

Pak court defers decision on challenge to jurisdiction

Key witness gives evidence against Sharif in treason case

KARACHI, Dec 21 : An anti-terrorism court today reserved a decision on a defence application challenging its jurisdiction to hear the case against deposed Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif, reports AFP.

Judge Shabbir Ahmed adjourned the proceedings until January 12 when he would give his verdict on the issue.

Prosecutor Raja Qureshi presented to the court an interior ministry document dated December 19 which he said empowered the court to try the case.

He said the court had jurisdiction to try Sharif and others accused on charges of waging war against Pakistan and other offences against the state.

The defence application moved Monday said that since the accusations were offences against the state the original complaint had to be brought by the central or a provincial government.

But the original accusation

against Sharif was made by an army colonel in the weeks after General Pervez Musharraf seized power in a coup on October 12.

Sharif, his brother Shahbaz, and five other officials are expected to be charged with treason, hijacking, kidnapping, criminal conspiracy, attempted murder and collecting arms to wage war against Pakistan.

They face the death penalty if convicted.

During Tuesday's hearing the prosecutor pleaded that the case be heard on day-to-day basis.

The judge said he would follow the procedure and practice of a high court.

Responding to a defence request, the judge allowed family members to meet the accused for three hours on the two days

next month of Eid festival marking the end of holy month of Ramadan.

"The treatment being meted out to us is shameful," Sharif said during the proceedings.

"We can live without meeting our family members. I and my brother do not wish to meet our family members. We can live without them, we do not want any favours from them [prosecution]."

Meanwhile, a key witness has given evidence against deposed Pakistani premier Nawaz Sharif in his treason and conspiracy to murder case, according to his statement seen by AFP today.

Aminullah Chaudhary, the former head of Pakistan's Civil Aviation Authority, was originally accused alongside Sharif

and other senior officials but agreed to give evidence against Sharif in return for a pardon.

Sharif was ousted in October by army chief General Pervez Musharraf.

The former premier and six others are expected to be charged with treason, criminal conspiracy and hijacking among other offences and face the death penalty if convicted.

The case against them relates to the night of the coup, when Sharif is accused of preventing the landing in Karachi of a Pakistan International Airlines flight carrying Musharraf and nearly 200 other passengers from Sri Lanka.

The plane only landed after the army seized control of the airport. Within hours Musharraf had assumed sweeping powers and detained Sharif.

In his statement Chaudhary says Sharif clearly told him not to let the aircraft land in Pakistan.



Sri Lankan opposition presidential candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe (L) speaks to reporters as his wife Maithree (C) looks on after casting their ballots in Colombo yesterday. Wickremesinghe is challenging President Chandrika Kumaratunga who narrowly escaped an assassination attempt on December 18, which left 21 people dead. — AFP photo

EU calls on China to improve HR record

BEIJING, Dec 21 : The European Union today called on China to improve human rights record and end capital punishment, reports AFP.

"The EU expresses concern about the pace of China's evolution towards a more open and transparent society based on the rule of law and internationally recognised human rights standards," the 15-nation bloc said in a statement issued at the end of a one-day summit with China.

"It further urged China to ratify the two UN covenants already signed and stands ready to share experience concerning their ratification and implementation."

The EU also encouraged the Chinese authorities to abolish capital punishment and expressed cautious optimism about China's prospects of joining the World Trade Organisation.

The EU welcomes the steps already taken by China to enter the WTO, but nevertheless underlines the issues that are of great importance to Europe.

Pakistan has no plans for war: Musharraf

Islamabad is ready to help resolve row over Laden

KARACHI, Dec 21 : Pakistan will maintain a deterrent but has no plans for war or to expand its territory, the country's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf said today, reports AFP.

"The only viable option is to remove the temptation from the minds of potential aggressors by maintaining a credible deterrence," Musharraf said, in an apparent reference to arch-rival India.

Pakistan openly became a nuclear power last year after conducting nuclear tests following similar blasts in India.

Musharraf, the army chief who seized power in a coup in October, has pledged to maintain that nuclear deterrence.

The general was speaking at the induction of a new French-built Agosta 90-B submarine into the Pakistan fleet.

Pakistan and France signed a contract for three Agosta submarines under a technology transfer contract in 1994, and the first arrived this month.

Agosta 90-B submarines are conventionally powered attack subs used against other subs and surface vessels, as well as for intelligence-gathering and special missions, such as commando transfers.

Meanwhile, Pakistan is ready to help resolve the row between the United States and Afghanistan over indicted terrorist Osama bin Laden. Pakistan's interior minister told

AFP: "It is originally a matter between the US and Afghanistan. They should hold negotiations with Afghanistan, but if they think we could resolve the issue then we will extend whatever support we can." Moinudeen Haider said in an interview late Monday.

"First those governments should hold negotiations and listen to each other's point of view," the retired army general said.

"Then we will try our best to resolve the issue."

Washington wants Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia to hand over Bin Laden, a billionaire Saudi dissident who is on the FBI's 10 most wanted list.

Bin Laden has been charged in the United States with the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August last year in which 224 people died.

But the Taliban refuse to hand over Bin Laden, saying that would breach their traditional cultural obligations to a guest.

The United Nations slapped financial and aviation sanctions on the Taliban last month in another effort to win the extradition of Bin Laden.

Indian officials in US for talks ahead of planned Clinton visit

NEW DELHI, Dec 21 : Senior Indian officials are in Washington for talks ahead of US President Bill Clinton's expected visit to India early next year, a foreign ministry spokesman said today, reports AFP.

"It is a functional official level contact which evolves from the larger dialogue taking place between the Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott," spokesman RS Jassal said.

"They cover a huge canvass of issues. Nine rounds have already been held so far. These official level talks are routine," Jassal told AFP.

Britain scotches rumours of free Millennium visas

ISLAMABAD, Dec 21 : This is a message for British visa seekers who heard rumours that anyone in the Millennium Dome in London on December 31 will automatically get British citizenship or become a British resident. Forget it, reports Reuters.

The British High Commission (embassy) in Islamabad took the unusual step of denying such rumours, which were rife this week among Pakistanis hoping to live in Britain.

60 to 70 pc turnout in Lankan polls

Voters shrug off fear of violence

COLOMBO, Dec 21 : Sri Lankans shrugged off fears of Tamil Tiger separatist violence to cast their votes today in a hotly contested presidential election marked by a heavy army and police presence, reports AFP.

Polling booths opened at 7:00 a.m. (7:00 a.m. BST) and Election Commission officials estimated turnout nationwide at between 60 and 70 per cent in the first five hours of voting.

Government-run radio complained of attacks, aided by police, on ruling People's Alliance (PA) supporters during the polling.

Police said they shot dead two PA activists in a northwestern district after one of their patrols allegedly came under fire.

The whole of Sri Lanka's 50,000-strong police force was mobilised for the polls, with the armed forces playing a back-up role.

Month-long campaigning for the elections -- which boiled down to a neck-and-neck race between President Chandrika Kumaratunga and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe -- ended in bloodshed on Saturday with bombings at separate election rallies.

Kumaratunga narrowly escaped assassination at the hands of a suicide bomber who killed 21 people and injured 110 at a rally outside Colombo Town Hall.

With the country's Sinhalese majority divided in its support

Kumaratunga, who was protected from the main impact by her car, suffered shrapnel injuries to her face. She was discharged from hospital on Monday, but did not cast her ballot in the election.

In a second bombing attack Saturday on a rally organised by Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), at least 12 people were killed and 40 wounded.

The government has blamed the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for both attacks. The Tigers are leading a drawn out campaign for independence in the island's north-east.

"We have taken certain precautions to prevent violence and any malpractice," election chief D.M. Dassanayake said, adding that three policemen had been assigned to guard each of the nearly 10,000 polling booths nationwide.

A nationwide all-night curfew was expected to be imposed as a formality Tuesday evening. Polling ends at 4:00 p.m. (10:00 GMT), with a final result expected Wednesday morning.

Voting was steady and relatively trouble free in the capital Colombo although private poll monitors reported complaints of intimidation by ruling party activists in several central districts.

With the country's Sinhalese majority divided in its support

for the two main candidates, the vote of the Tamil minority, which accounts for about 18 per cent of the 11.7 million electorate, is expected to prove decisive.

Kumaratunga's sister, brother and daughter all cast early ballots in the president's home town north of Colombo.

Wickremesinghe, who voted in the capital, said he was confident of leading Sri Lanka into the new millennium.

A strong opposition campaign left the poll outcome in the balance, although some analysts believed sympathy for the injured Kumaratunga could tip the vote in her favour.

The president, sporting a bandaged right eye and plasters on her face, addressed the nation Monday night, calling on all Sri Lankans to unite against the "terror politics" of the LTTE.

Defence ministry spokesman Sunil Thennakoon said the Tigers were aiming to disrupt voting in the northern peninsula of Jaffna.

"The LTTE will try to terrorise the people not to go to cast their vote," Thennakoon said. "Our main concern is to ensure that people can go and vote freely."

He said the Tigers had launched artillery attacks in Jaffna but there were no casualties. However, further south of the peninsula at Paranthan, heavy fighting was raging Monday.

The privately-run Centre for Monitoring Election Violence has said it is "very worried" about the situation in the northeast, where some 150,000 voters have been affected by the relocation of polling stations.

"It is unclear if people even know where to vote," said spokesman Arjuna Parakrama.

An AP report adds: Police shot and killed two political activists outside a polling station Tuesday.

But election violence among political parties also is common, and Tuesday's vote was preceded by hundreds of incidents during the two-month campaign in which seven people were killed and dozens injured.

At Gampaha, the hometown of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the president's 83-year-old mother, was brought in a wheelchair to cast her vote alongside Kumaratunga's sister Sunetra and daughter Yasodhara.

President was unlikely to come to Gampaha, 30 kilometers north of Colombo, to vote. Kumaratunga was recovering from injuries from the suicide bombing at her final campaign rally Saturday, and police feared another attempt to kill her.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan denounced the bombing and expressed concern.

BRIEFLY

Lawyers on strike in India: Thousands of lawyers went on strike in India's capital Tuesday to protest proposed legislation that could open the door to foreign attorneys practising in India, AP reports from New Delhi.

The proposed bill also would require the lawyers to renew their licenses every five years and would set up a committee of judges and government officials to impose discipline on errant attorneys. Defying an appeal by the Bar Council of India, about 5,000 lawyers assembled around the India Gate monument near the Supreme Court building to voice their objections to the proposals by the government-appointed Law Commission.

Six inmates sent from US to Cuba: Six Cuban inmates who had held seven people hostage for most of last week in a Louisiana prison have been sent back to Cuba, the US Justice Department said Monday. AFP reports from Washington.

The six men left Pineville, Louisiana at about 4:15 p.m. (3:15 a.m. BST) and arrived in Cuba at 6:20 p.m. (5:20 a.m. BST), the department said in a statement, without specifying where in Cuba the plane landed. A seventh inmate involved in the hostage crisis, Roberto Villar-Grana, 31, was not deported because he is still under investigation in Saint Martin Parish, Louisiana, and he faces sentencing on state charges in January.

Macau hopes presence of Chinese troops will calm triad wars

MACAU, Dec 21 : Chinese troops raised the flag over their new garrison in Macau today, signalling they are here to stay as residents hoped their presence will lend weight to the new government's vow to crack down on triad turf wars, reports AFP.

The flag-raising, witnessed by hundreds of cheering local people, followed a day after 500 People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops rumbled into the enclave to a rapturous welcome barely hours after Portuguese leaders flew out ending four centuries of rule from Lisbon.

Major General Liu Yuejun, commander of the Macao PLA Garrison Troops, said his force would "respect the Macao SAR (special administrative region) government headed by Edmund Ho Hau Wah, the chief executive, as well as the local social system and life style."

Late Monday Ho vowed to put "all resources to fighting crime" in Macau where triads have been battling for control of prostitution and gambling rackets.

The new Macau authorities had a "good plan" which would be disclosed later, he said.

Several people invaded the PLA compound Tuesday to take pictures of themselves beside rows of uniformed troops and armoured personnel carriers.

The Tender Notice No. 19/1999-2000 Vide Memo No. LGED/EE/STIDP/Shariat/G-151/97/3505 dated: 28.11.99 have some corrections in para-2. The sentence "If the lowest bidder found more than (one) then the selection of contractor will be done through lottery and lottery will be held on 02.01.2000 (if necessary)" should be omitted.

Other terms and conditions will remain same.

Executive Engineer
Local Government Engineering Department
District Shariatpur

DFP-28000-15/12
G-2142

Flood in Venezuela

Thousands search for relatives

MACUTO, Venezuela, Dec 21 : After helping nearly 70,000 people to safety, rescue workers today continued to dig for survivors of devastating floods and mudslides that may have killed up to 25,000 Venezuelans, reports AFP.

Some survivors had walked for hours, carrying whatever relief they could, in the ravaged communities along the Caribbean coast, they mingled with those left homeless who headed in the opposite direction, toward Caracas, or wherever they could find hope and shelter.

Authorities said Monday they feared the death toll from the floods and mudslides that struck northern Venezuela would reach catastrophic proportions.

"Taking into account the population density of affected areas, I believe we could be talking about 15,000, 20,000, 25,000 people who are beneath the rubble," Civil Defence agency chief Angel Rangel told Union Radio.

But as the search for bodies continued, President Hugo Chavez said he would not speculate on the death toll. "We have seen and counted 342 bodies," he said in a television address Monday night.

Chavez said a total of 68,670 people had been rescued and that operations were continuing. "We are still rescuing people, there are still people who are cut off," said Chavez, adding: "We will not rest until we have checked every house, every village, by land, by sea and by air."

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Elián Gonzales (L) looks up as he listens to Delfin Gonzales (R), one of his Great Uncles, while playing with a toy car in the back patio of his relative's home Monday in Little Havana, Miami. Elián was found clinging to an inner-tube off Florida's coast last month after a boat carrying 14 would-be Cuban immigrants sank, killing the boy's mother and stepfather. Relatives in Miami want Elián to remain with them, but his father -- with the support of the Cuban government -- is demanding he be returned to Cuba. — AFP photo

Communists take marginal lead in Russian polls

MOSCOW, Dec 21 : The Communist Party stayed marginally ahead of the pro-Kremlin Unity bloc with 90 per cent of the Russian ballot counted, the central election committee said today, reports AFP.

The Communists garnered 24.55 per cent of the vote compared to 23.88 per cent for Unity, a party which was launched less than three months ago to bolster President Boris Yeltsin's allies in the State Duma, Interfax reported quoting the commission.

The Fatherland-All Russia (OVR) faction led by presidential hopeful and ex-premier Yevgeny Primakov lagged behind in third place with 11.98 per cent of the vote.

The reformist Union of Rightist Forces (SPS) picked up 8.63 per cent, the pro-Kremlin Zhirinovskiy Bloc 6.18 per cent, and the liberal opposition Yabloko faction 5.94 per cent.

The three parties were the only other groups to cross the five-percent threshold to win a seat in parliament.

Half of the Duma's 450 seats are decided by results of the party list section of the ballot, the other 250 seats being distributed through local single-mandate elections where independent candidates fare best.

The results have dramatically boosted the stature of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who has openly backed the Unity faction, as presidential hopefuls vie for position to succeed Boris Yeltsin in June's presidential poll.

They have also heavily impaired the standing of Primakov, who had been seen as the Kremlin vote fixer until Putin's political emergence.

As long as you have a dictator and an authoritarian regime, you can replace it and say the people like it. But if you have elections, you can't do that."

The longer Taiwan stays politically separated from China, the harder it will be to build public support for reunification, said Broadfoot, managing director of the Political and Economic Risk Consultancy.

Public opinion polls show more than 90 per cent of the people in Taiwan see Taiwan as a sovereign state and a majority of Taiwanese people oppose reunification with China.

Cheng said he sees a growing sense of urgency in the way the Chinese government sees the Taiwan issue.

"The Chinese government has been too patient in the past. They set no deadline for reunifying with Taiwan. But this issue can't drag on forever," Cheng said. "You can see Lee Teng-hui has already abused China's patience by calling for statehood for Taiwan."

Chinese President Jiang Zemin used the Macao handover ceremony and its aftermath to issue a fresh invitation to Taiwan to rejoin the mainland on the basis of the "one country, two systems" arrangement applied to Hong Kong and Macao.

"The experiences of Hong Kong and Macao have shown the 'one country, two systems' is the most appropriate and best approach in solving the Taiwan issue," Jiang said during a ceremony celebrating the Macao handover in Beijing Monday.

"The move towards democratisation of Taiwan will complicate reunification, if and when it happens," said China watcher Bob Broadfoot.

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Office of the Executive Engineer
Naogaon O&M Division
BWDB, Naogaon

Tender Notice

- Tender No : 11/1999-2000.
- Name of work : Protection work on the right bank of the river Little Jamuna at Ataikula Janakalyan High School in PS Raninagar, Dist Naogaon during the year 1999-2000.
- Tender document will be available from office of the :
 - Divisional Commissioner's Office, Rajshahi Division, Rajshahi.
 - Sonali Bank, Shaheb Bazar Branch, Rajshahi.
 - Agrani Bank, Naogaon Main Branch, Naogaon.
 - Agrani Bank, WAPDA (Irri) Branch, Sopura, Rajshahi.
 - Pubali Bank Ltd. Natore Branch, Natore.
 - Sonali Bank, WAPDA Branch, Motijheel Com Area, Dhaka.
- Cost of tender : Tk 750/00 (non-refundable) per documents set.
- Last date of : 27-12-1999.
- Date and time : 26-12-99, 27-12-99 and 28-12-99 of receiving up to 12:00 hours.
- Date and time : 28-12-99 at 12:30 hours.
- The office :
 - The Divisional Commissioner, Rajshahi Division, Rajshahi.
 - The Superintending Engineer, Dhaka O&M Circle, BWDB, Dhaka.
 - The Executive Engineer, Naogaon O&M Division, BWDB, Naogaon.
 - The Executive Engineer, Rajshahi O&M Division-I, BWDB, Rajshahi.
 - The Executive Engineer, Natore O&M Division, BWDB, Natore.
- Estimated cost :
 - Estimated cost: Tk 19,76,888/00.
 - Earnest money: Tk 49,422/00.
- Eligibility of : 'A' and 'B' class contractor of contractor BWDB enlisted during the year 1999-2000.
- Name and : Md Abdul Mannan, Executive address of the Engineer, Naogaon O&M Division, BWDB, Naogaon.

Executive Engineer
Naogaon O&M Division
BWDB, Naogaon.

PANI-309/1999-2000
GD-1223