

Bush reassures Asia allies after polls blow

REUTERS, Singapore

President George W Bush tried to reassure nervous Asian allies on Thursday that he remains committed to opening up global trade markets despite humiliating losses in US elections that could weaken his hand.

Bush flew to Singapore at the start of a three-nation trip trying to shore up his international standing a week after his Republicans lost control of Congress to Democrats, traditional critics of his trade liberalisation policies.

"We hear voices calling us for us to retreat from the world," Bush said, taking a veiled swipe at Democratic opponents, in a speech at Singapore's National University.

"These are the old temptations of isolationism and protectionism and America must reject them."

The centerpiece of his trip will be a Pacific Rim economic summit hosted by Vietnam, a former foe turned trading partner. Bush on Friday begins his first visit to Hanoi, where he will try to bolster a fragile coalition pressing North Korea to curb its nuclear program.

Seeking to ease concerns that political weakness will prevent him from delivering on free trade, Bush said: "America will remain engaged in Asia because our interests depend on the expansion of freedom and opportunity in this region."

Bush's pad could be rocky in his final two years in office. He has only until mid-2007 to make trade deals under fast-track authority that a new Democrat-controlled Congress is almost certain to let expire.

Bush already suffered an embarrassing blow when a historic bid to normalize trade with communist Vietnam failed to win enough votes in the US House of Representatives this week.

In his first international foray since the November 7 polls, Bush assured Asian leaders that the United States remained a reliable partner in con-

fronting North Korea, fighting terrorism and grappling with a host of other issues.

SEEKING REVIVED TRADE TALKS

He also appealed to the 21-nation Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, ahead of its weekend summit, to help revive the Doha round of global trade talks, which collapsed in July after clashes over subsidies and farm tariffs.

In a draft of the ministerial statement, APEC members, who together account for nearly half of world trade, put pressure on their own leaders to get the Doha round back on track.

Bush also said a free-trade zone encompassing all the Asia-Pacific countries "deserves serious consideration," despite a rebuff of a US bid to make the longstanding proposal a key part of this year's APEC gathering.

Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the first Asian leader to meet Bush on this trip, offered no hint of concern about the direction of US policy. "Our interests are aligned," he told the president on Thursday.

"Asian leaders will be looking at President Bush's body language," said Michael Green, a Washington-based Asia expert. "They're going to be all looking to see how he plays the game after this political setback."

Another key indicator will be whether Bush can turn up the heat on North Korea ahead of renewed six-party talks with Pyongyang after its first nuclear test last month.

Bush reiterated any transfer of nuclear weapons by North Korea would be a "grave threat to the United States" and it would be held accountable. He said it was a positive sign that Pyongyang agreed to return to talks and "we will do our part."

Izharul-led IOJ

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BNP-led 4-party alliance, was an aspirant for an alliance ticket for contesting the October 2001 election from Banshkhal constituency.

The then prime minister BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's August 29 declaration of former state minister Jafrul Islam Chowdhury as the alliance candidate from the constituency added to the grievances of Mufti Izhar.

Izhar expressed all out support to the 14-party combine's reform proposal for holding a free, fair and neutral parliament election.

Terming Chief Election Commissioner MA Aziz 'a disgrace to the country', Izhar demanded his immediate resignation.

Staying inside the 4-party alliance he witnessed how the BNP leaders looted properties worth thousands of crore taka, he said, adding that as many as 40 projects were rejected for not paying 'percentage' to Hawa Bhaban.

"The AL leaders could make me realise that the word 'secularism' actually meant freedom for all religious practices and beliefs and now I don't have any objection against the constitution of 1972," Mufti Izhar, who is also the president of Bangladesh Nejami Islami Party, said.

14-party mourns

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he was sworn in as the chief of a non-party and neutral caretaker government "undemocratically" and "unconstitutionally."

He urged the chief adviser to step down from the post and appoint a neutral person as the caretaker government chief.

Razzak also demanded the removal of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) MA Aziz and other controversial election commissioners as well as reconstitution of the Election Commission (EC) so that people can exercise their right of franchise freely and fearlessly.

They would continue their movement unless the CEC and other commissioners are removed and the EC is reconstituted, he said warning that if the government did not meet their demands by Sunday, they would enforce another non-stop blockade across the country.

AL Presidium Member Tofail Ahmed said the police deliberately drove the truck through the peaceful rally at Sonargaon intersection killing Wajullah.

"Wajullah's sacrifice and the people who made the ultimate sacrifice on October 28 and 29 will not go in vain. We will realise the demands they gave their lives for," he said.

He also said the entire nation except the BNP-Jamaat alliance demands the reconstitution of the EC and the removal of CEC.

Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya, Motia Chowdhury, Obaidul Quader, Hasanul Haque Inu, Rashed Khan Menon, Pankaj Bhattacharya, Nurul Islam and other city leaders of 14-party spoke at the rally.

It may be mentioned that Wajullah was killed at Sonargaon intersection near Karwan Bazar in the capital on November 13 when a police truck drove through a group of 14-party alliance activists on the second day of the countrywide blockade programme.

CEC Aziz, however, outright rejected the possibility of resignation and announced that the next parliamentary election will be held under the present EC led by him.

Aziz talks polls

FROM PAGE 1

There is little possibility that the meeting will be held before Monday—the day the Awami League-led 14-party alliance resumes its countrywide blockade.

Awami League (AL) General Secretary and 14-party alliance Coordinator Abdul Jalil yesterday met the president and asked him again to reconstitute the EC immediately.

A delegation of Jamaat-e-Islami, a key ally of BNP, met the president around 3:15pm and demanded his intervention for immediate announcement of the election schedule by the EC.

Meanwhile at a programme, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia also asked the CEC to announce the election schedule without any delay.

In the wake of the prevailing situation, the AL-led alliance, which suspended the blockade programme up to Sunday, announced yesterday to enforce countrywide blockade and street agitations from Monday if the demand for EC reconstitution is not met.

CARETAKER GOVT GOES SLOW

The advisers to the caretaker government were expecting to sit in a meeting yesterday as they were not sure if any meeting will be held on Friday and Saturday.

"We are now waiting for the president's directions to move forward," Adviser CM Shafi Sami, a member of the advisory committee that held the dialogue with the political parties, told reporters yesterday at his office.

Asked if they are preparing any report based on the talks, he said, "Everything is ready and now we are waiting for the president's directions."

He said, "If we can take a collective decision, it will be possible to create an environment for holding a fair election through participation of all political parties."

The advisory committee comprising advisers Dr Akbar Ali Khan, CM Shafi Sami, Mahbulul Alam and Yasmin Mursheed opened the dialogue

14-party accuses

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function without directives from a special quarter, he has to appoint a non-partisan person as the CA as per the constitution, the AL leader said.

All the political parties except the BNP-Jamaat alliance and people from all walks of life have reached a consensus that a free and fair election is not possible without resignation of the CEC and reconstitution of the EC, he said.

There are 1.40 crore fake voters in the draft voter roll, he said, adding that the chief adviser should take immediate steps to stop printing of the faulty voter lists and inclusion of eligible persons in the voter list.

Jalil demanded immediate removal from the civil and police administration the officials who are beneficiaries of and loyal to the BNP-Jamaat alliance and replacing them with honest and eligible officials.

He posed the question how an officer assigned by the former prime minister enters into the Bangabhaban at night easily without any prior permission.

Transfer order of a number of police officials were postponed after the officer met the president while an APS of BNP Joint Secretary General Tarique Rahman has given a list of 15 officers-in-charge (OCs) to the chief adviser to make sure their posting in Shariatpur districts, Jalil said.

Without taking any effective action in last 17 days, the president and chief adviser himself has been brought the CG under question, he said.

Senior 14-party leaders Obaidul Quader, Rashed Khan Menon and Hasanul Haque Inu were present at the briefing.

on Monday night and met the president twice on Tuesday and Wednesday to inform him of the outcomes.

However, the other advisers who were not in the advisory committee have not yet been informed formally of the outcomes of the talks.

"I thought the president will convene a meeting today and we will discuss the matter to find ways to resolve the deadlock," an adviser told The Daily Star yesterday, wishing anonymity.

The council of advisers started searching ways to make the EC credible from its first meeting on November 1 and continued discussions at several meetings on November 2, 4, 8, 12 and 13.

On November 13, the council of advisers formed the four-member committee, which held the dialogue with seven political parties.

All political parties, except the BNP-led four-party alliance, strongly recommended reconstitution of the EC through removal of the CEC.

CEC Aziz, however, outright rejected the possibility of resignation and announced that the next parliamentary election will be held under the present EC led by him.

Eminent citizens

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Salah Uddin Ahmed, Sardar Fazlul Karim, musician Kalim Sharaf, Dr Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, Prof Anisuzzaman, Dr Ajoy Roy and Selina Hossain.

They said it is the caretaker government's duty to ensure a free and fair election within 90 days and they hoped that the head of the caretaker government would consider the demands for reconstituting the Election Commission (EC) and removal of all election commissioners including the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) as the voter rolls prepared by the present EC is full of errors.

How the home secretary could send the circular to the deputy commissioners across the country ordering deployment of the army when home ministry was under direct supervision of the CA, they questioned.

Again, on the same night, the decision was changed by another circular. The nation is taken aback since the secretary responsible for this blunder is still holding the post. This issue has to be resolved urgently.

The letter emphasised that the CG should take measures immediately to resolve the issues mentioned as time is running out and the people are questioning the neutrality of the caretaker government ever more.

Reconstitution of the EC by removing the CEC, three other election commissioners and the EC secretary, temporary suspension of the home secretary who issued the circular to deploy army and conducting proper investigation into the matter are some of the recommendations they made.

The letter also condemned transferring police officer Kohinur Mia instead of suspending him or placing him under investigation for his involvement in running over demonstrators by a police van during the blockade programme. If the president/ CA is unaware of the person responsible for Kohinur's transfer, he should track down that person pulling the strings from behind the scenes, said the letter.

They urged the head of the caretaker government to uphold the honour of the offices endowed upon him by taking stern action to safeguard the greater interest of the nation.

Full operations

FROM PAGE 1

representatives and dock workers' leaders is negotiating with the mayor for his consent to resume the operation of gantry cranes, sources said.

As the gantry cranes have been kept idle, loading and unloading activities at the Chittagong Container Terminal (CCT) have all but stopped. Fifty per cent port activities remained suspended, said a high official of the Chittagong port.

Private company Saif Powertech Ltd had been awarded the job of operating the vital gantry cranes in June this year as the performance of the port operators in loading and unloading of containers was very poor, sources said.

Mayor Mohiuddin Chowdhury, who wants operation of the cranes through port operators, is opposing resumption of the operation of the gantry cranes, said the sources, adding that a section of port stevedores are supporting the mayor as they may get job if the private company leaves the task.

The Chittagong port workers loyal to the city mayor are demanding cancellation of the agreement with Saif Powertec Limited for operating the cranes for two years.

Two gearless container vessels are now anchored idle at the container terminal while another four gearless vessels are waiting at the outer anchorage for getting permission to anchor. A normal container vessel can operate without a gantry crane, but a gearless vessel is unable to get loading and unloading work done without it.

Loading and unloading activities accelerated after Saif Powertec

Limited started operating the QGC on August 5 this year. The private company handled 25-30 containers per hour against only 10-12 containers handled by the port operators earlier.

After commissioning the private operator, the average daily handling of containers increased to 700-750 from previous 450-500 containers by the port operators.

There are also allegations that port operators used to charge Tk 100-150 as kickbacks for handling each container.

Earlier, two vessels used to berth at the container jetty at a time but now the number increased to three. The private operation also helped reduce the turn around time of feeders calling at CCT.

But the sudden stoppage of QGC operation at CCT caused the feeder operators heavy losses. The twelve gearless feeder vessels that call at Chittagong port cannot be served unless the gantry cranes begin operation.

It is feared that the export and import activities will be badly affected if operation of gantry cranes is not resumed soon.

As of yesterday afternoon, around 50 ships were in the queue at the outer anchorage for berthing at the port. Of those, 18 are container carriers and 32 general cargoes. Eight ships were at different jetties.

Meanwhile, the CPA will have to pay huge amount as compensation if agreement with the private operator is cancelled, sources said.

Life gets back

FROM PAGE 1

Businesses at the Motijheel moved on in full swing with people thronging the commercial hub of the capital.

The Chittagong and Mongla seaports and all land ports resumed operations early in the morning and the trucks and buses got back to the highways linking other cities of the country with the capital, our correspondents report.

The people who were stranded outside or inside the capital due to the blockade also started returning to their workplaces.

The intercity bus, train and launch services that were snapped resumed from Wednesday evening as soon as the blockade was withdrawn. The Kamalapur Rail Station sources said within 24 hours of resuming operations, a total of 31 trains left the station while many Dhaka-bound trains from different stations of the country reached there as usual.

The Gabtali Bus Terminal also started the inter-city bus services from Wednesday evening, sources

said.

Although vegetables and other food supplies to the city increased after a four-day interval, the kitchen market showed no signs of decrease in the prices of the essentials.

"Can you imagine, one kilogram atta is selling at Tk 28, while price of only four eggs is Tk 22. The situation is getting worse day by day," said a resentful customer at the Karwan Bazar yesterday.

Most of the low-income group, especially the day labourers, who could not get any work during the blockade, were also seen back in business. Subal Shil, a barber from the city's Green Road providing services mostly to this group, said that even his business was not good due to the blockade.

"Flow of customers to the saloon was very thin in the past four days as people could not earn enough money to come here due to the blockade. Everything was halted during that time, but the situation is now getting normal," he added.

Deprived officials

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government are preparing to help rig the general election and thus make the administration controversial," an official told Secretary AFM Soaliman Chowdhury.

The demonstrating officials alleged that the establishment ministry is still promoting and giving postings to officials selected by Hawa Bhaban.

"Information is being leaked to Hawa Bhaban soon after any move is made at the establishment ministry. We want to see removal of the officials who represent Hawa Bhaban," Shafiq Alam Mehedi (82-regular batch), a deputy secretary, complained to the establishment secretary.

"Despite fulfilling all criteria for a promotion, more than one thousand officials were deprived of their due promotions during the four-party alliance government's tenure," he added.

Some 50 officials of different ministries also demanded formation a new 'fit list committee', as the committee still includes members loyal to the previous government.

They demanded suspension of all postings and transfers until the deprived officials are promoted. They urged the secretary to enforce the government service rule and consider seniority and the quality while making the list of deputy commissioners.

Replying to their demands, Secretary AFM Soaliman Chowdhury said his ministry already sent a file to the Cabinet Division seeking dates from the Superior Selection Board (SSB), a body that approves government officials' promotions.

The Cabinet Division informed him that the SSB would sit Sunday

afternoon to promote qualifying officers.

The secretary said promotion would be considered at all levels of the administration.

About reshuffle in the field administration, the secretary said the advisory committee on administration has already decided to initiate mass transfer of field-level officials for making a congenial atmosphere for the general election.

Alauddin Ahmed, Abul Kalam Azad, Safait Ahmed and Chowdhury Mohammad Babul Alam also spoke at the sit-in.

The agitating officials threatened to launch further programmes if the ministry failed to consider their fair demands immediately.

Banks in business

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The central bank allowed the authorised dealer banks to keep their branches open on Saturdays for a limited period through a circular issued on September 15, 2005.

Bangladesh Bank had made the exemption considering the difficulties faced by the foreign trade and transactions since introduction of a two-day weekly holiday.

Meanwhile, the police administration relaxed the restriction on the movement of covered vans and trucks during the daytime until Sunday.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) in a statement yesterday appreciated the decisions by the central bank and the police administration.

It urged the trade body members to take necessary services from the banks.

The statement added that the BGMEA offices in Dhaka, Chittagong and at Chittagong seaport, and banks at the port and Customs House will remain open today.

BGMEA requested the owners of covered vans and trucks to operate their vehicles day and night until Sunday in the interest of the apparel industry.

Judgment

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the executive in compliance with the Supreme Court directives delivered some seven years ago.

The nine other mid-level bureaucrats, who are facing the contempt charge for "distorting" the Supreme Court's 12-point directive on separation of the judiciary, were present in the court during the hearing.

The group of top four has been exempted from appearing in person before the court since the contempt rule was issued in April this year.

Hearing

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court sources said.

In their petitions, the JMB militants rejected the established judicial system under the constitution terming it manmade and urged the Supreme Court to try them by constituting a court guided by Islamic laws.

The condemned petitioners are JMB chief Abdur Rahman, his second-in-command Siddiqui Islam alias Bangla Bhai, brother Ataur Rahman Suni, son-in-law Abdul Awal and suicide bombers Iftekhar Hassan Al Mamun and Khaled Saifullah.

Senior assistant judges Sohail Ahmed and Jagannath Pandey were killed in a suicide bomb attack in Jhalakathi on November 14 last year.

Outlaw killed

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India during Operation Clean Heart.

A police team around 4:00am yesterday took him to Bharatia in a bid to recover hidden firearms. But as the team reached the spot, Sujit's cohorts opened fire on the team in an attempt to snatch Sujit.

Police retaliated which led to a 15-minute-long gun battle. Sujit was caught in the line of fire during the battle. Police took injured Sujit to local health complex where on-duty doctors declared him dead.

Police recovered two pipe-guns, seven bullets and a large dagger from the spot. Three policemen including Sub-inspector Abdul Majid sustained bullet injuries. Sujit's accomplices, however, managed to escape.

A large number of people brought out a procession around noon in Dumuria upazila yesterday celebrating Sujit's death. City Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami and former lawmaker Mian Golam Parwar led the procession.

According to Officer-in-charge Abdullah of Dumuria Police Station, the slain outlaw was wanted in 23 criminal cases, including eight murders cases recorded with different police stations of Khulna and Satkhira. He was the prime charge-sheeted accused of Dumuria BNP leader Siraj Mollah murder case, Abdullah said.

Pakistan tests

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going to the brink of a fourth war in 2002.

Under an agreement on ballistic missile testing in late 2005, both countries notify each other in advance about tests, as one of several confidence boosting measures undertaken since peace talks began.

India and Pakistan expressed satisfaction with the way that accord was working at the end of two days of talks between their foreign secretaries in New Delhi earlier this week.

White House

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comment on it, said spokesman Ben Fallon.

But Fallon defended the administration's record on combating global warming, pointing to increased funding for alternative energy research, for example. He said, "The president has been focused on results-driven research and looking for practical ways to address climate change in ways that aren't damaging to the economy."

Officials at the Climate Change Science Program, also named in the complaint, did not immediately respond to calls seeking comment.

The lawsuit was filed in federal court in San Francisco by the Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace.

The assessment is the "first step in crafting solutions to the devastating consequences of climate change if we don't act now," said Julie Teel, an attorney for the plaintiffs.

Environmentalists have accused the administration of trying to suppress dissemination of the previous assessment, issued in 2000, which predicted a dramatic rise in catastrophic storms, floods, droughts and heat-related deaths.

The lawsuit comes as experts from around the world meet in Nairobi for the two-week U.N. climate conference, where they have been trying to set a course for future controls on global greenhouse gas emissions.

Scientists attribute at least some of the past century's 1-degree rise in global temperatures to the accumulation in the atmosphere of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping gases, byproducts of power plants, automobiles and other fossil fuel-burning sources.

Khaleda asks CG

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"Instead of talking a lot, you should better help the Election Commission hold a free and fair election," she said calling on the interim government not to bother about any unconstitutional or illogical demand from any quarter.

"You are talking too much while doing nothing. Perform your duties according to the constitution," she asked the advisers to the caretaker government and urged them to hold the election in time and hand over power to the people's representatives.

Referring to the recent United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report that billed Bangladesh as the Golden Boy of South Asia, she asked, "How come we made it possible if we had plundered everything."

She claimed that during BNP rule in 1991-96 they made the country an emerging tiger while Awami League (AL) relegated the country to a bottomless basket during its term after the independence.

"We will free the country of corruption if we return to power," she added.

Coming down heavily on the media, the former premier said, "The newspapers are enjoying so much freedom that they write at whim. They publish the rejoinders [of baseless stories] in inner pages so that people could not see."

On price hike of essentials, she said, "The prices of essentials did not rise, rather it's the income ability of the people that has increased over the last five years...I have the documents."

"They (AL) don't want to see a

2 JP leaders

FROM PAGE 16

their talks with the AL president lasted over an hour.

Details of their discussion could not be known immediately.

Sources said the JP leaders, as part of the party's set sharing negotiations with the AL-led 14-party alliance, have been maintaining close contacts with the AL high ups. Four other JP leaders also met Hasina during the last few days.

Parbatya Chattagang Jana Sanghati Samity leader Santu Larma also met the AL chief last night.

Barrage of attacks

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In Amil, a section of western Baghdad, a motorcycle rigged with explosives killed two civilians and wounded one at 8 am, said police 1st Lt Mutaz Salahhidine.