

Free elections will save Pakistan from failure: Think-tank

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan is in danger of failing as a state unless the military government of President Pervez Musharraf restores democracy by holding free and fair elections this year, a think-tank said yesterday.

While Musharraf was "determined to retain power at all costs," his regime was facing the most serious challenges of his eight-year rule, the International Crisis Group (ICG) said in a report.

Growing demands from both the political opposition and civil society for an end to military rule meant the end of Musharraf's regime was "now a matter of time," the Brussels-based group said in its report, titled "Elections, Democracy and Stability in Pakistan."

"The manner in which elections are held, however, will determine if there is a peaceful, orderly democratic transition or a violent transition with the attendant costs for a fragile state," it said.

General elections are due in Pakistan by early 2008, the first since late 2002. Army chief Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999.

Officials have said Musharraf aims to be re-elected separately by parliament as president-in-uniform, ahead of a constitutional deadline for him to quit the military by the end of this year.

The ICG accused Musharraf's government of "rigging elections," and said should the president declare emergency rule in the face of recent crises it could "portend disaster, nationally and regionally."

"President Musharraf and the military have maintained power by suppressing democratic forces and rigging national and local elections," the report said.

"Empowerment of Islamist parties to counter moderate opposition has been significant and is now essential to the military government.

"But the growing pro-democracy movement is leaving Musharraf with few choices, and the judiciary can no

longer be counted on to endorse unconstitutional acts.

"Another rigged or stolen election could possibly lead to a violent confrontation between the military and protesters," the ICG said.

Pakistan has been rocked by violence in the two weeks since security forces launched a deadly raid to dislodge religious militants holed up in Islamabad's Red Mosque. The raid and preceding siege left more than 100 people dead.

Since then, more than 200 people, many of them police and troops, have died in a spate of suicide attacks and rebel raids across the country, piling pressure on Musharraf.

The president faces further problems after the Supreme Court this month overturned his suspension of chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, who became an icon of opposition after his ouster in March.

Opponents said Musharraf tried to force out Chaudhry to weaken the judiciary in case of opposition legal

challenges to his plans to stay on as military ruler.

The ICG called on the Pakistani government to hold "free, fair and transparent" elections and said Washington -- which regards Islamabad as a key ally in its "war on terror" -- should encourage the re-emergence of democracy.

"Backing a deeply unpopular military regime is no way to fight terrorism and neutralise religious extremism," it said.

"The international community should support its natural civilian allies, including Pakistan's most popular national parties, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party and Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League."

Musharraf met secretly with Bhutto in Abu Dhabi on Friday to discuss a pre-election power-sharing deal, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Sher Afgan Niazi told AFP Monday.



PHOTO: STAR

Students of Azimpur School and College take out a procession on the college campus in the city yesterday as part of awareness campaign organised by the Bangladesh Association for the Aged. The campaign was aimed at raising awareness among the young generation about elderly people.

Turkey rounds up scores of illegal immigrants

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish security forces detained almost 90 illegal immigrants from Asia and the Middle East and three

US diplomat

FROM PAGE 16

guarantee that this new breeze of reform can permeate the political parties," she said.

The US charge d' affaires was addressing the monthly luncheon meeting of American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh (AmCham).

"To back up our calls for a robust political and electoral process, we are providing assistance in a variety of key areas: to increase the capacity of the judiciary, improve local governance, strengthen civil society, and help promote a free and professional media - all essential elements in a functioning democracy," Geeta Pasi said.

She viewed that corruption is an insidious disease that saps a nation of its vitality and promise, and it has no place in a democracy.

The US charge d' affaires said to make a real break with the past, and to earn people's confidence, the government needs to ensure corruption cases are prosecuted fairly, transparently, and without selectivity or political motivation.

"It is crucial that all those accused are accorded the full range of their legal and constitutional rights," Geeta Pasi added.

"This is a time of great opportunity in Bangladesh's history - the political, social and economic investments you make today are the venture capital of a new future for Bangladesh that must include a clear and unwavering focus on democratic values," she said.

The US chargé d' affaires said reports of deaths in custody and allegations of mistreatment of detainees, 'secret' detentions, and other breaches of due process raise concerns both here and abroad.

Citing Petrobangla-Chevron dispute, she said major investment partners of Bangladesh are being treated in a manner inconsistent with international norms and which signals other foreign investors to stay away.

"Bangladesh must respect contracts and international standards for resolving disputes in order to continue to attract foreign investment," Geeta Pasi suggested.

The US chargé d' affaires found that Bangladesh has already proven itself to be a world-class competitor in the readymade garments industry.

The dramatic improvements at Chittagong Port, in terms of pricing, transparency and efficiency are one such example of Bangladesh taking positive steps to control its own economic future, she said.

Geeta Pasi said the US is reviewing a petition from the AFL-CIO, an American labour organisation, requesting that Bangladesh's preferential trade status be curtailed because of inadequate follow-through in implementing the legislation to protect workers' rights.

"Upholding international labour rights standards, then, must be of vital importance to both governments and private businesses," she said.

In his welcome speech, AmCham President Syed Ershad Ahmed urged the government to implement the Foreign Private Investment Promotion and Protection Act properly to ensure a congenial environment for the foreign investors.

suspected Turkish traffickers during two raids here, Anatolia news agency reported yesterday.

Acting on a tip-off, paramilitary police found 38 Iraqis and 11 Palestinians in a truck in the suburb of Esenyurt, on Istanbul's European side.

The immigrants had reportedly paid between 4,000 and 6,000 dollars (2,900 and 4,370 euros) each to be transported by boat to Greece via the Maritza River, which forms the Turkish-Greek border. They had sneaked in from Iraq and Syria.

A follow-up operation in the district of Pendik, on Istanbul's Asian side, resulted in the detention of 30

Afghans and 10 Pakistanis found on another truck, Anatolia reported.

The immigrants were due to be deported, and the two Turkish truck drivers and their suspected accomplice were jailed pending trial on charges of human trafficking.

Turkey is a major route for human smuggling from Asia to Europe and illegal immigrants are detained on an almost daily basis.

The immigrants often try to cross to Greece by land, or brave sea journeys to Greece or Italy, often aboard unseaworthy vessels.

Gunmen abduct Pakistani in Nigeria

AFP, Lagos

Gunmen yesterday seized a Pakistani construction worker in the restive oil-rich southern Nigerian Rivers state, community sources said.

A source said the kidnappers were in a speedboat.

The Pakistani, whose name was given as Tahrir, was kidnapped in Bodo-city in the volatile Ogoni region.

The Rivers state police commissioner of police, Felix Ogbuadu told AFP he could not immediately confirm the abduction.

Community sources said the kidnapped man worked for the Gitto construction company, which is building a road in Rivers state in the Niger Delta.



PHOTO: STAR

ADB Country Director Hua Du speaks at a function at the ADB office in the city yesterday on the occasion of releasing quarterly economic update on Bangladesh.

Govt steps

FROM PAGE 1

It said, "Letting markets for necessities function normally without administrative actions that cause disruptions to the supply chain will also be important."

Containing prevailing inflationary trends is more of a demand management exercise, and requires cautious monetary policy, it said.

It is a million-dollar question and at the same time it is also difficult to answer about future inflationary pressure, ADB Country Director Hua Du said adding, "The high trend of international food prices, which is beyond our control, may bring risk to continue high inflation in Bangladesh."

The rising domestic demand pressure aided by higher incomes and continued high monetary and credit growths mainly fuelled inflationary pressures, she viewed.

The quarterly economic update said as domestic prices are increasingly linked to international prices due to globalisation, the increase in international food and commodity prices also aided inflation.

"The administrative measures undertaken by the government have not succeeded in containing inflation," it said.

Hua Du said the government drive against corruption should be target oriented. "Then it will not affect the economic growth," viewed the ADB country director.

She said the ADB supports Bangladesh Bank's (BB) contractionary monetary policy. But the BB has to maintain the credit flow to the private sector, Hua Du added.

According to the report, GDP (gross domestic product) growth is estimated at 6.5 percent for the fiscal year 2007, slightly lower than 6.6 percent in 2006, because of moderating growth of agriculture.

The ADB said it is possible to achieve 7 percent economic growth in fiscal year 2008. But the private sector's confidence in investment is important, Hua Du said adding success to reach revenue target is another risk to achieve the growth.

The ADB report appreciated the high remittance inflow but said remittances have some shortcomings. "They often result in rise in consumption and not always in investment."

To make the best use of remittances, most needs to be diverted into productive sector, the ADB in its economic update felt.

From hay day to doomsday

FROM PAGE 1

market for jute yarns combining both Europe and the Middle East and elsewhere of about 120,000 tons in 1080 had grown to over 300,000 tons a year by 2004. However, Bangladesh could not scale back its export market for jute and jute goods, which has been on a steady and substantial erosion.

REVIVAL OF JUTE INDUSTRY? However, there have been positive developments in the form of a growing market for yarn used in woven carpets and sacking. With the rising oil prices - and the trend is projected to continue in the future -- manufacturing of synthetic alternative to jute has become costlier and therefore beaconing a new life for jute industry. And environment concerns are back on the consumers' mind in favour of natural fibres.

Bangladesh was all through the major provider of raw jute to the mills set up by the British in Calcutta. But then the scenario changed and India has been the leading jute producers since the 1970s. Today it produces 1.977 million metric tons of jute while Bangladesh produces only 963,000 metric tons in 2003-04. The more recent growers like China and Thailand decreased output in the 1980s and 1990s. Myanmar, Nepal and Brazil are just some small producers on the edge.

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), which has begun a study on the jute sector, in a preliminary analysis has shown that the jute growing area in Bangladesh reduced by 8.3 percent over the last six years although jute production increased 3.2 percent mainly because of a yield growth of 12.5 percent. And in 23 years since 1981, Bangladesh's total production of jute goods decreased by 53.94 percent while India's increased by 42.5 percent.

In Bangladesh, although the internal market for jute goods is much less prominent than in India, there is a good case to be made for the introduction of packaging regulations to encourage the use of jute sacks as has existed for many years in India. This policy successfully generated a huge internal market for India. Today, internal per capita jute goods consumption in Bangladesh is about half the amount of India. Bangladesh also does not have a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for jute like its neighbour, rather there has been price support for rice farmers, resulting in farming migration from jute to rice. As a consequence, there has been a long-term reduction in jute growing area.

Pakistan, on the other hand, imports jute from Bangladesh and maintained a stable production at 75,000-85,000 tons a year mainly for internal use and a little bit of export. But Chinese jute industry collapsed for competition from synthetic products in the late 1980s.

The industry is also in crying need for new technology with some mills running on equipment dating as back as 1930s. Although there are a few examples of improvisation through using textile mill machinery in jute industries, most of the mills have equipment made in the 1960s and more recent versions are available. As such, it now needs 40 man-days to produce a ton of yarn or fabric. Bangladesh entrepreneurs had imported second hand machinery from Europe, Thailand, Pakistan, Indonesia and African countries, but fund crisis often stymied the modernisation process. There is also a bleak future for further modernisation as equipment manufacturers do not find much incentive to invest heavily in research and development.

Court orders

FROM PAGE 16

of the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court passed the attachment order receiving police reports on the arrest warrants issued earlier against the accused.

The same court on July 25 issued arrest warrants against them after Kabiruddin Mollah, deputy tax commissioner of Circle-8, filed the case in connection with evading Tk 8.48 crore income tax between the financial years 2004 and 2007.

The accused are Bashundhara Industrial Complex Ltd, Bashundhara Group Chairman Ahmed Akbar Sobhan Shah Alam, its managing director and also Sobhan's wife Afroza Begum, their sons--directors Sadat Sobhan, Safayet Sobhan and Sayem Sobhan, deputy director Mostafizur Rahman and MM Kuddus, proprietor of Kuddus & Company.

In the complaint, Kabir said Shah Alam and others repeatedly gave false information to the income tax department about their real income and expenditure and did not show their income tax returns.

CASE AGAINST ENAYETUR

The same court yesterday fixed August 6 for hearing on charge framing against Enayetur, ex BNP lawmaker Harunur Rashid and a businessman in connection with a graft case.

Enayetur, Harun and owner of Sky Autos Ishtiaq Sadiq were present in the court during the hearing of the case.

The case was filed on March 17 with Pallabi Police Station in connection with evading tax during import of luxury car by abusing duty-free car import privilege of an MP.

CASE AGAINST SALHUDDIN'S SON

The same court yesterday ordered attachment of properties of Imran Ahmed, son of detained former BNP lawmaker Salahuddin Ahmed of Demra in the capital, as he did not comply with its order.

Other accused are Salahuddin's wife Shamsunnahar Ahmed and two sons--Tanvir Ahmed and Shahriar Ahmed. They are now on bail from the High Court.

The case was filed on April 11, as they concealed Tk 6,45,28,342 in their wealth statements.

ARMS CASE AGAINST BABAR

Judge Sayed Jahed Mansur of the Special Tribunal-7 yesterday adjourned the hearing of the case, as the jail authorities could not produce Babar before the court due to his illness.

Three prosecution witnesses including complainant of the case appeared before it to give their statements.

The army-led joint forces recovered four firearms--a shotgun, a rifle, a pistol, and a Brazilian revolver--two magazines and 297 bullets during a raid in Babar's Gulshan home on May 28.

Later on June 3, an arms case was filed in this connection.



Square Hospitals Ltd donated 50 bags of fresh frozen plasma to the Burn & Plastic Surgery Unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) recently. Dr Md Faisal Zaman, Dr Manjuma Rahman, Dr Shoma Rani Saha and Jalil Khan of Square Hospitals and Prof Sayed Shamsuddin Ahmed, Dr Md Ashrafuzzaman and some other high officials of Burn & Plastic Surgery Unit of DMCH were present at the handover ceremony.