



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers are transported by boat through floodwaters near submerged houses in the village of Falimari in Dhubri district, some 330km from Guwahati yesterday. The flood situation in Assam has reached a critical level with some 600,000 people in 12 districts reeling under the swirling waters of the River Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

India, Naga rebels extend ceasefire

AFP, Guwahati

Indian government negotiators and rebels from the northeastern state of Nagaland indefinitely extended a ceasefire yesterday, a joint statement said.

But the rebels, who have been fighting since 1947 to create a "Greater Nagaland," urged New Delhi to come up with a solution to end the longest-running political feud since India's independence from Britain.

"Now it depends on New Delhi to come up with a mutually-acceptable solution or else the ceasefire could be abrogated immediately," said V Horam, a leader of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

The joint statement was issued at the venue of the talks in insurgency-wracked Nagaland state and follows 50 previous rounds of peace talks.

"After reviewing the status of the talks, it was decided to extend the ceasefire indefinitely," it said.

'Iran biggest threat to US interests in ME'

Rice denies Bush policies spreading fear in the region

BBC ONLINE, AFP, Sharm el-Sheikh

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has warned that Iran poses the biggest threat to US Middle East interests, as she begins a major regional tour.

Rice and US Defence Secretary Robert Gates are meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Arab ministers at the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

The meeting comes after Washington confirmed plans for a massive arms deal for the region.

The tour is aimed at uniting US allies against Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.

Rice denied Iranian claims that US policies were spreading fear in the Middle East.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman

MohammadAliHosseinihadaccusedtheUS of tamishing good relations between countries of the region.

The rare joint trip by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defence Secretary Robert Gates is also aimed at encouraging their allies to help stabilise Iraq and bolster the US-backed Baghdad government.

"As security permits we hope more states would undertake more diplomatic missions to Iraq," Rice told journalists on her way to the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, appealing also for further Iraq debt forgiveness.

Arab diplomatic missions in Baghdad have scaled back their representation following a campaign of attacks and kidnappings.

The US officials' arrival was preceded by Washington's announce-

ment on Monday of a multi-billion-dollar military aid bonanza for so-called moderate Arab states whose foreign ministers the US duo is due to meet.

"We will have a chance to talk about what initiatives we might undertake with our friends and allies in the security and political areas," Rice said. "We are very concerned to be able to provide for the security of our long-standing allies in the region." The United States revealed new military pacts worth 20 billion dollars (14.6 billion euros) for Saudi Arabia, 13 billion dollars for Egypt and 30 billion for Israel in a bid to counter Iran.

Iran's nuclear programme and influence among Shia Muslim militant groups have long been sources of US concern.

During a stop-over in Shannon, Ireland, Rice told reporters: "There isn't a doubt, I think, that Iran constitutes the single most important, single-country challenge to... US interests in the Middle East and to the kind of Middle East that we want to see."

The trip is the two officials' first joint tour of the region.

They will visit Egypt and Saudi Arabia together, and other countries separately.

Gates told reporters travelling with him that US officials wanted "to reassure all of the countries that the policies that (US President George W Bush) pursues in Iraq have had and will continue to have regional stability and security as a very high priority".

Myanmar under fire at ARF meeting

AFP, Manila

Asian nations piled pressure on Myanmar while China pledged to be a good neighbour, as foreign ministers from across the region met on the eve of high-level security talks here yesterday.

With less than two full days to carry out dozens of group and one-to-one talks on everything from terrorism to the economy, diplomats held a flurry of meetings as Philippine police tightened security across the capital Manila.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, who also vowed to defend his country over a failed terrorism case against an Indian doctor, led criticism of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, after the isolated state objected to a new human rights body.

"What amazes me about Burma is that... the leadership seems completely insensitive to and impervious to the views of the outside world," said Downer, adding various strategies had failed to sway the ruling junta.

"There have been sanctions, there has been so-called constructive engagement, there have been human rights dialogues, there have been visits, there have been representations, there have been threats," he said.

"But nothing moves the leadership of Burma."

Diplomats said Myanmar's objec-

tions nearly kept the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) from mentioning the creation of a new human rights body in the draft of its first-ever charter presented on Monday.

The draft included the rights body but contained no details on how or when it would come into being, and Downer urged China and India to help get the reclusive state to restore democracy and release activist Aung San Suu Kyi.

Meanwhile China again promised that its rising power was not a threat to the region, vowing to be a good neighbour to Asean at a meeting with foreign ministers from the bloc as well as his own country, Japan and South Korea.

"China is committed to building good-neighbourly relations and partnerships with its neighbours and strengthening cooperation in the region," Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said.

"All of this shows that Asean Plus Three has made a great contribution to peace, stability, economic development, social progress and common prosperity," he said.

Ministers also held a moment of silence before the meeting to pray for two South Koreans kidnapped and slain in Afghanistan by the hardline Taliban.

Taliban set new deadline as 2nd S Korean killed

AFP, Ghazni

Afghanistan's Taliban set the government a new deadline of noon (0730 GMT) today to meet its demands in order to save 21 South Koreans, a day after a second hostage was killed.

The headline Islamic militia wants the government to free at least eight Taliban prisoners in Afghan jails, a demand government negotiators have rejected.

"If our demands are not met by then, we will start killing the rest of the South Koreans," Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi told AFP.

The bloodied corpse of the second hostage to be killed since 23 were kidnapped nearly two weeks ago was found early Wednesday in the southern province of Ghazni, about 140km south of Kabul.

The body was dumped in a field just off a main road, with the hands tied and bullet wounds to the head.

South Korea's foreign ministry identified the victim as Shim Sung-Min, 29. The country reacted with outrage.

"The Korean government strongly condemns and urges an immediate end to these heinous acts of killing innocent people in order to press for demands that it can't meet," the presidential office said.

Media reports said Shim had quit his job at a Seoul IT company two

months ago to become a teacher at the disabled at a Seoul church, which had then sent him to Afghanistan on an aid mission.

The body of pastor Bae Hyung-Kyu, 42, who had been leading the group on the mission to the risky south, was found in the same area last Wednesday.

The South Korean government urged the international community to "use flexibility" to save the remaining 21 hostages.

But a spokesman for President Hamid Karzai said the Taliban's demands should "as a principle" not be accepted as this would only encourage kidnapping.

If the government continued "responding positively to their request and to the demands of the terrorists, we'll face more problems," Humayun Hamidzad said.

"I think as a principle we shouldn't encourage kidnapping by accepting their demand," he said, adding: "This shouldn't become an industry."

Five Taliban prisoners were freed from jail in March in a widely criticised deal that saved an Italian journalist kidnapped by the Taliban. The rebels nevertheless killed two Afghans captured with him.

Analysts warned at the time that the exchange could encourage kidnapping by militants and criminals alike. Karzai vowed then that such swaps would not

be repeated.

The Taliban has said it is also holding a German engineer who was kidnapped in Wardak province near Kabul a day before the South Koreans. It has also demanded the release of prisoners to save his life.

Police said Tuesday that a four-man Afghan health team missing near the southern city of Kandahar since Monday had been kidnapped but it was not clear who might be holding them.

Government negotiators said meanwhile they were continuing efforts to free the remaining South Koreans, 16 of whom are women, but there had been little movement.

"Taliban are not responding very nicely," Mahmood Gailani told AFP. "We are hopeful to find a solution, but it's very difficult."

The government side was still asking the militants to release the female captives while the rebels stood firm on their demand that Taliban prisoners should be freed first, he said.

"We are asking for more time," Gailani said.

The Taliban meanwhile claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing near international troops in the capital Kabul Tuesday. The blast killed an Afghan truck driver and wounded three US soldiers, local police said.

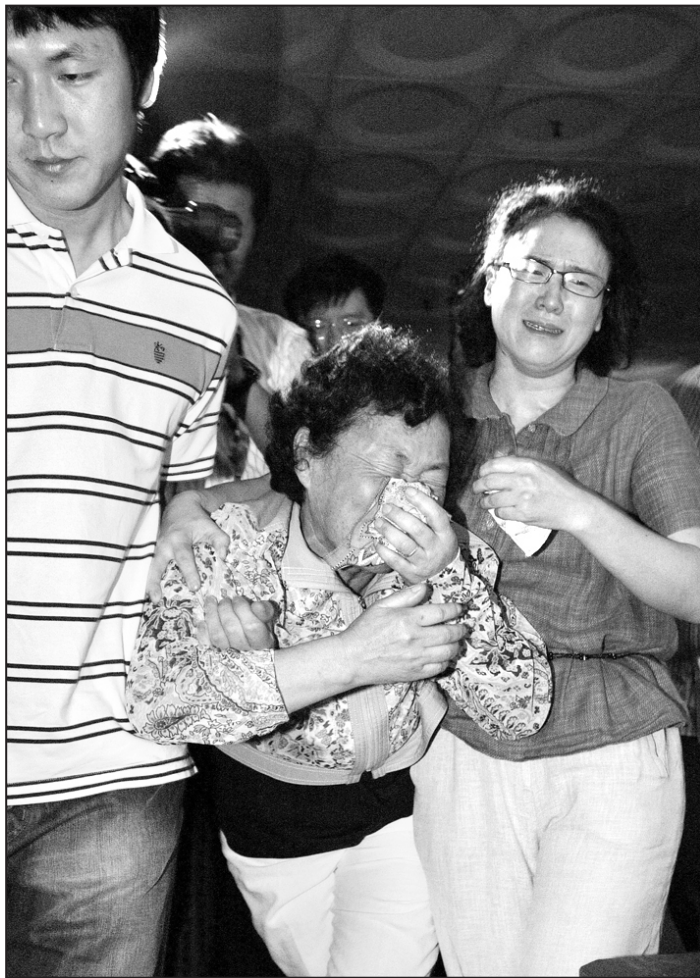


PHOTO: AFP

The mother (C) of Shim Sung-Min, one of the South Koreans held in Afghanistan, cries with her family members in Seongnam, south of Seoul after hearing the news that her son was killed by the Taliban yesterday.

69 trapped Chinese coal miners fed milk

AP, Beijing

Rescuers poured milk down a coal mine's ventilation pipes in a bid to save 69 workers trapped underground for more than 50 hours in central China, state media said yesterday.

The Xinhua News Agency said authorities were maintaining contact with the workers via a fixed line telephone, and there were no reported injuries.

The 69 were trapped when the state-owned Zhijian mine in Henan province's Shan County was flooded early Sunday. Thirty-three miners managed to escape.

Late Monday, 400 kilograms of milk was sent down 2,624-foot long ventilation pipes into the pit, it said. Rescuers were hoping the milk would "prolong the miners' lives and give rescuers more time to eventually save them," it said.

Maldives heads for referendum on political system

AFP, Colombo

The Indian Ocean tourist paradise of the Maldives will hold a referendum to decide the future role of its powerful presidency held by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom for the past 29 years, officials said yesterday.

The main opposition party welcomed the move to hold a plebiscite next month on whether the presidency or a parliament should govern the country.

"The referendum will give people the choice to decide whether they want to be ruled by a presidential or a parliamentary system of government," Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) founder Mohamed Lathief said.

Currently the country has an appointed body known as the Majlis, which can comment on, but not change presidential legislation.

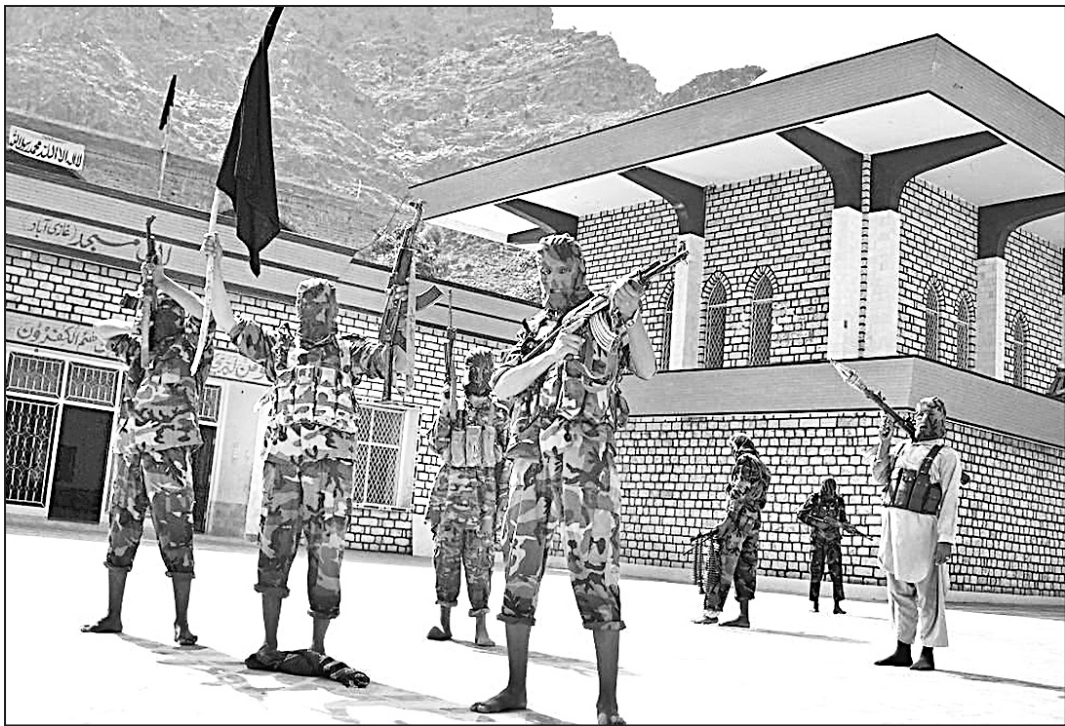
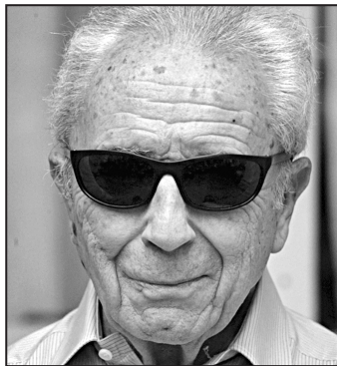


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani pro-Taliban militants who seized a historic shrine shout slogans as they stand inside the shrine in Lakaro village in the lawless Mohmand tribal district bordering Afghanistan, some 60km northwest of Peshawar on Monday. Pro-Taliban militants who seized a historic shrine and named it after Islamabad's radical Red Mosque said they would resist with suicide bombing if Pakistani troops tried to flash them out.

'New Red Mosque' rebels threaten suicide attacks

AFP, Lakaro

Pro-Taliban militants who seized a shrine and named it after Pakistan's radical Red Mosque said Monday they would retaliate with suicide bombings if troops tried to flush them out.

Around 150 armed masked men late Saturday took control of Turangzai Sahib Mosque in a village in lawless Mohmand tribal district, some 60km northwest of Peshawar.

The militants renamed it the Red Mosque, referring to the radical mosque in the Pakistan capital where more than 100 people died in clashes between security forces and militants early this month.

A group of journalists who visited the tribal district's Lakaro village saw some 50 masked men wearing camouflage jackets and armed with rocket launchers and assault rifles occupying

the mosque's ground floor.

More militants were holed up on the first floor of the building.

"We are ready to sacrifice our lives for the mission of Abdur Rashid Ghazi", a militant leader, who identified himself as Umar Khalid, told reporters.

He was referring to the Red Mosque's firebrand cleric who died when troops launched their assault this month.

Khalid claimed he had the support of some 3,000 tribesmen from Mohmand district, which borders Afghanistan's volatile Kunar and Ningharhar provinces.

"Local tribesmen are financing our program to implement Sharia in the region," he said, adding that he and his men were ready to wage Jihad (holy war) against the United States and its allies.

Nuke accord recognises 'real difference' between India, Pakistan: US

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

The United States says it considers relations with both India and Pakistan as important but the accord to implement India-US civil nuclear deal is a clear recognition of a "real difference" between them.

Washington "also wants to see a dialogue between India and Pakistan, dialogue that has expanded and has grown under the leadership of President Pervez Musharraf and others," State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey said on Monday.

But "...this is not something that should be viewed as an action that we take with India that somehow requires a similar action in the case of Pakistan," he said in response to a question suggesting that Pakistan had test-fired another missile capable of carrying nuclear weapons to "challenge" the deal.

"And I think we've also been very

clear that because of the issues with proliferation from Pakistan, that it's a very different situation between those two countries. And the fact that we have this agreement with India now is a clear recognition that there is a real difference," Casey added.

Repeating US Under Secretary of State Nick Burns' remarks on Friday on the formalisation of the 123 agreement, "the critical piece required under our law" to implement the nuclear deal, he said, "we believe that we have a relationship with India that's important and we have a relationship with Pakistan that's important."

"In the case of India, we've moved forward with this arrangement because, as the President said and as you heard from Nick on Friday, India has been a responsible actor. It's been outside the non-proliferation regimes, but it's actually behaved responsibly. It hasn't proliferated weapons technology. It hasn't done anything to undermine international assurances," Casey said.

Putin backs Abbas to secure Palestinian unity

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin voiced support yesterday for efforts by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to end a bitter stand-off in the Palestinian territories.

"I want to assure you that we will support you as the lawful leader of the Palestinian people. We are certain that you will do everything to secure unity," Putin told Abbas at the start of key talks in the Kremlin.

Abbas said he would make "every possible effort" for unity following a bloody takeover of the Gaza Strip last month by the Islamist radical movement Hamas opposed to his Fatah party.

Russia has carved out a unique position in Middle East diplomacy by maintaining contacts both with Fatah and Hamas, which is considered a terrorist group by the European Union and the United States.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stressed in his Monday meeting with

Abbas "the need to restore Palestinian unity through dialogue between all political forces," the ministry said in a statement.

Speaking in Gaza on Monday, sacked Palestinian premier Ismail Haniya said that his Hamas movement would welcome Russian mediation "to fill the gap between us and Fatah, to put an end to the crisis."

But Abbas was expected to press Moscow to cut contacts with Hamas during his three-day visit, which ends Tuesday, though the Russian foreign ministry on Monday gave no indication it would do so.

Abbas and the newly-appointed Palestinian prime minister he backs, Salam Fayyad, have ruled out any dialogue with Hamas as long as the movement maintains its takeover of the Gaza Strip.

Ahead of the meeting in the Kremlin, Abbas said that he was "eager" for the talks with Putin in order to find ways in which Russia could help end the "inter-

nal political deadlock" in the Palestinian territories.

The Palestinian president has declined to openly criticise Russia for engaging with Hamas, telling Russian daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta in an interview published Tuesday that this was "Russia's matter as a sovereign state."

Putin has worked steadily to boost Russia's presence in the Middle East, though Russia's official contacts with Hamas -- including a Moscow visit by the group's chief Khaled Meshal in February -- have been criticised in the West.

The Palestinian president's visit comes amid efforts to inject new energy into the Middle East Quartet, which recently appointed former British prime minister Tony Blair as its envoy.

This week's talks also precede a Middle East conference scheduled for September at the initiative of US President George W. Bush.

'1000 Maoist fighters fled Nepali camps'

THE KATHMANDU POST/ ANN, Chitwan

Over one thousand Maoist Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) fighters, including two platoon commanders, cantoned at the Maoist Fourth Division in Nawalparasi have fled the camps over the past six months, a Maoist platoon commander has claimed.

Addressing a press conference in Narayanghat on Tuesday, commander of the Maoist fighters cantoned at the Jhyaltung Danda, Kul Prasad Bhattarai also known as Kusum disclosed that some one thousand PLA fighters had left the cantonments over the past 6-7 months.

"Initially, there were 1500 fighters in the main cantonment. Now there are only 1000," Kusum said, "Some 500 fighters from three other satellite camps, too, have fled."

"There are only four thousand fighters left in the main as well as three

satellite camps," Kusum added.

He also informed that the number of PLA fighters who had left the camps could be even higher.

A large number of PLA fighters have fled the camps over the last couple of days, accusing the party of not providing them the monthly allowances and perks released by the government.

"The amount released by the government for the PLA fighters has been subjected to extreme misuse. None of our comrades who were injured during the war have received treatment. When we raised this issue, we were threatened with action. The fighters have been victims of the dictatorship of the camp leadership," said Kusum.

He added that the PLA fighters have not received the monthly allowance of Rs3000 each and medical allowances allotted by the government.



PHOTO: AFP

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (R) meets with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown at the UN Headquarters in New York yesterday. Brown addressed the United Nations Tuesday on the need to focus on meeting key poverty reduction targets, a day after reaffirming support for Washington on tackling extremism.

Italian film legend Antonioni dies

AFP, Rome

Director Michelangelo Antonioni, one of the last great figures in Italian cinema, has died at the age of 94, ANSA news agency reported Tuesday quoting his family.

Antonioni, who made only about 20 films, died at his home on Monday night, the report said.

His major movies included "Blow Up", made in England in 1966, "L'Avventura" ("The Adventure") in 1960, and his 1975 work "The Passenger", starring Jack Nicholson.

"Blow Up" won Antonioni the Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival in 1967, while the Venice film festival honoured him with the Golden Lion for "Red Desert" (1964) and a career Golden Lion in 1983, followed two years later by a career Oscar.

Born in Ferrara, northern Italy, on September 29, 1912, into a well-to-do family, Antonioni excelled in economics at the University of Bologna.