

Hopes for Suu Kyi release fade at Asean meet

AFP, Singapore

Hopes for the release of Myanmar democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi were raised and then quickly faded at a meeting of Southeast Asian ministers, as officials said Monday that comments indicating she could be freed within months had been misinterpreted.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) foreign ministers have told their Myanmar counterpart they were "deeply disappointed" over the junta's recent decision to extend the opposition leader's house arrest by another year.

But Singapore Foreign Minister George Yeo said Sunday that the regime's foreign minister Nyan Win had suggested she could be freed within six months under a technical deadline set in Myanmar law.

Asked Monday whether Aung San Suu Kyi could be released then, Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda said: "That's our hope."

But Yeo said Monday that Nyan Win had been misunderstood, and that the legal limit of the detention period would only be reached "six months from May 2009" when the



Aung San Suu Kyi

one-year extension expires.

Aung San Suu Kyi has spent most of the past 18 years under house arrest at her home in the country's main city Yangon, with the most recent spell beginning in May 2003.

Trevor Wilson, a former Australian ambassador to Myanmar, said he expected the democracy leader to be kept in detention until elections billed for 2010.

"I don't think there's any evidence that the government is ready to release her," he told AFP.

David Mathieson, a consultant on Myanmar for US-based Human Rights Watch, said the military regime's claims to be abiding by national laws were farcical.

When the six-year limit expires "they'll probably just come back up with another excuse and bank on people's short memories," he said.

Mathieson urged Asean to push for Aung San Suu Kyi's immediate release, and to ensure she was freed without conditions and was permitted to travel the country and participate in the elections.

"It's a slow way of making her irrelevant, and that's the real crime," he said.

Myanmar's treatment of its democratic opposition is a perennial embarrassment for the bloc, comprised of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

On Monday it formally ratified Asean's new charter, but observers said they doubted the regime would live up to the document's ideals on democracy and human rights.

Thailand, Cambodia begin peace talks

AP, Aranyaprathet

Cambodian and Thai military leaders held talks yesterday aimed at reducing simmering tensions over disputed territory near a World Heritage Site temple, where more than 4,000 troops from the two sides have been deployed.

There was little sign of a swift resolution at the talks, which dragged on behind closed doors, leaving delegates from both sides visibly strained.

The conflict over territory near the ancient Preah Vihear Hindu temple escalated earlier this month when Unesco approved Cambodia's application to have the complex named a World Heritage Site. Thai activists say the new status undermines Thailand's claim to 1.8 square miles around the temple.

"I have full confidence that our joint efforts will result in a mutually satisfactory solution to (the) current problem," Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said in a letter to Thai Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej ahead of the talks at the Thai border town of Aranyaprathet.



PHOTO: AFP

A handout still video image made available by Israeli human rights group B'Tselem yesterday shows an Israeli soldier apparently shooting a rubber bullet towards the leg of a handcuffed and blindfolded Palestinian detainee who was protesting against Israel's separation barrier in the West Bank village of Nilin on July 7, 2008. The Israeli soldier caught on film shooting at the Palestinian detainee in the leg has been detained, the army said Sunday.

Anwar vows to topple govt

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim yesterday vowed to topple the prime minister despite what he called attempts to "demonise and intimidate" him.

Anwar said allegations of sodomy levelled by a 23-year-old male aide showed he posed a threat to Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's National Front coalition, which has ruled Malaysia for more than 50 years.

"We are on track to take over the government. We want to pursue this agenda for reform," a smiling Anwar told reporters.

"Clearly, I am a political threat," he added.

Anwar has denied the accusations by Mohamad Saiful Bukhari Azlan, which he says were fabricated to prevent him from seizing power after the opposition made unprecedented gains in March elections.

"What is the issue? I have not seen the (police) report (made by Saiful)," he said.

Anwar's Keadilan party aims to establish a new coalition government by the end of the year, its information chief told AFP.

"We are confident a change of government will happen by year-end," said Tian Chua.

British PM warns Tehran in Israeli parliament speech

AFP, Jerusalem

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown warned Iran yesterday it must freeze sensitive nuclear work or face more sanctions, in the first address by a British premier to the Israeli parliament.

He also railed against Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's "abhorrent" threats against Israel and declared that Britain stands alongside the Jewish state.

Brown, who held talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders on Sunday, said peace was within their grasp, but only if Israel withdraws from settlements in the occupied West Bank and the Palestinians stamp out "terrorists".

His comments on Iran's nuclear drive echoed a warning by US

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that Tehran had two weeks to respond seriously to an international offer or face further "punitive measures".

"Iran now has a clear choice to make: suspend its nuclear programme and accept our offer of negotiations or face growing isolation and the collective response not of just one nation but of all nations round the world," Brown said.

"Just as we have led the work on three mandatory sanctions resolutions of the UN, the UK will continue to lead -- with the United States and our European Union partners -- in our determination to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapons programme."

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Israel "highly appreciates"

Brown's "determination... (on the) issue of terrorism and Iranian nuclear armament."

"The most serious threat for stability in the Middle East and the global peace is rooted in... Tehran," he added.

Brown was introduced by parliament speaker Dalia Itzhik, who said "the Iranian nuclear spearhead is directed not only towards Israel but towards the entire West."

Tehran is "inciting genocide and they are about to complete the last stages of nuclear weaponry. Many are trying to reassure us that the Shoah (Holocaust) will not be repeated," she said.

Brown's spokesman said the premier did not rule out "extended sanctions in some form on the oil and gas sector" in Iran, OPEC's number two producer.

Zimbabwe parties to sign accord

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's ruling party and opposition were set to sign a pivotal deal on Monday that would pave the way for fully-fledged talks on resolving the country's protracted political crisis.

Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa said an agreement would be inked Monday afternoon, laying out a framework within which negotiations would be held under the mediation of South African President Thabo Mbeki.

"The signing will take place this afternoon," Chinamasa, who is also the chief negotiator for President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, told AFP.

A source from the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, asking not to be named, confirmed that "the MOU (memorandum of understanding) is going to be signed this afternoon."

The move towards substantive negotiations comes after a series of meetings between Mbeki, the rival parties and officials from the United Nations and African Union.

There were conflicting reports as to whether Mbeki would be flying into Harare for the signing of the agreement, with sources in Harare indicating he would land in the early afternoon while his spokesman would not confirm this.

"When the president goes out of the country we always issue a statement. So there hasn't been a statement issued yet," presidential spokesman Mukoni Ratshitanga told AFP.

UN special representative to Zimbabwe Haile Menkerios and African Union commission chairman Jean Ping, who met with the parties over the weekend, expressed confidence the "pact" would be signed for talks to go ahead.

Obama begins firsthand inspection of Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama began Monday his first on-the-ground inspection of Iraq since launching his bid for the White House, with US commanders ready to brief him on progress in a war he long opposed and Iraqi leaders wanting more details of his proposals for troop withdrawals.

His planned stops in Baghdad and other areas of the country marked the second major leg of a war zone tour that opened in Afghanistan. The contrasts in tone and message were distinct.

Obama sees the battle against the resurgent Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan as America's most crucial fight and supports expanding troop strength to counter a sharp rise in attacks.

But Obama had stood against the Iraq invasion and now worries that an open-ended US combat mission will sap military resources and focus at a time when Iraq violence has dropped to its lowest level in four years.

The Illinois senator travelling in a congressional delegation with Sens. Jack Reed, D-Rhode Island, and Chuck Hagel, R-Nebraska

arrived in the country early Monday. Their first stop was Basra, according to a US official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to give details of the trip.

Basra is the centre for about 4,000 British troops involved mostly in training Iraqi forces. An Iraqi-led offensive begun in March reclaimed control of most of the city from Shia militia believed linked to Iran.

Obama's travel precise travel plans were kept secret, but he was expected for a meeting Monday in Baghdad where the airport is located near the vast Camp Victory, a nerve centre for the US military in the palaces and gardens that were once part of Saddam Hussein's presidential compound.

The lawmakers made no public statements.

The meetings were expected to include the top US commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, and other military chiefs outlining the significant gains in recent months against both Shia militia and Sunni insurgents including al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The White House and military leaders and many residents of Baghdad trace the momentum back

to last year's buildup of more than 30,000 troops in areas around Iraq's capital. Obama's challenger, Sen. John McCain, has tried to hammer Obama on his critical remarks before the so-called "surge."

All five surge brigades have left Iraq, but there are still about 147,000 US soldiers in Iraq, more than in early 2007.

Obama has endorsed removing US combat forces over a 16-month period, but has been less precise on the size and type of US military role needed in Iraq after an exit from the battlefield.

Iraqi leaders are expected to press Obama for more clarity on his long-term vision. Such discussions have added importance since Iraq and US negotiators appear stalled in efforts to reach a long-range pact to define future US military presence and operations.

American diplomats hoped to reach a final accord by the end of the month, but it now seems the goal is a stopgap "bridge" document that would maintain the status for US forces once a UN mandate on their presence expires at the end of the year. Such a move would leave the hard bargaining to the next president.

China, Russia sign border agreement

AP, Beijing

China and Russia signed an agreement Monday to end a long-running dispute over the demarcation of their eastern border, the scene of military clashes between the once-bitter Communist rivals.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov signed the agreement with his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi, but no details were immediately released on how the border issues were resolved.

"From a legal point of view we have created the preconditions for the border to become a link of stability, openness, mutual benefit, friendship and cooperation," Lavrov said.

The tug-of-war over the eastern part of their 2,700-mile border reaches back centuries to their competition for territory as imperial China and Czarist Russia expanded toward each other.

The struggle resulted in violent clashes in the 1960s and '70s when strained relations were at their most acrimonious, feeding fears abroad that the conflict could erupt into nuclear war.

Syria wants new chapter in ties with Lebanon: FM

AFP, Beirut

Visiting Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said on Monday that Damascus was keen to open a new chapter in its relations with Lebanon and to delineate the border between both countries.

"Our relations today are on an equal footing," Muallem told a press conference after meeting with Lebanese President Michel Sleiman on the first such visit by a high-ranking Syrian official in more than three years.

"There is a new consensus president (in Lebanon) who has trustworthy ties with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and this can help resolve a lot of outstanding issues," he added.

Lebanon and Syria said earlier this month that they had agreed to establish diplomatic relations and planned to open embassies in both capitals for the first time since independence from French colonial rule more than 60 years ago.



PHOTO: AFP

A picture released by the official Kuwait News Agency (Kuna) shows Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah (L) greeting US Democratic presidential contender Senator Barack Obama in Kuwait City on Saturday. Obama stopped in Kuwait on his way to Iraq.

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