

Myanmar opposition still not sure on polls boycott

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar's junta has not yet fixed the dates for elections in 2010 but the opposition is already debating whether to boycott them and lose all influence or take part in what critics say is a sham.

The military regime forced through a new constitution in 2008 -- just days after Cyclone Nargis devastated the country leaving 138,000 people dead -- under which the first national polls for 20 years will be held.

But so far the conditions are acceptable only to the junta. Critics say the sole aim of the elections is to legitimise the generals' grip on power and entrench their proxies in parliament.

UN urges Asian nations to get tough on Myanmar

AP, United Nations

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged a ministerial meeting of southeast Asian nations late Saturday to take a tougher line with fellow member Myanmar in hopes its military junta will free political prisoners and hold fair elections.

Ban said it is in the best interest of the rest of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations to lean on Myanmar to free political prisoners, including democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The 64-year-old Nobel Peace laureate has been in detention for 14 of the last 20 years, since leading a pro-democracy uprising that was crushed by Myanmar's military junta.

Asean members generally refrain from criticising one another, however.

"Our collective interest is to find ways

to encourage Myanmar to free Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners, start a genuine political dialogue and create conditions conducive to credible elections," Ban said.

Last week, Myanmar's ruling junta released at least 25 political detainees as part of an amnesty, but that figure was believed to be only about 1 percent of all political inmates being held. Authorities want the former prisoners to participate in next year's vote.

Ban called the amnesty "a step in the right direction (that) falls short of expectations" and said next year's election has to be credible.

"Next year will be critical," he said. "The first planned election in two decades must be held in an inclusive and credible manner if they are to advance stability, democracy, reconciliation, national development and respect for

human rights."

Myanmar Prime Minister Gen Thein Sein is scheduled to speak at the UN General Assembly's ministerial meeting on Monday, the highest-ranking junta official to do so in 14 years.

"Myanmar has an opportunity to demonstrate to its people and to the international community its clear commitment to an inclusive political transition," Ban said. "It is an opportunity Myanmar should not miss."

"Asean countries have an important role to play in this effort -- first and foremost to ensure the well-being of the people of Myanmar, but also in the wider interest of peace and security in the region," he said.

Washington has traditionally been Myanmar's strongest critic, applying political and economic sanctions against the junta.



Members of the National League for Democracy party sit next to portraits of Myanmar opposition icon Aung San Suu Kyi as they celebrate the party's 21st anniversary of its founding day at their headquarters in Yangon yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Rescuers pluck bodies from muddy water in Philippines

106 dead or missing as storm toll rises

AP, Manila

Rescuers plucked bodies from muddy floodwaters and saved drenched survivors from rooftops Sunday after a tropical storm tore through the northern Philippines and left at least 106 people dead and missing.

It was the region's worst flooding in more than four decades. The government declared a "state of calamity" in metropolitan Manila and 25 storm-hit provinces.

Tropical Storm Ketsana roared across the northern Philippines on Saturday, dumping more than a month's worth of rain in just 12 hours. The resulting landslides and flooding have left at least 83 people dead and 23 others missing, Defence Secretary Gilbert Teodoro said.

Many parts of the capital remained "flooded" Sunday, although "waters were fast receding."

TV footage shot from military helicopter showed

drenched survivors still marooned on top of half-submerged passenger buses and rooftops in the suburbs of Manila. Some dangerously clung on high-voltage power lines while others plodded through waist-high flood waters.

Authorities deployed rescue teams on boats to save survivors sighted during the aerial check.

More than 330,000 people were affected by storm, including some 59,000 people who were brought to about 100 schools, churches and other evacuation shelters, officials said.

The "state of calamity" declaration allowed officials to utilize emergency funds for relief and rescue.

Teodoro said that so far, army troops, police and civilian volunteers have rescued more than 5,100 people.

Many residents lost all their belongings in the storm, but were thankful they were alive.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Plane crashes at S Korea fair

AP, Seoul

A light plane crashed at the site of an international fair packed with thousands of visitors in South Korea on Sunday, killing one of its two pilots and injuring 11 people on the ground, an official said.

The plane hit a bus on display at the site in Incheon, just west of Seoul, said Kim Ju-hee, a spokesman for the Global Fair & Festival 2009 Incheon.

Four Iraqi cops killed in attack

AFP, Ramadi

A suicide car bomber on Sunday killed four Iraqi policemen and wounded four others near the predominantly Sunni Arab western city of Ramadi, a police official said.

The attack happened around 10.30 am (0830 GMT) 10 kilometres (six miles) north east of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, which was an al-Qaeda stronghold in the aftermath of the US-led invasion in 2003.



Residents waded through a flooded highway in the town of Cainta in Rizal province, east of Manila yesterday to reach higher grounds a day after tropical storm Ketsana lashed the area around the capital. At least 73 people were killed and more than a quarter of a million displaced after tropical storm Ketsana dumped the heaviest rainfall on capital Manila in more than four decades, officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

India wants to resolve all issues peacefully with Pakistan: Krishna

ANI, United Nations

Foreign Minister SM Krishna, took the podium at the United Nations General Assembly to remind the world of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, and said that India wants to resolve all outstanding issues with Pakistan through peaceful dialogue.

Krishna singled out Pakistan from where the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks came, and said that he is devoted to establishing a good and friendly relationship between the two nations.

"Peace, security, stability and welfare of our neighbourhood is vital for India," Krishna said.

"India is committed to establishing good neighbourly relations and resolving all outstanding issues with Pakistan through peaceful dialogue."

Krishna said that terrorists are threat to the world order, and stressed that Indian Government's devotion to peacekeeping in the region.

"Mr President, the barbaric terrorist attack on the innocent people of Mumbai on November 26, 2008 reminds us of the daily and malignant menace that terrorism poses to all countries," he said.

"It is our collective responsibility and duty to work together to ensure that terrorists, organisers, perpetrators and supporters of such crimes are brought to justice," he added.

Krishna's speech also cited the peace work underway in the region, adding there is a new political beginning in Sri Lanka, and that Nepal and Afghanistan remain top priorities for India.

Krishna during his speech cited text from India's 41 years old, and praised the international body for its devotion to world peace, while maintaining India's steadfast support.

Krishna also voiced India's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation, calling it one of the highest priorities of the international community.

Blast aimed at Afghan minister kills 4

6 foreign troops killed in attacks, storm

AP, AFP, Kabul

A suicide car bomb explosion targeting Afghanistan's energy minister killed four civilians yesterday, while attacks and a violent storm killed six international troops, including three French and two American forces, officials said.

Taliban assassination attempts against Afghan officials have intensified this year, with more than 100 officials and pro-government tribal elders attacked -- half of them fatally.

The convoy carrying Energy Minister Ismail Khan, a power-broker in the western region of Herat, was headed to the airport when a suicide car bomb exploded outside a high school, said Raouf Ahmadi, a police spokesman. Ahmadi said four civilians died and 17 people were wounded, including four of Khan's bodyguards.

He said Khan escaped unharmed and arrived safely at the airport.

A Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, claimed responsibility and said the explosion targeted Khan, who was once governor of Herat, a western province bordering Iran.

The Taliban assassination campaign is a strong sign of deteriorating security in the country, where a record number of US and Nato troops have also died this year. The Obama administration is now debating whether to send more American troops to Afghanistan as its government faces allegations of widespread fraud from the disputed Aug. 20 presidential election.

Two US service members died Saturday in the country's south -- one from a roadside bomb explosion and the other from an insurgent attack, the Nato-led force said. A third Nato service member died

Sunday from a bomb explosion in southern Afghanistan. No other details were released.

Elsewhere, three French soldiers died in a violent storm in northeastern Afghanistan late Saturday. One soldier was struck by lightning while two were swept away by a rain-swollen river during an operation in Kapisa province, said military spokesman Christophe Prazuck.

This year has been the deadliest of the eight-year war for US and Nato troops. The latest six deaths bring to 64 the number of Nato troops killed this month.

Elsewhere in western Afghanistan, three Afghan civilians died when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb in Farah province. Gen Mohammad Faqir Askar, Farah's police chief, said the vehicle had just turned off the main highway toward a village when the bomb exploded.



Afghan bystanders look at the wreckage of a destroyed car at the site of an explosion in Herat city yesterday. Four civilians were killed and 17 others were wounded.

PHOTO: AFP



South Korean man Kim Gi-Sung (2nd L) makes a toast with his North Korean relatives during their reunion at North Korea's Mount Kumgang resort near the inter-Korean border yesterday as the North-South humanitarian programme resumed for a second day after a two-year hiatus.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan offers reward for 5 militant chiefs

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistan yesterday slapped bounties on the heads of five Taliban and militant leaders, part of an ongoing manhunt for the masterminds of deadly attacks rocking the northwest.

The five wanted men all hail from Khyber, a lawless tribal district on the border with Afghanistan where the military has recently turned its attention after wrapping up an anti-Taliban assault in nearby Swat valley.

One of the men is Mangal Bagh, head of banned militant organisation Lashkar-e-Islam (Army of Islam), who stands accused by officials of running torture centres and private jails in Khyber.

"Anyone who catches these people, dead or alive, or anyone who gives solid information leading to the arrest of these militant commanders will be rewarded with cash,"

said the advert in the English-language paper The News.

"These people are involved in the killing of innocent Muslims of Khyber agency and surrounding areas -- children are becoming orphans because of the bloody activities of these people," it added.

Bagh has a bounty of five million rupees (60,000 dollars) on his head, while two other Lashkar-e-Islam commanders and two Pakistani Taliban leaders have two-million-rupee rewards.

Shafirullah Khan, the top administrative official of Khyber agency, confirmed that the government had taken out the advertisement.

Islamabad has vowed to clear the northwest of Islamist militants blamed for the deaths of up to 2,100 people in attacks in the last two years.

In April, troops launched a blistering assault in a bid to dislodge Taliban fighters who advanced into Swat valley.

Pakistan blasts show Taliban ability to strike

AP, Islamabad

The suicide blasts that rocked northwest Pakistan over the weekend signal the Taliban remain a threat despite intensified military operations and unmanned drone attacks targeting the group's leaders, analysts said yesterday.

Seventeen people were killed and more than 150 wounded Saturday in two attacks hours apart in North West Frontier Province. The Taliban claimed responsibility for one of the strikes.

Pakistan is battling al-Qaeda and Taliban militants close to the Afghan border blamed for scores of attacks over the last two years. The insurgents are linked to those in Afghanistan, where violence against Nato and US troops is running at record levels.

The leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, was killed in a CIA missile strike in

the northwest last month. While the militants have named a new leader, some have speculated the group may have lost some of its ability to stage attacks.

A retired former intelligence chief of the region, Asad Munir, said Saturday's attacks were a reminder of the threat from Islamist extremists.

"That area is the safe haven for the al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership and they don't want to lose it," Munir told The Associated Press. "Yesterday's attacks were a show of strength and indicated the potential threat from militants in those areas."

Two explosives-packed vehicles driven by suicide attackers levelled a police station in the rural district of Bannu, killing seven, and tore through a commercial area in the main city of Peshawar, leaving 10 dead. More than 150 people were wounded, officials said.

Escape bid by Lankan war refugees thwarted

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops opened fire to stop dozens of war-displaced Tamil civilians escaping from a government camp where they have been detained in the island's north, the military said yesterday.

Internees at the Manik farm camp pelted soldiers with stones and tried to break free on Saturday night, military spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara said.

"The army fired in self-defence," he said. "These people were throwing stones and were trying to escape." Nanayakkara said 19 arrests had been made after the incident, in which at least three people were reported by police to have suffered gunshot wounds.