

US plans to engage Myanmar diplomatically

Sanctions under spotlight in policy change

AFP, Bangkok

The Obama administration, sketching out a new policy toward Myanmar, pledged Wednesday to engage diplomatically with the country's military rulers in a bid to promote democratic reform there.

Speaking at the UN General Assembly in New York, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton raised the possibility of an eventual easing or lifting of sanctions if US engagement produces political changes in Myanmar, earlier known as Burma.

Hillary told reporters that "we believe that sanctions remain important as part of our policy, but by themselves they have not produced the results that had been hoped for on behalf of the people of Burma."

The United States and European Union have imposed sanctions on Myanmar due to its refusal to recognize the last elections in 1990 and prolonged detention of the victor, democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

"So going forward, we will be employing both of those tools pursuing our same goals, and to help achieve democratic

reform, we will be engaging directly with Burmese authorities," the chief US diplomat said.

Taking a less confrontational international approach than his predecessor George W. Bush, President Barack Obama has already taken steps or announced plans to engage hardline regimes in Tehran, Pyongyang, Damascus and Havana.

Hillary said she could "preview" the new approach toward Myanmar, because a policy review begun by the administration days after it took office in January was almost complete.

She made the information public after briefing foreign ministers from a group of countries concerned about the situation in Myanmar that was chaired by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

"2010 will be a very critical year for Myanmar," Ban said after the meeting.

He echoed calls by other members of the international community for the release of political prisoners so that they can take part in elections next year.

Critics have dismissed the planned polls as a sham designed to entrench the

military's hold on power.

Hillary said the "basic objectives" of US policy toward Myanmar have not changed.

"We want credible democratic reform, a government that responds to the needs of the Burmese people, immediate, unconditional release of political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi," she said.

Aung San Suu Kyi has spent 13 of the last 19 years in detention since the junta refused to recognize the National League for Democracy's landslide victory in the country's last elections in 1990.

The junta, Hillary added, must also engage in a "serious dialogue with the opposition and minority ethnic groups."

A senior US official said the Obama administration sought to change its policy partly because the military rulers themselves showed signs of wanting to improve relations with the United States.

Hillary outlined the new US stand on sanctions to the foreign ministers from countries of the Group of Friends Burma, which includes a cross-section of countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, China, Britain and France.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian officials and bystanders gather around the site of a collapsed chimney in Korba, some 200km from Raipur Wednesday. About 100 people are feared dead as a chimney caved in at a thermal power plant under construction in central India.



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada (L) greets Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi prior to their bilateral talks at the United Nations headquarters in New York on Wednesday.

Taliban gun down 9 tribal elders in Pakistan

AP, Peshawar

Militants ambushed a convoy of prominent anti-Taliban tribal elders in volatile north-west Pakistan yesterday, spraying their cars with gunfire, killing nine people and wounding six others.

The members of the anti-Taliban citizen's group were traveling from the Machikhel area to meet security officials in Bannu district when their three-vehicle convoy was attacked by insurgents, police officer Mohammad Ghani Khan said.

Nine bodies were recovered from the bullet-riddled cars, including at least four tribal elders who had opposed the Taliban in the region, said Ajaz Khan, another police officer. Six people were wounded and hospitalized, he said.

Armed local residents came out of their homes and fought off the Taliban after the ambush, preventing them from finishing off the survivors, Khan said. Security forces later arrived in Khaisur area and joined the gunbattle

that still raged Thursday afternoon.

The ambush followed a separate attack by militants who killed two members of another anti-Taliban committee Thursday in the Swat Valley to the northeast. The assailants struck as members of the "peace committee" slept in Sertelegram area, Mayor Mohammad Ibrar Khan said. Security guards fought the militants and killed several of them, although no bodies were recovered.

Local people formed the Sertelegram group last week to protect their area from Taliban fighters who controlled the valley until July when a major offensive by the Pakistani army scattered them.

Pakistan's government endorses such groups, but they have angered the Taliban leading to attacks.

In a third area, the Kanju district, thousands of armed Swat citizens gathered the Saidi Sharif airport, fearing a possible Taliban comeback and pledging to protect their area.

100 feared dead in Indian chimney collapse

Says union official

AFP, Raipur

Rescuers searched desperately for survivors yesterday in the rubble of a giant chimney that collapsed in central India, with a top union official saying more than 100 workers were feared dead.

Labourers had completed 100 meters (330 feet) of the planned 275-metre chimney when the entire structure came crashing down in bad weather on Wednesday.

Officials said 20 bodies had been recovered and dozens more were believed to be buried under a vast pile of brick and stone at the site in Korba, 200 kilometres (124 miles) from Raipur, the state capital of Chhattisgarh.

"I expect the number of dead will cross 100," said Vinod Kumar Sharma, general secretary of the workers' union at aluminium group Balco, a subsidiary of London-listed Vedanta,

which was building the chimney for a power plant.

Sharma said his estimate was based on testimony from union members near the scene of the accident, who said workers were sheltering from heavy rain in and around the structure when it collapsed at about 3:45 pm (1015 GMT).

"Only nine people who are in hospital are alive. The others are dead," he said. "It is a major tragedy. It is very sad for the poor families."

Police and government officials said they were having difficulties establishing exactly how many people were buried because the company has been unable to say how many contractors were working on the site.

Sharma said an average shift would have seen 55-70 people working directly on the chimney, with dozens more on the ground.

"The chance of finding

survivors is getting very bleak," police officer Ratanlal Dangi said by phone from the site.

"We are facing great difficulty in removing the concrete. Once the debris is removed, we will be able to rescue people or find bodies."

Deadly construction site accidents are relatively common in India, where health and safety rules are routinely flouted, but a builders' labour group said this incident was bad, even by Indian standards.

"It is one of the worst accidents in India's recent construction history," Rajeev Sharma, South Asia head of Building and Wood Workers' International, told AFP.

KC Gupta, director general of the National Safety Council of India, said the disaster was the latest in a string of fatal accidents in the construction sector.

Saeed's lawyer files petition seeking his early release

ANI, Islamabad

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) chief Hafiz Mohammad Saeed's lawyer, AK Dogar, has filed a petition in a court seeking Saeed's release from house arrest.

Saeed, the alleged Mumbai terror attacks mastermind and chief of the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) was placed under house arrest four days ago.

The Pakistani authorities had also barred him from leading Eid prayers.

Saeed's house arrest came three days after police in Faisalabad registered two FIRs under the Anti-Terrorism Act for inciting people to wage jihad.

UN envoy holds talks with Lankan officials over refugees

AFP, Colombo

The United Nations' top envoy for refugees met with Sri Lankan authorities yesterday to discuss the plight of over 250,000 war-displaced civilians held in camps in the north, officials said.

Walter Kalin, the UN secretary general's envoy for refugee rights, arrived late Wednesday and will also tour the camps in the island's north before leaving on Sunday, UN and local officials said.

"Kalin will be in Colombo today for talks with various government officials to appraise himself with the developments on the IDPs (Internally Displaced

Persons)," a spokesman for the human rights ministry said.

Kalin's visit comes as Sri Lanka once again ruled out any foreign probe into the island's rights record amid mounting international calls for war crimes investigations.

International Trade Minister GL Peiris said he would resist moves by the European Union to investigate human rights violations as a pre-condition for tariff concessions to enter the lucrative European market.

"Foreigners will not be able to interfere with Sri Lanka's sovereignty," Peiris was quoted as saying by the state-run Daily News.

China promotes Mao Zedong grandson to general

AP, Beijing

Mao Zedong's only grandson has become the youngest general in the People's Liberation Army at age 39, a Chinese newspaper said Thursday.

Military historian Mao Xinyu is the son of Mao's second son Mao Anqing, who died in 2007 at the age of 84. The younger Mao is a member of the main advisory body to the country's rubber stamp parliament and a fierce defender of his grandfather's legacy.

The state-run Changjiang Daily reported that the promotion came "recently" and said the move made Mao Xinyu the first PLA general born in the 1970s.



PHOTO: AFP

All Indian Youth Welfare Federation members shout slogans against the Punjab state government as they hold placards and an effigy of state Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal in Amritsar yesterday. The demonstration was held to protest power cuts of up to ten hours in the northern Indian state.

Malik rejects presence of Blackwater in Pakistan

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan Interior Minister Rehman Malik has once again rejected reports regarding the presence of private US security firm Blackwater inside the country.

"Blackwater does not engage in any activity in Pakistan. Indeed no official or foreign security company has been provided any facility in the country," Malik told a private television channel.

Referring to the recent raids on office premises of a security company hired by the US embassy in Islamabad, Malik said strict action would be taken any firm or security agencies possessing illegal weapons.

Commenting on Indo-Pak relations, he said the international community must not discriminate while dealing with both countries, The Daily Times reports.

Gene sweep shows Indians descended from two groups

AFP, Paris

Nearly all Indians can claim descent from two ancestral groups, a study released on Wednesday said, adding that millennia of inter-marriage may have left the country's population more at risk to some inherited diseases.

US and Indian scientists took blood samples from 132 individuals from 25 diverse groups in India, representing 13 states, all six language families as well as tribal groups and "upper" and "lower" castes.

They then unravelled the volunteers' genetic code, sifting through key areas of DNA for similarities and differences.

Two ancestral populations emerge, and their genes dominate the Indian genome today, the researchers said.

"Different Indian groups have inherited 40 to 80 percent of their ancestry from a population that we call the Ancestral North Indians, who are related to western Eurasians, and the rest from the Ancestral South Indians, who are not related to any group outside India," said Harvard Medical School geneticist David Reich.

The north-and-south findings chimed with scenarios whereby a small number of venturers, the so-called Austro-Asiatic people, first moved into the sub-continent about 60,000 years ago.

Around 5,000 years ago, the arrival of a Dravidian-speaking tribe caused the community to disperse. Its members went on to form enclaves of small, tightly-knit groups.

NEWS IN BRIEF

17 killed in violent Mexican city

AFP, Ciudad Juarez

Seventeen more people were killed in a 24-hour period in Ciudad Juarez, the border city at the epicentre of a bloody war among the country's ruthless drug cartels, authorities said.

The killings occurred during a period from Tuesday through Wednesday, according to prosecutors.

They said the latest victims included a 36-year-old Mexican resident of Arizona who was shot at least 10 times in his car just 200 meters (yards) from a bridge that spans the US-Mexican border.

Obama to visit Japan in Nov

AFP, New York

US President Barack Obama told Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama on Wednesday that he will visit Japan in November, a Japanese official said.

"Obama said he's looking forward to visiting Japan in November," a Japanese official said on condition of anonymity.

"Hatoyama said we heartily welcome it," he said.

Bomb attack kills Afghan policemen

AFP, Kandahar

A roadside bomb tore through an Afghan police vehicle killing three policemen and wounding two others in a Taliban stronghold of southern Afghanistan on Thursday, the government said.

The police were en route from Lashkar Gah, capital of Helmand province to neighbouring Ghorzab district when the blast took place, Daud Ahmadi, spokesman for the provincial governor, told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

This picture taken on Wednesday shows Pakistani local residents arriving at a cinema house in Mingora, the capital city of Swat Valley two days after the Eid-ul-Fitr. More than a year after locking their doors and ripping down racy posters because of Taliban threats, cinema is once again attracting excited men in Pakistan's Swat valley.

Pakistan cinema returns to post-Taliban Swat

AFP, Mingora

More than a year after locking doors and ripping down racy posters because of Taliban threats, cinema is once again attracting excited men in Pakistan's Swat valley.

Mingora, the capital of the northwest district formerly overrun by Islamist gunmen determined to enforce Sharia law and ban entertainment, is now seeing hundreds queue up to watch re-runs of Pakistani films.

"I love the big screen. It's a lot of fun. The curse (Taliban) is almost finished," 21-year-old mechanic Abid Khan told AFP inside the Swat Cinema.

"Forget the Taliban, come on enjoy," he said, jumping up to dance along to a song from a faded Pashto musical blaring out into the auditorium.

Taliban fanatics set fire to music and DVD shops, closed cinemas, killed and threatened dancers and banned people from even listening to

music, plunging the once relatively liberal, northwest tourist centre into fear -- and boredom.

But this week a billboard showed a silver screen hero, Kalashnikov in hand, with an actress dancing in a provocative manner on the side.

The Pashto film, "Gul Soori Soori Karam", which loosely translates as "The Flower Who Injured Me", is a popular old-time favourite for the Muslim religious festival of Eid-ul-Fitr which took place this week.

"There is no other source of entertainment. Where can the young go? That's why I'm here to enjoy," said 17-year-old shop worker Sajid Ali who came to see the film with eight friends.

Pakistan launched a blistering assault against the Taliban in and around Swat last April after foot soldiers loyal to radical cleric Maulana Fazlullah advanced further south towards Islamabad in defiance of a peace deal.