

UK coalition faces test at the polls

AFP, London

Prime Minister David Cameron's eight-month-old coalition government was facing its first by-election test yesterday in a vote that could deliver a slap in the face for his junior partners.

The vote in Oldham East and Saddleworth, northwest England, is the first proper chance since May's general election for voters to give their verdict on the coalition between Cameron's Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

Polls show that the opposition Labour Party are set to win the seat comfortably, dealing a major setback to Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg's Lib Dems.

The Liberals are likely to be punished for their U-turn on a policy which will see a tripling of tuition fees for university students -- a measure which has sparked demonstrations, some of which have descended into violence.

Labour beat the Lib Dems to the seat by just 103 votes in the general election, with the Conservatives trailing in third place.

But the winner then, former immigration

minister Phil Woolas, was found to have made untrue statements about his Liberal rival Elwyn Watkins and was stripped of the seat.

The by-election has also been closely watched to see if the centre-right Conservatives and the left-leaning centrist Lib Dems keep their promise to compete with each other in elections despite their tie-up at national level.

There have been reports that Cameron ordered Conservative campaigning to be scaled back to help out his coalition partners.

The government has unveiled a package of deep spending cuts and tax rises in a bid to rein in Britain's record deficit.

Polling stations opened in the constituency near Manchester at 0700 GMT and were set to close at 2200 GMT, with the result likely to come early today.

The result will not have a significant impact on the coalition's strength, as the government has a working majority of 84.

Of the 650 seats in parliament, the Conservatives hold 305, the Lib Dems 57 and Labour 253.

Toll set to rise as Brisbane floods recede

CNN, Brisbane, Australia

Floodwater that threatened the worst flooding in Brisbane in decades slowly started to recede yesterday, carving a muddy trail of destruction through the city which authorities warned would take months to clear up.

More than 20,000 homes were inundated with water after the normally subdued Brisbane River turned into a raging torrent as weeks of rain combined with bulging dams and high tides to push it to a peak of over four meters at high tide early yesterday.

At a news conference, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh fought back tears as she described the damage inflicted by the state's "worst natural disaster in our history."



A woman lights a candle to mark Defenders of Freedom Day in Vilnius yesterday. The EU Baltic nation of Lithuania marks the 20th anniversary of a bloody Soviet assault on its independence movement that left 14 dead and hundreds injured in a botched crackdown that sped the communist bloc's demise on January 13, 1991

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Biden visits Baghdad 'to celebrate progress'

AFP, Baghdad

US Vice President Joe Biden said yesterday he had come to Baghdad "to help Iraqis celebrate" progress, as he met with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki hours after arriving in the Iraqi capital.

Biden's unannounced tour of world hotspots had previously taken him to Kabul, where he met Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and to Islamabad, where he met with top Pakistani officials.

"I'm here to help the Iraqis celebrate the progress they made. They formed a government. And that's a good thing. They have a long way to go," said Biden.

Russia urges Iran to explain 'grey areas' at nuclear talks

AFP Moscow

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday called for Iran to agree talks to clear up "grey areas" in its contested nuclear programme at a meeting with six world powers in Istanbul this month.

Iran will meet Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States and Germany for the talks on January 21-22. The world powers have insisted that the talks with the Islamic republic should focus on

Hariri asked to lead caretaker government in Lebanon

CNN, Beirut, Lebanon

Lebanese President Michel Suleiman asked the country's prime minister yesterday to remain as head of a caretaker administration after Hezbollah and its allies brought down Lebanon's unity government, his office said.

Prime Minister Saad Hariri's government fell Wednesday after Minister of State Adnan Sayyed Hussein turned in his resignation along with 10 members of the Hezbollah-led March 8 alliance, meaning that the threshold needed -- 11 resignations from the 30-member Cabinet -- to collapse the

No wrong in detention

FROM PAGE 1

what the person did," he said.

Rapp observed that the people of Bangladesh want to see justice to war crimes; especially the young people want to know what happened to their uncles, aunts and grandparents in 1971.

"It creates an expectation and sends a message that crimes like these are not going to be tolerated; that perhaps not in a week after the crime, but even 40 years after the crime" said Rapp, a former prosecutor of Special Court for Sierra Leone in 2007.

The court tried former Liberian president Charles Taylor for his crimes during the country's civil war.

"The individuals that chose to target innocent people for their political or whatever gain, and chose to kill innocent will face consequences," he noted.

He thinks that the trial can be held under the law formulated in 1973 provided that the crimes are recognised under international humanitarian law. The constitution of Bangladesh also accepts such laws, he added.

He, however, suggested some changes to the International Crimes Tribunal Act, 1973 for ensuring a transparent trial.

The law should include definitions set by International Criminal Court (ICC) and other international tribunals on genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, he observed.

He will send a letter to the law minister next week suggesting issues that might be raised by defence lawyers or international organisations during the trial.

On the overall trial process, he said it should maintain international standards.

"It is important that these cases happen in national level, close to the communities that were affected, close to the victims, close to the families of the people who were accused who can visit and watch and learn for themselves. This is an opportunity for a process that can be developed as a model."

2011 evokes fear

FROM PAGE 20

High-income countries were expected to expand by 2.7 percent and developing countries would speed up just a notch, to 6.1 percent.

Still, the overall pace of growth is too weak to give the recovery solid traction, the World Bank said.

"Unfortunately these growth rates are unlikely to be fast enough to eliminate unemployment and slack in the hardest-hit economies and economic sectors."

In addition, "serious tensions and pitfalls persist in the global economy, which in the short run could derail the recovery to differing degrees," it warned.

Threats that could derail the recovery include the eurozone financial market crisis, volatile capital flows and the rising prices of commodities, including food and fuel, the 187-nation institution said.

The World Bank expressed particular concern about rising commodity prices, including food and fuel, driven by loose monetary policies in the developed countries and solid demand in the emerging economies.

"Although real food prices in most developing countries have not increased as much as those measured in US dollars, they have risen sharply in some poor countries," the World Bank said.

"And if international prices continue to rise, affordability issues and poverty impacts could intensify."

"We are very concerned about the rise in the

food prices... We see some similarities with the situation in 2008, just before the financial crisis," Hans Timmer, the bank's director of development prospects, said at a news conference.

In 2008, oil prices surged above \$147 a barrel in July, then fell to nearly \$30 six months later.

Currently around \$92 in New York, oil prices are above the bank's estimate of \$85 a barrel on average in 2011, compared with \$79 in 2010.

Commodity prices excluding oil were expected to dip 0.1 percent in dollar terms.

The 2008 scenario of soaring food and oil prices amid slowing growth, which had revived the word "stagflation," would likely be avoided, the World Bank said, as long as supply follows the rhythm of demand.

"The situation is also slightly different from 2008, because first of all in the grain markets, the stocks are much larger than the tight situation then, and also, it (the market) is much more localized, much more diverse" than for the industrial commodities, Timmer said.

In 2008, a powerful surge in commodity prices was abruptly snuffed out by the bankruptcy of US investment bank Lehman Brothers in September.

Asked how conditions would be different this time, the economist said he hoped that supplies would respond to demand.

"You have there still large stockpiles, which were not available in the crisis of 2008, but clearly we are in an upward trend," he said.

"And the consequences for people and individual countries can be serious."

Culprits warned

FROM PAGE 20

mentioned the premier.

Referring to an FAO warning that the world will witness food deficit in coming years, Hasina directed all to cultivate every inch of land to ensure country's food autarky.

The premier expressed her sincere sympathy for the city dwellers who have been experiencing low gas pressure. "Cooking has become difficult these days due to low pressure of gas at places," said Hasina, the president of ruling Awami League.

She held BNP-Jamaat coalition and caretaker governments responsible for the gas and electricity crises. Mentioning AL's defeat in the 2001 parliamentary elections, she said her party had to accept it only because she did not want to sell gas to the foreigners.

"We had been told that the country is floating on huge reserves of gas. But when we took charge this time we found the reserves depleting gradually."

She said her government

has taken several initiatives, including exploring new gas fields in the country in a bid to put an end to this crisis.

She requested people to be economical in using electricity. "When you go out of home, please don't forget to switch off the bulbs or the television sets... You can get lower electricity bill and conserve power," she said.

Thanking Bangladesh Army for commissioning the plant within four months, the premier directed the other companies for quick completion of the ongoing power plant projects.

DPA Power Generation International Limited implemented the power plant under the supervision of Bangladesh Army. Army-run Bangladesh Diesel Plant, local Primordial Energy Ltd and Aggretech AG of Germany jointly set up the plant.

Pointing to Bangladesh's geographical position, the premier said "We are going to build an international standard airport which, I hope,

would bridge the east and west."

She also stated that her government's aim is to build a developed, prosperous and modern Bangladesh and sought cooperation from all to this end.

Prime Minister's Energy Adviser Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Brig Gen (ret'd) Enamul Haq, AL lawmaker Sarah Begum Kabori, Chief of Army Staff General Md Abdul Mubeen, DPA chairman and Quarter Master General of Bangladesh Army Lt Gen Iqbal Karim Bhuiyan, Power Division's Additional Secretary Tapos Kumar Roy and chairman of Bangladesh Power Development Board, ASM Alamgir Kabir also spoke at the function, chaired by DPA Managing Director Brig Gen (ret'd) Golam Zakaria.

WikiLeaks chief blasts Chinese Internet censorship

AFP, London

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has blasted China as the "technological enemy" of his whistleblower website because of its aggressive Internet censorship, in comments published yesterday.

Assange has enraged the United States with his site's release of leaked diplomatic cables, and lawyers for the Australian believe efforts are under way to send him to the US where they claim he could face the death penalty.

But China, with its vast Internet censorship system known as the "Great Firewall of China," is the site's most feared foe in cyberspace, the 39-year-old told Britain's New Statesman magazine.

"China is the worst offender" when it comes to censorship, said Assange, who is on bail in Britain fighting attempts to extradite him to Sweden over claims of sexual assault.

"China has aggressive and sophisticated interception technology that places itself between every reader inside China and every information source outside China.

"We've been fighting a running battle to make sure we can get information through, and there are now all sorts of ways Chinese readers can get on to our site."

China's system of censorship is designed to filter out any information deemed sensitive or politically harmful by the country's Communist government.

Social networking site Facebook, video-sharing giant YouTube and microblogging site Twitter are among those blocked by Chinese censors.

In the interview yesterday, conducted by veteran journalist John Pilger, a prominent supporter of the Australian hacker, Assange also claimed he had files on media mogul Rupert Murdoch.

Trial done

FROM PAGE 20

was based on testimonies of other accused and no corroborating evidence.

He placed his statement before an HC bench hearing the writ petition that challenged the martial law regulation under which the tribunal was formed, Col Taher was tried and sentenced to death in 1976.

Abdul Ali, then a first-class magistrate, said he had verbally explained the law to the authorities that nobody can be tried and sentenced based on such testimony and without corroborating evidence.

"I had no intention to become a judge of the military tribunal and I had tried to resign from my office but I could not submit the resignation letter to the authorities due to the situation during the military regime," he told the HC.

In his statement, Abdul Ali said he went to the tribunal as a judge following the directive of then deputy commissioner of Dhaka MM Shawkat Ali.

The HC bench of Justice AHM Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik and Justice Sheikh Md Zakir Hossain yesterday ordered MM Shawkat Ali to appear before the bench on January 18 for placing his statement.

The HC on January 12 directed the government to let the court know the present status and whereabouts of four judges of the military tribunal, including Abdul Ali, by January 18. One other judge is now deceased.

Abdul Ali told the bench that he signed the

judgment, convicting Col Taher, since the majority of judges of the military tribunal had agreed on the verdict.

The judges and lawyers of the tribunal had taken oaths of secrecy, he said.

He apologised to the court for being a member of the tribunal.

In reply to a query of the HC, Abdul Ali said as far as he could remember, Col Taher was accused of killing 32 people, including two women, sedition and conspiring against the then government.

Replying to another query, the retired judge said he was not a relative of late president Ziaur Rahman.

The three other living judges of the military tribunal are Abdur Rashid, then wing commander of Air Force; Siddique Ahmed, then acting commander of the navy; and first-class magistrate Hasan Morshed.

Yusuf Haider, a military officer at that time and chairman of the tribunal, is now dead.

The court earlier recorded statements of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal lawmaker Hasanul Huq Inu, Major (ret'd) Zia Uddin, Mahmudur Rahman Manna and sergeant (ret'd) Syed Rafiqul Islam who were convicted by the tribunal.

The bench adjourned the hearing until Sunday.

Additional Attorney General MK Rahman and Deputy Attorney General ABM Altaf Hossain appeared for the government.



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PRICE SENSITIVE INFORMATION

Mr. Waliur Rahman Bhuiyan, currently the Managing Director of BOC Bangladesh Limited, voluntarily decided to take early retirement due to health reasons and will step down on 12 May 2011. In its meeting on 13 January 2011, the Board of Directors of the Company has appointed Mr. Erphan Shehabul Matin, currently the Business Director as the new Managing Director who will take over the responsibilities from Mr. Bhuiyan with effect from 13 May 2011.

Mr. Azizur Rashid, currently the Finance Director & Company Secretary of the Company has also voluntarily decided to take early retirement effective 31 January 2011. In the same meeting, the Board of Directors of the Company has appointed Mr. Nazmul Hossain, currently the General Manager, Finance, as the new Finance Director & Company Secretary with effect from 1 February 2011.

Issued by the office of the Company Secretary,
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