

Women's Day remains a reminder of enduring inequalities

Nearly 100 years old, International Women's Day on March 8 marks an ongoing worldwide battle to ensure equal rights for half the globe's population on issues such as work, voting and abortion.

Conceived in 1910, and recognised by the United Nations in 1977, the origin of marking a day for women's rights is actually American -- although, like many such symbolic days, is clouded in uncertainty and competing claims.

In the United States, the country's long-defunct Socialist Party of America celebrated a National Women's Day on February 28, 1909.

But it was a year later, at an International Socialist Women's conference in Copenhagen, that

the notion was born of an international day to celebrate the female sex -- at a time of mounting anger over unequal treatment in politics and the workplace.

On March 19, 1911, the day was commemorated for the first time in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, with more than a million women and men coming out onto the streets.

A massive women's protest in the Russian city of Saint Petersburg in 1917 to protest the price of bread and to welcome soldiers home from the World War I front on March 8 (February 23 in the Russian calendar) helped spark the Russian Revolution and cement the day in history.

Today, the March 8 tradition remains strong in communist countries: in China, for example, female workers are granted a half-

day off.

Elsewhere, it gained momentum alongside the broader feminist movements of the 1970s, when women seized the symbolism of the day to mark their demands for equal political and social rights.

In 1977, it was officially declared by the UN General Assembly as the United Nations Day for Women's Rights and International Peace.

And at a 1995 UN Women's Conference in Beijing, representatives from 189 countries agreed that gender inequalities affected the well being of all the world's population -- both men and women.

Today, the day serves as a reminder of the fields in which women must still battle for fundamental rights, and where they remain victims of violence and enduring inequalities.

Fresh fighting claims 66 in Sri Lanka

AFP, Colombo

At least 61 Tamil Tiger rebels and five government troops were killed in fresh fighting across Sri Lanka's embattled north, the defence ministry said on Friday.

Heavy fighting along the de facto border with territory held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) saw fierce clashes on Wednesday and Thursday, leaving a total of 66 combatants killed, the ministry said.

It said security forces had captured key locations from the Tigers in the coastal district of Mannar over the past two days.

A pro-rebel Tamil MP and his driver were killed in a bomb attack inside rebel-held territory on Thursday, officials said. The rebels accused the security forces of carrying out the attack.

So far this year, the defence ministry has reported that security forces have killed at least 1,901 rebels for the loss of 112 govern-

ment soldiers.

The government numbers cannot be independently confirmed as Colombo bars journalists and rights groups from embattled areas.

Three Sri Lankan MPs have also been killed this year, including the lawmaker killed Thursday.

The latest violence came as the island's government, which claims to be gaining ground in intensifying combat with the rebels, was accused this week of being behind hundreds of "disappearances."

The report from New York-based Human Rights Watch -- entitled "Recurring Nightmare: State Responsibility for 'Disappearances' and Abductions in Sri Lanka" -- also added to calls for tough United Nations monitoring.

Sri Lanka has in the past accused diplomats raising concerns over human rights of being "terrorists" and supporters of the Tigers, who are waging a decades-old battle for an independent homeland for the island's Tamils,



An ethnic Chinese woman walks past an election campaign banners of the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) at a predominantly-Chinese wet market in northern Penang state, on the eve of Malaysia's 12th general elections yesterday. Malaysia's ruling coalition made an all-out push to counter a resurgent opposition which hopes to deny it a two-thirds majority for the first time.



Indian women perform a traditional Punjabi dance during celebrations for International Women's Day in New Delhi yesterday. International Women's Day is being celebrated across the world today.

Differences remain between PPP-PML-N

THE DAILY TIMES, Islamabad

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari said on Thursday that though major issues had been sorted out with coalition partners alluding mainly to Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz but 'small matters' remained unresolved.

Zardari also said the nominee for the prime minister slot would be finalised by the time the National Assembly was called into session, but reiterated that he was not in the running.

"I would have been the candidate for prime minister by virtue of the party office [I hold], but I have decided not to be a candidate," he said.

Although the party tried to project the impression that delaying the nomination for the premiership was a tactical move, party sources cited internal differences over the prime ministerial candidates -- Makhdoom Amin Fahim, Yousaf Raza Gilani, Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Chaudhry Ahmed Mukhtar and the behind-the-scenes negotia-

tions with the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q).

The negotiations were being pursued in case the PPP failed to work out modalities with the PML-Nawaz, the sources said. The party was finding it hard to reach a working relationship with PML-N on the key issues of the restoration of the judiciary and working with President Musharraf, they added.

At the meeting, sources said Zardari had taken the party's National Assembly members-elect into confidence on the ongoing dialogue with other political parties on government formation.

Committee: The party named a five-member committee, consisting of Mian Raza Rabbani, Farooq H Naek, Sherry Rehman, Raja Pervez Ashraf and Syed Naveed Qamar to chalk out a working formula with the PML-N.

The PPP co-chairman also announced that he would conduct further meetings with the party's MNAs-elect from each division, separately, from today (Friday) to decide which prime ministerial candidate had the broadest support.

Saarc to collaborate on social research

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) countries have agreed to enhance collaborative research in the field of social science through exchange of social scientists and information on research outcomes.

The agreement was arrived at a meeting of the Regional Forum of the Ministers of Social Development which ended here on Thursday.

Holding that South Asia paid little attention to social science research, the meeting decided to promote activities in this area, recognising the importance of social development in line with SAARC Development Goals envisaged in the regional forum's Social Charter.

Given the fact that the focus of the meeting was on the Right to Information, it was agreed to take all possible steps to make right to information an effective tool of social empowerment by conferring it to all citizens.

The meeting also agreed to work towards eliminating arbitrariness and corrupt practices and improve governance at regional, national

and local levels.

"All the SAARC countries agreed have decided to replicate the Right to Information Act in their respective countries taking into consideration their economic and social limitations", India's Minister of State for Human Resource Development D Purandeshwari told reporters here.

Some SAARC countries like Pakistan told the meeting that they have the Right to Information at local level and extension of the same at a higher level would have to happen at a later stage.

Bhutan's Education Minister Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho said "we have already prepared the draft to come out with an Act to provide access to information at all levels. However, making it a law would take a little time".

The SAARC also decided to help Afghanistan in addressing its special needs in education, technical and vocational training, development of new technologies, protection of disabled persons, protection of children at risks and control of use of narcotics and drug trafficking.

UN envoy holds talks with Myanmar vote chief

AFP, Yangon

UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari met Friday with the top official overseeing Myanmar's upcoming referendum, officials said, in a bid to press for democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's inclusion in the process.

His meeting with Aung Toe, the Supreme Court chief justice tasked with organising the balloting, came after more than two hours of talks with the information minister, Brigadier General Kyaw Hsan, Myanmar officials said on condition of anonymity.

The content of Gambari's talks and even his itinerary has been kept under close wraps.

Gambari arrived in Yangon on Thursday, his third visit to the country since the regime launched a deadly crackdown on pro-democracy protests last September, killing at least 31 people according to the United Nations.

Myanmar's tightly controlled state media have said little about his latest mission. State television and official newspapers have limited themselves to briefly summarising Thursday's schedule, without comment.

Myanmar's political landscape has shifted enormously since his last visit in November.

A month ago, the regime surprised the world by announcing it

would hold a referendum on a new constitution in May, setting the stage for multiparty democratic elections in 2010.

The junta also brought in a law criminalising public speeches and leaflets about the referendum and announced that Aung San Suu Kyi would be barred from running in elections because of her marriage to a foreigner, Briton Michael Aris, who is now dead.

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party has already warned that the public would not accept the junta's new charter, but it has stopped short of calling for a boycott or urging a "No" vote.



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Afghan soldier to die for killing 5

AFP, Herat

A military court in Afghanistan sentenced an Afghan soldier to death for killing a US-led coalition troop and four Afghan colleagues last year, an official said yesterday.

The court handed down the punishment on Thursday to Shukrullah, who goes by one name, in the western city of Herat, where the multiple murders took place in July last year.

The court found him guilty of the fatal shootings, which took place after an argument in Guzara town of Herat, a top army commander General Jalandar Shah said.

"He was sentenced to death on charges of shooting and killing four Afghan soldiers and a coalition soldier last year. Three other soldiers were wounded," the commander told AFP.

The foreign soldier was wounded in the attack but died a day later.

So far this year at least 21 foreign soldiers, mainly under NATO command, have been killed in Afghanistan fighting a resurgent Taliban.

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