

Riots threaten Myanmar's future

UN warns; Suu Kyi in Geneva, says unrest needs political settlement

AFP, Sittwe

Communal violence in western Myanmar poses a threat to the country's shift towards democracy, a UN rights envoy warned, as the death toll from almost a week of unrest rose to 28.

Tomas Ojea Quintana, the UN's special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, urged the country's reformist government to tackle the "root cause" of discrimination against Muslim Rohingya living in the strife-hit region.

"The underlying tensions that stem from discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities pose a threat to Myanmar's democratic transition and stability," he said in a statement released late Wednesday in Geneva.

"I urge all sides to exercise restraint, respect the law and refrain from violence."

"The latest death toll we can confirm is 28 with 53 people wounded," a government official, who did not want to be named, told AFP in the state capital Sittwe, without saying whether they were Buddhist or Muslim Rohingya.

The Buddhists and Rohingya have accused each other of violent attacks. An uneasy calm has now returned to central Sittwe which is under a dusk-to-dawn curfew.



Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi is greeted by the president of the International Labour Organisation Juan Somavia in Geneva yesterday.

Decades of discrimination have left the Muslim Rohingya stateless and viewed by the United Nations as among the most persecuted minorities on the planet. About 800,000 Rohingya live in Myanmar, according to the UN, mostly in Rakhine.

The Myanmar government considers the Rohingya to be foreigners, while many citizens see them as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and view them with hostility.

Meanwhile, opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday said a ceasefire to halt ethnic vio-

lence in Myanmar's Kachin state was not enough and underlined the need for a political solution.

Suu Kyi was asked to comment on the violence affecting various parts of Myanmar at a press conference at the UN which followed an address to the International Labour Organization.

However, she didn't mention the raging violence in the western part of the country.

"Ceasefire is not enough," Suu Kyi told reporters in Geneva where the veteran activist has begun a landmark European tour after years spent under house arrest.

"We have to have a political settlement if there is going to be the kind of peace that is lasting and meaningful."

The democracy icon Aung also called for foreign investment in Myanmar during the first speech of her landmark tour.

In the 20-minute address Suu Kyi urged help for unemployed youth in particular, who were suffering from a lack of education.

Suu Kyi concluded by inviting members of the ILO to visit Myanmar to see its potential.

Switzerland is the first stop on the more than two-week tour taking her to Norway, Britain, France and Ireland and which will include a speech in Oslo for her 1991 Nobel Peace Prize.

Violence tests 'free' Myanmar's media

AGENCIES

When Myanmar emerged last year from army rule, state censors started to loosen their powerful grip, allowing newspapers to report freely on what had been unthinkable, from the views of opposition politicians to allegations of government corruption.

But as sectarian violence rages between majority Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas in western Rakhine state, the old ways are returning. Censorship is creeping back, raising questions about whether the pre-screening of copy will be dropped, as the government has said.

"We cannot write whatever we want," said Maung Wuntha, a prominent author and journalist who was jailed for publishing work deemed subversive by the former regime.

"We can only write when the press scrutiny board approves... and despite that, we were warned," he said, referring to government warnings about stories on the unrest.

The Rakhine state violence is perhaps as big a test for Myanmar's media as it is for a government desperate to put on a presentable face for the outside world.

The unrest is an extremely sensitive issue in Myanmar. The Rohingyas are not recognised as one of Myanmar's numerous ethnic groups and their very presence is contested by many.

The chief minister for Yangon, Myint Swe, issued a warning late on Sunday to journalists with private media that they faced nine years in prison if they used inflammatory language that could incite violence and endanger stability.

Ironically, the government may have broken its own rules when state media reported the deaths of the 10 Muslims using the word "kalar", a derogatory term for people of South Asian descent in Myanmar. The references were removed from websites.

Meanwhile, thousands of unfiltered opinions and comments about the unrest, many inflammatory, have appeared on the web forums of news journals and on Facebook



A Rohingya Muslim woman is pictured as she tries to flee the violence.

pages as nationalist anger runs wild.

Some people, journalists included, have taken aim at exiled media such as the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) and foreign media organisations that were praised for their truth-telling during the military's oppressive 49-year reign.

Now they are being accused of bias towards stateless Rohingyas, whom many Buddhists blame for instigating the arson, rioting and machete attacks in Rakhine state.

Internet access is low in Myanmar, with only 0.2 percent of the population online by some estimates. But young people are increasingly using social media to share news and opinions and there is a large Myanmar diaspora worldwide.

New strains emerge in India's ruling coalition

Congress rejects Mamata-Mulayam options

STAR REPORT

New strains emerged in India's ruling coalition yesterday amid wrangling over their candidate to be the next president, further weakening the already shaky alliance.

The Congress party, the biggest member of the left-leaning coalition, had put forward Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee as its preferred choice for the mainly ceremonial post, which will be decided in elections on July 19.

But in a move that mirrors previous difficulties, minority partner the Trinamool Congress publicly snubbed him, saying it preferred Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Banerjee and the leader of another regional party, the Samajwadi Party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav, proposed Left leader Somnath Chatterjee and former Indian president APJ Abdul Kalam as alternatives.

But yesterday, in a rebuff to Trinamool Congress and Samajwadi Party, Congress rejected the three names proposed by them, sending signals that it was not in a mood to bow before them.

Congress General Secretary Janardan Dwivedi said "we cannot afford to spare Dr Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister. The other two names (A P J Abdul Kalam and Somnath Chatterjee) are not acceptable".

Unfazed by Congress' rejection, Trinamool Congress chief Mamata strongly pitched for Kalam describing him as the "best" Presidential candidate and saying that the people of India would overwhelmingly vote for him if people could directly elect a president.

Earlier, Dwivedi said the process of con-

sultation was still on and Sonia Gandhi had not finalised any name.

"There is a dignity to the process. When such talks are held, names are not discussed outside," Dwivedi said, apparently referring to Mamata Banerjee disclosing the names to the media immediately after meeting Sonia Gandhi at her residence on Wednesday.

The announcement made by Mamata and Mulayam about their own Presidential candidates is interpreted in political circles here as a direct challenge to Congress and Sonia Gandhi.

Other Congress allies such as DMK, NCP, RLD and NC, have already indicated their support for Pranab Mukherjee.

The Times of India said the move by the two parties "raised doubts if the coalition would last its full term" because it potentially signals that the two parties are preparing to withdraw their support from Congress.

Mamata said she has no intention of quitting UPA or toppling the UPA government of which her party is a constituent but virtually dared Congress to throw Trinamool Congress out of the alliance.

Mamata said she and Yadav were seeking consensus on the candidature of Kalam and "whichever supports. If they do not support, we will go according to our path".

There have been previous suggestions that the coalition might fall apart which could trigger elections ahead of their scheduled date in 2014.

Banerjee and her Trinamool party have consistently defied the Congress party, forcing a series of embarrassing policy U-turns on everything from rail fares and petrol prices to foreign investment in the retail sector.

Parliament in Egypt declared illegal

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's top constitutional court yesterday ruled the whole Islamist-dominated parliament illegitimate, paving the way for the military to resume legislative powers, state media and a military source said.

"The constitutional court affirmed in the details of its verdict that the parliamentary elections were not constitutional, and the entire composition of parliament has been illegitimate since its election," the official MENA news agency reported.

Members of the ruling military council were in a meeting and did not immediately issue a statement. But a military source said the court decision gave the military legislative powers.

"We don't want it (the power) but according to the court decision and that law, it reverts back to us," the source said.

The military suspended the constitution after a popular uprising overthrew president Hosni Mubarak last year and left in charge army generals who rule under an interim charter.

Faruq Sultan, the head of the constitutional court, told AFP that the decision "voids" parliament and must be respected by the authorities.

The court also ruled yesterday that a law barring Shafiq and other senior Mubarak officials from standing for public office was unconstitutional.

UN environment summit opens

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Twenty years after the first Earth Summit, a renewed bid to rally the world behind a common environmental blueprint opened Wednesday in Rio de Janeiro against a backdrop of discord and economic gloom.

Kicking off the so-called Rio+20 summit, Dilma Rousseff, president of host nation Brazil, called on "all countries of the world to commit" to reaching an accord that addresses the most pressing environmental and social woes.

The UN conference, which marks the 20th anniversary of the Earth Summit -- a landmark 1992 gathering that opened the debate on the future of the planet and its resources -- is the largest ever organised, with 50,000 delegates.

Around 115 leaders are expected to attend the main event itself on June 20-22 but a series of conferences grouping businesses, environmental groups and non-governmental organizations are being held in advance.

Behind the scenes, there is incipient panic over the draft summit communiqué after three rounds of preliminary informal negotiations left more than 75 percent of the paragraphs still to be agreed.

The charter is supposed to sum up the challenges and spell out pledges to nurture the oceans, roll back climate change, promote clean growth and provide decent water, sanitation and electricity for all.

The biggest divergences lie in four areas, according to sources close to the negotiations.

They include action on climate change, protecting the oceans and achieving food security, and whether "Sustainable Development Goals" should replace the Millennium Development Goals when these objectives expire in 2015.

FALKLANDS DISPUTE Argentina takes issue to UN again

AFP, D Nations

Argentina said Britain has "a duty" to negotiate the future of the Falkland Islands ahead of a UN meeting on the disputed territory on Thursday's 30th anniversary of the end of war between the two countries.

President Cristina Kirchner will lead a delegation of more than 90 Argentine diplomats and officials at the UN decolonisation committee's annual meeting on the Falklands and 15 other territories around the world.

Two of the eight members of the Falklands legislative assembly will put the case that the 3,000 population want to remain under the British flag.

Britain, whose troops ended a 74-day Argentine occupation of the South Atlantic islands on June 14, 1982, has always refused talks saying the population should decide their own future. It boycotts the committee meetings.

UK PM faces Murdoch storm at media probe

AFP, London

David Cameron received a text message from one of Rupert Murdoch's closest aides saying they were "in this together", Britain's press ethics inquiry heard during testimony from the prime minister.

The 2009 text from Rebekah Brooks -- the former head of Murdoch's British newspaper wing and editor of shamed tabloid the News of the World -- raised fresh questions about Cameron's links to Murdoch's media empire.

Cameron dismissed claims that his party made secret deals with Murdoch, but he was put on the spot over the text from Brooks, a close friend of his who appeared in court just a day earlier charged with obstructing justice.

"I am so rooting for you tomorrow not just as a personal friend but because professionally we're definitely in this together," said the text, which was read out by counsel to the inquiry Robert Jay.

The text was sent a day before Cameron, who was then opposition leader, was due to address the annual conference of his Conservative party in October 2009. Brooks

was chief executive of News International at the time.

"Speech of your life? Yes he Cam!", the text continued, punning on his surname and on US President Barack Obama's 2008 election slogan.

The text also suggested that Cameron -- who knew Brooks' husband Charlie from their schooldays at the elite Eton College -- have a "country supper" to discuss an "issue" with the Murdoch-owned Times newspaper.

Murdoch's top-selling British tabloid the Sun had come out in support of Cameron just over a week earlier, dropping then-prime minister Gordon Brown

of the Labour Party. Cameron's appearance comes amid new reverberations from the scandal, with a rift opening in the coalition government over a parliamentary vote on Wednesday over whether to investigate the minister responsible for deciding on the bid.

Cameron set up the Leveson inquiry in July last year after the News of the World was shut down. The inquiry is due to produce a report, likely to include recommendations on the future of press regulation, in October.

US expanding spy bases in Africa: Report

AFP, Washington

The United States military is expanding a secret network of air bases across Africa in order to spy on al-Qaeda and other militant groups, the Washington Post reported late Wednesday.

The surveillance is carried out by small, unmarked turboprop planes with hidden state-of-the-art sensors that fly thousands of miles between air bases and bush landing strips across the vast continent, it said.

The program, dating back to 2007, underscores the massive expansion of US special forces operations in recent years and the steady militarization of intelligence operations during the decade-long war on al-Qaeda.

Bases in Burkina Faso and Mauritania are used to spy on al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, while bases in Uganda are used in the hunt for the Lord's Resistance Army.

In East Africa, US aircraft operating out of Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and the Seychelles archipelago spy on Somalia's Qaeda-inspired Al-Shebab militia.



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