



Lanka's opposition files court challenge to president

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's former army chief and defeated presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka yesterday petitioned the Supreme Court challenging incumbent Mahinda Rajapakse's re-election, his lawyer said.

Fonseka, who lost a January 26 vote, alleged that he was robbed of victory because of rigging, electoral malpractice and undue influence on the 14 million electorate, lawyer Wijeyadasa Rajapakse told AFP.

"We are presenting a 40-page complaint to the Supreme Court on bribery, corruption, the use of undue influence and vote rigging at the election," Rajapakse said.

Fonseka received 40.15 percent of the popular vote compared to 57.88 for Rajapakse at an election many had expected to be a close fight. Two weeks after his defeat, Fonseka was arrested and placed in indefinite detention.

Rajapakse said he had earlier obtained permission from the Supreme Court for Fonseka to sign his election petition while he was being held by the military pending court martial proceedings on unspecified charges.

The country's defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is the president's younger brother, has said that Fonseka was plotting a coup, a charge rejected by the ex-army chief.

Fonseka's arrest has sparked protests and an outcry abroad with the United States, the European Union and the United Nations expressing concern that democracy should not be undermined in a country emerging from a 37-year-old separatist war.

Leaders of Sri Lanka's influential Buddhist clergy have scheduled a meeting Thursday to press their demand for the immediate release of Fonseka, the country's only four-star general who served in the military.

Top monks of all key sects as well as the guardians of the island's holiest shrine, the Temple of The Tooth, have made a joint appeal to the President to free Fonseka who is mounting a separate legal challenge over his arrest.

Fonseka was the battlefield architect of the government's victory over Tamil Tiger rebels last May, which ended their 37-year old fight for an independent Tamil homeland that cost an estimated 80,000-100,000 lives.

However, he fell out with Rajapakse and quit in November and ran against the president in January's elections.

PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka's opposition People's Liberation Front supporters protest in Colombo on Tuesday for the immediate release of former army chief and defeated presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka on whose behalf, lawyers yesterday filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging President Mahinda Rajapakse's re-election in the January 26 vote.

Blast kills 2 children in Jaffna

BBC ONLINE

At least two children have been killed and seven others injured in an explosion in the northern Jaffna peninsula, police officials say.

Police believe the pupils had been playing with an unexploded grenade they had found by the roadside, which exploded when thrown.

Two boys, aged nine and 10, were killed and five girls and two boys injured.

The area saw intense fighting between security forces and Tamil Tiger rebels in recent years.

The government has been working with international agencies to de-mine the former warzone.

Meanwhile, a police spokesman in Colombo said they had raided a private bank and seized more than \$500,000 (£319,242) belonging to relatives of the arrested former army chief Gen Sarath Fonseka.

He added an arrest warrant had been issued for Gen Fonseka's son-in-law.

Gen Fonseka, who denies plotting to overthrow the government, led the army to victory against Tamil Tiger rebels, but fell out with the government last year and contested this year's presidential election as the main opposition candidate.

Nato forces progress against fitful Taliban resistance

AP, Marjah

US and Afghan forces traded gunfire with insurgents shooting from haystacks in poppy fields yesterday as Nato forces progressed against increasingly fitful resistance in the Taliban stronghold of Marjah.

Hoping to avoid prolonged gun battles, Marines called for long-range artillery support to disperse sniper squads harassing their advance into the town. For the first time since the offensive started Saturday, US forces fired the non-lethal artillery "smoke shells" to intimidate insurgents who also lobbed rockets and mortars at them.

"We are trying not to be decisively engaged so we can progress, but we're having some difficulty right now," said Lima Company commander Capt Joshua Winfrey.

Marines said the resistance was more disorganized than in previous days.

"We're not seeing coordinated attacks like we did originally. We're still getting small-arms fire but it's sporadic, and hit-and-run tactics," said spokesman Capt Abraham Sipe. "As a whole, while there is still resistance, it is of a disorganized nature."

A Taliban spokesman, however, claimed that insurgents retain control of the town and coalition forces "descended from helicopters in limited areas of Marjah and now are under siege."

Spokesman Tariq Ghazniwal extended an invitation by e-mail to journalists to visit Marjah, saying the trip would "show who have the upper hand in the area."

Three more Afghan civilians were killed in the assault, Nato forces said, highlighting the toll on the population from an offensive aimed at making civilians safer.

The deaths in three separate incidents come after two errant US missiles struck a house on the outskirts of Marjah on Sunday, killing 12 people, half of them children. Afghan officials said three Taliban fighters were in the house at the time of the attack.

About 15,000 Nato and Afghan troops are taking part in the massive offensive around Marjah the linchpin of the Taliban logistical and opium poppy smuggling network.

India condemns Maoist attack

Death toll rises to 25

AFP, New Delhi

India's home minister yesterday condemned an attack by Maoist rebels that killed 24 police officers and a student, the latest brazen raid in a campaign of insurgent violence.

About 20 rebels on motorcycles and in cars launched the assault on a police camp in West Bengal state's Midnapore district at about 5:00 pm (11:30 GMT) Monday, killing officers in a hail of gunfire, looting weapons and detonating landmines that started fires.

It came as a security offensive is under way in several Maoist-infested states aimed at flushing the outlawed insurgents out of their strongholds.

Police said Tuesday that eight more bodies had been pulled from the charred remains of the security centre, 200 kilometres (125 miles) west of the state capital Kolkata.

In addition to the 24 officers killed, a student caught in the crossfire also died.

Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram said the attack was "another outrageous attempt by the banned organisation to over-awe the established authority in the state."

"Every attack of this kind exposes the true nature and character of the CPI (Maoists). Their goal is to seize power. Their weapon is violence."

In other recent major attacks, about 30 policemen were killed in two separate ambushes in the nearby state of Chhattisgarh in July last year. In October, 17 policemen were gunned down in western India.

"This is the worst ever attack by Maoists on security men in West Bengal," state police inspector general Surojit Kar Purokayastha told AFP by telephone.

Seven other policemen were hospitalised with bullet and severe burn injuries.



An Indian official inspects a body in a courtyard containing several bodies covered by blankets in West Midnapore of West Bengal state, on Tuesday. Twenty-four soldiers and one student were killed in an attack on an Eastern Frontier Rifles Camp on February 15, 2010 by suspected Maoists.

Amnesty urges Myanmar to end repression

BBC ONLINE

The military government in Burma has been urged to end the repression of ethnic minorities ahead of elections.

A report by Amnesty International says Burma's ethnic minority groups - up to 40% of the population - are important in the country's political opposition.

But, the rights group says, activists face surveillance, harassment and discrimination when trying to carry out legitimate political activities.

The Burmese junta has previously denied repressing ethnic groups.

It says it will hold elections at some point this year but no date has yet been set.

Amnesty International said members of the many minority groups risked arrest, imprisonment, torture and even death when attempting to participate in political life, as the junta sought to crush dissent.

It urged the Asian regional organisation the Association of South East Asian Nations, or Asean, and China to help ensure that Burma's people can participate openly in the political process.

A United Nations envoy for human rights, Tomas Ojea Quintana, is currently visiting Rakhine state in the north-west of the country, home to the ethnic Rohingya people.

Tens of thousands of Rohingyas, who are mostly Muslim, have fled the country - many to neighbouring Bangladesh - claiming abuse and oppression.

Amnesty International's latest report outlines the repression of activists including Rakhine monks, who the group said led a 2007 uprising that was bloodily suppressed with the loss of at least 31 lives.

"Any resolution of the country's deeply troubling human rights record has to take into account the rights and aspirations of the country's large population of ethnic minorities," the London-based group's Burma expert Benjamin Zawacki said.

Govt projects \$23b plan

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southwest parts of Bangladesh, including the Benapole and Darshana land ports as well as the Mongla seaport.

The project development paper for the construction of the bridge at a primarily estimated cost of \$1.9 billion has already been approved.

The government also informed the donors about its plan to construct the Jamuna Railway Bridge connecting Phulchhari and Bahadurabad ghats.

Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain said, "We have already invited letters of interest for the construction of the Jamuna Railway Bridge. We want to build the new bridge after conducting a feasibility study by a consultant."

The government has also

taken up a plan to increase the number of lanes on all regional and national highways to four to prevent accidents, he said.

"The prime minister has approved the project and the proposal has been sent to the cabinet committee on economic affairs," the communications minister added.

He said a huge amount of money would be required to implement the project, which would not be available from the donors. So, the government will take initiatives to implement the project through public-private partnership.

Syed Abul Hossain also said the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway is being upgraded to have four lanes and the government has floated a tender for increasing two more lanes.

Alternatively, the government is also considering construction of a 225km Dhaka-Chittagong elevated expressway. The donors have been informed about it and requested for assistance in the project, he said.

The minister said the development partners have raised the issue of transparency in implementing big projects in the communication sector.

The donors have been informed that all relevant documents are sent to the Transparency International for verification after any big project of the communications ministry is approved, he said.

This has assured the donors about the ministry's zero tolerance stance regarding corruption, he added.

Kennedy's letters to mistress up for auction

ANI, New York

The letters that late John F Kennedy had written to a Swedish woman during his affair with her are now up for grabs and are expected to fetch up to 25,000 dollars at auction.

According to ABC.com, the letters, which chronicle an affair Kennedy had with Gunilla von Post in the early 50s, when he was still a young US Senator, will be auctioned off on February 22.

The affair had begun well before his marriage to Jacqueline Bouvier, but it continued afterwards as well.

Indian sweepers pollute city for salary hike

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Bhubaneswar

Cleaning workers have deposited garbage on the main street of Orissa's pilgrim city of Puri, protesting against the local civic authorities turning down their demand for a salary hike.

Heaps of garbage, comprising house waste and filth, littered the streets of the temple town, some 56 km from here. Experts say this may trigger health problems among residents and tourists, if not cleared soon.

The city has about 800 temporary and permanent cleaning workers who are employed by the city's Municipality.

Opposition walks out

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senior vice-chairman of BNP. Zillul said Tarique does not have any educational qualifications and that everyone knows him as "world champion in corruption" and "prince of corruption".

BNP, Jamaat and BJP lawmakers got back to the House after two minutes.

Before Zillul, BNP lawmaker Rasheda Begum Hira had launched a broadside against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's son Sajeeb Wazed Joy.

She said Joy sees militancy in Islam and dreams of a Hindu prime minister in Bangladesh.

"It is to materialise his dream that the government has been out to eliminate Shibir activists," Hira said amid a chorus of protest from the treasury bench.

Earlier, at the beginning of the sitting, BNP lawmaker Moudud Ahmed took the floor, raising a point of order.

Referring to the changing of ZIA into Shahjalal International Airport, he said it "exposes the government's narrow-mindedness and vengeance". It is an attempt to erase Ziaur Rahman's name from people's mind.

As soon as he finished speaking, the opposition deputies walked out.

At that point, AL lawmaker Abdul Mannan took the floor and blasted Moudud for "changing sides throughout his political career".

He also accused the opposition of blemishing the dignity of the House by throwing files and papers.

Jatiya Party lawmaker

Mujib ul Haque said BNP has no moral right to preach on name-changing because it did the same while in power.

During its rule, he said, Chandrima Udyan was renamed Zia Udyan. It also blotted out Ershad's name from Ershad Army Stadium.

The past BNP government had dissolved upazila parishad system, saying that autocrat Ershad introduced it. But it did not cancel allocation of Khaleda Zia's cantonment and Gulshan residences and other financial facilities provided by the Ershad government.

JP Chairman HM Ershad, who was present at the House at that time, joined the treasury bench lawmakers in thumping desks to welcome his party colleague's speech.

Some other AL lawmakers said it was during the previous BNP rule when the Bangabandhu Bridge was changed into Jamuna Bridge, Chittagong MA Hannan International Airport into Shah Amanat International Airport, Bangabandhu Novo Theatre into Bhashani Novo Theatre, and Bangabandhu International Conference Centre into Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre.

name as it is engraved in people's hearts."

Fakhrul said that the government is now engaged in changing the names of establishments and organisations despite coming to power promising to change people's lives.

He also condemned that firecrackers were planted near BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's office on Monday and described the incident as one of a string of assassination attempts.

Protest rallies will be held at BNP district headquarters across the country and the central BNP will stage a demonstration in the capital's Muktangan at 3:00pm.

The senior joint secretary general said Awami League's recent activities are of national concern because it appears to be marching towards one-party rule.

Fakhrul said, "Awami League wants to bring back BAKSAL rule by having the constitution's fifth amendment modified in court."

He demanded release of former state minister for home Lutfozzaman Bazar who he alleged is being tortured in detention on fabricated charges.

At the press conference, former deputy minister Ruhul Quddus Talukder protested the recent attack on his Natore residence and demanded a fair probe into the incident.

The other leaders who attended the press conference included Tariquul Islam, Gayeshwar Chandra Roy, Fazlur Rahman Patal, Amanullah Aman, Ruhul Hossain Rizvi, Syed Moazzem Habib Alal and Habib-un-Nabi Khan Sohel.

Myanmar sentences 4 activists as UN envoy visits

AP, Yangon

Military-ruled Myanmar sentenced four activists to prison terms with hard labour on the same day a UN envoy arrived to assess progress on human rights in the country, the opposition said yesterday.

The four women were arrested last October after being accused of offering Buddhist monks alms that included religious literature, said Nyan Win, spokesman for the opposition party headed by detained Nobel Peace prizewinner Aung San Suu Kyi. The women used to hold prayer services at Yangon's Shwedagon pagoda for Suu Kyi's release.

Kashmir to have law on violence against women

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Jammu

The Jammu and Kashmir government will introduce a bill in the budget session of the state legislature for the protection of women against domestic violence.

The decision was taken at the state's winter capital here, at a meeting chaired by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah late Monday night.

The decision was taken in the backdrop of several cases of mysterious deaths of women in Jammu and Kashmir, attributed to a demand for dowry or harassment of women by in-laws.

Omar Abdullah had promised that the government would act fast in such matters, and in Monday night's cabinet meeting it was decided that the law ministry in consultation with the social welfare ministry will introduce a bill in the budget session, which will commence Feb 22.

4-party mulls over

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government could not fulfil any of its pledges and said "everyone with political or non-political background started speaking against its activities."

Refuting allegations that Shibir activists cut tenders of Chhatra League workers at Rajshahi University, he said he had thrown a challenge in the fifth parliament on this issue, but none came up with any proof that Shibir was involved with politics of cutting tenders.

"Such allegation has no reality. This is part of a false campaign to undermine the Chhatra Shibir," Nizami said.

Replying to a question, he said the unfortunate incident at Rajshahi University was a "pre-planned move to divert the public attention" from the failures of the government,

particularly the failure of the prime minister's visit to India.

He said, "By staging the incidents at Rajshahi University, the government prepared the ground for launching the coming operation against Jamaat-Shibir."

"This has become clear from the recent statements of the home minister and the state minister for home."

The Jamaat chief alleged that the government wants to stop the path of constitutional politics, but he said, "People would never ever accept any undemocratic political system in the country."

He cautioned that it would not be good for anyone if the door of constitutional politics is shut.

Asked whether he apprehends involvement of any third force in the recent state

of incidents that may lead to another one-eleven episode, Nizami thinks that the government is staging these incidents by using its agencies.

"Eruption of new incidents following the unfortunate happening at Rajshahi University tends to raise question by some civil society members whether the country is again moving towards the one-eleven."

He said imprudent decisions by previous governments had created scope for intervention by the third force.

"We don't have any information about it but all political parties should think over it."

The Jamaat leader said his party will project "government's repression on them in a democratic way, as they did not take any hot headed steps in the past."