

Myanmar completes charter talks: Delegates

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's National Convention, a military-appointed group tasked with drafting guidelines for a new constitution, completed its work yesterday, delegates to the talks said.

"Everything is finished today," said one delegate, who declined to be named.

The convention will officially close on Monday, the delegates said, but declined to provide details because they were not authorised to speak to reporters.

The talks have dragged on fitfully for 14 years, and the work concludes as Myanmar's military regime headed by Senior General Than Shwe is contending with the most sustained protests against its rule in almost as long.

Peaceful anti-government rallies broke out in the commercial capital Yangon on August 19 in protest at a massive hike in fuel prices.

The junta has accused the protesters of attempting to disrupt the National Convention.

Activists say that more than 100 people have been arrested since then, including top pro-democracy leaders, but near daily protests have continued to pop up around the country.

Myanmar has been without a constitution since 1988, and the military claims that writing a new one will be the first step on a "road map" to democracy that, in theory, would eventually lead to free elections.

But pro-democracy supporters have already warned that the proposed constitution risked sparking new protests.

The constitutional talks have been derided internationally for failing to include the National League for Democracy (NLD), headed by detained Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

The NLD won elections in a landslide victory in 1990, but the military refused to recognise the results.

FOUNDING ANNIVERSARY Sonargaon Hotel to donate revenues for flood victims

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel, Dhaka is celebrating its 26th founding anniversary this year in a different way by donating 26 percent of its revenues to be earned throughout the celebration period from September 2 to 12 to flood victims.

"This donation is part of our social responsibility towards our community," said Hidetaka Ishiyama, general manager of the hotel, at a press conference yesterday.

Under the banner 'Mission Possible 26', the hotel therefore invites its valued guests to join a series of special events during the period and contribute to the process of helping the flood-affected people of the country.

The highlights of the anniversary programme include Ladies Day on September 6, Children's Day on September 7 and Gala Dinner with a complementary exclusive fashion show from the fashion house Vasavi on September 8.

On Ladies Day, the women will be offered free services in the beauty parlour of Pan Pacific Sonargaon, while on the Children's Day, the children will be offered various toys and fun, said Selina Momen, public relations and communications manager of the hotel.

"No extra charge will be made from the guests for the special services," she added.

The hotel will also hold a raffle draw everyday. Hidetaka Ishiyama said, adding that the money collected from the project will be donated to the Chief Adviser's Relief Fund.

The general manager said Sonargaon has commitments to their guests, associates and the community.

"During our celebration, we cannot leave a section of our community who have been badly affected by the devastating flood. This prompted us to think differently while celebrating the anniversary," he said.

Apart from the decision of donating 26 percent of revenues from the 'Mission Possible 26', all the staffs of the hotel have also donated salaries of one day for the flood victims, said Hidetaka Ishiyama.

"And some of our associates have also donated the salary of full one month for the purpose," added Selina Momen.

"One of the objectives of such initiative is to create awareness that we also have our role to play for our community," she noted.

Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmed, director of People Innovation and Education, MA Awal, director of sales, and AKM Morshed, director of technical services, were also present at the press conference.



Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) organised a Charity Ball at Radisson Water Garden Hotel in the city on Thursday to raise funds for the acid survivors. The photo shows some acid survivors and sponsors of the fund at a press conference held at the same hotel yesterday.

More relief, donations pour in for flood victims

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Different government and non-government bodies, political parties and social organisations continue to distribute relief materials among the flood victims as well as making donations to the Chief Adviser's Relief and Welfare Fund through Bepza.

Youngone Hi-Tech Sportswear Industries Limited has been conducting relief distribution programmes and providing free medical services among the flood victims around Dhaka Export Processing Zone area. It has already distributed medicines among 6,158 flood hit people. The company also donated Tk 50 lakh to the Chief Adviser's Relief and Welfare Fund through Bepza.

Youngone will set up a temporary medical camp in Shishu Kanan Ideal School of Ershad Nagar at Tongi in Gazipur and provide free medical services from 9:00am to 3:00pm on today and Monday.

Workers' Party of Bangladesh (WPB) distributed relief among the flood-hit people in Tangail.

While distributing relief, WPB General Secretary Saiful Haque urged the government to start post flood agricultural rehabilitation

programme immediately and to allocate cash, seeds and fertiliser to the farmers.

He also urged the government to start Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and different employment projects in Tangail, Gaibandha, Kurigram, Jamalpur, Sherpur and other Monga (a near famine situation) prone areas and to continue the programmes for at least three months.

National Garment Workers' Federation distributed relief among around 300 garment workers at Bashabo playground. Dr Kamal Hossain and General Secretary of the federation Amirul Haque Amin were present during the distribution programme.

Society of Justice and Mukto Shishu O Nari Samik Forum also distributed relief and cooked food.

Meanwhile, The University of Asia Pacific (UAP) is helping the flood-affected people by providing oral saline, water purifying solution and dry food. Members of the Board of Governors of UAP Foundation and Faculty members of the UAP have donated their one day's salary to the University Flood Relief Fund.

Our Gaibandha Correspondent

adds: Gono Unnayan Kendra gave 125 ultra poor families Tk 3000 each at Arendabari union in Phulchhari under Char Livelihood Programme (CLP) on Thursday to help the flood victims rehabilitate.

Ballamjhar Union Information Centre with the help of Mass Line Media Centre (MMC) and Manusher Jonno Foundation distributed relief among 125 ultra poor families of the union.

Two killed in road accident

BSS, Feni

One person was killed in a road accident at Sonagazi in Feni on Thursday while another succumbed to his injuries yesterday.

The accident took place when an autorickshaw they were travelling in collided head-on with a pickup van at Bakarmunshi at Sonagazi.

Omar Faruk, son of Abdul Haque, died on the spot while Palash Chandra Sheel, 22, son of Dwijendra Kumar Das, was rushed to Sadar hospital in a critical condition.

Palash succumbed to his injuries at Feni Sadar Hospital yesterday.

Housewife killed over dowry

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Chittagong

A housewife was allegedly killed for dowry at Sitakunda in Chittagong yesterday.

Police recovered the body of Pyara Begum, 20, wife of Hafizur Rahman Raju, from her in-law's house at Malipara of Bhatary under Sitakunda upazila at around 1:30am yesterday.

Police suspect that Pyara was strangled by her husband and others over dowry.

Investigation Officer (IO) of the case Sub Inspector (SI) Shamsuddin Mohammad Khorshed said they found the body lying on the floor and a scarf was tied round her neck.

Police arrested Shaheda Begum, mother-in-law of the victim, while her husband went into hiding.

Meanwhile, in another incident an unidentified person, aged around 55, died as he fell from a tree at Chandaganj in the port city yesterday afternoon.

Seriously injured, he was rushed to Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) at around 1:00pm where the on duty doctors declared him dead.

9 arrested for stealing laptops from cars

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police yesterday arrested nine members of a gang which was involved in stealing laptops from different private cars in the city.

Police also recovered 10 laptops and Tk 92,500 from their possession in a drive at Tilpa para of Khilgaon area.

Rowshon Ali, a sub-inspector of Gulshan Police Station, told The Daily Star that following the increase of laptop stealing from the cars in last five months, a special team comprising three sub-inspectors of Gulshan, Khilgaon and Badda police stations were formed.

Under the leadership of the deputy commissioner (DC) of Gulshan zone, Sub-Inspectors Rowshon Ali, Iqbal Hayat and Shamsuddoha arrested the gang and recovered the valuables.

Quoting the gang leader Abdur Rahim, police said they bought the laptops from the thieves paying Tk 12000 to 15000 per set and sold them in the shops at higher prices.

Using special keys, they could open the door of the cars parked on city streets and took away the laptops and other valuables, the police added.

Inter-Service Qirat, Azan contest prize distributed

BSS, Dhaka

The prize distribution ceremony of the Inter-Service Qirat and Azan Competition-2007 was held at the Army Central Mosque at Dhaka Cantonment after Juma prayers yesterday.

Bangladesh Navy won the title obtaining 1991 points while Bangladesh Air Force became runners-up with 1920 points, said an ISPR press release.

In Qirat competition, Mus-1 MS Islam of Bangladesh Navy won the first prize while Sergeant Md Emdadul Islam of Bangladesh Army got the second prize.

Meanwhile, in Azan competition, Lance Naik MZ Abedin of Bangladesh Navy won the first prize while Top-1 MW Islam of the same team got the second prize.

The top two prize winners of the champion team recited verses from the Holy Quran and rendered Azan respectively on the occasion.

Chief of Air Staff Air Marshal SM Ziaur Rahman attended the ceremony as the chief guest and listened to Qirat and Azan of the competitors. Later, he distributed the prizes among the winners.

Senior military officers, a large number of members of three services and other devotees were present on the occasion.



Dong Yung Yoon, country manager of Woori Bank Dhaka Branch, hands over a cheque for Tk 10 lakh to Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed at his office recently in donation to the relief fund for flood-affected people.



Md Aminul Hasan, acting managing director of Teletalk Bangladesh Ltd., hands over a cheque amounting to one day's salary of the officers and employees of Teletalk to Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed at his office recently for flood-affected people.



Officials of Ahsanullah Engineering College Club of 1954-58 batches hand over a cheque for Tk 70,000 to Brac Chairperson Fazle Hasan Abed in contributions for flood relief operations recently. Club President AH Abdur Rahman, Vice-President Ataur Rahman and General Secretary M Mujibur Rahman were present.



Bangladesh Red Crescent Society Chairman Prof Dr Abdur Rob distributes relief among flood victims in Dhamrai on Thursday. The Centre for the Defence of Human Rights organised the relief distribution programme.



Students of the University of Asia Pacific prepare oral saline for distribution among flood victims.

Russia plans manned Moon mission by 2025

AFP, Moscow

Russia plans to send a manned mission to the Moon by 2025 and wants to build a permanent base there shortly after, the head of Russian space agency Roskosmos said yesterday.

"According to our estimates we will be ready for a manned flight to the Moon in 2025," Anatoly Perminov told reporters. An "inhabited station" could be built there between 2027 and 2032, he said.

The only moon landing in history is NASA's Apollo expedition in 1968.

Laying out Roskosmos' plans for the next three decades, Perminov said that Russia's space programme receives less than 10 percent the funding the US programme receives, yet retains great ambitions.

Russia intends to complete construction of its section of the

International Space Station by 2015 so that the ISS "becomes a fully-fledged space research centre," he said.

"Major modernisation" will also be carried out to the Soyuz craft used to ferry people and cargo to the space station.

An expedition to Mars remains a long-term ambition for Roskosmos, which hopes to mount manned flights there after 2035, he said.

Many difficulties linked to the planet's extreme physical conditions remain unresolved, however. "Current spacecraft do not provide the protection needed for the crew to survive and return to Earth," he said.

The expected two- to three-year duration of the voyage would also involve huge challenges in terms of storage space and stress on the crew, he said.

Shiite clashes in Iraq ominous

AP, Baghdad

Rivalries and violence between Shiite factions are threatening to overshadow progress US forces have made against al-Qaida in Iraq and other extremists just weeks before the top American commander and diplomat in Iraq report to Congress.

An all-out, Shiite-on-Shiite conflict could plunge the oil-rich and mainly Shiite south of Iraq into chaos that could rival or even surpass the bloodshed across Baghdad and the centre of the country for more than four years.

That, in turn, could shatter the relative unity in the Shiite mainstream, which has given crucial support to the US-led mission in Iraq, and deepen the predicament of embattled Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Clashes between rival Shiite factions have not been uncommon since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, but the most recent ones are by far the most ominous given their deadliness, scope and timing.

For Washington, the danger of a full fledged armed conflict in southern Iraq could not have come at a worse time.

Gen David Petraeus, America's top commander in Iraq, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker are due to report to a skeptical Congress on the Iraq war in less than two weeks.

A southern Iraq mired in political turmoil and bloodshed could only strengthen the argument of war critics and intensify calls for a draw down on the estimated 160,000 US troops now in Iraq.

Dealing with such a conflict could pose a serious dilemma for the US military to watch from the sidelines while rival factions fight it out or intervene to restore the peace.

Taking the first option would undermine the military's reputation as the ultimate guarantor of security in Iraq. The second would most certainly mean bolstering the relatively light US military presence in the area now overseen by British forces giving the politically damaging impression of a widening war.

The major players in the power struggle in the south are the Mahdi Army militia loyal to anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, the country's largest Shiite political party and the patron of the Badr militia.

Security forces in the region are known to be dominated by supporters of the Supreme Council, led by Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, whose family has been locked in a long-

running competition with al-Sadr's family over leadership of Iraq's Shiites.

The rivalries boiled over into deadly clashes Monday and Tuesday in the holy city of Karbala during a major Shiite religious festival. Dozen of people were killed.

ANALYSIS

In an apparent bid to deflect criticism of the Mahdi Army over the violence in Karbala, al-Sadr announced Wednesday a "freeze" of the militia of up to six months to allow for its restructuring. The move was followed by reported threats by al-Sadr aides that the feared militia would resume its activity if the arrest of Sadrists officials did not stop.

Tensions have been building up in the south in recent weeks, with two provincial governors assassinated and clashes erupting in several cities between the Mahdi Army and Badr militia.

The future of south Iraq looks even more uncertain because of Britain's plans for the gradual reduction of its military force in southern Iraq, where it has played a

key role in keeping the peace among rival Shiite factions since its arrival in 2003.

One particularly ominous sign came Sunday when about 50 Mahdi Army militiamen systematically looted a former British-Iraqi security command.

Hassan al-Suneid, a key Shiite lawmaker from al-Maliki's Dawaa party, also sought to discount the significance of the latest tensions, arguing that there has been no sign to date to suggest that irreparable damage has been inflicted on the unity of Iraq's Shiites, who account for about 60 percent of the country's estimated 27 million people and are Iraq's most dominant group.

"It is mostly a case of political jockeying," said al-Suneid. "Everyone wants to be seen as Iraq's hero and the deliverer to win a larger popular following."

The rivalry between Shiites in the south is mainly motivated by the pursuit of domination in the strategic and potentially rich Shiite heartland.

Beside the vast oil reserves, control of the south offers the wealth generated by the area's shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, which attract millions of visitors

every year and cash donations by pilgrims. The two cities also are prestigious seats of Shiite learning.

Part of the problem in the south is that the Sadrists did not take part in local elections held in January 2005, selecting to focus instead on the simultaneous parliamentary vote. That decision allowed their rivals in the Supreme Council to dominate the local governments across the south, leaving the Sadrists bitter and angry over their lack of representation.

The deeper roots of the conflict may be found in the makeup of the protagonists themselves.

Al-Sadr's supporters are primarily poor Shiites who gain from the services offered by the group and obtain a sense of empowerment through membership of the Mahdi Army. In contrast, the Supreme Council is perceived as a magnet of middle- and upper-class Shiites and enjoying the endorsement of the wealthy and traditional clerical leadership.

"In many ways, the Sadrists are leading a social revolution," said Joost Hiltermann, Middle East director of the International Crisis Group, a respected research agency based in Brussels, Belgium.

"It is a struggle against the traditional political class and the wealthy merchants of the Shiite shrine cities who support the Council," Hiltermann said.

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