

## MYANMAR PRESIDENT SEEKS TO EXPLOIT ANTI-MUSLIM POLICIES

**YANGON:** With an eye on upcoming elections, Myanmar's president has ticked off a list of accomplishments under his administration - noting with apparent pride a number of anti-Muslim policies he hopes will help him win another five-year term.

In a video message posted on Facebook this week, Thein Sein said he repeatedly, and firmly, told the international community there were no Rohingya Muslims in the predominantly Buddhist nation. He said a string of controversial laws on race and religion were passed under his watch and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation - which represents more than a billion Muslims across the globe - tried unsuccessfully to open an office in west-

ern Rakhine state. The president's comments came as the US, Britain and other governments expressed concern about rising religious tensions ahead of the Nov 8 general election, which many hope will be relatively free and fair following decades of military rule. The countries issued a statement this week saying they were "concerned about the prospect of religion being used as a tool of division and conflict during the campaign season."

Myanmar has seen a rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric since Thein Sein's nominally civilian government came to power in 2011, including attacks on Rohingya that left up to 280 people dead and sent another quarter million fleeing their homes. Half are now living under

apartheid-like conditions in camps, where they have limited access to medical care and education. Others took to the sea, sparking Asia's own migrant boat crisis.

Though many Rohingya arrived in Myanmar generations ago, the government says all 1.3 million are migrants from neighboring Bangladesh. Adding to their disenfranchisement, the Rohingya for the first time will not be allowed to vote. Thein Sein, a former army general, has expressed on-and-off again interest in running for another five-year term.

His video message appeared to be aimed at a domestic audience. He said the country was now being visited by President Barack Obama and other powerful leaders after years

of isolation and sanctions. He noted there has been an increase in foreign investment and that people now have access to mobile phones. He also cited his handling of the Rohingya. "There are no Rohingya in this country," Thein Sein said in the video message. "We clearly and strongly announced this to the international community." "We did not allow the OIC to set up an office in our country," he continued. "And our country successfully passed four laws protecting race and religion." Critics say the laws regulating religious conversion, interfaith marriage, population control and monogamy could further entrench discrimination against women and religious minorities. — AP



**KATHMANDU:** Nepalese lawmakers greet each other after the final constitution process at Constitution Assembly hall. — AP

## NEPAL AT CROSSROADS AFTER NEW CONSTITUTION ADOPTED

### FIRST POLITICAL FRAMEWORK SINCE ABOLISHING MONARCHY

**KATHMANDU:** After a decade of political infighting and violent protests, the long-awaited passage of Nepal's constitution should be a reason to celebrate. But there are also signs that the Himalayan nation's first complete political framework since monarchy was abolished in 2006, could set the stage for prolonged conflict as some ethnic groups are protesting the charter. The government sees the new constitution as a much-needed success for the nation of 28 million, still recovering from a devastating April 25 earthquake that killed thousands. The constitution, passed late Wednesday, sets the country up as a secular federation of seven states, each with a legislature and chief minister. "The people have achieved a republican nation that they have aspired for decades," Foreign Minister Mahendra Bahadur Pandey said.

However, some ethnic and religious groups say lawmakers ignored their concerns over how state borders should be defined. Some among majority Hindus also believe the country's reference as a Hindu nation should have been restored in the constitution. Smaller opposition parties rejected the new constitution in a joint

statement yesterday, and announced a nationwide general strike on Sunday followed by protests where they will burn copies of the new charter. "The constitution being rushed through is not giving positive indications," analyst and former election commissioner Bhoj Raj Pokhrel said. "It is giving birth to a conflict. The grievances of those who oppose the constitution need to be immediately addressed by the state. The future of Nepal depends on how the state acts and reacts."

#### Protests and blockades

Protests organized by two ethnic groups - the Tharu in southwestern Nepal and the Madhesi in the country's south and southeast - have shut down parts of Nepal for weeks. Authorities have imposed curfew and deployed security forces, but the protests and blockades still have slowed food and cargo deliveries by road to the capital, Kathmandu.

On Tuesday, police opened fire after a group of protesters attacked a 160-truck convoy, killing four people. The violence came amid weeks of protests that have left more than 44 people dead, including police officers.

The Madhesi groups have vowed to continue protesting.

"The big parties have tried to crush the minority groups and, as a result, pushed the nation into chaos," said one Madhesi group leader, Shivaji Yadav of the Federal Socialist Forum. He said their issues should have been resolved before the draft constitution was voted on. "Speeding the process to push through the draft was not done to empower the people, but for the big leaders to come to power," he said.

On the streets of Kathmandu, many Nepalese expressed relief that politicians set aside their differences and voted for the constitution. "How long can the nation hold back on everything just because these politicians cannot reach agreement?" businessman Susil Shrestha said. Teacher Bishnu Aryal said that an imperfect charter was still better than ongoing political uncertainty. "We just can't get a constitution where everyone is happy," Aryal said. "It is what the majority wants, and a few minorities cannot and should not hold the nation as hostage because of something they disagree with." — AP

## BANGLADESH ARRESTS 20 HUMAN SMUGGLERS

**DHAKA:** Bangladesh police have arrested a human trafficking "godfather" in a fresh crackdown on smugglers amid fears of a resumption of the racket that sparked a regional migrant crisis earlier this year, an officer said yesterday. Police have arrested at least 20 traffickers in the past month including alleged kingpin Dil Mohammad on the weekend in the southern smuggling town of Teknaf bordering Myanmar.

Teknaf police inspector Kabir Hossain said Mohammad, 45, was arrested after arriving back in Bangladesh from Malaysia. "Mohammad has been wanted in Malaysia and Thailand for smuggling hundreds of poor Bangladeshis to Malaysia by using rickety boats in the Bay of Bengal," Hossain told AFP.

Bangladesh targeted smugglers in May after persecuted Rohingyas from Myanmar and economic migrants from Bangladesh were abandoned at sea en route to Southeast Asia. A crackdown by Thailand led to the unraveling of people-smuggling networks that saw thousands stranded in open waters and dumped in jungle camps. Bangladesh smugglers who went into hiding at the time have since returned to their villages now that the monsoon season is ending.

"Gradually the fugitive smugglers are returning home after the end of the monsoon anticipating the hit is gone," Hossain said. With seas expected to be calmer in coming weeks, experts said smugglers were looking to restart voyages to Thailand and Malaysia. "The smugglers have been accumulating strength for a fresh start to their business. We've reports their grassroots operations have become active," Shakirul Islam, a migration expert, told AFP.

The crisis in May shone a spotlight on the booming human smuggling industry that preys on the desperation of the thousands trying to escape grinding poverty in Bangladesh or persecution in Myanmar. In May, Bangladesh police said they shot dead four smugglers in gunfights and arrested 90 others, following the discovery in Thailand of mass graves of migrants.

#### Oppn leader to face graft trial

In other news, Bangladesh's High Court yesterday decided former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia can stand trial on corruption charges involving a contract for a coal mine with a Chinese company, lawyers said. The court quashed Zia's petition to scrap the case filed in 2008 by the country's official anti-corruption watchdog.

The charges accuse Zia and 15 others of causing millions of dollars of losses to the state exchequer by awarding the contract of Barapukuria coal mine to China National Machinery Import and Export Corporation (CMC). The Chinese company got the award to operate, manage and maintain the coal mine. State counsel Khurshid Alam Khan said the bench of Justice Mohammed Nuruzzman and Justice Abdur Rob made the decision, paving the way for going ahead with the corruption trial.

"There is no more bar to go ahead with the case," Khan said. But Zia's counsels said they would appeal the decision in the Supreme Court. The High Court is the lower part of the Supreme Court in Bangladesh. The case proceedings remained halted for years as Zia had sought a halt to the proceedings but the state revived the case earlier this year.

Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party says the case was politically motivated but authorities have denied that. Zia and her political alliance boycotted the 2014 elections because their demands that a caretaker government hold the elections were not met. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government said those demands were unconstitutional. The boycott by Zia allowed Hasina to win the elections and return to power for five years. — Agencies