

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guerrillas to join the commissioned officers' corps of the army.

"In the first batch, 60 of us were selected to undergo training for officers, and I was one of them. In the second batch, there were 90 more. Anam was in the second batch."

Maj Gen (ret'd) Jamil added, "There was no fanfare, no band, no drill ... but we heard the deafening noise of the war to join our comrades, and we went back to the battlefield."

The two batches underwent an intensive three-month training. "We answered the call of the motherland when the country needed us," he said.

The country was liberated during the officer training of the second batch of the guerrilla fighters, of which Anam was a part. Then, in



"We answered the call of the motherland when the country needed us. These cadets, including [Mahfuz] Anam, pioneered the all-Bangladesh officers' batch of the Bangladesh Army in 1972."

Maj Gen (ret'd) Jamil D Ahsan, Bir Protik

February 1972, the guerrillas were repatriated.

"These cadets pioneered the all-Bangladesh officers' batch of the Bangladesh Army in 1972," said Maj Gen (ret'd) Jamil. "Several, like Anam, went on to continue their studies and lead civilian lives... He [Anam] studied economics in Dhaka University and made his mark in the country as a journalist."

The editor's training mates then handed over a memento of appreciation to him.

Upon receiving the honour, Mahfuz Anam thanked his comrades and said their bond of friendship created during the war has lasted for over the last 55 years and will endure till death parts them.

"When friendships are born at war, those friendships are absolutely immaculate and irreplaceable."