

# US steps up pressure on Myanmar junta

## Asean lawmakers call for expulsion

AP, AFP, United Nations/ Yangon

The United States stepped up pressure on Myanmar's military junta, winning approval Friday for a UN Security Council briefing on the latest situation in the country, which Washington accuses of detaining political opponents and violating human rights.

When the United States last attempted to get the council to discuss Myanmar in June, it failed to get enough support from members. But on Friday the council agreed to hold a one-off briefing at a closed meeting in the next few weeks, which the US wants Secretary General Kofi Annan to deliver to demonstrate the importance of the

issue.

But Myanmar will not go on the Security Council agenda for further action, in a compromise between countries that believe Myanmar poses a growing threat to international peace and security, led by the United States, and nations that see no immediate threat including Russia, China, Japan, Algeria and Brazil.

Myanmar rejected yesterday US accusations that the military-ruled country is a security threat to the region.

"These accusations are utterly wrong," Information Minister Kyaw Hsan told reporters in Yangon. "For example, the accusation that we are developing nuclear power, we will

refute this false accusation."

The Security Council action fell short of adding the situation in Myanmar to the 15-member council's formal agenda.

US Ambassador John Bolton indicated that he saw the upcoming briefing as a step toward getting Myanmar on the council's agenda, which would subject the country to regular international scrutiny and possibly other measures. But Washington would face strong opposition from China and Russia, which have veto power, as well as Japan, the Philippines, Algeria, Brazil and others.

Meanwhile, lawmakers called yesterday on Myanmar to be expelled or suspended from a

regional Southeast Asian grouping unless its military rulers carried out substantial democratic reforms within a year.

The chairman of the Inter-parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC), Zaid Ibrahim, said the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) had to show it was not complicit with the military junta in Yangon.

"I think the longer the situation goes, this lack of progress and this lack of reform in Myanmar, for Asean to do nothing would suggest Asean is supporting the regime," Zaid told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian residents are transported by boat in Chennai yesterday. Cyclone Baaz, which was hovering in the Bay of Bengal, weakened into a depression late Friday but brought rain through the night to drench this southern metropolis.

## UK urged to change asylum policy

AFP, London

Senior British church leaders yesterday called on the government to change policies they claim "victimise" asylum seekers by leaving them "homeless and destitute".

The calls were led by John Sentamu, a former asylum seeker from Idi Amin's Uganda and newly installed this week as the Archbishop of York, the church's second most senior figure to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Sentamu and a cross-section of leading figures from the Roman Catholic faith and other Christian denominations said it was "inhuman and unacceptable that some people seeking asylum are left homeless and destitute by government policies".

## India to ink 4 accords with Russia

### Manmohan leaves for Moscow today

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Cooperation in defence and energy sectors and signing of four agreements will be high on agenda of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Russia.

Manmohan leaves for Moscow today on a three-day visit, during which he will hold talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

One of the key defence-related agreements India and Russia are set to sign in Moscow during Singh's visit is on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) which is expected to pay the way for joint designing and

manufacture of futuristic weapon systems including supersonic anti-ship missiles for the Indian Navy, official sources said here yesterday.

The two countries will also sign an agreement on technology safeguard relating to Russia-designed space communication system to implement last year's accord on cooperation in space navigation system.

Another agreement will be on amending the existing bilateral ten-year defence accord, which expires in 2010, under which India will acquire military equipment worth 20 billion dollars from Russia.

## India to upgrade roads links with Bhutan

AFP, New Delhi

India pledged yesterday to upgrade communication and road links with the neighbouring Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan.

The pledge by Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran follows a December 2003 crackdown by the Bhutanese military on insurgent groups from India's northeast sheltering in the Himalayan kingdom.

Speaking to a seminar in New Delhi, Saran said the joint operation had been a "milestone" in the fight against terrorism, the Press Trust of India reported.

"We look forward to continue this cooperation by jointly upgrading our border infrastructure and management, including through better roads and communication links as well as information-sharing," he said.

# Nepali king renews vow to restore democracy

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra, returning from abroad to street protests against his February power grab, insisted yesterday he was planning to restore democracy in the Himalayan kingdom.

King Gyanendra said the security situation in the country had improved since he fired a civilian government and seized power on February 1 ostensibly to end a deadly Maoist revolt.

"As peace and security in the country have improved, the country is gearing up for municipal and general elections," state media quoted him as saying late Friday on his return to the

capital Kathmandu from a three-week foreign trip.

"Restoration of a lasting peace and a meaningful exercise in multi-party democracy is what Nepal needs and what the Nepalese people yearn for," he said.

However, the king said the nation's "determination in conducting free and fair elections, which is the very soul of democracy, can be realised only if violence is renounced."

Opposition parties which have announced plans to team up with the Maoists to restore democracy in the world's only Hindu kingdom say they will boycott the municipal polls, calling them a bid "to camouflage

the lack of democracy".

On Friday, tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Kathmandu in pro-democracy demonstrations timed to coincide with King Gyanendra's return. Political leaders say they plan more protests in the weeks ahead.

King Gyanendra made no comment on the plans by the seven mainstream parties to form a pro-democracy alliance with the Maoists as long as the insurgents lay down their arms.

Last week, the RSS news agency, seen as a government mouthpiece, denounced the link-up between the parties and the Maoists as an "unholy alliance."

## Candidates register for Palestinian election

REUTERS, AFP, Gaza

Candidates began signing up on Saturday for a Palestinian legislative election next month at which President Mahmoud Abbas' restive, ruling Fatah will face an unprecedented challenge from powerful Islamist faction Hamas.

Beset by violence and allegations of voter fraud during its primaries, Fatah did not immediately have a candidate list ready. Hamas, in its first parliament race, also held off registering, saying it would not present a list before Sunday.

That left dozens of Central Elections Committee offices that opened throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip dealing with smaller factions and a slew of independent candidates who had mustered the required 500 signatures each from supporters.

## Rice to warn Europe to back off over secret prisoner flights

REUTERS, Washington

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is expected to give allies in Europe a response next week to their pressure over Washington's treatment of terrorism suspects: back off.

For almost a month, the United States has been on the defensive, refusing to deny or confirm media reports the United States has held prisoners in secret in Eastern Europe and transported detainees incommunicado across the continent.

The European Union has demanded that Washington address the allegations to allay fears of illegal US practices. The concerns are rampant in among the European public and parliaments, already critical of US prisoner-abuse scandals in Iraq and Guantanamo, Cuba.



PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri earthquake survivors sit outside a tent in Drangyari, some 130kms northwest of Srinagar yesterday. The October 8 earthquake killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistan and 1,300 in India, and the focus now is on the 3.5 million people facing a harsh winter without enough food or proper housing.

## UN WARNS Quake aid efforts on knife's edge

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Eight weeks after the South Asian earthquake, efforts to shelter thousands of Kashmiri survivors from the killer Himalayan winter are on a knife's edge, the United Nations said Friday.

Many tents handed out to victims are not designed for winter, while complacency about the aid given so far was a bigger enemy than the weather and the rugged terrain, UN emergency coordinator Jan Vandemoortele said.

"The situation remains very difficult and indeed we are on a knife's edge," Vandemoortele told a news conference in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital.

The October 8 earthquake killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistan and 1,300 in India, but the focus now is on the 3.5 million underfed people facing winter

without homes.

The three biggest needs were providing heating for freezing families; corrugated iron sheets so quake victims can build shelters from the rubble of their homes; and winterised tents, Vandemoortele said.

There were encouraging aspects to the aid effort but massive problems remained, adding: "We have got two versions of the story, of the glass being half full and half empty."

Darren Boisvert of the International Organisation for Migration, which is leading efforts to provide shelter, warned that 90 percent of the 420,000 tents handed out "are not winterised".

But Vandemoortele stressed that most people were using blankets and plastic sheeting to bring their tents up to standard to get through the winter.

## 2nd Chinese city shuts own water plant

AP, Yilan, China

A second city in northeast China shut down a water plant on a poisoned river, fearing contamination from the approaching toxic chemicals, a city official said yesterday.

Farther downstream, residents of the Russian border city of Khabarovsk bracing for the arrival of the polluted water vented their anger at China.

The shutdown Friday in Jiamusi, a city of about half a million people, came as China's chief environmental regulator resigned, taking the blame for the Nov. 13 chemical spill into the Songhua River in China's northeast.

The disaster has disrupted water supplies to millions of people living along the river and strained relations with Russia.

The benzene from a chemical plant explosion upstream is expected to reach Jiamusi on Tuesday, according to the government.

## Pak Afghan border closed after clash

### Taliban kill Afghan official, cops

AFP, Chaman/ Kabul

Pakistan closed its main border crossing with Afghanistan after a confrontation between the two countries' frontier guards, a military official said Friday.

The crossing at Chaman on the Pakistani side and Spin Boldak in Afghanistan was shut late Thursday after a Pakistani soldier was "abducted" by Afghan troops, Pakistani spokesman Colonel Hassan Jamil told AFP.

The Afghan guards kidnapped the soldier after Pakistani troops refused to allow entry to a group of 12 people who did not have proper travel documents, he said.

"The soldier was however released after some time and the Afghan officials at a meeting later expressed regrets over the incident," he said.

The matter has been resolved but the border remains closed, he said.

The Pakistan side has since told Afghan officials that they would not allow people to cross the border without proper documents, to stop militants or criminals entering the country, he said.

"We hope the border will be reopened on Saturday," Jamil said.

Meanwhile, a remote-controlled bomb and a separate ambush, both claimed by Taliban militants, killed a district chief and three policemen in southern Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

The bomb was detonated Friday under the vehicle of the head of Shawali Kot district of insurgency-hit southern Kandahar province, deputy head Obaidullah Khan said.