

CONTEMPT OF COURT

Pakistan SC to indict Gilani

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's top court yesterday summoned Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani to appear February 13 to be indicted with contempt over his refusal to pursue corruption cases against the president.

Gilani said he will appear before Pakistan's Supreme Court.

"I will appear in the Supreme Court. I have attended the court when summoned in the past and I will attend again now," Gilani told the parliament.

It was a shock announcement in a long-running case that significantly escalated pressure on the embattled prime minister, threatening to plunge his weak government deeper into crisis and force early elections within months.

Judge Nasir-ul-Mulk told the court there were grounds to proceed against Gilani over the government's refusal to follow a court order and ask Swiss authorities to re-open corruption cases against President Asif Ali Zardari.

The government argued that Zardari has immunity from prosecution while head of state and accused judges of plotting with the military to wage a witch-hunt against him. Switzerland shelved the cases in 2008, when Zardari took office.

Gilani was previously summoned to appear in court on January 19, when he refused to back down on Zardari's immunity. Experts say that if convicted, he could be jailed for up to six months and disqualified from public office.



A foreign tourist looks at skulls of Khmer Rouge's victims displayed in a stupa at the site of the former killing field at Choeng Ek in the outskirts of Phnom Penh yesterday. A Khmer Rouge jailer who oversaw the deaths of 15,000 people at a notorious torture prison will learn his fate today when Cambodia's UN-backed court issues its final judgment in the landmark case.

PHOTO: AFP

AFGHANISTAN WAR

US to end combat role in 2013

AFP, Aboard A Us Military Aircraft

The United States plans to end its combat mission in Afghanistan in 2013 and shift to a training role, one year before most US troops are due to withdraw, Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said Wednesday.

Although US commanders had already indicated a move towards an advisory mission in coming months, Panetta's comments marked the first time the US administration had forecast American and allied troops could end their combat operations by the second half of next year.

"Hopefully by the mid-to-latter part of 2013, we'll be able to make a transition from a combat role to a train, advise and assist role," Panetta told reporters aboard his plane en route to a Nato meeting in Brussels.

With President Barack Obama facing a tough re-election campaign, the Pentagon chief's remarks represented the strongest signal yet that the White House wants to wrap up the wars it inherited from the previous administration, after having overseen the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq in December.

Obama took a similar approach in Iraq before the pullout there, declaring an end to the combat mission while the Pentagon renamed units as "advise and assist" brigades.

Panetta portrayed the approach as in keeping with a gradual Nato plan adopted in Lisbon in November 2010, which calls for handing over security duties to Afghan forces by the end of 2014.

Despite the goal of ending the combat mission next year, the United States had no plans to move up the 2014 deadline for the withdrawal of American and coalition forces, Panetta said.

RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

Gingrich to get Trumps blessing

AFP, Las Vegas

Donald Trump was to make a "major announcement" yesterday about the US presidential race, according to his aides, as media reports said he will endorse Newt Gingrich.

The real estate tycoon and reality TV star, who flirted with running for the presidency himself last year, will speak in Las Vegas, a day after saying he would endorse a Republican candidate "in a very short period of time."

His office would give no more details but various media reported that Trump will endorse Gingrich, who suffered a heavy defeat in Florida and faces an uphill battle to regain momentum against Romney.

Romney makes gaffe on poor

AFP, Reno

Republican White House frontrunner Mitt Romney stumbled Wednesday after his big win in Florida, saying he was not concerned about "very poor" Americans -- a gaffe that earned sharp criticism.

Having soundly defeated former House speaker Newt Gingrich in the Sunshine State's primary, multimillionaire Romney headed to the western battleground of Nevada, but his controversial comments threatened to slow his momentum.

"I'm not concerned about the very poor. We have a safety net there. If it needs repair, I'll fix it," said Romney, a wealthy businessman who last week acknowledged earning \$20 million in 2010.

"I'm not concerned about the very rich, they're doing just fine," Romney, a former venture capitalist who lives off his investments, told CNN.

"I'm concerned about the very heart of



Mitt Romney Donald Trump Newt Gingrich

America, the 90-95 percent of Americans who right now are struggling and I'll continue to take that message across the nation."

The remarks came as the race for the right to take on Democratic President Barack Obama in November widened into more states, and were quickly seized on by his opponents.

The Democratic National Committee issued a message that said the remarks by the former Massachusetts governor were his latest dig at the poor and a "shallow attempt to show concern for the middle class."

And Gingrich, who lost to Romney by more than 14 percentage points in Florida, seized his chance to get back at his rival.

"I am fed up with politicians in either party dividing Americans against each other. I am running to be president of all the American people and I am concerned about all of the American people," Gingrich said in Nevada.

Pakistan vows peace in Afghanistan

Signals imminent end to Nato blockade

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday said it was willing to do whatever Afghans wanted to end 10 years of war with the Taliban, but insisted the process should not be led by the Americans or any other foreign power.

Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar also hinted at lifting ban on Nato supplies through Pakistan after a deadly attack that killed 24 Pakistani troops.

A day after talks with President Hamid Karzai billed as a fence-mending visit designed to ease frosty ties, Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar sought to refute perceptions that Islamabad was an obstacle to peace.

"We're willing to do whatever the Afghans want or expect," Khar said.

She said Karzai was due in Islamabad in the middle of the month and that she would travel with Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani to Qatar, where the Taliban has set up a liaison office for talks with the Americans.

She was determined to distance from Pakistan being in any way an independent actor in an effective peace process.

"It is Afghanistan to decide and as a friendly neighbour, it is our job and responsibility and will stand strongly behind that. The only prerequisite that Pakistan has is that it should be an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-driven, Afghan-backed process which has the ownership of Afghans people."

She also signalled that Pakistan could shortly end a more than two-month blockade on Nato supplies entering Afghanistan for foreign forces.

Islamabad shut the border and ordered a review of its US alliance after air strikes killed 24 Pakistani soldiers on November 26.

Responding as to when parliament would pass the review, she said: "I'm going to hopefully ensure and push it very hard that it is no later than within a week... first half of February is probable."

NEWS IN brief

Bollywood to go on strike on Feb 23

TIMES OF INDIA ONLINE

In protest of the Central Government's proposal to levy service tax, which would increase costs, filmmakers have decided to go on strike.

The Film Federation of India has proposed a nationwide shut down of the film industry on February 23rd, 2012, to protest against the levy of a service tax. Whether the strike will be for only a day or continue indefinitely is still unknown.

An industry insider informed Mumbai Mirror, "The imposition of service tax will cripple the filmmaking process. The Central Government has proposed a service tax of nearly 10.3 per cent. This is not a small percentage. The budget of many films

The Times probed for hacking

AFP, London

The Times newspaper is being investigated by British police over claims of hacking emails, reports said yesterday.

The investigation comes after an ongoing inquiry into the ethics of the British press heard that a journalist at the broadsheet had hacked a police blogger's email.

Tom Watson, a lawmaker from the opposition Labour party, said he had received confirmation from London's Metropolitan Police that the Times, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News International, was being investigated.

Watson said on Twitter, "The Met police have confirmed to me they are investigating Rupert Murdoch's newspaper The Times over email hacking."

Egypt film star sentenced for defaming Islam

AFP, Cairo

A Cairo court has sentenced Egyptian comedy giant Adel Imam to three months in jail for "defaming Islam" in several roles he played on stage and screen, the actor told AFP yesterday.

Imam, arguably the Arab world's most famous actor, was sentenced with hard labour in absentia, he said, after he was sued by Asran Mansur, a lawyer with Islamist ties.

The 71-year-old celebrity said that among the works criticised are the 1994 production Al-Irhabi (The Terrorist), in which he portrays an Islamic fundamentalist and the play "Al-Zaeem" (The leader), a comedy in which Imam pokes fun at the region's autocratic leaders.

Palestinians hurl shoes at UN chief

AFP, Gaza City

UN chief Ban Ki-moon faced angry protests as he visited Gaza yesterday, where he condemned rocket fire from the area and urged Israel to ease its blockade of the territory.

As Ban entered Gaza, a crowd of protesters threw shoes, sand and small stones at his convoy, angered that his schedule did not include meetings with the families of Palestinians held in Israeli jails.

He was able to continue on to Khan Yunis in southern Gaza, where he was met by more protests, with demonstrators toting banners reading "We need to live in peace" and "We demand a trial for Israel's leaders."

Ban's visit, which included stops at a school, a housing project and UN headquarters in Gaza City, came hours after a barrage of eight rockets was fired from the territory into southern Israel.

The UN chief also called on Israel to ease its restrictions on Gaza and urged Israelis to halt settlements in the disputed territories.

But his call for Israel to halt settlement construction, a key Palestinian demand, appeared to be rebuffed by Netanyahu, who said Wednesday he considered settlements an issue for discussion during negotiations, not before.

Ban's trip to Gaza came as part of a visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories intended to convince the two sides to continue meeting, as the international community seeks a way to kick start direct negotiations.



A shoe, circled, thrown by Palestinian protestors hits a vehicle in the convoy of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as it arrives at the Erez checkpoint in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ferry sinks in PNG

Hundreds rescued

AFP, Port Moresby

More than 200 people were plucked from waters off Papua New Guinea yesterday after a ferry sank but many others remained missing, with rescuers scouring the area for further survivors.

Operator Star Ships said it lost contact with the MV Rabaul Queen at about 6:00am yesterday (2000 GMT Wednesday) while it was travelling between Kimbe and Lae in the east of the Pacific nation, blaming "bad weather" for the disaster.

More than 300 people were feared to be on board when the disaster happened.

Australia's Maritime Safety Authority said it was helping coordinate the rescue, with 219 people saved so far.

INDIAN ASSEMBLY POLLS, 2012

Sonia blows war trumpet in UP Beware of Cong's traps: Mayawati

TNN, Deoria

Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday kickstarted her election campaign for UP polls from Deoria, slamming successive non-Congress governments in the state over the last 22 years for failing the common man.

"These parties have done nothing for the state during their governments. They have, however, filled their own pockets," she said, adding that though there had been a lot of change and development in the country and the world, UP has been ruined by these non-Congress governments.

In a 10-minute speech at the Government Inter College ground, the UPA chairperson panned Mayawati's government for not using Central funds and held SP, BSP and BJP responsible for 'destroying the state'. "SP, BJP and BSP have different names but play similar roles and the results of their work are also the same," she said.

Launching her campaign to retain the crown in UP, Dalit queen Mayawati cautioned large crowds at her two rallies in Sitapur and Barabanki against Congress's "divide and rule" policy.

She warned her followers - Dalits and backward - to be on guard against Congress's sub-quota politics that would split them into Dalits and maha-dalits or backward and most backward. The CM made an hour-long speech to crowds of over 50,000, who came from six constituencies of this dalit-dominated district. In 2007, BSP won four out of six seats here.

Repeatedly cautioning dalits and backward against falling "in Congress's trap", she said, "They have included a number of castes without increasing the total quantum of reservation. This is a well thought out ploy to divide your unity. Congress is playing the same game with Muslims by promising them 9% out of the OBC quota," she said.

Join Feb 7 human chain

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decided on January 29 to form the 12-kilometre human chain between Gabtali bus terminal and Jatrabari crossing from 3:00pm to 4:00pm.

Speaking on the occasion, ruling Awami League leader and State Minister for Law Quamrul Islam hoped the trials of seven to eight "identified war criminals" at the International Crimes Tribunal would be completed by the year-end.

The government would begin work on the formation of another tribunal in the first week of March to quicken the trials of those charged with committing crimes against humanity during the Liberation War in 1971, he said.

The state minister said the main opposition BNP was now working at the behest of the Jamaat-e-Islami.

The presence of Jamaat

leaders and activists was more prominent than that of BNP men at the recently held road march, he added.

Referring to the March 12 programme of the BNP, Quamrul said by that time the political field will remain under the control of AL.

Presided over by Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya, 14-party Dhaka city convener and AL city general secretary, the meeting was also attended by city AL Vice-President Mukul Chowdhury, Ganotantri Party leader Nurur Rahman Selim, Samyabadi Dal leader Harun Chowdhury, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal leader Aktar Hossain, NAP leader Ismail Hossain, City AL Organising Secretary Shahe Alam Murad, AL lawmaker Aslamul Haq, city AL Publicity Secretary Abdul Haq Sabuj and Assistant Office Secretary Shahidul Islam Milon.