

US senator meets Myanmar junta, Suu Kyi in historic visit

Webb to fly out with convicted American

AFP, Yangon

US Senator Jim Webb met Myanmar military ruler Than Shwe and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday in an unprecedented visit that could herald a shift in Washington's tough stance against the junta.

Webb, a Democrat who is close to US President Barack Obama, became the first US official to hold talks with Than Shwe, encountering the reclusive regime supreme in his bunker-like capital Naypyidaw, officials said.

He later met Nobel peace laureate Suu Kyi at a government guesthouse near her Yangon home -- her first meeting with a foreign official since her house arrest was extended by another 18 months earlier this week.

The Myanmar regime sparked international outrage when a junta-backed court convicted Suu Kyi and US national

John Yettaw over an incident in which the American swam uninvited to her lakeside home in May.

In a direct result from the talks with Than Shwe, officials said Myanmar would deport Yettaw soon after Webb's departure.

After talks, Webb said he will fly out of Myanmar Sunday with an American convicted to seven years imprisonment after securing his release from the military regime, Webb's office said in a statement Saturday.

"I am grateful to the Myanmar government for honoring these requests," Webb said in the statement.

"It is my hope that we can take advantage of these gestures as a way to begin laying a foundation of goodwill and confidence-building in the future," he said.

Webb flew to Yangon afterwards for the talks with Suu Kyi. She was driven from her crumbling mansion in a convoy com-

prising her car and several police vehicles, witnesses said.

She left about 45 minutes later and details of the talks were not immediately available.

He was not due to meet Yettaw, a diabetic and epileptic former military veteran who is being held at Yangon's notorious Insein Prison. Yettaw was hospitalised earlier this month after suffering a series of fits.

Dissident groups have warned that Webb's visit could be manipulated by the Myanmar government to "endorse" its treatment of Suu Kyi and the more than 2,100 other political prisoners in the country's jails.

The UN Security Council issued a watered-down statement Thursday expressing "serious concern" about her detention, while the European Union the same day extended sanctions against the junta, including the judges in the trial.

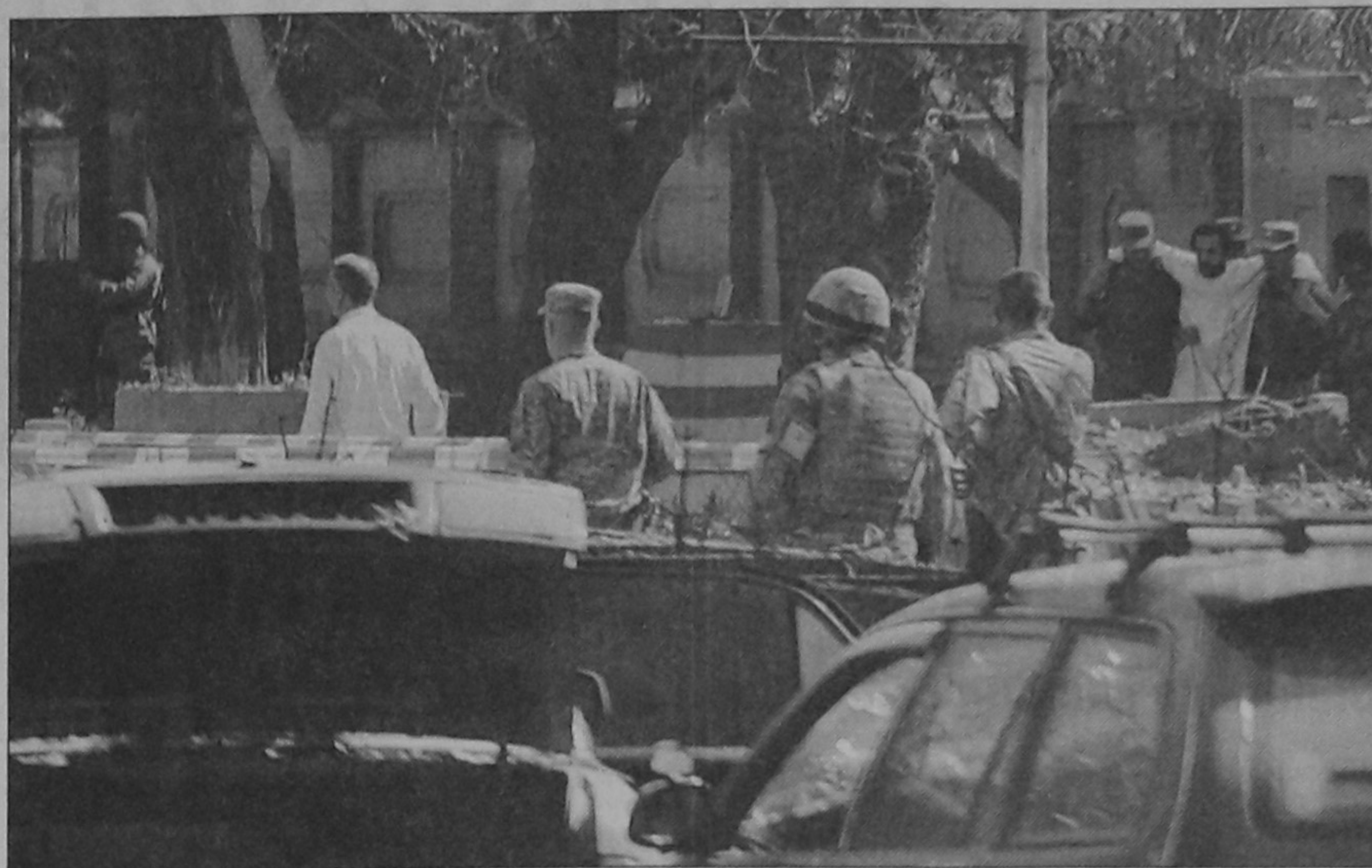


PHOTO: AFP

Afghan policemen (Rear) help an Afghan wounded man at the site of a suicide attack outside the Nato military headquarters in Kabul yesterday. A suicide car bomb exploded outside the base in the Afghan capital, killing seven Afghans.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) inspects a guard of honour on India's Independence Day celebration at the Red Fort in New Delhi yesterday. India celebrated 63rd anniversary of independence from British rule with a vow to eradicate terrorism from its soil in the wake of last year's devastating militant attacks on Mumbai.

China takes up 'zero refusal' policy for foreign reporters

THE CHINA DAILY, Beijing

Chinese government ministries will be pushed to give better access to foreign journalists in a policy called "zero refusal", a senior official of the State Council Information Office (SCIO) said on Friday.

"Zero refusal means that the ministries must designate people to deal with calls and interview requests from foreign media and that they have to give a response within 24 hours or the period they prescribed, no matter what the result is," Guo Weimin, director of the SCIO press department, told China Daily in an exclusive interview.

"It doesn't mean all applications will be accepted, but we have to tell the media how we handled it, so they can understand," he said. China gave unprecedented access to foreign journalists in 2007, under a set of provisional regulations for the Beijing Olympics Games in 2008.

Peaceniks light candles at Indo-Pak border

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Attari border

In what has become an annual ritual at the Attari-Wagah international border between India and Pakistan, peace activists from both sides assembled at the check post in Attari border on Friday midnight to light candles and pledge for better relations between both sides.

The peaceniks, led by veteran Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar, walked up to the border gate on the Indian side, 30 km from Amritsar city, and lit candles there.

Border Security Force (BSF) officials accompanied the activists up to the gate.

BSF Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Jagir Singh told IANS that peace activists from both sides had come for the informal ceremony.

He said that BSF officials will exchange greetings with their counterparts from Pakistan Rangers on Saturday to celebrate India's 63rd Independence Day.

Peace activists from the Pakistan side also arrived at the Wagah border gate.

The annual ritual is carried out to mark Pakistan's creation day (Aug 14) and India's Independence Day (Aug 15).

Mud-slinging goes on in Afghan vote trail

AFP, Kabul

They may be backed by warlords and rely on donkeys to get their supporters out to vote, but contenders in Afghanistan's elections are making promises and trading insults like politicians anywhere.

Just days before Afghans choose their president, the main candidates are criss-crossing the country to get the vote out, and like lawmakers from Washington to Whitehall, their rhetoric is testing hyperbolic heights.

To hear the top contenders tell it, their rivals are thieves, drug lords and human rights abusers. They are bad for democracy, cut deals with criminals, are cheating Afghans of a future, and only get into politics to get rich.

French minister calls for full ban on burka

AFP, London

A ban on wearing the all covering burka in France would stem the spread of what French minister Fadela Amara called the "cancer" of radical Islam, a report quoted her as saying yesterday.

The Muslim minister for urban regeneration told the Financial Times newspaper that the head-to-toe body covering and veil represented the "oppression of women, their enslavement, their humiliation."

Amara, who is of Algerian descent, said France was a beacon for an enlightened Islam at ease with modernity, so it was necessary to fight the "gangrene, the cancer of radical Islam which completely distorts the message of Islam."



Shah Rukh detained for 2 hours at US airport

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan was detained for two hours at a US airport after American immigration officials spotted the 'Khan' in his name, his aide said.

Shah Rukh was on his way to Chicago to attend a function to mark India's Independence Day when the incident took place at Newark airport.

"He was detained because his surname is Khan. He was kept until officials from the Indian embassy intervened. Now he has been released," Niloufer Qureshi, Shah Rukh's manager, told IANS over telephone from Mumbai.

Other Bollywood stars like Katrina Kaif, Kareena Kapoor and Saif Ali Khan too are set to attend the event.

Four Kashmir rebels killed as India marks Independence Day

AFP, Srinagar

Troops killed four Muslim rebels in Indian Kashmir as a separatist strike paralysed the restive region yesterday in protest against celebrations marking India's 1947 independence, police said.

The militants were killed in a fierce gunbattle in southern Kashmir late Friday, on the eve of India's celebrations of its 62nd anniversary from British colonial rule, police said.

Since 1989, when insurgents launched a revolt against New Delhi's rule, separatists have marked festivities honouring India's independence as a "black day" in the Muslim-majority region.

Separatists staged their traditional one-day anti-India strike to coincide with the celebrations, shutting down shops and businesses and emptying the streets of people.

The four militants killed by troops belonged to the region's most powerful guerrilla group, the Hizbul Mujahedin, which is fighting for the inclusion of Indian Kashmir by neighbouring Pakistan, police said.

During the night soldiers also defused eight bombs planted by militants in the scenic Himalayan region, where authorities have sharply boosted security for the celebrations, said police.

PPP won't field candidate against Sharif in by-polls

Says Zardari

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has said his party will not field any candidate against PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif in the upcoming by-polls.

However, presidential spokesman Farhatullah Babar was quoted by the Daily Times as saying that the PPP has not yet decided whether to field a candidate against Nawaz or not.

"A decision will be taken when the by-poll schedule is announced," he said.

Zardari, who was speaking at an inauguration function, said all political parties were united in serving the nation and every citizen had the right to participate in the country's political process.

He added that "Bhutto-ism" had provided courage to the PPP to face dictatorship and work for the restoration of the democracy in the country.

Aziz denies supporting Musharraf over removal of Pak judges

ANI, Islamabad

Former Pakistan prime minister Shaukat Aziz has rejected former President General Pervez Musharraf's claims that he had discussed the November 3, 2007 action of removing judges of the superior judiciary with him (Aziz).

"I had neither advised Musharraf nor had taken part in any consultation process that led to the ousted Musharraf's decision to abrogate the Constitution on Nov 3, 2007," sources close to Aziz said.

According to them, Aziz believed that Musharraf took the unconstitutional decision in his capacity as the Chief of the Army Staff and not as country's president.

Panic spreads faster than swine flu virus in India

AP, New Delhi

The streets of the western city of Pune were half-empty, schools in Mumbai were ordered closed, and people suffering aches flooded hospitals across the country as India confronted duelling outbreaks of swine flu and swine flu panic.

Twenty one people have died from the flu here, the government said Friday, and 1,390 have been confirmed infected in this nation of 1.2 billion people. But fear of the flu has outpaced the virus itself.

"The amount of frenzy or hysteria is totally disproportionate to the overall reality of the disease," Dr. Jai Narain, the head of the regional communicable disease office for the World Health Organisation, said Friday.

Breathless reports of swine flu have dominated India's 24-hour news channels desperate for stories amid the August doldrums. That in turn has helped whip the public into a frenzy, even in cities with relatively few cases of flu.

In New Delhi, where no deaths have been reported, people have begun wearing surgical masks in the street. In Lucknow, parents demanded their children be tested.

"Over 1,000 people lined up at different hospitals. ... Eleven of them tested positive," Dr RR Bharati, a top health official in the northern city of Lucknow said earlier this week.

In Mumbai, the country's financial capital, the government closed all schools and movie theatres, hammering the Bollywood film industry over the long Independence Day holiday weekend. The government also asked malls in Mumbai to tone down their traditional holiday sales to keep away crowds.

The nearby city of Pune is India's worst affected, with 13 of the country's 21 deaths.

There, the streets were half-empty, the usual crowds shunned the shopping malls and many workers stopped showing up at offices. With schools closed, worried parents kept their children shut inside.

3 soldiers killed in Pak suicide attack

AFP, Peshawar

At least three soldiers were killed in a suicide attack in restive northwestern Pakistan yesterday, officials said.

The attack took place near a military checkpoint in Waliabad village the Swat valley, where the military has been battling Taliban insurgents.

"A suicide bomber blew up his vehicle near a military checkpoint in Waliabad village, killing at least three soldiers," a senior security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

He added that two soldiers were killed on the spot while another died of his injuries in hospital.

Swat police chief Sajid Mohmand confirmed the attack and said five people, most of them soldiers, were also wounded in the attack.

Meanwhile, the military said it killed eight militants and arrested two others during the ongoing operation in Swat.

"Security forces conducted a search operation at Deari area, near Kanju village in Swat, and killed eight terrorists," the military said in a statement on Saturday.

It added that an insurgent surrendered to security forces in Sakhra while another was arrested in Amluk village.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani supporters of the banned Islamic party Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) march during a rally in Lahore on Friday to express solidarity with Muslims in Indian administered Kashmir as the country marks its 62nd Independence Day.

News in Brief

Iran appoints new judiciary chief

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has appointed Hojatolislam Sadegh Ardesthir Larijani as the country's new chief of the judiciary, state television reported yesterday.

Larijani, the younger brother of parliament speaker Ali Larijani, replaces Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi and will head the powerful judiciary for five years.

19 dead in prison riot in Mexico

AFP, Mexico City

At least 19 people were killed Friday in a riot that erupted in a prison in northern Mexico, a top security official said.

The rioting that was sparked by rivalries among prison gangs also left 26 others injured, according to Jorge Torres, the public security secretary in the Mexican state of Durango. All the victims were inmates at the prison that is located in the town of Gomez Palacio.



PHOTO: AFP

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo consoles the families of fallen soldiers at a military camp in Zamboanga City yesterday and pays her respects before the coffins of some of the 23 soldiers slain in combat with Muslim extremists.

মৃত্যু বার্ষিকী স্মরণে



আজ উত্তরা গ্রুপ সন কোম্পানীজ এর প্রতিষ্ঠাতা চেয়ারম্যান ও ব্যবস্থাপনা পরিচালক মরহুম মোহলেছুর রহমান এর ১০ম মৃত্যু বার্ষিকী। আজ ১৬ই আগস্ট আমরা গভীর শ্রদ্ধাভরে তাঁকে স্মরণ এবং তাঁর বিদেহী আত্মার মাগফেরাত ও শান্তি কামনা করছি।

মরহমের পরিবারের সদস্যবৃন্দ এবং উত্তরা গ্রুপ সন কোম্পানীজ এর সকল পরিচালক, কর্মকর্তা ও কর্মচারীবৃন্দ।

উত্তরা গ্রুপ সন কোম্পানীজ
"উত্তরা সেন্টার" ১০২, শাহীদ ভাটলিন আহমেদ সড়ক, ডেজারীও, ঢাকা, ফোন: ৮১৪৪০৩০