

International

Dissent over price rises grows BJP braces for key meeting with coalition partners

NEW DELHI, Feb 2: India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under attack from partners in the coalition government for raising the prices of key commodities, braced today for a key meeting with leaders of allied parties, reports Reuters.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was due to sit in on the meeting with the support groups which make up his disparate 10-month-old coalition, as dissent over the price rises grew.

"BJP allies sharpen knives over prices," said The Hindu Times ahead of the meeting, which was set for 12 pm (0630 GMT).

Vajpayee's BJP leads the coalition government, which has been racked by discord since it took office last March.

The government last week increased the prices of sugar, wheat and rice sold in rations through state-controlled shops and of cooking gas in a bid to trim its subsidy bill.

He branded the price rises "unilateral, arbitrary and anti-people."

It also took on the powerful

farm lobby by raising the price of urea, a key fertilizer.

Three key support groups, including the southern All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), have said the decision to cut subsidies was an onslaught on the poor.

"There is no justice in hitting the poorer sections harder and harder to make them pay for reviving the country's economy," AIADMK leader Jayaram Jayalalitha said in a statement.

Trinamul Congress, another regional supporter, threatened to launch a sit-in to protest against the price rise.

The southern Telugu Desam Party, which offers support to the coalition from outside, also turned up the heat.

"We want to discuss various options (within the party) and one of the options is to withdraw support," TDP spokesman Venkatareswari told reporters on Monday night.

He branded the price rises "unilateral, arbitrary and anti-people."

Pinochet can't be tried in foreign courts: Lawyers

LONDON, Feb 2: Pressing their case for Gen Augusto Pinochet in Britain's highest court, lawyers for Chile are claiming that international laws allowing war crimes suspects to be tried in foreign courts don't apply to the former Chilean dictator, reports AP.

During times of peace, foreign courts can't trespass on other country's sovereignty as they did following World War II "under the rights of a victor to punish war criminals," Lawrence Collins, the lawyer for Chile, told House of Lords judges Monday.

Pinochet, who gave up power in 1990, was arrested Oct 16 in London at the request of a Spanish magistrate seeking his extradition to face charges of murder, torture and hostage-taking.

Judge Baltasar Garzon says Spaniards were among those slain after Pinochet toppled elected Marxist Salvador Allende in 1973.

Pinochet's lawyers, who are fighting his extradition to Spain, contend any acts committed during his 17-year regime would be protected by head-of-state immunity.

The government of Chile is also arguing that while it condemns the acts blamed on the

83-year-old general, the allegations are still not a matter for foreign courts.

"However odious and however deplorable, they were the acts of a sovereign power," Collins told the seven-judge panel on the ninth day of a hearing to determine if the general's arrest may stand.

Lawyers for Spain and human rights groups are relying heavily on an "international law against torture, which they contend supersedes any of the general's claims to immunity. They also said the law gives every nation the right — and duty — to try any official accused of torture who is found in their country. Britain, Spain and Chile all signed the treaty.

But Pinochet's lawyers denied the torture law overrode immunity protections or gave outside nations the right to intervene. They also said the law applies only to crimes after it was endorsed in 1988. Most of the allegations against Pinochet date back before then.

Collins admitted Monday that Chile accepts that torture was prohibited under international law, even before the torture act was signed. Still, he said that Chile maintains that it has primary jurisdiction.

Continuing sanctions in the current context is doing the relationship no good," the Indian Express said.

It said India's "good-faith" pledges on signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and its "excellent" record in not transferring "sensitive" technologies to other states, should be "more than sufficient" guarantees for Washington to remove the sanctions.

State Department spokesman James Rubin told reporters in Washington Monday that the dialogue was productive and generated new momentum.

There was encouragement on the part of our negotiators... there are some indications that the Indians are going to move in

the direction that will allow us to respond with moves to our own."

The United States wants India and Pakistan to sign the CTBT, halt further fissile material production, strengthen export controls and exercise mutual fissile material production and exercise mutual restraint in missile and weapons development.

Expert-level meetings will be held in March for follow-up talks on export controls.

India's nuclear tests in May 1998 triggered similar tests by the United States. These sanctions were partially lifted in December.

The Pioneer daily, however, mirrored the Indian foreign ministry's line that there "was miles to go" before anything substantial materialised from the talks.

"There are a couple of steep hurdles," it said. "On the US side, it will mean the scrapping of the entities list banning exports to 40 Indian institutions by US firms and no longer blocking World Bank loans to the tune of 1.6 billion dollars.

"On their part, the Indian authorities have to work towards

creating a national consensus in favour of signing the CTBT."

India has traditionally opposed the CTBT, arguing that it was biased in favour of the five recognised nuclear powers. But Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has since pledged to sign the treaty before September.

The Hindustan Times said the eighth round of Sing-Talbot talks had achieved little and warned that signing the global treaty would spell doom for India.

Arguing that the move would "sanction technical espionage by the major powers" the editorial said it would neither "eliminate technology sanctions or the resistance to India's nuclear power status."

The Hindustan Times said signing the CTBT would not harm India in a global situation where the idea of disarmament has been gaining wider acceptance," but added that Washington should recognise and make allowances for India to keep a minimum nuclear deterrent for its security.

"Washington must admit India's argument and take security perceptions in terms broader than south Asian security."

"No strikes — missile or otherwise — will speed up the settlement of the problem," Russia's Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said over the weekend.

"On the contrary, they would only throw back the negotiations and the settlement process in general."

The Contact Group last week gave Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and Kosovo's ethnic Albanians a week to start negotiations and another two weeks to agree on self-rule in the province. If they fail, NATO's Secretary-General Javier Solana will have the power to order military action.

The Contact Group has

summoned the ethnic Albanians and Serbian authorities to Rambouillet, France, just outside Paris, on Saturday. Milosevic and Kosovo Liberation Army officials have promised to respond in a few days.

While backing efforts to find a peaceful solution in Kosovo, Russia fears what it sees as the expansion of Western power at a time when it has lost much of its world influence and its economy and military are in shambles. Moscow has adopted a confrontational policy against the United States and other western nations to bolster allies such as Iraq and Serbia against the West.

Russia was unable to do anything to avert recent US and British air strikes on Iraq, but its anti-western rhetoric has sometimes reached Cold War levels. Many Russian politicians fear NATO is a weapon still aimed primarily at Russia.

Russia insists that military action can only exacerbate the Kosovo situation and it calls for exclusively peaceful solutions.

In Kosovo, the use of force would "detonate a more serious destabilization in the Balkans," Ivanov said.

At the same time, some ana-

A Nairobi University student takes to his heels after hitting a riot police officer in Nairobi Monday. Riot police fired teargas but failed to disperse students from two public universities on the third day of protests against construction of homes in a large section of Kenya's few remaining indigenous forests.

— AP/UNB photo

Suu Kyi supporter freed: Myanmar's military government announced Tuesday that an imprisoned supporter of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi had been freed out of consideration for his age, AP reports from Bangkok.

Ohn Myint, 81, was sentenced April 28, 1998, to seven years' imprisonment for working with underground organisations and trying to create rifts between authorities and rebellious ethnic groups, the government said in a statement.

Rebels seize Angolan town: UNITA rebels claimed Monday they had seized a town on a strategic road leading to the capital and foreign-owned oil fields, AP reports from Luanda.

Rebel forces drove government troops out of the town of Kiende on Saturday, days after taking the provincial capital, Mbanza Congo, 25 km to the east, according to a UNITA statement. Government officials were not immediately available for comment and there was no independent confirmation of the claim.

Albright meets Albanian PM: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met in Washington with Albanian Prime Minister Pandeli Majko to discuss economics, regional democracy and the Kosovo crisis, the State Department announced late Monday. AFP reports from Washington.

Albright and Majko held "productive discussions on Albania's democratic and free market economic reforms, on developments in Kosovo, and on US-Albanian relations," State Department spokesman James Rubin said in a written statement.

WW II bullet kills girl in PNG: Police in the island province of New Ireland have called on the United States to clean up abandoned World War II ammunition after a young girl was killed by an exploding bullet, AP reports from Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

The 8-year-old girl died on tiny Emirau Island, part of the St Matthias group of islands in New Ireland province, on Jan 31, police said Tuesday. The girl and members of her family were cooking in a traditional earth oven — a hole in the ground filled with hot stones — when bullets buried near the oven exploded.

Snow removal trucks clean up snow on Red Square in Moscow Monday following heavy snowfall.

— AP/UNB photo



An Indian soldier with automatic weapon keeps vigil on Haran village, some 30km from Srinagar, Monday. Encounters between Kashmiri militants and the Indian army in which two militants have been killed so far began Sunday evening.

— AP/UNB photo

Indian media for speedy lifting of US sanctions

NEW DELHI, Feb 2: The United States should quickly lift sanctions imposed on India after its May nuclear tests and then resolve irritants such as New Delhi's opposition to a global test ban treaty, newspapers

are claiming that international laws allowing war crimes suspects to be tried in foreign courts don't apply to the former Chilean dictator, reports AP.

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Fighting leaves 3000 dead in Sierra Leone

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 2: A rebel offensive in Sierra Leone has left approximately 3,000 civilians dead and created an acute need for medicine, health care and sanitation, a UN official said Monday, reports AP.

The humanitarian situation in the war-ravaged West African nation is "very serious" and likely to deteriorate further if fighting continues and aid workers remain unable to get to two-thirds of the country, said Kevin Kennedy.

Kennedy, who heads the emergency liaison branch in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and Abdul Majid Hussein, deputy director of the UN Children Fund's Office of Emergency Programs, visited Sierra Leone Jan 19-28.

Rebels renew their offensive against Sierra Leone's democratically elected government in December, and fighting is still going on in the eastern part of the capital Freetown.

Aid workers have been unable to enter eastern Freetown, but flights over the area indicate that 80 per cent of the buildings have either been damaged or destroyed in the fighting, "so there's an urgent need for shelter," he said.

The United Nations is shipping plastic sheeting for 10,000 families, he said.

The situation in hospitals and clinics in central and west-

ern Freetown is "fairly desperate," despite the recent arrival of medical teams from Doctors without Borders in France and from Doctors of the World, Kennedy said.

After the main Connaught Hospital reopened recently, it received 300 cases requiring surgery in five days — mainly people wounded in the fighting or victims of rebel amputations, he said.

Medical teams in hospitals and 23 clinics opened in the last 10 days are unable to handle all the injuries and amputations, Kennedy said.

The food situation is serious but not acute and the price of the main staple, rice, which soared 300 per cent at the start of the fighting, has fallen to just above the pre-fighting cost, he said.

UN World Food Program

warehouses in eastern Freetown were looted, losing about 3,000 metric tons (3,300 US tons) of food, Kennedy said.

lys predict that Moscow may be less hostile because NATO now is directing its policy against both Serbs and Kosovo's ethnic Albanian rebels.

Russia has long blamed the Kosovo Liberation Army for provoking clashes in the region.

NATO is now acknowledging that the Albanian side also is to blame for the continuous tension, and that's a radically new approach," said Sergei Ozinobishchev, who heads the Institute for Strategic Assessment, an independent think-tank.

However, Ozinobishchev added, NATO's military action without specific approval by the UN Security Council is still bound to anger Moscow.

Russia insists that NATO strikes must be mandated by the Security Council, while the alliance believes it already has UN clearance for the use of force.

The Interfax news agency on Monday quoted unidentified Russian diplomats as saying Moscow would not approve deployment of an international peacemaking force to