

INDIA'S REFORM PUSH

Mamata threatens govt with no confidence vote

AFP, New Delhi

A former coalition ally said yesterday it would bring a no-confidence vote against India's government over its reform proposals, pointing to the fierce legislative battle lying ahead in parliament.

On Thursday, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's cabinet quickened its dash for reforms, approving plans to open up the insurance and pensions sectors to foreign investors.

"The minority government cannot play such (an) immoral role. Let us move a no-confidence motion," the leader of the regional Trinamool Congress party, Mamata Banerjee, wrote on her Facebook page.

The new government proposals follow a highly contentious decision to invite foreign supermarkets into the retail sector last month, alongside other measures to reduce subsidies on gas and diesel and part-privatise state-owned companies.



While the latter could be decreed by the cabinet, foreign investment in the more sensitive insurance and pensions sectors must be approved by parliament where the ruling coalition is now technically a minority.

Banerjee, a populist who decries moves to cut subsidies or invite in foreign investors as "anti-poor", withdrew her party from the coalition last month.

To survive a no-confidence vote --

which could prompt early elections -- the coalition will have to rely on outside parties, many of which are hostile to foreign investment.

The government has proposed allowing foreign companies to own up to 49 percent in insurance companies, up from 26 percent now, and the same level in the pensions sector, which is currently closed to outsiders.

The ruling Congress party would "engage with all bodies" in parliament to get the measures passed, Finance Minister P Chidambaram told reporters.

The cabinet also okayed a bill on Thursday to overhaul corporate regulation.

The government has stressed the need for "hard decisions" to encourage foreign and domestic investment to get the economy moving again.

Singh, as well as his political boss Sonia Gandhi, the head of the ruling Congress party, face a broad coalition of opposing forces, ranging from political parties hostile to foreign companies to trade unions worried about job losses.

RE-OPENING ZARDARI GRAFT CASES

Pak court grants more time to govt

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's top court yesterday gave the government more time to meet its demands about corruption allegations against the president, indicating that a solution to a nearly three-year showdown was imminent.

Since December 2009, the Supreme Court has insisted that the government re-open multi-million-dollar graft cases against Asif Ali Zardari in Switzerland that were frozen when he became head of state in 2008.

Earlier this year it convicted and dismissed prime minister Yousuf Raza Gilani for refusing to ask Switzerland to re-open the cases, but the government appeared to back down last month by agreeing to write a letter.

"We are inches away from a perfect solution, which upholds the dignity of the court and takes care of any other concerns," Judge Asif Saeed Khosa told the court.

He gave the government until October 10 to consult Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf and amend a paragraph of a still unpublished draft letter that the court had deemed objectionable and threatened fresh contempt proceedings over.

"This opportunity should not be allowed to go waste if we are so close to a solution," said Khosa.

The government has long argued that it could not ask the Swiss to reopen the cases as the president has immunity from prosecution as head of state.

The allegations against Zardari date back to the 1990s, when he and his late wife, former premier Benazir Bhutto, are suspected of using Swiss banks to launder \$12 million in alleged kickbacks from companies.



This file picture shows Priyanka Gandhi (L) daughter of Congress President Sonia Gandhi and her husband Robert Vadra (R) in New Delhi. A new Indian anti-graft political party lead by Arvind Kejriwal has levelled corruption charges against Robert Vadra accusing him of large scale corruption in real estate dealings.

PHOTO: AFP

Americans protest US drone strikes in Pakistan

CNN ONLINE

About 35 American activists dressed in pink took part in a demonstration in Islamabad against US drone strikes yesterday that target militants in Pakistan.

The US protesters, from the anti-war group Code Pink, are visiting Pakistan to make contact with people affected by the drone strikes and draw the attention of the American public to the situation in areas where the attacks take place.

"We are here to say, on behalf of those Americans with a conscience, that we apologize to the people of Pakistan for the killing and suffering" caused by the drones, Medea Benjamin, one of the founders of Code Pink, said at a news conference Thursday in Islamabad.

Organized in conjunction with a British advocacy group, the rally took place in one of the Pakistani capital's busiest market places.

The drone strike program in Pakistan has long been controversial, with conflicting reports on its impact from the US government, Pakistani officials and independent organizations.

American officials insist that the choice and execution of the strikes meet strict standards and that cases of civilian deaths or injuries are extremely rare.

But a study released last month by Stanford Law School and New York University's School of Law said the drone attacks had killed far more people than the United States acknowledges, traumatized innocent residents and been largely ineffective.



Indian farmers block traffic on a national highway during a protest against the state and central government at Rayya village some 35 kms from Amritsar yesterday. Train and road traffic movement were hampered after farmer organisations protested against price hikes in diesel, cooking fuel, and the passage of foreign direct investment (FDI) in multi-brand retail.

India's rupee at near 6-month-high

AFP, Mumbai

The Indian rupee yesterday soared to its highest level against the dollar in almost six months after the embattled government pushed ahead with more measures to attract foreign investment.

The unit was trading at 51.56 to the dollar, after peaking at 51.36 in early trade -- its strongest since April 18 -- on optimism about foreign fund inflows to the country's capital markets.

Indian shares were down 1.44 percent at 18,783.81, off a day's high of 19,137.29, as investors started taking profit in index heavyweights, with prices at 15-month highs.

Democracy most unsatisfactory form of government

Says Jaswant Singh in his new book

PTI, New Delhi

Have empty rituals become substitutes of principles on which our parliament and democratic system stands? Whom actually do our governments, any of them represent? Where did India stand in the comity of nations earlier and what is our role in international affairs now? These are few of the questions raised by former Union minister Jaswant Singh in his latest book.

"In each parliament session there is still a joint sitting, an address and a formal announcement of our government's programme but all sadly now not so inspiring. I am assailed by gnawing doubts about functioning of our parliament and about our democratic system," says veteran leader in the book in an article titled 'Irrelevance of Parliament and its MPs'.

"The audacity of opinion. Reflections, journeys and musings," by Amartya Sen's publications is the compilation of essays written by Jaswant Singh over the years on a broad spectrum of issues which he says, India has been facing in the past and which continue to exist even today.

At the function where the book was launched, Jaswant Singh however evaded the question about the recent session of parliament being stalled by his own party.

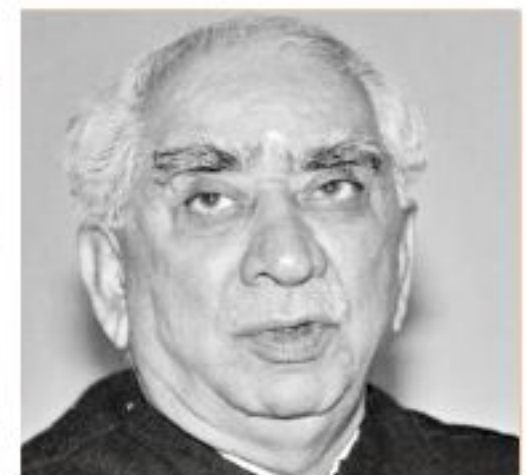
"Parliament in our theory is the custodian of liberties, a watch dog body over misgovernance, a check over the executive, in fact it's no longer so," he said adding, "The theoretical system of 'checks and balances' has lost nearly all its balance, the only check there is with the government, a check of their own incompetence".

According to Singh, "Democracy is the most unsatisfactory form of govt" until as Churchill as said 'You start examining others'".

The book includes essays on wide spectrum of issues touched by Singh in his writing over the years like Assam accord, terrorism in Punjab, the challenges of diplomacy, the politics of secularism, credibility stakes, PM's trip abroad and much more.

However the book is not just a compilation of serious and analytical pieces of writings by him but also pieces laced with wry humour like 'Sex and public life', 'Raid Raj', 'Bureaucrats and Bureaucrats', 'Rama-Ravan' elections, 'Brass tracks to Brass flaps' among others.

Singh who has authored twelve books including 'Jinnah India, Partition, Independence' and 'A call to honour in service of emergent India' says, "In the very writing of all articles, is implicit arrogance. But there is yet another elemental quest, and not simply arrogance. The quest of finding answers to the challenge of our times which continue to trouble us even today."



New hope of a cure

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produce eggs naturally could have them created in a test tube from their own cells and then implanted in their body.

A team at Kyoto University harvested stem cells from mice and altered a number of genes to create cells very similar to the primordial germ cells that generate sperm in men and oocytes -- or eggs -- in women.

They then nurtured these with cells that would become ovaries and transplanted the mixture into living mice, where the cells matured into fully-grown oocytes.

They extracted the matured oocytes, fertilised them in vitro -- in a test tube -- and implanted them into

surrogate mother mice.

The resulting mice pups were born healthy and were even able to reproduce once they matured.

Researchers said the findings, published in the US journal Science, provided a promising basis for hope in reproductive medicine.

"This achievement is expected to help us understand further the egg-producing mechanism and contribute to clarifying the causes of infertility," professor Michinori Saito told reporters ahead of publication.

"We intend to continue this research with monkeys and humans," he said.

But Saito cautioned that this was not a ready-made cure for people with fertility problems, adding that a lot of work remained.

Stem cells -- infant cells that develop into the specialised tissues of the body -- have sparked great excitement because they offer the chance of rebuilding organs damaged by disease or accident.

Until fairly recently, the only way to obtain stem cells was to harvest them from embryos.

But pioneering work done in 2006 by Shinya Yamanaka, also at Kyoto University, succeeded in generating "induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells", from skin tissue.

Like embryonic stem cells, iPS cells are also capable of developing into any cell in the body, but crucially their source material is readily available.

Yamanaka told the daily

Asahi Shimbun the researchers had made "great strides towards clarifying the causes of infertility and the development of treatment".

However, researchers said in addition to the many practical difficulties that remained, the latest stem cell science also poses a number of ethical problems.

Religious conservatives, amongst others, have objected to research on human embryonic stem cells because they hold that the destruction of a foetus -- necessary for the harvest -- is wrong.

The findings on egg development published this week come just a year after scientists in Kyoto successfully coaxed sperm cells from mouse stem cells.

CHINA LANDSLIDE All 18 children confirmed dead

AFP, Beijing

The bodies of all 18 schoolchildren buried under a landslide in China have been recovered, officials said yesterday, as authorities defended returning them to school following recent deadly earthquakes.

The landslide, triggered by sustained rains, buried the school and three farmhouses on Thursday in southwestern China's Yunnan province.

Any last hopes for survivors among the children evaporated early yesterday when local officials said rescuers had pulled the body of the last missing child from the debris.

Dubai to build

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The latest development is a \$1 billion replica of India's Taj Mahal.

Dubai's version of the iconic building will be named the Taj Arabia complex, and will include a 300-room hotel and shops.

"The Taj is made as a monument of love and we hope to promote this in Dubai as a major wedding destination," said developer Arun Mehra.

The Taj Arabia will sit within the extravagant, 107-square-mile Dubailand, which the city hopes will be the "world's greatest theme park".

It will be divided into six theme worlds and will be twice the size of all the Disneyland and Disney World resorts put together.

The Taj will be part of Falcon City, a large plot of land designed to resemble a falcon spreading its wings, which should be finished by around 2014.

Falcon City will also

feature scale reproductions of other wonders of the world including the Great Pyramid in Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Coliseum and the Lighthouse at Alexandria, the Leaning Tower of Pisa and the Great Wall of China.

This being Dubai, the developers point out, the famous Pyramid "includes retail and hotel space the ancient Egyptian architects would never have imagined!"

They have even placed a jogging track on one section of the Great Wall of China.

London Bridge, Big Ben, St Paul's Cathedral and Houses of Parliament will also be reproduced in the mind-boggling development, which will be bigger than Birmingham.

Tourists will also be able to gape at a version of the Las Vegas strip that will be four times as big as the real thing.

The Town of Venice

situated on the waterfront is to house waterfront, open-air cafes, gondolas and pedestrian shopping, and luxury apartments for shortlets.

There will be Tiger Woods-designed golf courses, a Formula 1 race track, luxurious villas and water parks.

The Pharaohs Theme Park will have multiple white-knuckle rides and rollercoasters.

When announced in 2003, Dubailand was one of the world's most ambitious leisure development proposals, costing \$4.3 billion, but plans have been seriously set back by global recession and Dubai's financial crisis.

The project was put on hold in 2008 but has now resumed.

The developers hope Falcon City will evoke the spirit of ancient civilizations for visitors, while celebrating the architectural marvels of the world.

Kim signals

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earlier than currently projected ... there are going to have to be some changes in the way we run the institution," Kim told reporters.

He said he wants the poverty-fighting institution to be less focused on pushing development loans out of the door and more on making a difference on the ground.

"Specifically, I am going to ask the governors to work with us so the organization can move to a model where we move more quickly, we can make mid-course corrections more easily and where our board and our governors focus much more on holding us accountable for results on the ground in countries, rather than focusing so much on approval of large loans," he added.

Kim said he would be more specific about reforms at the next meetings of member countries in April. "The need for these

changes has been clear for a very long time," he added.

With the United States and European countries wrestling with weak growth and high debt burdens, Kim said now was not the time to ask big donors to pony up money for the World Bank.

"At this point, I see really no appetite ... it is not the time for us to have a discussion about a capital increase, this is something I don't think the donor countries are ready for," he added.

Kim, a Harvard-trained medical doctor and anthropologist, said the Tokyo meetings would also highlight growing concerns about rising food prices and the impact climate change is having on farmers around the globe.

The worst drought in half a century in the United States and poor crops from the Black Sea bread basket have lifted world prices of staples such as corn, wheat and soybeans. While prices have not reached 2008

record levels, increased food price volatility is a worry.

As the first scientist to head the World Bank, Kim said the increases have raised his concern over the impact on poor countries from climate change.

"This is the first drought that scientists clearly attributed to man-made climate change," Kim said. "Climate change is real, the scientific community is overwhelming in agreement about the dimensions about man-made climate change and we simply must face it."

Until now, the World Bank has been reluctant to speak out loudly on global climate change for fear of getting involved in the politics of combatting global warming.

Developing countries have blamed the European Union, the United States and other rich economies for trying to avoid deeper emissions cuts and dodging increases in finance to help poorer nations deal with climate change.

A teacher

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The headmaster narrated how Bahaz came to work even on September 14 -- the day his mother died -- after keeping the body at his yard in the morning.

"After signing the [attendance] register, Bahaz took the day's first class and returned to his house. But surprisingly, he came back to school right after his mother's burial and went on to take his scheduled class," said the headmaster.

He added, "Bahaz, however, had to give in and return home at his colleagues' insistence on the day."

"When his father Abdul Hamid Fakir died on a Friday in 2003, Bahaz took all his scheduled classes as usual the following day," the headmaster said.

The founder of the school, established in 1972, declared a bonus for the school staff in 1987. According to the declaration, a teacher or other staff member who has not skipped work for a single day in a year is entitled to a month's additional salary.

"Bahaz Ali has been getting the bonus every year ever since," said Mohammad Abdul Malek, assistant headmaster of the school and also former teacher of Bahaz. "I am really proud of my student...."

"Most of the students here are from rural areas," said Bahaz. "And I try to serve them in the best way possible. As many as 103 students, out of 260, obtained A+ in English in the last year's SSC examination."

He is very popular among students, said Asma Rafia, a class-VIII student of the school. "He does not hesitate to spend some extra time and make us understand lessons in the classroom."

Some other students said as their teacher never misses a class, they also try not to miss any.

Bahaz lives in a tin-shed house in Tengri area with his wife, son, and two daughters.

His elder daughter Aysha Siddiqua Badhon, who passed the HSC examination last year, said, "We respect our father's sincerity and we are proud of him."