



Indian girls stand on a homemade raft as two boys use a boat to navigate through floodwaters in Kachua, some 45km from Nagaon in Assam state yesterday. Over 300,000 people have been hit by flood in the northeastern state after incessant rains caused all major rivers, including the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, to overflow.

PHOTO: AFP

## Suu Kyi's party regrets Ban's fruitless visit

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's opposition party said Sunday Ban Ki-moon's failure to meet its imprisoned leader Aung San Suu Kyi was a "great loss" as the UN chief left the military-ruled nation empty-handed.

The UN Secretary General said he was "deeply disappointed" as he left Myanmar following his two-day visit, during which the ruling junta snubbed his attempts to visit the pro-democracy icon.

Ban departed with a stern rebuke for the military ruler Than Shwe, saying the reclusive general had missed an opportunity to show the regime's commitment to implementing democratic reform and to holding free elections in 2010.

But his failure to extract even the smallest concession from the iron-fisted regime plays into the hands of critics, who warned him against visiting while Aung San Suu Kyi faces an internationally condemned trial.

"Mr Ban Ki-moon did not work as he intended during his visit," said Nyan Win, spokesman for the Nobel Peace Laureate's National League for Democracy (NLD).

"Failing to meet with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was important. We would like to say it was a great loss for him."

"But we do not want to say his trip was a failure as we do not know in detail what he discussed with Senior General Than Shwe," he added.

Myanmar's state media said Sunday that while Than Shwe said he "would like" to have arranged a meeting between Ban and Aung San Suu Kyi, the UN chief's requests were refused because of her current trial at Insein prison in Yangon.

Than Shwe told Ban "that the case is being heard freely and fairly, so they have no right to arrange a meeting between the UNSG (secretary general) and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi", according to The New Light of Myanmar newspaper.

Aung San Suu Kyi is charged with breaching the terms of her house arrest after a US man swam uninvited to her lakeside house in May. Ban had hoped to secure her release and that of Myanmar's estimated 2,100 political prisoners.

He defended himself against criticisms that his trip was fruitless, saying that the junta chief only rejected his request to meet Aung San Suu Kyi.

## 'Taliban suicide attack renews fears over Pak nuke safety'

ANI, New York

Thursday's suicide attack on a bus carrying officials of a nuclear establishment in Pakistan's Rawalpindi city has once again raised questions over Islamabad's claims that nuclear facilities in the country are safe and guarded well enough to counter the Taliban's increasingly bold assaults against the country's military complex.

Immediately after the attack, in which one person was killed and several others grievously wounded, the government denied reports that the bus was carrying officials from nuclear plant, but military experts believe that it was apparently an attempt to avoid further embarrassment, The New York Times reports.

"It showed that their intelligence is current. It was a deliberate strike. They are trying to give a hint that they can strike the personnel who are working for the nuclear facilities," said Talat Masood, a retired general and a military analyst.

It was claimed that the workers aboard the bus were from the Kahuta Research Laboratories, where weapons-grade uranium is produced, and no high-level official or scientist was travelling in that bus.

It may be noted that the laboratory was once run by Abdul Qadeer Khan, who himself has been accused of nuclear proliferation, the report said.

## Bomb attack kills 5 in Philippines church

AFP, Cotabato

Five people were killed and at least 34 wounded in a suspected Muslim rebel bomb attack outside a Catholic church in the strife-torn southern Philippines Sunday, officials said.

A lone suspect left a homemade device outside the Immaculate Conception cathedral in Cotabato city which exploded just as the congregation was leaving early morning mass, officials said.

## 14 killed after train hits bus in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

Fourteen people were killed and more than a dozen injured Sunday when a train slammed into a minibus on a level crossing in the Indonesian province of Central Java, reports said.

At around 10:20 am (0320 GMT) the train sped through a crossing with a missing safety gate and hit the minibus carrying 35 people, dragging it for a hundred metres, news website Detiknews.com reported.

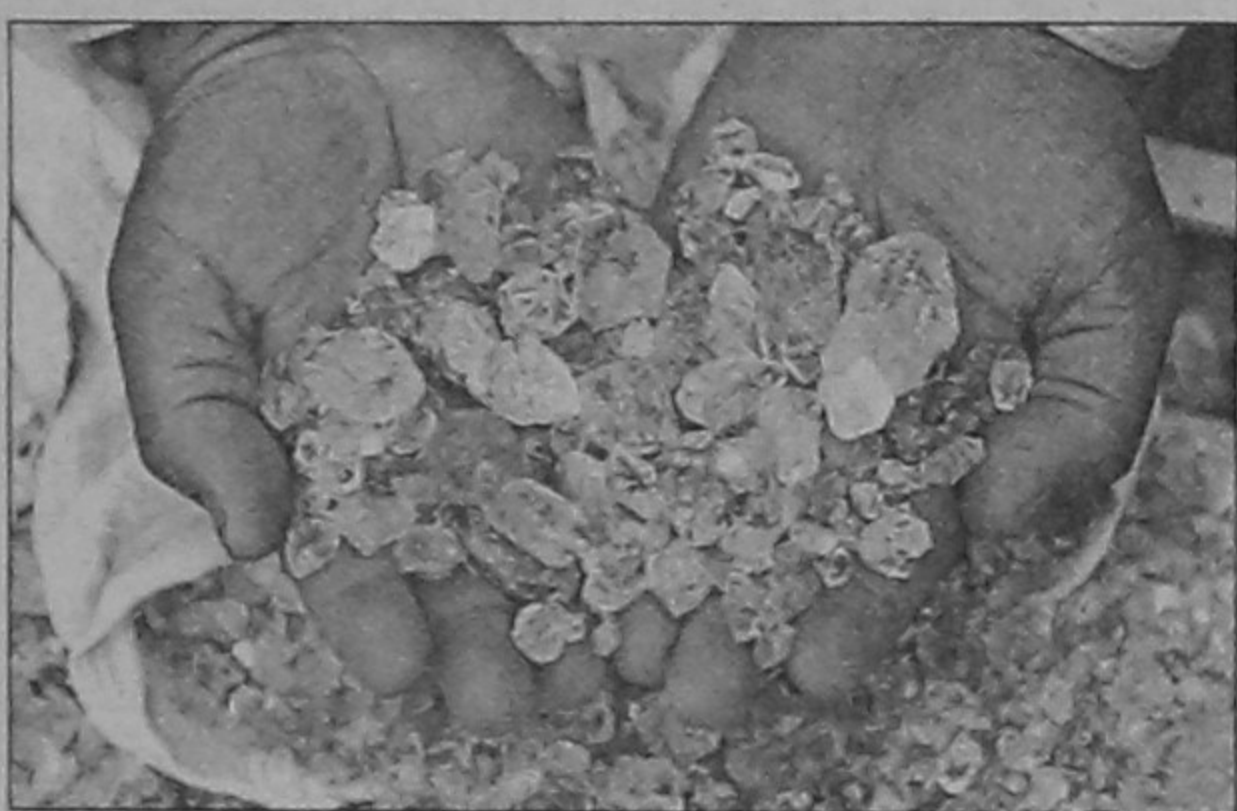


PHOTO: AFP

This picture taken on July 1 shows a Pakistani employee displaying gems at a processing plant in Peshawar.

## Taliban cashing in on untapped gem wealth

AFP, Peshawar

In the narrow lanes of a market in Pakistan's northwest capital Peshawar, dealers squat on carpets and spread out a rainbow of precious gems on the floor for potential buyers.

Chunks of bright blue lapis lazuli, and rough rocks studded with flashes of light and colour clutter window displays, but no one is buying in a city hit by a wave of deadly bombings blamed on Taliban militia.

A treasure trove of precious stones is locked in the rocks of Pakistan's rugged northwest. Violence, legal tussles and state mismanagement have deterred investors but allowed the Taliban to

cash in on the bounty, dealers say.

"God has given us enormous wealth in terms of emeralds from Swat, rubies, pink topaz, beautiful tourmaline," said Ilyas Ali Shah, a gemologist with the government-run Pakistan Gems and Jewellery Development Company.

Shah said that if Pakistan properly mines these deposits the impoverished country could reverse its hefty foreign debt. "But we need peace."

In February this year, Islamist extremists waging a bloody insurgency to expand control opened three shuttered emerald mines in the northwest Swat valley around the main town Mingora and invited villagers to blast away.

## Palin eyes larger role in US politics

AP, Juneau

Alaska Gov Sarah Palin didn't wait long to give some hint of what her political life might look like after she leaves office at the end of the month.

After staying out of the public eye for most of Saturday, a day after abruptly announcing she would soon give up her job as governor, Palin indicated on a social networking site that she would take on a larger, national role, citing a "higher calling" to unite the country along conservative lines.

"I am now looking ahead and how we can advance this country together with our values of less government intervention, greater energy independence, stronger national security, and much-needed fiscal restraint," the former Republican vice presidential candidate wrote in a posting on her Facebook page. Palin's spokeswoman, Meghan Stapleton, confirmed Palin wrote the entry.

Palin shocked even her closest friends on Friday when she announced she would resign July 26, more than a year before her first term ends. But the controversial hockey mom has not revealed many details of bigger plans and national agenda.

## Lanka troops record first fatality after war

AFP, Colombo

A Sri Lankan soldier was shot dead by a Tamil rebel in the island's east, the first military fatality after the crushing of the guerrilla leadership in May, the army said yesterday.

A Tiger rebel grabbed the gun of a soldier and opened fire as he tried to search a suspicious boat in the eastern district of Batticaloa on Saturday, the army said in a statement.

"An army soldier had spotted this suspicious boat with one man on board and tried to search it after talking to the boatman," the statement said, adding that the man was later identified as a Tiger regional leader.

Two other soldiers opened fire and overpowered the boatman who sustained injuries and was later admitted to hospital, the army said, adding that a search was under way in the area for remnants of the defeated rebel movement.

### AFGHAN OFFENSIVE

## US Marines in constant firefight with Taliban

AFP, Garmser

Since 4,000 US Marines pushed into Taliban-controlled areas of southern Afghanistan on Thursday, one company has been in a constant firefight with the insurgents, the military said.

Troops from Echo company of the 2/8 infantry battalion flew in by helicopter to Mian Poshteh, a key canal and road junction in Helmand province, as part of President Barack Obama's efforts to finally defeat the Islamist militants.

The 200 Marines fighting to hold the position arrived at dawn on Thursday, and they were still engaged in fierce combat through the weekend, Major Dan Gaskell told AFP at nearby Camp Delhi.

"Echo company landed by the canal intersection and set up shop," he said late Saturday. "They have been fighting to hold that position."

"The enemy really wants it back, and have been doing everything they can to dislodge Echo. That continues."

The US has called in helicopter gunships three times to help the Marines, Gaskell said, including one attacking a Hellfire missile.

He said about 40 Taliban fighters were using small arms, rocket-propelled grenades and rockets against the Marines, who have based themselves in a walled compound.

"The enemy tactic is to conduct a feint attack from one compass direction, then fire from a second direction, and follow up with a proper attack from a third," he said.

"They have shown the ability to switch back and forth, so the combination may come from any angle."

One Marine was killed by hostile fire in the first day of the battle, while at least two others have suffered chronic heat exhaustion in the scorching temperatures and had to be evacuated by helicopter.

"Mian Poshteh is the most difficult situation in the current operation," Gaskell said of the site 25 kilometres (15 miles) south of Camp Delta in the Garmser district of Helmand.

"The enemy are against a 200-plus

Marine company, which is the most feared thing in the world. But we have rules of engagement and destroying everything in the area is not our intent. We fight back in a proportional way."

The Helmand River valley is crisscrossed with canals and irrigation ditches built by the US in the 1950s and 1960s to promote agriculture in the region, but the main crop is now opium which funds much of the Islamist insurgency.

"The terrain is pretty tricky and easy to get bogged down in, especially with the weight of gear that Marines carry," Gaskell said.

"The Hellfire missile was fired after the company commander had spent eight hours trying to manoeuvre in on one pocket of resistance. We knew from live aerial video there were no civilians there."

He said another air attack, on Saturday afternoon, was "a helicopter rocket and gun run" that had either killed those targeted or forced them to flee the tree line from where they were firing on the Marines.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan investigators inspect the site of a suicide bombing in Gereskh district of Helmand province on Saturday. Two US soldiers and seven Afghan policemen were killed in separate explosions on Saturday, highlighting the level of violence faced by Marines pressing one of the biggest assaults in eight years.

## N Korean missiles can hit key targets in South Japan mulls new missile defence system

AP, AFP, Seoul Tokyo

The ballistic missiles that North Korea test-fired this weekend were likely capable of striking key government and military facilities in South Korea, a defence official said yesterday, amid growing concerns over Pyongyang's firepower.

North Korea launched seven missiles into waters off its east coast Saturday in a show of force that defied UN resolutions and drew international condemnation and concern.

The missiles appear to have travelled about 250 miles (400 kilometres), meaning they could have reached almost any point in South Korea, an official at the South Korean Defence Ministry said on condition of anonymity, citing department policy.

The official said the exact details of the launches were still under investigation.

North and South Korea, which fought a 1950-53 war, still face off across the world's

most heavily fortified border. The United States, South Korea's key ally, has 28,500 troops stationed in the country as a deterrent.

South Korea's Yonhap news agency citing a South Korean government source it did not identify reported that five of the seven ballistic missiles landed in one area, indicating their accuracy has improved.

Yonhap said two of the seven missiles launched are believed to be variants of Rodong missiles while the rest are believed to be upgraded versions of Scud-C missiles.

Meanwhile, Japan is considering introducing a new type of missile defence system to counter airborne attacks, notably from North Korea, a local newspaper said Sunday.

Japan has two types of defence against airborne attacks -- the warship-installed Standard Missile 3 (SM-3) and Patriot Advanced Capability 3 (PAC-3), a surface-to-air missile that tracks and hits incoming targets.

### NEWS ANALYSIS

## Yudhoyono leaves anti-graft battle legacy

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who is running for re-election on July 8, leaves a first term legacy of greater stability and gains in tackling entrenched corruption, analysts say.

Elected in Indonesia's first direct presidential poll in 2004, Yudhoyono was handed a country crippled by widespread graft, an insurgency in Aceh province and bombings by the Jihadi Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) network.

Yudhoyono, known here as SBY, finishes his first five year term with significant gains on all these issues, but analysts warn these successes may have more to do with benign neglect than any reforming zeal.

"By not committing any crimes of his own, or mistakes of his own, we have arrived," political analyst Wimar

Witoelar told AFP.

"It's like winning a game without making any double faults or any difficult shots," he said.

He oversaw a 2005 foreign-brokered peace deal with separatist rebels that ended a nearly three decade civil war in Aceh -- although Vice President Jusuf Kalla, who is challenging Yudhoyono in the election, claims most of the credit.

Yudhoyono also cracked down on JI, the Islamist outfit behind bombings on Bali island in 2002 and 2005 that killed more than 200 people.

Hundreds of militants have been arrested and there has not been a significant attack in Indonesia for more than three years.

But it is progress against corruption that is generally seen as Yudhoyono's top achievement.

The Independent Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) has

claimed a series of high-profile scalps, including senior government officials, lawmakers, diplomats and the father-in-law of the president's son.

This is a major change from the centralised cronyism of the Suharto dictatorship, but analysts say there are worrying signs the campaign is losing momentum.

Lawmakers are dithering over a vote to renew the mandate of the independent corruption court by a December deadline, raising suspicions that one of the most vital organs in the anti-corruption effort is being sabotaged.

Yudhoyono was recently quoted as saying the KPK's power "must not go unchecked" and that the organisation was "only responsible to God", comments that some saw as a threat to the independence of the commission.

The president was also embarrassed last month when state auditors

claimed he ordered them to investigate the KPK's use of wiretaps, its most effective weapon and one it has used with devastating effect.

The recent arrest of the KPK's chief, Antasari Azhar, for allegedly hiring hitmen to murder a rival in a love triangle, has only fuelled speculation that Yudhoyono's much-vaunted anti-graft campaign is in trouble.

"He didn't monitor its implementation and he didn't keep pushing," Gadjah Madha University academic Zainal Arifin Mochtar said.

"If we look at the trend of SBY's declining efforts on corruption, I'm scared it will continue dropping."

Yudhoyono's graft fight also has not been entirely impartial, watchdog Transparency International's Indonesia head, Todung Mulya Lubis, said.



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