

Army chief defends govt's tough economic measures

ISLAMABAD: Chief of the Army Staff General Qamar Bajwa on Wednesday defended the government's tough economic measures as indispensable.

He was speaking at a Corps Commanders meeting at the General Headquarters (GHQ), where the economic and internal security situation was discussed in addition to emerging challenges on the external front.

"COAS also apprised forum about difficult but extremely essential long term beneficial measures taken by the government for improving & strengthening national economy," said a statement issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) at the conclusion of the meeting of the army's top brass.

Faced with large fiscal deficit, higher inflation and lower GDP growth, the government in the budget for financial year 2019-20 unveiled an aggressive plan for revenue generation through newer taxes and increased tax rates. Furthermore, subsidies were withdrawn. The foreign exchange rate has also been linked to market dynamics because of which the rupee devalued significantly.

Corps commanders discuss internal security operations, action against proscribed organisations

Energy costs have also gone up and the State Bank has hiked policy rates. Most of these measures are believed to have been taken in accordance with a staff-level agreement with the International Monetary Fund. Defence budget, because of the dire economic situation, too has been frozen at the last year's level.

This was the second occasion in a week when Gen Bajwa, who has recently been made part of the newly constituted National Development Council, spoke on the economy.

A few days ago, he dwelt upon the economic situation at a seminar at the National Defence University and blamed financial indiscipline and timid decision making in the past for the current fiscal mess in the country, endorsed the steps being taken by the government to deal with the situation and sought public support for the economic plan.

Internal security

The ISPR said the corps commanders discussed ongoing internal security operations and action against proscribed organisations.

Action against proscribed entities has lately been intensified. Punjab's Counter-Terrorism Department has over the past couple of days registered 23 cases against the leadership of Jamaatud Dawa (JuD), Lashkar-e-Taiba and Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation for making assets from terror financing through trusts and not-for-profit organisations. JuD chief Hafiz Saeed and other leaders have been booked on charges of terror financing.

Pakistan has struggled to meet the deadlines for the corrective measures agreed with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). As per the recent most appraisal by the FATF on progress by Pakistan, the illicit financing watchdog has noted that after having failed to meet the January deadline, the country also missed the deadline for actions that were to be taken by May.

The FATF has, therefore, asked Pakistan to swiftly complete its action plan by October this year when the group will finally decide its future course of action.

“Pakistan is on positive trajectory of peace and development and shall carry forward the same towards enduring peace and prosperity,” the army chief said.

External front

The ISPR mentioned discussions on India, Afghanistan and Iran without elaborating. Relations with India remain tense and the army on Wednesday blamed it for an explosion in Barnala, Chamb sector (Azad Kashmir) close to the LoC in which five troops were martyred. The attack was described as “state sponsored terrorism by India”.

Meanwhile, talks between Taliban and the United States are continuing in Doha and initial reports suggest progress towards an agreement. Pakistan has, moreover, been under pressure from its Arab allies and the US to take a clear position on the escalation in the Persian Gulf.

Baqir Sajjad Syed