

Pakistan PM fears ouster, hits out at army

AFP, Islamabad

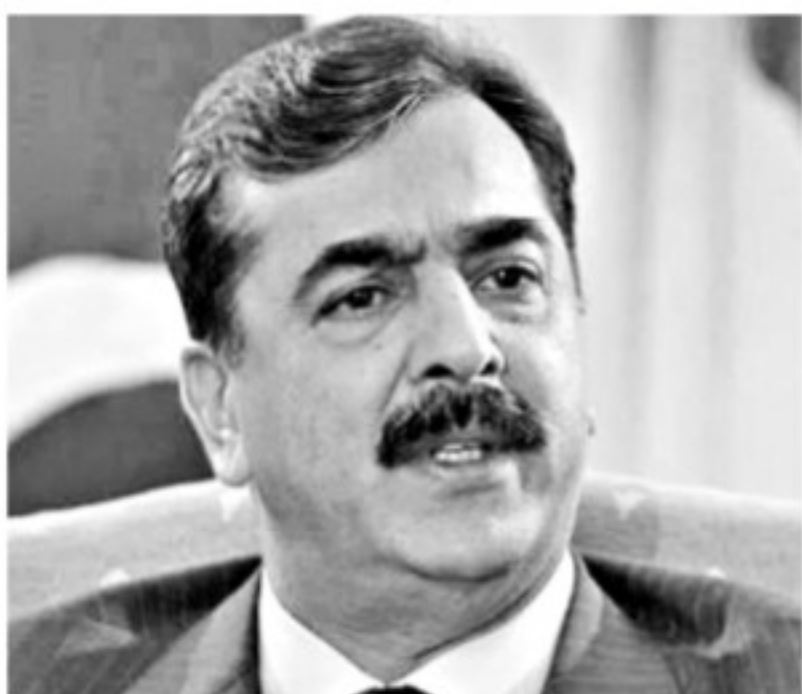
Pakistan's embattled Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani yesterday said conspirators were plotting to bring down his government and delivered an unprecedented tirade against the powerful military.

In astonishing confirmation that he fears being ousted, he angrily denied the government was subservient to the army, long considered the chief arbiter of power in Pakistan as his administration grapples with a damaging scandal.

Pressures are at boiling point over a memo, allegedly written with approval from the president, asking for US help to prevent a feared military coup after Osama bin Laden was killed in May.

Rampant speculation that President Asif Ali Zardari could be forced out of office over the scandal and illness has refused to die, despite his return to the capital following two weeks of medical treatment in Dubai.

"I want to make it clear today that conspiracies are being hatched here to



pack up the elected government," Gilani told a gathering at the National Arts Gallery, without naming anyone.

"But we will continue to fight for the rights of people of Pakistan whether or not we remain in the government," Gilani said, declaring himself the country's longest serving premier, with 45 months on the job.

He was the most senior member of the government to speak so candidly about frenzied speculation pumped out daily by the local media about the

future of an administration made unpopular by recession, power cuts, scandal and inflation.

Two weeks ago, Interior Minister Rehman Malik dismissed rumours that a coup could overthrow the government, but Gilani's remarks appeared to show that members of the administration believe their early departure is all too possible.

Zardari and his government have earned praise for successfully navigating scandals and calls for their resignation since taking office after the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won elections in February 2008.

But any decision from the Supreme Court to investigate the memo, as recommended by the military, would build significant pressure on the president.

Elections are not due until February 2013, but the opposition has begun campaign rallies in earnest and many observers expect polls some time in 2012. No civilian leader in Pakistan has ever completed a full term in office.



PHOTO: AFP

Indians sign up in support of veteran Gandhian social activist Anna Hazare and his opposition to the proposed Lokpal bill in its current form in Mumbai yesterday.

UN calls for Philippine flood aid

AFP, Iligan

The United Nations yesterday appealed for aid for victims of floods that killed more than a thousand people in the Philippines, likening the devastation to that of a tsunami.

UN country coordinator Soe Nyunt-U appealed to foreign governments and aid agencies to provide \$28.6 million in funds to provide clean water, food and emergency shelter to about half a million people affected by the disaster.

"It was as if the cities were hit by an inland tsunami," he said, recounting the horror and devastation of the flash floods unleashed by tropical storm Washi on the southern ports of Iligan and Cagayan de Oro.

Egypt PM urges unity for sake of economy

AFP, Cairo

Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzouri called on Egyptians yesterday to set aside their political differences for the sake of the economy, warning that the country's finances were deteriorating alarmingly.

The appeal came a day after Moody's Investors Service downgraded Egypt's government bond rating from B1 to B2 and placed it on review for further possible downgrade over political instability and the worsening economy.

The military-appointed prime minister told a press conference that much of the aid promised by donor countries had yet to arrive, while the country suffered an outflow of \$9 billion in the past few months.

"Only a billion has arrived" out of \$10.5 billion pledged by Arab countries, he said.

"The G8 met and decided on \$35 billion for Egypt and Tunisia," he added referring to



the developed nations' club. "Nothing has arrived yet."

"Nine billion dollars left Egypt in the past few months," he added, while investors continued to avoid projects in the country after a popular uprising ousted veteran president Hosni Mubarak in February.

"Doesn't that demand of Egypt and its people sit down and talk?" he asked. "Isn't it useful to sit down and push forward the economy a little?"

Foreign reserves in Egypt have fallen from \$36 billion at the beginning of the year to \$20 billion now.

By February, they are projected to fall to \$15 billion, a level at which it will become difficult to pay for imports such as wheat, analysts say.

Ganzouri's nomination as caretaker premier in November by the military rulers who took over from Mubarak prompted a sit-in outside the cabinet office by protesters demanding an immediate transition to a civilian government with full powers.

7 Colombian rebels killed in army raid

AFP, Colombia

The Colombian military killed at least seven leftist militants during an assault on a rebel base Wednesday, Defense Minister Juan Carlos Pinzon said.

Pinzon said the dead included a woman who was a regional commander of the National Liberation Army (ELN), the second largest left-wing guerrilla group after the FARC, which has been at war with the Colombian government for decades.

"At this point we know that seven members of the organization have fallen and that another four members have been wounded or captured," he told reporters during a visit to a military base in the country's southeast.

The attack took place in the northwest Antioquia department.

Hazare challenges Sonia to debate on Lokpal

PTI, Ralegan Siddhi

Hitting out at the government on the "useless" Lokpal Bill, Anna Hazare yesterday challenged the Congress chief Sonia Gandhi to a public debate on it to convince people that the proposed legislation is strong.

Hazare said the new Bill is of no use if the anti-corruption ombudsman does not have control over the Central Bureau of Investigation and the lower bureaucracy is not brought under its direct control.

"Sonia Gandhi says the bill is strong. If it is so, let she come out and debate with us in front of media. Let people see it. Convince the people of the country that it is strong. We will explain how it is not strong," he told reporters in.

"What is right and wrong with the bill, let us debate in public," he said as government prepared to introduce the bill in Lok Sabha.

Hazare's remarks came as a response to Gandhi's speech at the Congress Parliamentary Party meeting on Wednesday during which she said the proposed legislation was strong and she was ready for a fight for it.

Continuing his attack on the government,

Hazare said he will go ahead with his three-day fast from December 27, 2011 and then a jail bharo agitation against the "weak" Bill which will not help the poor in their fight against corruption.

"I will be part of the group that will gherao the residences of Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi as part of our jail bharo agitation," he said.

He said putting the CBI out of Lokpal shows how the Bill will be "useless".

"The biggest victims of corruption are the poor who have to pay bribes to get any work done. How will the common man live like this? Out demand is that lower bureaucracy be brought under Lokpal," he said.

But, Hazare said the lower bureaucracy is being brought under Central Vigilance Commission which is under the control of government.

"How will the commonman get justice. Lower bureaucracy and CBI should be under Lokpal. Only then the bill will be in right form," he said.

Criticising the Grievance Redressal Bill, Hazare said the government does not have the intent to help people fight corruption.

NEWS IN brief

Polish PM goes to Afghanistan to honour 5 dead soldiers

AFP, Warsaw

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk went to Afghanistan yesterday to pay homage to five Polish soldiers who were killed by a makeshift bomb, the PAP news agency reported.

At a military ceremony at the Polish base in southeastern Ghazni the head of government hailed the memory of the victims of what he called "the greatest tragedy in the history of Polish missions" abroad.

Taliban bombers attacked the soldiers' convoy on Wednesday, causing the deadliest single loss for

Medvedev unveils Russia reform but warns 'extremists'

AFP, Moscow

President Dmitry Medvedev yesterday warned that "provocateurs and extremists" were seeking to stir unrest in Russia, as he unveiled a drive for political reform in response to an outburst of protests.

Two days ahead of a new mass rally accusing the authorities of rigging parliamentary elections, he proposed a range of political reforms including the resumption of direct elections of local governors.

But in his last state-of-the-nation address before his expected handover of the Kremlin to Vladimir Putin next year, Medvedev also warned that Russia would not allow its biggest protest wave in years to destabilise the country.

"Attempts to manipulate Russian citizens, lead them astray and incite strife in society are unacceptable," Medvedev told both houses of parliament.



Australian teen jailed over Indian student killing

BBC ONLINE

An Australian teenager who stabbed an Indian student to death in an attack that sparked a diplomatic row with India has been jailed for 13 years.

The 17-year-old, who cannot be named, admitted killing Nitin Garg in a Melbourne park in January 2010.

The attack - and a string of others against Indian nationals in Australia - caused anger in India over what some commentators called racist violence. Indian student numbers dropped in the wake of the row.

Garg, an accounting graduate, was stabbed mul-



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan policemen perform a demonstration drill during a graduation ceremony at a police training centre in Herat yesterday. Some 500 officers graduated following their eight-week training course at Ansar 606 police training centre in the western province of Herat.

Militant Hamas moves to join PLO umbrella

AP, Cairo

The rival Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas took an important step toward reconciliation yesterday, announcing plans for the Islamic militants to join the umbrella group that has overseen two decades of on-and-off peace talks with Israel.

The deal to admit Hamas into the Fatah-dominated Palestine Liberation Organization could have deep repercussions. Hamas has opposed the peace talks and rejects Israel's right to exist. A strong Hamas voice in the group would further complicate the already troubled Mideast diplomatic process.

Israeli officials reacted with alarm to the emerging agreement.

Hamas overran Gaza in 2007, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is also the head of Fatah, has ruled only the West Bank since then. The division has been an obstacle in peacemaking efforts with Israel, since Abbas does not speak for all the Palestinians.

A full reconciliation could solve that - or it could put Hamas in charge. The Islamist group won a parliamentary election in 2006, and a short-lived government Hamas formed with Fatah was shunned by Israel and the West, freezing peace efforts.

Under the agreement, Hamas' supreme leader, Khaled Mashaal, joined a committee that will prepare for elections of the PLO's parliament in exile. He will serve alongside Abbas.

Kazakhstan invites UN to probe riots

AFP, Astana

Kazakhstan yesterday invited the United Nations to take part in an investigation into last week's deadly rioting in the oil-rich west amid mounting concerns over its treatment of protesters.

At least 15 people were killed in the town of Zhanaozen Friday in clashes between the security forces and striking oil workers that were the worst bloodshed in the Central Asian state since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev arrived in Aktau, the capital of the Mangistau region on the Caspian Sea where Zhanaozen is located, to chair a meeting over Friday's clashes, the Interfax news agency said.

'Nature mourns' North Korea leader

BBC ONLINE

Strange natural phenomena have been witnessed in North Korea since the death of the country's leader Kim Jong-il, the state news agency KCNA reports.

Ice cracked on a famous lake "so loud, it seemed to shake the Heavens and the Earth", and a mysterious glow was seen on a revered mountain top, KCNA said.

The personality cult surrounding North Korea's founding father and son bestows near-divine status on them.

Meanwhile, South Korean intelligence has questioned how Kim died.

Citing US satellite photos, the country's national intelligence service director Won Sei-hoon said there was no sign that the special train, on which Kim is reported to have died while on a visit on Saturday, had ever left Pyongyang over the weekend.

South Korea's president says Seoul is trying to show no hostility towards Pyongyang. Lee Myung-bak said a return to



Kim Jong-il

stability in the communist state was in the interests of the region.

Seoul is also sending its top nuclear negotiator to Beijing for talks on the situation in its northern neighbour.

In North Korea, state media continue to report mass grieving following Kim's death, reportedly from a heart attack.

The 69-year-old had led North Korea since the death of his father in 1994 and an elaborate personality cult, involving multiple stories of alleged miracles or astonishing deeds, has been built up around him.

Even nature is mourning, the state-run Korean Central News Agency reported yesterday. A snowstorm hit as Kim died and ice on the volcanic Chon lake near his reported birthplace at Mount Paektu cracked, it said.

Following the storm's sudden end at dawn on Tuesday, a message carved in rock - "Mount Paektu, holy mountain of revolution. Kim Jong-il" - glowed brightly, it said. It remained there until sunset.