

Pak army chief briefs PM on militancy

Musharraf ally dropped as intelligence chief

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani premier Yousaf Raza Gilani was briefed by the country's army chief Wednesday as part of his new government's efforts to find political solutions to Islamic militancy, a statement said.

Army chief General Ashfaq Kayani met Gilani along with key coalition partners and ministers in Islamabad, two days after the ministers were sworn in and just over a week after the premier was elected by parliament.

The new government is led by opponents of the embattled US ally President Pervez Musharraf, including the party of slain opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, which trounced Musharraf's allies in elections in February.

An official statement said Kayani "presented all the efforts it (the army) had undertaken to stabilise the situation" in Pakistan's troubled tribal areas bordering Afghanistan and in the restive northwestern Swat Valley.

Gilani and his coalition partners ordered the briefing "in order to come up with political policy guidelines to address the menace of terrorism and extremism, through a comprehensive strategy based on political engagement, economic development and backed by a credible military element," it added.

Those present at the meeting included Bhutto's widower Asif Ali Zardari, the de facto head of her Pakistan People's Party, and former premier Nawaz Sharif, whose party is the second biggest in the coalition.

Gilani is a leading member of Bhutto's party.

Pakistan has been a bulwark in US-led efforts to tackle al-Qaeda and Taliban militants since Musharraf joined the so-called "war on terror" after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

Gilani said on Saturday that militancy was the new government's biggest priority, but stressed the need for political as well as military solu-

tions amid a wave of suicide bombings in Pakistan.

These include reforming the British colonial-era laws that govern the tribal areas, an ethnic Pashtun-dominated region that US officials have branded a safe haven for Osama bin Laden's terror network.

Meanwhile a key ally of President Pervez Musharraf has been dropped from his position as head of one of the country's top intelligence services, the military said Wednesday.

Army chief General Ashfaq Kayani appointed Major General Mohammad Asif to take over as head of the powerful Military Intelligence (MI) outfit from the current holder of the post, Major General Nadeem Ejaz.

MI is one of Pakistan's three main spy agencies. The others are Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which is also run by the army, and the Intelligence Bureau, which is a civilian organisation.

"Major General Mohammad Asif has been appointed director general Military Intelligence today, replacing Major General Nadeem Ejaz," chief military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas told AFP.

Asif previously served as Pakistan's defence attaché to Russia. Analysts said Ejaz was a close confidante and a relative by marriage of key US ally President Musharraf, who seized power in a coup in 1999 and was army chief until November last year.

Musharraf appointed Ejaz in 2006. Under Ejaz, MI assumed a greater role in the country's political affairs and Ejaz was one of the key witnesses when Musharraf controversially suspended the country's chief justice in March 2007.

Asif, by contrast, is close to Kayani, who took over from Musharraf last year and has since set about reducing the army's role in politics to focus on tackling al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

The MI chief is supposed to be the eyes and ears of the army chief, analysts said.

Irish PM announces resignation

AFP, Dublin

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, who has come under growing pressure over alleged financial irregularities, announced Wednesday that he would stand down next month.

The 56-year-old, re-elected for a record third term last year after overseeing a decade-long economic boom, denied any wrongdoing but said he did not want the charges to distract the focus of government.

"It is my intention to tender my resignation to President Mary McAleese by Tuesday 6 May," he told a hastily-arranged press conference in Dublin.

"I know in my heart of hearts that I've done no wrong and wronged no one," he said. "I want everyone to understand... never in all the time I served in public life have I ever put my personal interests ahead of the public good."

During Ahern's period in office at the head of three coalition governments, the country has experienced unprecedented prosperity as a result of the so-called Celtic Tiger economic boom.

With former British prime minister Tony Blair, he helped steer British-ruled Northern Ireland from decades of violence to the peace process, the landmark 1997 Good Friday agreement and the setting up of a cross-community power-sharing administration in Belfast.

Ahern has come under increasing pressure as a result of revelations at a three-judge Mahon Tribunal investigating planning corruption and payments to politicians.

Opposition leaders planned to question Ahern about his finances when the Dail (lower house of parliament) resumes after the Easter recess on Wednesday.

The tribunal, which has been sitting since 1997, is investigating an allegation -- strongly denied by Ahern -- that he received payments from a property developer between

1989 and 1992.

The popular premier, nicknamed the "Teflon Taoiseach" after his Gaelic title and because allegations against him have never stuck, is having to defend details of his finances and the source of payments that are being uncovered by the tribunal.

In an analysis of the Mahon hearings, the Irish Times said that the total value of lodgements and other transactions that have to date been queried by the tribunal exceeds 886,000 euros (1,387,000 dollars) in today's terms, applying the consumer price index for the period 1994 to 2006.

Ahern has been leader of the centrist Fianna Fail party since 1994 and has been prime minister since June 1997.

He was first elected to the Dail in 1977 for the north city Dublin-Finglas constituency and in 1981 moved to the Dublin Central constituency, which he has represented ever since.

He has been elected 10 times in 31 years.

After his election victory last year, Ahern said that he expected his Finance Minister Brian Cowen, who he described as a man with a "brilliant mind" and a "great colleague," to succeed him.

Cowen stood at Ahern's right as he had read his statement Wednesday.

Heavy fighting

FROM PAGE 16 The district of Polonnaruwa, 216 kilometres (135 miles) east of here by road, police said.

Sri Lankan troops are locked in combat with Tamil separatists in the island's embattled northeast.

Casualty figures given by both sides in the decades-old ethnic conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives cannot be independently confirmed as journalists and rights groups are barred from front-line areas.

Referring to the power crisis in the country, the finance adviser said if they (those opposing exploitation of coal) are so concerned about environment pollution, they should live in caves where there is no pollution.

There was no new power generation in the last six to seven years, but the present government has initiated the rental power purchase scheme, which is expected to add some power to the national grid soon, he added.

FROM PAGE 16 exploitation of coal on environmental grounds," he said while speaking at the launching programme of Business Directory of International Chamber of Commerce-Bangladesh (ICCB) at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre.

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War criminals

FROM PAGE 16 hossain Raza, Lt Gen Eaqub Malik, Maj Nader Parves, Col Tahir, Ashrafuzzaman Khan, Ashraf Hossain, Harun ar Rashid, and Chowdhury Mahmududdin are among the 120 war criminals.

"We have prepared the list on the basis of field-level investigation, statements of the victims and examination of relevant documents," said Dr Hasan.

About 13 researchers had been engaged in preparing the list from 1999 to 2006.

Claiming that they have all the necessary evidence and documents, he said the Committee is ready to show its documents and other information once the government forms special tribunal for trying war criminals.

Meanwhile, a faction of Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) on February 16 disclosed a list of 15 "war criminals," including Jamaat-e-Islami chief Motiur Rahman Nizami.

Aug 21 attack case

FROM PAGE 1 The grisly grenade attack on August 21 of 2004 on an Awami League (AL) rally on Bangabandhu Avenue left 22 AL leaders and workers killed and scores of others wounded.

AL President Sheikh Hasina narrowly escaped the attack, but suffered serious ear problems.

The investigation into the attack changed course several times, but the present interim government now says it has unearthed the perpetrators of the attack.

The erstwhile CID investigator of the case, allegedly influenced by the then political government, came up with a fabricated story of the attacks. The CID then maintained that Mokhesur Rahman, an AL ward commissioner in Maghbaraz area, and several top-listed criminals were behind the carnage. They also attempted to feed the public the made up story through an ostensible confessional statement made by a petty criminal Joj Miah. In his statement, Joj Miah named Mokhesur as one of the planners of the attack.

However, after the present government assumed power, the investigators found Islamist militant outfit Harkatul Jihad Al Islami (Huji)'s involvement in the attack. Mufti Abdul Hannan, chief of a section of the Huji and several other leaders and activists of the militant group have already confessed to the crime.

CID found out that fugitive militant leader Moulana Tajuddin, a brother of former deputy minister and BNP leader Abdus Salam Pintu, supplied the grenades used in the attacks. Following the findings, the CID has already arrested Pintu.

Nur Mohammad, the inspector general of police, told reporters yesterday that punitive measures would be taken against any police official who is found to be negligent in conducting the investigation of the case.

Food crisis

FROM PAGE 1 market for direct marketing of farm produce. He said such markets would be set up across the country to help decrease the number of middlemen, which will benefit both the buyers and sellers.

He assured the farmers of taking initiatives so that the market is not evicted with the change of government and developing the market-place as a permanent business centre.

Gen Moeen noted that the country faced natural disasters last year but nobody had to starve to death. "We all tried and succeeded in tackling the situation," he said.

UNB adds: The army chief said the Food Department has already started selling rice at fair price on the open market and the government is increasing rice allocation and the number of dealers.

"More people will be able to buy rice at fair price (at Tk 25 per kg) and save money," he said.

He said 78 lakh tonnes of potato has been produced across the country in the current season and the production of wheat also almost doubled. He hoped there would be a bumper production of Boro paddy this season as the supplies of seeds, fertilisers and power were normal.

Bogra Area Commander and GOC of 11 Infantry Division Major General Muhammad Shamim Chowdhury, senior army officials and government officials accompanied the army chief.

Meanwhile, Naznin Moeen, wife of the army chief, yesterday inaugurated Millennium Scholastic School in Jahangirabad Cantonment area in the city.

When a reporter enquired about the government attitude towards political parties' recent programmes like fasting and statements about movements with the state of emergency in place, Fahim said, "It will be clear through the dialogues whether there is any necessity for these at all. Let us see."

In his January 12 address to the nation, the chief adviser announced that the council of advisers decided in favour of having a dialogue with the political parties. He also said his administration would soon take steps to that end.

But a number of advisers said later that the talks will not take place before the Election Commission ends its reform talks with the parties.

The Election Commission began its second round talks on February 24 and had discussions with 15 parties in five days. But it could not finish off the job since it must wait for the BNP issue to be resolved in the High Court.

Housing and Public Works Adviser Ghulam Quader recently said the government will not have any special agenda for the dialogue.

The campaign against corruption will go on and the people would

Stealthy death

FROM PAGE 1 brother Ratan Das, 11, and his relative Biren Karmakar, 62.

The truck driver and his helper fled the scene as local people rushed to the spot to help.

Later, highway police and fire service personnel reached the spot and recovered the bodies of the victims who were crushed beneath the load of the truck and its goods.

Police sent the bodies to Barisal Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital for postmortem.

Md. Amiruzaman Amin, officer in charge of Gournadi police station and Moazzem Hossain, in charge of Gournadi highway police post said that Khkonon Das had come from India some 12 years ago and settled illegally in the area.

The orphaned baby has been taken by his maternal grandmother who lives in Kuriana village under Shorupkathi upazila in Pirojpur.

Railway

FROM PAGE 16 Following the theft, the authorities formed the committee headed by chief of BR's Engineering Department Abul Kashem.

Abul Kashem told The Daily Star that they have submitted a five-page investigation report to the BR director general.

"We have collected statements from 12 persons including the managers and key-men of Banani and Cantonment stations. We found that six to seven thieves took one and a half hours to two hours to steal the clips," he said.

The other recommendations of the committee include deploying ansar members as railway guards and welding regular clips with the sleepers.

Meanwhile, another committee headed by Assistant Superintendent of Government Railway Police Rakhal Chandra Sutradhar was formed Saturday to investigate the incident. The committee was given 10 days' time to submit its report.

Rajuk staff's wealth

FROM PAGE 16

He along with his wife also owns a five-katha plot in Purbachal Housing Project, three plots of 2.5 katha each in Badda Rehabilitation Project and around two acres of land property in Muradnagar, Comilla, from where he hailed.

All these assets he showed in his income tax file as earned through rent of his house and bank interests.

The investigators have found two business entities -- Nishat Design and Consultant, registered in 2005, and Niloy Enterprise, registered in 2006. "But those business entities did not do any transaction. These were made just to use as tools to whiten black money," said a taskforce member.

The investigators believe Amir's brother-in-law Omar Farukh's five-katha plot on Uttara No. 7 and his mother Qazi Hosneara Begum's two plots in Uttara are also his making.

He used his influence to allocate a three-katha plot to Salahuddin Khan, a survey assistant of Rajuk, in Uttara third phase. Salahuddin sold this plot allocation to Anwara Begum, Amir's mother-in-law.

Later, Amir used his influence to transfer the land to Uttara sector 10 without any application and sold it to one Sirajul Islam at Tk 50 lakh.

The taskforce started investigation against him with the bank transaction of that money, sources say.

Talks with parties

FROM PAGE 1 Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed chaired yesterday's cabinet meeting participated by all advisers, except Foreign Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury as he is now on a foreign tour, and the special assistants to the chief adviser.

On dialogue preparations, Fahim Munaim said the government is working on several aspects of the dialogue like its type and format, whether to sit with the political parties together or separately.

Asked if the government has its own agenda, Fahim expressed his ignorance "since the details have not been fixed yet".

The chief adviser will decide who would lead the dialogue, from the government side, Fahim said replying to a query.

Asked about an adviser's statement that the dialogue would take place before or after Pahela Baishakh (April 14), he declined to comment on it.

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6pc GDP growth

FROM PAGE 16 physical infrastructure, especially power and transport, together with continued efforts in improving the quality of education and basic healthcare services.

Hua Du pointed out that natural disasters have worsened growth and inflation indicators, but said uncertainty among investors due to the ongoing anti-corruption drives has started to ease.

The GDP growth is forecast to reach 6.5 percent in 2008-09 due to improved external and domestic demand and a recovery in agriculture, she added.

The ADO assumed that the caretaker government would take measures to further boost business confidence and that substantial external assistance would be available to cushion the flood and cyclone effects on economic growth and inflation.

It also assumed that the authorities would pursue well-coordinated fiscal, monetary and exchange rate policies with a focus on curbing inflation and raising revenues.

"A final assumption is that the government will at least partly rationalise fuel prices."

The report said the economic outlook considered several downside risks that could derail projections -- the main risk was political developments in the lead-up to the general elections scheduled to be held by the end of 2008, and their outcome.

"In macroeconomic management, the major risk is rapidly growing inflation, failure to rein it in could seriously undermine macroeconomic and political stability," it said, adding that the perennial vulnerability to natural disasters also presents a risk.

The report said the GDP growth must be raised to seven-eight percent for faster poverty reduction and job creation while climate change increasingly looms as a major developmental challenge.

It said greater investment is needed in power generation, the Chittagong seaport needs to continue contracting out operations and management to the private sector, including those of the New Mooring container terminal.

Formulation of an appropriate coal policy is especially important so as to expedite decisions on some of the foreign investment proposals worth US\$ 1.1 billion in important sectors, it added.

Rice export ban

FROM PAGE 16 that the neighbouring country had promised.

The exemption to Bangladesh and a few other countries from the ban on export of non-Basmati rice was provided under the Food Aid Programme.

According to the notification of the Director General of Foreign Trade, the ban on non-Basmati rice will not be applicable to the 5,51,010 tonnes of rice exported to Bangladesh.

Thirty-five consignments of rice which have already been accepted for export until March at land customs stations in West Bengal as part of transitional arrangements will not be affected by the ban, the notification said.

On Basmati rice, it said exports would be permitted only if the freight-on-board price is \$1,200 per tonne. The export will be restricted through six Indian ports. The minimum export price of Basmati rice was \$1,100 per tonne.

THE AGREEMENT Wasiuddin Ahmed, commercial minister of Bangladesh High Commission in Delhi, will sign the agreement on behalf of Bangladesh.

Zia family

FROM PAGE 1

However, a few former lawmakers who are known to be loyal to the pro-Saifur faction of BNP said requesting anonymity that they were not aware of the statement in which their names have been mentioned as signatories.

Responding to a query, Selima Rahman, also a former state minister, said the people would resist the government's plot to form a "puppet government consisting of individuals recommended by the World Bank and the IMF."

"The government, with the help of its foreign masters, intends to form a rubber-stamp parliament, but the people won't accept it," said the former lawmakers adding that they were ready for any sort of sacrifice to forge a movement against the interim government.

Demanding the release of political leaders including BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia, they said no election would be held in the country without Khaleda.

In reply to a question, Mohammad Shahjahan, former lawmaker and an organising secretary of BNP central committee, said the people have a growing sense of doubt that the election might not be held on time.

The statement contains the names of among others Khandaker Mahbubuddin Ahmad, M Shamsul Islam, MK Anwar, Mosharraf Hossain Shahjahan, Ali Newaz Khaiyam, Nasirul Haque Sabu, Abdul Hye, Elen Bhutto, Mohammad Shahjahan, Shahjahan Chowdhury, Syed Mehedi Ahmed Rumi, Ashraf Uddin Nizam, Sohrab Uddin, Shirin Sultana and Rehana Akhter Ranu.

GE surprised

FROM PAGE 16 the bids in consultation with IFC, which may also finance the successful bidder of the Bibiyana and Sirajganj 450 megawatt power projects. The bids submitted by Summit Industrial and Mercantile Corporation had 20 percent stakes held by GE.

After dilly-dallying an explanation for the rejection, Power Cell late last month said the tenders required the bidder's net financial value to be over \$100 million. The IFC's assessment determined that Summit's net value is \$32.5 million, though Summit submitted auditor's copy stating its net value as \$121 million.

This evaluation surprised most industry operators, since Summit was good enough for the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank's financing for the Sirajganj 450 MW power project in 2004. The Khaleda Zia-led government on political grounds had cancelled that project.

Having no stake in the power sector, Power Cell, which is an arm of the power ministry, after three years of the cancellation is now holding the tender for the same Sirajganj power project with IFC as its consultant.

"But this time, it's IFC which is telling the Power Cell what it should do," said a source. "The Cell has its own bid evaluation committee to decide matters like this. But unfortunately the cell is not utilising that committee."

The Daily Star asked global power giant GE Power's chief whether he struck alliance with local Summit without verifying its financial strength. "The GE did its due diligence with Summit. This is why we will take up this matter with IFC," he said.

Power Cell's rejection of Summit's bids reduced competition in these two major power bids. The Bibiyana tender will now have only three competitors and Sirajganj just two.

Top taxpayers

FROM PAGE 16 Institute of Diploma Engineers.

"Acquiring financial self-reliance through an increase in revenue collection is our topmost priority. This goal can be achieved by extending tax bases and though participation of all," the NBR Chairman said during his speech as chief guest at the event.

A total of 566 new taxpayers of Tax Zone -5, Dhaka handed over their returns to the NBR Chairman. Another 511 possible taxpayers submitted applications for the Taxpayer Identification Number (TIN) at the programme.

The government's treasury acquired around Tk 2.87 million through these submissions.

It was the second such event in the capital city where taxpayers have voluntarily submitted their tax returns. The first such event was organised by the Tax Zone -6, Dhaka at Elephant Road on March 27.

At that event 181 voluntary taxpayers submitted a total of Tk 54 lakh and another 443 businessmen applied for TIN numbers.

The NBR chairman pointed out that in its 37 years, Bangladesh has received a total of US\$ 5,000 crore in foreign aid and 52 per cent of that amount was given as a loan. He said the country now pays over Tk 4,000 crore annually to repay this loan.

Majid pointed out at present, that 72 per cent of national budget is managed with internal resources and the remaining 28 per cent through local and foreign loans.

The country will become self-reliant only when it is able to collect enough revenue to manage 100 per cent of the national budget, he said.

Kalipad Halder, commissioner of Income Tax Area-5, presided over the meeting.

Hasina's parole

FROM PAGE 1

to avoid movements after her return home following treatment in US.

But the AL is yet to make its position clear on participation in the election in any circumstances. A high profile meeting of the party yesterday decided that they would not go for movements and would prepare for the election. The party's future strategies were also discussed at the meeting.

"But finally a green signal from Sheikh Hasina is a must for joining the electoral race. She had earlier directed us to take part in the election even if she is barred from contesting it," said a key leader of the AL.

Sources said the AL would not make any kind of commitment with the authorities concerning the party chief but would welcome any decisions taken by her on going to US and coming back to the country.

Highly placed sources said some advisers of the caretaker government on Tuesday discussed the issue of allowing Hasina to go to US on parole to avert a chaotic situation in the country as the AL made repeated threats in the last few days to go for tougher negotiations.

"If she is sent to US, then we have to move towards the election, giving up the present hard line," said another senior AL leader.

The AL's secret meeting yes-

terday was held at acting party President Zillur Rahman's Gulshan residence in the capital to finalise the party stance over sending Hasina abroad.

It assigned acting AL General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam to keep contact with the authorities in this regard.

Earlier, AL Organising Secretary Saber Hossain Chowdhury held a meeting with some foreign diplomats Tuesday evening at a European diplomat's residence.

Later, Saber went to Zillur Rahman's residence and had talks with him. Party AL leaders Tofail Ahmed, Asaduzzaman Nur and Rahmat Ullah were also present there.

Following the talks, Zillur telephoned some senior presidential members of the party including Amir Hossain Amu, Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta and acting General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam to join the meeting yesterday morning.

Talking to The Daily Star, Suranjit said the meeting discussed the situation after Sheikh Hasina leaves the country. "But we want she is sent abroad as early as possible."

In reply to question, he said there would be no need to go for movements if the AL chief is sent abroad. "Everything is being done to resolve the issue through discussion with the authorities," he added.

Rice price hike