

India passes anti-graft bill

Hazare ends fast, vows to fight on

AFP, New Delhi

India's government sighed with relief yesterday after parliament's lower house passed an anti-corruption bill that has become a political albatross around the neck of Premier Manmohan Singh's coalition.

The bill, creating a powerful ombudsman to probe graft among senior politicians and civil servants, was passed by a voice vote in the Lok Sabha late Tuesday after a fractious debate.

Meanwhile, Indian anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare yesterday called off his latest hunger strike but vowed to step up his campaign to turn voters against the "traitors" in the ruling party and government.

Hazare only began what was billed as a three-day fast in the financial capital Mumbai on Tuesday. He has been laid low with a virus since the weekend

and heeded the advice of doctors to bring the protest to a premature end.

Despite the early end to his hunger strike, Hazare said he would continue to fight what he claimed was a government that was "acting like a dictator".

"If this continues, what can we do? We have to save the country. Every one of you should be ready to go to jail," he told supporters.

In a sign of his increasingly bitter battle with the ruling Congress party and the administration of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, he said he would tour five states holding elections next year to educate voters about corruption.

More than 170,000 people have signed up to court arrest and imprisonment by protesting outside the homes of government ministers and members of parliament, according to Hazare's India Against Corruption group.

The legislation has dominated the

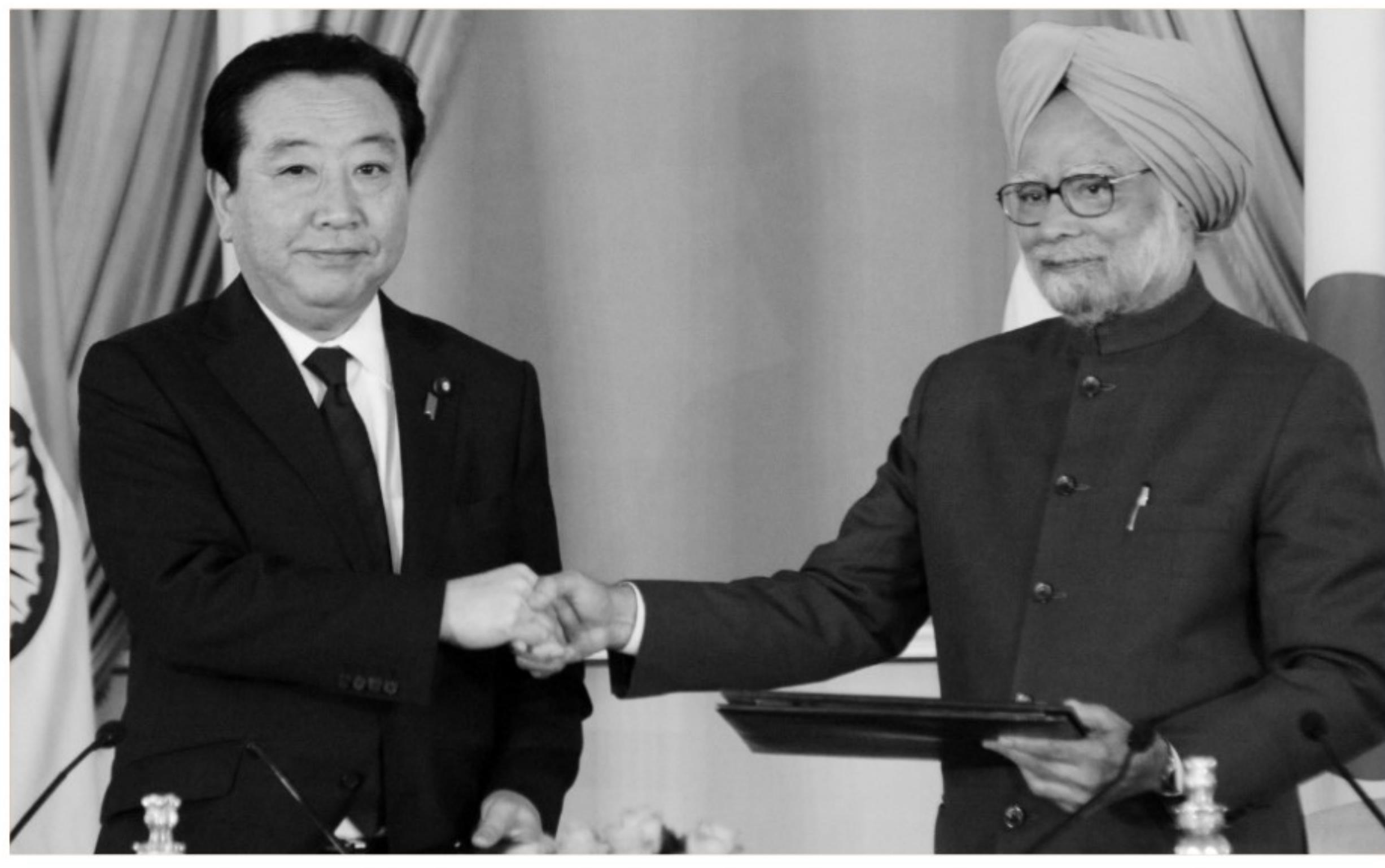
political agenda in India for months, piling pressure on Singh's administration which was already the target of fierce criticism over a series of high-profile corruption scandals.

The government had to redraft an earlier version in the wake of mass protests across the country in August, spearheaded by hunger-striking activist Anna Hazare who insisted the proposed bill was too weak.

The government's victory was tempered by its failure to get the two-thirds majority required to make the bill a constitutional amendment.

"This is a bit of disappointment that it could not be passed," Singh said afterwards.

There is a strong chance that final passage of the bill could be delayed as it faces a rough ride in the upper house of parliament, where Singh's ruling coalition is in the minority.



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh shake hands after exchanging documents in New Delhi yesterday. Japan and India struck a \$15 billion currency swap deal yesterday that could bolster the sagging rupee as Japanese prime minister made a lightning 36-hour trip to New Delhi.

PHOTO: AFP

Mubarak trial resumes after 3-month break

AFP, Cairo

The murder trial of Egyptian ex-president Hosni Mubarak resumes yesterday after a three-month hiatus that saw the ousted strongman's fate eclipsed by deadly clashes and an Islamist election victory.

An ailing Mubarak, 83, risks the death sentence if he is found to have been complicit in the killings of some 850 people who died during protests that overthrew him in February.

Mubarak, who is in custody in a Cairo military hospital, also faces charges of corruption, together with his two sons Alaa and Gamal.

Ex-interior minister Habib al-Adly and six security chiefs are also on trial for their role in quelling the protests.

Putin ready to open talks with opposition

AGENCIES

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said yesterday that he was ready for dialogue with the opposition but said he did not know who to hold talks with, responding to the biggest protest against his 12-year rule over the weekend.

Putin also rejected the idea of becoming acting head of state ahead of March 4 presidential elections where he is the favourite.

In his latest defiant brush-off of the protest movement that has rocked Russia ahead of the presidential polls, Putin also dismissed his opponents as lacking any programme or representatives with whom to hold dialogue.

"We have not discussed this," news agencies quoted Putin as saying following speculation that he could give up his post as prime minister and take on the job of president to get a full grip on Russia amid the protest wave.

"There is no need for this," Putin said.

Some analysts and media had suggested that Putin might be taking on President Dmitry Medvedev's role imminently, after agreeing to a plan earlier this year that would see the two allies swap jobs after the elections.

Putin also said that he had no intention of giving up his post as prime minister ahead of the elections to meet what some analysts claim is a constitutional requirement to ensure a level playing field in the campaign.

"I like this work," Putin told Russian reporters. "It is very concrete. The government bears responsibility in the area of the country's economic policies. It is directly responsible," Putin said.

ROW OVER DEADLY NATO STRIKE Pakistan rejects US report

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has rejected the joint US-Nato report on the attack on a Pakistani check post on Nov 26, military sources told DawnNews yesterday.

According to the sources, the US-led report was 'not based on facts', and that it can not be unbiased as long as the probe was headed by Brigadier General Stephen Clark.

US officials said Tuesday that the American military has briefed Pakistan's army chief on its investigation into US air strikes that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers on the Afghan border last month.

Pentagon spokesman Captain John Kirby told reporters that a report by military investigators was delivered to General Ashfaq Kayani on Sunday by a US officer based in Islamabad, who explained the findings to the general.

The full report from the joint US-Nato investigative team was not released publicly until Monday to allow time for the Pakistani leadership to read the findings first, Kirby said.

But a Pakistani security official told AFP "no such briefing took place and the report was not handed over in person to the army chief".

"The report was delivered to the concerned department (of army headquarters) but not to the chief," the official said.

Pakistan has yet to give a detailed public response to the report, but officials have expressed irritation that elements were initially leaked to American newspapers last week.

The air strikes further damaged the precarious US-Pakistani partnership and provoked outrage in Islamabad, which retaliated by cutting off Nato supply routes to Afghanistan.

The New York Times has reported the counter-terrorism partnership can only survive in limited form.

The United States and Pakistan disagree about the precise sequence of events in the deadliest single cross-border attack of the 10-year war in Afghanistan.

Pakistan denies shooting first, and has accused the Americans of an intentional attack on its troops.

Brigadier General Stephen Clark, who led the US inquiry, said the November 25-26 air strikes were the result of mistakes and botched communications on both sides reflecting an underlying mistrust between the two countries.

New floods hit Philippines

AFP, Cagayan De Oro

Fresh floods brought more misery to the southern Philippines yesterday, a week after tropical storm Washi killed more than 1,200 and left hundreds of thousands homeless.

A low pressure area, combining with a cold front, brought flooding to some parts of Mindanao island over the past two days and further stressed search and relief operations for those affected by Washi, officials said.

"There was pre-emptive evacuation. There was fresh flooding in some towns in the northeastern side of Mindanao," Benito Ramos, who heads the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council in Manila, told AFP.

Those affected by the new floods were in areas about 150 kilometres to the east of Iligan and Cagayan, he said.

Washi displaced more than 431,000 people with more than 54,000 huddled in overcrowded evacuation centres -- usually schoolhouses and gymnasiums, mostly in Cagayan and Iligan.

The death toll from Washi stood at 1,249 as of yesterday morning, but Ramos said search for dozens of others missing were still ongoing and could continue into the near year.

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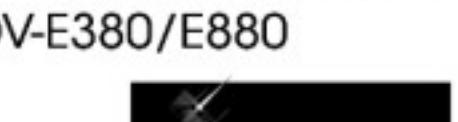


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