

2011

# Current Affairs

March 26



## POLITICS AND THE NATION

### Elections biggest source of corruption: CEC

- Noting that elections have become the biggest source of corruption, Chief Election Commissioner S Y Quraishi today said the incidents of paid news were on the rise during polls.
- A total of 86 cases of paid news have been brought to our notice and people have been pulled up for it," Quraishi said.
- While expressing his confidence in being able to "plug corruption," the CEC said, "Treatises between media houses and political outfits was disturbing."
- **"First it was surrogate advertising, now political parties and media houses have become even more daring by disguising election manifestos as editorials. This is not just unethical but disturbing but we are closely monitoring this,"** he said.
- Quraishi also raised concerns about state-funding of elections, saying the process would "further fuel corruption and my office is doing all that it can to stop this move," he said.

### CWG: BJP walkout in LS over Shunglu report

- Opposition BJP on Friday demanded immediate tabling of the report of Shunglu Committee that probed alleged irregularities in the conduct of Commonwealth Games and walked out from the Lok Sabha protesting the government's response.
- Raising the matter as soon as the House met for the day, LK Advani said there have been media reports that the Shunglu Committee had submitted its report to the government.
- The government should table the report in Parliament on Friday itself and if possible, have a discussion on it, he said.
- Advani said at the beginning of the session three issues related to corruption were raised -- *2G spectrum allocation, conduct of Commonwealth Games and the Adarsh Housing scam.*

- Since the talk of corruption began with the conduct of Commonwealth Games, the Shunglu Committee report should be tabled in Parliament without delay, he said.
- Parliamentary Affairs Minister said the **Shunglu Committee was set up by the government through an Executive Order** and its report was yet to be looked into by the government.

### **Don't dignify leaked WikiLeaks cables: Chidambaram**

- Home Minister P Chidambaram today "denounced" diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks after he came under attack in Parliament over his reported comments in one of them that *India would have made more progress if it had only Southern and Western parts*.
- Opposition members in both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha took strong objection to Chidambaram's comments reportedly made during his interaction with US Ambassador Timothy Roemer in 2009, which was leaked by the Wikileaks.

### **Bahrain forces quash small protests in "Day of Rage"**

- Small protests broke out in Bahrain's capital for a planned "Day of Rage" on Friday despite a ban under martial law imposed last week, but were quickly crushed by security forces fanned out across Manama.
- After a month of **mass protests from mostly Shi'ite demonstrators demanding constitutional reform, Bahrain's ruling al Khalifa family, from the minority Sunni population,** enforced a fierce police crackdown and wiped out protest. They also called in troops from neighbouring Sunni-led Gulf countries.
- **Bahrain has great strategic importance because it hosts the U.S. 5th Fleet, facing non-Arab Shi'ite power Iran across the Gulf, and is situated off-shore from oil giant Saudi Arabia.**
- **Friday was the first effort by protesters to regroup**

### **Tensions escalate**

- **More than 60 percent of Bahrainis are Shi'ites and most are demanding a constitutional monarchy. But calls by hardliners for the overthrow of the monarchy have alarmed Sunnis,** who fear the unrest helps Iran on the other side of the Gulf.
- Bahrain's government has responded sharply to any signs of what it considers to be interference over its crackdown.
- The island kingdom expelled diplomats from Iran after it criticised the clampdown last week. Its foreign minister formally complained to the Lebanese government over expressions of support for **protesters from the Shi'ite movement Hezbollah.**
- **Friday's "Day of Rage" was called by Internet activists and Shi'ite villages,** but **Wefaq ( Bahrain's leading Shi'ite opposition group) ,** which draws tens of thousands when it calls protests, distanced itself from the demonstrations.

### **Qatar first Arab state to patrol Libya no-fly zone**

- **Qatar on Friday became the first Arab country to begin patrolling a U.N.-backed no-fly zone aimed at preventing Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's forces from attacking civilians**, the coalition task force said in a statement.
- Qatar has deployed six Mirage 2000-5 warplanes and two C-17A transport aircraft to Europe to support the no-fly zone and deliver humanitarian assistance to Libyan civilians.
- The United Arab Emirates announced on Thursday it would join the coalition, but it has not yet begun flying missions, the statement said.
- **Eleven countries are directly involved in enforcing the no-fly zone**, the statement said. They are *Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Norway, Qatar, Spain, United Kingdom, and the United States*.

### **Yemen tense before "departure" protests vs Saleh**

- Protesters planned massive "**Day of Departure**" demonstrations against veteran **President Ali Abdullah Saleh** in Yemen on Friday and Amnesty International warned he could not just shoot his way out of the crisis.
- Western countries are alarmed that al Qaeda militants entrenched in the Arabian Peninsula state could exploit any disorder arising from a messy transition of power if Saleh, an important U.S. and Saudi ally fighting for his political life, finally leaves office after 32 years.
- Protesters who have been encamped in their thousands outside Sanaa University for six weeks declared Friday a "Day of Departure" when they hoped to bring hundreds of thousands onto the streets of the capital Sanaa once more in an attempt to oust the perennial political survivor. Similar mass protests last Friday left 52 people dead.
- Top general *Ali Mohsen*, widely seen as *Yemen's second most powerful man*, told that he had no presidential ambitions himself. An Islamist and kinsman of Saleh, Mohsen is seen by many Yemenis as part of the system they want to change.
- **Washington and Riyadh, Yemen's main financial backer, have long seen Saleh as a bulwark against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula**

**(AQAP)**, which has tried to stage attacks beyond Yemeni soil since 2009 in both Saudi Arabia and United States.

- **Yemen lies on key shipping routes and borders the world's leading oil exporter Saudi Arabia. It has often seemed to be on the brink of disintegration: Northern Shi'ites have often taken up arms against Saleh and southerners dream of a separate state.**
- **With no clear successor in line and with conflicts gripping northern and southern Yemen, the country of 23 million faces the risk of a breakup, in addition to poverty, a water shortage, dwindling oil reserves and lack of central government control.**

### **Thousands chant "freedom" despite Assad reform offer**

- Saleh, who oversaw the 1990 unification of north and south Yemen and emerged victorious from a civil war four years later, has shown no signs publicly of being prepared to stand down.
- He has offered a string of concessions, all rejected by opposition parties, including this week to hold presidential elections by January 2012. He has also warned military officers who have turned against him not to plot a coup.
- **President Bashar al-Assad** made a rare public pledge to look into granting Syrians greater freedom on Thursday as anger mounted following attacks by security forces on protesters that left at least 37 dead.
- Despite the promise and the offer of large public pay rises, thousands of Syrians turned out to chant "freedom, revolution" in the centre of the southern city **of Deraa, the focal point of protests against 48 years of Baath Party rule.**

### **Deraa Killings**

- Security forces opened fire on hundreds of youths on the outskirts of Deraa on Wednesday, witnesses said, after nearly a week of protests in which seven civilians had already died.

- The main hospital in Deraa, near the Jordanian border, had received the bodies of at least 37 protesters killed on Wednesday, a hospital official said. That brings the number killed to at least 44 in a week of protests.
- About 20,000 people marched on Thursday in the funerals for nine of those killed, chanting freedom slogans and denying official accounts that "armed gangs" were behind the killings and violence.
- Assad, a close ally of Iran, a key player in neighbouring Lebanon and supporter of militant groups opposed to Israel, had dismissed demands for reform in Syria, a country of 20 million.

## **Ground shifts as new Middle East order takes shape**

### **SPARKS OF REVOLT**

- In a region where opposition has come in recent decades from militant Islam, the nature of the sparks that have touched off explosive anger reveal a much broader, less religious, movement intent on reclaiming a sense of personal destiny and dignity.
- The protesters are often young, but always courageous and mostly determined. No longer cowed by the arsenal of repression available to their rulers, these young Arabs have a sense of climbing out of a dungeon that has been their disfigured world.
- **In Tunisia**, it all began with a slap and a slur hurled at a vegetable seller by a policewoman in a rundown provincial city. Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight in protest and, three months after his death, he would scarcely recognise the region he knew.
- **In Egypt**, it started with a march of anger against police brutality and the beating to death of an activist, Khaled Said.
- **In Libya**, the spark was the arrest of a human rights lawyer in Benghazi. In Syria, peaceful protests began in the border town of Deraa to demand the release of 15 schoolchildren. They were jailed for daubing on walls slogans about freedom which they had heard beamed in from Egypt on satellite television.
- **The balance sheet so far is:** two dictators have gone, in Tunisia and Egypt; another is under siege in Libya; yet another autocrat whose days in power

seem numbered in Yemen; and a host of other Arab leaders whose thrones are beginning to wobble.

## COMMON THEMES

- **What these states have in common is not just socio-economic profiles -- plus or minus the ruler's ability to offer oil cash to appease citizens. It is also that a common language and culture have helped foster a thirst for emulating successful revolutions** in neighbouring states like Tunisia and Egypt.
- **Promises of prosperity have not deflected calls for change.**
- *"It is not just about bread and butter or jobs. It is more than that. It is about freedom in society. It is about having a representative government. People want to be proud citizens. They want to have a say in the way their countries are governed and how their society is managed".*
- Young people -- typically one in two or three of these fast-growing Arab populations -- have thrown off traditions of deference to elders to spearhead a drive against an old, post-colonial order that is marked by tyranny and stagnation.
- A generation or two ago, revolutions -- often military coups -- brought to power some of these men with promises of people power. Yet many ended up establishing their own dynasties, sharing out their nations' wealth among their families, clans, and loyalists in the military and business elites.
- They held power through wholesale repression, exercised by ubiquitous secret police using torture, imprisonment without trial and, on occasion, massacres. Promises of prosperity and education for all translated into very little for the majority.

## PRESSURE FOR CHANGE

- Faced with the unprecedented protests, many Arab leaders have made concessions in recent weeks that they had never contemplated in decades of absolute power. Yet the wave of revolt keeps on building among populations who believe their countries will change only once the old order is pushed aside.



- **Syrian President Bashar al-Assad**, who has joined the ranks of leaders facing challenges, made a rare public pledge to grant greater freedoms on Thursday after attacks by security forces on protesters in the southern city of Deraa that left 44 dead.
- Yet Friday saw more and more widespread protests, and more killings, in a country at the heart of the Arab cultural world.
- Citizens have revolted against their system. **"Not every country wants to topple its ruler but everybody wants significant changes in the governance and the exercise of power, change in the role of the security forces and the rights of citizens."**
- Satellite television, mobile phones and social media have weakened leaders' ability to kill thousands without challenge, as for example Egypt's new deposed Hosni Mubarak did in the 1990s or Assad's father did against Islamists in Hama in 1982.
- When the forces of President Ali Abdullah Saleh killed 52 unarmed protesters in the Yemeni capital Sanaa last Friday, he lost the support of key figures in the elite.
- **Division at the top has become a feature of difficulties Arab leaders have found themselves in.**

### **Gaza rockets strike deeper inside Israel**

- Palestinian rockets struck deep inside Israel on Thursday close to the urban sprawl south of Tel Aviv, and Israel pounded targets in Gaza in a surging conflict that has raised fears of a new war.
- Israeli police said long-range Grad rockets fired from the **Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip** hit Ashdod and an area north of the Mediterranean port. There were no reports of casualties.
- Violence along the Gaza border has worsened in recent days and a bomb attack on Wednesday in Jerusalem that Israeli police blamed on Palestinian militants killed one woman and injured 30 people. It was the first such bombing in the city since 2004.
- Israel carried out a series of strikes on Gaza throughout the day and there were no initial reports of casualties.

## CONFLICT ACCELERATES

- Israel says the air strikes have been a response to rocket barrages. Hamas says its attacks in the past week have been in reaction to Israeli strikes. Five Palestinian militants and four civilians, three of them children, were killed by Israeli fire in Gaza on Tuesday.
- The upswing of violence in the past few days has led to fears of a new war between Israel and Hamas Islamists, who have ruled the small Mediterranean coastal territory since 2007, after months of relative quiet.
- On Wednesday, militants in Gaza fired more than a dozen rockets and mortar bombs across the border.
- In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, the Islamic Jihad militant group said two of its leaders were detained by security forces of the Western-backed Palestinian.

## Guatemala's first lady divorces "for her country"

- Most loving couples hope their marriage will last "until death us do part". But for Guatemala's first lady, politics got there first.
- **Sandra Torres** tearily announced on Thursday she had divorced her husband **President Alvaro Colom** for the sake of the nation, thereby hoping to skirt a law in Guatemala that blocks the president's relatives from running for office.
- **A constitutional clause dating from Guatemala's transition to democracy in the mid-1980s after decades of autocratic rule prevents family members of the president from taking power.**
- But Torres, who was already a divorcee, hopes to step into Colom's shoes after an election later this year.
- An ambitious politician who many analysts say wields significant power behind the scenes in Colom's center-left National Union of Hope (UNE) party, Torres said she was putting the Guatemalan people before her own personal happiness.
- *"I am getting a divorce from my husband, but I am getting married to the people,"* the 51-year-old Torres said at a news conference, fighting back tears. *"I am not going to be the first or the last woman who decides to get a*

*divorce, but I am the only woman to get a divorce for her country,"* added Torres.

- While the constitution explicitly bans blood relatives of the president and vice president from running for office, it is unclear what the rule is on ex-spouses and the electoral court will have to decide if Torres will be allowed to run.

### **Nearly one million Ivorians uprooted by conflict – UNHCR**

- Up to one million Ivorians have now fled fighting in the main city **Abidjan** alone, with others uprooted across the country, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said on Friday in a sharp upwards revision of previous estimates.
- ***"The massive displacement in Abidjan and elsewhere is being fuelled by fears of all-out war,"*** UNHCR spokeswoman Melissa Fleming told a news briefing in Geneva.
- **Ivory Coast has descended to the verge of an all-out civil war following a disputed election in November last year which Alassane Ouattara is recognised internationally to have won. Incumbent Laurent Gbagbo has refused to cede power.**
- The violent stand-off has led to about 462 confirmed deaths.
- A U.N. human rights officer said on Thursday forces loyal to Gbagbo were shelling neighbourhoods seen as pro-Ouattara, and had killed 50 people in the past week.

**FEATURED ARTICLE**

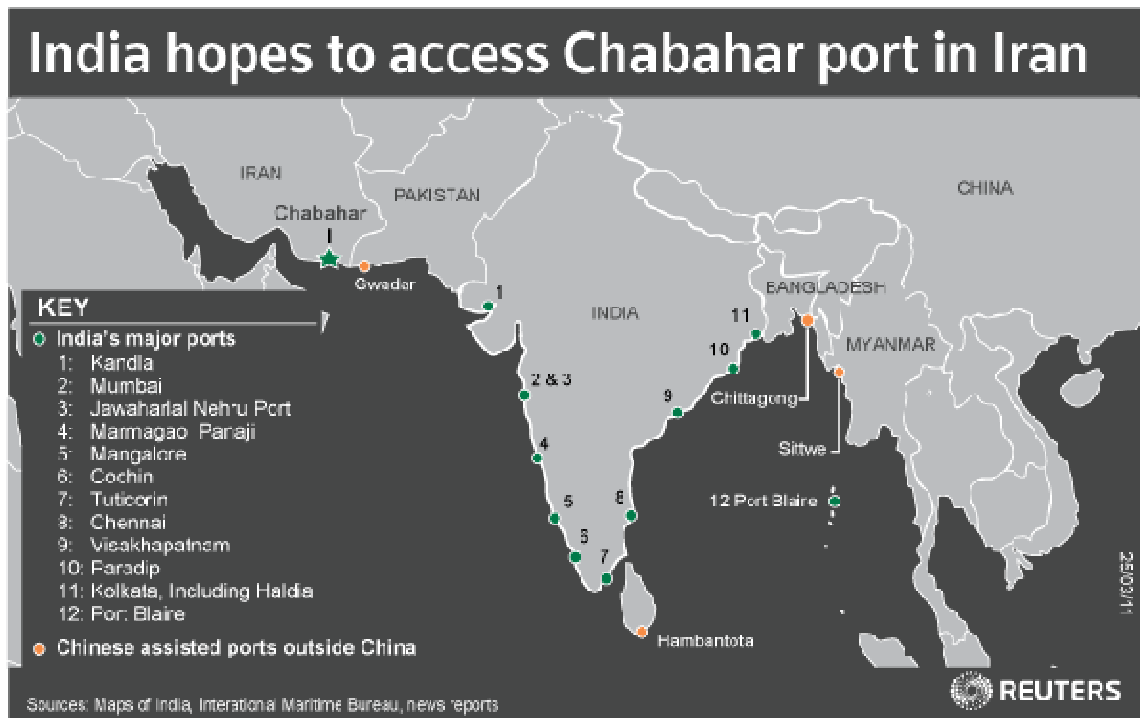
**India, China's rivalry and a tale of two ports**

India and China's quest for clout and resources extends across the globe, but perhaps the best manifestation of this fierce competition, and possible sign of who will ultimately win, lies in a tale of two ports.

The **port of Chabahar in the southwest corner of Iran, which India is hoping will win it access to Central Asia and Afghanistan, is barely 72km (44 mile) from Pakistan's deep-water Gwadar port which China has built to secure its energy supplies.**

The dueling ports on the doorstep of Gulf shipping lanes are another strand in the race between the Asian giants to project influence beyond their shores, and seek resources to feed their fast growing economies, that has seen them compete for contracts from Africa to Latin America to even Afghanistan.

A graphic showing the location of ports



In trying to develop the two strategic ports, India and China are up against unsettled regional conditions in both Iran and Pakistan and their own limited resources and influence, more so in the case of India than China.

For years, Indian officials say they have been urging the Iranians to expedite work on the Chabahar port facilities to handle specialised cargoes, warehouses and proper disembarkation arrangements so it can become a trading hub.

While the port is functional, it has a capacity of only 2.5 million tons per year, against the target of 12 million tons. **Iran has declared Chabahar, located in its Sistan-Baluchestan province, a free trade zone.**

At their last meeting in July, the Indian side told Iran **a thriving port near one of the world's fastest growing regions was in the interest of Tehran, the Central Asian republics, Afghanistan and of course India.** The Iranian side said they were committed to its development.

*"But, there has been hardly any movement since then," the official involved with the discussions said.*

Indian officials now believe that **Iranian reluctance to move faster on Chabahar may linked to its anxieties about the troubled Sistan-Baluchestan region where Shi'ite Muslim Iran is trying to put down a Sunni Muslim insurgency.**

India, meanwhile, has completed its end of the trilateral arrangement with Iran and Afghanistan. Indian engineers braved militant attacks to build a **200km-long road from Nimroz province in Afghanistan to the Chabahar port, offering landlocked Afghanistan an alternative supply route and reducing its dependence on trucking goods through Pakistan.**

India is willing to go the extra mile to get this going because this is in everyone's interest, especially Afghanistan whose only access at the moment is Karachi and which is subject to the vicissitudes of Afghan-Pakistan relations," the Indian government official said.

## **GWADAR**

A key factor driving India to promote the port in Iran, despite pressure from the United States, is the growing anxiety over the **all-weather Gwadar port that the Chinese have built on Pakistan's Baluchistan coast.**

Beijing financed more than 80 percent of the initial development cost of \$248 million for the port on the Arabian Sea, as part of a plan to open up an energy and trade corridor from the Gulf, across Pakistan to western China.

**So in theory China needn't ship all its oil supplies from the Gulf through the Indian Ocean and then up to Shanghai. Instead the oil tankers would drop off at Gwadar, and from there the supplies would be trucked through Pakistan and into China through the Karakoram Highway that China is trying to expand.**

It also gives China access to the Indian Ocean where India has long been the main player, after the United States.

More worryingly for New Delhi, **the strategic location of Gwadar, 180 km from the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz, offers Pakistan the chance "to take control over the world energy jugular and interdiction of Indian tankers,"** according to former Indian navy admiral Sureeh Mehta.

"Gwadar has the potential to move much faster than Chabahar because the Chinese are involved. It will depend on how fast they can double the capacity of the Karakoram Highway," the Indian government official said, pointing to the pace with which China completed a port on Sri Lanka's southern coast last year which has added to India's fear of encirclement.

With the Chinese completing the first phase of development in 2007, Gwadar port became operational shortly afterwards. But its progress, although faster than

Chabahar, has been affected by worsening security in Baluchistan, a dispute with the port operator PSA of Singapore and the slow pace of road links.

The port handled about \$700 million in cargo in 2009, less than half of its cargo capacity. Under the agreement, the Baluchistan government was to develop a free-zone for warehouses and export processing zone and establish road and rail links.

A growing Baluch insurgency has added to the port's problems with several Chinese engineers attacked and kidnapped. Baluch nationalists see the port as another exploitation of the province's rich mineral resources by Pakistan's powerful Punjabi elite without any local benefit.

**India will be watchful for any militarisation of Gwadar, though for now there are no signs of that.**

### **Shortest Budget Session in recent years ends**

- The shortest Budget Session of Parliament in recent years came to a close on Friday after acrimony over diverse issues ranging from the CVC controversy to the cash-for-votes scam.
- A highlight of the month-long session having 23 sittings was the setting up of the Joint Parliamentary Committee to probe the 2G spectrum scam, an issue that had washed out the entire Winter Session.
- The session witnessed uproar over many issues and the Lok Sabha lost over 25 hours due to interruptions followed by adjournments. However, the members made up for the lost time by sitting late for more than 26 hours.
- In the Rajya Sabha 20 hours were lost due to interruptions and members partly compensated the loss by sitting late for over 12 hours.
- After 2006, the Budget Session this year saw the completion of the Budgetary exercise before the end of the current financial year.
- The second phase of the Budget Session, which was earlier scheduled to start in April, was dispensed with in view of assembly elections in five states.
- A highpoint of the session was the confrontation between the government and the Opposition over the cash-for-votes scam in the wake of a WikiLeaks report, first accessed by 'The Hindu' daily, which spoke of members being bribed to win the July 2008 trust vote.
- The evacuation of Indians from troubled Libya, radio collaring of Indian students in an American university, the Income Tax notice to Gujarat Government and attacks on Indian fishermen by Sri Lankan navy also figured prominently in Parliament.

### **PM likely to chair manufacturing policy meet soon**

- A high-level committee chaired by the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, is soon expected to discuss the proposed manufacturing policy aimed at increasing the sector's share in India's GDP to 25 per cent in the next decade, said the Commerce and Industry Minister, Mr Anand Sharma.



- The Finance Minister, Mr Pranab Mukherjee, had also made a mention of the manufacturing policy during his budget speech.
- The Government aims to take the share of **manufacturing sector, which contributes over 80 per cent to the country's overall industrial production**, in GDP from about 16 per cent to 25 per cent over a period of 10 years.
- **Under the upcoming policy, the Government has proposed to set up integrated greenfield mega-investment zones to attract global investment and latest technologies.**
- The Minister said increasing manufacturing share in the Indian economy is a priority as millions of skilled workforce is expected to join the segment in the near future. The new policy would also help in attracting greater FDI into the country and it would also address labour and environment issues.

### **Formula 1 – Chandhok's Team Lotus debut ends with a crash**

- **Karun Chandhok's** first drive in the **Team Lotus Formula One** car lasted less than a minute before he spun on the track and crashed into a barrier on Friday.
- The 27-year-old, named as a reserve driver for the team only on Tuesday, was first out of the pits in the first practice session for Sunday's season-opening Australian Grand Prix.
- Driving Italian Jarno Trulli's car, Chandhok lost control on a track still damp after morning rain and hit a barrier, smashing the front wing off the T128. The driver walked away apparently unhurt.
- Malaysian-owned Team Lotus have yet to score a point in Formula One after making their debut last year as Lotus Racing.
- **Chandhok drove for Hispania (HRT) last year.**

### **Arctic sea ice ties for smallest area this winter**

- Even at its biggest, Arctic sea ice extent this winter was among the smallest ever seen, apparently tying with 2006 for the least amount of ice covering the region around the North Pole, U.S. researchers reported.
- **Sea ice on the Arctic Ocean usually starts growing in September and hits its maximum area in February or March;** this year, the maximum appeared to occur on March 7, when ice stretched over 5.65 million square miles (14.64 million square km), according to the National Snow and Ice Data Center.
- That area of ice-covered water is 471,000 square miles (1.2 million square km) below the average maximum ice extent observed by satellites from 1979 to 2000, the center said in a statement.
- This thin ice is sensitive to weather, which can make it move or melt quickly, and it often stays around the maximum for days or weeks, as it has done this year.
- **Arctic sea ice extent -- the area the ice covers in summer and winter - - is one measure scientists use to track changes in global climate.**