

Polls will not be free and fair

Says Suu Kyi ahead of tomorrow's election

AFP, Yangon

Pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday said that elections in Myanmar would not be "genuinely free and fair", sounding a note of caution over her landmark bid for a seat in parliament.

The Nobel laureate, who spent most of the past 22 years as a political prisoner, complained of a series of problems, including "many, many cases of intimidation" as well as the vandalism of signboards.

"I don't think we can consider it a genuinely free and fair election," the democracy icon told a news conference ahead of Sunday's polls, when 45 seats are at stake -- not enough to threaten the ruling party's majority.

"While we recognise that even in well-established democracies there are irregularities and misdemeanors when elections take place, what has been happening in this country (is) really beyond what is acceptable for a democratic election," she added.

"Still we are determined to go forward

because we think that this is what our people want."

Experts believe the regime wants the pro-democracy leader to win a seat in a parliament dominated by the army and its political allies to burnish its reform credentials and encourage an end to Western sanctions.

But Suu Kyi said that she had no plan to accept a position as minister in the army-backed government if offered because under the constitution she would be required to give up her seat in parliament.

The NLD won a landslide election victory in 1990 but was never allowed to take office.

President Thein Sein acknowledged in a recent speech that there had been "unnecessary errors" in ballot lists, but said the authorities were trying to ensure the by-elections would be free and fair.

Since taking office a year ago, Thein Sein has carried out reforms including releasing hundreds of political prisoners, easing media restrictions and welcoming the opposition back into mainstream politics.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI

From prisoner to lawmaker

REUTERS, Yangon

Aung San Suu Kyi, the long-time standard-bearer for democracy in Myanmar, is taking a leap of faith in running for parliament on Sunday, opting to enter a political system crafted and run by the soldiers who kept her locked up for a total of 15 years.

Her party's participation in this weekend's by-elections marks a change of heart for the Nobel Peace Prize winner who repeatedly rebuffed the military's attempts to bring her into a political apparatus.

But since a general election in November 2010, followed by Suu Kyi's release from house arrest the same month, the pace of change in the former Burma under a nominally civilian government has been staggering, enough to convince her to compromise with the apparently reform-minded ex-generals now in charge.

But Suu Kyi is keeping an open mind. "Some are a little bit too optimistic about the situation. We are cautiously optimistic. We are at the beginning of a road," Suu Kyi said last month.

There is little doubt that without her



National League for Democracy (NLD) party's participation, Sunday's by-elections for 45 seats - just 7 percent of the elected seats in a legislature dominated by the military - would have barely registered on the global news agenda.

It was the Oxford-educated Suu Kyi's steely determination in confronting the authoritarian generals that kept her country in the spotlight during its isolation, winning the hearts of her people and giving her a crucial role in the West's targeted policies to squeeze Myanmar's junta.

Suu Kyi was living in Britain but returned to her family home in April

1988 to care for her ailing mother just as resentment of junta rule boiled over into nationwide protests.

As the daughter of the General Aung San, Myanmar's assassinated independence hero, Suu Kyi was persuaded to enter politics which she accepted.

The military crushed the uprising the following month. Paying the price for her popular appeal, Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest on July 19, 1989, and remained there for six years.

Even in her brief periods of freedom after 1989, she never left Myanmar, afraid that the military would not let her back in. For that reason she was unable to be with Aris, her husband, when he died in Britain in 1999 from prostate cancer.

But now, she has put some trust on the government of Thein Sein. It will not be plain sailing.

Suu Kyi has made no secret of the fact she wants to change a constitution that enshrines the military's role in politics.

That puts her on a collision course with hardliners and an armed forces commander who just this week vowed to protect the military's place in the corridors of power.

US drone strike kills 4 in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

A US drone launched a missile attack on a militant compound in Pakistan's northwestern tribal region near the Afghan border early yesterday, killing four insurgents, security officials said.

The missiles targeted a house in a market area of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, known as a stronghold of Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked militants, they said.

"Two missiles hit a house and four militants were killed," a security official told AFP. "The attack took place at about 3:00am."

Pakistan wants drone strikes to stop, arguing that they are counter-productive because they kill civilians, exacerbate anti-US sentiment and violate sovereignty.



Protesters against Dow Chemical's sponsorship of the London 2012 Olympic Games demonstrate outside the venue of the final International Olympic Committee (IOC) press conference in central London yesterday. Dow's sponsorship of London 2012 has sparked controversy as the company has been linked to the 1984 Bhopal Gas disaster which killed scores there.

EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLINGS UN official raps India

AFP, New Delhi

A top UN official yesterday called on India to investigate allegations of rampant extrajudicial killings and abolish a sweeping law that allows security forces to shoot on sight.

Christof Heyns, a UN Special Rapporteur, issued the call after travelling for 12 days through India's insurgency-hit Jammu and Kashmir state and the northeast, as well as the states of Kerala, Gujarat and West Bengal.

Heyns, the UN expert on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, urged the Indian government to set up a commission of inquiry into widespread allegations of what he dubbed "so-called fake encounters".

"Despite constitutional guarantees and a robust human rights jurisprudence, extrajudicial killings are a matter of serious concern in India," Heyns said.

Heyns also urged the Indian government to repeal the harsh Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which gives authority to the army and paramilitary forces to kill suspected rebels, arrest people and destroy property.

"In the northeastern states and Jammu and Kashmir, the armed forces have wide powers to employ lethal force," Heyns said, referring to the legislation.

Such a law "has no role to play in a democracy and should be scrapped", he said. "It has become a symbol of excessive state power" and "clearly violates international law".

India has been fighting a more than two-decade separatist revolt in heavily militarised Jammu and Kashmir while the northeast, which borders Bangladesh, China and Myanmar, is home to a number of separatist rebel groups.

NEWS IN brief

US offers \$120m for Sahel region

AFP, Washington

The United States will give \$120 million in emergency aid for western Africa's drought-hit Sahel region in hope of preventing severe hunger, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Thursday.

Hillary announced the aid after a UN appeal in February for \$725 million in urgent assistance for the Sahel, the latest food concern in Africa following a famine believed to have killed tens of thousands in Somalia last year.

The Sahel -- which includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger -- has been hit hard by a drought, high food prices and regional conflict.

Denmark officially in recession

AFP, Copenhagen

Denmark has entered a recession, official data showed yesterday, after growth figures for the fourth quarter of 2011 were revised to show a 0.1-percent contraction.

In February, the national statistics institute had forecast slight growth of 0.2 percent in the October-December period, following a 0.1-percent contraction in the previous quarter.

A recession is defined by two quarters running of negative growth.

Bush senior endorses Romney

AFP, Chicago

Former US president George HW Bush called on Republicans Thursday to rally behind frontrunner Mitt Romney and wrap up the party's presidential nominating process.

"We've known Mitt for a long time and he's the man to do this job and go on to win the presidency," Bush told reporters gathered in his Houston office, with his wife Barbara and Romney at his side.

"I do think it's time for the party to get behind Governor Romney," Bush said.

The endorsement comes amid concerns that a prolonged primary battle leading all the way to the national nominating convention could ultimately hurt Republican chances to defeat Democratic incumbent Barack Obama in November.

Bush's son Jeb Bush also announced his support for Romney last week. Another son, former president George W Bush, has yet to make an endorsement.

Romney is ahead in the nomination race with 565 delegates, followed by Rick Santorum with 256, Newt Gingrich with 141 and Ron Paul with 66, according to the Real Clear Politics website.

A candidate needs 1,144 delegates to clinch the nomination.

TENSION IN KOREAN PENINSULA Japan approves rocket interception plan

AFP, Tokyo

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's cabinet yesterday gave the green light to shoot down a North Korean rocket if it threatens Japan's territory, as the planned launch raises global alarm bells.

Pyongyang has said it will fire a rocket to put a satellite into orbit between April 12 and 16 to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of founding president Kim Il-Sung, saying the launch was for peaceful purposes.

But the United States and its allies suspect it is a disguised missile test, and say the launch would contravene UN sanctions aimed at curbing North Korea's missile programme.

"(The cabinet) at a security meeting this morning confirmed the policy to issue a destroy order," an official in the prime minister's office told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The order gave Defence Minister Naoki Tanaka the power to have the projectile shot down, as Japan grows increasingly worried that the rocket may pass over -- or fall into -- its territory.

Japan's move come as satellite images showed North Korea has begun preparing for a rocket launch next month despite international condemnation.

Stop harassing army chief

BJP tells govt

PTI, New Delhi

The BJP yesterday cast aspersions on the government on the army chief controversy, saying there seems to be something "fishy" and demanded that the Centre should stop "harassing" General VK Singh and instead look into the issues raised by him.

"There is something fishy in the manner, in which this government is giving explanations on the whole controversy. We do not want security matters to become an issue.... But instead of harassing Gen VK. Singh, this government should look into the issues he has raised," BJP vice-president Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi said.

Troubles worsen for Gilani

Son in drug scam as court threatens with new case

PTI, Islamabad

Adding to woes of premier Yousaf Raza Gilani, Pakistan's supreme court yesterday warned him that a second contempt case could be initiated against him if he failed to act on its verdict that annulled a graft amnesty issued by former military ruler Pervez Musharraf.

During a hearing by a seven-judge bench on the implementation of the apex court's verdict striking down the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), justice Ejaz Afzal Khan said that another case of contempt could be taken up against Gilani if he does not act on SC's orders.

The same bench is hearing a contempt case initiated against Gilani earlier this year after he failed to act on the court's orders to approach Swiss authorities to revive cases of alleged money laundering against President Asif Ali Zardari.

Adding to his injuries, a Rs 7 billion "drug quota allotment" scam allegedly involving Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani's son has

surfaced in Pakistan, Geo News reported.

A three-member Supreme Court bench headed by Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry heard a case on Thursday against the health ministry illegally allotting a quota of a bronchodilator drug "ephedrine" worth Rs 7 billion to two Multan-based companies.

The case was filed by Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) to bring the culprits to the task but its lawyer pleaded before the court Thursday that his client wanted to withdraw the case.

When the Chief Justice asked Zulfiqar what was stopping the ANF from pursuing the case, he revealed that ANF was under extreme pressure regarding its probe into the health ministry's violations of rules, while awarding a quota of 9,000 kg ephedrine drastically exceeding the legal limit of 500 kg.

The lawyer disclosed that one "Tauqeer Ali Shah", who claimed himself to be the secretary of PM Gilani's son Ali Musa Gilani, had been pressurising the ANF to sweep the case under the carpet.

Saarc trade, tourism fair

FROM PAGE 20

been set up at the annual event, with the host country displaying their products at around 180 booths.

Speaking as the chief guest at the opening ceremony, Muhith said although the Saarc had been established 27 years ago, its member states are still struggling to make it effective.

The trade volume among the eight Saarc nations is below five per cent of their total overseas trade, though the region is home to one-fifth of the world's total population, he noted.

The minister cited the examples of the European Union, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), where the volume of intra-regional trade is much higher.

"Trade in Saarc countries can rise. Regional cooperation is an important instrument for growth in trade. The ASEAN has benefited from the regional cooperation," pointed out Muhith.

He also called for introducing on-arrival visa for the citizens of Saarc states to help them travel more freely.

The Saarc countries also lag behind in intra-regional tourism. They accounted for only 23.8 per cent of the tourist arrivals in the region in 2008, whereas the intra-regional tourism made up 66 per cent in Africa, 71 per cent in America, 86 per cent in Europe and 59.5 per cent in the Middle East, according to World Tourism Organisation, a United Nations agency.

Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Muhammad Faruk Khan said trade and tourism can promote economic development in the region.

"There is immense potential for trade and tourism within the Saarc and beyond," he mentioned adding, "We have the world's best mountains, seas, beaches and forests. The governments just need to come up with right policies to exploit the potentials."

Commerce Minister GM Quader said tourism is the

most potential service sector in the region, where the Saarc members can complement each other instead of competing.

AK Azad, president of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), urged holding discussions on trade barriers and finding ways to remove those.

Ameen Abdullah, state minister for economic development of the Maldives, said the region has great potentials for tourism. "We have developed the tourism sector in our country. We are ready to extend our cooperation to develop the sector in the region."

Lekh Raj Bhatta, minister for commerce and supplies of Nepal, said the Saarc countries need to double their efforts to boost intra-regional trade, which has been dismally low.

Shubhashish Bose, vice-chairman of Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) and Md Mizanur Rahman, chief executive officer of Bangladesh Tourism Board,

spoke, among others.

Organising this type of fairs is very important to improve trade relations, observed the foreign participants.

It helps promote trade a lot, said Vijaya Laxmi, an official of Vedavathi Self-Help Group of Andhra Pradesh in India.

Her company has put hand-made sarees, home textiles products, mobile phone covers, and travel bags on display.

In another stall Nepal Pashmina Craft is showcasing Pashmina shawl and muffler. The firm's managing director Ranjita Nepal has already joined in a single country fair in Bangladesh, which she sees as a potential market.

Jointly organised by the EPB, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism and Bangladesh Tourism Board, the fair will remain open to all from 10:00am to 8:00pm.

The visitors will enjoy free entry to the exposition.

Afghan cop kills nine colleagues

AFP, Kabul

An Afghan policeman shot dead nine of his colleagues as they slept early yesterday in the eastern province of Paktika, police and provincial government officials said.

It was the latest in a series of shootings by Afghan security personnel of their local and foreign colleagues, deaths that have ramped up tensions between the allies even as Nato-led forces prepare to pull out by the end of 2014.

Paktika provincial police chief Dawlat Khan said the shooting happened before dawn in Yahyakhil district yesterday. "A local policeman named Asadullah was persuaded by Taliban insurgents to carry out the firing inside the security check post," he told AFP.

Asadullah fled the scene after the shooting, he added.

'What do you do?'

Castro to Pope

REUTERS, Havana

Pope Benedict and Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro, both octogenarians, joked about their age in a meeting on Wednesday and then Castro popped the question: So what do you do?

The two world figures chatted for about 30 minutes at the Vatican embassy in Havana near the end of the pope's three-day



Fidel Castro and Pope Benedict visit to Cuba, where he called for greater freedom and a bigger role for the Catholic Church in the communist-led nation.

Under Castro's 49-year rule from 1959 to 2008, Cuba for years called itself an atheist state. However, relations with the Church seem to have improved over the past two decades.

"What does a pope do?" Castro asked Benedict, who is just one year his junior. The pontiff told him of his ministry, his foreign trips and his service to the Church, saying he was happy to be in Cuba and with the welcome he received. Castro told the pontiff he had watched his whole visit on television. Two of his children were also presented to the pope.

Indonesia's fuel price hike plan in jeopardy

AFP, Jakarta

A controversial plan to hike Indonesia's heavily subsidised fuel price was in jeopardy yesterday after the ruling coalition's second-largest party voiced last-minute opposition to the move.

Around 3,000 protesters rallied outside parliament house as lawmakers debated the proposal to raise the fuel price by one third.

With the coalition holding the majority of seats, parliament had been widely expected to vote in favour of cutting subsidies which the government says the nation can't afford.

But after weeks of nationwide protests including some that turned violent, the coalition's Golkar Party withdrew its support late Thursday, saying the subsidies should stay in place even as global oil prices soar above \$100 a barrel.