

Afghan Taliban announces Eid ceasefire after President's unconditional offer

Agency
Kabul, June 9

The Afghan Taliban on Saturday announced a three-day ceasefire over the Eid holiday at the end of this week, their first offer of its kind, following a ceasefire announced by the government on Thursday. The terror group said foreign forces would be excluded from the ceasefire and that operations against them would continue. They also said they would defend themselves against any attack.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced an unconditional ceasefire with the Taliban on Thursday, coinciding with the end of the

Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, but excluding other terror groups, such as ISIS. Ghani's decision came after a meeting of Islamic clerics declared a fatwa, or ruling, against suicide bombings, one of which, claimed by ISIS, killed 14 people at the entrance to the clerics' peace tent in Kabul. The clerics also recommended a ceasefire with the Taliban, who are seeking to reimpose strict Islamic law after their ouster in 2001, and Ghani endorsed the recommendation, saying it would last until June 20.

It was not immediately clear when the Taliban ceasefire would begin, as Eid starts when the moon is first sighted on either the 29th or 30th day

of Ramadan, and the moon appears at different times across the country.

Ghani has urged ceasefires with the Taliban before, but this was the first unconditional offer since he was elected in 2014.

In August, U.S. President Donald Trump unveiled a more hawkish military approach to Afghanistan, including a surge in air strikes, aimed at forcing the Taliban to the negotiating table.

Afghan security forces say the impact has been significant, but the Taliban roam huge swaths of the country and, with foreign troop levels of about 15,600, down from 140,000 in 2014, there appears little hope of outright victory.

Pranab triggers political football

Courtesy: The Pioneer
New Delhi, June 9,

The reverberation of former President Pranab Mukherjee's visit on Thursday to the RSS headquarters and his speech to the graduating RSS cadre there has continued in the political corridor amid wild speculation about his future political moves.

In what is seen as a noteworthy reaction, BJP patriarch LK Advani, who rarely comments on any contemporary issues, described Pranab's speech and his visit to the RSS headquarters as significant events in the contemporary Indian history. Advani's reaction was put up on the official website of the BJP even as majority of senior BJP leadership maintained a curious silence on the issue.

The political circles remained abuzz with subtle suggestions that the 82-year-old former Congressman—who after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, could have even been a candidate for the post of Prime Minister—may even be a consensus nominee for the PM post, acceptable to the Opposition and not opposed by the present ruling dispensation. The news highlighted by more than one TV channel was source-based, but it was enough to set the social media on fire.

Pranab's visit to the RSS head

office in Nagpur came against serious reservation of 'secular circles', but he silenced them by highlighting their concerns on "intolerance" and "pluralism".

At the same time, Pranab also kept his hosts in good humour by describing RSS founder Keshav Baliram Hedgewar "as the great son of Mother India". The controversy that preceded Pranab's visit to Nagpur has kept dogging him even though he is back to Delhi. On Friday, a "morphed picture" showing Pranab in RSS-style of salutation appeared on social media. RSS joint general secretary Manmohan Vaidhya blamed "divisive political forces" for first trying to make former President "refrain" from attending its event and then for posting a morphed photograph showing him in a prayer position identified with the organisation.

"Some divisive political forces have posted a morphed photo of former President Pranab Mukherjee standing in a prayer position with a folded hand during recitation of Sangha prarthana (prayer) at Thursday's RSS function at Nagpur," Vaidya said in a statement. Pranab's daughter Sharmistha Mukherjee, a Congress leader who had opposed his visit to the RSS event, had highlighted the photograph and said, "See, this is exactly what I was fearing &

warned my father about. Not even a few hours have passed, but BJP/RSS dirty tricks dept is at work in full swing!"

On Thursday, Pranab addressed the RSS cadre passing "Tritiya Shiksha Varg" (three year graduation course), one of the most important milestones in the life of an RSS cadre. Only the third-year graduates in the Sangh can become RSS pracharakas or full-timers.

Pranab, who has been for long the main strategist of the Congress and two successive UPA Governments, has been lauded by Advani for accepting the invitation of the Hindutva organisation. The senior BJP leader also praised RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat for inviting him, saying there was significant concord and resonance in the views expressed by both of them.

As a lifelong "swayamsevak" of the RSS, BJP veteran Advani said he believed that Pranab and Bhagwat have truly set a praiseworthy example of dialogue transcending ideological affiliations and differences.

"Both of them highlighted the essential unity of India, which accepts and respects all diversities, including the pluralism of faiths," Advani said in a statement.

Advani, who has served as the BJP president for the longest

period, expressed his happiness over the RSS under Bhagwat expanding and intensifying its efforts to reach out to various sections of the nation in the spirit of dialogue.

"Such conversations, conducted in the spirit of openness and mutual respect, will surely help in creating a much-needed atmosphere of tolerance, harmony and cooperation to build an India of our common dreams," he said. Praising Pranab, Advani said he showed grace and goodwill in accepting the RSS invite as he recalled his long association with him.

"His own reflective nature, combined with his long and varied experience in public life, has made him a statesman who strongly believes in the necessity of dialogue and cooperation among people of various ideological and political backgrounds," he said of Pranab.

The former President's decision to accept the RSS invite to address its members had drawn a lot of adverse responses from senior Congress leaders and other political parties which had reservations against the Nagpur outfit.

But shortly after Pranab delivered his written speech at the RSS headquarters, he drew praise from Congress leaders as well as from those associated with the RSS.

Massive fire breaks out in Mumbai's Fort area, 2 firefighters injured

Agency
Mumbai, June 9

A massive fire broke out inside Patel Chambers in Mumbai's Fort area around 4:30 am today. Around 16 fire engines were rushed to the spot as level-3 fire became level-4. Two firefighters also got injured after part of the building collapsed due to fire.

The operations to put out fire are underway and Chief Fire Officer Prabhat Rahangdale told news agency that the situation is under control.

Mumbai's Patel Chambers caught fire on Saturday

morning. Two firefighters had minor injuries and everyone else is safe, said the officer.

"We deployed 16 fire engines, 11 tankers and 150 fire officers. Situation is under control," he said.

"This building has been vacant for around four years. It's a very old building. The staircase inside had collapsed long ago, so there was no way for us to go inside," Mr Rahangdale said, adding, "It is a very congested area, so chances were that the fire could spread to neighbouring buildings as well. We are investigating

the cause of the fire."

This is the second incident of major fire in the Fort area in last 10 days. A huge fire broke out at the Income Tax office in South Mumbai's Scindia House on last Friday. No casualties were reported in the incident. People who were trapped inside were rescued by fire tenders.

Thunderstorm & lightning claim 53 lives in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar

AIR
Lucknow, June 9,

Thunderstorms and lightning have claimed 53 lives in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh during the last 24 hours. In Uttar Pradesh, maximum five deaths each have been reported from Jaunpur and Sultanpur districts.

Quoting official sources our correspondent reports, four persons lost their lives in Unnao district followed by 3 each in Baharich and Chandauli. Reports said that the State government has

announced the financial assistance of four Lakh rupees each to next of kin of those killed.

In Bihar, casualties in thunderstorm and lightning have risen to 27 in several parts of the state. Thirty four people have been injured. Maximum eight deaths have been reported from Saharsa district. Met department has forecast more thunderstorm and lightning in the next 48 hours in several parts of the state.

Meanwhile, South West Monsoon has progressed in

some more parts of the country. Talking to AIR, Head of the Weather Services of IMD, M Mohapatra said, in the next 48 hours, the monsoon will advance further.

Mumbai received heavy rainfall today following the onset of the southwest monsoon in Maharashtra. There are reports of water-logging in several areas, affecting vehicular traffic and suburban train services. Several flights are delayed and two canceled.

Indian Navy personnel are on standby in parts of the

metropolis. Disaster Management Department and the Police are keeping a close watch over the situation. The Met Department has predicted heavy to very heavy rainfall in the city today and advised people to stay indoors. Fishermen have been advised against venturing into sea off the Konkan and Goan coasts till Tuesday.

In Goa, some roads and streets in the state capital Panaji have been inundated and municipality workers have been deployed to clear clogged drains. Heavy and

incessant rains in the hinterland have also affected daily life while bringing cheer to local farmers.

In Uttarakhand, road connectivity in remote areas has been disrupted due to rain during the last 24 hours. Our correspondent reports that in many parts of the Garhwal region, the connectivity of many villages from headquarters has been affected and there are reports of trees falling and landslides in the Kumaon region. Met Department has forecast rain in different parts in the next 24 hours.

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Editor

Former CEC, experts challenge Election Commission's theory on VVPAT failure

Agency
New Delhi, June 9

The Election Commission on Friday declared that the reason behind the malfunctioning of a large number of voter verified paper audit trail (VVPAT) machines during the recently held by-elections to the Kairana and Bhandara-Gondiya parliamentary constituencies was due to the "failure of contrast sensor" and "failure of length sensor" and that both these errors were "mainly caused by excessive exposure to illumination in the polling station".

However, past and present EC officials present at a conclave on elections in India expressed surprise at this "finding", since the VVPATs have undergone extensive tests under varying conditions in the past without malfunctioning.

Failure despite all-weather tests surprises former CEC
Speaking at the conclave on "EVMs, Election Funding and the Election Commission" organised by a group of retired civil servants and armed forces veterans at the Indian Social Institute here, former Chief Election Commissioner S.Y. Quraishi noted with concern that VVPAT machines were

failing despite undergoing tests in all kinds of weather conditions.

Quraishi, in whose term as CEC the testing of VVPATs had taken place from 2011 till their introduction in an election in Nagaland in September 2013, recalled how tests had first been conducted in wet and humid Kerala, dry and hot Jaisalmer, the cold high-altitude of Ladakh, rain-soaked Cherrapunji and Delhi. He said that since many machines had malfunctioned after the first round of tests, the necessary changes were made and they were again tested in all these five different locations.

Wondering how the Election Commission was now saying that these machines malfunctioned during the polls on May 28 due to heat, he said it appeared unlikely to be the cause as these machines had been tested in the extreme heat of Jaisalmer, which was hotter than the constituencies where they are said to have not worked properly.

Quraishi for sampling more VVPAT votes after every poll
Quraishi was also of the view that when it came to VVPATs, there was a need to sample more of them after every election as the current practice

of taking the count of just one polling station in every constituency was too little.

While the Supreme Court has not directed the EC on what percentage of the VVPATs should be counted, Quraishi said it would be best if the commission went for a significant percentage. "It is wrong to say that VVPAT counting would delay the results. You can always deploy more hands for the job to ensure that they too get counted by the time the electronic votes are."

Stating that the Supreme Court has examined VVPATs, Quraishi said the EC only has to operate them. He also suggested that the winner-loser or other contestants should be allowed to select a few machines at random for tallying VVPAT votes.

EC assured testing of all 18 lakh VVPATs will be by in-house engineers

The former CEC also noted that it was the EC's decision to go for VVPAT machines and that the Supreme Court had only asked the Centre to release adequate funds for them. He said that with 18 lakh machines to be operationalised ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha and assembly elections, people

were also wondering how they would be tested and if the job would be outsourced. "But the EC has assured me that all the testing would be done by in-house engineers, who too would be randomised for the machines."

Current practise of counting VVPAT votes of just one polling station is akin to 'marginal tokenism'

Raising questions on the reliability of the VVPATs, the convener of the Forum for Electoral Integrity, retired IAS officer M.G. Devasahayam said the counting of votes of these machines in just one polling station amounted to just 0.4-0.5% of all votes polled and therefore their use was akin to "marginal tokenism".

He demanded that to win the confidence of the people, a random sample of paper audit trail should be drawn from machines from booths or polling stations which record very high or low turnout, which have voters who are predominantly from backward castes or minorities and the like. He also noted that the VVPAT malfunction percentage in the by-elections was much higher than the admissible level of 5% and stood at 20.82% for Kairana,

19.27% for Bhandara-Gondia and 13.16% for Palghar.

EC expert says VVPATs more than mere 'thermal printers'

A member of the technical expert committee of the EC, Rajat Moon, while discussing the unique technical features of VVPATs, said that "they are not only thermal printers, their print does not fade for five years unlike those of other similar devices which become faint within a few days".

He also said VVPATs are "encapsulated devices" which work independently and have different sensors which even keep a measure of the length of its tape and ensure that it remains at 99 mm. He said the quality of print, the contrast and the fact that every slip is supposed to drop in the box are all monitored by the machine.

A former director general of the Centre for Developed and Advanced Computing, Moon said "each VVPAT machine goes through a temperature-humidity cycle". He said behind the recent failure of these machines were caused by "multiple factors", including "not enough maturity in handling them". These machines, he said, had earlier been used successfully

in the Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat assembly elections. "Yet, when they encountered trouble the EC said 'don't shift them, change them' since there were many on standby which could be used".

EC wants design improvements in VVPATs, training of staff

Meanwhile, the Election Commission has asked the manufacturers and the technical expert committee to suggest additional design improvements as well as suggestions on any layout changes in polling stations to prevent any excessive exposure of VVPATs to illumination in future. "Manufacturers have also been asked to do a detailed technical analysis once the

VVPATs are free from election petition (as these cannot be currently accessed in strong rooms till 45 days election petition period is over)," it said. The commission has also decided to reiterate its standard operating procedures regarding do's and don'ts and has also formed a committee to further examine these SOPs. It has also stated that it would make the first level checking (FLC) process stricter and adopt hardware improvements recommended by the TEC to prevent auto shutdown of VVPATs due to excessive light. Further, training of the polling officials would be strengthened and streamlined to minimise failures due to human errors.

Original Mark Sheet lost

I, undersigned, have lost my original mark sheet of class X, Sc. bearing Roll No. 7035 and Regd. No. 0804555013 of 2010 issued by BOSEM on the way between Khwairamband Bazar to Manipur University on 5/6/2018.

Finders are requested to handover the same to the undersigned.

Sd/-
Kumam Boris Singh
Moirang Kumam Leikai