

BILL TO CLIP CJ'S POWERS Pak govt, judiciary in new standoff

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's government yesterday rejected a panel set up and headed by the chief justice that is due to rule on a draft law clipping his powers, claiming conflict of interest, the latest standoff amid months of economic and political turmoil.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's government is involved in a row with the Supreme Court over the holding of snap polls in two provinces where former leader Imran Khan had dissolved the local governments this year in a bid to force early elections.

The government says it is not economically viable to hold snap elections first ahead of a general election due in October. Chief Justice (CJ) Umar Ata Bandial on Wednesday set up a panel of eight judges, to be headed by himself, that yesterday started discussing the draft law, according to the court's cause list.

The draft law, which has been passed by parliament and sent to the president for assent, cuts down the chief justice's powers to constitute panels, hear appeals or assign cases to judges in his team, according to a copy of the bill. "We reject this panel," Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar, flanked by all of the government's coalition partners, told a news conference in Islamabad.



PENTAGON LEAKS US spying on UN chief over Russia: report AGENCIES

Leaked Pentagon files indicate the United States was monitoring UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres because it believed he was too soft on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine.

The documents appear to reveal private communications between Guterres and his deputy that focused on a Black Sea grain export deal, which, according to the leaked papers, the UN chief was eager to preserve and willing to accommodate Russian interests to make happen.

"Guterres emphasised his efforts to improve Russia's ability to export, even if that meant working with sanctioned Russian entities or individuals," the leaked US document said, according to a BBC report.

Ukraine and Russia signed the export deal in July. They committed to allowing the export of grain, fertiliser and other farm goods across the Black Sea while they are at war. Guterres and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan mediated the talks, which they said would help ease a global food crisis.

During discussions in February, Guterres was "undermining broader efforts to hold Moscow accountable for its actions in Ukraine", the leaked document alleged.

Another document said Guterres expressed "dismay" after a call with EU chief Ursula von der Leyen in which she said EU intended to increase its production of weapons mmunition for Ukraine, reports Al Jazeera Online.

Ukraine forces cut off inside Bakhmut

Says Russia, Kyiv denies; Moscow delivers fresh warning over grain deal

AFP, Moscow

Moscow said yesterday that Russian forces were "blocking" Ukrainian forces from getting in or out of the frontline hotspot of Bakhmut.

But, a Ukrainian army spokesman rejected Moscow's claims. "This does not correspond to reality," Sergiy Cherevaty, spokesman for Ukraine's eastern forces told AFP.

He said Ukrainian forces were able to "deliver provisions, ammunition, and medicines" and take out wounded troops.

However, the head of mercenary group Wagner, which has spearheaded much of the fighting for the city, said it was "too early" to say Bakhmut was surrounded.

"Airborne troops are providing support to advancing assault troops, blocking the transfer of Ukrainian army reserves to the city

and the possibility of retreat for enemy units," the Russian defence ministry said in a statement.

The statement said "Wagner assault units were continuing high-intensity combat operations to oust the enemy from the central quarters" of the city in eastern Ukraine.

The Wagner mercenary group says it has spearheaded the Russian attack on Bakhmut.

Recent days appear to have pointed towards gains in Bakhmut for Moscow, with several Russian correspondents publishing images from inside the city.

The Russian-installed head of the eastern Ukrainian region of Donetsk, Denis Pushilin, also made a trip to Bakhmut this week.

Bakhmut had a population of 70,000 people before Moscow launched its offensive.

Both Russia and Ukraine are believed to have suffered huge

losses in the battle, despite analysts saying the city has little strategic value.

Russia delivered a new warning to the West over a grain deal with Ukraine yesterday, saying a number of conditions must be met for Moscow to extend it beyond May 18.

Negotiated in July by Turkey and the UN, the agreement has given Ukrainian grain shipments a safe corridor in the Black Sea after they were blocked amid the conflict with Russia.

Russia, whose economy has been hit by a raft of Western sanctions, has repeatedly threatened to walk away from the agreement if obstacles to its own exports remained.

The Russian foreign ministry said yesterday that "it is hard to talk about the further extension of the 'Black Sea initiative' after May 18" if Moscow does not see any progress.



US President Joe Biden, left, is welcomed by Ireland's President Michael D Higgins and his wife Sabina at the Aras an Uachtarain in Dublin yesterday, during his four-day trip to Northern Ireland and Ireland to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the "Good Friday Agreement".

PHOTO: AFP

AGRICULTURE, FOOD SYSTEM World would gain \$1tn by closing gender gap: UN

AFP, Paris

Closing the gender gap in the agriculture and food system, where women still earn less than men, would add \$1 trillion to the global economy, a UN report said yesterday.

The report, updating the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 2011 study into the matter, found that women continue to occupy a "marginal" place in agrifood systems.

Women must "cope with work conditions that are often more difficult than those of men, in that they are confined to jobs that are casual, part-time, informal or low-skilled", it said. Women represent more than half of the agricultural workforce in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and just under half in Southeast Asia.

Around the world, they are lagging behind when it comes to access to land, resources like fertilisers and seeds, financing or technology "The share of men who hold the rights to property or are guaranteed rights of agricultural land is two times higher than that of women," in more than 40 percent of countries that provide data on women's land ownership, the FAO said.

MIGRANT SHIPWRECK Tunisia recovers 14 more bodies

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia has recovered 14 bodies of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in the Mediterranean, bringing to 24 the number of dead after their boat headed for Europe sank, the coastguard said yesterday. The coastguard had announced on Wednesday that it had recovered 10 bodies of sub-Saharan African migrants after the shipwreck the day before off the coastal city of Sfax. But yesterday, it said 14 more bodies of migrants were discovered, including six women, during search operations, as well as the body of the boat's Tunisian captain. Faouzi Masmoudi, the spokesman for the court of Sfax which is investigating the tragedy, told AFP that the 15 bodies had been trapped under the boat. The spokesman for the National Guard also announced yesterday that 41 Tunisian migrants, including five women and nine children, had been "rescued" off the coast of Sousse. Dozens of migrants, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, have drowned off Tunisia in recent weeks in desperate attempts to reach Europe. The country has long been a favoured spot for migrants attempting the journey.

NY appoints first- ever rat 'czar'

AFP, New York

New York appointed its first rat "czar" on Wednesday, tasked with cracking down on one of the more unappealing aspects of life in the Big Apple. The appointment of Kathleen Corradi comes four months after the city posted a tongue-in-cheek advert seeking "somewhat bloodthirsty" candidates for the role. Rats are regularly seen in America's largest metropolis, often spotted scurrying between subway tracks and sniffing around garbage bags on sidewalks. Legend has it that there are as many rats as humans -- around nine million -- although that figure has been debunked as a myth by a local statistician. Even English novelist Charles Dickens complained about the rodents when he visited New York in 1842. One of the critters shot to internet stardom in 2015 when it was filmed walking down the stairs of a subway station with a full slice of pizza in its mouth. "New York may be famous for the Pizza Rat, but rats, and the conditions that help them thrive will no longer be tolerated -- no more dirty curbs, unmanaged spaces, or brazen burrowing," Corradi said in a statement. The former teacher and expert in waste management will be paid \$155,000 a year, according to The New York Times.

Trump to testify under oath in fraud lawsuit

AFP, New York

Donald Trump was due back in New York yesterday to answer questions in a civil case that accuses the ex-president and three of his children of business fraud.

The deposition comes a week after Trump's historic arraignment on criminal charges in a Manhattan courtroom in a separate case.

The 76-year-old Republican was due to be questioned under oath in the lawsuit brought by New York state attorney general Letitia James, the New York Times reported.

Trump himself appeared to confirm the deposition, his second in the case, in a post on his social media platform Truth Social.

He said would be "heading downtown to meet with a Racist who leaked that I would be there at 9:30 AM."

Trump has repeatedly called New

York prosecutors who are Black and investigating him racist.

James sued Trump, Donald Trump Jr, Eric Trump and Ivanka Trump in September last year alleging they committed "incredible" fraud at the Trump Organization.

Her lawsuit asserts that they lied to tax collectors, lenders and insurers for years in a scheme that routinely misstated the value of Trump's properties to enrich themselves.

James said they provided fraudulent statements of Trump's net worth and false asset valuations "to obtain and satisfy loans, get insurance benefits, and pay lower taxes."

Trump, the frontrunner for the Republican nomination for the 2024 White House race, has used his common refrain of "witch hunt" to describe the case.

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