

Facing 'tax terrorism' after notice

Says India's Congress

REUTERS, Mumbai

India's main opposition party said yesterday it had been asked to pay an additional 18.2 billion rupees (\$218 million) in taxes, which it called an attempt by the tax department to financially cripple it weeks before general elections.

Calling the latest notice from the Income Tax Department "tax terrorism", Congress treasurer Ajay Maken told reporters the party would fight the demand in court.

India will vote in seven phases between April 19 and June 1 in general elections. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to win and secure a record-equalling third straight term.

"The law is on our side, we have no doubt about it, but by the time we get relief, elections will be over," Maken said. The Supreme Court is expected to hear the case on April 1, he added.

A tax department spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment yesterday.

Big powers need to stop 'strangling' N Korea: Russia

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia said yesterday that major powers needed a new approach to North Korea, accusing the United States and its allies of ratcheting up military tensions in Asia and seeking to "strangle" the reclusive state.

Russia vetoed the annual renewal of a panel of experts monitoring enforcement of longstanding United Nations sanctions against North Korea over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes.

Moscow's move, which strikes a blow at the enforcement of a myriad of UN sanctions imposed after Pyongyang carried out its first nuclear test in 2006, underscores the dividend that Kim Jong Un has earned by moving closer to President Vladimir Putin amid the war in Ukraine.

"It is obvious to us that the UN Security Council can no longer use old templates in relation to the problems of the Korean Peninsula," said Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.

The battle of Kushtia

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published in the Time magazine on April 19, 1971.

TAJUDDIN ENTERS INDIA

Tajuddin Ahmad and Amirul Islam crossed over to India in the early hours of March 30, 1971. They met senior Border Security Force (BSF) officer in West Bengal, Golok Majumdar, at the border post. Tajuddin briefed on the situation in Bangladesh and handed over a list of Awami League leaders and members of the National Assembly. Later they were driven to the airport in Kolkata where they met Director General of BSF KF Rustamji, who had arrived posthaste from Delhi.

BLOOD TELEGRAM

On March 30, 1971, American Consul General Archer K Blood in Dhaka, sent a telegram to the US State Department. After providing gory details of the Pakistan army's brutality in Dhaka University, the telegram read: Question of whether university professors subject of pre-planned purge still unanswered although actively being looked into. Academics met since military crackdown fearful for safety and in hiding. They believe they [are] subject to elimination. Systematic destruction of academic records at university suggests campaign underway to erase all traces [of] current "trouble making" generation at Dacca university. Figure of thousand dead at university nonetheless strikes us as exaggerated, although nothing these days is inconceivable.

Israel kills

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since March 21, it added.

In a separate development, an Israeli strike in south Lebanon yesterday killed the deputy head of Hezbollah's rocket unit, the Israeli military said.

Hezbollah, which has a powerful arsenal of rockets and missiles, has exchanged near-daily fire with the Israeli army since the offensive began on October 7.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians inspect the damage to a building after Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Israel continued its bombardment in Rafah, the Palestinians' last refuge where over half of Gaza's 2.3 million people were sheltering.

Famine 'quite possibly' in some areas of Gaza

Says US official; Japan to resume funding to UNRWA

AGENCIES

Famine is both a risk and quite possibly present in at least some areas of the northern Gaza Strip, a senior US State Department official said yesterday, while adding that a scarcity of trucks was an obstacle to getting more aid into the densely populated enclave under Israel siege.

"While we can say with confidence that famine is a significant risk in the south and centre but not present, in the north, it is both a risk and quite possibly is present in at least some areas," the official told Reuters on the condition of anonymity.

Earlier this month a global authority on food security - backed by the United Nations - warned that famine was imminent and likely to occur by May in northern Gaza and could spread across the enclave by July.

Malnutrition and food insecurity have probably exceeded famine levels in Gaza's

north, and hunger-linked death rates were likely to do so soon, said the report by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification.

The number of trucks distributing aid in south and central Gaza had nearly topped 200 a day, an increase compared to a month ago, but more were needed, the State Department official said.

"You need to address the full nutrition needs of the population of Gaza of all ages. That means more than just that minimal survival level feeding," the official said, adding that malnutrition, infant newborn and young child mortality was a significant problem that was growing.

"It has to be addressed by additional assistance coming and the right kind of assistance coming in," he said.

Meanwhile, Japan is preparing to resume funding to the UN's crisis-hit Palestinian refugee agency (UNRWA), which

coordinates nearly all aid to Gaza, the government said.

Once the sixth-largest contributor to the agency, Japan joined more than a dozen countries in pausing funding after Israel claimed that 12 of UNRWA's 13,000 Gaza employees were involved in the deadly October 7 Hamas attack, reports AFP.

Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa met UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini in Tokyo on Thursday to discuss measures taken by the agency to strengthen governance and transparency.

"Japan and the UNRWA confirmed that they will advance final coordination about necessary efforts to resume Japan's contribution," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Japanese media reports said the resumption of funding, which was suspended in January, was expected to come in the first half of April.

S Africa bus crash kills 45 Easter pilgrims

REUTERS, Mamatlakala

A bus crash in northern South Africa killed 45 pilgrims travelling from Botswana for Easter festivities on Thursday, authorities said, with the sole survivor an eight-year-old girl currently being treated in hospital.

South African police said 31 female and 15 male Botswanan passengers died in the crash, after the driver lost control and collided with barriers on a bridge near Mamatlakala. The bus went over the bridge and hit the ground below, catching fire.

TV footage from the scene showed a wreck of mangled metal from the bus amid scattered clothes and other belongings. "Authorities are combing the scene for more bodies," police said in a statement.

China halts work on two projects after deadly attack

Says Pakistan official

AFP, Peshawar

Chinese contractors have halted construction on two major dam projects in Pakistan after a suicide bomber killed five Chinese engineers and a Pakistani driver this week, a provincial official told AFP yesterday. The companies have demanded that Pakistan authorities come up with new security plans before reopening the sites where around 1,250 Chinese nationals are working, the official said. The security of Chinese workers is a major concern to both countries, with nationals frequently targeted by militants hostile to outside influence. The workers were targeted on Tuesday by a suicide bomber who rammed into their vehicle on a mountainous road near one of the dam sites. He detonated his explosives on impact, plunging their vehicle into a deep ravine. A senior official from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa interior department said that since Wednesday, China Gezhouba Group Company has halted work on the Dasu dam in the province and Power China has stopped work on Diamer Bhasha dam, which straddles two provinces. "They have demanded new security plans from government," he said. "Around 750 Chinese engineers are engaged in Dasu Dam project, while 500 are working on Diamer Bhasha Dam," he added.

Power supply under 'increasing threat' Ukraine warns as Russian air strikes damage power stations, kill one person

AFP, Kyiv



Ukraine warned yesterday that Russian air attacks were putting its electricity supply under "increasing threat", hours after strikes damaged power stations and killed at least

one person. Moscow has stepped up aerial bombardment of Ukraine in recent weeks, targeting energy infrastructure in response to deadly Ukrainian assaults on Russia's border regions. A Russian drone killed a 39-year-old man and wounded another person near the southeastern city of Nikopol, while an air attack on Kamianske further north wounded five people, including a child, authorities said. "Last night Russia continued its barbaric attacks against the Ukrainian energy system. Emergency blackouts have been introduced in some regions," Prime Minister Denys Shmygal said. He said the strikes showed Ukraine urgently needed more air defence systems, a demand Kyiv has repeatedly made to its allies as its energy sector buckles under pressure.

UN reacts to Kejriwal arrest

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On Wednesday, hours after India summoned a senior US diplomat to protest remarks on Kejriwal's arrest, Washington reiterated that it encourages fair, transparent, timely legal processes.

On the US diplomat being summoned in Delhi, US State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller said "I'm not going to talk about any private diplomatic conversations. But of course what we have said publicly is what I just said from here, that we encourage fair, transparent, timely legal processes. We don't think anyone should object

to that, and we'll make the same thing clear privately."

India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) officials summoned Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Gloria Berbera to their office in South Block in the Indian capital. The meeting lasted for more than 30 minutes.

On Thursday, India said the US State Department's recent remarks on the arrest of Kejriwal are "unwarranted" and asserted the country is "proud of its independent and robust democratic institutions" and committed to protect them from any form of undue external influences.

Criticism is now

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Asked to clarify what he meant by "pressure", Hafiz said everyone knows about it but won't talk about it fearing jail or being forcibly disappeared.

Asked about his role in the formation of BNP, he denied his involvement saying a group of people spreading these false narratives to gain popularity.

"Two months before the election, I openly mentioned in a press conference that I would not leave the party, nor would I join any new party. ... Why this issue is coming up again after six months? It is simply because they crave popularity," said Hafiz without naming anyone.

He also said he had no role in naming or helping BNM get registration. "Everyone knows well who does these things. Which arm of the government is involved, we all know that," he said without explaining further.

About Shakib Al Hasan, the BNP leader said they had met once before the election. Hafiz said he told Shakib not to get into politics before retirement. Asked about his position on the BNP's support of the social media campaign on boycotting Indian products, he said a discussion was held within the party.

"The party's statement is my statement," he said without elaborating. Asked whether BNP made a mistake by not participating in the polls, Hafiz said the party should have contested the January 7 polls. "I have already told this in a press conference. If BNP participated in the election under the UN or USA mediation, then BNP would have been in power now. They [the foreign powers] would have made it a fair one."

However, he said the onus was on the BNP to take the decision. "There was so much discussion. BNP wanted an election under a caretaker government and the ousting of Sheikh Hasina's government. But it was a daunting task. And why would the foreigners go to that extent [in realising the BNP's demand]? They don't."

Asked about BNP's failure to fulfil its duties as an opposition party, Hafiz said BNP has made sacrifices. "BNP is trying, but it is impossible to do more. 22 of our people gave away their lives during the movement. What more can they do? Some say 16 people were killed in the jail. ... These are all sacrifices," he added.

Asked about the future of BNP, he said the party will survive and thrive. "BNP has a very bright future. The party's immense popularity will not go up in thin air. ... One day, BNP will receive the people's verdict," he said.



Migrants wait to disembark from a fibre boat in the port of Arguineguin, on the island of Gran Canaria, Spain on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Erdogan to hold talks with Biden in May

AFP, Istanbul, Turkey

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet with US counterpart Joe Biden at the White House on May 9, a Turkish official told AFP yesterday.

It would be the first White House meeting between the two leaders, who last met on the margins of the Nato summit in Lithuania in July.

The Nato allies are seeking to rebuild ties strained over disputes including Turkey's delayed approval of Sweden's accession to the alliance.

"I think this is quite a significant trip. Erdogan has now been in charge of running Turkey for 21 years and Biden is the first president until this moment to not have invited him to the White House," Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Program at

The Washington Institute, told AFP.

"It's a pretty big deal that Erdogan has finally secured an invitation just before the end of Biden's term," he said.

Turkey's resistance to Sweden's Nato bid after Russia's war on Ukraine in 2022 was one of the sticking issues in ties. The move reflected Erdogan's more nuanced stance toward Russia.

Turkey has profited from maintaining trade with Moscow while at the same time supplying Ukraine with drones and other essential arms.

Erdogan has also been one of the few Western leaders to hold regular meetings and phone conversations

with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was initially expected to visit Turkey in February.

Ankara refused to join the West in imposing sanctions on Russia as concerns were raised over Turkey

becoming a transit route for goods supporting Moscow's wartime defence industry.

"We have no intention to harm legitimate trade between Turkey and Russia but we are very serious when it comes to illegal trade," a Western diplomat told AFP.

The Biden administration in January approved \$23 billion in F-16 warplanes for Turkey swiftly after it ratified Sweden's stalled Nato membership bid.

Turkey will get 40 new F-16s and upgrades to 79 jets in its existing fleet.

Washington did not green light the transaction until Turkey's instruments of ratification of Sweden's membership had arrived in Washington, a US official said then, highlighting the highly sensitive nature of the negotiations.