

Indian SC asks about river linking project

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The Indian Supreme Court on Thursday wanted to know the fate of the ambitious Rs 5 lakh crore river interlinking project and wanted Attorney General Ghulam E Vahanvati to apprise it of its status.

"The project has to be feasible and work itself out. We want a statement from the government whether it is feasible" said a Bench comprising Chief Justice S H Kapadia and Justices K S Radhakrishnan and Swatanter Kumar.

Appearing for an intervenor, advocate Prashant Bhushan questioned the public interest involved in a mammoth scheme and alleged officials were being forced to keep the project alive because of the "misconception" that it was a court-mandated project.

While amicus curiae and senior advocate Ranjit Kumar dispelled the alleged notion and said there was no doubt that it was a beneficial project.

The fate of the ambitious Rs 5,00,000 crore project proposing linkages between major rivers by the year 2016 has virtually remained a non-starter and the detailed project report (DPR) is virtually in cold storage.

The inter-linking project has drawn widespread concerns in Bangladesh over its impact on environment and availability of water in the Ganges and the Brahmaputra.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani waves as he arrives at the headquarters of political party Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) in Karachi yesterday. Pakistan's Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) said that it would rejoin the government coalition, but not the federal cabinet in a move that restores the prime minister's majority following a five-day crisis.

MQM party to rejoin Pak PM Gilani's coalition

BBC ONLINE

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has pulled his government back from the brink, persuading a former ally to rejoin the coalition.

The Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), which walked out last Sunday, relented a day after Mr Gilani defied the IMF with a climbdown on fuel price rises.

After talks with the MQM in Karachi, Mr Gilani also confirmed there would be no tax reform soon - another IMF demand.

As well as rampant militancy, Pakistan faces the threat of hyperinflation.

The sense of crisis has been growing in the country after Tuesday's assassination by his bodyguard of an outspoken liberal governor of the ruling Pakistan People's Party.

Mr Gilani's car was showered with rose petals as he arrived to meet MQM leaders yesterday in Karachi, the capital of the southern province of Sindh.

"The Muttahida Quami Movement announces it will sit on

the government benches in the larger interest of the country and democracy," senior MQM member Raza Haroon told a news conference with Mr Gilani afterwards.

The MQM's change of heart comes a day after the prime minister told parliament fuel prices would be restored to the levels they were on 31 December.

The MQM had walked out condemning the 9% rise in the price of petrol and the kerosene, leaving the prime minister facing a possible no-confidence vote.

US missiles kill five in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah, Pakistan

A barrage of US missiles killed up to five militants in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal district yesterday, destroying a vehicle used by Islamist fighters, security officials said.

Pakistani security officials reported the strikes in what is reputedly the country's most impregnable Taliban and Al-Qaeda fortress, where US officials want Pakistan to launch a ground offensive to eliminate the militant threat.

They said strikes killed five rebels in Ghar Laley village, 35 kilometres (22 miles) west of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, and close to the Afghan border.

"US drones fired four missiles, targeting a vehicle and a house," a local Pakistani security official said.

"So far five bodies have been recovered," he said. "Taliban have surrounded the area and there are fears the final toll may go up," he said.

The area is a stronghold of Taliban commander Hafiz Gul Bahadur but neither the precise identities of the dead nor whether they included any high-value target was immediately clear.

NEWS IN brief

Taliban suicide attack kills 17 at Afghan bath

AFP, Kandahara

Taliban suicide bomber yesterday assassinated a police commander and killed 16 others at a public bath in southern Afghanistan near the Pakistan border.

The militia claimed responsibility for the attack as part of its nine-year insurgency against the Western-backed Afghan government, concentrated in the south, particularly the province of Kandahar where the bomber struck.

"At around 12:00 pm (0730 GMT) a suicide bomber blew up explosives strapped to his chest at a public bath in Spin Boldak," border police

Parcel bomb blasts wound 1 at US state office

AFP, Washington

At least one person was injured Thursday when packages delivered to US state government buildings detonated, with one of them flaring and another giving off smoke, officials and local media said.

Maryland's WTOP radio initially reported explosions at a government building at the state capital Annapolis and at a Department of Transportation building in the eastern part of the state.

But a local official declined to confirm that the packages had exploded and the radio station later said that they appeared to have fizzled.

Cargo ship fire kills four Chinese off S Korea

AFP, Seoul

Four Chinese sailors died yesterday after a fire gutted a Cambodia-flagged cargo ship off South Korea's southern port of Busan, coast guard officials said.

The coast guard said the 1,400-ton Yunxing with eight Chinese and one from Myanmar aboard caught fire early yesterday, two nautical miles from Busan.

Four Chinese died and the rest of the crew was pulled to safety, a Busan coast guard spokes-

Mideast Christians victims of 'cleansing': Sarkozy

AFP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy said yesterday that Christian minorities in the Middle East are victims of "religious cleansing", following deadly attacks on churches in the region.

"We cannot accept and thereby facilitate what looks more and more like a particularly wicked programme of cleansing in the Middle East, religious cleansing," he said in an annual New Year's

'Qaeda ambush' kills five Yemeni soldiers

AFP, Aden

Yemen Al-Qaeda militants killed five Yemeni soldiers and wounded two others along with a civilian yesterday when they attacked a military convoy in restive southern Abyan province, officials said.

"We were hit today in an Al-Qaeda ambush which resulted in the killing of five soldiers and two others being wounded," a security official who requested anonymity told AFP.

Rebels major

FROM PAGE 20

and the opposition BNP each have 86 aspirants for Rajshahi division where the polls will be held on January 12.

The situation has worsened for BNP as its ally Jamaat-e-Islami nominated 13 candidates in eight districts of the division. Of them, four will stand in Rajshahi and three in Chapainawabganj.

The AL-led grand alliance spared only one mayor seat of Gabtoli municipality in Bogra to its ally Jatiya Party.

Meanwhile, Workers Party and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal of the grand alliance independently gave one candidate in Rajshahi and four in Rajshahi and four in Chapainawabganj, Bogra and Joypurhat districts respectively.

AL, however, managed solitary candidates in Kesharhat and Bhawaniganj municipalities while BNP in Godagari and Charghat.

The polls in Rajshahi division will be held in 11 municipalities, the highest in the country, where 53 mayor aspirants -- 22 AL and 21 BNP -- are vying to win. AL and BNP have rebel contestants within the parties in nine municipalities.

Despite being expelled from the party, Mundumala Municipality AL general secretary Ahsanul Haq Swapan and AL leader Nazrul Islam of Durgapur are continuing their election campaigns in full swing alongside AL candidates.

Some 39 mayor candidates -- 11 of AL and 15 of BNP are competing in nine municipalities of the northern business district of Bogra where AL has rebels contestants in three municipalities and BNP in seven.

At Kalahu, upazila AL president Helal Uddin Kabiraj is competing against his brother Kamal Uddin Kabiraj, upazila AL joint secretary.

Meanwhile, confusion stroke the voters of Nandigram as AL has nominated Mahmud Ashraf there after Jatiya Party's Mahbubur Rahman had earlier been declared locally the grand alliance candidate.

Pabna has 37 candidates - 17 of AL and 15 of BNP vying in seven municipalities. Although two of the

three rebel AL aspirants in Pabna municipality kept from contesting the polls following the party's warning, more rebels are still campaigning in five municipalities there, except for Chatmohor and Iswardi.

BNP, however, has rebel candidates campaigning in all the seven municipalities in Pabna.

Sirajganj has 29 mayor aspirants nine of AL and eight of BNP in six municipalities. AL managed to avoid rebels in Sirajganj, Belkuchi and Ullapara municipalities while BNP has dissidents in only Raiganj and Sirajganj.

Natore district also has six municipalities with 25 mayor candidates -- 12 of AL and 10 of BNP. AL has rebel candidates only in newly made Naldanga municipality while BNP has single candidates in Natore, Shingra and Naldanga.

In Chapainawabganj, 19 mayor aspirants six of AL and seven of BNP -- are contesting in four municipalities. Both the parties have dissidents in Rohonpur and Nachol municipalities. Although there is no rebel in Shibganj, BNP candidate Shamim Kabir Helim will have to race with Jamaat's Jafar Ali.

Joypurhat has seven AL and eight BNP candidates among a total of 22 mayor aspirants competing in four municipalities. AL has three rebels in Kalai and Panchbibi while BNP also has rebels in those two municipalities along with one more in Akkelpur.

Although AL and BNP have no rebel aspirants among five mayor candidates at Naogaon municipality, former mayor Aminul Haque of AL is facing tough rebellion of AL upazila adviser Sayed Latifur Rahman at Nazirpur municipalities of the district.

Insiders of both the parties said divisions between central and district unit leaders in AL and BNP sparked dissidents at the grassroots level and the leaders are now asking the rebels to quit the polls.

AL high command said they would take disciplinary actions against those who are disobeying party decision after repeated warnings.

Pakistan bans road, rail onion exports to India

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan this week banned overland onion exports to chief rival India in a bid to control rising prices at home for the South Asian food staple, the commerce ministry said yesterday.

"The exports triggered a shortage of onions in our domestic market," a ministry spokesman told AFP. "I can confirm the restriction has been imposed on exports of the commodity through the Wagah border," he said, in reference to the land crossing between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, who have fought three wars since 1947.

Exports of onions to India by sea, however, were not restricted, he said.

The clampdown was aimed at discouraging ordinary traders from trucking onions to India, currently facing a shortage of the vegetable, after consumers complained that costs have more than doubled in Pakistan in recent weeks.

Prices in Islamabad, where food items are generally more expensive than elsewhere, have risen from 40 Pakistani rupees last month to up to 90 rupees a kilo (\$0.47 to \$1.05).

In India, prices reached 80-85 Indian rupees (\$1.75-\$1.87) last month and are currently around 70 rupees a kilo, way above the "normal" retail price of 20-25 rupees.

"We have urged them (the authorities in Pakistan) that the contracted quantities, which were to come via the land route, should be released," The Economic Times quoted Indian Commerce Minister Anand Sharma as saying yesterday.

Advertisement for CCA (Citizens' Complaints Commission) featuring a magnifying glass icon, contact information, and details about the commission's services.

A detailed table listing various government services, including recruitment (নিয়োগ বিজ্ঞপ্তি) and other administrative notices with specific dates and locations.