

ROHINGYA ISSUE

Asian leaders to put pressure on Myanmar

REUTERS, Phnom Penh

Southeast Asian leaders will put pressure on Myanmar to resolve violence between Buddhists and minority Muslims, a senior regional official said yesterday, after unrest left scores dead and as many as 100,000 people displaced since June.

Myanmar President Thein Sein has blamed nationalist and religious extremists for unrest in June and October that killed at least 167 people, but has faced criticism for failing to address underlying tensions in Rakhine State, where an estimated 800,000 Rohingya Muslims are not recognised as citizens.

"Eight hundred thousand people are now under tremendous pressure," Surin Pitsuwan, secretary-general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), told reporters on the sidelines of a regional summit in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh.

"If that issue is not handled well and effectively, there is a risk of radicalisation, there is a risk of extremism," he said.

Surin said he expected Asean leaders to raise the issue with Myanmar, which is a member of the bloc, during bilateral talks. The leaders were committed to reducing internal conflicts as the group moves towards economic integration by 2015, he said.

US President Barack Obama is expected to raise the issue of ethnic tensions today, when he travels to Myanmar and meets Thein Sein. Obama will be the first sitting US president to visit Myanmar, also known as Burma.

"In addition to the democratic reforms, we've been concerned about the continued ethnic conflicts in Burma," Ben Rhodes, deputy national security adviser, told reporters accompanying Obama aboard Air Force One.

"I think the president will be underscoring that national reconciliation is also going to be a part of Burma's democratic transition," he said.

A Reuters investigation into the crisis painted a troubling picture of organised attacks led by Rakhine nationalists tied to a powerful political party in the state, incited by Buddhist monks and, some witnesses said, abetted by local security forces.

More than 97 percent of the 36,394 people who fled the latest violence are Muslims, according to official statistics. Many now live in camps, joining 75,000 mostly Rohingya displaced in June.



US President Barack Obama waves to the media after his arrival at Don Mueang International airport in Bangkok yesterday. Obama yesterday launched his Asia tour to intensify a US foreign policy pivot towards the fast-rising region on his first overseas trip since re-election, including a landmark visit to Myanmar.

PHOTO: AFP

Obama's Myanmar trip not a threat: China

TNN, Beijing

China is downplaying the impact of US President Barack Obama's upcoming visit to Myanmar and upcoming discussion on the South China Sea dispute at the meeting of Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Cambodia. But it is clearly anxious about both.

"We believe the US is not here to threaten China, and China has no intention to pose a threat to the US," vice foreign minister Fu Ying said while discussing the US president's visit on Saturday.

China on Saturday donated \$50,000 for earthquake relief in northern Myanmar on top of \$70,000 given by Chinese hydropower and oil companies in recent days.

"China and Myanmar are close friends," Chinese ambassador Li Junhua said while presenting a cheque to the chief minister of Mandalay UYe Miynt.

Beijing's worries goes beyond US influence in Myanmar and involves its anxiety to keep the energy rich country from getting close to the government and oil companies of India.

Beijing has been asking India to agree to a road project between the two countries via Myanmar. The entry of US and other Western countries into Myanmar may force Chinese leaders to look at its proposal in a new light, sources said.

China is also anxious about the recent trip by Burmese opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi to India because it showed a strong emotional bond between the countries.

Tehran warns against arming Syrian rebels

Regime slams 'hostile' France; 142 killed

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday warned against sending weapons to Syrian rebels battling its ally in Damascus, saying that this would threaten regional stability and increase the "risk of terrorism."

"Some countries envisage arming the opposition with heavy and semi-heavy weaponry," Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi said in a speech to open an inter-Syria dialogue in Tehran.

"In reality, they seek to legitimise publicly what they have been doing in secret," Salehi said, without naming any country.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime and its main allies, Iran and Russia, accuse some Arab and Western countries of having secretly provided weapons to Syrian rebels for months.

Russia has warned that providing the coalition with weapons would be a "gross violation" of international law.

Syria yesterday slammed France as it decided to host an ambassador from the opposition National Coalition, as regime forces bombarded southern districts of the capital and clashes raged nationwide.

Meanwhile, Israeli artillery responded early yesterday after gunfire from Syria hit an army vehicle but caused no casualties, Israel's military said, in the latest spillover of violence from the bloody civil war raging across the ceasefire line.

Yesterday's fighting came a day after at least 142 people were killed nationwide, according to the Observatory, which has put the death toll in more than 20 months of conflict at upwards of 39,000.

No-TRUST MOTION Mamata seeks BJP support against UPA

AGENCIES

Trinamool Congress chief and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee called the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Sushma Swaraj yesterday seeking support for bringing a no-confidence motion against the UPA government at the Centre, senior BJP leader Murli Manohar Joshi said here.

"Ms Banerjee has approached Sushma Swaraj," Joshi said at a press conference at Kolkata Press Club here.

"The NDA will meet tomorrow or day after and take a decision," the BJP MP said.

Mamata had attacked UPA government on FDI in retail and corruption issues on Saturday and said TMC would bring a no-confidence motion against it in the coming winter session of parliament and sought support of UPA allies and Left parties. She had also expressed readiness to talk to BJP.

Earlier, Indian Finance Minister P Chidambaram on Saturday said the government is preparing for elections in 2014 and not earlier, asserting that there was no threat to its stability.

NEWS IN brief

Coptic Pope enthroned in Cairo

BBC ONLINE

The new pope of Egypt's Coptic Christian church has been formally enthroned in Cairo.

Pope Tawadros II was confirmed as the new leader of Egypt's Christian minority at a ceremony at St Mark's cathedral in the Egyptian capital.

The 60-year-old succeeds Pope Shenouda III, who died in March after four decades on the patriarchal throne.

Christians make up 5-10% of Egypt's majority Sunni Muslim population and form the largest

US denies visas to Iran officials

REUTERS, Dubai

The United States has denied visas to Iranian officials hoping to attend a UN meeting in New York, Iran's state news agency reported on Saturday.

The Iranian judiciary's Human Rights Headquarters said in a statement that the United States denied visas to members of an Iranian delegation that planned to travel to a meeting of the United Nations' Third Committee, which focuses on social issues and human rights, state news agency IRNA said.

India says farewell to Thackeray

AFP, Mumbai

Huge crowds thronged the streets of Mumbai yesterday to witness the funeral procession of Bal Thackeray, chief of the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party and one of India's most divisive politicians.

Thackeray, who called his followers "Hindu warriors" and was widely accused of stoking ethnic and religious violence, died aged 86 on Saturday, triggering a virtual shutdown of the city.

Majority of Britons wants quit EU

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Well over half of British voters now want to leave the European Union, according to an opinion poll that shows anti-EU sentiment is sweeping through all three main political parties.

The Opinion/Observer survey finds that 56% of people would probably or definitely vote for the UK to go it alone if they were offered the choice in a referendum.



Palestinians gather around a destroyed home of the al-Dallu family following an Israeli air strike in Gaza City yesterday. At least seven members of the same family, including four children, were among nine people killed when an Israeli missile struck a family home in Gaza City, the health ministry said.

PHOTO: AFP

Matia blasts US embassy

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Terming the Jamaat an anti-Liberation War organisation and attackers of police across the country, Matia said: "I strongly protest against and criticise those who urge us to sit with the attackers of police."

Immediately after Matia, another senior Awami League leader Tofail Ahmed, MP, criticised the US Embassy's call for a dialogue. The embassy on November 15 expressed deep concern over the recent country-wide violence and urged a dialogue to resolve the differences.

Speaking on a point of order, Tofail said: "I was surprised how the country [the USA] that launches drone attacks to kill militants and terrorists in Pakistan could urge [the government] to sit with a militant organisation like the Jamaat."

Launching a blistering attack on US Ambassador

Dan W Mozena, Matia during the unscheduled discussion said: "Would his [Mozena's] country sit for a 'love talk' with a force had it attacked their law enforcers?"

"This is nothing but hypocrisy. Urging a dialogue with the attackers will only inspire them," an indignant Matia said amid a thumping of desks by lawmakers.

She also said it was impossible to make anyone agree to do anything by dint of power. "They [the US] observed this once in 1971 and will see it again at present."

Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu and a host of other ruling alliance lawmakers, including Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon and ALMP Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, also came down heavily on the recent spate of violent attacks on police by Jamaat-Shibir men.

They also demanded

that the government ban the Jamaat and its student front Islami Chhatra Shibir's religion-based violent politics.

They alleged that the Jamaat-Shibir's recent "commando" attacks on police were aimed at foiling the war crimes trial as verdicts against some accused Jamaat leaders were drawing closer.

They also blamed the opposition BNP for "siding with" the Jamaat in their recent violent activities in the country.

In response, Speaker Abdul Hamid, who was presiding over the sitting, said: "You all belong to the ruling alliance government. Therefore, you can hold discussion on this matter and come to a decision."

During the unscheduled discussion Menon and the lone independent MP Fazlul Azim enquired about the prime minister's recent comment that her government would try

the attackers of police under Sharia law, if need be.

"Sharia law contradicts our Constitution. Will the government go into amending the Constitution and introduce sharia law?" said Menon.

The Workers Party chief said he was also confused to hear the premier's speech on Sharia.

Hasina, also leader of the House and president of ruling AL, was not present at that time.

During the discussion, Matia however said the Jamaat always spoke about 'rule of Allah and rule of good people'. "But we have seen 'rule of good people' during the past BNP-Jamaat tenure and recently we saw their attacks on police in the name of rule of Allah."

"That's what the prime minister meant -- let's apply that law [Sharia]," Matia added.

Israel has right to defend itself

Says Obama, hopes for no 'ramping up' of Gaza crisis

AFP, Bangkok

US President Barack Obama yesterday backed Israel's right to defend itself and said it was "preferable" for the Gaza crisis to be ended without a "ramping up" of Israeli military action, as fears mounted of a new invasion of the Hamas-run territory.

"Israel has every right to expect that it does not have missiles fired into its territory," Obama said, adding, "if that can be accomplished without a ramping up of military activity in Gaza, that is preferable".

Obama spoke, in Thailand, after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel was ready to "significantly expand" its operation against militants in the Gaza Strip, sparking fears of a new invasion.

His comments came on a day in which the crisis deepened, with two rockets shot down over Tel Aviv and the Palestinian death toll from retaliatory strikes reaching 69.

The US president said the "precipitating event" of the Gaza crisis was a string of extremist rocket attacks on Israeli territory, which he said no nation in the world would tolerate.

"There is no country on earth that would tolerate missiles raining down on its citizens from outside its borders," he said.

Obama has spoken to Netanyahu, with whom he has had a tense relationship, several times since the start of the crisis, most recently on Friday.

Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary William Hague yesterday warned that Israel could lose much of its international support if it sent troops into Gaza.

"A ground invasion of Gaza would lose Israel a lot of the international support and sympathy that they have in this situation," he said.

"It's much more difficult to restrict and avoid civilian casualties during a ground invasion and a large ground operation would threaten to prolong the conflict."

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