

Pak PM offers concessions ahead of long march

Pak intelligence fears al-Qaeda attack

AFP, ANI, Islamabad/ Karachi

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani held out the prospect of concessions to political opponents Wednesday, saying he wanted to end an unpopular governor's rule in Punjab province.

The government has been locked in a showdown with the main opposition leader Nawaz Sharif since the Supreme Court on February 25 banned him and his brother Shahbaz from contesting elections.

Shahbaz Sharif was immediately kicked out as chief minister in Punjab, where he was generally popular, and President Asif Ali Zardari put his own supporter, Governor Salman Taseer, in charge of Pakistan's most populous province.

Addressing newly elected senators at his official residence, Gilani said he recognised that the governor's rule in Punjab "has come under severe criticism".

"We do not want to prolong it, we want

to end it as early as possible," he said.

"I will request the president, who is returning from Iran tomorrow, let the house decide and the party commanding a majority will form the government in Punjab," said Gilani.

The Sharif brothers are urging hundreds of thousands of lawyers, political and civil society activists to take part in a four-day march to the capital, which begins in the southern port city of Karachi on Thursday.

They are demanding that the unpopular Zardari act on his promises to reinstate judges sacked by ex-military ruler Pervez Musharraf, including Supreme Court chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

"On the judges issue we are also trying to look into all legal aspects to resolve it. There is remedy for every wrong," said Gilani.

"Leaders can come and go but we want to do something for the future of this country. We do not want the institutions

to be weakened. We want to deliver and we will deliver to the nation," he said.

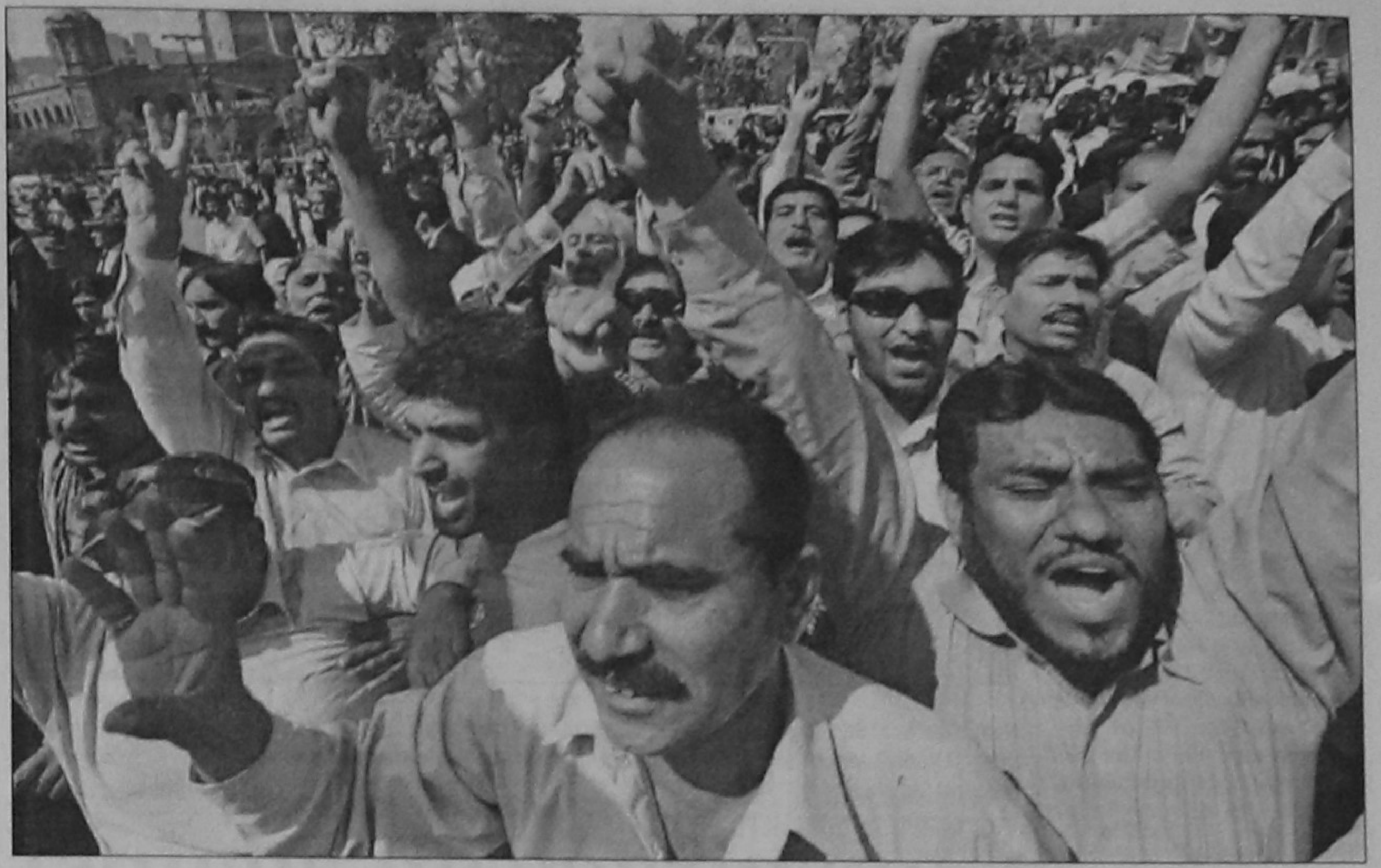
The prime minister has distanced himself from Zardari over the Supreme Court ruling against the Sharif brothers, who have refrained from criticising him publicly.

Meanwhile, Pakistan intelligence agencies have warned about a possible al-Qaeda attack on the lawyers' long march in Sindh.

"Security agencies have been specifically warned that terrorist organisations can strike during the long march, with March 14 and 15 being sensitive days," The Daily Times quoted a Sindh Home Department official, assaying.

Following the intelligence report, security in and around sensitive installations such as the Governor's house, Chief Minister's house, courts, hotels and restaurants has been tightened and Rangers have been deployed in Karachi.

Police officials have also briefed political leaders about the probable attack.



Supporters of former Pakistani premier Nawaz Sharif shout slogans during a protest rally in Karachi yesterday. Pakistan police baton-charged activists in Karachi as thousands defied the government ban and joined the long march which has thrown the country into crisis.



Pakistani plainclothes policemen arrest a political party activist during a protest in Karachi yesterday. Lawyers in black suits and opposition party activists carrying flags and punching their fists in the air marched in Pakistan's biggest city demanding that embattled President Asif Ali Zardari reinstate sacked judges.

Missing BDR arms

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missing, Inspector General of Police (IGP) Nur Mohammad told The Daily Star.

"If we fail to recover the firearms, very normally those who will land in the hand of criminals and the law and order would definitely witness a slide," Nur Mohammad added.

"I just left 250 rounds of bullets inside Sweepers' Colony. Give me a lungi and help me flee," a fleeing BDR man was quoted by Sagarika, a resident of Ganakuti.

The BDR man, who introduced him as Masum at around 11:00pm on February 26, was injured in his knee and claimed to have suffered the wound when he jumped from a two-storey building to escape.

"At first the border guard fainted at the entrance to my house. When he recovered, he made the statement. Almost all the border guards who fled Pikhana through this area had ammunition in their pockets. They changed dresses at places

and left behind those with the ammo," she added.

The BDR men left arms and ammunition wherever they could while fleeing, especially near the places where they took shelter. Besides Ganakuti, abandoned firearms were found in Birban Kasra, Moneshwar Road and Kikhana in Hazaribagh.

Lalbagh police say they recovered only 26 bullets abandoned by the BDR men, while Kamrangirchar police did not make any such recovery.

"Covers of some grenades suggest somebody might have taken away the hand-bombs. Even now you can find grenade holders in drains and sewage" a sub-inspector involved in the recovery of weapons told The Daily Star.

As locals refused to give shelter to some of the fleeing BDR men, many of them took shelter at Madina Masjid in Ganakuti and abandoned a grenade and 224 bullets on the mosque premises.

Pak govt admits its failure to nab Lahore attackers

ANI, Lahore

Over a week after the attack on the Sri Lankan cricket players, the Punjab government has admitted that it has failed to nab any of the culprits who had carried out the attack.

"According to an official report of the provincial government, not a single perpetrator of the terror attack has been put behind the bar yet."

The report viewed the attackers as members of a highly-trained group, and feared that they could initiate more such attacks in near future.

According to The Daily Times, the government has expressed apprehensions that foreign embassies and nationals, especially Chinese nationals working in Pakistan could be targeted next.

Rights group slams Pak crackdown

AFP, Islamabad

A US-based human rights watchdog Thursday criticised Pakistan for arresting hundreds of opposition activists and charged that the crackdown imperilled the country's transition to democracy.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) demanded that the government of embattled President Asif Ali Zardari lift a ban on gatherings, invoked in a bid to foil a long march to demand the reinstatement of judges sacked two years ago.

"The government of Pakistan should end its crackdown against activists of opposition groups led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)," HRW said.

The rights group said Pakistani authorities had detained at least 300 activists from former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's opposition party and affiliated groups across Punjab province, the

stronghold of PML-N.

"It's a disgrace for elected officials to mimic the discredited military government by using old and repressive laws to stifle political expression," said Ali Dayan Hasan, senior South Asia researcher at HRW.

"The protesters who were arrested should be freed right away and allowed to demonstrate peacefully without fear of violence or arrest."

The four-day march is scheduled to start from Karachi on Thursday and descend on the capital Islamabad.

"Pakistan's transition to democracy is imperilled by the government reacting to a political dispute with unnecessary force," said Hasan.

Pakistan has been thrown into renewed political crisis since February 25, when the country's Supreme Court upheld a ruling banning Sharif from contesting elections because of a previous criminal conviction.

Direct election in 100 reserved JS seats

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Of the 45 reserved seats, 36 have been allocated for AL, five for BNP and four for Jatiya Party (JP) as per their strength in parliament.

Reserved seats for women had been increased to 45 from previous 30 during the tenure of previous BNP-led alliance government.

When asked about the seating arrangement for 345 lawmakers in the House, the LGRD minister said it will be restructured to accommodate the increased seats.

Parliament secretariat officials said the VIP gallery located on the left of the speaker's podium has to be demolished to accommodate the increased seats in parliament.

Nominees of the three parties had submitted applications seeking candidacy in the election scheduled for March 30.

The returning officer (RO) will scrutinise the applications on March 15.

The RO has already asked the parliament secretariat to send

an official with samples of the signatures of the lawmakers who proposed and seconded the applications.

Although the election is slated for March 30, the RO is likely to announce the names of candidates elected uncontested after 2:00pm on March 19, the deadline for withdrawal of candidature.

The would-be lawmakers of the reserved seats are expected to join the current parliament session starting from March 15 and likely to continue for another two weeks.

THE WOULD-BE LAWMAKERS

Ashrafunnesa Mosharaf, Jahanara Begum, Shahida Tareq Dikti, Shaifa Khatun, and Asma Zerin from Dhaka, Mamtaz Begum of Manikganj, Tarana Hailm of Tangail, Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury, Faridun Nahar Laily and Rubi Rahman of Noakhali, Jobeda Khatun Parul and Amena Ahmed of Comilla, Chemon Ara Taiyeb of Chittagong, Ethin Rakhain of Cox's Bazar, Farida Rahman of Narail, Nur Afroze Ali, Nurjahan

Begum of Jhenidah, Hamida Banu Shova of Nilphamari, Sultana Bulbul of Dinajpur, Saleha Mosharaf of Faridpur, Rawshan Jahan Sathi, Zebunnesa Haque of Sylhet, Tahura Ali of Jamalpur, Shahin Manoara Haque of Naogaon, Nazma Akhtar of Bagerhat, Apu Ukil of Netrakona, Mahfuza Rahman Rina of Joypurhat, Sadhana Halder of Pirojpur, Prof Zinnatunnesa Talukder of Rajshahi, Khadiza Khatun Shefali of Bogra, Shefali Mamtaz of Natore, Shawkat Ara Begum of Chapainawabganj, Farida Akhtar Hira of Panchagarh, Ahmed Nazmin Sultana of Kurigram, Mamtaz Begum of Munshiganj and Parvin Talukder Maya of Barisal submitted applications as AL nominees.

Rasheda Begum Hira, Shammi Akhtar, Rehana Akhtar Ranu, Asifa Ashrafi Papiya and Nilur Chowdhury Moni submitted applications from BNP.

Mahzabin Morshed, Salma Islam, Nasrin Jahan Ratna and Nur-e-Hasna Lily Chowdhury and Merina Rahman submitted

applications as JP nominees.

If one of the five JP nominees does not quit the electoral race within the deadline, election will be held among the five contenders for four seats where only Jatiya Party lawmakers will be allowed to cast votes, said EC Secretariat officials.

ADP

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crore budget. Sources said after the ADP cut the size of the budget would be around Tk 99,000 crore.

The budget gives Tk 4,200 crore as fertiliser subsidy, which can go up to Tk 6,200 crore while export subsidy of Tk 1,200 crore is likely to go up by Tk 500-600 crore.

However, the budget deficit will remain between 4.5-5 percent.

In the next fiscal year, the size of the national budget may go near Tk 1.20 lakh crore and budget deficit may be nearly 6 percent. The present government will place the next fiscal year's budget in light of its election manifesto.

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