

## British Home Secretary's significant visit

Details of terrorist links should be made known

BRITAIN'S Home Secretary Jacqui Smith has been here in Dhaka on what was certainly a significant visit. In the course of her trip, she gave people a good deal of food for thought. Her unambiguous statement that there are links between terrorist outfits in Bangladesh and Britain is quite a revelation coming from a senior British government functionary. The reason is simple: rarely in the past has a British cabinet minister, or for that matter any high profile western visitor, been as candid as Ms. Smith. The issue she talked about in Dhaka is one that demands the closest attention. The possible global links between terrorist groups are matters that have persistently exercised minds in Bangladesh at various levels of government and also among the general public.

The British Home Secretary did not unveil the linkages even in broad outline, but she did note that a high level British-Bangladesh joint working group would be meeting in June to work out the details of practical programmes on counter-terrorism. One key aspect of such programmes will be sharing of information on terrorism and anti-terrorism training. That will surely be a step forward in dealing with the menace. We would like to add, though, that such information as passes between Dhaka and London should also be made available to the general public in Bangladesh in order for them to be forewarned of the threats held out by extremism. Since obviously the goals of the two governments in tackling terrorism are similar, it stands to reason that Bangladesh's citizens should be kept informed of the extent to which terrorists are maintaining links with one another in the two countries as well as their sources of funds. Both Britain and Bangladesh have experienced terrorist activities in the last few years. Since London has demonstrated much efficiency, especially since the 7 July bombings, in watching out for new outbreaks of extremist-related activism, we may have notes to exchange. That only emphasises the need for regular, necessary dissemination of public information about terrorist activities and so secure the fullest measure of public cooperation in combating terrorism.

Overall, Jacqui Smith's visit to Bangladesh was a reminder of what her country and Bangladesh need to do jointly to tackle the forces of extremist disorder. And together the two countries can put in their efforts in identifying the threats to global security and tackling them head-on.

## Expedite distribution

Allotted rice yet to reach targeted groups

A prominent Bangla daily brings into focus the fact that despite food and employment crises, some 13 thousand metric tonnes of rice allotted under test relief and food-for-work programmes remain stacked in government godowns. The food grains ought to have been distributed by February, according to plan. Now the Food Adviser Dr AM Shawkat Ali has asked the deputy commissioners to implement the unfinished projects and complete the distribution work by April 15.

Project implementation remains a perennial problem with us. No matter what the size of the project or the modalities of implementation, we have an uncanny ability for messing up things. The matter involved distribution of food grains in exchange for work, by far the simplest task of straight forward handing over of wage in kind. Even in doing this we have failed.

It's tell-tale negligence on the part of the authorities. In November-December last year the government had allocated 1,81,994 metric tonnes of rice to 479 upazilas under test relief and food-for-work programmes. Of the projects numbering 62,693, 19,702 involving 13,546 metric tonnes of rice couldn't be implemented.

The lapse is all the more inexplicable because the ministry had delegated the authority for project-wise distribution to the deputy commissioners. Of course the amount of rice stuck in the government godowns is not big but the episode raises a number of questions. Why in such a context of scarcity even a maund of rice should remain unutilised? It smacks of inefficiency and lack of supervision and coordination in the district administrations.

Some of the deputy commissioners have raised a few practical issues like delayed start of the projects for want of soil with the boro crop in the field. Due to lack of timely work evaluation, the fourth installment couldn't be given to the labouring poor.

We believe the whole matter warranted a probe which understandably the food adviser has ordered in a bid to find where things went wrong and devise ways and means to redress them.

## When country needed them most!



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE honourable food advisor gave us food for thought during a press conference last week when he said that there was no famine in Bangladesh. He analysed famine step-by-step, starting with scarcity, followed by starvation, ending with a large number of deaths. Then he said something stunning. Hidden hunger is on the rise in this country, and 800 million people on earth are exposed to it. Those who are new to the game of semantics, please note that it's an excellent example of how all the right things can be said in the wrong context.

It's hard to imagine why he said it though. What was on his mind? Was he showing erudi-

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tion? Did he try to duck questions on famine? Was he telling us one thing, and then rambling off to something else? In hindsight, no matter what, it wasn't the best thing to say.

I tried to find out what it means. Hidden hunger refers to an insidious type of hunger. It's caused by eating cheap and filling food, deficient in micro-nutrients and vitamins. Hidden hunger is widespread in the Third World, where families fill themselves with cheap rice, but can't afford a balanced diet including meat, fruit and vegetables.

The term isn't commonly used outside specialist journals, and the sub-editors of newspapers and magazines tend to use their blue pencils to mark it as jargon. Sometimes, it's employed as a general term for

## CROSS TALK

the extreme poverty that exists undetected or unacknowledged in developed countries. The presence of hidden hunger has been registered in countries like New Zealand and the USA.

Why did then the food advisor choose to use such an unfamiliar term? He was asked if there was any chance of a famine in the country, whether, if not already existing, an outbreak was likely as some experts were telling. His answers should have been sweet and short.

Instead, what he said raised more questions. If hidden hunger is rising, are more people falling below dietary standards? Is it an early sign of famine? Is it an outcome of increasing scarcity? Lesson number one in the art of public speaking: Never say more than asked, because it's like one step too many in a mine-

field. One slip of tongue, it can blow up in the face and destroy credibility.

This government's advisors are educated, intelligent, bright, experienced and accomplished, yet they go around saying things that make one sit up. Even in more advanced countries, spokespersons, including prime ministers and presidents, go through proper media training before facing the press. Have our advisors been media-trained?

Well, everybody knows these advisors don't have political experience. Everybody knows they don't have the guile and skills to tackle political questions. That isn't a problem for the politicians. But it may not be so easy for people with scruples. They can feel uncomfortable if truth must be twisted for political reasons.

## Winning election at all cost



ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

THE November 2008 US presidential election is still eight months down the line, and yet people around the world are attuned to the primary election process in which two candidates are heading for a showdown in the Democratic party's August convention in Denver, with the prospect of unelected super-delegates deciding the eventual nominee a process that the party is trying to circumvent.

This year's presidential race is intriguingly exceptional because of its historic nature an articulate 46 year old, charismatic Harvard-educated black senator and a high-powered Yale-educated female senator and former first lady, both contending for the Democratic Party's nomination -- both gender and race wise, a first ever in US history.

Amid the day-to-day dubious innuendos, self-embellishing mis-statements, and, of course, reciprocal diatribes by the candidates and their surrogates that keep streaming on the TV screen, the Republican Party's presumptive presidential nominee, Sen. John McCain a Vietnam war hero seems somewhat forgotten and unexciting.

While the persona of the two candidates are as contrasting as their difference in gender and race,

## NO NONSENSE

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media attention at home and around the world is equally animated because of the issues at stake - the economy, the plummeting dollar, global inflation, rising food and energy prices, the Iraq war, and green house gas -- that have both national and global implications.

Make no mistake, this election is profoundly viewed as an opportunity for change -- one that may transform America's image from the current "preemptive" warmonger to a presumptive peace maker -- to a kinder and gentler presidency.

Columnists and commentators argue that Obama, because of his amiable disposition, is more fitted for bringing about the desired changes than Clinton, who is perceived as divisive, conflicting and, of course, over-ambitious.

Sen. Pat Leahy's (and others') recent call to Sen. Clinton to quit her presidential bid has made her even more resolute to steer her campaign in full force. To avoid any potential backlash from such calls, Sen. Obama graciously, and rightly so, conceded that Sen. Clinton had the right to stay in the race for as long as she desired.

But there is an arithmetic reality at which a candidate's chances of winning become so low that to pursue the unattainable appears narcissistic, and Clinton seems to have reached that state. Her persis-

tence for the nomination is merely weakening the party's position, and the presidential bid of the eventual nominee.

There's hardly anybody who can persuasively argue that Clinton can overtake Obama in either pledged delegates or popular votes. However, her surrogates' stretched spin is that Obama's delegate lead is "small but almost insurmountable" (USA Today).

They argue that, since neither can wrap up the nomination with 2025 pledged delegates, the eventual nomination should be decided by the super-delegates -- and Clinton is hoping that the super-delegates will hand over the nomination to her as an entitlement -- a daydream scenario unless the party risks all-out riots on American streets reminiscent of what happened in the 1968 convention in Chicago.

Many commentators are convinced that Obama's nomination is all but certain. If a lead is insurmountable, then by definition, how can it be small? The rules that make it insuperable for Clinton to catch up -- proportionate allocation of elected delegates that award small net sums to the winner -- are exactly why Obama's lead is insurmountable.

If the race continues until the party's August convention, then it may not really matter who wins the

nomination -- Obama or Clinton. They have already inflicted mortal wounds on each other, the dirt they've thrown at each other has handed John McCain the ammunition to degrade his opponent with that same dirt. The Republican dirt machines are already oiled and tuned up, and ready to run nonstop to marginalise the Democratic nominee.

After her campaign began sinking, I saw the most vicious demeanour on the part of the Clintons. She has revealed herself as a "win-at-all-cost" candidate. Her innuendos and inaccurate statements about Obama are comparable to "below the belt" punches in boxing. Her mud-slinging and refusal to tame her tirades reminds me of the acrimonious BNP-AL politics.

What about her husband, and former president Bill Clinton? He seems to be always looking for an opportunity to throw "racially coated" words and phrases.

Wanting to win elections at all costs is a common trait of most politicians across all nations. However, in advanced democracies, the efforts are often limited to contentious rhetoric and running and rerunning TV advertisements of rivals' weaknesses and negatives. The Clinton campaign is doing that, but with such nastiness that it seems as if she isn't running against a fellow

But do they realise that perception is like bookkeeping, where every mistake is debit for them and credit for their critics? If today we hear that a political government would have handled the food situation better, it's because the balance sheet is tipping against them.

Since the food advisor has already spoken, he needs to speak more. We need a clear picture of the food situation. Robert Zoellick, the World Bank President, has made that job easier for him. The price of rice in global markets has nearly doubled in the last three months. Robert has also confirmed that the real price of rice rose to a 19-year high last month, while the real price of wheat hit a 28-year high. No questions asked. We are in difficult times. It's a global thing.

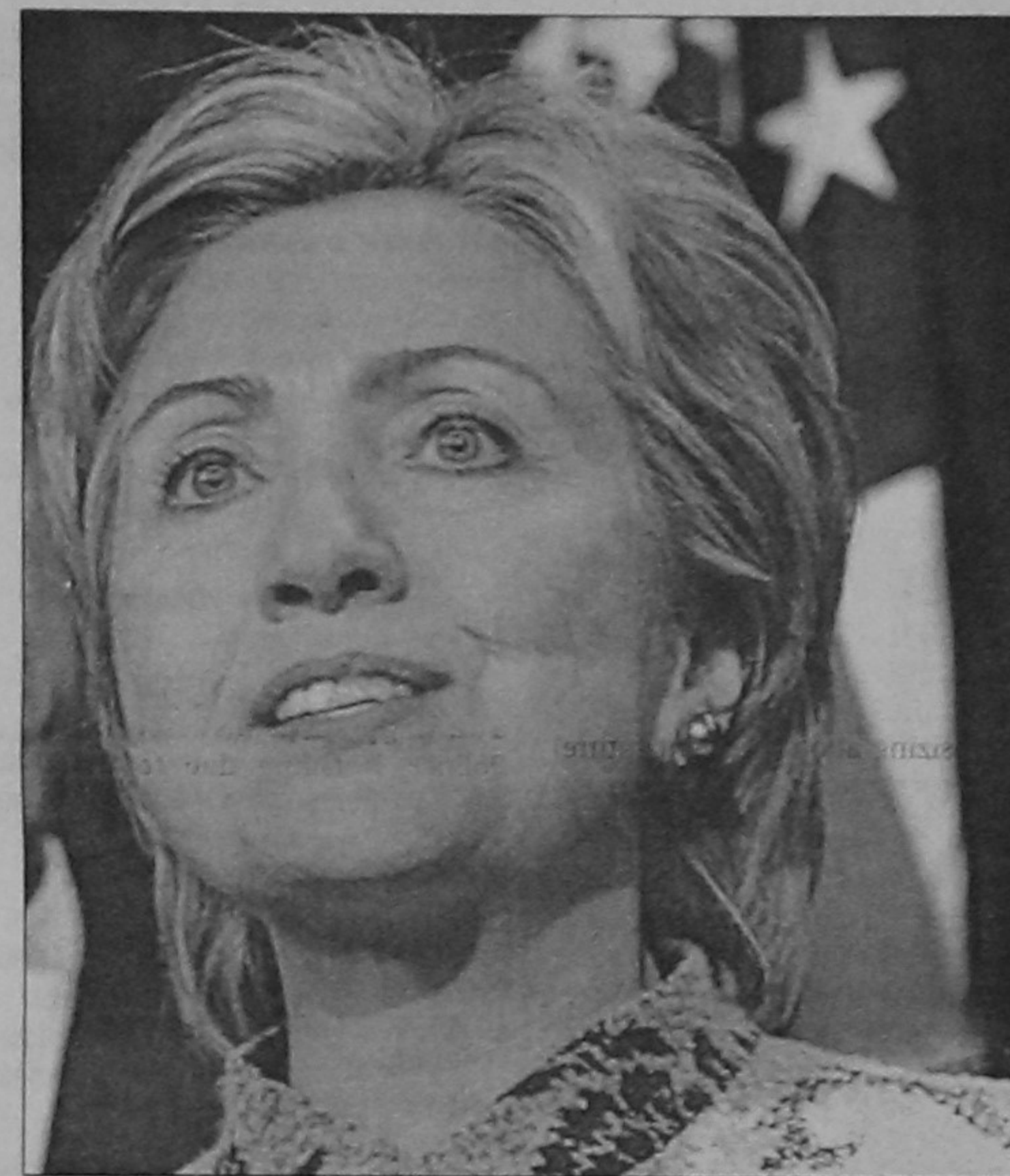
So, we want educated answers from educated people. We want numbers, plans, projections and strategies, something that gives an educated account of what lies ahead of us. We want to know how much of the 28 (?) million tonnes of food grain production we are going to achieve this year. How are we

planning to cover the usual supply-demand gap of 1.5 (?) million tonnes? If we are expecting a bumper crop, will 17.5 million tonnes of boro do anything to squeeze the prices? These answers are needed sooner than soon to tell people if they should worry or not.

If hunger is hidden, the hungry isn't hiding. People are streaming out of their houses and queuing up in front of the OMS trucks. This is scarcity. There is also news of starvation people skipping meals, changing food habit, eating less, adding salt and chilli to spike the rice to discourage children from excessive eating. Only large-scale deaths remain the missing link between where it stands today and a full-blown famine!

What we know is that if famine comes, it will pass. Crops will grow again and there will be harvesting times. Then people are going to sit down and think why top boys in class couldn't stay on top of things. That also only one time when their country needed them most!

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Win at all cost?

Democrat but against an equally nasty Republican rival -- which makes it utterly demeaning.

Like many of my friends, I cannot accept the possibility of seeing the Clintons back in the White House again because, once honourable people, they have now turned to be not so honourable after all. Their drive to win the election at all cost reminds me of politicians back home in Bangladesh, although the comparison is grossly unfair in any scale of measure. For example, the drive to win elections at all costs by BNP in the postponed election brought the country to

the brink of a possible civil war, which was averted by the promulgation of the 1/11 state of emergency.

The Clintons have a life-long record of working against discrimination based on race, gender, skin colour, religion, and so on. Now one of the products of that "diversity uplifting mission" has challenged their self-perceived entitlement -- one that would tarnish the legacy of the Clinton presidency -- for sure.

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## Getting out of reach

In a continent where rice is a staple food item and accounts for more than 40% of the calorie consumption of individuals, meeting the consumers' demand while keeping its prices low has emerged as a major challenge.

### NEWS DESK

THE higher prices of rice have rattled consumers and governments across Asia. Concerned by the problem of food security becoming worse, major importing countries have started looking for avenues to bring in more rice into their lands, while big producers are aiming to tame inflation by keeping more supplies at home to drive down domestic prices.

In a continent where rice is a staple food item and accounts for more than 40% of the calorie consumption of individuals, meeting the consumers' demand while keeping its prices low has emerged as a major challenge.

After three decades, the ghost of rice shortage and its spiralling prices have once again started to haunt Asian governments.

Rice stocks in Asia last hit a low in 1976, when consumption rose and harvests dropped, mostly due to bad weather and insects. Now, in 2008, we are facing the same prob-

lem again.

Although the latest figures on Asia's rice stockpile are not available, the US Department of Agriculture said that the world's rice inventories now stand at about 72 million tonnes, a record low since 1976. This means the world only has stock to meet 17% of global annual consumption, compared with 35% eight years ago.

This is certainly not good news for Asia, which consumes more than 80% of the rice produced in the world.

Anxiety is running particularly high in the Philippines, the world's largest buyer of the grain. A few weeks ago, Manila said it wanted to buy 500,000 tonnes of rice after failing to buy a similar amount earlier in March.

The Philippines is struggling to import up to 2.2 million tonnes this year, in what could be the biggest overseas purchase in a decade, to cover a production shortfall. The situation is similar in Bangladesh, where Cyclone Sidr

and repeated floods have destroyed majority of the rice crops.

While consumer nations such as the Philippines, Bangladesh, Indonesia, North Korea and Nepal fret over food security, big producers are aiming to tame inflation by keeping more supplies at home to drive down domestic prices.

In Vietnam, consumer prices rose by nearly 20% this month, the highest in more than 12 years. In a bid to stabilise prices, Vietnam, the second largest rice exporter, will limit rice shipments to 3.5 million tonnes, down from 4.5 million tonnes last year, a government statement quoted Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung as saying. Hanoi imposed a limit for the first 10-month shipment last week.

In India, wholesale price inflation is close to a 14-month high, posing a major policy challenge at a time when economic growth is slowing. New Delhi's response is to raise the minimum sale price for rice exports by more than 50%, effectively ending overseas sales of



Queuing up for rice.

all but the highest grades. Cambodia, a small exporter, also announced an export ban on March 27.

It is estimated that export restrictions have removed a third of rice traded in the international market, creating a shortage in supply. This short supply is, in

turn, fuelling price hike.

A recent Asian Development Bank report said prices of rice in the international market soared to \$700 per tonne in March from \$378 in December 2007. On April 3, the price of Thai rice, a global benchmark, jumped 30% overnight to an all-time high of \$760 per tonne

after Egypt, a leading exporter, imposed a formal ban on selling rice abroad in a bid to stabilise soaring prices at home. In Thailand, the world's top rice exporter, industry officials foresee prices rising to \$1,000 a tonne.

Experts have cited various reasons for this surge: less rice

yields as a result of typhoons, cyclones and flooding in the Philippines, Bangladesh and Indonesia, outbreak of a deadly disease that destroyed crops in Vietnam, reduction of land allotted to rice farming, and the recent panic buying and hoarding.

Worried by the rising prices, and fears of its shortage, consumers in Hong Kong are thronging to supermarkets to buy more rice. In the Philippines, consumers are flocking to buy up rations of government-subsidised rice, and in Bangladesh many arrive at the government-owned rice outlets early in the morning to secure a front spot in the line.

It is a well-known fact that rice is a staple food item for 2.5 billion Asians. Many Asians can go without meat, pork, chicken, fish and vegetables for days, but they will consider it the worst kind of deprivation if their meal does not contain rice.

In Asia, rice also accounts for more than 40% of the calorie consumption of most of its residents. Poor people spend a large proportion of their income for buying rice. Thus, the level of rice production and its prices are important factors in determining the progress made in the well-being and living standard of Asians.

Given this, taming the high prices of rice has become a major concern for governments across Asia.

Although governments are trying to solve the problem by extending subsidies or imposing price control mechanisms, these only provide short-term solutions. To avert similar problems in the future the governments must think of ways to increase the yields.

According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation, rice production in Asia, which contributes to 90% of the global rice output, rose by an estimated 0.4% to 389.9 million tonnes last year.

While in China and Indiathe world's largest and second largest rice producers, production went up by a meagre 0.7% and 0.5%, respectively, to an estimated 127 million tonnes and 93.3 million tonnes.

The governments should also funnel more funds into irrigation systems, seeds and crop management technologies. These can only provide a permanent buffer to the crisis we are currently facing.

(With reports from The Straits Times, Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Daily Star.)

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