

UNSC laments lack of progress on Myanmar

AFP, United Nations

The Security Council on Thursday bemoaned the slow progress in initiating democratic reforms in Myanmar and pressed for an early visit to the country by UN mediator Ibrahim Gambari.

After huddling with Gambari, the 15 council members said in a statement that they "regretted the slow rate of progress so far toward" meeting objectives they set out last October, a month after Myanmar's military junta crushed the biggest pro-democracy protests in nearly 20 years.

Underscoring the importance of "further progress" toward the goal of reconciliation between the military regime and the opposition, they noted that "an early visit by Gambari could help facilitate this."

Gambari, the UN's point man in efforts to foster reconciliation between the military government and the Western-backed opposition, said all council members stressed, during closed-door consultation, "the need to accelerate progress."

Gambari has visited Myanmar twice since the bloody military crackdown in September on peaceful protests led by Buddhist monks.

The repression was sparked by protests against a steep rise in fuel prices a month earlier, which rapidly escalated into demonstrations against the military junta, which has ruled Myanmar for decades.

Gambari said he asked to return to Myanmar this month but was told by authorities that an April visit would be more convenient for them.

He added that all council members supported an "early visit as a means to engage the government of Myanmar in all areas of concern."

Last October, the Security Council adopted a non-binding statement calling for "the early release of all political prisoners and remaining detainees," including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace laureate, led her National League for Democracy (NLD) to a landslide victory in 1990 elections, but the result has never been recognised by the junta which placed her under

house arrest.

After Thursday's meeting, US Ambassador to the UN Zalmay Khalilzad told reporters that "in order for success to be achieved, we need to increase the pressure" on the military regime.

He stressed the need to "reduce the gap between where things are and where they need to be" in terms of democratic reforms, full respect for human rights, an end to forced labour and to repression of ethnic minorities.

Khalilzad specifically urged countries with influence on Myanmar, such as China, India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to persuade the military regime to cooperate with Gambari.

China is a major supplier of weapons to Myanmar and has come under criticism for its policy of non-interference in the reclusive southeast Asian nation's affairs.

India has also cultivated close ties with Myanmar's military rulers in recent years, citing its huge energy requirements as well as its need to jointly battle separatist rebels who are active along the two countries' jungle border.

Divisional Math Olympiad held in Khagrachhari

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Khagrachhari

The 6th Divisional Mathematical Olympiad was held on Khagrachhari Government High School premises yesterday.

Bangladesh Mathematical Olympiad Committee organised the event jointly sponsored by Dutch Bangla Bank Limited and The Prothom Alo.

Khagrachhari Government High School Headmistress Sri La Talukder inaugurated the function at about 10:00am while Khagrachhari Hill District Council Chairman Monindra Lal Tripura was also present.

Over 1000 students from different educational institutions in Rangamati and Khagrachhari participated at the Olympiad in four categories.

Among them, 60 students were selected for the national Olympiad, to be held on February 14-15 in Dhaka. The selected students were awarded crests and certificates.

Resident Editor of the Prothom Alo Abul Momen, Prof Lutfuzzaman, Prof Rashed Talukder, Prof Ashabul Hoque and Secretary to Bangladesh Mathematical Olympiad Committee Mohammad Munir Hossain also spoke on the occasion.



PHOTO: STAR

Winners of the 6th Divisional Mathematical Olympiad pose for photograph with the guests on Khagrachhari Government High School premises yesterday. Bangladesh Mathematical Olympiad Committee organised the event jointly sponsored by Dutch Bangla Bank Limited and The Prothom Alo.

Iran receives nuke fuel from Russia

AP, Tehran

Iran received a third shipment of nuclear fuel from Russia yesterday for a power plant being constructed in the southern port of Bushehr, state radio reported.

The 11-ton consignment arrived at the Bushehr power plant on Friday morning, and the remainder of the fuel will arrive in five separate shipments in coming months, the radio report said.

Iran received the first two shipments of nuclear fuel from Russia on Dec. 17 and Dec. 28 after months of dispute between the two countries, allegedly over delayed construction payments for the reactor.

Iran has said Bushehr, the country's first nuclear reactor, will begin operating in the summer of 2008, producing half its 1,000-megawatt capacity of electricity.

Tehran heralded the first shipment as a victory, saying it proved its nuclear programme was peaceful, not a cover for weapons development as claimed by the US and some of its allies.

The US initially opposed Russian participation in building the Bushehr reactor and supplying it with fuel, but reversed its position about a year ago to obtain Moscow's support for the first set of UN sanctions against Iran.

The United States and Russia have said the supply of nuclear fuel meant Iran had no need to continue its uranium enrichment programme - a process that can provide fuel for a reactor or fissile material for a bomb. Iran has agreed with Russia to return the spent fuel to ensure it doesn't extract plutonium to build a bomb.

US blitz on al-Qaeda targets outside Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

The US military said on Friday it had renewed its air blitz on al-Qaeda targets south of Baghdad, dropping bombs on sites it said were training camps for the jihadi network.

The air strikes were part of Operation Phantom Phoenix, a major assault launched on January 8 by US and Iraqi forces on al-Qaeda, considered by US commanders to be the greatest threat to stability in Iraq.

A military statement said that on Wednesday 10,000 pounds (4,500 kilos) of munitions were dropped on bunkers in Arab Jabour, a Sunni rural area on the southern outskirts of the capital, reportedly used by al-Qaeda to train recruits.

"Air Force B-1 Bombers dropped 19 GBU-31s (guided bomb units) on the site," it said in Friday's statement.

Last week American warplanes dropped 47,500 pounds of explosives in a 10-minute blitz on Arab Jabour in one of the heaviest aerial bombardments since the US-led invasion in 2003.

US commanders said 47 targets were hit in that raid, while an anti-Qaeda "Awakening" leader in Arab Jabour said that at least 21 al-Qaeda fighters were killed. The US military did not mention casualties in its latest statement.

When Phantom Phoenix was launched, Lieutenant General Ray Odierno, the US second-in-command in Iraq, said the operation aimed to "pursue and neutralise remaining al-Qaeda in Iraq and other extremist elements."

Hillary tries to mend ties to blacks

AP, Compton

Hillary Rodham Clinton and her campaign tried to mend ties to black voters Thursday when a key supporter apologized to her chief rival, Barack Obama, for comments that hinted at Obama's drug use as a teenager.

The candidate herself, meanwhile, praised the Rev. Martin Luther King and promised to assist with the rebirth of this troubled, largely black city.

Bob Johnson, the founder of Black Entertainment Television, apologized for comments he made at a Clinton campaign rally in South Carolina on Sunday that hinted at Obama's use of drugs as a teenager. Obama is running to be the first black president.

Johnson initially denied he was talking about Obama's drug use, saying he was referring to the Illinois senator's days as a community organizer.

Johnson backed away from that explanation Thursday, two days after Hillary Clinton said during a nationally televised debate that she considered his comments "out of bounds."

"In my zeal to support Senator Hillary Clinton, I made some very inappropriate remarks for which I am truly sorry," Johnson said in a written statement. "I hope that you will accept this apology. Good luck on the campaign trail."

Johnson's comments and remarks by both Clintons before the New Hampshire primary last week had alarmed several black leaders and drew a rebuke from

Obama and his top aides.

It began when Hillary Clinton gave an interview in which she seemed to discount King's role in the civil rights movement. Later, former President Clinton cast aspects of Obama's candidacy as a "fairytale."

Obama and Hillary Clinton later called a truce in the controversy, and Clinton offered another olive branch Thursday when asked whether she would consider choosing Obama as her vice presidential running mate.

"I can't think that far ahead because it's bad luck. I'm very superstitious, and I don't want to be presumptuous," she said. "But he is an extraordinary man and has so much to give our country. I hope however this works out he will be a major figure in American politics for years and years to come."

Johnson's apology and Hillary Clinton's visit to Compton was her latest effort to reconnect with the black community after she and Obama engaged in a bitter exchange of words over the issue of race.

In Compton, Clinton praised King and promised to assist with this city's rebirth.

"Those who say it can't be done are usually interrupted by those who are doing it," she said during an appearance at a church, quoting noted black novelist James Baldwin.

Hillary Clinton pledged to help Mayor Eric Perodini with his goal of "birthing" a new Compton, which has struggled with crime and poverty.

Bush backs 'full scope' of Iran findings

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush endorses the "full scope" of last month's US intelligence findings on Iran, the White House said Thursday after Bush seemed to distance himself from the report.

"The president stands by the full scope of the findings in that they were put together by incredibly dedicated people that did their best work and put their best views out," spokesman Tony Fratto told reporters.

On Tuesday, the president had emphasised that the US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was crafted by "independent" spy agencies that "come to conclusions separate from what I may or may not want."

And his chief spokeswoman, Dana Perino, refused to say that he endorsed the NIE's chief finding that Tehran shelved a nuclear weapons programme in 2003, in what was seen as a blow to Washington's efforts to confront its archfoe.

Media accounts of Bush's message to Middle East leaders during a week-long trip to the region cited anonymous officials as saying that he distanced himself from the NIE, which is the consensus of all 16 US spy agencies.

Iran still aiding Iraq insurgents

Says US general

AFP, Washington

Iran is still training and funding insurgents attacking coalition troops in Iraq, the second highest US general serving in the country said Thursday.

"We know that they continue to train Iraqi extremists in Iran, we know that they continue to pay some of these extremists," General Raymond Odierno told reporters here, referring to Iran.

"We are not sure if they are still sending weapons into Iraq but we are certainly uncovering a lot of Iranian weapons here," he said in a video conference from Baghdad.

The United States has consistently accused its long-time foe Iran of backing extremists in its majority-Shia Muslim neighbour, where insurgents have carried out regular deadly attacks following the 2003 US-led invasion.

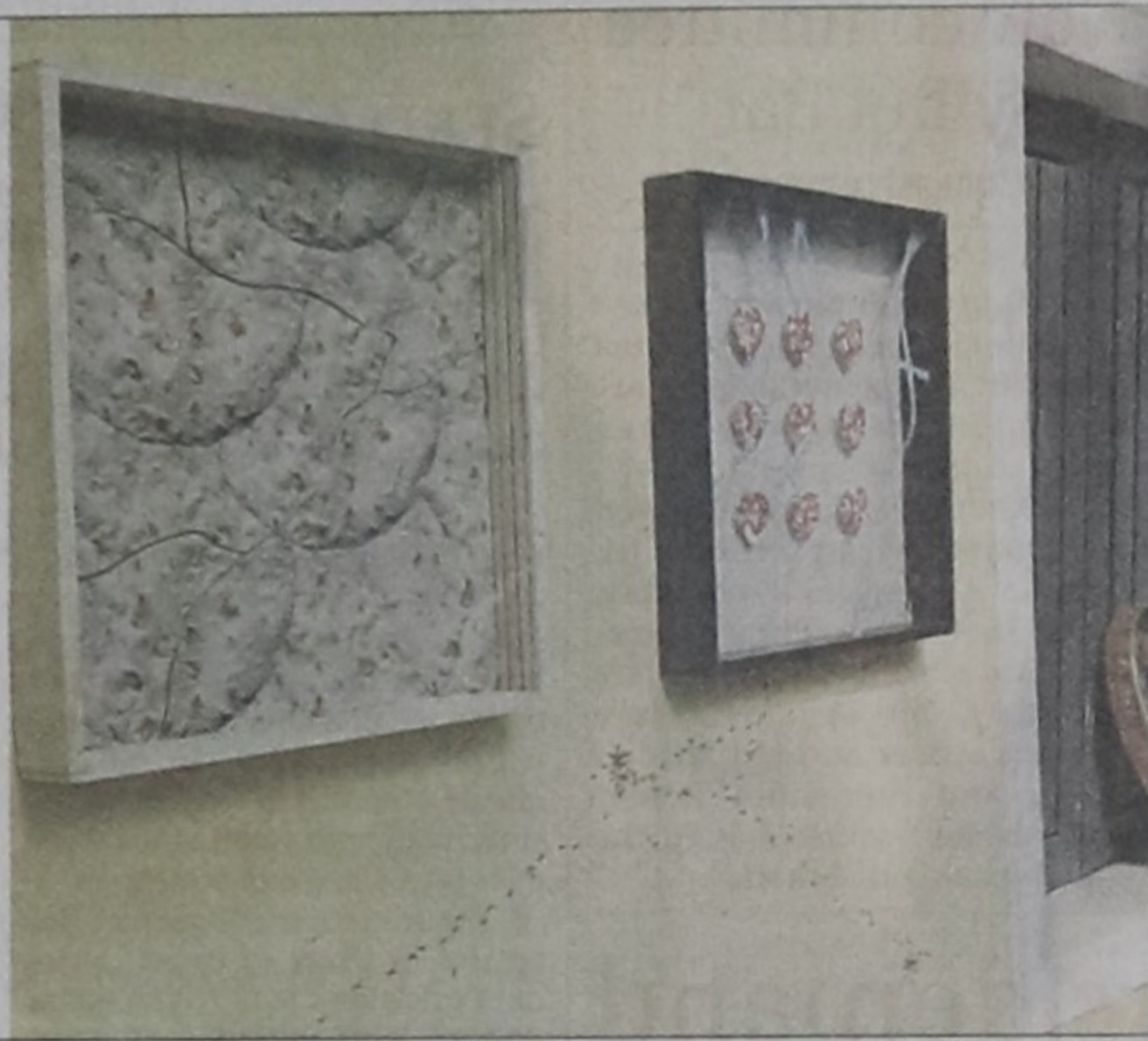


PHOTO: STAR

(Left) An artwork by Bangladeshi artists and (right) artworks of a Pakistani artist.

Thai official claims al-Qaeda funding Muslim militants

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's government spokesman Friday for the first time claimed al-Qaeda is funding Islamic separatists in the southern provinces, but the prime minister swiftly said any support is only ideological.

Chaiya Yimvilai told reporters the deadly insurgency in Thailand's mainly-Muslim southernmost provinces has intensified recently as a result of funding from the international terror network.

"The situation has intensified recently because they received money from overseas, from the international terror organisation al-Qaeda," Chaiya said.

But an hour later, army-installed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont used his daily press briefing to reassert the government's long-held position that any links to the al-Qaeda network are purely ideological.

The contradicting assessments highlight the government's failure to come to grips with the nature of the insurgency that has claimed more than 2,800 lives since fighting broke out four years ago.

No group has claimed responsibility for the violence, and the government has yet to publicly identify any of the militancy's leadership.

Chaiya bluntly told reporters that in addition to funding from al-Qaeda, corrupt Thai soldiers and politicians as well as drug traffickers had a hand in the unrest. "There are also local drug traffickers involved in both financial support and buying arms for militants," he said.

"Violence will continue because there are many factors, including corrupt local officials in uniform, with both local and national politicians involved," he added.

Surayud however reiterated Thailand's position that the conflict along the southern border with Malaysia is an entirely domestic problem with no formal links to global Islamic extremists.

"This organisation (al-Qaeda) has no capacity to provide financial support. Their only exchanges are ideological ones with the various groups operating in the south," Surayud told reporters.

The latest remarks about a possible al-Qaeda role came at the end of a week of grisly attacks in the provinces where the rebellion

began in January 2004.

Separatist rebels killed eight Thai soldiers in Narathiwat on Monday and tried to decapitate them, while at least 37 people were injured Tuesday when a bomb exploded at a morning market in Yala.

Surayud was appointed premier following a bloodless coup in September 2006, when the nation's first Muslim army chief, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, toppled prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Thaksin's heavy-handed tactics had been blamed for worsening the conflict, and Surayud quickly offered a series of olive branches to the militants in hopes of curbing the unrest.

Instead, killings have grown more frequent and more brutal since the coup, with both Buddhists and Muslims targeted every day.

An average of 72 people have been killed each month since the military took power, sharply up from 53 deaths every month before the coup, figures from independent monitoring group Intellectual Deep South Watch show.

Artists' workshop held in Bogra

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Bogra

A workshop of artists from home and abroad was held in Bogra yesterday.

The workshop was organised by Britto Arts in collaboration with the Ford Foundation and Nijera Kori, a non-government organisation.

Nijera Kori Coordinator Khushi Kabir and Prof Latifa Akand were present at the workshop.

At least 17 artists from home and abroad took part in the workshop.

Sources said Simon Tipping of the UK, Susanta Mondal of India, Atif Khan of Pakistan, Nishanata Hettriarachchi of Sri Lanka, Sujat Chitrakar of Nepal, Mariyam Omar of the Maldives, Ya-Chu Kang of Taiwan, Krishna Luchoom of Mauritius and Juman Al Nimri of Jordan attended the workshop as overseas artists.

Ashok Kartmoker, Mostafa Sharif Anwar, Ronni Ahmed, Manjur Ahmed, Lucky Barua, Yasmin Jahan Nur, Mahmudur Rahman and Tejosh Halder Josh were the Bangladeshi artists present at the workshop.

The main object of the workshop was to create and develop the relationship between the artists of different countries.

The culture of different countries was projected at the workshop.



PHOTO: STAR

Visitors admire the artworks put on display at an exhibition by Wakilur Rahman at Gallery Kaya in the city yesterday.

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