

Iran digs in with oil warning to S Arabia

US says crisis won't disrupt global oil supply

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday warned US ally Saudi Arabia to rethink plans to compensate for Iranian oil exports cut by sanctions, and boosted security for its targeted nuclear workers as it dug in under its showdown with the West.

Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi told Riyadh to "reflect" on a vow to open its oil taps to make up for an imposed reduction in Iran's oil sales.

He said such a position was viewed as "not friendly."

Meanwhile, US said the world has enough oil suppliers to continue meeting its needs even if Iran moves to disrupt supply in response to Western sanctions over its nuclear programme.

At the same time, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has ordered security stepped up for all of Iran's nuclear workers following the assassination last week of a key scientist, First Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi said.

The moves signalled a hardening of Iran's

stance as it confronted intense pressure over its controversial nuclear programme through Western sanctions impacting its economy, and a covert campaign including murder and sabotage.

Already, the Islamic republic has started new uranium enrichment operations at a heavily defended bunker southwest of Tehran, and it is preparing to hold more navy war games in the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Gulf, a strategic chokepoint for much of the Middle East's oil.

The tensions have raised the spectre of possible military action.

Speculation has increased of Israeli air strikes against Iranian nuclear sites, and Washington has deployed warships near the Strait of Hormuz to ensure the channel stays open.

Gestures to defuse the tensions have so far made little progress.

Relations between the West and Iran, long dogged by mutual mistrust, have sunk to a dangerous low in the past three months because of a succession of developments.

India defies US pressure over Iran oil

AFP, New Delhi

Energy-hungry India said yesterday it was continuing to buy oil from Iran, despite an intensifying US campaign to smother Tehran's vital oil exports until it abandons its nuclear programme.

Iran is India's second-largest oil supplier after Saudi Arabia, providing around 12 percent of the fast-growing country's oil needs at an annual cost of around \$12 billion.

Washington is spearheading a campaign to squeeze Iranian oil exports, and President Barack Obama recently signed a bill allowing penalties on foreign banks who settle oil import costs with Iran's central bank.

The law provides waivers to firms in countries that significantly reduce crude supplies from Iran.

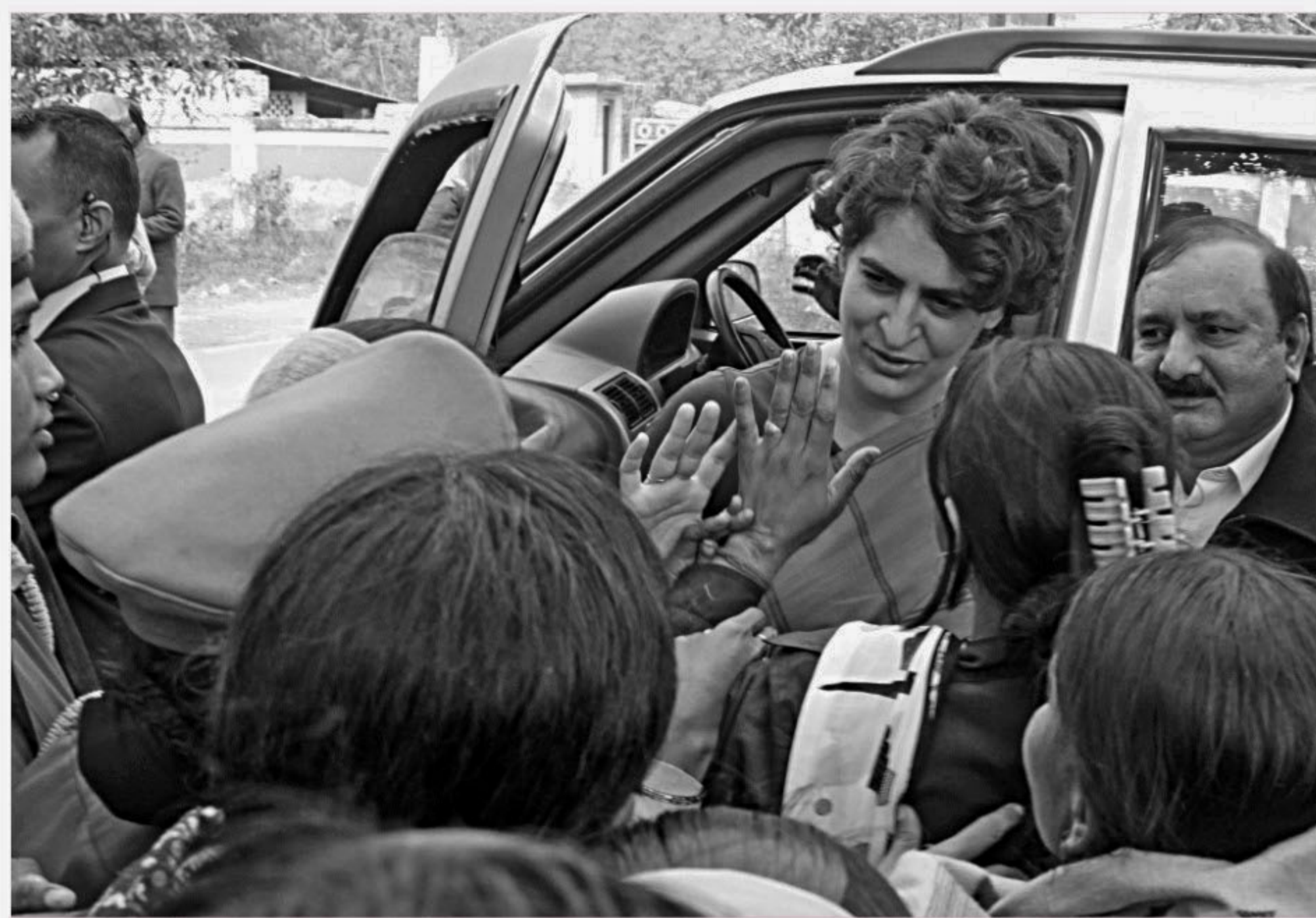


PHOTO: AFP
Congress party supporter and daughter of Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi Priyanka Gandhi, centre, arrives in Raebareilly for campaigning yesterday. The state assembly elections are scheduled in five states on January 30, 2012.

MYANMAR REFORMS Army told to halt attacks

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar has told the military to halt all offensives in ethnic minority conflict zones, a top official said yesterday, as the regime pursues peace deals with guerrillas as part of wider reforms.

The army-backed government, which last year replaced the long-ruling junta, on Thursday signed a ceasefire with Karen rebels in the eastern border region, raising hopes of an end to one of the world's oldest civil conflicts.

A day later, President Thein Sein ordered the military not to attack any ethnic minority groups except in self-defence, Khin Yi, the minister of immigration and population, told AFP in an interview in the capital Naypyidaw.

"The order covers the whole country," added the former national police chief, who was present at the signing of the ceasefire with the Karen National Union.

An earlier presidential order issued in mid-December for the military to cease attacks against ethnic Kachin guerrillas in the north of the country failed to stop heavy fighting in the region, according to the rebels.

The Kachin guerrillas have not yet taken up the government's offer of peace talks, Khin Yi said, but added that the authorities aimed to organise a meeting of all the ethnic groups if ceasefires are agreed.

'We would happily go into opposition': Imran Khan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's wildcard politician Imran Khan says he is happy to go into opposition if his "tsunami" of popular support fails to bring him a landslide victory at elections now widely expected within months.

The 59-year-old former cricketer has ridden a wave of support buoyed by mass rallies and has openly backed the courts' pursuit of embattled President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

But in an interview with AFP at his hilltop villa outside Islamabad, Khan admitted that his fledgling Movement for Justice could suffer if a series of crises force general elections earlier than September or October.

"The 'tsunami' is ready. We will be ready. Obviously it suits our party... if this government goes for another six months," he said.

Under the Pakistani constitution, a government resigns in favour of an administration of technocrats for up to three months before a general election.

If the current government collapses ear-



lier than the summer, Khan could see his popularity -- built on the back of nationalist rhetoric delivered with messianic zeal and rousing musical performances -- put to a premature test.

Speculation is widespread in Pakistan that Khan's party is being quietly groomed by the powerful military, which are believed to back moves in the courts to chip away at Zardari and Gilani's authority.

"I think it's the endgame because the government -- it's been openly defying the Supreme Court," said Khan.

But he added: "No one wants martial law in this country, none of us want it. I think the time for martial law is over in Pakistan."

Khan insists his relationship with the generals is a "sensible" one that would put him clearly in charge should his party sweep to power.

Predictions for early polls have inched forward as tensions have risen between the prime minister and army, and with the Supreme Court now holding Gilani in contempt of court.

India declines to comment on Pak turmoil

PTI, Bangalore

External affairs minister SM Krishna on Monday declined to comment on the turmoil in Pakistan where the Supreme Court issued a contempt notice to Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, saying it is an internal matter of that country.

"... We don't comment on what happens in Pakistan," he told reporters after discussions with the European Union high representative for foreign affairs, Catherine Ashton in Bangalore.

Pakistan's Supreme Court on Monday issued a contempt notice to Gilani for failing to reopen graft cases against President Asif Ali Zardari and asked him to appear before it on January 19. He is the first Pakistan Prime Minister to be issued a contempt notice by the country's apex court.

Romney unscathed from debate attacks

REUTERS, South Carolina

Republican presidential hopefuls attacked Mitt Romney's record in business and government on Monday and challenged him to release his tax returns, but the front-runner emerged largely unscathed from a South Carolina debate.

Newt Gingrich, Rick Perry and Rick Santorum questioned Romney's accomplishments and urged voters to take a critical look at the former Massachusetts governor as they tried to halt his growing momentum in the race to pick a challenger to President Barack Obama.

"We need to satisfy the country that whoever we nominate has a record that can stand up to Barack Obama in a very effective way," said Gingrich, the former House speaker, defending his questions about Romney's work at a private equity firm that critics say slashed jobs and plundered companies.

"There was a pattern in some companies, a handful of them, of leaving them with enormous debt and then within a year or two or three having them go broke. I think that is something he ought to answer," he said.

Romney's firm, Bain Capital, has become a flashpoint in the race in recent weeks, although the candidates have eased off their criticism on the campaign trail at the urging of some Republicans.

Romney defended his record at Bain, saying he invested in more than 100 businesses and had a mixed but overall successful record of job creation.

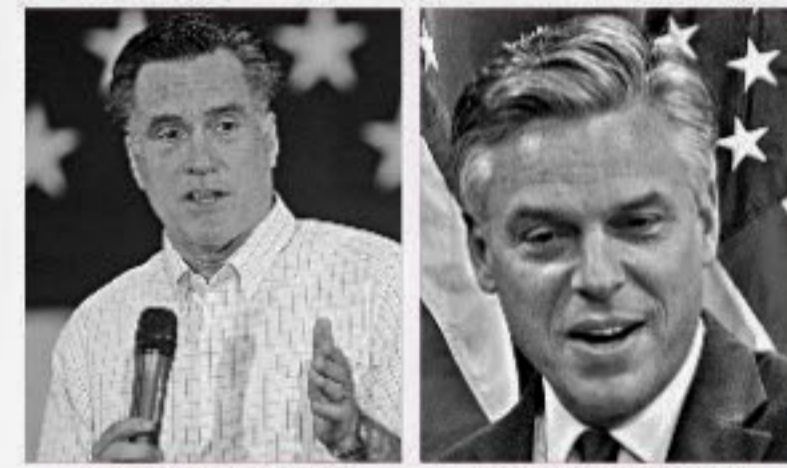
Just hours before the debate former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman dropped out of the Republican race and endorsed Romney, bolstering his drive for his party's nomination. Romney won the first two state nominating contests in Iowa and New Hampshire this month.

Romney leads polls in South Carolina, and a win here on Saturday would put him on an almost certain path to clinching the nomination to face Obama in November.

The candidates will get another crack at Romney at a debate in Charleston on Thursday, less than 48 hours before South Carolina Republicans start voting.

Perry, the Texas governor, challenged Romney during the nearly two-hour debate to release his tax returns. Perry and Gingrich have been raising the issue on the campaign trail in the last few days.

According to a new CNN/ORC poll released Monday, frontrunner Romney and Democrat Obama are in a dead heat, with the Republican taking a slight 48-47 percent edge among registered voters.



Mitt Romney Jon Huntsman

NEWS IN brief

Rushdie in doubt for India festival after threats

AFP, New Delhi

British author Salman Rushdie's planned appearance at a literary festival in India was thrown into doubt yesterday due to security concerns caused by protests from influential Muslim clerics.

Rushdie was due to speak on Friday and Saturday at the five-day gathering in the city of Jaipur, 240 kilometres from New Delhi, but his name has been dropped from the programme of events published on the Internet.

Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot told the NDTV news channel yesterday: "Salman Rushdie's presence does have security implications and we are keeping a close watch and have been in touch with the organisers."

29 still missing in cruise ship disaster

AFP, Giglio Island

Hopes began to fade for 29 people still unaccounted for from the wreck of a luxury liner off the coast of Italy yesterday as a judge questioned the captain over his role in the disaster.

A black box transcript showed Francesco Schettino -- reported to have sailed so close to the shore only to please a local crew member -- ignored a port official's order to return on deck after abandoning his ship.

The coast guard said six bodies had been found so far, denying a report in an Italian newspaper that a seventh body had been identified.

UK in major armed forces job cut

AFP, London

Up to 2,900 members of the British army including 400 Gurkhas will lose their jobs along with 1,000 air force personnel in the latest round of defence cuts, the government said yesterday.

Around 300 members of the Royal Navy will also be axed.

Many senior army posts will be cut, including eight Brigadiers and 60 Lieutenant Colonels and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) said the Gurkhas affected would be those with more than six years' service.

Indian army chief files case against govt

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The Indian government yesterday filed a caveat in the Supreme Court against any ex-parte order on the petition filed by Army Chief Gen V K Singh challenging the decision over his date of birth.

An application was filed by the Ministry of Defence urging the apex court not to pass any order on Singh's petition without hearing it.

In an unprecedented move, Gen Singh had yesterday dragged the government to the Supreme Court on his age row saying it was an issue of his "honour and integrity".

He filed a writ petition in the apex court after exhausting all statutory options within the Defence Ministry which had recently rejected his conten-

tion that he was born in 1951 and not 1950.

The petition challenges the July 21, 2011, order of the Defence Ministry which fixed the date of birth as May 10, 1950.

He has sought a direction from the apex court for declaring May 10, 1951 as the correct date of birth.

If Gen Singh's year of birth is 1950, he will retire on May 31 this year and if it is 1951 he will demit office next year.

Meanwhile, Defence Minister A K Antony today met Prime Minister



Gen V K Singh

Manmohan Singh to discuss the matter relating to Gen Singh moving the apex court on his age controversy.

Defence Secretary Shashikant Sharma, who was in Malaysia on a visit, was asked to cut short his tour and return home in view of the development related to Army Chief's action.

Meanwhile, main opposition BJP attacked the government for its "failure" to handle the age issue of Gen Singh.

"The government of India has displayed a serious failure of statecraft in the handling of the age-related matter of the Army Chief," said BJP's chief spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad.

On the other hand, ruling Congress party said it would have been had the army chief not approached the Supreme Court on his age issue.

Rebels urge UN to intervene in Syria

AFP, Nicosia

Syrian army defectors urged the UN Security Council to take control of the crisis from an Arab League peace mission it says has failed to halt the regime's deadly crackdown on dissent.

Eleven civilians were killed in Syria yesterday, including eight who died in an explosion in the north-western province of Idlib, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Syrian Free Army, based in Turkey, called on the 22-member Arab League to "quickly transfer the case of Syria to the UN Security Council," in a statement signed by its leader Riyadh al-Asaad, a dissident colonel.

The United Nations has pledged to assist the Arab mission deployed in Syria since last month, saying Monday it would start training the bloc's observers within days.

A formal request for help has been made by the Arab League and the UN has agreed to start the training in Cairo after League foreign ministers meet this weekend, a UN spokeswoman told AFP.

Bangladesh

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The Heritage Foundation, Washington's premier think-tank, have been publishing the index by tracking the march of economic freedom in 184 countries. The index covers 10 freedoms--from property rights to entrepreneurship, monetary, labour and trade. This year, Hong Kong's economic freedom score is 89.9, making it the freest.

Of the South Asian nations, Sri Lanka is the freest economy (97th) with a score of 58.3 followed by Bhutan with 56.6, Pakistan 54.7, India 54.6 and Bangladesh 53.2. All other South Asian countries are behind Bangladesh, according to the 2012 index report.

This year Bangladesh's score was up by 0.2 point from last year due to improvements made in business and labour freedom. Bangladesh was ranked 137th in the 2010 index report.

However, trade freedom dropped significantly, this year's report said.

It said recent reforms improved regulatory efficiency in the country and business start-up has become simpler. Business start-up time takes 19 fewer days now. The cost of getting necessary permits and establishing a company have been reduced considerably,

the report mentioned.

The economic freedom report said although a well-functioning labour market has not been fully developed, the growth of labour productivity is slightly higher than wage hikes. Inflationary pressure is high, and price control measures are in place. The advancement in freedom is accompanied by notable economic growth.

"Nonetheless, progress in overall reform has been uneven and deficient. The foundations of economic freedom remain fragile," it said.

The report said, "Corruption and an inefficient judicial system undermine the rule of law. Weak governance and structural problems continue to constrain development."

The index report also said inefficient regulatory regime is often heavily politicised, and policies needed to liberalise or sustain open markets are undercut by considerable government interference in the economy.

The underdeveloped financial sector impedes investment and the growth of a more dynamic private sector, it said.

The report, however, hailed the present government for handling Islamist extremist groups that were threatening Bangladesh's democracy and pluralist traditions.

JU gets new proctor

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boycotting all academic activities following the murder of Zubair Ahmed, a student of the English department, on January 9 on the grounds that the then proctor failed to maintain security on the campus. They also placed several demands including resignation of the proctor.

In the face of the teachers-students' agitation against him, Prof Arzu resigned from the post on Monday.

Yesterday, the university appointed Tapon Kumar Saha as JU proctor for a two-year term, Vice-chancellor

Prof Shariff Enamul Kabir confirmed.

Meanwhile, the students and teachers continue their agitation on the campus to realise other demands which include removal of other members of the proctorial body, punishment to the outgoing proctor and the killers of Zubair, and restructuring of the probe body formed to investigate the murder.

Agitating students organised a mass signature campaign and a photo exhibition on the campus while teachers brought out a mourning

procession and held a rally.

"We will continue the movement until our other demands are met," said Prof Nasim Akter Hossain, convener of the demonstrating teachers' faction.

About a reshuffle of the proctorial body, the new proctor yesterday said he would look into the matter later.

He had resigned from the post of provost of Shahid Jananara Imam Hall of the university while Prof Shamol Kumar Ray of the botany department had taken over the charge.

Khaleda submits

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accusing them of abusing power in setting up a charitable trust named after late president Ziaur Rahman.

The other accused are: Abul Harris Chowdhury, political secretary to the then prime minister Khaleda Zia, his assistant personal secretary (APS) Ziaul Islam Munna, and Monirul Islam Khan, APS to former Dhaka mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka.

On Monday, ACC pressed charges against Khaleda and the three.

BNP, however, had alleged that the case was filed only to

harass Khaleda and her two sons.

Meanwhile, apart from Khaleda's counsels and pro-BNP lawyers, a large number of BNP leaders and activists, including its acting Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, yesterday gathered on the court premises from 10:30am to welcome the party chief.

Traffic movement in the area came to a halt since 11:15am although the BNP chairperson reached the court around 12:30pm. BNP activists also blocked the road from Nayabazar to Jagannath University area to clear way for

their chairperson.

Additional law enforcers had been deployed on and around the court premises to avert any untoward situation.

On way from the court to her Gulshan residence, Khaleda was escorted up to Golapshah Mazar in Gulistan area by BNP supporters.

Before yesterday Khaleda had appeared at a court in 2007 after her arrest during the army-backed caretaker government. She had to appear before the lower court on four occasions in connection with different graft cases.