



Art students, with slogans painted on their bodies to promote communal harmony, cycle through the streets of Bangalore yesterday. The rally was organised to create awareness about communal harmony among the people and also to protest against the recent attacks on women by a radical Hindu group in a pub in the southern city of Mangalore.

PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar must respect Rohingya minority

Says Amnesty

AFP, Bangkok

A leading human rights group Friday called on Myanmar to stop persecuting its Rohingya people and urged its neighbours to meet their humanitarian obligations.

London-based Amnesty International said in an open letter the mistreatment of the Muslim minority from Myanmar's western Rakhine State was the "root cause" of a crisis which has seen thousands of migrants cast adrift in open seas.

"Myanmar must immediately stop the persecution of the Rohingya minority, which is the root cause of the crisis," said the letter, signed by Amnesty's Asia-Pacific Director Sam Zarifi and circulated to six Asian nations.

"All governments should meet their obligations under the law of the sea and provide assistance to those in distress at sea," it added.

Thailand's military was accused of towing hundreds of Rohingya people out to sea in

poorly equipped boats with scant food and water.

The accusations surfaced earlier this month after nearly 650 Rohingyas were rescued off India and Indonesia, some claiming to have been beaten by Thai soldiers.

Hundreds of the boat people are still believed to be missing at sea.

"The Thai government must stop forcibly expelling Rohingyas and provide them with immediate humanitarian assistance and cease any plans to proceed with more expulsions," the letter continued.

Amnesty said it was "encouraged" by reports that Thai premier Abhisit Vejjajiva had invited the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) to participate in a regional forum on the issue.

Meanwhile, UNHCR on Friday refused to comment on the condition of teenagers from Myanmar being held in Thai custody out of "courtesy" to Thailand's government.

DMK flays LTTE for not responding to 48-hr ceasefire

PTI, Chennai

Ruling DMK on Friday sharply criticised the LTTE for not responding to the 48-hour ceasefire declared by the Sri Lankan government in the Vanni region to evacuate large number of civilian Tamils caught in the fighting between the island army and the Tigers.

The LTTE had had not given any word on the safe passage of Tamils in the conflict zone, Tamil Nadu Finance Minister and DMK General Secretary K Anbazhagan said in the state Assembly.

Replying to a mention by Congress Whip S Peter Alphonse in this regard, he said even after last night's announcement of the ceasefire by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, LTTE leader V Prabhakaran and his cadres did not come forward to reciprocate it. "If Sri Lankan government could say that it will save the Tamils after India's intervention, why the LTTE had not shown any response to that?" he asked.

UN agencies had also welcomed the temporary ceasefire by the Sri Lanka government, said Anbazhagan, who fielded questions from the members on the issue for the second day in the absence of Chief Minister M Karunanidhi, who is indisposed. He wondered why the LTTE had not yet allowed the people a safe passage from the war zone.

9 Pakistani suspects remanded over Danish embassy attacks

AFP, Islamabad

Nine Pakistanis accused over a string of attacks that killed dozens of people and damaged the Danish embassy, were remanded in custody by an anti-terror court on Friday, police said.

The suspects were arrested in the garrison city of Rawalpindi this week and confessed to involvement in high-profile bombings at the embassy in Islamabad, an Italian restaurant and against Pakistani security forces, police said.

The men were remanded into police custody for 12 days "for further interrogation, from the court headed by an anti-terrorism judge," the top police

commander of Rawalpindi, Nasir Durrani, told AFP. Police have hailed the arrests -- the biggest alleged terror gang to be busted in Rawalpindi since Pakistan joined the US-led "war on terror" eight years ago.

"This catch was very important because these dangerous suspects were involved in acts of violence and providing suicide bombers. I hope their arrests will help in fighting the war against terrorism," Durrani said.

According to senior police officers, the Rawalpindi nine had links to Osama al-Kini, al-Qaeda's top commander in Pakistan, who was killed in a US missile strike in South Waziristan on January 1.

AP, PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan says the United Nations will help organise an international effort to overcome the country's massive security and economic problems.

Pakistan faces a dangerous combination of rising Taliban militancy and slowing economic growth, raising concern about the security of its nuclear weapons.

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said Thursday that the UN has agreed to help organise programmes to be funded by countries including the United States and Germany.

Donors formed a group called the Friends of Pakistan last year to boost Pakistan's security, economic and social development and energy supplies. Pakistan also took a \$7.6 billion bailout last year from the International Monetary Fund.

Qureshi said a donors' conference may take place in Tokyo, but announced no date.

Earlier Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said on Thursday in Davos US drone attacks on Pakistani territory were counterproductive and fuelling militancy, and called for a new approach by

the US administration.

Gilani said each drone attack undermined Pakistan's policy of trying to build relations with tribes in the restive areas and separate them from Taliban.

"When there is a drone attack that unites them again, the tribes and the militants," he told delegates during a discussion about Pakistan and Afghanistan on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum.

Meanwhile, some of the militants detained by Pakistan in connection with the Mumbai attacks are likely to be prosecuted with the completion of the country's probe into the terrorist incident, a media report has said.

Pakistani investigators have completed their probe into the alleged links between some of the 124 militants detained in the country and the Mumbai attacks, a senior unnamed Pakistani government official told CBS News.

The official said it was likely that some of the militants detained in Pakistan "will be prosecuted on charges that have yet to be spelled out". He did not elaborate.

Western diplomats responding to the news said a prosecution of this kind

would be the first ever undertaken by Pakistan.

A senior Western diplomat said Pakistan is considering trying some of the suspects under its cyber crime laws, based on evidence that the Internet and other communication technology were used between the attackers and their backers in Pakistan.

"This is a way to put these people behind bars," said a diplomat who spoke to CBS News on condition of anonymity.

India has blamed Pakistan-based elements, including members of the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba terror group, for masterminding and coordinating the Mumbai attacks. It has asked Pakistan to hand over these elements.

A media report earlier said that a preliminary probe into the Indian dossier on the Mumbai attacks had established that the terrorist strike was not planned within Pakistan.

Pakistan banned the Jamaat-ud-Dawah, a front for the LeT, after the Mumbai attacks and sealed dozens of its offices. Over 120 members of both groups have also been detained, interior ministry chief Rehman Malik has said.



PHOTO: AFP

Muslim League (ML) supporters shout anti-India slogans during a protest in Srinagar yesterday. Dozens of demonstrators held a protest against the detention of ML chairman Masrat Alam and other senior separatist leaders who were booked under the Public Safety Act (PSA) during an anti-election campaign against the 2008 state assembly polls.

Obama retains all options with Iran: White House

World powers to hold first meet after Obama takeover

AFP, Washington/ Berlin

US President Barack Obama prefers diplomacy with Iran but preserves "all his options," the White House said Thursday, refusing to rule out military strikes despite promises of a new rapprochement.

Asked if the military option was still on the table with regard to the Islamic republic, White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said: "The president hasn't changed his viewpoint that he should preserve all his options."

In tackling Tehran's nuclear ambitions, alleged support for terrorism and threats against Israel, Obama believes "we must use all elements of our national power to protect our interests as it relates to Iran," he said.

"That includes, as the president talked about in the (election) campaign, diplomacy, where possible, and that we have many issues to work through," Gibbs told reporters.

The spokesman's remarks followed a fiery speech Wednesday by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is running for re-election on June 12.

Meanwhile, senior diplomats from six world powers trying to convince Iran to curb its nuclear ambitions will meet next week in Germany for their first meeting since US President Barack Obama took office, a German official said Friday. Political directors from the UN Security Council permanent members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany will meet Wednesday near the western city of Frankfurt, German foreign ministry spokesman Jens Ploetner told a news conference.

Although the political directors are in constant telephone and email contact about Iran's nuclear programme, the meeting will mark the first gathering since Obama took office on January 20.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi (L) holds talks with his Afghan counterpart Rangin Dadfar Spanta (R) at the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad yesterday. Spanta arrived in Islamabad to hold talks with Pakistani leaders.

UN sounds alarm over humanitarian law violations in conflicts

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Thursday sounded the alarm about increasing violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by warring parties that particularly affect civilians.

Envoys of the 15-member council huddled behind closed doors at France's request to debate ways to ensure protection of civilians and respect of international humanitarian law (IHL) during armed conflicts.

"All of us noted the alarming trend of increased violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, especially against civilians and against children and women in particular, but also against humanitarian workers, UN workers and premises, journalists," France's UN Ambassador Jean-Maurice Ripert, the council chair this month, told reporters.

Council members stressed that "all parties to a conflict, be they states or armed groups" must respect IHL, he said, pointing to conflicts in the Gaza Strip, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of

Congo (DRC) and Sri Lanka.

Susan Rice, the new US ambassador to the United Nations, for her part said protection of civilians during armed conflict "is not just a moral duty; it must be a core element of military operations."

In this context, she said that Washington was "deeply concerned about the loss of Palestinian and Israeli life" during the recent 22-day Gaza conflict and "the tragic suffering of Palestinian civilians, who require urgent humanitarian and reconstruction assistance."

"Violations of international humanitarian law have been perpetrated by Hamas through its rocket attacks against Israeli civilians in southern Israel and the use of civilian facilities to provide protection for its terrorist attacks," Rice said.

And referring to "numerous allegations made against Israel some of which are deliberately designed to inflame," she added: "We expect Israel will meet its international obligations to investigate and we also call upon all members of the international community to refrain from politicising these important issues."

India issues passenger plane hijack alert

AFP, Mumbai

The Indian government has warned authorities in western Maharashtra state to step up security against a possible hijack attempt on a civilian aircraft, a government minister said Thursday.

State home minister Jayant Patil said he received the federal "advisory" Wednesday, asking security agencies to tighten security at airports in state capital Mumbai.

The "advisory received by Maharashtra government directs authorities to keep a watch on private aircraft at Mumbai airport," the Press Trust of India quoted Patil as saying.

Federal home ministry officials confirmed that an alert had been sent to Mumbai, the site of the massacre of 165 people last November by 10 gunmen, who India says came from Pakistan.

The national government also put federal troops guarding civilian airports across Maharashtra on high alert, the official who did not wish to be named, told AFP in New Delhi.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Army, Navy and Air Force officers pay tribute at Rajghat, the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi in New Delhi yesterday on Martyrs Day, the 61st anniversary of Gandhi's assassination. Mahatma Gandhi was on the way to a prayer meeting in the Indian capital when he was shot three times in the chest and head on January 30, 1948.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Obama-China relations off to rocky start

AP, Washington

China recently surpassed Japan as the US government's largest creditor. Any decision by Beijing to move its money would deal a dizzying new blow to an already tottering American economy. Yet relations between China and the new Obama administration are off to a rocky start.

For now, Beijing continues to loan Washington money by buying Treasuries and other US government securities, helping to finance the ever-growing US budget deficit. But there are signs its leaders may be considering trimming these holdings as that country experiences its own economic slowdown. Strains between the two economic powerhouses seem to be growing with the change in administrations.

The latest irritants are a "buy American" provision attached to White House-backed stimulus legislation moving through Congress and criticism of China's currency policies by Vice President Joe Biden and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner.

Geithner accused Beijing of "manipulating" its currency during his Senate confirmation process.

Biden, interviewed Thursday by CNBC, said that the Obama administration would "say to China -- which occasionally the last administration was reluctant to do -- 'You're a major player on the world scene economically, and you've got to play by the rules that everybody else plays by.'"

Their comments followed a move by Chinese censors to silence part of a live broadcast of Obama's inaugural address when he spoke of the US struggle against communism.

And at an economic forum in Switzerland on Wednesday, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao blamed China's economic woes on US-led Western financial institutions, suggesting "a lack of self-discipline" and "blind pursuit of profit."

The pointed words from Geithner and Biden were widely seen as an escalation of old complaints that China artificially depresses the value of its currency to bolster its exports, even though the

White House has sought to play down such comments and has denied increasing friction with China.

China has allowed the value of its currency to rise by 21 percent over the past two years. But American manufacturers complain the Chinese yuan is still significantly undervalued, making Chinese goods cheaper for US consumers and American products more expensive in China.

As to proposals before Congress to bar foreign materials from use in stimulus construction projects, White House spokesman Bill Burton said: "We are reviewing the buy American proposal and we are committed to a plan that will save or create at least 3 million jobs including jobs in manufacturing."

China holds roughly \$2 trillion in foreign exchange reserves and surpassed Japan in September as the biggest foreign holder of Treasuries. It also has the largest single-country trade deficit with the United States -- totalling \$246.5 billion in 2008 through November.