

Arab Spring brought only chaos: Assad

BBC ONLINE

President Bashar al-Assad of Syria yesterday told an Egyptian magazine that the Arab Spring uprisings only brought chaos and that the Syrian rebels cannot win as clashes raged

In a rare interview with the weekly al-Ahram al-Arabi, he said "both sides of the equation" were equal and that dialogue was the "only solution".

Assad insisted that his government would not fall like that of the late Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi.

His comments came as fresh fighting was reported in the second city of Aleppo.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said government forces backed by helicopter gunships had clashed with rebels near the Hananu army barracks in the north-eastern Arkoub district.

The nearby area of Sakhour and central district of Bustan al-Qasr also came under attack overnight, the UK-based activist group added.

It said at least 225 people - 140 civilians,



39 rebels and 46 security forces personnel - had been killed on Thursday, including more than 30 when a government warplane bombed a petrol station in Raqqa province.

Assad has not made public pronouncements for some time. But in his interview with al-Ahram al-Arabi there was no sign of flinching from the course he and his regime have taken, says the BBC's Jim Muir in Beirut.

"The armed groups exercise terrorism against the state. They are not popular within society... they will not be victorious in the end," he said.

His government would not fall, and change would not come about through foreign intervention or the removal of leaders. The overthrow of Arab regimes, Assad said, had "not worked in the interest of freedom, democracy or ending social injustice as much as it helped create chaos".

"Both sides of the equation are equal and political dialogue is the only solution," he added.

Khaleda's remarks

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court seeking review of the verdict. But, no one can oppose it," Quamrul Islam said.

"Opposing the verdict is tantamount to sedition," he said at a discussion organised by Bangabandhu Academy at the Jatiya Press Club.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia at a press conference on Thursday termed the Supreme Court verdict over the caretaker government system "biased" and "unacceptable".

"People will not accept the politically motivated, illogical and self-contradictory verdict given by a former chief justice, and they will not participate in any election to be arranged as per the verdict," said the leader of the opposition.

Turning down the BNP chief's allegation that a retired judge cannot write a verdict, Quamrul said Justice Khairul Haque followed due legal procedure in this respect.

About Khaleda's allegation of distorting the short verdict, the minister said the spirit of

the short verdict was that an unelected government cannot be the alternative to an elected government.

This spirit was reflected in the full verdict, he said.

"Khaleda Zia's statement in this regard was politically motivated and untrue. She has challenged the Supreme Court without any reason," Quamrul told the discussion.

Reiterating the government's stance on the interim government as per the constitution, he said, "Those who are dreaming of restoring the caretaker government system are living in fool's paradise."

Addressing the programme, Industries Minister Dilip Barua termed the caretaker government system a dead issue, saying "Caretaker government is now in the museum. There is no scope of restoring the system."

Chaired by Bangabandhu Academy adviser Mozaffar Hossain Paltu, the meeting was also addressed by Dhaka City Awami League vice-president Foyez Uddin Mia.

Car blast kills 6 in Thai south

AFP, Sai Buri

At least six people were killed and 40 more wounded yesterday after a car bomb exploded in a packed market in Thailand's insurgency-hit south, officials told AFP.

Nurses scrambled to attend to the wave of bloodied casualties in the main hospital in Sai Buri town, an AFP reporter at the scene said, adding blood donations were urgently required to help the wounded.

An army spokesman said militants opened fire on shops in Sai Buri town centre shortly after Friday prayers.

A complex insurgency calling for greater autonomy has plagued Thailand's Muslim-majority far south near the border with Malaysia since 2004, claiming more than 5,300 lives, both Buddhist and Muslim, with near daily bomb or gun attacks.

Grameen director

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the committee."

"My name has been put on the list without any discussion with me," she said in a statement.

Her comments came a day after Khondaker Muzammel Huq, chairman of the board, formed the five-member selection committee amid strong opposition from the directors.

Tahsina wrote a letter to the chairman, requested him to withdraw her name from the committee.

The nine directors, who are selected by 84 lakh Grameen members across the country, constitute the majority of the 13-member board.

Tahsina said her name did not come up at the board meeting. The chairman placed four names and said one of the nine borrower-directors would be the fifth member.

Tahsina said although the nine directors did not approve the selection committee, the chairman claimed the committee was

"formed by the board."

Asked on Thursday whether the board approved the selection committee, Muzammel told The Daily Star, "The board did not oppose it either."

In a statement yesterday, he also said the board of directors of Grameen Bank has decided to form the selection committee, which will draw up a short list of candidates for managing director.

The post has been vacant since May last year when Prof Muhammad Yunus stepped down as managing director of the bank he founded more than three decades ago.

The nine directors have been proposing that the board accepts the selection committee that includes Dr Yunus, former caretaker government adviser Akbar Ali Khan, former deputy managing director of Grameen Bank Khaled Shams, former member of Grameen Bank board Kamrul Hasan, and Tahsina Khatun.

Padma shines

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of corruption in the Padma bridge project, and our determination to take a strong line against wrongdoing will never waver."

For the first time in its 65-year history, the bank has completely withdrawn its cancellation of a loan deal.

There are instances of the bank withdrawing its loan cancellation order partially in some projects, but reviving a loan deal in its entirety is unprecedented, said a WB official.

The reinstatement of the deal will not require any approval from the WB board as the loan was cancelled before its activation. The bank's president and managing director have decided to revive the agreement, he added.

A finance ministry official said special moves by some high-ranking government officials and a host of countries contributed to the revival of the deal.

The government in April last year had entered the loan deal with the WB for implementing the country's largest ever infrastructure

project.

But the Washington-based bank in September the same year postponed its funding for the project, citing it had proof of a corruption conspiracy involving Bangladeshi officials, executives of a Canadian consultancy firm and some private individuals.

Since then the government and the WB had been engaged in a series of discussions, but the differences between the two sides were not resolved.

On June 29, the WB cancelled the loan deal after the government had failed to meet two of the four conditions set by the bank to release the fund.

The conditions were (i) placing all public officials suspected of involvement in the corruption scheme on leave from government employment until the investigation is completed; (ii) appointing a special inquiry and prosecution team within the Bangladeshi Anti-Corruption Commission to handle the investigation;

Better late than never

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But firstly, could the government have handled the affair better?

Yes. Ex-communication minister Abul Hossain resigned from the cabinet in July only after the World Bank cancelled its loan on June 29.

But had he been removed from the communication ministry soon after the bank suspended its loan in September last year to make the World Bank happy, many other conditions of the bank would not have emerged. Even the departure of Abul Hossain would have looked dignified.

Then when a second chance came after Abul's resignation, the World Bank wanted deactivation of Prime Minister's Financial Adviser Mashur Rahman. He, however, refused to do so. The prime minister backed him against everyone else's opinions.

All of it unnecessarily wasted a year. After all, the government eventually accepted the World Bank conditions. Then why did it waste time?

The only justification of wasting this time was harbouring a false pride that Bangladesh did not bow down to World Bank's pressure. But even Awami League working committee members trashed this argument saying that the bridge project was more important than two policymakers.

In September, 2011, when the World Bank temporarily suspended the loan bringing graft allegation, it asked the government that Abul Hossain be removed from the communication ministry. The prime minister acted reluctantly and in December moved Abul to the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology.

But this time, the World

Bank demanded that Abul be dropped from the cabinet saying that he played dubious role in selecting the supervisory firm for the main bridge construction.

The government's reluctance remained.

All the while, the nation saw a sudden emergence of Malaysia in the Padma bridge deal as a prospective donor. But despite all fanfare, the Malaysian proposals turned out to be empty.

After a few months' interval in June the World Bank and the government started fresh talks over the financing.

This time, the World Bank imposed four conditions including sending on leave the public officials accused of corruption, including the removal of Prime Minister's Financial Adviser Mashur.

A high official said a World Bank team stayed in Dhaka for four days and their discussions with the government on the first three days went on the positive note. The government had showed readiness to accept all conditions.

But on the fourth day, things went wrong.

Initially, the government was ready to accept removal of Mashur. But at the last moment, due to a hard line stance of the top level of the government, it changed its mind and this led to the loan cancellation.

After the initial shock, Finance Minister AMA Muhith talked about reviving the loan and Prime Minister's Foreign Affairs Adviser Gowher Rizvi also started hectic lobbying for the World Bank loan.

Their efforts were soon reinforced by the Asian Development Bank and Japan International Cooperation Agency, India and the USA. While they persuaded the World Bank, they wanted an assurance

from the government that it would fulfil all unmet World Bank conditions.

The ADB and Jica are partners in the bridge project finance and they extended their loan effectuation deadline five times.

But still the government delayed taking actions, especially on deactivating Mashur.

ADB's latest loan effectuation deadline ends on September 30. Jica's was supposed to end yesterday but sources said Jica would extend the deadline.

Luckily, the government in the end weighed the benefits of getting the low interest of World Bank loan and fulfilled its conditions.

According to a finance ministry official, if donor financing was not ensured, the government would have had to implement the project with its own resources.

The government opened two accounts for collecting funds from people. Until last week, not a single taka was deposited by citizens. Only \$1,000 was received in the foreign currency account.

For the Awami League, the cloud is still not clear. The Canadian government is investigating the scam of Canadian company SNC-Lavalin bribing Bangladeshi officials to secure its deal.

The hearing of the case starts next April. If Lavalin is found guilty, the Awami League would have to shoulder the blame of corruption.

But it was still better than not securing the bridge loan. The Lavalin case, if the company is found guilty, would affect the Awami League anyway. In addition, the party would look defeated before the nation for failing to begin the bridge construction. The success of which would surely give the Awami League political leverage.

Bangladesh loses some points

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Bhattacharya, eminent economist and distinguished fellow of Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), told the media yesterday, reports UNB.

He said: "[From now] the issue of accountability for any future project, not only the World Bank-ones, but also those of Japan [Jica] and the Asian Development Bank [ADB], will be more important."

On the fresh conditions set by the global lender, Debapriya said, "The international expert panel will work with the Anti-Corruption Commission to look into the alleged graft, and we will have to wait for the outcome. But it's important that the investigation process should not hamper the implementation of the project."

Noted economist and former caretaker government adviser AB Mirza Azizul Islam said it should be cleared who would be there in the external panel. "What will be the composition of the external panel?... it needs to be determined quickly to know who are from the country and who are from outside."

About the WB's return, Prof Anu Mohammad said the WB was always interested to provide loan to countries like Bangladesh.

"If a country like Bangladesh stops taking loan from the World Bank, then it'll collapse. Bangladesh will also face trouble in future while negotiating on any project," reports UNB quoting Prof Anu, who teaches economics at Jahangirnagar University.

Meanwhile, different quarters expressed happiness and welcomed the return of the WB, the lead co-financer of the mega project.

The government is expected to come up with its official reaction to the WB's decision by today or Sunday, sources at the finance ministry said.

Earlier on Thursday, in a statement, the WB said, "The Bank has agreed that, upon satisfactory implementation of the agreed measures by the

government, and with the support of the Bank's governing bodies, the Bank will engage anew in the Padma Multipurpose Bridge."

The Washington-based Bank cancelled its committed \$1.2 billion loan on June 29.

PROF WAHIDUDDIN MAHMUD

The leading economist in his reaction said this was great news if the WB and the government had reached a compromise to revive the funding of the Padma bridge.

"To arrive at this compromise, it has taken both sides to give in to some extent. Both the government and the donors need to take the next steps quickly so that there will be minimum procedural delays in getting the project started," he told The Daily Star.

"There seems to have been a realisation on the part of the World Bank about the harshness of the steps it took in cancelling the funding agreement, and the Bank apparently continues to have sympathy for what it considers genuine funding needs of Bangladesh for this project."

If the contract is revived, he said, this would perhaps be the first time that such a decision would have been made by the Bank for such a large project.

"Given that the next steps to be taken are not clear yet, the government needs to be seen to remain absolutely committed to implement the project in a transparent and corruption-free manner," stressed the noted economist.

There should be also more consistency between the government's stance in respect of domestic politics and how it conducts the external, Prof Wahiduddin added.

TIB FOR DUE PROBE Anti-grafts campaigner Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has called upon the government to take the "correct lesson out of the experience" so that it does not face any recurrence of such self-embarrassment in the days to come.

Dr Iftekharuzzaman, execu-

employees and officials alleged to have been involved in corrupt acts in connection with the project have been put on leave from Government service until an investigation is completed, and that a full and fair investigation is now underway," read the WB statement.

"Following our cancellation of the credit, the government of Bangladesh took actions necessary to fulfil the above measures. The government of Bangladesh has now begun to address the evidence of corruption the bank identified."

In its communication with the WB, mentioned the release, the government requested the bank to consider again the financing of the bridge.

Contacted for Finance Minister AMA Muhith's reaction, the minister's public relations officer Shahedur Rahman said Muhith would brief the media once Gowher Rizvi was back home from Washington.

19 killed in Pakistan

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numbers were still small in a country of 180 million.

Arsonists and looters attacked cinemas, banks, shops and restaurants in Karachi, where outbreaks of political and ethnically linked violence have killed hundreds this year.

Two picture houses were also torched and ransacked in the conservative north-western city of Peshawar, which runs into tribal belt strongholds of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

In Karachi, a policeman died after being shot by unknown people when officers used tear gas to disperse a crowd near the US consulate, and two people were killed in Peshawar, including the driver for a TV channel which blamed police for his death.

The US has paid for adverts on Pakistani TV that show President Barack Obama condemning the film, Innocence of Muslims, reports AFP.

The protests have already claimed several lives around the world.

Although the US has borne the brunt of protests, anti-Western sentiment has been stoked further by caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad published in a satirical French magazine.

In Peshawar, protesters attacked and ransacked two cinema buildings. A driver for a Pakistani TV station was killed when police opened fire to disperse protesters, seven of whom were reported wounded.

Clashes between police and protesters are also being reported from the cities of Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi.

In the capital Islamabad, which saw fierce clashes between protesters and security forces on Thursday, the BBC's Aleem Mambos says security forces have attempted to seal off large parts of the city to demonstrations - but that protesters on foot and motorcycles have breached a blockade after setting a checkpoint alight.

Dozens of protests against the film had already been held across Pakistan over the past week - killing at least two people - but Thursday was the first time violence had erupted in the capital.

All major political parties and religious organisations have announced protests for yesterday, along with trade and transport groups.

The Pakistani authorities have urged people to demonstrate peacefully, with mobile phone services cut across the country to reduce security risks.

Meanwhile, the US charge d'affaires Richard Hoagland was summoned to the Pakistani Foreign Office and an official protest was lodged with him. He is reported to have responded that the US government had nothing to do with the film.

The US state department has issued a warning against any non-essential travel to Pakistan.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, saw dozens torch an American flag outside the US consulate in Medan. In the city of Surabaya, protesters chanted "Crush America, crush France" outside the French consulate.

In Bangladesh, Islamist organisations staged demonstrations after Jum'a prayers in the capital's Paltan area, burning flags of the US and France and effigy of US President Barack Obama.

In the Arab world, authorities were also braced for demonstrations, with an Islamist militia in Libya's second city Benghazi calling for protests and Muslims protesting in Lebanon.

In Tunisia -- where France is the former colonial power -- the government has banned Friday protests.

Calls to protest against the caricatures have turned up in Tunisian social media. Interior Minister Ali Larayedh said it was believed that some groups were planning violent protests after Friday prayers.

There are also fears of violence in the Libyan city of Benghazi after rival groups said they would take to the streets.

One group intends to denounce extremism and urge militias to disband, following an attack on the US consulate in the city on 11 September that killed the US ambassador and three other American officials.

Throughout the week, Benghazi residents have left wreaths and placards condemning the attack outside the US mission.

Meanwhile, Ansar al-Sharia, the jihadist militia blamed by some local people for the attack, called for protests "in defence of the Prophet Muhammad". Both protests are scheduled for the same time.

In the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, more than 2,000 people protested peacefully in front of the US embassy.

Some protesters were holding signs insisting that insulting religion was not freedom of speech.

In Cairo, where the protests against the film began, Egyptian security forces are patrolling the streets around the US embassy.

Radical Islamists have clashed with security forces there in recent days, although President Mohammed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood has stayed away from the unrest, only condemning the film and calling for peaceful demonstrations.

The low-budget film that sparked the controversy was made in the US and is said to insult the Prophet Muhammad.

Its exact origins are unclear and the alleged producer for the trailer of the film, Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, is in hiding.

Anti-US sentiment grew after a trailer for the film dubbed into Arabic was released on YouTube earlier this month.

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