

BANGLADESH DEMANDS RETURN OF STOLEN BANK FUNDS FROM PHILIPPINES

MANILA: The Philippines must immediately return millions of dollars recovered from a high-profile hacking theft, Bangladesh's ambassador said yesterday in Manila, but Filipino officials warned resolving the embarrassing case could take months.

On February 5, unidentified hackers shifted \$81 million from the Bangladesh central bank's account with the US Federal Reserve to a nondescript bank in Manila, from where it was funnelled into local casinos. Filipino authorities now say they have tracked down all but \$21 million of the loot, but have only recovered a fraction of it.

Late March, Manila-based Chinese casino promoter Kim Wong, who is under criminal investigation after a portion of the stolen money was traced to his account, began handing over chunks of the stolen cash to Filipino authorities.

Bangladeshi ambassador to Manila, John Gomes, expressed outrage Thursday that the surrendered funds—now totaling \$15 million—had not been returned to Dhaka, nearly two months later. "It is Bangladesh's money, so it is our request that this should be followed through," a visibly upset Gomes said while testifying Thursday at a Senate public hearing on the case.

The brazen heist highlighted how the Philippines' banking loopholes and anti-money laundering laws have made the impoverished and corruption-weary Southeast Asian nation a dirty money destination.

Philippine law exempts casino transactions from scrutiny by the country's anti-money laundering council without a case filed in court. Wong, the casino junket operator, had earlier told the Senate that two high-rollers from Beijing and Macau shifted the \$81 million to dollar accounts at Manila's Rizal Commercial Banking Corporation.

Wong said he did not know that the money was stolen from Bangladesh and that he merely helped the two men—who are also his casino clients—open bank accounts. The Philippines' Anti-Money Laundering Council has filed a suit to gain control of the alleged stolen funds from Wong, the Manila bank and the casinos. But the council's executive director Julia Abad testified Thursday that the whole process could take at least three to five months for uncontested cases, and potentially years if the ownership were disputed.

"We are doing everything to provide the necessary assistance to the Bangladeshi government to recover the money... We cannot just take the law into our hands," Abad said. Ambassador Gomes said there were no other claimants apart from his government for the surrendered money, and he could not understand why the process was taking so long. He said the Filipino authorities had even invited him to witness the storage of the recovered funds at Manila's central bank vault. "We have bilateral relations, and this could happen in Bangladesh also with the Philippine ambassador. How would he be feeling about it?" the envoy said. "It would be like a slap on my face," Gomes added.—AFP

PAKISTAN IN RARE EXTRADITION OF DOUBLE MURDER SUSPECT TO UK

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has extradited a man charged by British police with a double murder in a rare handover between the two countries, officials said yesterday.

Mohammed Zubair is due to appear in a court in Bradford Thursday over the 2011 killings of 27-year-old Imran Pakistani officials would not confirm Zubair's nationality to AFP, and it was not mentioned in the British police statement. There is no extradition treaty between Pakistan and Britain, but the two countries have enhanced cooperation in recent years to solve major crime cases.

A Pakistani Interior Ministry spokesman said the signing of such a treaty had been a longstanding issue, but that present minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan has said the lack of an accord "can't halt the exchange of criminals and Pakistan will extradite suspects based on mutual cooperation".—AFP



GAUHATI, INDIA: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate Himanta Biswa Sharma, center in orange color shirt, celebrates with his supporters after winning in Assam state election yesterday.—AP

INDIA'S RULING PARTY EXTENDS POWER IN STATE POLLS

NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party won power in remote northeast Assam and made gains in other states yesterday, expanding its political influence beyond its traditional heartland two years after a landslide national election victory.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party seized control of restive Assam from the centre-left Congress party, which promised to "work harder" to win people's confidence after losing ground in several states. "These results show that the people are accepting, appreciating and supporting our pro-development ideology," Modi told supporters at his party's headquarters in New Delhi.

Assam is the first northeastern state to be controlled by the BJP, whose traditional power base is in Hindi-speaking north, central and west India. Political analyst Ashok Malik told AFP that Thursday's results showed the BJP was now India's only truly national party. "This expansion for the BJP comes at a time when the Congress is shrinking, even though they have different social constituencies," said Malik, a fellow with New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation think-tank. "And now, the BJP is the only pan-India national party, which the Congress once used to be."

The BJP needs to win state elections to gain more seats in the nation's upper house of parliament, which has been blocking reforms seen as crucial to fuelling the economic growth it has promised voters. Most members of the

upper house, which has obstructed measures such as a planned standardized goods and services tax, are indirectly elected by state legislatures.

'Fed up'

The BJP mounted a fierce campaign in tea-growing Assam, promising to support indigenous rights and crack down on illegal immigration from neighbouring Bangladesh.

Migrants have long been accused of illegally entering the state from Bangladesh and grabbing land, causing tensions with local people and sporadic outbreaks of communal violence.

India's seven northeastern states, joined to the rest of the country by a narrow sliver of land, are culturally distinct from the rest of the country and have a long history of separatist insurgencies. "People were fed up and they wanted a change... that's why this time they've voted for BJP and its alliance partners," said Sarbananda Sonowal, BJP's Assam chief ministerial candidate. Partial results showed Congress had just 26 of the total 126 seats in Assam and the BJP-led alliance had 86. The party also made gains in Kerala in the south and in eastern West Bengal state, whose feisty chief minister Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool party had won a clear majority even before all the votes were counted, despite corruption allegations.

Modi's party swept to power in a general election two years ago promising business-friendly reforms to overhaul the economy, but lost out in two critical state polls in 2015.

Colorful scenes

With final results from the five states still to come in, regional parties looked set to win in Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the south. Jubilant supporters of Tamil Nadu's popular Chief Minister Jayalitha Jayaram gathered outside her house to celebrate, many of them painted in the colours of the state flag.

The former movie star known as "Amma" (Mother) has long enjoyed a huge following in prosperous Tamil Nadu where she has won three terms as chief minister since 1991.

The 68-year-old has earned loyalty with a series of populist schemes including giving away gold, goats and kitchen appliances at election time, but has also drawn accusations of corruption and an autocratic governing style.

This year, her AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) party's election manifesto promises included free wi-fi at public places, laptops for students, free cell phones and minimum units of free electricity every month. Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi, who fronted the campaigning in several states, tweeted that his party would "work harder till we win the confidence & trust of people". Rahul's mother Sonia, who is the Congress president, said in a statement: "We will introspect into the reasons for our loss and rededicate ourselves to the service of the people with greater vigour." The party, in power nationally until 2014, was leading in only one state—the southern Indian seaside town of Puducherry, a former French colony with less than a million eligible voters.—AFP