

Maldives' new president agrees to early elections

AFP, Male

Maldivian President Mohamed Waheed yesterday agreed to demands for early elections, after taking power last week in what his ousted predecessor described as a coup d'état.

The island nation, set in the Indian Ocean, has endured a political stand-off since February 7 when protesters backed by police toppled Mohamed Nasheed, the Maldives' first democratically elected leader.

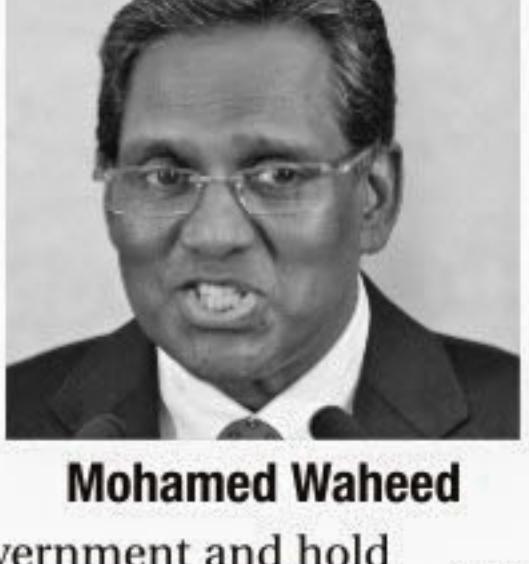
"The government will hold discussions with political parties to hold elections at an early date," Waheed's spokesman Imad Masoud told AFP in the capital Male.

"The government will work towards creating conditions that will permit such early elections to take place... if necessary the government will consider any constitutional amends that need to be made."

Waheed previously planned to form



Mohamed Nasheed



Mohamed Waheed

a national unity government and hold scheduled elections by late 2013 -- a proposal that had received the strong backing of the United States.

The change of policy was likely to be seen as a victory for Nasheed, who has refused to accept the new administration and repeatedly called for elections to be held as soon as possible.

India's Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai, who is visiting Male amid the political impasse, said in a statement that "our understanding is that elections would be held as early as considered feasible by all concerned."

Mathai also said that, following talks

on Thursday, Nasheed may call off a mass party rally today in the capital to avoid a repeat of recent violence.

The United States and Britain have issued travel advisories urging citizens against "all but essential" travel to Male, though the outlying islands that host luxury beach resorts were unaffected by the warning.

The Maldives relies heavily on tourism for income, with the industry estimating it could lose over \$100 million in revenue due to the cancellation of visitor bookings after the political unrest.

Nasheed's exit from office followed months of protests over high prices and calls for more religiously conservative policies in the Islamic state of 330,000 Sunni Muslims.

A nine-member Commonwealth ministerial mission is also due in the Maldives on Friday on a fact-finding mission to study the events surrounding Nasheed's resignation and the transfer of power.

Afghan, Iranian leaders arrive in Pakistan for summit

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday welcomed the leaders of Afghanistan and Iran for a regional summit at a key juncture in peace efforts with the Taliban and amid rising tensions between Tehran and Israel.

Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad flew into Islamabad in the afternoon for a formal summit meeting scheduled for today.

Afghan President Karzai arrived earlier in the day for a series of talks with the government and the military.

His office said separate talks with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani would focus on expanding relations, economic ties and "enhanced cooperation" on ending 10 years of war in Afghanistan.

China opposes forced regime change in Syria

Opposition rejects vote offer; violence kills 41

AFP, Beijing

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun said Beijing opposed armed intervention and forced "regime change" in Syria, a day before he heads to Damascus to push for an end to the conflict there.

"China condemns all acts of violence against innocent civilians" and does not approve of armed intervention or forcing so-called "regime change," Zhai Jun was quoted as saying by the official Xinhua news agency.

Foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin told reporters Zhai would "exchange views with the Syrian government and parties concerned in Syria on the current... situation to push for a peaceful and proper resolution of the... crisis."

His announced visit comes just days after a Chinese diplomat met the head of the Arab League to discuss the crisis. Another envoy will also soon go to the Middle East. He held talks with Nabil el-Araby, head of the Arab League, on Monday to explain why Beijing vetoed the resolution.

On the ground, Syrian armour moved on

the main hubs of an 11-month uprising yesterday killing at least 41 people, monitors said, a day after President Bashar al-Assad set a vote for a new constitution.

Opposition groups rejected the newly proposed constitution and urged voters to boycott a referendum set for this month, and to step up efforts to oust Assad.

As troops pummeled the central city of Homs for a 13th straight day, 18 people were killed in central Hama province and four others died in the southern city of Daraa, monitors reported.

Assad, whose government has vowed to crush dissent, on Wednesday decreed a vote for February 26 on a new charter that could end nearly 50 years of single-party rule.

The United States dismissed the move as "laughable," saying "it makes a mockery of the Syrian revolution." Russia, a major weapons supplier to Damascus, welcomed it.

In April, Assad scrapped emergency rule in force since 1963 when the Baathists took power in a coup d'état. But he has repeatedly promised reforms that have failed to materialise since the uprising erupted in March.

India, Nepal agree on Water, power sharing deals

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Giving a fresh boost to bilateral cooperation in water resources and power sectors, India and Nepal on Wednesday agreed on a slew of decisions relating to projects on common rivers and cross-border electricity trade.

A meeting of the Water Resources Ministers of the two countries agreed to expedite the setting up of Pancheshwar Development Authority (PDA) at the earliest for implementation of the Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project and speed up the completion of detailed project of Saptakosi High Dam Multipurpose Project and Sun Kosi storage-cum-diversion scheme by February next year.

A joint statement issued after the meeting held under the aegis of Joint Ministerial Commission on Water Resources (JMCWR) took note of the concerns of Nepal regarding payment of compensation for land and damage of crops and the meeting directed the Joint Committee on Water Resources (JCWR) to look into the problem.

The Share Holders' Agreement for the Nepal portion of the 400 KV Muzaffarpur-Dhalkebar cross-border line is being expe-

dited by Nepal and the meeting noted that the short-term strengthening scheme to facilitate import of 75 MW additional power by Nepal over the existing transmission links would be completed in the next six months.

The meeting agreed to explore the possibility of expediting the strengthening work for export of some quantum of power to electricity-deficit Nepal at the earliest and to expedite the implementation of medium-term strengthening work for additional power supply to Nepal, according to the statement.

The meeting recommended that finalisation of the draft memorandum of understanding on cross-border interconnection for power trade agreement received from Nepal including a second cross border transmission line for joint development be expedited.

Indian Water Resources Minister Pawan Kumar Bansal and his Nepalese counterpart Bogati and Shri Yadav led their respective delegations at the meeting which was also attended by Nepalese Water Resources Minister of India's Bihar state Vijay Kumar Chaudhary and senior officials of three Indian states Paschimbanga, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. All the four Indian states share the long and porous border with Nepal.



Editors of the Asia News Network pose for a photograph with Nepali President Hon Dr Ram Baran Yadav, centre, who was keynote speaker at a conference titled Himalayan System in a Changing Climate: Future and Media's Role organised by The Kathmandu Post together with Konrad Adenauer and ANN. The two-day programme which began yesterday in Kathmandu is also the annual meeting of the ANN, an alliance of 21 newspapers in 18 countries.

PHOTO: AFP

Libya militias out of control
Says Amnesty

BBC ONLINE

Armed militias are threatening the security and stability of Libya, Amnesty International warned yesterday.

The human rights group says at least 12 detainees held by militias have died after being tortured since September.

The report is being released to coincide with the first anniversary today of the revolt that toppled Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Last month, the UN said about 8,000 pro-Gaddafi supporters were being held by militia groups.

The interim government has said it is trying to reassert authority, but correspondents say it has largely failed to rein in the groups.

According to Amnesty, some groups of former rebels are committing human rights violations with impunity, unchecked by the interim government.

The report cites detainees who said they been suspended in contorted positions, beaten for hours with whips, cables, plastic hoses, metal chains and bars, and given electric shocks with live wires and taser-like electroshock weapons.

"Nobody is holding these militias responsible," Donatella Rovera, senior crisis response adviser at Amnesty International, told AP news agency.

In one detention centre, in Tripoli, investigators found severely tortured detainees who interrogators tried to conceal, Amnesty said. The report is based on research conducted in Libya in January and February.

The group noted that African migrants and refugees - who were accused during the conflict of being "mercenaries" for Muammar Gaddafi - were among those being abused.

US drones kill 13 in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

Two US drone attacks struck Islamist militants in Pakistan's tribal badlands yesterday, killing at least 13 fighters in North Waziristan near the Afghan border, officials said.

At least eight foreigners were among those killed when missiles destroyed a vehicle near the town of Mir Ali, about 30 kilometres east of Miranshah, the main town of North Waziristan, the Pakistani officials said.

The United States says Pakistan's tribal belt provides sanctuary to Taliban fighting in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda groups plotting attacks on the West, and Pakistani Taliban who routinely bomb Pakistan and other foreign fighters.

'Afghanistan can't be stable without drugs crackdown'

REUTERS, Vienna



Ban Ki-Moon

Afghanistan cannot be stable while its economy depends so heavily on the drugs trade, and its allies must step up the fight to combat the industry, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon said yesterday.

Opening a major international conference on ways to combat narcotics production in Afghanistan and smuggling through neighbouring states, Ban said the problem undermined efforts to help Afghanistan emerge as a normally functioning economy.

"We cannot speak of sustainable development when opium production is the only viable economic activity in the country," he told delegates of the so-called Paris Pact Ministerial Conference, which first met in 2003.

"We cannot expect stability when 15 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product comes from the drugs trade."

The Vienna conference, with participants

from more than 50 countries and international organisations including the foreign ministers of Russia and France, was due to adopt a new declaration at the end of a one-day session.

With foreign combat forces, and much of their cash and air power, expected to be gone from the country by the end of 2014, the Afghan government

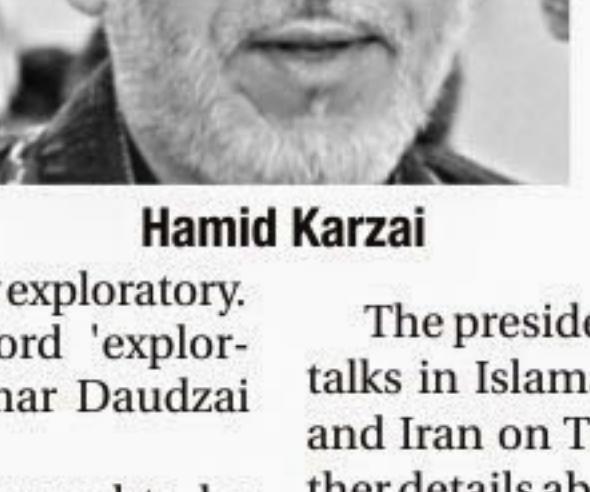
will need more help fighting poppy cultivation, which rose over the last year, experts say.

The poppy economy in Afghanistan, which provides an income for insurgents in the country blighted by decades of war, has grown significantly in 2011 with soaring prices and expanded cultivation, a UN report said late last year.

Land under poppy cultivation climbed 7 percent from 2010 as farmers sought to capitalise on a sharp rise in opium prices caused by an unidentified disease, the report by the UN drugs agency and Afghanistan's counter-narcotics ministry said.

Kabul involved in US-Taliban talks: Karzai

AFP, Kabul



Hamid Karzai

The Afghan government is part of a three-way peace dialogue involving the US and the Taliban, President Hamid Karzai reportedly said, despite the militia's denunciation of his "puppet regime".

But the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan later termed three-way peace dialogue as only exploratory.

"I must emphasize that word 'exploratory'. They are not talks," Umar Daudzai told Reuters.

"When there's talks, it's supposed to be between the Afghan government and the Taliban. We have not reached to that stage although we wish to reach to that stage."

Earlier, in an interview with the Wall Street Journal published yesterday, Karzai said the Afghan government was indeed involved in the dialogue and that most Taliban were "definitively" interested in a peace deal as foreign troops exit.

"There have been contacts between the US government and the Taliban, there have been contacts between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and there have been some contacts that we have made, all of us together, including the Taliban," Karzai was quoted as saying in the interview, conducted Wednesday.

The president, who is due to hold summit talks in Islamabad with leaders of Pakistan and Iran on Thursday, did not give any further details about the contacts.

Karzai did not mention any Pakistani involvement in the Taliban dialogue, but said the cooperation of Afghanistan's fractious neighbour "would make the whole matter easier for us, for the Taliban, and for the US".

The Taliban said last month that they planned to set up a political office in Qatar ahead of possible formal talks with the United States.

Mobiles outnumber

Nizami was unwilling

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Mobile data traffic in 2011 was eight times the size of the global internet in 2000, according to the report.

The rise in data consumption is likely to cause more problems for mobile operators already struggling to cope with demand.

Currently the average smart phone uses 150 megabytes of data per month but this is expected to rise to 2.6 gigabytes by 2016, the report found.

"By 2016, 60% of mobile users - three billion people worldwide - will belong to the Gigabyte Club, each generating more than one gigabyte of mobile data traffic per month," said Suraj Shetty, vice-president of products and solutions at Cisco.

There are various factors that are pushing data consumption ever higher.

People are using more tablet devices, which are even

more data-hungry than smart phones, the report found.

According to Cisco, tablet use exploded in 2011 - tripling to 34 million devices, each of which is generating over three times more traffic than smart phones. By 2016 it predicts that tablets will account for more than 10% of global mobile traffic.

Another factor is faster networks. 4G is currently only available for about 0.2% of mobile connections but they already account for 6% of mobile data traffic, the report said.

Using mobile data on a 4G connection generates 28% more traffic than a non-4G connection, it found.

Apple's iPhones had a reputation for using up more bandwidth than other handsets but the study found that Android consumption is now equal to, if not higher, to iPhone consumption in the US and Western Europe.

Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Ltd (CUFL) Mohsin Talukder and wanted to know why I was not informed about it earlier," a court source quoted Nizamuzzaman as saying.

"He [the CUFL MD] said he thought of telling me after learning it in details. I asked the DGFI, NSI and police were quizzing the CUFL officials, they were not allowed to go outside. I asked Mohsin to submit a report about the matter within 24 hours,"

Imamuzzaman stated.

"After opening of the office on Sunday, I met the then industries secretary Dr Shoyeb Ahmed and came to know that additional industries secretary Nurul Amin was staying at the rest house of CUFL on the night of the incident.

"Shoyeb Ahmed didn't instruct me anything and told me that he had informed the matter to the industries minister, who said the ministry had nothing to do about it. The industries secretary rather urged me to talk to the minister directly," Nizamuzzaman continued.

"As soon as I went there and raised the matter, the minister told me that he knew everything. Nizamuzzaman told me that since the law enforcement agencies seized the arms, the home ministry is taking necessary steps. So, the industries ministry doesn't need to do anything about it," he added.

"Later I prepared the report in details and sent it to the ministry. But we got no response from the ministry and that is why we could not take any step regarding the matter," he added.

The committee has to submit its recommendations to the HC by March 20, as per the ruling.

Prof Anisuzzaman will select the committee members, said the HC bench of

HC ruling

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broadcasts.

The order came following Prof Syed Manzurul Islam's "Bhasha dushon nodi dushon motor biddhongshi" (language distortion is as devastating as river pollution), published in the yesterday's copy of Bangla daily Prothom Alo.