



# Lanka president cuts PM's duties in power struggle

AFP  
Colombo

**S**ri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena yesterday reduced the responsibilities of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe as a power struggle worsened within their uneasy coalition.

Sirisena took away the central bank, the policy-making National Operations Room and several other institutions from the control of Wickremesinghe, who had held them since coming to power in January 2015.

The changes were published in a government gazette notice issued yesterday which transferred the responsibilities



President Maithripala Sirisena

to Finance Minister Mangala Samarawarna.

There was no official explanation for why the Central Bank of Sri Lanka had been taken away



PM Ranil Wickremesinghe

from the prime minister's control. In 2015 a central bank government appointed by Wickremesinghe, Arjuna Mahendran, was accused of insider trading.

Sirisena appointed a special inquiry which cleared Wickremesinghe of any wrongdoing. But Mahendran was held responsible for passing sensitive information to his bond-dodder son-in-law Arjun Aloysius to make \$75m in undue profits.

Sirisena joined hands with Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) to oust strongman president Mahinda Rajapaksa in January 2015 after a decade in power.

But since then their alliance has fractured, with Sirisena clashing with free-market champion Wickremesinghe over economic policy.

Relations worsened further after their coalition did badly in

local government elections last month.

The president blamed the premier for their electoral setbacks.

Earlier this year, Sirisena publicly lambasted Wickremesinghe and his UNP, saying they had mismanaged the economy. Sirisena said the current government was also more corrupt than the former regime they toppled together.

A section within Sirisena's party supports a no-confidence move against Wickremesinghe slated for April 4. However, the UNP is the largest single party in the 225-member assembly and commands a comfortable majority with the help of allies.

The premier could be

brought down only if Sirisena can unite his own fractured Sri Lanka Freedom Party and engineer defections from Wickremesinghe's UNP.

Tensions between the coalition partners have also escalated over Sirisena's attempts to extend his presidential term by one more year till 2021, a move that was rejected by the Supreme Court earlier this year.

The UNP has suggested that it may go it alone at the next general election in 2020.

Presidential powers to sack the government and call early elections were removed through a constitutional amendment introduced in the early days of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe coalition.

## Prisons to allow inmates to use mobile phone

Agencies  
Dhaka

**I**nmates in a Bangladeshi jail will be allowed to use mobile phones twice a month to speak to their families.

The service will be introduced initially at the Tangail District Jail as a pilot project.

Iqbal Hasan, additional inspector general of prisons, said that the service would be introduced gradually in all prisons throughout the country following the result of the pilot project.

"A prisoner will be allowed to speak to his family once every fortnight. Initially we will allow them 10 minutes to speak. However, the jail superintendent can increase or decrease the time," he said.

At present, family members can meet the convicted inmates twice a month and other prisoners once a month.

There will be a small charge applied to mobile phone conversations, which will be deducted from the amount deposited by the inmates, according to Hasan.

He also said the conversation over the phone will be recorded. Every prisoner will have to provide two mobile phone numbers when they are registered and can call to those two numbers only, he said.

Family members will be notified the time of call through a text message, the day before an inmate makes the call.

Abul Bashar, jailor at Tangail District Jail, said those accused or convicted of terrorism will not be allowed to use the service. He also said prisoners will be charged 1 taka per minute to talk over phone.

The project has been initiated by access to information (A2I) service innovation fund of Prime Minister's Office and Bangladesh Jail Authority.

He said there will be four phone booths made in a room inside the jail, adding bigger jails will have more booths.

## Continue pressure on Myanmar to take back Rohingya: Hasina

Agencies  
Dhaka

**P**riime Minister Sheikh Hasina has reiterated her call to the international community to continue pressure on Myanmar to take back its nationals from Bangladesh.

She made the call when WHO-SEARO regional director Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh met her at her official residence in Dhaka yesterday.

Prime minister's press secretary Hasim Karim briefed reporters after the meeting.

"The prime minister informed the WHO regional director that Bangladesh has given shelter to Rohingya refugees on humanitarian grounds.

She said the Bangladesh gov-

ernment has completed the biometric registration of the Myanmar displaced nationals who have entered Bangladesh facing atrocities unleashed by the Myanmar forces in Rakhine state.

Hasina said the government has given identity cards to Rohingyas so that they could be identified and sent to Myanmar government could take them back.

She said some 28,000 people are working round the clock to manage more than 1,00,000 Rohingyas.

Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh highly appreciated Bangladesh government's move over the Rohingyas issue.

"The Bangladesh government is doing a great job," she said.

She also mentioned that WHO will help Bangladesh provide medical services to the Rohingyas.

Expressing her concern over the health condition, sanitation and waterborne diseases of the Rohingyas in the upcoming monsoon, Dr Khetrapal Singh said it would be a challenging job to manage the Rohingyas. She urged the government to continue its immunisation activities.

She said the huge number of Rohingyas refugees, which is more than the total population of Bhutan, is the main problem to manage. "This is a gigantic job," she added.

Hasina said her government is in touch with five neighbouring countries bordering with Myanmar, including Thailand, China and India, on

the issue of Rohingya crisis.

Referring to establishment of community clinics across Bangladesh, she said such initiative was a vision of Bangladesh to reach healthcare services at the doorsteps of rural people.

Dr Khetrapal Singh highly appreciated the prime minister for her dynamic leadership as well as for Bangladesh's development, particularly on flood control, saying the country is an example in the world on the issue.

She also lauded Bangladesh's achievement on health and sanitation and said, "It's achievement in reducing child mortality and maternal mortality rate is commended globally."

At the meeting, the issue of autism was also discussed when WHO regional director praised



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. "Bangladesh has given shelter to Rohingya refugees on humanitarian grounds."

prime minister's daughter Saima Wazed Hossain for her role in creating awareness on autism globally.

The WHO regional director said that now people of South Asia know about the autism and are aware about it.

Saima Wazed Hossain, chairperson, Bangladesh National Advisory Committee for Autism and Neuro Developmental Disorders and also member of the WHO's expert advisory panel on mental health, was present during the meeting.

## Protests over road project in Nepal

IANIS  
Kathmandu

**S**everal protesters were detained and some were injured in Kathmandu yesterday as Nepal police used water cannon to disperse a demonstration against a planned road expansion project.

Hundreds of local residents, including members of the Newar community, one of the first groups to settle in Nepal centu-

ries ago, clashed with riot police who used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the protesters.

The project would see an expressway built between Kathmandu and the southern Terai region, Efe news reported.

The new road, which would replace a smaller route, would displace various religious and Newar cultural heritage sites, as well as encroach on farmland, affecting the livelihoods of locals.

Efe news cited police sources

as saying that five protesters were arrested and three were injured during the clashes.

The Nepal army, which is overseeing and administering the government project, assured residents that the new road would be "a win-win for all stakeholders"; an army spokesperson had said in January.

The proposed Kathmandu-Terai expressway would reduce travel time from the Nepali capital city to the southern plains from five hours to just one hour.



Smoke rises from a teargas shell fired by the police to disperse the crowd during the protest against the road expansion projects causing people in the affected areas to lose their houses and lands in Kathmandu yesterday.

## Library helps Nepali women gain cash and confidence

Thomson Reuters Foundation  
Bhimdhunga

**F**or farmers trying to figure out how to heal a sick cow or grow tomatoes commercially in this Himalayan community, help is at hand in the form of a crumbling, earthquake-scared library.

In a rural area where searching for information online or paying for expert advice is rarely an option, the library is a first stop for female farmers dammed by their new role: running the family farm while their husbands are away looking for work.

"Most of the men have migrated for money now in Nepal. It's a very huge problem," said Meera Marahathia, the "human Google" who runs the library.

But there's an upside. "Because of this male migration, females have the opportunity to lead," she added - sometimes for the first time.

Migration is growing around

the world among families hit by disasters, conflict or shifting weather patterns. In Nepal - and many other places - women are often left behind in rural areas as men seek work in cities or overseas. For some women, the absence of men can open up opportunities to try out their own ideas, learn new skills and gain confidence.

In Nepal, the Tribeni community library in Bhimdhunga is one of 22 that are part of a "Practical Answers" programme jointly run by READ Nepal, a literacy and anti-poverty organisation, and Practical Action, a British charity.

Besides providing resource books, the hubs collect queries from across the community, log them and set about providing tailored answers to farming and other technical challenges.

In Bhimdhunga, the library offers a computer suite, a children's nursery and a women's health section, attracting about 200 active members from the

mountainous neighbourhood.

Marahathia, the library head who is a community member herself, often travels house-to-house visiting remote mountain-top farms to field questions and train female farmers.

"We have a lot of enquiries," she said, proudly flicking through log books filled with neat rows of curling Nepali script.

During the planting season, she might receive as many as 1,000 questions a month - but that those suddenly put in charge of their households as their husbands or sons migrate abroad in search of work.

That change has offered some women a chance to try out their own farming ideas, becoming

more confident and boosting their family's finances in the process.

But there are "some negatives too," Marahathia admitted.

Women often complain to her of feeling overwhelmed, as if "all the responsibilities are on their heads," looking after both land and children.

And the shift in family dynamics, together with the disruption to family life that accompanies migration, has led to a rise in the number of divorces, Marahathia said.

Wearing a red shawl draped across her shoulder to match her bright red bindi and lipstick, Urumila Lama, 35, still has a youthful face - though her back bent from toil makes her seem older.

She lives with her 11-year-old son on a remote farm on a steep hillside overlooking the lush Kathmandu Valley. But their living quarters are a tin shack, hastily built after a powerful earthquake in 2015 reduced their home, and many others in the area, to rubble.

The disaster killed nearly

9,000 people and disrupted the lives of more than 8m.

"After the earthquake, our whole house collapsed. Everything went bad and my husband went to a foreign country to earn," she said.

But then she heard about the agricultural training being offered by Marahathia at the library and went along.

"I immediately took up the practices in my own house and have since been vegetable farming seriously," said Lama, who has constructed a number of large plastic-covered tunnels and makeshift greenhouses to boost her vegetable production.

"I realised we can have a good income from this," she said.

Initially, she earned about \$60 a month from growing vegetables such as sweet peppers and tomatoes.

Today she makes triple that amount, and can pay for her son's school fees and the family's daily expenses without having to ask her husband for money.

"I was here alone. It was not my husband's decision but my own to construct the greenhouses," she said proudly.

The community library - although a simple idea - has proved hugely popular with the community, said Rakesh Khadka, a project officer with the Practical Answers programme in Nepal.

Established in 2011, the facility was at first little used, but by 2013 "we were inundated," he said.

Sometimes the library refers tough questions to Kathmandu, where experts can better advise on technical issues. But answers are often found locally, with women sharing solutions among themselves, Khadka said.

Little by little, women are becoming more self-sufficient and farming the library less often or coming mainly to socialise, he added.

Crossing her sandy yard, Chitli Khadka, 55, pushes back a loose door to reveal a baby call, closely guarded by its mother. Khadka, who is illiterate and

was married at just 9 years old, was happy to show off the cattle that had made her a respected businesswoman in her remote Himalayan village.

"After my husband left me, I lived with my mother-in-law, who took pity on me. But she died a few years ago. We had many expenses for my children's studies, so I had to make an income," she said.

She heard about the library and started training with the other women. Khadka learned to rear cows, build sheds and calculate the correct nutrient requirements for her animals. She now has eight cows, with each fully grown animal worth about \$1,000 at market, she said.

She also sells milk in town and manure as fertiliser to other farmers in the area.

Khadka earns about \$30,000 (\$288) a month. That's more than her son, who works as a teacher, she boasts - and is even enough for her to hire another female farmhand to help tend the vegetables.