



UN representative to Afghanistan Kai Eide (2nd L) arrives at the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) in Kabul yesterday. Eide said that he had faith in the ECC in detecting fraud cases of the August 20 elections.

UN supports probe into polls irregularities

Afghanistan awaits first partial election results

AFP, Kabul

The UN special envoy to Afghanistan Kai Eide yesterday threw his full support behind the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) as the organisation investigates allegations of fraud during last week's polls.

Several candidates, Afghan and international election monitors and voters have alleged widespread irregularities during Afghanistan's second ever presidential and provincial council polls, held last Thursday.

The ECC, where three out of five top officials were appointed by Eide, said it had registered 225 complaints, of which 35 were high priority and could affect the outcome of the results.

"The ECC has my full confidence," Eide told reporters after meeting ECC members in the Afghan capital.

Eide said there was no doubt that irregularities had taken place and stressed it was critical for the whole electoral process for the ECC to detect and address fraud.

"It is not my job to define how significant and how widespread those irregular-

ities have been. That is up to the process that now follows and where the ECC will play a critical role," he said.

Eide congratulated Afghans for voting despite Taliban intimidation and security concerns. He called on all parties involved to be patient and give the ECC enough time to investigate all complaints.

"I know that the ECC would work as intensively as they possibly can in a way that demonstrates respect for the voters and for the process," he said.

The ECC has the authority to cancel votes from polling stations should they determine massive fraud took place, or call for a re-election at a particular site where fraud has taken place.

Officials say they will release preliminary partial results from Tuesday, but the ECC has warned that the final outcome - not expected until next month - could be hit by investigations into claimed abuses.

Karzai had been tipped to ease to a second term, but a strong campaign from former foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah and reports of miserable turnout in the president's southern power base have boosted speculation of a run-off vote.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan prepared yesterday to roll out partial results from a hotly contested election marred by allegations of massive fraud, with President Hamid Karzai and his chief rival both claiming the lead.

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But while Abdullah on Sunday alleged widespread rigging in favour of Karzai, some observers said he could be positioning himself for defeat and for a role in the political opposition.

"Negotiations are well under way for Abdullah to accept defeat at the first round. It may depend on what he gets in exchange," one Western diplomat in Kabul told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Pak denies Mullah Omar operating from Baluchistan

ANI, Lahore

Rejecting foreign media reports that Taliban supreme commander Mullah Omar and the central council of the terrorist organisation were present in Baluchistan, Frontier Corps Baluchistan Inspector General (IG) Major General Saleem Nawaz has said that they are not functioning from Quetta.

Major General Nawaz rejected the claims that the Taliban were operating from Quetta, calling the reports as "baseless".

Replying to a question, he said, Mullah Omar is not in Quetta and western media and leaders despite having technology often make false claims in this respect.

He said Pakistani authorities had effectively secured the Afghan border, but it was poorly managed on the other side.

Major General Nawaz added that the border had been completely sealed during the recent presidential election in Afghanistan.

He said that it was surprising that Pakistan had 260 check posts on the border whereas the Afghan side had only 40.

The Dawn quoted him as saying that despite poor security measures on their side, the Afghan Government continues to blame Pakistan for the infiltration of Taliban.

US seeks Seoul's support for N Korea sanction

AP, Seoul

A senior US diplomat sought South Korea's support yesterday to enforce UN sanctions against North Korea despite a series of gestures by the communist nation to reduce tensions with the rival South.

Separately, South Korean newspapers reported Monday that North Korean leader Kim Jong Il sent word via an envoy that he wants to hold a summit with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak a significant about-face by a nation that has heaped harsh criticism on Lee for his hard-line stance toward Pyongyang.

Lee's office quickly denied the reports, saying the president and North Korean envoy held general discussions on improving relations between the two sides during their meeting Sunday, but nothing related to a summit was discussed.

North Korea has significantly softened its stance toward the South in recent weeks, freeing a South Korean worker it held for more than four months, agreeing to lift restrictions on

border crossings, and pledging to resume suspended joint projects and the reunion of families separated during the Korean War.

In a gesture to the United States, Pyongyang released two American journalists following a trip to the North by former President Bill Clinton.

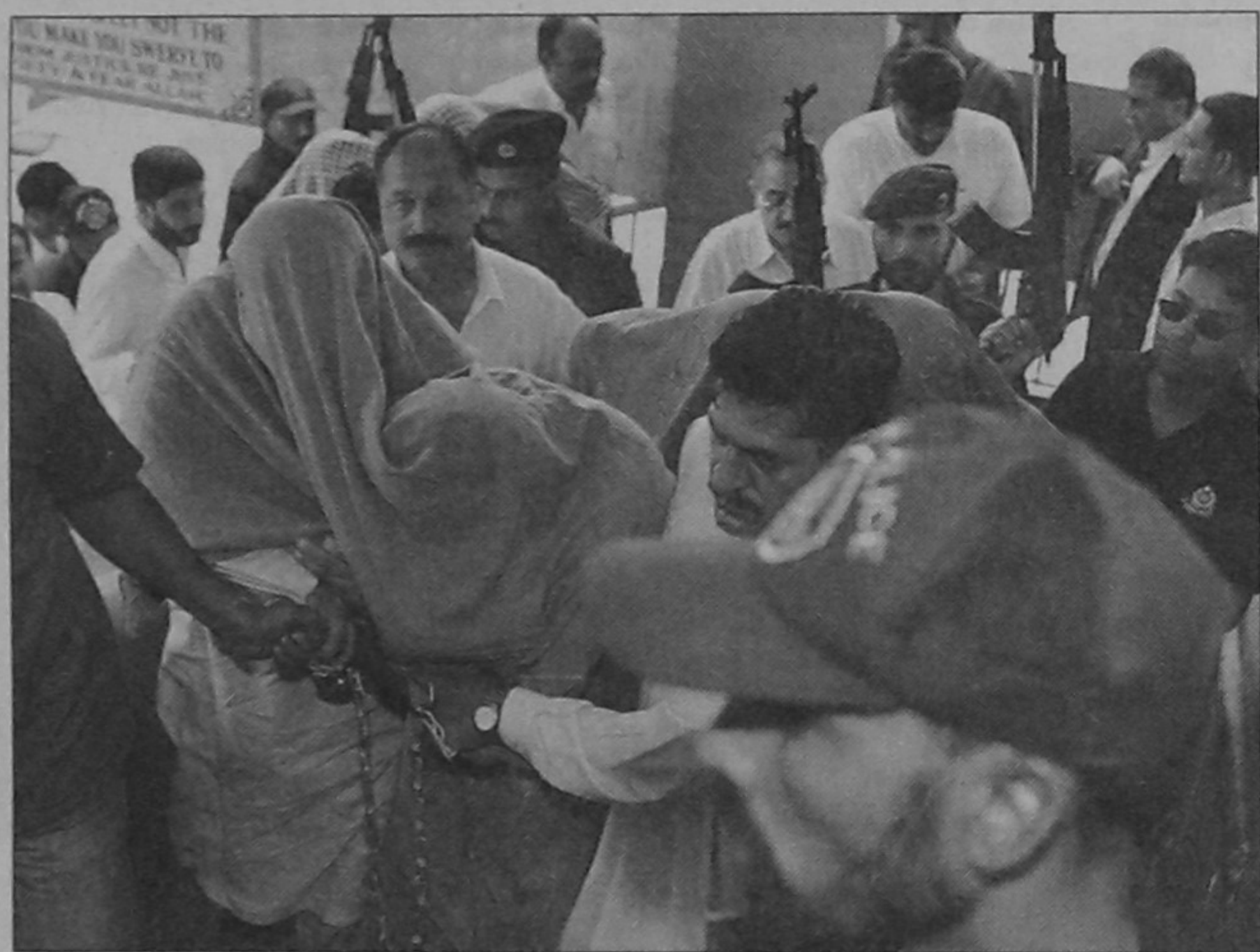
Despite those overtures, Washington has kept up pressure on Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear programs, sending a senior official to Asia to seek support for stringent implementation of the UN sanctions meant to punish the North for its May 25 nuclear test.

On Monday, envoy Philip Goldberg met in Seoul with the South's chief nuclear negotiator and said a complete, verifiable denuclearisation of North Korea is "certainly our goal" and the UN sanctions resolution "very much lays that out."

He told reporters the overall goal is "to bring about a return to denuclearisation and end to those missile programs that are violations not just of the UN resolutions but also of the previous commitments made by North Korea" during international disarmament talks.



Philip Goldberg (L), the US diplomat tasked with enforcing the sanctions against North Korea, talks with South Korea's top nuclear envoy Wi Sung-lac during their meeting at the Foreign Ministry in Seoul yesterday.



Pakistani policemen escort suspected militants of banned al-Qaeda-linked extremist group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi to a court in Karachi yesterday. Pakistani police have arrested 13 men accused of plotting attacks across the country, with one cell planning to disrupt Ramadan and the other targeting economic hub Karachi.

'Minus-one' formula a ploy to weaken, dislodge PPP govt: Pak PM

ANI, Lahore

Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has said that the 'minus-one' formula was just a ploy to weaken and dislodge the PPP government at the centre.

During an informal meeting with his close associates here on Sunday, a source quoted Gilani as saying: "I am well aware of the designs of the opponents of my party. They are giving an impression that our party would emerge stronger and the government would complete its term if I agree to the 'minus-one' formula, but they are working to send the whole set-up packing."

"Efforts are being made to weaken the party, but we will not let them succeed," The Dawn quoted him, as saying.

Commenting on the issue of the trial of former president Pervez Musharraf, he said: "The matter of Musharraf's trial under Article 6 is not over yet. However, there can be a difference of opinion on how to proceed."

Talking to reporters at the residence of Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission Sardar Assef Ahmed Ali, he denied that the issue had affected his relations with PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif.

"I have good relations with Sharif," he said, adding that both the PPP and PML-N had suffered at the hands of dictators.

About the "minus-one formula" he said: "There is no concept of minus-one formula in democracy."

The prime minister said he was constantly in touch with President Asif Ali Zardari, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif and other PML-N leaders on all important issues, including the sugar crisis.

Pak govt forms new team to probe Benazir killing

PTI, Islamabad

More than a year and half after she was assassinated, Pakistan government yesterday set up a fresh probe into the killing of former premier Benazir Bhutto.

The new probe team would comprise of law enforcement and intelligence officials and headed by the director of the Special Investigation Group of the Federal Investigation Agency, a unit that is also probing last year's Mumbai attacks.

The move comes in the wake of a decision by an anti-terrorism court in Rawalpindi to defer the hearing of a case related to her killing, following a request from the government. The setting up of the new probe comes as the United Nations has formed an inquiry commission to determine the facts and circumstances of Benazir Bhutto's killing.

Prisoners of forest

FROM PAGE 1

introduced settlers to implement controversial projects.

"The indigenous people were unable to pay bribe and get involved in the social forestry project. So the Department of Forest involved outsiders in the project and thus promoted the settlers in the forestland," said Ajay A Mree, an indigenous leader living in Madhupur.

In the process of gaining profit from the forest, the department also failed to protect the forestland, leave alone the rights of forest people.

The department always wanted to keep its control over the forest ignoring the local people, resulting in total degradation of the valuable natural forest and tension again and again in the area.

This forest is very much related to the indigenous people's life, culture and livelihood. The Garos collect 27 different types of tubers for food from the forest during the rains. Moreover, they collect 57 kinds of medicinal herbs besides dried leaves and fadders for their animals.

But the government between 2000 and 2004 tried to fence in the Sal forest prohibiting the forest dwellers from collecting forest resources. The government's National Park Development Project only mounted tension and led to

degradation of the natural forest.

However, almost all the money of this around Tk 10-crore project was kept for constructing different concrete structures including brick walls, roads, toilets and development of picnic spots.

The government also implemented many others donor-funded wood tree plantation projects in which the indigenous people did not want to take part. As they demanded their land rights, they went through a contentious relation with the Department of Forest.

The department filed hundreds of cases against local indigenous people accusing them of illegal logging, while the indigenous people allege those cases were filed only to harass them.

The same scenario went on and on for years.

"We can withdraw the cases but they have to promise that they would not fell anymore trees in the forest. But the indigenous people's leader cannot make such promise," says Shah-E-Alam, divisional forest officer of Tangail forest division.

Around 3,200 cases are now pending against the indigenous people. The government in 2006 suggested that the department withdraw the cases which were filed to "harass" the people.

"Still there are more than

3,000 cases against the indigenous people filed by the Department of Forest. They issued warrants against us under the cases filed in 2004 which was only for harassment," said Ajay A Mree.

The proposal of fencing in the forest was eventually abandoned at the cost of lives of two indigenous protesters - Peeren Slan who was killed by the law enforcers on 3 January, 2004 and Cholesh Richil who was declared dead in custody of the law enforcers during the caretaker rule.

Utpal Nakreke, an indigenous youth, became handicapped forever as bullets hit his backbone during protests against the eco-park project.

HOW MUCH LAND THEY NEED

The total land claimed by 4,129 Garo families in this forest is 8,171.74 acres, while settlers are occupying about 5,547.17 acres of land within the forest.

This was revealed by a recent door-to-door survey conducted by Bangladesh Environment Lawyers Association (BELA) and the Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad in Madhupur, Muktagachha, Ghatail and Phulbaria mouzas.

The survey detects the land claimed by the Garos and other dwellers in the 18 mouzas - Aronkhola (4180.315 acres), Pirgachha (3,138.33 acres),

Joramgachha (362.395 acres), Fulbagchala (531.21 acres), Chapaid (271.64 acres), Rasulpur (89.64 acres), Chunia (442.36 acres), Sholakuri (419.835 acres), Bijoypur (84.94 acres), Beribaid (2,872.815 acres), Mohishmara (492.61 acres), Molajani (269.6 acres), Idilpur (171.26 acres), Gachhabari (278.53 acres), Mirzabari (8.82 acres), Pirojpur (71.11 acres), Dholpur (13.23 acres) and Moraid (18.87 acres).

Asked how to preserve the natural forest and protect the rights of the local people as well, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, executive director of BELA, cited the experience of the neighbouring countries.

"They recognise the rights of the forest dwellers and manage the forest in participation of the local community. And they have successfully revived much share of the natural forests," she said.

"The indigenous community will never destroy the natural forest as it goes with their lifestyle, practice and knowledge. Just the authorities have to change the approach," she added.

HOW THINGS GOING SINCE BRITISH ERA

The first onslaught on the indigenous people came in 1927 when the British colonial rulers granted the entire Madhupur tract to the Raja of Natore.

The Raja dedicated the forest to the god Govinda as endowed property.

However, the Garos were allowed to live on homestead plots paying a yearly tax. The Garo woman tenants were also granted permission to register low-lying land in their names.

The registration started in 1892 and was incorporated again in the Cadastral Survey of 1914-1918.

In 1982 the government of independent Bangladesh in a gazette notification placed much of the Madhupur tract under the category of the government forestland.

The entire procedure was completed without issuing any notice to the Garos.

When the government move was challenged in the court of justice and in the land settlement office, the authorities allegedly refused to give any opportunity to the Garos to produce their documents.

The successive governments served eviction notices to the Garos while depleting the Sal forest and even replaced the local trees with unknown species, highly detrimental to environment and local inhabitants.

LEGAL RIGHTS VIOLATED

The sections 5, 11, 12, 14 and 15 of the Forest Act, 1927 state that the original forest inhabitants may claim rights over land,

rights of way, rights of pasture, and rights over forest produce declaring the forest as a village forest.

At the same time, the Wildlife Protection Act, 1973 does not put any blanket restriction on human living or settlement in the National Park areas.

But even after 82 years of the law being in force, no such forest has been declared as "village forest" to mean actual involvement of the forest dependent people in forest management.

Sanjeev Drong, a rights activist fighting for the rights of the indigenous people, says forming a different land commission for the plain land indigenous people could solve the problems and save the forests.

"We have been demanding constitutional recognition of the indigenous people and a separate land commission for years. A separate land commission could solve the issue," Sanjeev observes.

He expresses the hope that the current government would protect the rights of indigenous people and forest dwellers as it was in the election manifesto of the ruling Awami League.

"So far it seems the government is positive to its pledges."

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