



Pak PM hints at early polls

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan PM Yousaf Raza Gilani on Monday said the option of an early general election "is open" but political elements wanting polls ahead of schedule would have to take up the issue with him after the budget session of parliament in May.

Gilani made the remarks during a meeting with Muhammad Asim Nazir, a parliamentarian of the PML-Q, which is a partner in the Pakistan People's Party-led ruling coalition.

He "made it clear that the option for early elections is open", said a statement issued by the premier's office. "All those political elements who want early elections can talk to me but after the budget session," Gilani said. During an interaction with with Pakistani journalists on Sunday following his return from Switzerland, where he attended the World Economic Forum, Gilani had hinted at the possibility of the next general election being held ahead of schedule.

He said he would hold consultations on the issue with his government's allies and opposition political parties. The general election could be held sometime after the passage of the federal budget, Gilani indicated during the media interaction.

"With the passage of the fifth budget, the election year starts and we are of the view that early elections are likely after the budget," he said.

Is the Earth getting lighter?

BBC ONLINE

The recent crash landing of Russian spacecraft Phobos-Grunt has focused attention on the increasing amount of space junk orbiting the planet. So does this mean the Earth has been getting lighter?

There are factors that are causing the Earth to both gain and lose mass over time, according to Dr Chris Smith, a medical microbiologist and broadcaster.

Using some back-of-the-envelope-style calculations, Dr Smith, with help from physicist and Cambridge University colleague Dave Ansell, drew up a balance sheet of what's coming in, and what's going out. All figures are estimated.

By far the biggest contributor to the world's mass is the 40,000 tonnes of dust that is falling from space to Earth, says Dr Smith.

Another much less significant reason the planet is gaining mass is because of global warming.

But overall, Dr Smith has calculated that the Earth - including the sea and the atmosphere - is losing mass. He points to a handful of reasons.

For instance, the Earth's core is like a giant nuclear reactor that is gradually losing energy over time, and that loss in energy translates into a loss of mass. But this is a tiny amount - he estimates no more than 16 tonnes a year.

But there is something else that is making the planet lose mass.

"Physicists have shown that the Earth is losing about three kilograms of hydrogen gas every second. It's about 95,000 tonnes of hydrogen that the planet is losing every year.

So taking into account the gains and the losses, Dr Smith reckons the Earth is getting about 50,000 tonnes lighter a year.

Russia warns of war in Syria

US spy chief says fall of regime inevitable

BBC ONLINE

The Western-Arab drive to adopt a UN resolution on Syria is a "path to civil war", Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov warned yesterday amid raging violence.

The resolution will be discussed at an imminent UN Security Council meeting on the deepening Syrian crisis.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, in neighbouring Jordan for talks on Middle East peace, urged the Security Council to overcome bitter differences over Syria to increase pressure to end the bloodshed.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is leading a Western charge to press Russia to back Security Council action to stop a crackdown on dissent the United Nations says has killed more than 5,400 people in the past 10 months.

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague told the BBC that Russia would be increasingly isolated

across the Arab World if it vetoed the UN resolution.

Meanwhile, senior US officials have said it is only a matter of time before Assad loses his grip on power.

"I do not see how he can sustain his rule of Syria," intelligence chief James Clapper told a Senate hearing, but said the process could take a

President Bashar al-Assad to hand power to his deputy.

"I don't think Russian policy is about asking people to step down. Regime change is not our profession," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, stressing that while the Syrian president was not an ally, it was

Committee said, including two children.

The latest draft of the resolution strongly condemns violence and human rights abuses by the Syrian government and calls on countries to stop the flow of arms to Syria, without imposing an arms embargo.

At the core of the plan is an endorsement of an Arab League peace plan that would see President Assad delegate power to his deputy to oversee a political transition.

Moscow, which has maintained close ties with Damascus and has a naval base in the country, says this amounts to regime change and has criticised the document's threat of unspecified further measures if Syria does not comply.

As one of the five permanent council members, Russia has already said it will veto the draft, but the BBC's UN correspondent Barbara Plett says Western nations still hope to convince it to at least abstain.

UNSC MEMBERS' POSITION ON SYRIA

→ **US, UK, France, Germany, Portugal, Morocco drafted resolution.**

→ **Russia to veto any resolution imposing sanctions or authorising military intervention**

→ **China, India, Pakistan and South Africa expected to follow Russia's lead**

longtime.

Veto-wielding Russia has objected to a resolution introduced by Morocco which calls for the regime to put an immediate stop to violence against protesters and for

were killed across the country on Monday, including 40 civilians, said activists.

Another 30 people were killed yesterday, the Local Co-ordination

Obama's remark on drone strikes angers Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Hours after President Barack Obama confirmed that US drones regularly target militants in its tribal belt, Pakistan today said such attacks were "unlawful" and a violation of its sovereignty.

"Our position on drone strikes is clear and based on principles. Drone attacks are unlawful, counter-productive and hence unacceptable," Foreign Office spokesman Abdul Basit told PTI.

"We cannot condone the violation of our sovereignty," he said.

Obama confirmed for the first time that US drones had targeted militants in Pakistan's tribal areas during a chat with users of Google and YouTube. He said "a lot of these strikes have been in" Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas."

"This is a targeted focused effort at people who are on a list of active terrorists, who are trying to go in and harm Americans, hit



Barack Obama

American facilities, American bases, and so on... For us to be able to get them in another way would involve probably a lot more intrusive military action than the ones we're already engaging in," he said.

The drone campaign by the CIA has become an irritant in Pakistan-US ties largely due to growing anti-Americanism in Pakistan. Rights groups have alleged that scores of civilians

have died in the missile attacks.

US diplomatic cables leaked by WikiLeaks in 2010 showed that Pakistan's civilian and military leaders privately supported the US drone attacks.

The CIA has scaled down drone attacks following a cross-border Nato air strike that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers in November.

Pakistan reacted to the Nato attack by closing all routes used to transport supplies to foreign troops in Afghanistan and forcing the US to vacate Shamsi airbase, which was a hub for CIA-operated drones.



PHOTO: AFP

Republican presidential candidate and former Massachusetts Gov Mitt Romney delivers a birthday cake to Maeve Reston, a reporter covering the campaign, at the Jacksonville International airport on Monday in Jacksonville, Florida.

Join politics to fight graft

Imran Khan suggests Anna Hazare

IANS, Kolkata

Pakistani cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan Monday said if social activist Anna Hazare forms a party and captures power then he would be far more effective in fighting corruption.

"If Anna Hazare forms a party and captures power, then he will be far more effective in fighting corruption," Khan said during a programme at the Kolkata Book Fair here.

"You can be the most powerful pressure group, but if the government doesn't have the political will to fight corruption, then you can have any legislation you want to but eventually that will be implemented by the government," he said.

Citing the example of Pakistan, he said the country had a strong Supreme Court, but it lacked a good governance.

"We have an independent Supreme Court which is the best in fighting corruption, but we have a government which is totally inactive and is stalling the Supreme Court. It attacks the



Anna Hazare



Imran Khan

court to protect itself," he said.

He said wherever corruption had been reduced to a manageable level, all had been done by a determined government with a political will.

Khan, the leader of Tehreek-e-Insaf party, said the present regime in Pakistan was the most corrupted form of government but his party did not want any military government in the country.

"This is the most corrupt and incompetent government in the history in Pakistan, but still our party does not favour any military government in the country," he stated.

Libyans to sue ex-MI6 official over torture

AFP, London

Two Libyans are to sue the former counter-terrorism director of British spy agency MI6, claiming he played a key role in their rendition to Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, their lawyers said yesterday.

Abdelhakim Belhaj, who became Tripoli's military commander after the Libyan leader was ousted in last year's revolution, and fellow Gaddafi opponent Sami al-Saadi claim British complicity in their capture and subsequent torture.

They are taking action against Mark Allen, MI6's counter-terrorism chief at the time, after documents emerged suggesting his direct involvement.

British police announced this month that they would investigate the claims.

Ban calls for 'good will gestures' by Israel

AFP, Amman

UN leader Ban Ki-moon called yesterday for "goodwill gestures" by Israel to encourage the Palestinians to revive the Middle East peace process, ahead of talks with leaders from the two sides.

Speaking after meeting with Jordanian leaders, Ban did not say what the gestures were, but he has been an outspoken critic of Israel's increased settlement in the occupied territories, which the Palestinians blame for the latest peace impasse.

Ban held separate talks with Jordan's King Abdullah II and Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh before he goes on Wednesday to meet with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in Ramallah.

He praised Jordan for hosting five sets of preliminary talks between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators this month.

"This momentum created after two years should be sustained," Ban told a press conference after his talks with Judeh.

"Both sides should return to the dialogue table with a sense of strong political will and courage," he added.

The UN secretary general stressed the need for "the Israeli government to take some goodwill gestures so that these meetings can continue. Of course this will also require the Palestinian authorities to come to the dialogue table.

Polls open in Florida with Romney in driver's seat

REUTERS, Florida

Florida's Republican voters go to the polls yesterday in a high-stakes presidential primary election, with former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney holding a commanding double-digit lead in polls over rival Newt Gingrich.

Florida is the largest state to hold a presidential primary so far this year and a Romney victory would give him a big boost in the state-by-state battle to decide who will face President Barack Obama in the November election.

Polls opened at 7am and close at 7pm local time. Most of the state is on Eastern Time (plus 5 hours GMT), except the western Panhandle region, which is on Central Time and where polls will close an hour later.

Gingrich, a former speaker of the US House of Representatives, was riding high just 10 days ago after an upset win in South Carolina's January 21 primary and led in Florida polls as recently as early last week.

But the well-funded and well-organized Romney took back the lead after his two strong debate performances and a blizzard of television advertisements attacking Gingrich.

Reuters/Ipsos poll data on Monday showed Romney's support in Florida at 43 percent versus Gingrich at 28 percent.

A straw poll of conservative Tea Party sympathizers in the state released on Monday gave Gingrich 35 percent support against former US Senator Rick Santorum at 31 percent, Romney at 18 percent.

But other major voting blocs in Florida, including Hispanics, seem to be heavily favoring Romney.



PHOTO: AFP

Karen women dressed in traditional clothing present garlands to Karen National Union (KNU) soldiers during the celebration of 63rd anniversary of the Karen Revolution day at Oo Kray Kee village in Karen State, near the Thai-Myanmar border yesterday. The KNU is waging the world's longest-running insurgency, launched 63 years ago, shortly after the nation then known as Myanmar won its independence from Britain in 1948.