

Pak PM says govt will complete its term

Zardari talks of change through ballot, not bullet

APP, Karachi

Pakistan's Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani yesterday said the parliament will complete its five years term amid rising tensions that military may take power.

He said that this will strengthen the democratic institutions.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari has called upon the nation to make a pledge that it will not allow any change through "force and intimidation and respect the power of ballot as an instrument of change".

The tone and tenor of the text was striking given that triteness distinguishes messages on such occasions. The symbolism behind use of words like "change through force" and reference to 'ballot' and 'bullet' was unmistakable in view of the grim political scenario.

Tensions have been running high between the government and the powerful army after a scandal surfaced that said Zardari feared military power takeover after the killing of Osama bin Laden, raising concerns for the region and for Pakistan's already uneasy

relationship with its key ally, the US.

Mansoor Ijaz, an American businessman of Pakistani origin, wrote in a column in the Financial Times on October 10 that a senior Pakistani diplomat had asked that a memo be delivered to the Pentagon with a plea for US help to stave off a military coup in the days after the raid that killed al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in May.

Ijaz later identified the diplomat as Pakistan's ambassador to Washington, Husain Haqqani, who denied involvement but resigned over the controversy.

The scandal has reached a fever pitch, and rumors have swirled in recent weeks that President Asif Ali Zardari, who left Pakistan for medical treatment in Dubai earlier this month, would be forced out by the military, which has ruled Pakistan for almost half of its 64-year history.

Army chief General Ashfaq Kayani has ruled out the possibility of a coup and the military does not want to be seen as interfering in civilian politics, but there are still several scenarios under which Zardari could be forced out.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of Pakistani cricketer turned politician Imran Khan, inset, gather for a public rally in Karachi yesterday. As Pakistan wrestles with a political crisis Imran Khan, leader of the opposition Movement for Justice Party, is drawing ever-bigger crowds in his bid to become premier, but analysts remain sceptical about the national cricket hero's chances of winning.

Congress, Hazare on collision course

Sonia takes tough line as Team Anna gears up showdown

AGENCIES

The Congress has once again launched an offensive against Anna Hazare and his team, who are planning a big showdown on Tuesday's fasting event, after party president Sonia Gandhi took a tough line on the Lokpal issue.

Addressing the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) meeting, Gandhi was emphatic and assertive in listing out the action taken by the government to combat corruption.

The party's stand on Hazare and his team has been wavering since April this year when the veteran activist went on a hunger strike over Lokpal.

Strong statements by spokespersons Manish Tewari and Rashid Alvi that coincided with Hazare's second fast in August triggered huge public outcry, prompting the party to rework its strategy.

Though it decided to refrain from launching personal attacks on Hazare, general secretary Digvijaya



Singh continued to take on the Team Anna, alleging that its campaign was sponsored by the RSS.

"No one can dictate terms to the government," coal minister Sripaksh Jaiswal said.

Another leader Satyavrat Chaturvedi said, "Parliament cannot function as per Hazare's diktat".

Senior general secretary Janardan Dwivedi said, "We are not worried about any challenge."

As he prepares to go on a three-day fast for a strong Lokpal Bill, social activist Anna Hazare and his team yesterday shot off an open

letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Members of Parliament urging them to make the best possible law which includes provisions for an independent investigative wing for the ombudsman.

In the letter, Team Anna noted that the year-long campaign against corruption has brought people to the very edge of legislation that can tackle it powerfully.

Sensing the national mood, Parliament has also taken it upon itself to foster a significant debate on the issues within the Bill, and for this

we thank our elected representatives.

"While we are on record with our displeasure over the current draft of the bill, we are also keen that the best possible law should now emerge from the debate in the people's Houses," the letter said.

"We urge Parliament's consideration and adoption of these points, to give the country a real anti-corruption law. Our opposition to various other provisions of the draft bill remains, and we will take up the fight for improvements to the legislation in the months and years ahead," Team Anna said.

Meanwhile, preparations are on in full swing to spruce up the MMRDA grounds in Mumbai ahead of activist Anna Hazare's three-day fast beginning on Tuesday for a strong Lokpal Bill.

Volunteers of Hazare's India Against Corruption (IAC) group are overseeing the arrangements and have finalised the security details and other facilities.

'WAR ON TERROR' Musharraf signed 9 pacts with US

DAWN ONLINE

The Musharraf government had signed at least nine pacts, some of them secret, with the United States in 2002 to give shape to Islamabad's role in the 'war on terror' after the attacks of Sept 11.

The information came to light on Friday when the ministry of defence placed copies of nine pacts before the Parliamentary Committee on National Security (PCNS), which is deliberating on review of ties with Washington following last month's Nato attacks on Pakistani positions in Mohmand Agency.

Although the exact nature of the agreements is not known, it is believed that they pertain to intelligence sharing, permission to use the country's airspace and allowing Nato to use Pakistan's roads and the Karachi port for carrying supplies for troops in Afghanistan.

In its meeting on Dec 8, the committee had asked the Pakistan government to submit the record of all cooperation agreements with the US, whether written or otherwise. It is for the first time that these pacts would be available to parliamentarians for review.

The envoys' conference, whose recommendations would be considered by the PCNS, had asked for reconsidering and annulling a number of agreements reached during the Musharraf era and reducing reliance on the American aid.

Pak minister withdraws resignation

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's information minister withdrew her resignation yesterday, hours after she offered to quit amid tensions between the civilian government and the country's powerful military over a memo alleging an army plot to seize power in May.

Information Minister Firdous Ashiq Awan made the surprise announcement at a televised cabinet meeting but Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani later persuaded her to withdraw resignation.

Some media reports suggested that Awan offered to resign over criticism within the ruling party over her perceived failure to defend the government in the "memogate" scandal, as it is being called in Pakistan.

NEWS IN brief

Sudan army kills rebel leader

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan's army killed a key rebel leader from the Darfur region yesterday, state media reported, three days after anti-government forces said they had begun advancing on the capital.

Ibrahim headed the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), once the most heavily armed group in the Darfur region, though its recent strength remains unclear.

Sudan TV reported that government forces yesterday "clashed directly" with Ibrahim's troops, killing him and "a group of his leaders".

The JEM announced on Thursday through its London-based spokesman that its forces were advancing from Darfur eastward towards Khartoum.

Egypt to free jailed blogger

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's judiciary decided yesterday to free blogger and activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, who has spent the past two months in custody, his sister said.

Mona Abdel Fattah announced on Twitter that a court had decided to "free Alaa," who had been remanded in custody on October 30.

The blogger was accused of inciting violence during an October 9 demonstration by Coptic Christians in Cairo. The watchdog said around 12,000 civilians had faced military courts in just nine months under military rule on charges including "thuggery" and "insulting the army."

Arabs urged to monitor Syrian flashpoints

AFP, Damascus

The opposition Syrian National Council appealed yesterday for the Arab League to immediately send observers to the besieged city of Homs and other hotspots of a bloody crackdown on dissent.

The call came a day before a first group of Arab League observers is set to arrive in Syria to begin monitoring a deal the 22-member bloc agreed with the government in Damascus aimed at ending nine months of violence.

The central city of Homs has been a focal point of the Assad government's crackdown on anti-regime demonstrations, as well as the site of fierce clashes between the army and mutinous soldiers.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that security forces yesterday pounded Baba Amro with mortar fire, wounding eight people.



PHOTO: AFP

Pope Benedict XVI delivers his traditional Christmas "Urbi et Orbi" blessing from the balcony of St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican yesterday.

UN cuts budget amid global downturn

AFP, United Nations

The 193 UN member countries, after a series of all-night negotiations, agreed Saturday to cut the global body's budget for only the second time in the past 50 years.

An accord struck at dawn on Saturday saw the 2012-13 budget set at \$5.15 billion, down from \$5.41 billion in 2010-11.

The United States and crisis-stricken European countries had fought for cuts while developing countries had demanded spending be kept up.

"All budget years are tough. But this year was especially difficult," UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said, welcoming the accord and vowing more cuts in coming months.

This accord "is the first time since 1998 -- and only the second time in the last 50 years -- that the UN regular budget has declined in comparison to the previous budget's actual expenses," said US negotiator Joseph Torsella.

He called it a "budget for a strengthened, more efficient, and more effective United Nations that saves the American taxpayers millions of dollars and sets the United Nations on the path of real fiscal discipline and continued reform."

The United States has taken a tough line on UN spending, with Torsella this year railing at increased salary allowances for UN staff.

Assange may face spy charges

DAILYMAIL ONLINE

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange could face spy charges in the US after a court revealed his apparent 'role' in the theft of secret military documents, it emerged today.

Lawyers have produced logs of online chats they claim show him coaching US Private Bradley Manning how to break passwords to gain access to military computer networks.

The prosecutors made the allegations in an hour-long presentation at Manning's pre-trial hearing for allegedly uploading 700,000 stolen documents to WikiLeaks.

Assange is on bail pending an appeal against extradition to Sweden where he faces sex crime allegations.

South's disrespect to Kim enrages N Korea

Says stance may prove to be 'catastrophic'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday lashed out at South Korea for a perceived lack of respect towards Kim Jong-Il, as it reported more scenes of mass grieving in the isolated communist state for the late leader.

Saying the whole world is in mourning for "a peerlessly great man", the North for the second time in three days blasted the South over its response to Kim's sudden death on December 17.

There would be "unpredictable catastrophic consequences" for cross-border relations unless Seoul eases restrictions on condolence visits by South Koreans to Pyongyang, it said.

The South blames its neighbour for two deadly border incidents last year, but has taken a generally conciliatory stance since last Monday's shock announcement that Kim had died of a heart attack two days earlier at age 69.

The South Korean authorities should bear in mind that their obstructions will entail unpredictable catastrophic consequences to the north-south relations," a spokesman for the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea, a state body overseeing cross-border relations, told the official news agency.

The Seoul authorities' "unethical acts benefit of elementary etiquette and compatriotism have touched off unanimous outrage and wrath among Koreans and all other people of the world", the spokesman said.

Despite the tough rhetoric, analysts generally do not expect shows of military force as the new regime headed by Kim's son Jong-Un settles in.

The transition was high on the agenda when Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda held talks with Premier Wen Jiabao at the start of his first visit to China as premier.