

Fossil skull of giant toothy seabird found in Peru

AP, Lima, Peru

The unusually intact fossilized skull of a giant, bony-toothed seabird that lived up to 10 million years ago was found on Peru's arid southern coast, researchers said Friday.

The fossil is the best-preserved cranium ever found of a pelagornithid, a family of large seabirds believed to have gone extinct some 3 million years ago, said Rodolfo Salas, head of vertebrate paleontology at Peru's National History Museum.

The museum said in a statement that the birds had wingspans of up to 20 feet (6 meters) and may have used the toothlike projections on their beaks to prey on slippery fish and squid. But studying members of the Pelagornithidae family has been difficult because their extremely thin bones while helpful for keeping the avian giants aloft tended not to survive as fossils.

"Its fossils are very strange, very rare and very hard to find," Salas told The Associated Press.

The cranium discovered in Peru is 16 inches (40 centimeters) long and is believed to be 8 million to 10 million years old, based on the age of the rock bed in which it was found.

"Rarely are any bones of these gigantic, marine birds found fossilized uncrushed, and to find an uncrushed skull of this size is very significant," said Ken Campbell, curator of vertebrate zoology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles.

Campbell, who examined photos of the find but was not involved in the dig, said he knows of "no specimen of comparable quality."

Dan Kepska, a paleontology researcher at North Carolina State University who also was not part of the project, agreed that the skull is the most complete ever reported.

He called the birds "one of the great enigmas of avian paleontology."

With fossils discovered in North America, North Africa and even Antarctica, Kepska said, the birds were ubiquitous only a few million years before humans evolved and scientists puzzle over why they died out. Some believe they are related to gannets and pelicans, while other say they are related to ducks.

Campbell said the Peru find "will undoubtedly be of great importance to our understanding of these gigantic birds, and it will help clarify the relationships of the other fossil pelagornithids found in the Pisco Formation."

The formation, a coastal rock bed south of the capital, Lima, is known for yielding fossils of whales, dolphins, turtles and other marine life dating as far back as 14 million years.

Govt firm

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"The whole nation is shattered, regretful and angry for this. We strongly condemn and protest such heinous incidents," said the LGRD minister, adding those who are involved would be brought to book.

A probe body has been formed headed by the home minister. The committee will submit a primary report on the basis of which further investigations will be launched to find out all the culprits. "Wherever they hide, they will be traced out. No one will be spared."

The minister said such atrocities would not have taken place had there been proper trial of Bangabandhu murder case, four national leaders murder case and other killing cases. "If we could exemplarily punish the culprits of those killing cases, this incident would not take place," he regretted.

But Ashraf assured that the government will create an example by trying and punishing the culprits of BDR mutiny and the atrocities that followed. "This case will not be delayed like the ones in the past."

On the premier's general amnesty, he said it is not for those who were involved in killings and plunder. "The general amnesty is for the bystander BDR personnel," he added.

He said the whole nation is mourning for what happened in the BDR mutiny.

The government will hold briefing every day to give official information regarding the incident, Ashraf told the journalists.

Hazari

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before the trial court within two months.

Hazari was awarded 60 years jail in absentia in five cases while 14 more criminal cases are still pending in the court.

His arrival in the town has generated panic among the residents. After meeting with his mentally ill mother, Hazari visited a number of mazaras and the tribal town of Khagrachhari.

14-party

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At the meeting, 14-party leaders thanked the prime minister for tackling the situation with patience, firmness and wisdom.

They also told the meeting that questions have arisen in the public mind about the reaction of the main opposition BNP to such a situation. The meeting observed that the opposition was trying to mislead the people by raising unwarranted questions.

They also observed that though leaders from different political parties went to the scene at the time of need, none from the main opposition party showed up there.

"We all have to remain united now and try to find ways to tackle the loss caused to the nation," AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil told reporters after the meeting.

Leaders from the 14-party alliance Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Tofail Ahmed, Motia Chowdhury, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, Rashed Khan Menon, Dilip Barua, Hasanul Haque Inu and Mainuddin Khan Badal were present at the meeting.

Fresh exam

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through newspapers and other media, a press release of the education ministry said yesterday.

This opportunity will only be applicable to candidates from families of the BDR and army personnel who were directly affected by the incident.

A source at the education ministry said the ministry took the decision to hold separate exams in light of the current situation prevailing in the country.

Special prayers

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prayers were held at Baitul Mukarram National Mosque.

State Minister for Religious Affairs Mohammad Shahjahan Mian, Religious Affairs Secretary M Mamunur Rashid Chowdhury and Director General of the Foundation Shamim Mohammad Afzal attended the programme.

Khatib of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque Maulana Muhammad Salahuddin conducted the prayers.

Doa and special prayers were also held at divisional and district offices of the Islamic Foundation, seeking eternal peace of the departed souls of the victims and early recovery of those injured in the barbaric incident.

Prayers were also offered for peace, progress and prosperity of the country as well as greater unity of its people.

Mideast peace, Russian ties next up for Clinton

AP, Washington

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is using her second overseas trip to assess Mideast peace prospects, reconnect with European allies and remind her Russian counterpart that U.S. efforts to rebuild relations with Moscow have their limits.

She kicks off the weeklong tour by attending an international conference in Egypt, where on Monday she will announce a U.S. pledge of up to \$900 million in humanitarian aid for rebuilding of the war-shaken Gaza Strip.

The Palestinians are seeking \$2.8 billion. The United States does not recognize the Hamas movement that rules Gaza and will not allow aid money to flow through Hamas.

The pledge conference reflects in part a U.S. effort to move quickly to influence events there, where the Islamic militants of Hamas are aligned with Iran and opposed to peace talks with Israel. Hamas is at odds with the other Palestinian faction, Fatah, which takes a more moderate approach to Israel.

Clinton also will visit Israel to show President Barack Obama's commitment to finding a "two-state solution" that establishes a sovereign Palestinian state at peace with Israel.

After elections Feb. 10, Israel is operating under a caretaker government. The hawkish Benjamin Netanyahu is attempting to form a coalition government but the timing and outcome are in doubt.

Among leaders Clinton would be expected to visit in Israel are Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, leader of the centrist Kadima Party, which won one more seat in the election than Netanyahu's Likud.

Netanyahu, who opposes moving forward in peace talks with the Palestinians, was asked to put together the next government because he has the support of a majority of the elected lawmakers.

Israel edged closer to a government of hawks and right-wing religious parties Friday after Netanyahu failed to persuade Livni to join a coalition that could help avert a showdown with the Obama administration. Obama has pledged to become "aggressively" involved in pursuing Mideast peace.

Clinton also will go to the West Bank to meet with leaders of the Palestinian Authority, including Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and President Mahmoud Abbas.

After focusing her first foreign trip on Asia, Clinton now is trying to build on what

the administration believes is early enthusiasm in the Mideast and Europe for changing the dynamic of relations with America.

Daniel Fried, the assistant secretary of state for European affairs, said Friday a main theme of Clinton's visit to Brussels, Belgium, on Thursday will be "a sense of consolidating some of the enormous political good will on both sides of the Atlantic, and harnessing it to a common agenda not an American agenda but a common trans-Atlantic agenda."

On Friday, Clinton is scheduled to meet in Geneva with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. He had a sometimes rocky relationship with Clinton's predecessor, Condoleezza Rice, a Russian affairs specialist.

Lavrov was quoted by Russian news agencies on Friday as saying he expected the meeting to focus on arms control. That was an issue of great frustration for the Russians during the Bush administration. President George W. Bush abandoned the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty early in his first term in order to accelerate the development of a missile defense opposed by Moscow.

Clinton has said the administration is willing to move ahead quickly on a replacement for the START arms treaty that is due to expire in December, and to consider deeper cuts in nuclear weapons.

Fried said that although the administration is interested in improving relations with Russia, Lavrov will be reminded that the U.S. does not accept the Russian argument that it has a sphere of influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe that gives Moscow special say on issues like missile defense.

The administration's interest in engaging Russia is tempered by "cautionary notes," Fried said. That includes a concern that Moscow has gone too far in flexing its muscles in places such as the former Soviet republic of Georgia, where Russian troops fought a brief war last summer, and in opposing the NATO membership aspirations of countries including Ukraine, a former Soviet republic on Russia's border.

"The most productive way (to move forward with Russia) is to do so building on areas where we have common interests, but also mindful of our differences not shying away from them, nor abandoning our values and our friends," Fried said. "That makes for a complicated relationship with Russia."

UN urges LTTE

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"Estimates vary of the number of civilians trapped, from 70,000 according to the government, through around 200,000 according to UN estimates, up to 300,000 or more according to Tamil groups," Holmes said.

"The number of casualties from the fighting, among whom we believe are many civilians, cannot be verified in the absence of independent sources, since humanitarian agencies and the media have no access to the area, but we believe dozens of people per day at least are being killed and many more wounded," he added.

Holmes said the physical condition of civilians caught in the fighting is also "of increasing concern" because the only supplies that have gotten into the area are limited amounts brought in by sea by the International Red Cross and government agents.

"Food, medical supplies, clean water, sanitation facilities and shelter are now extremely short," he said. "The risks from hunger and diseases are growing rapidly, in addition to those from the fighting."

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan troops entered the last urban area held by Tamil Tigers, the defence ministry said Saturday, as the UN repeated calls for the rebels to free civilians in the war zone.

ministry said.

Troops who entered the town "found the LTTE's high-tech satellite communication centre" and met "stiff resistance" as they advanced into built-up areas, the ministry statement said.

Security forces seized a 1.5-kilometre (one-mile) stretch of rebel bunkers in an area east of Puthukkudirippu after heavy fighting on Saturday, the ministry said, adding that 13 rebels were killed in the fighting.

At least nine more guerrillas were killed in Friday's fighting, the ministry said, but it did not say if security forces suffered any casualties.

A military spokesman said troops destroyed 10 boats belonging to the Sea Tigers, the rebels' naval unit.

50 officers

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state. They should at least let us know if he's dead."

It was soon after the madness set in Wednesday that Gulzar's friends at Rab heard from him last. In his first call at around 9:00am, he sought help for him and the other officers under attack.

His last call came at around 10:00am. He said that he was "done" and told his friends to take care of his family.

Meanwhile, rescuers said that besides ransacking the houses and properties of the army officers at Palkhona, the mutineers vandalised the offices at BDR headquarters including that of the DG. It appears they fired at will inside these offices.

The dead

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18. LT COL NOKIB
17. COL REZA
16. LT COL SAJJAD
15. MAJ RABI
14. LT COL BADRUL
13. MAJ MOSHARRAF
12. COL ABU MUSA AYUB KAISER
11. COL MUJIBUL HUQ
10. LT COL ENAYETUL HAQ
9. SUBEDER ABUL KASHEM MAJUMDER
8. AMJAD ALI, 50, RETIRED DAILY WORKER
7. TAREK AZIZ, 23, A BBA STUDENT OF PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY
6. CAPTAIN MAJHARUL HAIDER RUBEL
5. HRIDOY MIA, 14, A VEGETABLE VENDOR
4. COL ANISUZZAMAN
3. COL ZAHID
2. COL AFTABUL ISLAM
1. BRIG GEN MA BARI ADDITIONAL DIRECTOR GENERAL (ADG), BDR

THE REST 33 BODIES WERE YET TO BE IDENTIFIED

BDR deserters

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heard an announcement through loudspeakers that the BDR Javans beat me and tore my uniform apart and they asked me to stay with them.

Following the accouchement when I came out rebel BDR Javans beat me and tore my uniform apart and they asked me to stay with them. Later at around 11:00am on Wednesday he managed to escape the headquarters and later his wife and lone son also fled the scene the same day.

About 100 BDR Javans reported at the headquarters till filing of this report yesterday evening.

When asked about the exact number of those who reported at the headquarters captain Mohammad Sayeed at the RIC said they only provide information about the persons missing during the mutiny and receive information from relatives of those who have gone missing.

A total of 193 BDR members had been arrested from different exit points of Dhaka while fleeing after laying down arms till Friday. But Dhaka Metropolitan Police headquarters sources could not confirm the exact number till yesterday evening.

During the mutiny, around 3300 BDR members were inside the BDR headquarters while the number of commissioned officers was 160, concerned official sources said.

But only 300 of them were found as the police took control of the headquarters on Thursday after 33 hours of bloody massacre, sources added.

Janaza

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namaz-e-janaza of seven slain army officers was held at army central mosque in Dhaka Cantonment. But their burials scheduled for the last Friday at army graveyard at Banani was also postponed.

Meanwhile, Colonel BM Zahid Hossain Chapal, killed in last Wednesday's mutiny, was laid to rest in his family graveyard in Agailjhara upazila of Barisal district yesterday.

Safety of the properties of those who left their Palkhona residence has already been ensured, said another ISPR release.

For any information in this regard, the concerned persons have been requested to contact the information centre set up at the main gate of Palkhona or over cell phone No. 01712419784.

UN, US, UK

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It also prayed for the departed souls that they may rest in peace and hoped that all will unite to help recover from this national tragedy in a spirit of peace and national oneness, for the greater good of the nation.

A US embassy statement issued on Friday night said that it was ready to assist the government at this "critical time". It said Ambassador James E. Moriarty spoke with the premier and "expressed support for her newly-elected democratic government."

"We will do what we can to assist the government at this critical time," the ambassador said.

A British High Commission statement said London condemned the BDR "violence" and offered its "full support."

"We offer our full support to the government of Sheikh Hasina as it deals with this crisis. A mood of national unity is vital at this time," it said.

Afghan president orders elections by April

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai ordered yesterday that presidential elections be held by April, months earlier than a date of August 20 set by the voting authority because of security and logistic issues.

In a decree that comes after weeks of consultations about the controversial date, Karzai said the Independent Election Commission had to conduct the elections according to provisions of the constitution.

He cited an article of the constitution which says the vote must be held within 30 to 60 days before the end of the presidential term which is on May 21.

The decree also said the commission should "provide the necessary conditions based on laws for peoples' participation in a transparent, clear, just, free" election.

Government must do all it "can to solve the problems the commission faces", the decree said.

The commission last month delayed polling day to August 20 saying security and logistical concerns meant it would not be ready to hold legitimate and credible poll in the timeline provided by the constitution.

"The IEC considered logistics, weather, security and funding and all aspects when it chose August 20," deputy chief electoral officer Zekria Barakzai told AFP after

Karzai's decree was issued.

The president has said he would stand for a second term, although he recently suggested he might reconsider.

It will be only the second presidential vote in the country's turbulent history and comes with Karzai under criticism for not being tough enough against corruption or being able to stop a downward spiral of insurgent violence.

Analysts have said an April election could benefit Karzai as he would campaign while in office and with the protection of international forces if he chose to travel into risky areas where insurgents are active.

The opposition meanwhile has not made clear who it would field for the vote and no serious challenger has yet thrown their hat into the ring.

The National Front coalition, the main opposition group, this week accused Karzai of trying to "confuse public opinions and confuse the contenders" with an early election.

Afghanistan's international backers, including the United States and Britain, have also supported the announcement of an election in August with the United Nations a later polling day was a "pragmatic necessity".

Obama's balancing act on Iraq withdrawal strategy

AP, Washington

President Barack Obama leaned heavily toward field commanders' preferences in setting a time frame for an Iraq pullout as he weighed the fervent desires of anti-war supporters who propelled him into office and the equally strong worries of war generals.

"To this very day, there are some Americans who want to stay in Iraq longer, and some who want to leave faster," Obama said in his announcement Friday, summing up a debate that has divided the country like no other since the former President George W. Bush launched the U.S. invasion six years ago.

Obama's description suggests he arrived at a split-down-the-middle compromise with one of the first and most important tasks of his young presidency.

But accounts of the process from officials in the White House, at the Pentagon and across the administration, who all requested anonymity so they could speak more candidly about behind-the-scenes discussions, show otherwise.

At stake was the promise that most defined and drove Obama's presidential bid: to bring all combat troops home effectively, to end the war 16 months after taking office. The details he offered in an appearance Friday before Marines at Camp Lejeune, N.C., depart from that pledge in several ways.

The combat withdrawal will take three months longer than he promised. It is now to be completed by the end of August 2010, 19 months after Obama's inauguration. Though what Obama emphasized most as a candidate was his determination to bring about a quick end to the war, in the fine print of almost all his statements was a commitment to flexibility.

The withdrawal will not happen at an even pace of one combat brigade per month, as he had repeatedly said. Instead, it will be backloaded. The force posture for this year and into the first few months of 2010 probably will be essentially the same as it would have been under Bush. Under Obama's plan, troops will start leaving in large numbers probably only next spring or summer. The president intends to leave decisions about the pace to field commanders.

Even after the drawdown, a force of as many as 50,000 troops will remain, which has caused heartache among anti-war Democrats who wanted a fuller pullout.

This residual force will have a new mission: train Iraqis, protect U.S. assets and personnel, and conduct anti-terror operations. Those soldiers and

Marines will remain in harm's way and engage at times in some form of fighting.

Understanding how Obama, his aides and his generals came to this plan must start with how the candidate arrived at his campaign promise.

According to one administration official, there was never any magic to the 16-month period. At the time Obama first made the pledge, there were about 16 combat brigades in Iraq, and military experts told the candidate that Iraq was too fragile for a drawdown much faster than one combat brigade per month.

As early as last July, Obama gave the military leadership a strong signal that they could influence his thinking.

During a trip to Baghdad, Obama privately assured Gen. David Petraeus then the top U.S. commander that although he favored a 16-month pullout, he would do nothing rash if elected to endanger security gains in Iraq, according to a U.S. official familiar with their meeting.

When he won, Obama and his team began meeting on the issue right away.

But the process didn't really begin until he held the reins of the presidency.

On Day One, Obama directed the Defense Department to start the planning for "a responsible military drawdown." Also that first week, he gathered top national security advisers in the Situation Room, with commanders participating in person and from the field via secure videoconference. A week later, he made his first trip to the Pentagon, to see the chairman and the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and all four uniformed service chiefs.

BNP to hold

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do a mahfil would be held tomorrow [today]," BNP office secretary Rizvi Ahmed told reporters soon after the meeting began with Chairperson Khaleeda Zia in the chair at her Gulshan office in the city.

The party called upon its leaders and workers across the country to arrange the programme in their areas.

Party leaders and activists wore black badges yesterday to observe the mourning programme taken up by the party in this connection.

Secretary General of BNP Khandaker Delwar Hossain, Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Moudud Ahmed and Shamsul Islam, among others, were present at the committee meeting.

The meeting was going on till the filing of this report at 9:15pm.

AFP, Washington

Restoring the ailing world economy will top a long agenda of pressing issues to be discussed between British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and US President Barack Obama next week, an official said Friday.

"The economy is going to be the number one issue for both him and President Obama," a senior British official told reporters ahead of Brown's visit to the White House on Tuesday.

The leaders of the two trans-Atlantic allies will also focus on the upcoming G20 meeting to be chaired by the British prime minister in London on April 2. A British economic team has already visited the United States a few times to start building ties with the new Obama administration.

"There needs to be a very strong, shared agenda between the UK and the US going forward to the summit," the official said, saying Brown would be putting forward ideas for "cleaning up and reforming the world of finance."

"We think the time has come to reshape the IMF and the World Bank, and probably the regional development banks come into this as well, reshape them for this century... We want to produce some ideas that people can work on."

Britain and the United States have already unveiled stimulus packages in a bid to kickstart their economies amid the global economic downturn.

"Jobs and returning to growth are the things most of our heads of governments' minds," the official said in Washington.

"For the UK side I think we are confident that the two leaders will emerge from that discussion on Tuesday with a clear message that we recognize the need in this area for a global approach for a global solutions to the huge problems that we face in the economic and financial area," the British official said.

Global leaders are also concerned about helping the world's poorest countries weather the economic storm.

"So to our minds that requires more resources from the International Monetary Fund in particular to enable them to have the firepower to help these countries," the British official said here.