

Embattled Thai PM misses graft hearing

Govt seeks UN's help in ending crisis

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's premier skipped an anti-corruption panel hearing into negligence charges yesterday that could lead to her ousting, as her government turned to the UN for help resolving a deadly political crisis.

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra is fighting for her political survival as pressure mounts on several fronts -- in mass protests on the streets, in the courts and from the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC).

The backdrop is a long-standing struggle between a royalist establishment -- backed by the judiciary and the military -- and Yingluck's billionaire family which has strong support in the northern half of Thailand.

The prime minister's critics welcome the graft probe as a long-overdue attempt to hold the government to account, but to her supporters it is part of an attempted power grab.

Yingluck, who has protested her innocence, sent her legal team to acknowledge the allegations linked to a flagship rice farm subsidy scheme, as she toured her political stronghold in northern Thailand.

The NACC, which filed charges against

Yingluck earlier this month, says she ignored warnings that the rice scheme was fostering corruption and causing financial losses.

She now has 15 days to submit her defence. If found guilty by the NACC she faces an impeachment vote in the upper house and a possible five-year ban from politics, as well as potential imprisonment by the courts on criminal charges.

It is unclear how long the commission will take to reach a conclusion.

The legal moves comes amid a spike in political violence, often targeting protesters, that has left 22 people dead and hundreds wounded in recent weeks.

One of Yingluck's deputy prime ministers yesterday said he would appeal to United Nations Secretary General Ban

Ki-moon to try to broker an end to the crisis.

"There is no neutral person in Thailand, no one credible" to act as a mediator, Surapong Tovichakchaikul told reporters, a day after Ban condemned the violence and called for dialogue.

Government supporters and some experts see the charges as part of an attempted "judicial coup" by Thaksin's foes within the royalist establishment, without sending tanks onto the streets.



A supporter of "Red Shirts" of Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra holds a placard during a gathering after shutting down the gates of the headquarters of the National Anti-Corruption Commission in Bangkok, yesterday. Inset, Anti-government protesters hold placards during a rally in Bangkok.

PHOTO: AFP

N Korea test-fires four short-range missiles

AFP, Seoul

North Korea test-fired four short-range missiles into the sea yesterday, Seoul's defence ministry said, in an apparent show of force to coincide with South Korea-US joint military exercises.

A ministry spokesman told AFP the missiles, with an estimated range of 200 kilometres (125 miles), were fired off the east coast of North Korea.

"Our military will maintain tight vigilance in preparation for additional launches or any military provocation from the North," the spokesman said.

North Korea carries out short-range missile tests on a fairly routine basis, and has used them before to display its anger at the annual military exercises.

Observers said the tests were unlikely to trigger a significant rise in military tensions.

The South Korea-US drills kicked off Monday, despite vocal opposition from Pyongyang which views them as rehearsals for invasion.

This year, they overlapped with the end of the first reunion for more than three years of families divided by the Korean War -- an event that has raised hopes of greater cross-border cooperation.

AFTERMATH OF UKRAINE

US, Russia chess game and Mid East

STAR DESK

Western governments are scrambling to contain the fallout from Ukraine's weekend revolution, pledging money, support and possible EU membership, while anxiously eyeing the response of Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, whose protege has been ousted.

The whole fiasco still raises quite a few questions as to what stances Asian powers will hold in this 'chess game' being played by Washington and the Kremlin, and how it will affect the Middle East through its outcome.

Seemingly the biggest loser in the three-month drama's denouement, the Kremlin has the potential to create the most mischief because of Ukraine's pro-Russian affinities in the east and south, and its dependence on Russian energy supplies.

But let's focus on the possible impact of Russia's Ukraine trauma on the crisis-hit Middle East.

Frustrated with Moscow's failure to enact any compromises from the Syrian regime at US-Russian sponsored peace talks in Geneva, the United States has now signaled it is examining its policy options in Syria, where the bombing by al-Assad's forces against civilians has intensified.

Russia avoided a potentially embarrassing diplomatic bust-up on the eve of the closing ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympics, casting its support behind a US-backed United Nations Security Council resolution designed to compel the Syrian government, as well as armed opposition groups, to allow in needed humanitarian aid and immediately lift the siege of several Syrian towns.

NEWS ANALYSIS

China, which had joined Russia in vetoing three previous resolutions on Syria, also voted in favor of the resolution.

But Russia's UN envoy, Vitaly I Churkin, made it clear to the council that his government was not prepared to automatically penalise Syria if it fails to move quickly to end its siege of Homs, Aleppo and other battered cities. His remarks signaled that the US and its allies are likely to face an uphill battle to address any foot-dragging by Syria. And after Ukraine, Assad may feel more secure.

Putin's desire to maintain a sphere of influence in the Middle East is in no ways limited to Syria. He has met US ambivalence toward the military-led government by

welcoming the de facto Egyptian leader, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, to Moscow this month, giving him an endorsement for his as-yet undeclared candidacy for president and continuing discussions about a \$2 billion arms deal for Egypt, even as the US has suspended some military support to Cairo.

The visit was a Russian bid to rekindle a relationship that founded since the Cold War, when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat broke off ties with the Kremlin. The ties remained frosty during Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule. But the warm reception of Sisi and Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy also seemed designed to send a message to the United States that Russia still has clout in the region's most influential and populous country and is prepared



'I am still Ukraine president'

Says ousted Yanukovich
AFP, Moscow

Deposed Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich yesterday broke five days of silence to declare himself to still be Ukraine's head of state, as sources strongly indicated that he had taken refuge in Russia. Yanukovich issued a defiant statement through Russia's three main news agencies, saying he had asked Russia to ensure his personal security. His comments gave no further clue about his whereabouts.

In the strongly-worded statement, Yanukovich said he did not consider his ousting last weekend to be legal and believed he was still Ukrainian president.

"I, Viktor Fyodorovich Yanukovich, address the people of Ukraine. I still consider myself to be the legal head of the Ukrainian state," said Yanukovich in a statement to Russian news agencies.

He added that the latest decisions by the Ukrainian parliament, who have appointed an acting president in his place, "do not have legitimate character."

However Yanukovich added that he was not ordering the army to intervene. He applauded the pro-Russia Black Sea peninsula of Crimea for showing opposition to the new authorities.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, left, greets German Chancellor Angela Merkel outside 10 Downing Street in London, yesterday. Merkel yesterday urged Britain to stay in the European Union, saying the bloc would be a stronger force in the world with London's voice.



PHOTO: AFP

Polls don't always lead to democracy: Kerry

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State John Kerry spoke passionately Wednesday about the "incredible yearning for modernity" sweeping across the world, warning that free elections do not necessarily usher in true democracy in many countries.

The months of protests in Ukraine that led to the ousting of president Viktor Yanukovich were just one example of "people power" in recent months.

Such protests were "a reflection of this incredible yearning for modernity, for change, for choice, for empowerment of individuals that is moving across the world, and in many cases moving a lot faster than political leadership is either aware of or able to respond to," the top US diplomat told a small group of reporters.

The ousting of Yanukovich, like July's toppling of Egypt's first democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi, proved



that elections by themselves were not always enough.

"A democracy is not defined solely by an election," the top US diplomat argued.

"You can have a democratically elected government, but you don't have democratically-instituted reforms that actually give you a democracy, a full, practicing, functioning democracy," Kerry said.

"And what you have in many places is a general election, a popular election, absent reform, present with great corruption, great cronyism and a huge distortion of democratic process."

Since the start of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the United States has sought to support countries and their fledgling democracies as they emerge from under decades of autocratic rule.

But many Middle Eastern and North African nations are still grappling with the fallout of

Palestinians reject US push for peace talks beyond April

AFP, Ramallah

A senior Palestinian official yesterday rejected US moves to extend an April deadline for nine months of hard-won talks with Israel to culminate in a framework peace deal.

"There is no meaning to prolonging the negotiation, even for one more additional hour, if Israel, represented by its current government, continues to disregard international law," Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP.

"If there was a committed partner, we wouldn't even have needed nine hours to reach that deal," he said.

He was responding to comments by US Secretary of State John Kerry, who told reporters in Washington on Wednesday that more time would be needed and that he hoped first to agree a framework to guide further talks.

It was Kerry who coaxed the two sides back to the negotiating table in late July, after a three-year hiatus.

"Then we get into the final negotiations. I don't think anybody would worry if there's another nine months, or whatever it's going to be... But that's not defined yet," he said.

Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon

said last month that he expected the timeframe to be lengthened.

"We are now trying to reach a framework to continue negotiations for a period beyond the nine months some thought would suffice for reaching a permanent accord," he said.

US President Barack Obama is to host Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House next week when he is expected to renew pressure on his guest to rein in the expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, that has threatened to drive the Palestinians away from the negotiating table.

Israeli newspaper Yediot Aharanot reported on Thursday that Netanyahu's cabinet had quietly begun a de facto freeze on expanding settlements outside the major Jewish population centres.

The paper said that the move was revealed to a West Bank settler leader in a conversation with Cabinet Secretary Avihai Mandelblit.

"We've received instructions from the political level not to move ahead on (construction) plans beyond those for the settlement blocs," it quoted Mandelblit as telling Jordan Valley settler David Elhayani.

Climate change is real

Say US, British science academies

AFP, Washington

US and British scientific academies said Wednesday there was a clear consensus that climate change is real and will have serious disruptive effects on the planet.

The US National Academy of Sciences and Britain's Royal Society said they were making the joint declaration in hopes of moving the public debate forward -- to the question of how the world responds, instead of whether climate change is happening.

"It is now more certain than ever, based on many lines of evidence, that humans are changing the Earth's climate," the joint publication said.

"The atmosphere and oceans have warmed, accompanied by sea-level rise, a strong decline in Arctic sea ice, and other climate-related changes."

The academies cautioned that science inherently cannot settle every detail and that debate remained on some specifics, including how much climate change is

linked to extreme weather events.

But it said scientists were "very confident" that the world will warm further in the next century and that a rise by just a few degrees Celsius would have "serious impacts" that are expected to include threats to coasts and food production.

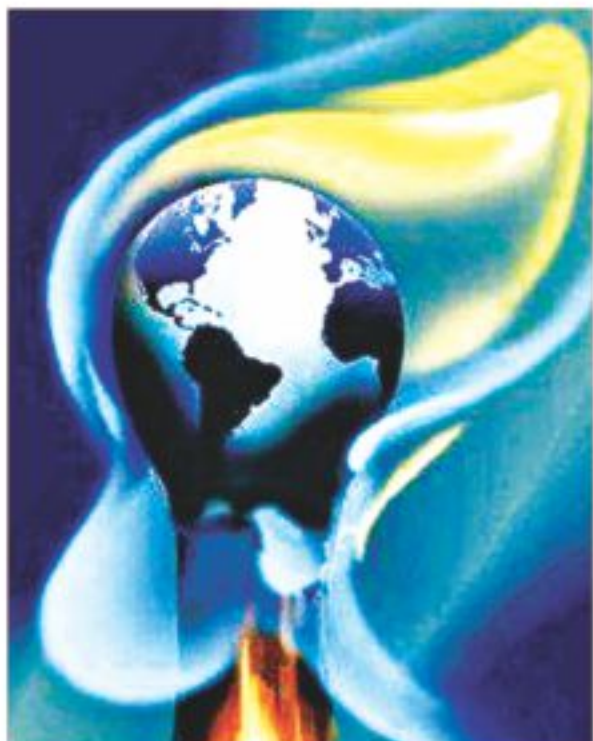
Amid a bitter winter in several parts of the world, the academies stressed that global warming is a "long-term trend" and that day-to-day weather can still be unusually cold or warm.

Climate change is already widely accepted by scientists.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a United Nations-backed group of scientists, said in a report in September that it was more certain than ever that humans were causing

rising temperatures and that heat waves, droughts and other threats would intensify.

But there has also been a backlash, including in the United States where industry-friendly conservative lawmakers have questioned the science as they oppose laws to curb carbon emissions blamed for



Most democrats want Hillary to run in 2016

NEW YORK TIMES ONLINE

More than 8 in 10 Democrats say they want Hillary Rodham Clinton to run for president in 2016, showing a level of interest in her that no other potential candidates -- Democrat or Republican -- come close to matching among their party's voters, according to a New York Times/CBS News Poll.

The potential candidates drawing the most interest after Hillary are Vice President Joseph R Biden Jr, former Gov Jeb Bush of Florida and Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky.

The election, of course, is far off. But the level of enthusiasm among voters for candidates in their own party still matters, as those potential candidates are already deciding whether to run and beginning to plan campaign and fund-raising strategies.

While Democrats appear overwhelmingly eager for a Hillary candidacy, the poll suggests that the Republican field, at least at this early stage, is far more muddled, with no potential candidate garnering majority enthusiasm for a presidential run.

Male and female Democrats expressed similar levels of interest in Hillary. A potential Clinton candidacy also drew the strongest support among self-described independents, with 52 percent saying they hoped she would run.

The nationwide poll is based on telephone interviews conducted February 19-23 on landlines and cellphones with 515 Democrats, 519 Republicans and 550 independents.

