

Bangladesh commandos storm militants hideout; 6 killed, 40 injured

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Dhaka: Six people were killed and nearly 40 others injured, including a top intelligence officer, in two powerful blasts outside a building occupied by the Islamist militants as army commandos prepared for a final assault to flush them out in northeastern Sylhet city in Bangladesh after over a 30-hour security siege, police said today.

The casualties included a policeman and a college student, security officials said.

Four security officials injured in the blasts were critical, according to Osmani Medical College, Hospital's deputy director Debabrata Roy.

Golam Kibria, a senior police official in Sylhet city, said explosions took place on a road near an Islamic religious school.

Since Friday, paramilitary troops have been engaged in an operation to flush out a group of Islamist radicals holed up in a nearby building with a large cache of ammunition.

The first blast happened around 7:00 p.m. about 400 metres off the five-storey building where the militants were hiding.

The blast was targeted at the huge crowd which had gathered to witness the operation codenamed 'Twilight' by the army commandos. Policemen were deployed there as part of a cordon.

Another blast took place in front the hideout an hour later and killed the policeman. "The Rapid Action Battalion and armed policemen had replaced onlookers at the first blast site when the second attack happened," an eyewitness told PTI.

The injured were being treated at nearby hospitals, including the Osmani Medical College, Hospital. The first blast occurred shortly after an army spokesman hinted that the commandos were set for the final assault on

the extremists, after they had evacuated the building of the residents with the help of firefighters and other officials.

The militants are said to have spread across the building and planted Improvised Explosive Devices, contrary to earlier reports that they had taken over only the ground floor.

Authorities were yet to hold a briefing for the media after the blasts. But Brigadier General Fakhru Ahsan has said the number of militants holed up is not yet confirmed.

When asked about how long the commando operation could take, he said: "It is the commander of the operation, who will decide how it will be conducted or when it could end."

Sylhet-based 17 Infantry Division's Major General Anwarul Momen is leading the operation, a military spokesman said, which was assisted by police's SWAT and counter-terrorism units. The elite Rapid Action Battalion is also involved.

The militants have carried out 12 explosions since the operation was intensified this morning after the nearly 30-hour security siege around the building failed to flush them out.

Police had raided the building early morning Friday and cordoned off the area.

Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) chief Monirul Islam said they got information that JMB chief Musa along with some other JMB militants were in Sylhet, but it was not clear if they were the ones hiding in the building.

The neo-JMB, said to be inclined to the Islamic State, was behind the July 1 terror attack on a Dhaka cafe in which 22 people, including 17 foreigners, were killed.

Earlier today, TV channels were barred from broadcasting the operation "live" but their reports showed commandos taking positions around the building.

Witnesses said smoke billowed out of the building and they heard intermittent explosions and gunshots from the building.

People in the neighbourhood have been advised to remain indoors as the operation was still in progress.

Reports have said at least two suspected militants, including a female, were on the ground floor of the building but a police officer later feared a "whole lot of them (neo-JMB operatives)" could be hiding there.

Police had publicly urged the two suspected militants, staying in the building as tenants for three months, to surrender, but they refused. The militants shouted "Allahu Akbar" (God is the greatest) and told police to 'send your SWAT team'.

Authorities have cut off gas and power lines of the building since last night.

The operation "Twilight" was launched after a suicide bomber last night blew himself up at the international airport in Dhaka in an attack claimed by the Islamic State group. It came a week after an identical attack on a RAB camp in Dhaka.

Police had tracked down the Sylhet hideout less than a week after they busted two militant dens on the outskirts of the southeastern port city Chittagong.

The gunbattle came a day after a man detonated himself near a police post on a busy road near the airport in Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital. No one other than the attacker was killed or injured in that explosion.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack, according to the SITE Intelligence group, citing the Islamic State news agency Amaq. SITE monitors terror group activity online.

The blast was the second suicide attack in a week in the Dhaka area. On March 17, a suspected bomber died in a blast near barracks of the elite Rapid Action Battalion anti-terror police force.

Bangladesh has been witnessing a spate of attacks on secular activists, foreigners and religious minorities since 2013. The country launched a massive crackdown on militants specially after the Dhaka cafe attack.

- (With agencies)