

India adopts more reforms despite row

AFP, New Delhi

India's embattled government pushed ahead on Thursday with its make-or-break reform agenda, approving contentious new measures to open up the insurance and pensions sectors to foreign investors.

Despite fierce resistance from opposition parties which are threatening to bring down the coalition in the next parliamentary session, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh unveiled the measures aimed at reviving economic sentiment.

A cabinet meeting yesterday afternoon gave the green light for foreign companies to own up to 49 percent in Indian insurance companies -- up from 26 percent previously.

In the pensions sector, previously closed to outside investors, foreign groups will be able to buy up to 26 percent under the proposed changes, which must now be approved by parliament, an official in the prime minister's office told AFP.

A new Companies Bill was also adopted, which would introduce concepts like corporate social responsibility, class action suits and a fixed term for independent directors.

Singh and his reformist new finance minister, P Chidambaram, have stressed the need to encourage foreign and domestic investment to get India's economy moving again after a slump in growth and worries about the budget deficit.

Last month, in a blitz of measures heralding an end to years of policy deadlock, the cabinet changed the law to allow foreign supermarkets into the retail sector and opened up the broadcasting and aviation industries.



PHOTO: AFP

Turkish soldiers take positions in the southern border town of Akcakale after tension escalated along the Turkey-Syria border yesterday.

Nato backs Turkey but unlikely to do more

AFP, Brussels

While Western powers quickly backed Ankara after deadly Syrian fire on a Turkish border village, it is unlikely its Nato partners, above all the United States, would opt for a military response, analysts said.

The incidents, with Turkish forces retaliating in kind, are serious but not enough on their own to justify intervention given the risk of being sucked into an increasingly bloody Syrian conflict, they said.

For Washington, there is the immediate concern of the November presidential election and the disincentive of Iraq and Afghanistan -- wars taken on enthusiastically in the belief of quick victories which turned into quagmires.

Exchanges like those on the Syria-Turkey border "only create a fire when the time is right", said Nadim Shehadi, Associate Fellow at Chatham House in London.

"Previous incidents did not lead anywhere," Shehadi said, recalling June

when Syria shot down a Turkish fighter plane with the loss of its two-man crew.

"It is clear that Nato is unwilling or not ready for an engagement. If they were, then a smaller spark than this" would be enough, he added.

Other analysts said the mutual defence commitment of Article V of the Nato treaty clearly applies to Turkey, but could be fulfilled in a limited form.

"Nato might consider it appropriate to deploy some forces to Turkey as a gesture of support under Article V (for instance additional air forces and perhaps maritime presence)," said Michael Codner, Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London.

There is also a major political problem.

Many of Nato's 28 member states "would want a specific UN mandate for this level of action and it is very unlikely that there would be consensus among (them) for anything so robust," Codner said.

Turkey okeys Syria military action

Damascus apologises for shelling; alarmed world leaders urge restraint

AFP, Akcakale, Turkey

Turkey's parliament yesterday authorised military action against Syria but insisted it was not a mandate for war following deadly cross-border fire that sent tensions soaring.

The vote came as Turkish artillery hit targets inside Syria in retaliation for the shelling that killed five Turkish nationals.

Turkey said Syria apologised and vowed the incident would not happen again.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon urged "maximum restraint." Western powers, as well as Syria allies China and Iran, issued similar appeals.

In Ankara, the Turkish parliament met behind closed doors in an emergency session and agreed to the government's request to authorise military operations inside Syrian territory.

The year-long mandate received 320 votes in the 550-seat parliament.

Security sources told AFP that

Turkish shelling continued sporadically throughout the night until 0600 GMT yesterday.

But the shelling could resume if needed, a Turkish official warned.

"Turkey has no interest in a war with Syria. But Turkey is capable of protecting its borders and will retaliate when necessary," Ibrahim Kalin, chief advisor to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said earlier on Twitter.

The Turkish action in Syria is similar to the bombing raids that the army regularly carries out against suspected Kurdish rebel bases in neighbouring Iraq.

Damascus's close ally Russia said Syria had acknowledged that the deadly shelling was "a tragic accident".

Syrian Information Minister Omran Zoabi said Damascus was looking into the origin of the cross-border shelling and offered condolences to the families of the victims.

The incident prompted a forecast that it could tip events in favour of the

rebels fighting to bring down President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Ankara unleashed artillery shells at its neighbour late on Wednesday after mortar fire crashed on to the Turkish border town of Akcakale.

Several Syrian soldiers were killed as a result of the Turkish riposte, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights watchdog said, without giving an exact figure.

Turkey had demanded that the UN Security Council take action against Damascus over Wednesday's fire, which drew sharp Western condemnation.

But Russian objections to a draft UN statement condemning Syria's shelling sent the Security Council back into consultations, diplomats said.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Washington was "outraged" at the Syrian shelling, while France said it constituted "a serious threat to global security and peace."

Amid the rising tensions, calls for

calm poured in.

The European Union condemned Syria but urged restraint on all sides, while Germany called for a "de-escalation", "a measured handling of this worsening situation."

Following Wednesday's shelling, Nato member Turkey called an emergency meeting of the alliance.

Nato said that it stood by its member Turkey and urged the Syrian regime to end "flagrant violations of international law" that it described as "a clear and present danger" to an ally.

Inside Syria, meanwhile, the Syrian army yesterday shelled several areas of Aleppo, the country's second city that has been one of the focal points of the conflict since mid-July when the army promised the "mother of all battles" to clear the city of rebels.

In Damascus province, clashes between the army and rebels left at least 21 members of Syria's elite Republican Guards unit dead, the Syrian Observatory watchdog said.

NEWS IN brief

Philippine arrests ex-president

AFP, Manila

A "distraught" ex-Philippine president Gloria Arroyo was arrested at hospital yesterday after being charged over a third case of alleged corruption during her time in power.

An anti-graft court ordered her arrest after Arroyo was charged with plunder for allegedly stealing 366 million pesos (\$8.8 million) in state lottery funds meant for charity programmes, and spending the money on election campaigns. Arroyo could face life in jail if found guilty.

Facebook hits one billion users

AFP, New York

Facebook yesterday said that it now has more than one billion users, in a new milestone for the world's biggest social network.

Facebook said it reached one billion monthly active users on September 14 at 12:45pm Pacific

India test-fires nuke missile

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India yesterday successfully test fired its nuclear-capable short-range ballistic missile at a site in eastern state of Odisha.

The state-of-the-art Prithvi has the capability to carry 500 kg of both nuclear and conventional warheads with a strike range of 350 km, sources said.

Drone kills 5 'Qaeda men' in Yemen

AFP, Aden

A drone air strike blasted two cars carrying suspected al-Qaeda gunmen in the southern Yemen province of Shabawa yesterday, killing five of them, a tribal chief and witnesses said.

Witnesses said the drone fired four missiles at the two cars as they travelled through the town of Saeed in Shabwa, a stronghold of the militant group.

Tutu awarded for good governance

AFP, Johannesburg

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded yesterday a one-off million-dollar prize by the Mo Ibrahim foundation that promotes good governance on the continent.

At a glitzy Johannesburg hotel, Sudanese-born billionaire Mo Ibrahim said the special civil society prize was in recognition of Tutu's "lifelong commitment to speaking truth to power."

ESPIONAGE ROW Russia denies sending spies to US

AFP, Moscow

Russian diplomats and security chiefs yesterday denied sending their spies to the United States to purchase high-tech military electronics and detonators in faked civilian deals.

The United State on Wednesday disclosed the details about an 11-member spy ring from ex-Soviet nations that allegedly used doctored documents to procure pieces of equipment too advanced for the Russian state.

The arrests were a feather in the cap of the US spy agency that irritated the Russians and notched another rung lower in relations that have suffered since before Vladimir Putin's return to an historic third term as president in May.

9/11 ATTACK

US court orders Iran, others to pay \$6b

AFP, New York

A US judge formally ordered Iran, al-Qaeda and several other defendants Wednesday to pay \$6 billion compensation to the victims of September 11, 2001, in a largely symbolic ruling.

Although Iran denies any connection to 9/11, it was included in the list of alleged culprits by the US District Court in New York, along with the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, Afghanistan's Taliban guerrillas and al-Qaeda, which took credit for the massive terror attack.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is also named. Bin Laden and al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks, in which hijacked airliners were used to bring down the World Trade Center towers in New York and to crash into the Pentagon near Washington, DC.

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan at the time and were giving shelter to al-Qaeda. Iran was blamed by the US court partly because some of the hijackers passed through the country on their way to carrying out the attacks.

However, the money, awarded for economic, personal and punitive damages for a total of \$6,048,513,805, is unlikely to be recovered.

Karzai pledges new leader in 2014

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai pledged Thursday that he would step down as required by the constitution at the end of his second term in 2014 and that nothing would prevent presidential elections being held.

The election coincides with the scheduled withdrawal of Nato forces from Afghanistan and questions have been raised about whether the security situation could make it impossible for the vote to go ahead.

But the Western-backed Karzai, who has been the only elected head of state in Afghanistan since the 2001 US-led invasion brought down the Taliban, said no security reasons would prevent the elections.

"Even if my term is prolonged by one day it will be illegitimate," he told a news conference.

"The election will definitely happen, 100 percent will happen, on due time. You can choose your favorite candidate. Whoever you like, vote for him."

Karzai's re-election in 2009 was accompanied by widespread fraud. The international community sees the next vote as one of the last major hurdles before NATO combat troops withdraw at the end of 2014.

The president suggested in April that he was considering calling an early election to leave enough time for the new government to handle a planned security transition from US forces to Afghans, but has apparently dropped the idea.

The president also criticised Western media for gloomy predictions about Afghanistan's future once US-led foreign forces withdraw from the war against Taliban insurgents in 2014.

Landslide buries China school, kills 16

AFP, Beijing

Sixteen Chinese children were confirmed dead yesterday after a landslide engulfed their school as they made up classes lost due to deadly earthquakes last month, state media said.

Three others were missing after the landslide buried the school and three farmhouses at Zhenhe village in the mountainous southwestern province of Yunnan, Xinhua news agency reported.

The slide also blocked a nearby river, creating a lake and forcing the evacuation of more than 800 residents living downstream, the agency said.

The landslide struck at 8:00am as students were arriving for classes, reports said.

'Obama wanted bin Laden alive'

THE DAILY MAIL ONLINE

President Barack Obama hoped Osama bin Laden would be taken alive by US Navy SEALs so that he could face trial in a civilian courtroom, it was claimed on Wednesday.

A new book reveals that the Commander in Chief wanted to give the mastermind of the September 11 attacks the full rights of any civilian defendant, including government-sponsored defense lawyers and the right to confront witnesses.

Obama hoped it would show the world that America was committed to due process.

In 'The Finish,' journalist Mark Bowden quotes the president as saying he expected bin Laden to go down fighting.

A team of Navy SEALs raided bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan in May 2011 and killed the terrorist leader.

"Frankly, my belief was if we had captured him, that I would be in a pretty strong position, politically, here, to argue that displaying due process and rule of law would be our best weapon against al-Qaida, in preventing him from appearing as a martyr," Obama is quoted saying in an interview with Bowden.



Osama bin Laden



US Daily newspaper International Herald Tribune executive editor, Alison Smale, poses with the paper.

IHT marks 125 years as 'world's newspaper'

AFP, Paris

First delivered by horse-drawn carriages to Paris newsstands and hotels, the International Herald Tribune marked its 125th anniversary yesterday amid troubling times for the newspaper industry.

But the pioneer of global journalism -- a dependable presence for international travellers whether in Paris, Kuwait or Tokyo -- is confident it can adapt to a digital age that has turned the newspaper business model on its head.

"Like everybody else, we're sort of searching for the silver bullet," executive editor Alison Smale said in an interview at the IHT's new offices situated just outside Paris.

The flood of news websites, 24-hour broadcasters and Twitter have all changed how news is produced and consumed, but Smale said the IHT believes its future lies with its traditions.

"What you obviously can do, and all of us do it every day, is surf around the web and get the information you're seeking," she said.

"But you don't have the serendipity of a newspaper, where sophisticated, incredibly intelligent and talented editors have made a great choice for you of 'this is what you need to know about the world today'."

Founded on October 4, 1887, by New York Herald publisher Gordon Bennett, the newspaper aimed to provide American expats living in Paris with news from home, from stock prices to the latest baseball scores.

It settled on its current name in 1967, after the New York Times and Washington Post took stakes in the paper following the collapse of the New York Herald Tribune.

The New York Times took full ownership of the IHT in 2003, and today it employs more than 100 journalists, has editorial hubs in Paris and Hong Kong, prints at 38 sites and is distributed in more than 160 countries.

One journalist at the paper, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said many in the Paris newsroom are concerned about its finances.

"The IHT is definitely viable," said Larry Kilman, the deputy head of the Paris-based WAN-IFRA global association of newspapers.

"The more we get into the digital culture, there is a sense that more isn't always good and that a concise picture, concise information edited and presented well, has value," he said.

"It's a good model and I don't think there is any doubt the IHT will survive."