



UN handout photo shown Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (L) meets with former armed groups at the Myat Taw Win Hotel in Naypyidaw, Myanmar on Friday.

Ban fails to meet Suu Kyi despite talks with junta

AFP, Naypyidaw

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said he was "deeply disappointed" after the chief of Myanmar's military junta on Saturday refused to let him meet pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Ban announced the regime's decision after holding a second meeting with reclusive military supremo Than Shwe in the bunker-like capital Naypyidaw on the second and final day of his visit to the country.

"I am deeply disappointed," Ban told reporters as he boarded a plane for Yangon. "It is a setback for the international community and it is a missed opportunity for the Myanmar authorities."

He said that Than Shwe had cited the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi is currently on trial as the reason for denying the visit. She faces up to five years in jail if convicted on charges of violating her house arrest.

The refusal will add fire to critics of Ban's visit to Myanmar, which had been considered diplomatically risky because of its timing during her trial and the likelihood that the ruling generals would fail to offer concessions.

Ban had pushed the iron-fisted Than Shwe on Friday to release all political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi ahead of elections promised by the ruling generals in 2010.

Rights groups had warned that his visit would be considered a major failure unless he managed to win her freedom.

Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was transferred from house arrest to Yangon's notorious Insein prison in May to face trial after an American man swam uninvited to her lakeside house.

The 64-year-old has been in detention for most of the past two decades since the junta refused to recognise her party's victory in the country's last elections in 1990.

Ban said on Friday that he had made a personal request to Than Shwe to be able to meet her.

"He told me that she is on trial but I told him this is my proposal, this is important and I am waiting for their consideration and reply," Ban said after Friday's encounter.

The UN chief is now due to visit areas affected by deadly Cyclone Nargis in 2008. He made his first visit to the country after the disaster, when he managed to persuade the regime to accept international aid.

MUMBAI ATTACKS Trial of LeT operatives adjourned

PTI, Islamabad

The trial in a Pakistani anti-terror court of five Lashker-e-Toiba operatives accused of involvement in the Mumbai attacks was adjourned till July 18 without any proceedings yesterday.

The case, being heard by an anti-terror court in Rawalpindi, was adjourned for a fortnight due to the non-availability of a judge, sources said.

There has been no movement in the case since May 23 as Justice Sakhi Muhammad Kahut, the judge of anti-terror court number 2 who was hearing the matter, was removed as part of judicial reforms.

2 US soldiers die in attack on base in Afghanistan

32 insurgents killed in airstrikes, 7 policemen in bomb blast

AP, AFP, Kabul/ Nawa

Militants exploded a vehicle outside the gates of a US coalition base in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, sparking a two-hour gunbattle that ended when American troops called in airstrikes, officials said. Two US troops were killed and four were wounded.

More than 30 insurgents were killed by the airstrikes in Zerk district of Pakika province, said Hamidullah Zawak, the provincial governor's spokesman.

The multi-pronged attack near the Pakistan border came as thousands of Marines in southern Afghanistan pursued the biggest US military operation here since the American-led invasion of

2001, trying to cut insurgent supply lines and win over local elders.

Saturday's attack started when insurgents drove an explosives-laden vehicle toward the gates of the American base, and the vehicle blew up, Zawak said. For two hours, insurgents then fired at the base from several locations before US-called airstrikes ended the fight, he said.

Two US troops were killed and four were wounded in the assault, said Tech. Sgt. Chuck Marsh, a US military spokesman. An Afghan soldier was also wounded, Zawak said. The base housed both US and Afghan soldiers, he said.

Zawak said 32 insurgents were killed in the airstrikes, and the authorities have already recovered 16 bodies.

Saturday's attack happened in the same province where an American soldier and three Afghans were, believed captured by insurgents Tuesday.

Meanwhile, a roadside bomb tore through a police vehicle in an insurgent attack in a southern Afghanistan flashpoint on Saturday, killing seven officers, the interior ministry said.

The incident took place in Registan district in Kandahar province, a hotbed for the Taliban-led insurgency, the ministry said.

"A roadside bomb struck a police vehicle which resulted in the martyrdom of seven policemen," the statement said. Two other officers were wounded in the blast, which the ministry blamed on insurgents.

Sharif pushes for Musharraf's trial for years of 'misdeeds'

ANI, London

The bitter feud between former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and former President General Pervez Musharraf continues unabated, with Sharif now calling for a trial of the former military General.

Talking to media persons here, Sharif regretted that Musharraf has not been tried even after years of misdeeds.

Referring to the United Nations (UN) inquiry into Benazir Bhutto's assassination case, Sharif said the UN team should also interrogate Musharraf, because he is the prime suspect in the case.

Sharif, who is living close to Musharraf's mansion here, said the former Army General must be asked to come to Pakistan to cooperate with the UN inquiry team.

He held the autocratic ruler responsible for the current turbulent situation of Pakistan, and blamed him for pushing the country into pandemonium.

"If Pakistan was not de-tracked again and again by military adventures, we would today not be staring in the face of total gloom. I absolutely have no doubt that all the problems that we face today, including extremism and militancy, would not have raised their head were it not for the military coups," The News quoted Sharif, as saying.



PHOTO: AFP

In this picture taken on Friday shows a Pakistani military MI-17 helicopter flies over the mountainous area surrounding Mingora, the capital of troubled Swat valley. At least 26 security personnel on board a military helicopter were killed on July 3 in northwestern Pakistan when it went down due to technical fault.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani politician Imran Khan (C) leads a rally as he marches along with supporters during a protest against an increase in petroleum prices and electricity shortages in Lahore on Friday. Pakistan increased the prices of petroleum products on July 1 by 10 to 20 percent to match the increasing global petroleum prices.

Ten Chechen police killed in Russian Caucasus

AFP, Nazran

Ten Chechen police were killed Saturday when militants fired on their convoy in the neighbouring Russian region of Ingushetia, one of the deadliest recent attacks in the increasingly volatile Caucasus.

The convoy of six vehicles came under grenade and gun fire from unknown individuals hidden in a forest as it travelled on a road in Ingushetia at around 0530 GMT, security officials said. One vehicle burst into flames.

"Forty-five members of the Chechnya police force were returning from a joint special operation when their convoy came under fire. Ten were killed and ten were wounded," an Ingush security source told AFP.

Lanka denies arms deal with China

ANI, Beijing

Visiting Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama has denied that his country has inked an arms deal with China.

"Sri Lanka and China enjoy a traditional bilateral relationship and have enjoyed a smooth development of cooperation since the diplomatic ties were established in 1957," Bogollagama told the China Daily.

He dismissed speculations that China was providing military equipment to Sri Lanka to fight against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and said the rumours of arms sales are based on "no facts and figures".

Bogollagama, however, lauded China's significant efforts in responding to Sri

Lanka's humanitarian aid calls. China gave a million dollars in humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka to help displaced civilians.

Beijing also provided 2.9 million dollars worth of tents to help the Internally Displaced Persons out of the discomfort after the conflict.

Bogollagama said China has a role to play in post-war Sri Lanka, especially in areas of development and reconstruction.

One of the key aspects of Bogollagama's visit to China is to further their relationship and seek help with future construction projects in Sri Lanka, he said.

There have been speculations in the West on China's funding of the construction of Hambantota port in the southern part of Sri Lanka.

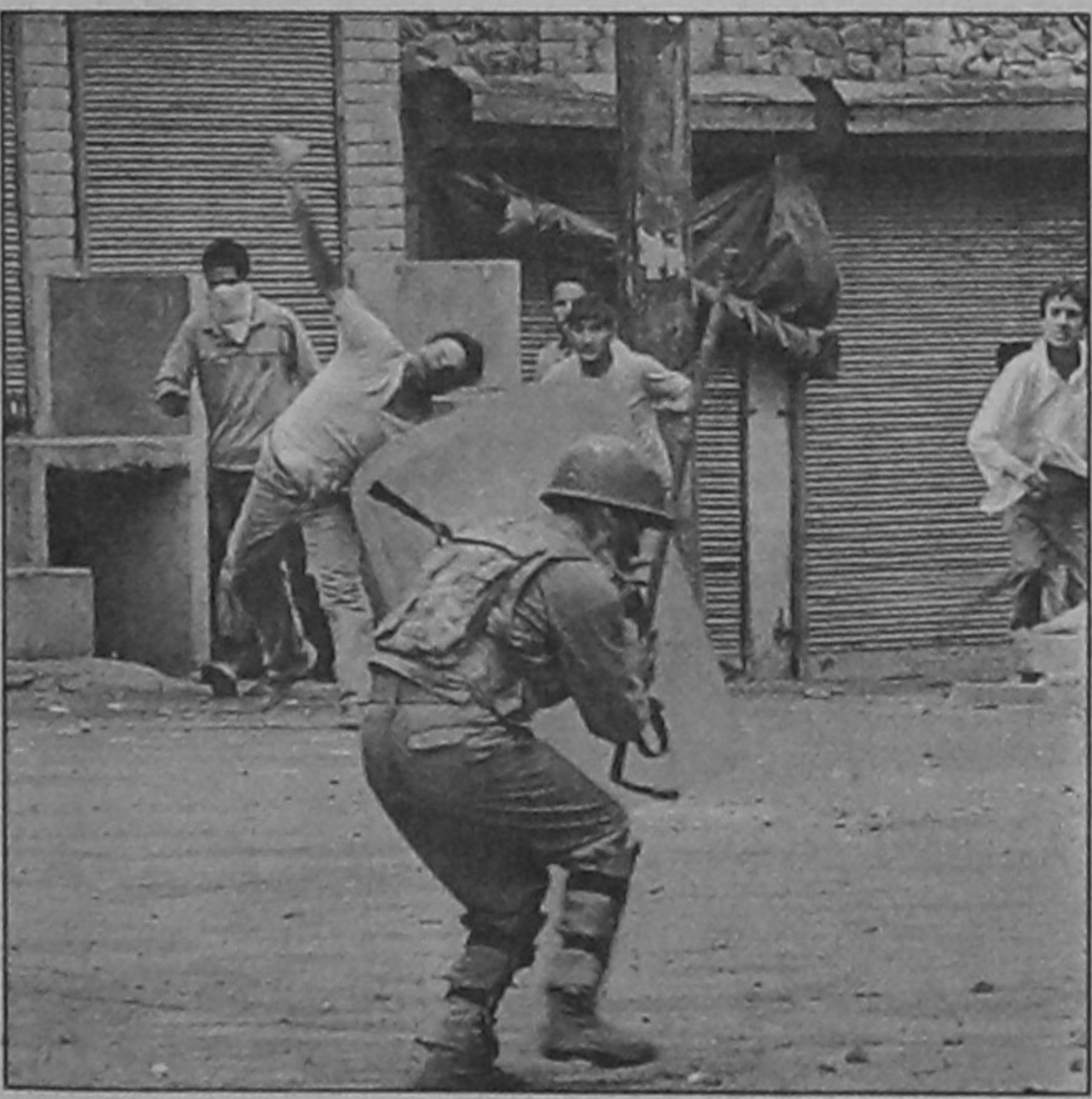


PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri protesters throw stones at Indian police in Srinagar on Friday. Anti-India protests have raged across the Muslim-majority Kashmir valley since the May 29 discovery of the bodies of two women, aged 17 and 22, who were abducted, raped and killed by security forces.

Curious Russia prepares to welcome Obama

AFP, Moscow

Russia was preparing yesterday to welcome Barack Obama for the first time as US president, heartened by his description of the country as an equal but also stunned by criticism of Vladimir Putin.

Obama arrives in Russia on Monday on a visit to mend ties frayed by a series of disputes. He is set to sign a deal on the transit of US military goods to Afghanistan and a framework on replacing a key Cold War-era weapons treaty.

The US president is due to have several hours of talks with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev as well as a shorter breakfast meeting with the strongman former Kremlin chief and current prime minister Putin.

Russia has been eagerly awaiting the visit as proof of a change in the US attitudes towards Moscow but observers were astonished by a pre-summit interview in which Obama said Putin still had "one foot" in the Cold War.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Obama said he believed "Putin has one foot in the old ways of doing business and one foot in the new." By contrast, Obama said he had "a very good relationship" with Medvedev.

The mass-circulation Moskovsky Komsomolets newspaper said Obama was trying to break up the hitherto tight Russian ruling "tandem" of the president and the prime minister by taking sides.

Skygazers await rare celestial treat

PTI, Hyderabad

The months of July and August will present a grand spectacle for the sky gazers across the country as a rare astronomical event—a series of triple eclipses, commences from July 7.

"The sequence of the first triple eclipse will be a penumbra lunar eclipse (in which the moon will be darkened by the earth's shadow) occurring on July 7, will be followed by a solar eclipse on July 22 and then another lunar eclipse on August 7," India General Secretary of city-based Planetary Society, N Raghunandan Kumar said here today.

"The second penumbra lunar eclipse of the year falling on July 7 will not be visible from India, but the third lunar eclipse of the year falling on August 7 is visible from India," he said.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Offensive test for Obama's Afghan strategy

AFP, Washington

The US military offensive launched in Afghanistan's south this week is the first step in President Barack Obama's new strategy in a war he has described as a key priority for his administration.

Around 4,000 Marines are involved in the massive operation launched Thursday in southern Helmand province, a Taliban stronghold.

Operation Khanjar ("Strike of the Sword") is part of the new White House strategy for Afghanistan, which is intended to curb an insurgency that has grown stronger and more lethal over the last few years.

Commanders on the ground say the operation's immediate objective is to improve security in Afghanistan's most volatile region and ensure that presidential elections scheduled for August proceed smoothly.

In the longer term, the military wants to secure sufficient stability to allow economic and political development, regain the trust of the local population and transfer responsibility for the country's security to local forces.

"Ultimately, there needs to be an economic and a governance solution," US Vice President Joe Biden said during a surprise visit to Iraq on Thursday.

"Military forces are necessary but

not sufficient" for success in Afghanistan, he added.

The outcome of this first offensive will be key for Obama, who has maintained that Afghanistan is the central front in the US war on terror.

His position on Afghanistan contrasts sharply with his predecessor George W. Bush, who set the war in Iraq as his presidency's top military priority.


Obama has ordered the deployment of 21,000 additional US troops and hundreds of development experts to Afghanistan with the goal of defeating the Taliban and al-Qaeda and developing Afghan institutions in a bid

to bolster the country so that it can ensure its own security.

The number of US troops on the ground will nearly double between 2008 and the end of 2009 to 68,000, out of a 100,000-strong foreign military contingent in Afghanistan.

A new commander of international forces in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, has been named to oversee the strategy.

McChrystal is also charged with trying to reduce the number of incidents in which US military personnel accidentally kill civilians, events that fuel growing resentment from the local population.



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