

Delhi in showdown over Lokpal bill

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government faced off against angry opposition parties and a popular hunger-striking activist yesterday as it sought to push a divisive anti-corruption bill through parliament.

India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh warned opponents of a key anti-graft bill that they risked unleashing "chaos and anarchy".

Manmohan spoke during a heated debate on the draft law, which has been branded too weak by opposition parties and veteran activist Anna Hazare who launched a hunger strike yesterday to demand the bill be redrafted.

Parliament was convened for a special three-day session devoted to the new legislation which would create an independent "Lokpal" or ombudsman to probe corruption among senior politicians and civil servants.

The main points of contention focus on the ambit of the ombudsman's office and its powers of investigation.

"If you don't pass this bill, the people of this country will never forgive you," Telecoms

Minister Kapil Sibal warned MPs as the debate got off to a heated start with the opposition insisting on a raft of amendments.

The government bill offers only limited jurisdiction over the prime minister and requires the ombudsman to put any criminal probes in the hands of the government-controlled Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

Hazare and a number of opposition parties want the ombudsman's office to have its own, independent investigative team.

But Singh insisted that such a move would be tantamount to creating a separate, unelected executive that was unaccountable to parliament or the Indian people.

"Let us not create something that will destroy all that we cherish, all in the name of combating corruption. Let us remember that the road to hell is paved with good intentions," he said.

And in a clear message to the Hazare campaign, Singh stressed that while other voices should be heard, the final decision on any legislative proposal lay solely with the parliament.



Activists of ruling Pakistan Peoples Party light lamps on the fourth death anniversary of slain former premier Benazir Bhutto in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan's embattled president used the fourth anniversary of his wife Benazir Bhutto's assassination to urge the country to foil "conspiracies against democracy."

PHOTO: AFP

Hazare starts new hunger strike

Asks supporters to get ready for final battle

AFP, Mumbai

Anna Hazare yesterday faced a low turnout as he launched his three-day fast against a "weak" Lokpal Bill asking people to be ready for an 'aar paar ki ladaai' (fight to finish) to stamp out corruption and ensure that "criminals" do not enter Parliament.

The 74-year-old Hazare, who sought to sidestep the appeal of his close aides to stop fast due to his health condition, said people will one day teach the government a lesson for the "betrayal" on the Lokpal issue.

In contrast to the impressive gathering at his three protests in Delhi earlier, the numbers were not up to expectations at the MMRDA ground.

Hazare repeated his threat to undertake a tour of five-poll bound states, including Uttar Pradesh, and said he will campaign against the government and do the same when General Elections are announced.

En route to the ground, he was jeered and heckled by a group of demonstrators carrying black flags in oppo-



sition to his protest while parliament was still debating the new draft of the anti-corruption bill.

On stage, Hazare -- in his trademark white homespun cotton -- was dwarfed by a picture of his idol Mahatma Gandhi, who launched the "Quit India" movement against British rule from Mumbai in 1942.

"The government is betraying us ... the entire country," Hazare told the crowd.

"We have to decide today this way or that way. We will not stop back whatever the odds are, even if it means that we may have to go to jail," Hazare told

his supporters after starting his fast at 12:30pm.

Emphasising that Parliament should retain its dignity, he claimed that 150 MPs in the House were criminals and if there is a Right to Reject provision, they will not get entry into the "sacred temple of democracy".

Termining his campaign as the second freedom struggle, Hazare said the fight for a strong Lokpal will not end today and one has to fight a long battle.

"You will not get the Lokpal Bill. You need to be ready for a long battle."

Hazare said after ensuring the setting up of a strong Lokpal, the next fight will be for Right to Reject provision.

Inside the dusty grounds, overlooked by the gleaming glass offices of corporate India, at least 2,000 police officers, plus bomb disposal specialists and an armed response team looked on. Sniffer dogs snoozed in the shade.

The low initial turn-out was perhaps predictable, given the working day and with Mumbaiers legendary for letting little get in the way of making money combined with cold weather.

Philippine flood toll rises to 1,249

AFP, Cagayan De Oro

The death toll from killer floods in the Philippines rose to 1,249 yesterday, more than a week after the disaster struck, with officials expecting more corpses to be found.

The civil defence office initially said the confirmed number of fatalities had surged by more than 200 to 1,453, before revising the figure downwards due to double-counting.

Tropical storm Washi brought heavy rains, overflowing rivers and flash floods to the southern Philippines from December 16 to 18, sweeping away whole villages built on sandbars and riverbanks.

More than 376,000 people were displaced by the storm and almost 55,000 are still huddled in crowded makeshift evacuation centres.

Pak govt seeks dismissal of 'memogate' case

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's government stuck to its guns yesterday by telling the Supreme Court not to investigate a controversial memo asking for US help in curbing the power of the military.

Attorney General Maulvi Anwarul Haq reiterated that parliament's national security committee should investigate and not the court, which has been asked by the opposition and intelligence chief to order an independent inquiry.

The memo was allegedly an attempt by a close aide of President Asif Ali Zardari to enlist American help to head off a feared military coup in May in exchange for overhauling the country's powerful security leadership.

The scandal has fuelled rampant speculation that Zardari's days are numbered and a decision from the Supreme Court to investigate would build pressure on the president, with most observers expecting early elections sometime in 2012.

"Let the parliamentary committee complete its task. Within the parameters of (law), the petitions cannot be maintained," Haq,

who is the top government legal adviser, told the court.

He insisted that the memo was a "worthless piece of paper" but it does need to be probed.

Tensions between the army and government soared this month over the memo, allegedly delivered to then US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, in May and first made public by an American-Pakistani businessman in October.

Both sides have since made efforts to quell the tensions, but it remains unclear how the military or the court will respond to Haq's latest remarks.

Pakistan's army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, last week denied rumours that the military is plotting to overthrow the government.

On Monday, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani denied that he wanted to sack Kayani or ISI chief lieutenant general Ahmad Shuja Pasha.

Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry is heading a nine-judge panel deliberating on whether to investigate what has been nicknamed "memogate" by appointing an inquiry commission.

NEWS IN brief

Egypt court ends 'virginity tests'

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian court ordered the Egyptian army yesterday to stop forced virginity tests on female detainees, months after the practice sparked a national outcry and stained the ruling military's reputation.

The Cairo Administrative Court ruled in favour of Samira Ibrahim, who sued the army over the practice, slammed by rights groups as torture and sexual violence.

Ibrahim was one of several women subjected to forced virginity tests when they were detained during a March demonstration in Cairo's Tahrir Square -- the epicentre of protests that toppled veteran strongman

Prince Philip leaves hospital

AFP, Papworth

Queen Elizabeth II's husband Prince Philip left hospital yesterday, four days after he was rushed in for heart surgery and missed the royal family's Christmas celebrations.

The outspoken 90-year-old smiled and waved from the open window of his Range Rover vehicle as he was driven away from Papworth hospital near Cambridge, eastern England, an AFP photographer witnessed.

He was then driven to the royal Sandringham estate in Norfolk, where the queen together with the couple's children and grandchildren have spent the Christmas holiday.

Iran begins trial of accused 'CIA spy'

AFP, Tehran

Iran opened a trial yesterday of an American of Iranian descent accused of spying for the US Central Intelligence Agency, the Fars news agency reported.

Hekmati, a 28-year-old former US Marine born in the US state of Arizona to an Iranian immigrant family, was shown on Iranian state television mid-December saying he was a CIA operative sent to infiltrate the Iranian intelligence ministry.

Italian ship hijacked off Oman

AFP, Rome

Pirates hijacked an Italian cargo ship with six Italians, five Ukrainians and seven Indians on board at dawn yesterday off the coast of Oman in an area known for Somali pirate attacks, officials said.

The Enrico Ievoli, which was carrying 15,750 tons of caustic soda from the United Arab Emirates to the Mediterranean, was boarded by pirates at around 0400 GMT, the Naples-based owner of the ship, Marnavi,

Faster than a speeding bullet

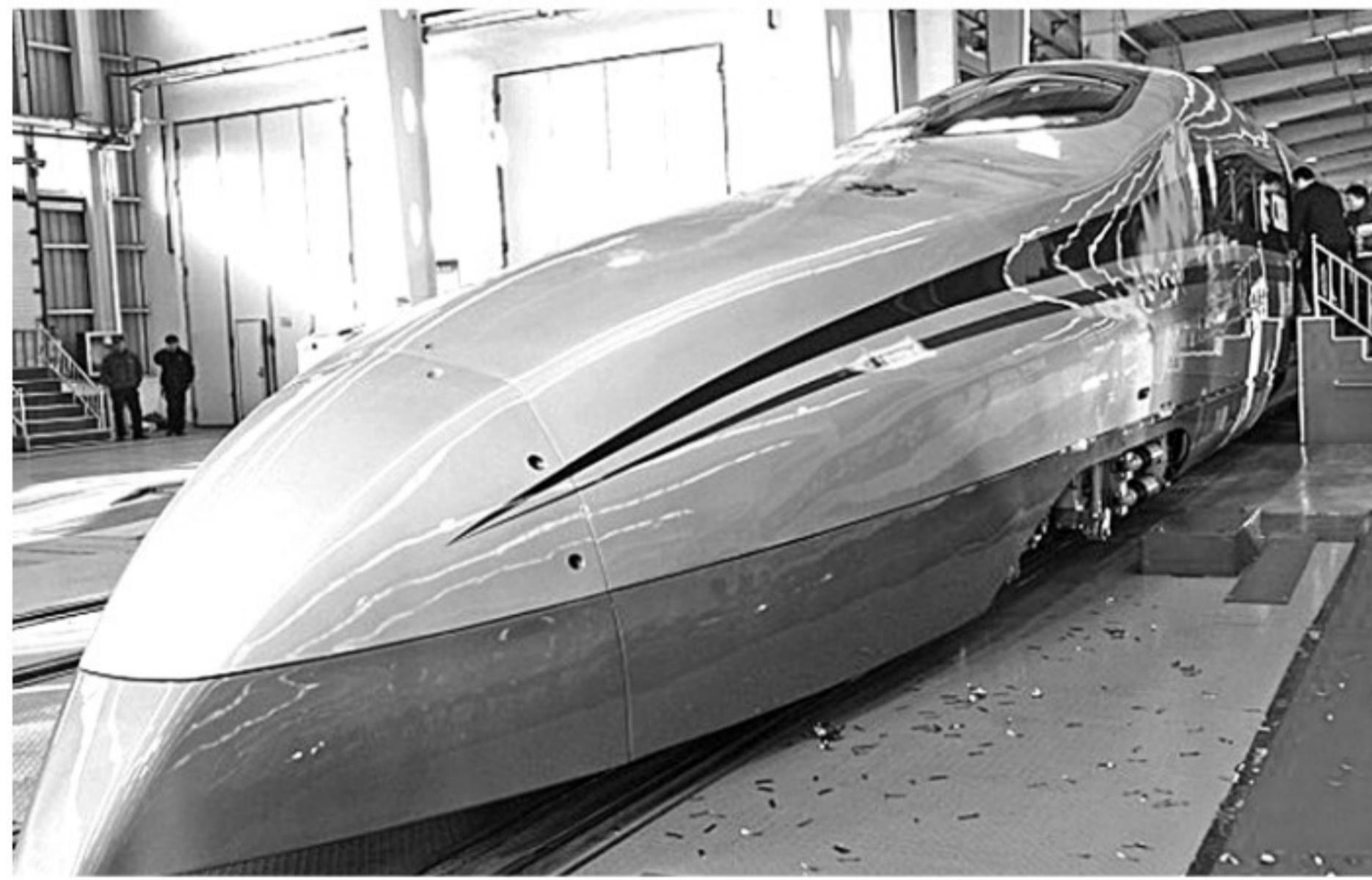
DAILY MAIL ONLINE

China has produced a super-rapid test train capable of travelling at speeds of up to 300 miles per hour (mph) - 100mph faster than the current record-holder.

The train, made from plastic materials reinforced with carbon fibre, is designed to resemble an ancient Chinese sword and 'will provide useful reference for current high-speed railway operations', according to train expert Shen Zhiyun.

Earlier this year, the Communist regime unveiled its fastest operational locomotive which was able to cover the 824-mile trip between Beijing and Shanghai in five hours - reaching record-breaking top speed of 200mph and maintaining an average speed of 165mph.

The latest test model has



A partial view of the high speed train which can travel 300 mph.

a maximum tractive power of 22,800 kilowatts, compared with 9,600 kilowatts for the Beijing-Shanghai CRH380 trains

But future Chinese trains will not necessarily run at such high speeds. CSR chairman Zhao Xiaogang said, "We aims to ensure the safety

of trains operation.' The Ministry of Railways claims it has made extensive preparations for safety and security of the trains.

Putin slams opposition, rejects poll review

AFP, Moscow

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin yesterday belittled Russia's protest movement as lacking clear aims or leaders and rejected their demands for a review of the results of disputed parliamentary polls.

Putin's comments were his latest warning he does not plan to be swayed by the demands of the emboldened protestors, who at the weekend staged their biggest demonstration yet against his 12 year domination of Russia.

"They have no united programme, clear ways of reaching their aims -- which are themselves not clear -- or people who could achieve something concrete," Putin said in comments broadcast by state television.

He bluntly rejected the protestors' most pressing demand -- a review and re-run of the December 4 polls for the State Duma



lower house of parliament won by the ruling United Russia party which the opposition says was rigged.

"The elections are over. The parliament has started its work and a speaker elected. The State Duma is working... There can be no talk of any review," Putin said.

But Putin said it was necessary to lift any "insinuations" that alleged there would be fraud in the March 4 presidential polls and vowed that there would be increased transparency if required.

"I, as one of the candidates, need no tricks. I want to have the will of the people and their trust. Without that there is no point in working," he added.

Putin is bracing for a challenging two months ahead of the March 4 presidential elections where he will stand for a historic third term as Kremlin chief after his four year stint as prime minister.

Arab monitors visit restive Syria city

70,000 rally against Assad; tanks pulled out

AFP, Damascus

Arab observers visited Homs, a central protest hub in Syria, after dozens of people were killed in 24 hours of a crackdown on dissent and police used tear gas to disperse some 70,000 protestors took to the street in Homs yesterday.

Activists said the military pulled its tanks back from one district ahead of the Arab League team's arrival, only to hide them inside government zones from where they could be redeployed within minutes.

The demonstrators appeared to have been emboldened by the presence of a team of Arab League observers headed by veteran Sudanese military intelligence officer General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi.

Syria's Dunia television reported that the observers also visited the Bab Sebaa neighbourhood of Homs, where they "assessed the damage carried out by terrorist groups." The observers are also due to travel to two

other protest hubs -- the central city of Hama and Idlib in the northwest, close to the border with Turkey, the television added, without giving a timetable.

Ahead of the observers' arrival in Homs, the army pulled back heavy armour from the Baba Amro neighbourhood of the city, scene of much of the violence, Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Eleven tanks pulled out around 7:00am, its chairman, Rami Abdel Rahman, told AFP.

The Observatory said the withdrawal was part of the regime's "deception" and showed its attempt to "deny the crystal clear fact" that Syrians were trying to "regain power, freedom and dignity" in a popular revolt.

The observer mission is part of an Arab plan endorsed by Syria on November 2 that calls for the withdrawal of security forces from towns and residential districts, a halt to violence against civilians and the release of detainees.

FUTURE DISASTERS World 'dangerously unprepared': UN

BBC ONLINE

Some countries' failure to pay into a UN disaster relief fund is leaving the world "dangerously unprepared" for future crises, Andrew Mitchell says.

The international development secretary said several countries had not donated to the Central Emergency Response Fund, aimed at speeding-up relief delivery.

Britain has increased its pledge for 2012 from £40 million to £60 million but the fund is expected to be £45 million short next year.

The international community must "wake up" to the challenge, Mitchell said.

The Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) was set up in the wake of the Indian Ocean tsunami on 26 December 2004. It includes a grant element based on voluntary contributions from governments and private sector organisations and individuals.

The fund was designed by the United Nations to speed up relief in crisis zones with one central fund, though many countries still choose to give bilaterally.

ActionAid spokeswoman Jane Moyo told BBC Breakfast, "The importance of this fund is that it pre-positions money where it is most needed and it is important that people - other governments - pull their weight because then we can help people who are most in need, in their time of most need."