

Pakistan court to probe 'memogate'

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's Supreme Court is to investigate a scandal surrounding an unsigned memo seeking Washington's help to rein in the powerful Pakistani military, a decision announced yesterday that is bound to heap pressure on the weak civilian government.

The "memogate" scandal has highlighted historic tensions between the government and the military, in power for more than half Pakistan's 64 years and whose help Washington needs to battle militants fueling violence in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Pakistan's politics were thrown into crisis on October 10 when businessman Mansoor Ijaz wrote in the Financial Times 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 feared military coup. This followed the raid that killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May.

Ijaz, who is of Pakistani descent, later identified the diplomat as Pakistan's ambassador to Washington, Husain Haqqani, a close ally of President Asif Ali Zardari.

Haqqani denied involvement but resigned over the controversy.

The decision puts additional pressure on the government. There is widespread speculation the probe could lead to Zardari's ouster if a link is established.

"I think that this is one of the darkest days in history for the judiciary," Haqqani's lawyer, Asma Jahangir, told reporters.

The court set up a judicial commission to investigate the scandal and present a report in four weeks.

It also directed the government to contact Research in Motion to obtain verification of Ijaz's claims of BlackBerry conversations with Haqqani.

The government has become increasingly unpopular since Zardari took office in 2008, failing to tackle myriad problems from crippling power cuts to suicide bombings and a struggling economy.

Speculation had swirled of an imminent coup, but all sides have since dismissed the rumours as baseless. Analysts say the military has plenty of other ways to pressure Zardari to step down.



Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi meets victims of a recent explosion in a warehouse at a relief center in Yangon yesterday. A pre-dawn blast at a warehouse in Myanmar's biggest city killed at least 17 people and injured dozens more on December 29 sparking a blaze that took firefighters hours to tame, officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

Govt vows to bring Lokpal in budget session

PTI, New Delhi

Putting up a brave front after it failed to muster the numbers in the Rajya Sabha, the United Progressive Alliance government yesterday said the Lokpal Bill will "definitely" be brought before the Rajya Sabha during the budget session.

"Definitely we will bring it in March in the Budget session...we have to study the 187 amendments brought by Opposition parties as most are overlapping," Minister of State for Personnel V. Narayanasamy said here.

He said after going through the amendments, the government will take a call on what to accept and what to reject and get back to the Opposition parties.

Govt engineered high drama: Team Anna

PTI, New Delhi

Team Anna yesterday sought to tear into the government on the Lokpal Bill alleging that it engineered the high drama in Rajya Sabha as it did not have the intention to set up a strong anti-corruption ombudsman.

Putting the blame squarely on government, Anna Hazare's supporters contended that the government could have passed the Bill if it had accepted the three amendments independence of the Central Bureau of Investigation, selection and removal process and delinking Lokayukta on which the Opposition was in agreement.

They chose not to attack the Opposition on its insistence that Lokayukta in States should not be brought through the Bill, though it is one of their key demands, but insisted that its passage after accepting opposition amendments would have been the first step towards setting up a strong Lokpal.

"The way the voting in Rajya Sabha was prevented shows that government was committing fraud after fraud. They say they want to bring a strong Lokpal but they don't have the intention," Team Anna member Arvind

Kejriwal told reporters.

He said the Bill presented in the House was not only weak but also "dangerous" as the ombudsman was fully under the control of government.

In the Lok Sabha, he said, 55 amendments were moved and all of them were not useless. There were good amendments like the one demanding independence for the CBI but all of them were defeated by the government "wrongly using its majority", he said.

Noting that the entire opposition was in agreement with three amendments, Kejriwal said if there was voting, it would have been carried out as two of them on the CBI and selection and removal process were critical.

"It would have been the beginning of a strong Lokpal," he said while another Team Anna member Prashant Bhushan said, "now the fight is for to save democracy."

Team Anna also said the manner in which the government "orchestrated" the disruption of the proceedings and prevented a vote on the opposition's amendments to the government's Lokpal Bill exposed the "hollowness" of its claim that it is committed to an effective anti corruption legislation.

Myanmar sets by-poll date

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar is to hold by-elections on April 1, a government official said yesterday, which could propel democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi into the army-dominated parliament.

"The by-election will be held on April 1," a Myanmar government official told AFP. Suu Kyi, who officially registered her opposition party a week ago, has already said she intends to stand in the polls.

Her National League for Democracy (NLD) was given the green light by authorities to rejoin mainstream politics earlier this month, but is waiting for official approval of its application.

For Suu Kyi, 66, who has spent much of the past two decades in detention, the by-elections will offer her an opportunity to seek a seat in a parliament.

'Expect no change'

North Korea tells world

BBC ONLINE

North Korea yesterday told the international community not to "expect any change" in the wake of Kim Jong-il's death.

The message came in a statement carried by state media and attributed to the powerful National Defence Commission.

"We declare solemnly and confidently that the foolish politicians around the world, including the puppet group in South Korea, should not expect any change from us," it said.

Since Kim Jong-il died on December 17, the outside world has been watching to see whether his son Kim Jong-un, aged in his 20s, would stick to its hardline "military first" policies that have seen the isolated nation move closer to nuclear weapons capacity.

Kim Jong-il had ruled North Korea since the death of his father Kim Il-sung in 1994. Under him funds were channelled to the military and North Korea conducted two nuclear tests.



His son, Kim Jong-un, has been named "supreme leader of the party, state and army".

North Korea's neighbours are watching to see whether the leadership change will affect Pyongyang's ties with the international community.

The impoverished communist state remains technically at war with South Korea and is isolated on the international stage because of its dire human rights record and pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The statement from the NDC - which is thought to be the country's top decision-making body - said North Korea would "never deal" with South Korean leader Lee Myung-bak.

The NDC also criticised Seoul's "unforgivable" decision to allow only two non-official delegations to cross the border to pay their respects to Kim.

On Thursday North Korea held a national memorial service for Kim Jong-il, ending the period of mourning.

NEWS IN brief

Mosque blast kills 4 in Nigeria

AFP, Kano

An explosion killed four people in the violence-torn city Nigerian city of Maiduguri as Muslim faithful left a mosque after Friday prayers, the military and residents said.

The group - which wants strict sharia law - has carried out scores of attacks, mainly in the north-east.

It has said it attacked several churches on Christmas Day, killing at least 42 people. Boko Haram has also in the past targeted international organisations and Muslim leaders from rival sects.

Earlier this week, Nigeria's main Christian group warned that the community may have to defend itself if the security forces could not protect it.

US slams Chavez cancer remark

AFP, Washington

The US State Department on Thursday chastised Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's "reprehensible" allegation that the United States could be giving cancer to Latin American leaders.

Without providing any evidence to back up his claim, Chavez posed the rhetorical question "Would it be that strange if they had developed technology to induce cancer without anyone knowing about it?" at a ceremony for the national armed forces on Wednesday.

"With regard to the Chavez statements, let me simply say that they are horrific and reprehensible," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters.

Vietnam cargo ship sinks, 22 killed

AFP, Hanoi

A Vietnamese cargo boat that vanished near the Philippines on Christmas Day has sunk, killing 22 of its 23 crew members, Vietnam state shipping firm Vinalines said yesterday.

The Vinalines Queen disappeared after passing Luzon Island and apparently did not send out a distress signal.

Late yesterday online newspaper Dan Tri reported that a surviving sailor from the ship, Dau Ngoc Hung, was rescued by a British ship which was heading towards Singapore.

Vinalines said its ship was carrying more than 54,000 tonnes of nickel ore and was travelling from Indonesia to China when it lost contact.

The Japanese-built 190 metre Vinalines Queen was one of the largest and most modern cargo ships in the Vietnamese fleet, with a capacity of more than 56,000 tonnes. It had been in service for Vinalines since 2005.



A man rides a motorbike on a damaged highway along the Bay of Bengal Sea on the outskirts of Chennai after Cyclone Thane hit the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Cyclone Thane hits south India

16 kill as heavy rain batters region

AFP, Hyderabad

A severe cyclone packing winds of up to 140 kilometres an hour tore into India's southeastern coast yesterday, killing at least 16 people, a senior official said.

Cyclone Thane lashed the coast between Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu state and the territory of Pondicherry early yesterday, according to the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA).

"Fourteen persons have died in Tamil Nadu and two in Pondicherry. Though the death toll may not go up drastically, there is a possibility of some more deaths," Marri Shashidhar Reddy, vice-chairman of NDMA, told AFP.

The damage and loss of life in these two places was mainly caused by strong winds, heavy rainfall and storm surges that led to the collapse of old, rickety buildings.

Reddy hoped the worst was over as the cyclone was showing signs of weakening.

Indian meteorological officials predicted "heavy to very heavy" rainfall over places in Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Kerala and Karnataka during the next 24 hours.

India and Bangladesh are hit regularly by cyclones that develop in the Bay of Bengal between April and November, causing widespread damage to homes, livestock and fields.

US frees \$40m fund for Palestinians

AFP, Washington

The US State Department said Congress has released \$40 million in aid to the Palestinians, part of the nearly \$200 million that was frozen over their bid for full UN recognition.

The monies, provided through the Economic Support Fund, are targeted for economic and humanitarian support.

"We will continue to work with Congress when they come back in session to secure additional funding for these programs, because we think they're important," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said.

"We think they aid in stability and security and development for the Palestinian people. That's in our interest, it's in their interest and we believe it's also in Israel's interest."

In November, officials said US lawmakers lifted a hold on nearly \$200 million in aid to the Palestinians, mainly money for the police force, that had been suspended in response to the Palestinian bid for full UN membership.

However, officials also said lawmakers were maintaining a block on some \$192 million in aid for infrastructure projects in the Gaza Strip, ruled by the Islamist movement Hamas, and the Fatah-controlled West Bank.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asked Congress in October to preserve the aid to the Palestinian Authority, warning that Hamas militants could otherwise try to fill the void.

Hazare fades after 'flop' show

AFP, New Delhi

He was the unexpected political star of 2011 in India, but anti-corruption campaigner Anna Hazare has seen his lustre fade after his latest campaign failed to ignite.

The frail 74-year-old led country-wide protests in August against endemic corruption in India, channeling popular anger over a series of high-profile scandals that revealed the rot at the top of Indian politics.

During a 12-day hunger strike, he was feted as a national hero in the media and mobbed by supporters at a tumultuous procession through the capital New Delhi.

The outpouring of emotion caught the government by surprise in one of a number of humiliating incidents during the year for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who promised to come up with a tough new anti-corruption law.

Hazare, a former army driver who models himself on Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, hoped



to repeat the trick earlier this week with a three-day hunger strike in Mumbai as parliament debated the legislation.

Organisers had predicted crowds of at least 40,000, but at times the 2,000 police at the open-air venue in Mumbai appeared to outnumber supporters.

Even before Hazare arrived at the protest site, demonstrators waving black flags stopped his cavalcade, accusing him of having no respect for India's democratic processes.

On Wednesday Hazare called off his fast early, laid low by a virus and stung by the poor public response and the

change in sentiment in the media that had previously lionised him.

Tabloid newspaper Mail Today and the Hindustan Times called the protest a "flop show", while the Times of India said he had "retired hurt" and the campaign had ended with a "whimper".

"The Anna Hazare movement seems to have had its 15 minutes of fame," the Mail wrote in an editorial on Wednesday. "The poor turnout at his meetings in Mumbai and New Delhi indicates people are suffering from protest fatigue."

With fame has come scrutiny, as well as a sense of saturation. Hazare has rarely been out of the headlines since the beginning of the year.

Analysts say there are multiple factors at play.

"Earlier they (the Indian people) were in blind awe of Hazare," said Madhuresh Kumar of the National Alliance of People's Movement, a non-profit body working to raise awareness about corruption.

"People have now started looking at the bigger picture."