

Buddhadeb urges to stop auctioning Tagore's work

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee has urged the federal Indian government to stop the auction of rare paintings of Rabindranath Tagore in London next month.

In a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, he said the paintings, presented to Leonard Elmhirst by the poet himself, had been planned to go under the hammer at the Sotheby's in London on June 15.

The news has deeply disturbed us. The Elmhirst collection of Tagore paintings is a priceless treasure of Indian culture and the government of India should take all necessary steps to bring them back to India," Bhattacharjee said.

Twelve paintings in all will be presented for sale by the Dartington Hall Trust, a charitable organisation based on Dartington Hall estate, near Totnes in South Devon in the UK.

Sotheby's has set a pre-sale price of around 250,000 pounds.

US launches Afghan civilian death probe

REUTERS, Kabul

The United States has launched an investigation into allegations that a number of American soldiers were responsible for the "unlawful deaths" of at least three Afghan civilians, the US military said yesterday.

"There are also allegations of illegal drug use, assault and conspiracy," the military said in a statement, adding that while no charges had yet been laid, one soldier was in pre-trial confinement.

The United States, which has the bulk of some 140,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, has been criticized several times by rights groups and Afghans for allegedly mistreating civilians and torturing suspected militant prisoners.

Six die in Kashmir fighting

AFP, Srinagar

An Indian policeman and five suspected Islamic militants, including two commanders wanted by the authorities, were killed in two separate gun battles in revolt-hit Kashmir, police said yesterday.

The overnight clashes took place in the southern Pulwama and Doda districts, a police spokesman said in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian-ruled Kashmir.

"Among the dead were two militant commanders wanted by the security forces," the spokesman said.



A Pakistani policeman walks past burning tyres torched by an angry mob during a protest against alleged target killings in Karachi yesterday. At least 25 people including two children have been killed in political clashes in Pakistan's financial capital Karachi in the past two days, a government official and police said.

PHOTO: AFP

Kabul denies meeting Taliban in Maldives

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan government yesterday denied sending representatives to the Maldives to take part in talks with the Taliban and branded the meeting counter-productive.

A spokesman for the Maldives president said Afghan government envoys and Taliban representatives would hold a second meeting at a resort in the Indian Ocean nation on Thursday.

Afghan presidential spokesman Waheed Omar told AFP that Kabul was aware of talks in the Maldives but said no official representatives were attending.

He said President Hamid Karzai was opposed to the talks.

"We are not represented, we do not approve of it and we do not support it," Omar said of the talks.

"They will be counter-productive."

"The Afghan government has its own plan for the reconciliation and reintegration (of Taliban operatives)," he said.

"We believe these meetings will not be productive," he said.

"We call on those parties to follow the Afghan government to make sure that this process is conceived properly and the Afghan people support it, the international community support it and we have a good result," Omar said.

Asked who was taking part in the talks, Omar said: "We're not interested."

Maldivian President Mohammed Nasheed's office said the meetings would start later Thursday, although his government was not involved.

He said there was no legal impediment for the men linked to the Taliban to enter the Maldives as they had valid passports and their names were not on UN or international travel blacklists.

"Maldivian security and intelligence agencies have been fully informed of the talks," said Nasheed's press secretary Mohamed Zuhair, without giving further details.

Naxals carried out 14 attacks during strike

PTI, New Delhi

Naxals had carried out 14 attacks during the two-day strike called by them in five states starting May 18, government said here yesterday. The Naxals not just targeted security forces but also infrastructure such as railway tracks, tractors and trucks, telephone towers and even a Gram Panchayat buildings, a statement released by the Union Home Ministry said.

Five CRPF personnel and one civilian were also killed in the violence. While West Bengal and Bihar reported five incidents of Naxal violence, Jharkhand one and Chhattisgarh three.

Laila slams Indian state, 15 killed

50,000 evacuated

AP, Hyderabad

Cyclone Laila slammed into the south Indian coast yesterday, battering the region with heavy rains and winds up to 90 kilometers (55 miles) per hour, and uprooting trees and electric lines, officials said.

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister K Rosaiah said that the cyclone appeared to be weakening, though it still could cause widespread damage. The state had evacuated more than 50,000 people as it braced for its worst storm in 14 years.

Heavy rains and strong winds killed at least 15 people over the past 24 hours, including four workers when an industrial workshop collapsed because of heavy rain, authorities said. At least 55 fishermen were reported missing.

Even before the cyclone hit, some parts of the state had been hit by up to 1 foot (32 centimetres) of rain, officials said.

Along the state's coastal districts, officials ordered fishing vessels to stay in port, Rosaiah said. "We are fully geared to face this natural calamity," he said before the cyclone hit.

More than 50,000 people were moved

from coastal and low-lying villages to temporary shelters in schools and government buildings, said state revenue minister Dharmana Prasad Rao. The state administration has identified 800 villages as vulnerable and were evacuating people before the cyclone hits, he said.

The state government set up control rooms in the nine coastal districts to coordinate any rescue missions, and helicopters and buses were on standby to evacuate more areas and deliver relief supplies, he said.

Strong winds uprooted trees, power lines and billboards, blocking off roads in many places. At least six districts were hit by power outages and hundreds of villages were in darkness for more than 10 hours.

Authorities on Wednesday decided to open 120 relief camps in Machilipatnam, a town considered to be the likely cyclone landfall point, said Piyush Kumar, the district administrator.

Kumar said people were being moved to high ground from 83 villages in the area, about 215 miles (350 kilometres) east of Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh state.

Pakistan blocks YouTube access

BBC ONLINE, AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has blocked the popular video sharing website YouTube because of its "growing sacrilegious content".

Access to the social network Facebook has also been barred as part of a crackdown on websites seen to be hosting gun-Islamic content.

On Wednesday a Pakistani court ordered Facebook to be blocked temporarily in a row over a competition involving caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad.

Some Wikipedia pages are also now being restricted, latest reports say.

There has been no response yet from YouTube. The site was briefly blocked in Pakistan in 2008 - ostensibly for carrying material deemed offensive to Muslims.

Correspondents say it remains to be seen how successful the new bans will be in Pakistan and whether citizens find a way around them.

Facebook said on Wednesday it was investigating the competition on its pages but that the content did not violate its terms.

There have been protests in several Pakistani cities against the Facebook competition.

The Pakistan Telecommunications Authority authorities said it had ordered internet service providers to "completely shut down" YouTube and Facebook from being viewed within Pakistan.

Pak Islamist leader shot dead

BBC ONLINE

Gunmen have shot dead a former Pakistani parliamentarian near the north-western city of Tank, police say.

Maulana Merajuddin was the head of Maulana Fazlur Rahman's Islamist Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party in tribal areas where the Taliban have a stronghold.

He was shot dead near his home by two men on a motorcycle as he returned from the mosque after pre-dawn prayers.

He was a key figure in the government's talks with tribal elders and militants in the neighbouring Waziristan region.

"Maulana Merajuddin was shot dead at about 6am just a few yards outside his residence in Murtaza village when he was returning from the mosque," Shahab Ali Shah, the administrative head of South Waziristan tribal region, told the BBC.

Air power use against Maoist on meeting agenda

ANI, New Delhi

Defence Minister A K Antony yesterday said the government will thoroughly discuss the use of air power for fighting Maoists, and added that the decision would be binding on all, including the defence ministry.

"I will not entertain a public debate on this. The strategy is not to be debated in public. Government will discuss thoroughly, then ultimately government will take a decision. That decision will be binding on everybody, including the Ministry of Defence, Antony said.

Earlier on Wednesday, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh had said air power could not be used to attack the insurgents as it may result in major collateral damage.

Reacting to a question about the use of air strikes against the rebels, Singh said air power could not be used to attack the insurgents as it may result in major collateral damage. He, however, favoured the use of helicopters.

ME PEACE TALKS

No signs of progress as US envoy leaving

AFP, Jerusalem

There were no immediate signs of progress as US envoy George Mitchell wrapped up his latest visit to the Middle East yesterday after holding "proximity talks" with Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

US and Israeli officials declined to comment on three and a half hour talks between Mitchell and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the special envoy was scheduled to depart shortly after the meeting.

Israeli media had reported that Netanyahu would offer a package of goodwill gestures to encourage the Palestinians to proceed to direct talks, which they have refused in the absence of a total freeze on Israeli settlement building.

France trying to gag Shinawatra on Thai crisis

AFP, Paris

French authorities are seeking to prevent former Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra from speaking out in Paris on the political crisis in his homeland, the newspaper Le Figaro reported Thursday.

Contacted by AFP, the French foreign ministry was not willing to confirm nor deny the report, which also alleged Thaksin was photographed buying luxury goods on the Champs-Elysees while fighting raged on the streets of Bangkok.

The newspaper did not publish the picture, but a foreign policy think tank issued an invitation to journalists to meet Thaksin on Monday next week at a press dinner in Paris to discuss the chaotic events of recent weeks.

Organisers confirmed that the event organised by the little-known Centre of Political and Foreign Affairs was still expected to go ahead, but added that the fugitive former leader had temporarily left Paris for London.

Thaksin was ousted in a bloodless military coup in 2006 and lives in self-imposed exile, mainly in Dubai, to avoid a jail term for corruption.

Many of the "Red Shirt" protesters who have been demonstrating in Bangkok seek the return of the former premier, and the current government has accused him of bankrolling the protests and inciting unrest from overseas.

UK govt publishes 'historic' coalition policy deal

BBC ONLINE

Details of the coalition deal struck between the Tories and the Lib Dems have been published in full in what the parties called a "historic document".

Prime Minister David Cameron said policies had been ditched on both sides - but the coalition had the "potential to be a great reforming government".

He said it would provide "strong, stable government" for Britain.

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said the deal was defined by three words: "Freedom, fairness and responsibility."

The two men shared a platform to launch the 34-page document, which has been put together in nine days - something hailed by Mr Cameron as a "remarkable achievement".

It builds on the four-page deal produced during negotiations in the days after the UK election resulted in a hung Parliament.

FLEXIBLEWORKING

The document includes the agreements on policy areas such as banking, civil liberties, defence, the environment, Europe, immigration, welfare and political reform - some of which the parties have disagreed on in the past.

It includes plans to sell off at least part of Royal Mail, although it vows to keep the Post Office network in public ownership.

On crime, it promises to slash police bureaucracy and says people will be given "greater legal protection to prevent crime and apprehend criminals". Anonymity in rape cases will be extended to defendants.

The sale of below cost price alcohol will also be banned and councils allowed to charge more for late pub licences to pay for more police - although 24 hour drinking will not be scrapped.

The new government also pledges to freeze council tax in England for at least a year. The right to request flexible working will also be extended to all employees.

Both Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg said tackling Britain's record budget deficit would be their first priority but stressed that that did not mean they could not pursue a "radical" reforming programme of government.

In the document's foreword, the two party leaders write: "In every part of this agreement we have gone further than simply adopting those policies where we previously overlapped."

"We have found that a combination of our parties' best ideas and attitudes has produced a programme for government that is more radical and comprehensive than our individual manifestos."

"For example, when you take Conservative plans to strengthen families and encourage social responsibility and add them to the Liberal Democrat passion for protecting our civil liberties and stopping the relentless incursion of the state into the lives of individuals, you create a big society matched by big citizens."

New anti-austerity strike begins in Greece

BBC ONLINE

Much of Greece's transport network has been immobilised, as trade unions stage another 24-hour general strike against austerity measures.

Ferries are tied up in port, railway stations shut, and the Labour Ministry occupied by communist protesters.

Organisers are hoping that up to 100,000 people will join protests on the streets later.

There are fears of renewed violence after protests in Athens two weeks ago led to the deaths of three people.

Many Greeks are angered by spending cuts and tax and pension-age rises planned, in return for a 110bn-euro (€95bn) bailout from the EU and IMF.

The measures aim to achieve billions of euros in budget cuts over three years, with the goal of cutting Greece's public deficit to less than 3% of GDP by 2014. It currently stands at 13.6%.

'MOOD BAROMETER'

The strike officially began at midnight on Wednesday local time.

Train services, shipping and domestic flights were severely disrupted early on Thursday.

The strike was also expected to force the closure of government buildings, schools and banks, and to reduce hospitals to emergency staff later in the day.

The country's main civil service and public sector unions say they represent some 2.5 million workers.

"People are bleeding financially but they will participate in the strike," Ilias Vrettakos, a senior member of the ADEDY union, was quoted as saying by Reuters.

However, Greek air traffic controllers are not taking part in the industrial action.

They have decided to continue working because travellers have faced too much disruption recently from the Icelandic volcano and also because of concerns about the impact of the strike on tourism, the BBC's Malcolm Brabant in Athens reports.

He says that journalists have also decided to postpone their industrial action, because one of the most essential components of this rolling campaign is publicity.



A man shouts slogans in front of the Greek Parliament during the protest march marking the 24-hour general strike against the austerity measures yesterday. Thousands of protesters took to the streets of Athens and second city Thessaloniki on Thursday in a new general strike against the government's debt-dictated austerity spending cuts and pension reform.

PHOTO: AFP