Isolated incidents do not signal security decline

Salahuddin tells JS; opposition slams home ministry over violence

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A heated exchange erupted in Parliament yesterday over law and order, with the opposition accusing the home ministry of failing to curb violence, while Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed insisted that "isolated acts of sabotage" did not indicate worsening security.



Opposition Leader Shafiqur Rahman and Opposition Chief Whip Nahid Islam cited bus arson, crude bomb blasts inside the CID headquarters compound and attacks on police vehicles as evidence of growing insecurity.

During an unscheduled discussion, Shafiqur, also the Jamaat ameer, said the ministry responsible for law and order appeared ineffective and questioned how the government could evade responsibility for public anxiety.

He cited explosions at the Army Golf Club, outside Special Branch headquarters, at police station gates and at Dhaka University, where blasts occurred for three consecutive days, injuring two people yesterday.

He also referred to a young soldier recently killed during anti-militant operations in border and hill areas and tensions in Sajek Valley.

"Where does all this end?" he asked.

Shafiqur alleged that police vehicles had repeatedly been attacked and torched in Gopalganj, ruling party offices vandalised and looted, and opposition activists assaulted nationwide.

"Crude bombs are being detonated right in front of intelligence offices, which means even those facilities are not secure. What exactly are those intelligence agencies doing?"

Nahid, also National Citizen Party convenor, raised the issue on a point of order, citing "unprecedented terrorism, disorder and sabotage" over the previous two days.

He accused supporters of the ousted Awami League government of covert attacks, including bus arson, and cited reports of civilian casualties.

"We believe the home ministry has failed. We see

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A Fire Service official, along with others, inspect the charred interior of a madrasa in Narayanganj after a fire broke out, leaving 63 students hospitalised, yesterday.

PHOTO: SAURAV HOSSAIN SIAM

Police on alert as crude bomb blasts, arson spread

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ARSON

The lone fatality was reported in Faridpur, where a parked bus was set on fire near the Goalchamat New Bus Stand area early yesterday.

The victim was identified as bus driver Kalachan Sheikh, 60, from Muksudpur upazila of Gopalganj, police said.

Kalachan, who was sleeping in the bus, died from smoke inhalation, OC Mahmudul Hasan of Faridpur Kotwali Police Station told this newspaper.

Sribas Barai, senior station officer of Faridpur fire service, said firefighters brought the blaze under control within 15 minutes.

In Gopalganj, a group of people set a police vehicle on fire and clashed with law enforcers yesterday, prompting authorities to deploy six platoons of BGB personnel, police said.

According to local sources, around 3,000 to 4,000 people gathered in the Tungipara bus stand area around 9:30am and blocked the road.

When police tried to disperse them, chases and counter-chases took place.

The Dhaka-Khulna highway was blocked by setting fire to wood and tyres in the Pathalia area of Gopalganj Sadar upazila around 1:00pm.

A procession and road blockade were reported near the BSCIC bridge in Gopalganj town around the same time.

Police and locals said those who took part in the events were affiliated with the AL and its associate organisations.

Gopalganj Deputy Commissioner Md Arif-Uz-Zaman told The Daily Star that the situation remained under control and six BGB platoons had been deployed to prevent further untoward incidents.

In another development, police recovered two grenade-like objects from in front of Hazrat Shah Makhdum Airport in Rajshahi.

In Mohanganj of Netrokona, at least six houses of AL leaders and activists were attacked, vandalised, and looted on Monday night, hours after a procession reportedly organised by local leaders of banned Chhatra League, according to police and local sources.

The Amtala branch of Grameen Bank at Dugia Bazar in the district's Sadar upazila was set on fire early yesterday.

A fire also damaged seats in a compartment of Haor Express at Mohanganj Railway Station in Netrokona.

In Savar, a parked bus was torched in Dhamrai around 1:00am, while another bus was set on fire in Savar's Namagendha area around 2:00am, said police.

In Cox's Bazar, several incidents of arson and vandalism were reported in the district between Monday night and early yesterday.

A moving truck came under a petrol bomb attack at Ramu Bypass Gate. Petrol bombs were also hurled at the gates of Chowfoldandi Union Parishad and a Grameen Bank branch in Cox's Bazar Sadar upazila, setting them on fire. Crude bombs were also thrown at Kaiarbil in Chakaria and Shapla Chattar in Teknaf, according to police.

Meanwhile, miscreants locked the main entrance of the Chakaria UNO office and the gates of four to five educational institutions on Monday night.

In Khagrachhari, a parked vehicle was torched in front of KSTC Hospital.

Miscreants locked the main gates of a court and three educational institutions in Rangamati.

In Shariatpur, vehicular movement via Padma Bridge was halted for around an hour early yesterday after banned Chhatra League activists blocked the road near the toll plaza at Jazira, said police.

In Chattogram, two buses were set on fire in the port city's Sagarika and Kalurghat areas on Monday night and early yesterday, reports the daily Prothom Alo.

OC Nurul Absar of Pahartali Police Station said police were trying to identify those involved.

In Kishoreganj's Bajitpur, a parked college bus was torched late Monday night at Pirijpur bus stand.

A municipality garbage truck was also set on fire in Barguna's Betagi, according to the Prothom Alo report.

Meanwhile, BNP leaders and activists, along with those from its associate and like-minded parties, yesterday took positions at various points in the capital to prevent subversive activities.

Armed with sticks, they were seen guarding road entrances and alleyways in Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Farmgate, Bijoy Sarani, Tejgaon, and several other areas.

[Our correspondents from the respective districts contributed to this report.]

88 students in hospital after madrasa blaze

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extinguished it around 3:45am.

"About 1,300 students study at the madrasa, most of them residential. They were all asleep when the fire broke out. Many suffered from smoke inhalation, and several were taken to hospital," Arefin said.

The fire service suspects an electrical short circuit, but the exact cause will be determined after an investigation, he added.

Jahangir Alam, senior station officer of Kanchpur Model Fire Station, told The Daily Star, "We did not find any fire safety measures anywhere in the madrasa. There was not even a fire extinguisher. However, as there was a water storage facility beside the building, we did not face much difficulty in bringing the fire under control."

Atiqur Rahman, vice-principal of the residential madrasa, said they had never faced such an incident before and had therefore not given much thought to fire safety.

However, he said the madrasa authorities would take steps to strengthen fire safety measures following the incident.

Maruf Hossain, a student of the madrasa, said that although there had never been a major fire incident before, a residential madrasa should have adequate safety arrangements.

During a visit to the madrasa, this correspondent found burnt books and documents piled up in the courtyard. Inside, charred books, computers and electric fans lay damaged and twisted. Concrete had also come off the ceiling and floor in some places.

Fire official Arefin told reporters that the library was air-conditioned and its interior was made of wood and board. As these materials are highly flammable, the fire was intense, he said.

Meanwhile, a four-member probe committee has been formed to investigate the incident, said Narayanganj Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Raihan Kabir.

Members of the Crime Scene Unit of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) visited the madrasa as part of the investigation. They spoke to students, teachers and local residents and collected evidence.

Tk 45,000cr expansion, hasty assessment

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According to the proposal, DGHS will implement the project, while the PWD and the Health Engineering Department will carry out the construction work.

Apart from hospital buildings, multi-storey service buildings will be constructed in 443 upazilas and four residential buildings each in 15 upazilas to accommodate doctors, nurses and other staff.

The project aims to expand the range of services at UHCs, including intensive care units (ICUs), coronary care units (CCUs), and maternal and newborn care, physiotherapy, and kidney dialysis.

Syed Abdul Hamid, a professor at the Institute of Health Economics of Dhaka University, said the decision to upgrade all UHCs to 151 beds should have been based on a proper needs-based evaluation, considering disease burden, population projections and future healthcare demand.

"I could not find the justification... Since this involves public money, the government should explain why it has chosen this particular capacity. Whether a hospital should have 50, 100 or 250 beds depends on the needs of a specific area. We should assess not only current demand but also healthcare needs over the next 10 to 20 years."

The Health Bulletin 2023 showed wide variations in the utilisation of UHCs. Bed occupancy rates at the 20 least-used facilities ranged from 11 to 65 percent, indicating substantial underuse of existing capacity.

By contrast, the 20 most heavily burdened UHCs recorded occupancy rates of 160 to 221 percent, pointing to an uneven distribution of patient load across the healthcare system.

Prof Hamid acknowledged the necessity of replacing dilapidated UHC buildings constructed in the 1980s and 1990s, but said any replacement should be based on local needs.

He questioned whether sufficient assessments were conducted and experts consulted before the project was formulated, especially given the short time taken to prepare the proposal.

He further said the project reflected the infrastructure-focused approach of the ousted Awami League government, even though the current government had pledged to prioritise healthcare service delivery over new infrastructure.

Prof Rashid-E-Mahbub, convener of the Doctors Platform for People's Health, said the decision to upgrade all UHCs, irrespective of their individual needs, was not justified, as they differ in terms of geographical location, population, and the demand for healthcare services.

"The first problem is the shortage of manpower. We do not have adequate doctors and nurses or even support staff like cleaners and sanitation workers."

He said the expansion of bed capacity without ensuring the necessary human resources, logistics and other support services will not improve healthcare delivery.

"Before investing in new infrastructure, we should ensure the optimal use of the existing facilities," he said.

Contacted on November 9, Foara Tasmim, additional director general (planning and development) of DGHS, said, "Some facilities may not require that many beds right now, but demand could rise in the future. We want to strengthen primary healthcare and preventive services at upazila and union levels to ease pressure on tertiary hospitals."

Describing the government move as a high-level policy decision, she said the objective is to upgrade facilities, not to determine bed requirements separately for each upazila.

When her attention was drawn to the wide variation of hospital bed occupancy rates across upazilas, she argued that enhancement of primary healthcare services could increase utilisation of those facilities and eventually ease pressure on larger hospitals.

Asked whether adequate preparations were made for the expansion, she said that soon after the authorities made the initial decision to upgrade the UHCs to 101 beds in June, PWD started mapping and assessing facilities in every upazila, examining the existing infrastructure, available land and the need for new construction or expansion of existing buildings.

"We are trying to make the project as technically sound as possible. We are consulting architects and experts to ensure that the facilities are properly designed and remain suitable not only for today's needs but also for the next 20 years."

At a programme on October 28, MA Muhit, the state minister for health, defended the government decision, saying it was part of a broader effort to strengthen primary healthcare and reduce pressure on larger hospitals.

Referring to concerns over manpower, he acknowledged that infrastructure expansion alone would not be enough and said that preparations were already underway for additional recruitment.

JS panel seeks action on Biman audit findings

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He said the committee wanted the names of former board members and officials involved in questionable decisions and had allowed Biman another month to provide information sought earlier.

Nurul said the airline could become profitable through better management and service standards, and that current efforts to improve it should be encouraged alongside efforts to ensure accountability.

The committee questioned Biman's purchase of two formerly leased DHC Dash-8 aircraft, described in the parliamentary account as 15 years old, despite a procurement policy that did not permit buying old aircraft.

Of 45 audit objections concerning recovery of money, the audit department rejected Biman's claims of settling eight because the airlines did not produce valid bank statements substantiating the recoveries.

Auditors had also identified alleged revenue leakage where passengers were upgraded from economy to business class after paying extra, but the additional revenue was not reflected in Biman's accounts.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's office has initiated an IT audit, and Biman was instructed to provide records covering July to October.

The committee sought a joint report within seven days concerning allegations that Sabre, the airline's passenger service system provider, had received full payment without delivering all contracted services.

It also requested route-wise financial statements and an investigation within a month into alleged underreporting of revenue from Dhaka-Guangzhou chartered cargo flights during the pandemic.

Biman officials assured the committee that they would submit the requested aircraft-related documents within the deadline.

Meanwhile, the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) held a board meeting yesterday to consider a proposed agreement with a Japanese consortium to operate Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport's third terminal.

The proposed 15-year arrangement has drawn scrutiny over a restriction on competing civilian airports beginning commercial operations within 100 kilometres of the airport and the future use of Terminals-1 and -2.

Abul Kalam Azad Siddique, chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on the civil aviation ministry, told The Daily Star he had not received the agreement documents in his capacity as chairman and said the matter was under process.

Aviation expert Kazi Wahidul Alam questioned the December 16 partial-opening target, saying even an immediate signing would leave insufficient time to prepare for and complete trial operations.

He also welcomed the parliamentary committee's scrutiny of Biman, saying such investigations could strengthen accountability if followed through, and called for the findings to be made public.

The Tk 22,213 crore terminal was ceremonially inaugurated in October 2023 but has yet to begin regular commercial operations.

Aviation Minister M Rashiduzzaman Millat earlier said the government aimed to begin partial operations with around 20 flights.

Global fossil fuel emissions to fall slightly in 2026

Say researchers citing Iran war-driven oil price shock, growth in renewables

AFP, *Antalya*

Global fossil fuel emissions are projected to fall slightly in 2026 due to the expansion of renewable energy and the oil price shock sparked by the Iran war, researchers said yesterday.

Emissions from the burning of oil, gas and coal -- the main drivers of climate change -- rose by 0.9 percent per year on average in the past decade, hitting a record high in 2025, according to the Global Carbon Budget report.

But they are expected to drop by 0.4 percent in 2026, according to the research, published as nations meet at the UN's COP31 climate summit in Antalya, Turkey.

It would be the first annual drop since 2020, when the Covid pandemic paralysed the global economy, trade and transport.

This year, the US-led war in Iran and closure of the Strait of Hormuz played a role in driving emissions down as it caused a drop in oil consumption amid soaring crude prices, the researchers found.

The deployment of solar panels, wind farms and electric vehicles also contributed to the drop. Two thirds of the increase in global energy demand is being met by solar and wind power and electric vehicles, the report found.

"A decline in fossil CO2 emissions is encouraging, but a reduction driven partly by geopolitical shocks is not a sustainable climate solution," said Pierre Friedlingstein, director of the Global Carbon Budget Office at the University of Exeter in Britain.

'Practically no real contact'

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of India, and I for mine," she writes, describing her own position as one opposed to hegemony and committed to equality. She also makes clear that she does not regard their differences as a personal quarrel.

Gandhi writes that she and Modi have had little personal contact throughout his years as prime minister.

Their encounters, she says, have largely been confined to official or semi-official gatherings, including meetings in the Lok Sabha Speaker's chamber at the end of parliamentary sessions. "To this day, I've had practically no real contact with him," she writes.

She describes their exchanges as formal greetings, contrasting them with an earlier political culture in which leaders from opposing parties maintained more cordial personal relationships. According to Gandhi, PM Modi tends to avoid eye contact during their encounters.

Gandhi also recalls the communal violence in Gujarat in 2002, when Modi was the state's chief minister. The violence followed the February 27 burning of a coach of the Sabarmati Express near Godhra, in which 59 passengers died. Many of the victims were Hindu kar sevaks returning from Ayodhya.

In her memoir, Gandhi describes watching televised reports of the riots and receiving desperate calls from Congress colleagues in Gujarat.

She alleges that the administration failed to respond adequately to the violence and recalls allegations involving extremist elements associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the RSS and the Bajrang Dal.

The publication of Belonging follows a dispute over the book's Indian publishing rights. Penguin Random House India had initially been in discussions to publish the memoir but did not proceed with the arrangement.

The Indian Express reported in September that the disagreement involved proposed edits and deletions relating to PM Modi, the RSS, communal violence and other politically sensitive subjects.

Penguin Random House India disputed suggestions that the decision was simply the result of Gandhi refusing editorial changes, saying that discussions had reached an impasse over an unresolved issue.

HarperCollins India subsequently acquired the rights to publish the memoir in the Indian subcontinent and confirmed November 10 as its release date.

The memoir also revisits Gandhi's decision to decline the prime ministership after the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) won the 2004 general election.

In an excerpt published by The Indian Express yesterday, Gandhi recalls that Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra opposed her accepting the post, having lived through the assassinations of their grandmother Indira Gandhi and father Rajiv Gandhi.

She describes the pressure from alliance leaders who wanted her to lead the government and her concern that her foreign origin could become a source of political confrontation.

Gandhi recounts ultimately informing her son that she would maintain her decision.

She subsequently nominated Manmohan Singh to lead the Congress Parliamentary Party and become prime minister.

The 544-page memoir traces Gandhi's childhood in post-war Italy, her meeting with Rajiv Gandhi in Cambridge, their marriage in 1968 and her subsequent life in India.

It also examines the assassinations of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, and the events that eventually brought her into active politics.

The book is published in India by HarperCollins and in the United States by Alfred A Knopf.