

International

Pak court suspends 3-year extension for army chief

Top general granted six months in power

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's top court yesterday gave the government six months to justify why it granted a controversial extension to the country's army chief, in a rare case that pits the judiciary against the government and the military. The cabinet of prime minister Imran Khan approved a three-year extension for General Qamar Javed Bajwa in August, citing a worsening national security situation in the region over its rivalry with India. But in a surprise ruling on Tuesday, the Supreme Court suspended the extension, citing a series of irregularities and ordering the government and the army to produce legal provisions and detailed arguments on the reasoning behind the move. On Thursday the court granted a temporary six-month extension to Bajwa's tenure, due to end at midnight, but said the government must pass legislation through parliament in that time to clarify the section of Pakistan's constitution governing the armed forces. "We are showing judicial restraint although there is no provision in law to grant an extension," Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa told the court. "We leave this matter to parliament to make law regarding this."

Khan welcomed the verdict yesterday. "Today must be a great disappointment to those who expected the country to be destabilized by a clash of institutions," he said in a tweet. But despite giving a temporary reprieve over its handling of the extension, the episode could weaken the authority

of the coalition government, led by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, that now has to pass what is likely to be complex legislation on the military through parliament.

The civilian government has enjoyed good relations with the armed forces, in contrast to the previous government of Khan's main rival Nawaz Sharif. It has also led to questions about the future of Bajwa, who has led the military through a period of escalating tensions with India and western neighbor Afghanistan. The abrupt decision of the court to suspend Bajwa's extension, and the government's reaction, has been branded "a comedy of errors" by Pakistan's media, which is rarely critical of the military.

"This is without a doubt the most shambolic episode in the PTI government's tenure so far," said an editorial in Dawn, the country's leading English-language newspaper yesterday. "Surely there are other officers more than capable of leading the army. General Bajwa's next step will determine whether he is thinking of himself or his institution."

Bajwa was commissioned as an army officer in 1980. As a general, he has served as a field commander of units stationed in the contested Kashmir region, where nuclear powers India and Pakistan have fought two wars since both won independence from colonial power Britain in 1947. Upon his appointment by Sharif in 2016, a gov-



ISLAMABAD: A Pakistani lawyer records video messages on his cellphone in front of the Supreme Court building yesterday. — AFP

ernment minister told Reuters the then-prime minister had picked Bajwa because of his low-key style, and felt the incoming general would be more willing to cede control of key areas to the civilian government.

But during his tenure, the military has been accused by opposition politicians of electoral ma-

nipulation, meddling in politics, suspension of civil liberties and muzzling the media to help Khan win power last year. The military has always denied interfering in politics. The army chief usually serves a three-year term. Since the role was established in 1972, only one general has had his term extended by a civilian government.— Reuters

Former Maldives leader jailed for money laundering

MALE: Disgraced Maldives ex-president Abdulla Yameen was sentenced to five years in prison for money laundering yesterday after a corruption probe into the former strongman's rule of the luxury tourist destination. Yameen, who ran the Indian Ocean archipelago with an iron fist before his shock election loss in 2018, was accused of illegally transferring one million dollars from one of his bank accounts during an ongoing graft investigation.

The 60-year-old was arrested in February on charges of bribing witnesses in the ensuing money laundering trial. Authorities also froze bank accounts belonging to Yameen that held around \$6.5 million at the end of last year following accusations he had taken illicit payments. Investigators believe Yameen could have millions more stashed abroad and are working to repatriate the cash.

Yameen's government regularly jailed opponents or forced them into exile during its five years in power, and the former president relied heavily on China for political and financial support as his human rights record faced criticism. Current leader Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's won an unexpected landslide victory last year on a pledge to end corruption, and dissidents have since returned to the country.— AFP

Men who exposed Afghan pedophile ring released

KABUL: Afghan security officials have released two rights activists detained by the country's powerful intelligence agency for exposing an alleged pedophile ring operating in the country's schools. Musa Mahmudi - a youth social worker - told Britain's Guardian newspaper earlier this month that teachers and local officials were involved in the ring based in Logar province, sparking outrage across the country. Mahmudi and activist Ehsanullah Hamidi were later detained by the National Directorate of Security (NDS) on their way to meet with the European Union ambassador in Kabul last week.

"They are in Kabul now and reunited with members of their families. There is no restriction to their movement," Naeem Nazari, deputy head of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commis-

sion (AIHRC), told AFP. At least 546 boys from six schools were allegedly abused, the Guardian reported. Some victims went on to be murdered, the newspaper said, adding that rights campaigners had uncovered more than 100 videos of the abuse. Authorities have not confirmed the allegations.

The two were released Wednesday just a day after the NDS released a video of Mahmudi appearing to retract his account, which sparked harsh condemnation of the spy agency's conduct by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and the US envoy in Kabul - who blasted the agency over its "Soviet-style tactics". Amnesty International had also called for the pair's immediate release and warned that Mahmudi had been receiving death threats accusing him of "dishonoring the people of Logar".

Hamidi's role in revealing the scandal was not immediately clear, and he was not referenced in the Guardian story. Sexual abuse is widespread in Afghanistan despite efforts to clamp down on the crime, and boys are often reluctant to come forward in a culture that still shames victims rather than going after perpetrators. Parts of Afghanistan still tolerate the practice of bacha bazi, or "boy play", where older men force boys to dress up as women and then force them to have sex.—AFP

Cuba allows police to snoop electronically

HAVANA: Cuba has authorized state security agencies to use electronic surveillance without prior approval from a court, prompting criticism from the United States which accuses Havana of spying on opponents and tourists. Havana said the new laws would make the police more effective "in preventing and confronting money laundering and terrorist financing." The measures were introduced in a change to the Communist-run country's penal code last week.

Investigators must first request surveillance authorization from the attorney general. "This is the case everywhere in the world.

The difference is that elsewhere you need authorization from a judge whereas in Cuba it is between police and the prosecutor's office," constitutional analyst Julio Fernandez Estrada told AFP. Fernandez said electronic surveillance would allow investigators to "listen to and record conversations," locate and track suspects, take picture and videos and tap into all types of communications technology. The United States - involved in a mass surveillance scandal in 2013 reported by ex-Central Intelligence Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden - slammed what it called "a sweeping new law that enables surveillance in Cuba".—AFP