

STANDOFF WITH JUDICIARY Maldives seeks UN help

AFP, Colombo

The Maldives yesterday asked the UN and the Commonwealth to send a team of international legal experts to mediate in a judicial crisis that has sparked street demonstrations in recent days.

Anti-government activists have been protesting against President Mohamed Nasheed, who initiated the arrest last Monday of the head of the country's criminal court on charges of misconduct and favouring opposition figures.

Criminal Court Chief Justice Abdulla Mohamed's arrest triggered clashes and mass arrests. Opposition parties said police detained dozens on Friday while protesting, raising to 82 the number of arrests in the past few days.

The island's Supreme Court and prosecutor general have called for Mohamed's release.

Foreign Minister Ahmed Naseem wrote to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Commonwealth asking them to "urgently dispatch" a team of jurists, President Mohamed Nasheed's office said yesterday.

Naseem said the judicial impasse represented "a systemic failure" and deeper structural reforms were needed to restore judicial independence.

The government last week raised fears that Islamic extremism were taking hold in the Indian Ocean island nation, best known for its upmarket tourism and as a destination for honeymooners.



US senators John McCain, left, and Joseph Lieberman, centre, answers questions from the press next to Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi after a meeting at her house in Yangon yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Disgusted by police plot Says Rushdie

AFP, Jaipur

British author Salman Rushdie yesterday accused Indian police of making up an underworld plot to assassinate him that forced him to pull out of a literary festival this weekend.

Rushdie withdrew from the event in Jaipur, the state capital of Rajasthan, after being warned by Indian officials that paid gunmen were heading to the city to kill him for his writing that is alleged to insult Muslims.

But Rushdie said that he now believed the supposed plot -- apparently undertaken by Mumbai criminal gangs -- had been invented to keep him away from the festival and to avoid controversy.

"I've investigated, & believe that I was indeed lied to. I am outraged and very angry," Rushdie said on Twitter after newspaper reports that Rajasthan police had concocted the death threat.

Rushdie's 1988 novel "The Satanic Verses", which remains banned in India, is seen by many Muslims worldwide as a blasphemous work that insults their religion.

The author, who was born in Mumbai, spent a decade in hiding after Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued a fatwa in 1989 calling for his death over the novel.

Fellow authors at the Jaipur festival, which draws tens of thousands of Indian and foreign visitors, expressed their opposition to the campaign to stop Rushdie appearing, and said free speech needed to be protected in India.

Writers Hari Kunzru and Amitava Kumar read out passages of "The Satanic Verses" from the stage in protest on Friday, angering some local Muslim groups who had welcomed Rushdie's withdrawal from the programme.

Rushdie appeared at the festival without incident in 2007 but this year Muslim activists lobbied for him to be banned, raising fears of angry protests and security problems at the scenic venue in the gardens of an old palace.

INDIAN ASSEMBLY POLLS, 2012

Will Priyanka's charm work?

TNN ONLINE

She's called a 'reluctant bride', a 'seasonal variation' and a 'media lovely'. For the swish set, Priyanka Gandhi is a fashion icon or a socialite. But when she goes to the rural hinterlands, she's appears wrapped casually in a cotton sari, reminding one of her grandmother. And now, she's campaigning in UP for her brother Rahul.

UP is the acid test for Brand Rahul. But it's Priyanka that people are talking about despite her campaigning in the 'family' constituencies. Will Brand Priyanka work for the party and her brother? "Priyanka's presence may have marginal impact at the ground level. She has Indira Gandhi's looks, has more charm than Rahul and can draw people, but in today's caste-based politics, these factors may only garner more audience, not votes. Often, people come to see her out of sheer curiosity," says Mithileshwar Jha, professor of marketing, IIM-Bangalore. "She's like a reluctant bride but people want to see what she will deliver."

While she is visually appealing with Indira's aquiline nose and charisma, ad



Priyanka Gandhi

mass leader after Indira," says Sajjan Raj Kurup, founder and creative chairman of Creativeland Asia. "A brand needs sustained content and stature. I don't know what the content here is. Rahul and Priyanka come across as tender newbies in front of hardened politicians like Mulayam and Mayawati."

But does she have the 'wow' factor that's needed in a brand? While Kurup said she was naturally interesting, Piyush Pandey, executive chairman of Ogilvy, South Asia, said her warmth and softness are plus points. "She seems empathetic to the masses. Her pres-

ence would help Rahul. She is spotless and comes with a clean slate, unlike Mayawati and Mulayam," he says.

When compared to Rahul, Priyanka scores well. Rahul needs a course in Hindi diction and comes across as a boy scout than a man, says Visvanathan. "He seems like a tableaux in slow motion," he said.

But the biggest drawback of the siblings, say advertisers, is their lack of issues. Also, Priyanka's presence is only cosmetic. She can't be propelled if she isn't seriously about foraying into politics. And that's where she should make up her mind. If she decides to take the plunge, says Jha, her crowd-pulling abilities will be better than Rahul's; she will have a longer future too. But they all agree that despite both places being VIP constituencies, the impact of this family hasn't been enough.

Arvind Sharma, chairman and CEO, Leo Burnett India, suggests that the siblings work in tandem. "Priyanka with her intuitiveness and easy style and Rahul with his earnestness could make a dent."

But will the dent become a lasting mark? Only time will tell.

Maoist camp destroyed in India

PTI, Malkangiri

A Maoist camp was destroyed and several weapons and explosive devices were seized during a joint combing operation by security forces in a jungle in Odisha's Malkangiri district yesterday.

Acting on a tip-off, the elite anti-naxal Special Operations Group (SOG) force of Odisha and police launched combing operation and spotted the camp in Tekguda forest under Kalimela area, about 50 km from here, Inspector-in-Charge of Kalimela police station, Anirudh Routray said.

Though the red rebels fled from the scene on getting information about combing operation, police seized three electronic detonators, more than 200 metres of wire used for landmine, two country-made rifles and many live cartridges from the spot, he said.

US 'pleased' with Myanmar reforms

AFP, Yangon

A key US senator yesterday said the United States was "pleased with the progress" of Myanmar's reforms but urged the nominally-civilian regime to ensure upcoming by-elections are "free and fair".

Following an hour-long meeting with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi at her Yangon home, John McCain said there remains "a great deal to be done".

McCain told reporters that he had urged President Thein Sein to continue in the right direction at a meeting in the capital Naypyidaw yesterday morning, but had added the US does not "expect miracles".

"We made it very clear that we are pleased with the progress that has been made but we said there are a number of issues that need to be addressed including the rule of law, including ethnic conflicts and of course progress towards free and fair elections," he said.

The senator said he had pressed Thein Sein to allow international observers to monitor by-elections on April 1, but had received no commitment from the president.

Suu Kyi is running for a parliamentary seat in the vote, one of several dramatic developments in recent months.

Reforms have also included the release of hundreds of political prisoners, leading US President Barack Obama to call for the resumption of full diplomatic ties.

Speaking in Bangkok on Saturday, McCain said the US would likely begin to lift sanctions if the by-polls were free and fair, but he also expressed caution, saying Washington should not "rush into judgments that we may regret later on".

NEWS IN brief

26 babies die in India hospital

AFP, Kolkata

At least 26 infants have died in the past five days in a state-run hospital in India's West Bengal state, authorities said yesterday.

The hospital in Malda, about 340 kilometres north of Kolkata, has come under attack for negligence while state health officials claim the babies were underweight and several of them were "terminally ill".

"Two more babies died on Sunday taking the death toll to 26. Most of them were underweight and had been suffering from birth asphyxia," West Bengal health services director Biswa Ranjan Satpathi told AFP by telephone.

Satpathi said the hospital has 60 beds for infants - barely enough to cope with the surge in patients.

"More than 14,000 babies were admitted to the hospital over the past three months. The hospital does not have the infrastructure to offer treatment to so many infants," he said.

17 killed as Iran boat sinks

AFP, Tehran

Seventeen people died when an Iranian passenger boat capsized in heavy winds after running out of fuel in the Strait of Hormuz, the official IRNA news agency reported yesterday.

The boat set sail Saturday evening from Hormuz Island, the most northern piece of land at the entrance. The vessel ran out of fuel during the 10-kilometre (six-mile) journey and was caught in a heavy storm, which also hampered rescue efforts, state television reported.

It then capsized and its 22 passengers, captain and crew members were trapped underneath, IRNA said. Rescue teams saved five people.

Pakistan nabs 31 Indian fishermen

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani authorities have arrested 31 Indian fishermen and seized 14 boats for allegedly violating the country's maritime boundary, an official said.

The fishermen were detained by the Maritime Security Agency (MSA) during routine patrolling yesterday, a spokesman for the agency said.

The Indian fishermen allegedly continued to intrude into Pakistan's marine-rich Indus delta region "at the cost of livelihood of local fishermen", he claimed.

The MSA handed over the fishermen to police in Karachi for further investigation.

China looks positive

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this sector, has set up its office in Dhaka and is ready to participate in this project in commercial manner.

Xianyi said Chinese enterprises are also ready to cooperate with enterprises from other countries to jointly take part in this project.

Asked about the much talked about tri-nation road and rail links, he said China stands ready to work together with Bangladesh and Myanmar to establish the road and railway links among the three countries at an earlier date.

"There are already several routes that connect China and Myanmar. For routes between Bangladesh and Myanmar, I hope Bangladesh can have more consultation with Myanmar to push this process forward."

The ambassador said the Chinese side always attaches importance to the connectivity among China, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

"We believe, this is conducive to the economic, cultural, people to people links, and to peace and stability of this region."

Asked about Chinese assistance in dredging of riverbeds in Bangladesh, Ambassador Xianyi said that against the backdrop of climate change, river dredging becomes even more important.

Each year, the Chinese government provides training to Bangladeshi officials and technicians, he said.

On September last year, he said China Harbour Engineering Company Ltd was selected to implement a project for Jamuna River dredging (14 kms).

Asked about the con-

struction of the 7th and 8th Friendship Bridges, the ambassador said that the construction contract on the 7th China-Bangladesh Friendship Bridge at Kazirtek was signed on January 3 this year and the works will start very soon.

About the 8th Friendship Bridge, he said consultations are going on between the two countries and hopefully, there will be a positive result soon.

Asked about bilateral trade and economic cooperation, Xianyi said the two-way trade volume in the first 11 months of 2011 reached \$7.5 billion with an increase of 21.3 percent compared with the same period in 2010.

Bangladesh's export to China reached \$400 million,

an increase of 79.5 percent, while the Chinese investment in Bangladesh in 2011 amounted to more than \$200 million.

Ambassador Xianyi said Bangladesh and China signed agreements on introduction of 3G technology and expansion of 2.5G network as well as construction of Shahjalal Fertilizer Factory. The construction work will start very soon.

Besides, China exempted debts of Bangladesh worth more than 600 million RMB.

Asked about providing duty-free access to more Bangladesh products, the ambassador said that since July 1, 2010, China began offering zero tariff treatment to 4,762 Bangladesh products, covering 70 percent of Bangladesh exports to

China.

As a result, he said Bangladesh's export to China has increased by 91 percent in 2010 and 79.5 percent in 2011.

"As next step, China will increase this ratio to 97 percent," he said, adding Bangladeshi businesses can make full use of widely open Chinese market and increase their exports to China.

Replying to a question about easing visa regime for Bangladeshi businessmen and tourists, Xianyi said the Chinese embassy has already eased the visa procedure for Bangladeshi business community.

In 2011, the Embassy of China issued visas to more than 20,000 Bangladesh citizens.

Khaleda, 3 others

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Senior Special Judge's Court will decide on the day whether the charges brought against the accused will be taken into cognisance.

On January 16, the Anti-Corruption Commission pressed charges against Khaleda and three others, accusing them of abusing power to set up a charitable organisation named after late president Ziaur Rahman.

The other accused are Abul Harris Chowdhury, political secretary to the former prime minister, Khaleda Zia; his assistant personal secretary (APS) Ziaul Islam Munna; and Monirul Islam Khan, APS to former Dhaka City Corporation mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka.

According to the charge sheet submitted by ACC

Assistant Director Harunur Rashid, investigation officer of the case, the four accused, in collaboration with each other, realised over Tk 2.17 crore from unknown sources in the name of establishing Shaheed Zia Charitable Trust.

The charge sheet also points out irregularities in spending over Tk 1.24 crore in the process of purchasing a piece of land for the trust.

Khaleda, Munna and Monirul obtained bail from the High Court on different dates while Harris Chowdhury has been absconding since the ACC filed the case on August 8 last year with Tejgaon Police Station.

Harris was shown as a fugitive in the charge sheet and while submitting it the IO prayed to the court for an arrest warrant against him.

Discipline, no anarchy

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the BNP's first official reaction to the army's announcement that it had "foiled a conspiracy to topple the government."

Addressing all members of the armed forces, he said, "Do not walk into a trap. We do not want any division, rashness or anarchy in the armed forces. We do not want to see any conflict or clash in army barracks, or hear the cries of a mother, a widow or a father."

He thanked Almighty Allah that no bloodshed had happened, and that the civil administration and constitutional process prevailed in the country.

"The game of blaming one another will not bring any success to anyone. It will rather result in a deterioration in the situation."

Alamgir alleged that the ruling party wanted to use

the existing situation to further its own interests. He urged people in the government not to use the army for their petty party interests.

"The army's statement on Thursday is a reflection of the government's thoughts. The details of the failed coup were not provided. It did not even mention the names of the members of the court of inquiry."

Asked whether Khaleda Zia had hinted at such an event through her allegation of the disappearance of army officers, Alamgir said she wanted to know about the matter from the government as "such information" was available in the media and on blogs.

It may be recalled that the BNP chairperson alleged at a Chittagong rally on January 9 that army officers had been disappearing.

Alamgir blamed ruling

party leaders and the Indian media for carrying out propaganda implicating the BNP in the incident. He said the BNP always believed in a hand over of power through a free and fair election with the support of the people.

He also accused the Awami League of supporting army intervention in politics in 1975, 1982 and 2007.

When a reporter inquired whether the BNP wanted to have a discussion in parliament on the incident, he said the party's standing committee and parliamentary party would decide on the matter.

BNP standing committee members Moudud Ahmed, Nazrul Islam Khan, Dr Moyeen Khan, Jamiruddin Sircar and Mirza Abbas, party vice chairman Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, and chairperson's adviser Osman Farruk were also present.