

Albanian PM defiant after 3 killed in clashes

Calls for counter protests

AFP, Tirana

International organisations appealed for calm after clashes between demonstrators and Albanian security forces during an anti-government protest in Tirana left three people dead and dozens wounded.

Three people were brought to the city's military hospital with fatal gunshot wounds, hospital emergency services chief Sami Koceku told AFP by phone.

Meanwhile, Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha yesterday slammed the opposition for a "Tunisia-style" revolt and called for counter demonstrations as opposition leaders vowed to continue their protest.

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets for an anti-government protest called by the socialist opposition on Friday. The demonstration ended with violent clashes between protesters and the police and three

people were killed.

It remained unclear who had shot the demonstrators, but Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha said they had been killed by weapons that police and the army "do not use" and blamed the protest's organisers for the violence.

Police were yet to confirm the toll, but hospital sources reported 55 injured, of whom 25 were police officers and 30 civilians.

The clashes marked the first time opposition protests had ended in violence since the political crisis erupted after disputed 2009 general elections.

The socialists, led by Tirana Mayor Edi Rama, called the demonstration to pressure the government to step down, accusing it of corruption and electoral fraud.

Their call came after last week's resignation of deputy prime minister Ilir Meta, who is at the centre of a corruption affair.



PHOTO: AFP
Demonstrators sport Algerian and Tunisian flags as they shout slogans outside the opposition Rally for Culture and Democracy party's headquarters in Algiers yesterday. Riot police clashed with protesters in the Algerian capital as they broke up a banned pro-democracy rally amid mounting public grievances that have fueled fears of Tunisia-style unrest.

Nuclear talks with Iran fail

AFP, Istanbul

Talks between world powers and Iran ended yesterday without progress in tackling concerns over Tehran's nuclear programme, and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said no more are planned.

"We had hoped to embark on a discussion of practical ways forward, and have made every effort to make that happen. I am disappointed to say that this has not been possible," Ashton told reporters.

She spoke at the end of two days of talks in Istanbul between Iran and the so-called P5+1 group of Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States and Germany, whose delegation she headed.

NEWS IN brief

Beijing welcomes inter-Korean talks

AFP, Beijing

Beijing has welcomed proposed talks between military officers from North and South Korea, the first since a deadly artillery attack sent relations on the peninsula into a tailspin.

"We welcome and support the move by North Korea and South Korea to improve their relations through dialogue, moving towards reconciliation and cooperation," said foreign affairs spokesman Hong Lei, according to a posting on the ministry's website.

"We hope this dialogue will bring about a positive

Shot US lawmaker leaves Tucson hospital

AFP, Los Angeles

US lawmaker Gabrielle Giffords was given an emotional send off Friday as she was moved close to her family in Texas, where medics called her recovery "outstanding" two weeks after a gun rampage.

The Arizona congresswoman had tears in her eyes when she heard well-wishers applaud the ambulance taking her from hospital in Tucson, where she was shot in the head at point-blank range two weeks ago in an attack that killed six.

"The transfer of Gabby... went flawlessly," said trauma expert Randall Friese at the Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston, Texas, where

Blair sounds warning on Iran

AFP, London

Former prime minister Tony Blair told Britain's Iraq war inquiry that the world had to use force if needed to curb Iran's nuclear drive and expressed regret at the death toll from the 2003 conflict.

Blair also said US President Barack Obama's approach to Tehran was failing during his second appearance before the inquiry.

The former premier, now Middle East peace envoy, was at his most animated when talking Friday about Iran's influence in the region, which he condemned as "negative" and "destabilising".

"Iraq is one part of a far bigger picture and right across that region, people are facing that struggle," he said.

Cuba halts all mail deliveries to US

AFP, Havana

Cuba halted all mail deliveries to the United States on Friday over a dispute about US security procedures, and after they said that US-bound mail had been returned to the island.

State postal service Correos de Cuba announced that a freeze on all correspondence was "the result of new security measures imposed on the aviation authorities of the United States to all countries in the world."

The service "advises that until further notice, post offices are not accepting any shipments destined for the United States."

The United States adopted the new security measures last year following the attempted mailing of

Venezuela's Chavez may end party leadership

AFP, Caracas

President Hugo Chavez suggested Friday that he was too busy to continue being head of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), the country's main leftist force.

Chavez was ratified just last week as head of the PSUV, a group that formed when several leftist political groups merged in 2007.

"I am president of the republic, I am head of state, head of government, head of the army... it's only an idea, I'll leave it up to you to debate the issue,"

Tunisian PM pledges to quit after 'free' polls

Tunisia braces for fresh rallies

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia braced for fresh protests yesterday after the main trade union called for a new government of "national salvation", as the prime minister promised the first democratic elections since independence.

The rallies come on the second day of a national mourning period put in place by the new authorities for the victims of a bloody crackdown by 23-year president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali before his ouster on January 14.

Flags flew at half-mast and public television broadcast Koranic prayers.

The UGTT union, which played a key role in the protests, has rejected the government installed after Ben Ali's downfall because it has kept in place some of the same people in key posts despite unveiling huge democratic reforms.

"The street is still boiling over," said the independent daily Le Quotidien.

Protesters "are determined to wipe out any trace of the old regime and its ideological instrument, the RCD", it said.

"It's clear that transition to a truly democratic regime will not happen without a hitch," it added.

Earlier, Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, who has kept his post despite the revolt, vowed to quit politics after the north African country's first fair polls since independence from France in 1956, in comments broadcast on Friday.

"After the transition, I will retire from political life," said Ghannouchi, who has been prime minister since 1999. He also said that like many Tunisians he was "afraid" under the Ben Ali regime.

"All undemocratic laws will be scrapped" during the transition to democracy, he added, mentioning electoral, anti-terrorism and media laws.

Pvt project on public land

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"But the ministry had decided to favour the EWPD during the time of BNP-led alliance. So the ministry directed the Land Appellate Board to adjourn the hearing of the appeals showing loopholes in the laws," Rauf commented.

After the scam centring the Bhawal land and EWPD was revealed during the last caretaker rule, the DG of land survey directorate was instructed to resume hearing on the appeals and implement the judgments that went in favour of the Court of Wards.

The instruction was conveyed to the DG in a letter signed and sent by Suraiya Pavrin Shelly, a senior assistant secretary of the land ministry, on November 17, 2008.

Nothing, however, has happened so far except formation of a new committee.

For several years both the Court of Wards and the Land Reform Board officially tried to convince the ministry that the land on which the housing project was developed belonged to them.

Now the ministry is again examining the flaws in survey laws and corruption in the matter upon which EWPD possesses the expensive land.

"But the probe stops at a certain stage as many officials don't want to dig into the matter," informs a land ministry official asking not to be identified.

CLAIMS OF THE COURT OF WARDS

The Court of Wards, official management committee of the estates of Bhawal and Dhaka Nawab, claims 202.76 acres of land equivalent to 12,165 kathas.

This land was first recorded as the property of the Bhawal estate in the Cadastral Survey (CS), concluded in 1940, that the first survey conducted in Bengal during the British rule.

According to the documents of the Court of Wards, now operating under the Land Reform Board since 1995, the Bhawal estate land under the Zowar Sahara Mauza, where a part of EWPD is situated, was never sold or its ownership was never transferred.

During the Revision Survey (RS) during the Pakistan time, the Land Survey and Record Directorate recorded the land of Bhawal estate under others' names though the real owner was the government itself, said Abdur Rauf.

"With meagre strength we could not follow up the huge property of the Bhawal estate. We checked all the documents during the Dhaka city land survey (1996-2003) and discovered that our land was recorded under others' names," he added.

Examining the papers, the Court of Wards learned about the property under Zowar Sahara Mauza and wrote a letter to the land ministry to take action in this regard, he continued.

According to the CS records, the EWPD occupied .32 acres under 3011 dag number, 5.75 acres under 3012 number, 16.89 acres under 3227 number, 20.86 acres under 3246 number, 90.12 acres under 3285 number, 11.93 acres under 3232 and 3411 numbers, 28.59 acres under 3189 and 3439 numbers, 4.27 acres under 1575 number and 12.5 acres under 3237 number.

As per the CS records, the EWPD has occupied total 202.76 acres of Bhawal estate land.

During the Dhaka city land survey, the Court of Wards filed 1,215 appeal petitions in 2003 with the Land Appellate Board to record the 202.76 acres of land under its name.

The ministry initially directed the Board to take necessary steps to record the land under the Court of Wards.

"When the hearing started the Bhawal estate won 166 cases and got back around 57 acres of land worth over Tk 300 crore," said the estate manager in a letter forwarded to the ministry during the caretaker rule.

As the hearing of the petitions was going on, Akbar Sobhan, chairman of EWPD, applied to the land minister to cancel those appeal petitions on October 16, 2003, says an annual report of the Bhawal Estate.

The then land minister instructed the land record and survey directorate to conduct an investigation into the land possessed by the EWPD.

Following an investigation the then land minister directed the land record and survey directorate to withdraw 1,049 cases under an office order (Land ministry/section 2/30/2003-824 on December 29, 2003) under East Bengal Tenancy Rules, 1955.

The ministry also cancelled the judgement of the 166 petition cases that went in favour of the Bhawal estate.

"So our demand was ignored by the land ministry and the government lost the huge property," said Abdur Rauf.

Some other housing companies and local influential people have also encroached on most of the 1,035 acres of land originally belonging to the Bhawal estate in Dhaka city in connivance with a section of corrupt land officials.

HOW THE LAND GOES TO EWPD

Benu Gopal Dey, the then director of Land Record and Survey Directorate, investigated the issue and submitted a report on November 22, 2003 where he recommended staying of hearing on the 1,049 cases.

Based on that report the then land minister ordered to withdraw the 1,049 cases under an office order.

On January 1, 2006 the case charge officer of the Land Appellate Board cancelled the judgment provided earlier in favour of the Court of Wards and accepted the appeal of the EWPD.

Benu Gopal Dey, now retired from the government service and working as a consultant, said he submitted his report according to the land survey law and a directive of the ministry that said not to accept any review petition as it "lingers" the land survey process.

"Whatever I did, I did in accordance with the law and available documents. I just followed the ministry's instructions," Benu told The Daily Star.

Interestingly, the former land minister and elderly BNP leader does not remember the matter.

"I am out of the office for a long time. I

Earth may have another sun

Blistering supernova to turn night into day

THE DAILY MAIL ONLINE

The Earth could soon have a second sun, at least for a week or two.

The cosmic phenomenon will happen when one of the brightest stars in the night sky explodes into a supernova.

And, according to a report yesterday, the most stunning light show in the planet's history could happen as soon as this year.

Earth will undoubtedly have a front row seat when the dying red super-giant star Betelgeuse finally blows itself into oblivion.

The explosion will be so bright that even though the star in the Orion constellation is 640 light-years away, it will still turn night into day and appear like there are two suns in the sky for a few weeks.

The only real debate is over exactly when it will happen.

In stellar terms, Betelgeuse is predicted to crash and burn in the very near future. But that doesn't necessarily mean you have to rush out and buy sunglasses.

Brad Carter, Senior Lecturer of Physics at the University of Southern Queensland in Australia claimed yesterday that the galactic blast could happen before 2012 or any time over the next million years.

"This old star is running out of fuel in its centre," said Dr Carter.

"This fuel keeps Betelgeuse shining and supported. When this fuel runs out the star will literally collapse in upon itself and it will do so very quickly.

"This is the final hurrah for the star. It goes bang, it explodes, it lights up - we'll have incredible brightness for a brief period of time for a couple of weeks and then over the coming months it begins to fade and then eventually it will be very hard to see at all," he added.

When it happens, the Betelgeuse supernova will almost certainly be the most dramatic ever seen.

It is the ninth brightest star in the night sky and the second brightest in the constellation of Orion, outshining its neighbour Rigel or Beta Orionis only very rarely.

Irish PM quits as party leader

AFP, Dublin

Embattled Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen announced yesterday he was stepping down as leader of his Fianna Fail party but would remain as leader of the country ahead of elections on March 11.

"Taking everything into account, and having discussed the matter with my family, I have decided on my own counsel to step down as uachtairin (president) of Fianna Fail and leader of Fianna Fail," he told reporters in Dublin.

don't remember the fact clearly," he said.

"Now I don't have any options to examine the papers. So I cannot say anything about this," he added.

COMMENTS OF THE EAST WEST PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT

The EWPD started its residential project during 1984-85 developing around 3,000 acres of land, of which 202.76 acres of land belongs to the Bhawal estate out of 308 acres under the Zowar Sahara Mauza.

Despite repeated attempts, no top officials of EWPD were available for a comment on the issue. Finally, Deputy General Manager (DGM) Advocate Delowar Hossain was available for comments.

Asked about the issue, Delowar Hossain said they had bought the land from different people. After such a long time there should not be any presence or claims of the Court of Wards, he added.

"If the Court of Wards really possessed the land, why did not they claim it following the RR and SA surveys?" he asked.

The DGM also suggested that this correspondent forget about the demands of the Court of Wards saying it is not possible to check the land documents right now as the number of owners of that said land has crossed hundreds.

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