

NEWS ROUND UP

Wednesday, April 03, 2019

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MR renews warning against draconian and undemocratic Counter Terrorism Bill

Opposition Leader and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa yesterday renewed his serious concern over the Counter Terrorism Bill, warning it will destroy democratic rights of people and lead the country to a repressive ‘police state’.

Mahinda Rajapaksa

Briefing editors of English and Tamil media over breakfast, Rajapaksa said the CT Bill, which is aimed at replacing the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act, was worse than the latter. “PTA has been applicable specifically during the times of emergency imposition and continuity of which must be approved by Parliament. However, the proposed CT Bill results in draconian regulations as part of normal law,” Rajapaksa opined at the briefing along with Prof. G.L. Peiris, Keheliya Rambukwella, and Mahindananda Aluthgamage. “This CT Act will prevail over all other written laws in the event of inconsistency,” he added.

“We will be talking to other like-minded parties to prevent the passage of the CT Bill in Parliament. The proposed new legislation is because of undue international pressure and the failure of the Government,” alleged Rajapaksa, who said if his party SLPP comes to power, they will revoke it.

The Bill was published in September 2018 and after the Opposition went to the Supreme Court, it ruled that certain provisions will require a two-third majority and a Referendum. At present, the Bill is being studied by a Parliamentary Sectoral Oversight Committee on national security.

Prof. Peiris, who described the CT Bill as “draconian”, and one that will ring the death knell for democracy, said the definitions of terrorism in the Bill are designed to suppress democratic protests by trade unions and all civil society organisations. It also includes damage to public and private property and obstruction or damage to essential services and supplies, and interference with any critical infrastructure facility or causing risk to health, etc., are all described as offences of terrorism. Penalty if found guilty includes 20 years of rigorous imprisonment.

It was pointed out that the CT Bill also confers arbitrary powers on the Police to quell freedom of protest, holding of rallies, procession or meetings association and dissent. “It also erodes into the privilege against self-incrimination and the right to silence, which is a basic human right, and freedom in criminal proceedings,” Prof. Peiris warned.

The CT Bill is also a serious threat to media freedom, he said, adding that gathering confidential information for supplying such information to a person who commits an offence under this Act becomes an act of abetting terrorism. It also gives powers for orders to be issued relating to prohibited places and prohibiting entry, taking pictures or making video recordings. “The net of liability is very wide as all directors and principal executive officers of corporate bodies are liable, as well as every partner of a firm if found guilty,” Prof. Peiris emphasised. (Daily ft)

Ministry of Crab to serve Thailand and Maldives

Listed among ‘Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants,’ Ministry of Crab will expand its culinary journey to Bangkok and Maldives in the second half of this year, promoting Sri Lanka’s finest produce and best in gastronomy.

"Today Ministry of Crab is four strong. We have opened in Shanghai, Manila and Mumbai. By the end of the year there will be two more, adding Bangkok and Maldives on that list," Ministry of Crab Co-Owner and renowned chef Dharshan Munidasa told media in Colombo on Monday.

Ministry of Crab opened its first overseas outpost in Shanghai, China in November last year and was followed by two others in Manila, Philippines in January and Mumbai, India in February this year.

He said the Maldives outlet would be managed and operated by the same team of Sri Lanka, while the Bangkok branch would be a franchise operation.

In addition to the Ministry of Crab, Munidasa also noted that he would open two restaurants in the Maldives, which would include a new venture called 'Carne diem,' specialising in beef steak. The Maldives would also have his other flagship Japanese restaurant, Nihonbashi. He explained that crab would be imported from Sri Lanka to the Maldivian Ministry of Crab, whilst his Thai Ministry of Crab would source local crab.

Ministry of Crab was brought to light by the famous Sri Lankan cricketers Kumar Sangakkara and Mahela Jayawardene, along with experienced Chef Munidasa.

"It's been an amazing journey for us. As three friends who wanted to start something new and exciting in Sri Lanka, eight years later we are now around six key cities of Asia. We only serve the best ingredients, backed by a lot of heart and passion," he added.

Munidasa also said that they had built a strong partnerships with all the overseas custodians of Ministry of Crab and believes that they will continue for years to come. (Daily ft)

Rupee extends gains; stocks hit 2-week closing high

The rupee closed firmer on Tuesday as more foreign investors purchased government securities, while inward remittances remained high ahead of the traditional New Year celebrations, market sources said.

The currency extended gains into a sixth session to end firmer at 174.45/60 to the dollar, compared with Monday's close of 174.70/85.

The island nation's currency gained 2.09% in the last six sessions and 4.8% so far this year as exporters converted dollars and foreign investors purchased government securities amid stabilising investor confidence after the country repaid a \$1 billion sovereign bond in mid-January.

The Colombo Stock Exchange index ended 0.19% higher at 5,578.43 on Tuesday, its highest close since 19 March.

The benchmark stock index rose 0.31% last week, recording its first weekly gain in eight weeks. The index has declined 7.8% so far this year.

The market awaits some positive news from the third and final vote on the 2019 Budget scheduled for 5 April, market sources said.

Turnover was Rs. 433.7 million (\$2.49 million), less than this year's daily average of Rs. 644.1 million. Last year's daily average came in at Rs. 834 million.

Foreign investors bought a net Rs. 16.8 million worth of shares on Tuesday, but they have been net sellers of Rs. 5.7 billion worth of equities so far this year.

Sri Lanka was plunged into political turmoil in October when President Maithripala Sirisena abruptly removed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and then dissolved Parliament. A court later ruled the move was unconstitutional, and Wickremesinghe was reinstalled as Premier.

Investor sentiment took a big hit as a result of the 51-day political crisis, leading to credit rating downgrades and an outflow of foreign funds from government securities.

The rupee dropped 16% in 2018, and was one of the worst-performing currencies in Asia due to heavy foreign outflows.

Foreign investors bought a net Rs. 1.6 billion worth of government securities in the week ended 27 March, the fourth net inflow in six weeks, extending year-to-date net foreign buying to Rs. 3.3 billion, the latest Central Bank data showed.

The latest Budget aims to increase government spending by 13% in 2019, during which the Presidential election must be held, while it has set an ambitious goal to reduce a large fiscal deficit. (Daily ft)

Pradeep appointed Deputy Chief of Staff to PM

Pradeep Amirthanayagam has been appointed as the Deputy Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Pradeep Amirthanayagam

Amirthanayagam is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing UK (FCIM) and a reputed advertising and media personality in Sri Lanka with over 30 years of experience in the fields of journalism, advertising and administration.

He is a media icon who served as a news presenter for Rupavahini, ITN and SLBC and also an interviewer and a cricket commentator.

Amirthanayagam was instrumental in setting up Holmes Pollard and Stott Ltd. advertising services company in 1990. He had been the Deputy Chairman of People's Leasing & Finance since 2015.

He is a past President of the Rotary Club of Colombo West and a Director of the Anura Bandaranaike Foundation. (Daily ft)

Cabinet heats up over power crisis

For the second consecutive week the Power Ministry was in the centre of the discussion at the Cabinet meeting yesterday with President Maithripala Sirisena demanding removal of officials in the Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka.

The exchange between President Sirisena, and Power, Energy and Business Development Minister Ravi Karunanayake, centred on the conduct of the PUCSL and the current crisis, with Minister Champika Ranawaka trying to bring in a different view regarding the issue, Daily FT learned.

The Cabinet has been informed by Karunanayake that the PUCSL has initiated legal action on the CEB for failure to inform and get approval prior to initiating power cuts due to current power shortage. Sirisena however found fault with one Government institution taking legal action on another and questioned the

move, leading to his demand of removal of the officials in the regulatory body, top Cabinet sources confirmed.

The President finding fault with the PUCSL for causing the delay in implementing the Long Term Generation Plan has demanded that the official he blamed to be the cause of the delay to be removed from the post. Attempts by Minister Ranawaka to interject in the argument to make Sirisena see a different version to the situation was not successful, Daily FT learned.

The ministers then decided that Power Minister should meet both the CEB and PUCSL today to mediate a truce between the two entities. The Minister is to meet both President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe today to brief them on the situation with the PUCSL as well.

According to sources, Minister Karunananayake has also requested the PUCSL to withdraw the case filed by them against the CEB for carrying out unannounced power cuts during the last three weeks. However, the PUCSL has gone ahead with the case, and the CEB has been summoned before Fort Magistrate Court on the 9 April. (Daily ft)

Tax evading steel industry depriving state coffers millions

UNP lawmaker Mujibur Rahuman on Monday proposed a proper taxation system for the steel industry saying the absence of such a system is costing the State millions in tax rupees.

Mujibur Rahuman

Moving an Adjournment Motion in Parliament on a ‘Proper taxation method for steel industry’, Rahuman said there is a high demand for steel bars and rods of different sizes made out of fresh steel or recycled steel by the construction industry, but local producers tend to mislead the tax authorities by amending the sales and manufacturing records.

“Steel manufacturers in the country are not taxed properly. Most of these factories are tax evading and are engaged in frauds. Annually, the tax evasion from the steel industry leads to a loss of Rs. 22 billion Value Added Tax (VAT). I propose a better system to keep a tab on the activities of these factories,” he said.

The MP noted that most of these steel factories are scattered in the Western Province and alleged that according to information he received, most of these factories defraud by evading the VAT and Nation Building Tax (NBT).

“We suspect some top brass in the Inland Revenue Department too are turning a blind eye,” the UNP MP said.

The MP said that 45,000MT of steel bars are used per month for concrete construction works in different part of the country. “Each ton of steel is sold subject to 15% VAT and 2% NBT. On certain occasions, the tax is evaded showing only about 30% of the sales. They cover up the actual sales and manufacturing data,” he alleged.

“There are two methods followed to produce these steel rods. The first method is to heat the scrap metals to produce recycled steel bars. The other system is to use billets to produce steel rods. Based on the extremely high profits earned by the market players, more and more scrap metal recycling plants are commissioned in the country,” he added. (Daily ft)