



Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi (C) looks on following a meeting with US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell (L) at a hotel in Yangon yesterday. The most senior US official to visit Myanmar for a decade and a half held talks with Suu Kyi after the ruling junta allowed the detained Nobel laureate to make a rare public appearance.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan in 'state of trauma' over blasts

AFP, Rawalpindi

The anxious wives were on the phone again to their husbands in the Pakistani garrison town of Rawalpindi, a terrorist target where daily routine can turn to horror in an instant.

"She's very worried," Abdul Habib said after putting down the receiver while visiting a friend's carpet shop close to the site of a bombing which left 35 people dead.

Not far from the carpet shop, Junaid Anwar Baig's wife had also phoned.

"She calls two or three times a day," said Baig, 62, who sells copper ornaments and other handicrafts.

"She always says: 'Be careful. Don't move around.'"

Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked extremists have carried out a two-year campaign of attacks that have killed more than 2,400 people in Pakistan, which has a population of around 167 million.

The indiscriminate killing, beamed into living rooms by television channels broadcasting round the clock, is cultivating a state of fear and uncertainty across Pakistan.

"The whole nation is in a state of trauma," said Naima Hassan, a psychologist who has

counselled victims of the attacks.

There have been around 300 blasts since the wave of violence began. Last week in northwestern city Peshawar 118 people -- many of them women and children -- died in a market bombing that was the country's second-worst attack.

"The problem is this: you can't stop it," said Habib, 57. "Anything can happen at any time. Mentally, everybody's upset."

That feeling of helplessness is common, said the psychologist.

"They feel that they are unable to cope with this terrorism," she said.

Along Mall Road, a wide, busy street in front of the carpet shop and Baig's business, they have already had a lot to cope with.

In the latest attack to strike this city adjoining the capital Islamabad, a bomber on a motorcycle blew himself up close to people queuing for their salaries outside a Pakistani bank and hotel, police said.

The bomb site, still blocked by police, is about 200 metres (yards) from army headquarters where last month 10 gunmen kept up a nearly 24-hour siege that left 23 people dead and deeply embarrassed the military.



PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama (2nd R) speaks beside Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt (C), the European Council High Representative Javier Solana (2nd L), and President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso (R) during the US-European Union Summit in the Cabinet Room of the White House in Washington, DC, on Tuesday.

EU, US join forces to combat global warming

Merkel calls for a climate protocol in speech to American lawmakers

AFP, Washington

The European Union and the United States join forces yesterday to combat global warming ahead of a key UN-backed climate summit next month, but the Europeans warned Washington that not enough had been done.

Fresh from a White House meeting Tuesday with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who also made a heart-felt plea for a climate protocol in a speech to US lawmakers, US President Barack Obama held talks with European Union leaders to assure them his administration supported clinching a new treaty in Copenhagen in December.

The EU-US summit goes into its second day Wednesday for talks with US Energy Secretary Steven Chu, after the Europeans pressed Washington to take action on climate change and Obama stood shoulder to shoulder with his European allies in pressing to redouble efforts to combat global warming.

"All of us agreed that it is imperative for us to redouble our efforts in the weeks between now and the Copenhagen meeting to assure that we create a framework for progress in dealing with (a) potential ecological disaster," Obama said after talks with European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso, Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

Merkel, in a rare speech to a joint session of Congress, compared the battle over climate change to the struggle to bring down the Berlin Wall two decades ago next week.

She also backed Western calls for emerging nations to do more. "I'm convinced that once we in Europe and America show ourselves ready to adopt binding agreements, we will also be able to persuade China and India to join in," she said.

But even as she and Obama stressed the need to solidify a framework agreement at Copenhagen, US Republican lawmakers boycotted a committee meeting on an Obama-backed bill to set the first US requirements on curbing carbon emissions blamed for global warming.

Asked what impact Merkel's speech might have on the US debate, Senator James Inhofe, the top Republican on the committee looking at the climate legislation, said: "None whatsoever."

Barroso, who praised Obama for having "changed the climate on climate negotiations," said he was "worried by the lack of progress in negotiations" ahead of the December 7-18 climate meeting that aims to seal a treaty to succeed the Kyoto Protocol before it expires in 2012.

"Of course we are not going to have a full-fledged binding treaty, Kyoto-type, by Copenhagen," Barroso told reporters. "This is obvious. There is no time for that."

An international meeting next year in Mexico could be used to finalize a treaty, but Barroso said Copenhagen needed to come up with the framework of the deal, and that the world's largest economy in particular should take a lead role.

"What we are asking is the United States to show leadership in this, such an important issue," Barroso said.

After meeting with Obama, he said he was "more confident now" about Washington's commitment, but also warned against protracted negotiations akin to the stalled Doha round of trade liberalization talks.

Reinfeldt, whose country currently holds the rotating EU presidency, said the United States should at least agree on targets for cutting emissions and on financing for developing nations.

US, allies give Karzai 6 months to perform

Abdullah terms his foe's re-election illegal

ANI, AFP, Washington/ Kabul

The United States and its allies have reportedly given Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai six months to sideline his brother and reduce corruption or risk losing American support, Afghan officials have told The Times.

Senior palace insiders said that President Obama delivered the ultimatum when he congratulated Karzai on his re-election on Monday.

Top of his demands was action against corruption, the appointment of "reform-minded ministers" and several high-profile scalps to prove Karzai's commitment to cleaning up his Government.

"If he doesn't meet the conditions within six months, Obama has told him America will pull out," said an official with access to Karzai's inner circle.

"Obama said they don't want their soldiers' lives wasted for nothing. They

want changes in Cabinet, and changes in his personal staff," he added.

Meanwhile, former presidential challenger Abdullah said Hamid Karzai's re-election as Afghan leader was illegal, accusing his rival Wednesday of lacking a mandate to deliver on pledges of unity and reform.

Three days after pulling out of a runoff against the incumbent, Abdullah said a subsequent decision by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) to hand Karzai another five years in power had no basis in law and underlined its bias.

But the former foreign minister refrained from calling on his supporters to take to the streets.

"This (IEC) decision does not have a legal basis," Abdullah told reporters.

"Such a government which lacks legitimacy cannot fight corruption."

"A government which comes to power

without the people's support cannot fight phenomena of terrorism, unemployment, poverty and hundreds of other problems."

The President's half-brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, has repeatedly denied claims that he controls Afghanistan's billion-dollar heroin trade.

As he head of Kandahar's provincial council, he is the main powerbroker in the south of the country, but the President has refused to remove him, insisting that there is no proof of wrongdoing.

In his acceptance speech Tuesday, Karzai vowed to eradicate the "dark stain of corruption", which he admitted had undermined faith in his regime.

Afghan officials said that efforts are on to find Wali Karzai a new position.

The American Embassy is understood to have warned Karzai it will start collecting evidence against Wali Karzai if he is not removed from Kandahar.

'Rogue' Afghan cop kills 5 UK soldiers

AP, Kabul

Five British soldiers were killed in a shooting in the southern Afghan province of Helmand, Britain's defence ministry said yesterday, in an attack Afghan authorities said was carried out by an Afghan policeman.

Tuesday's attack occurred in the Nad-e-Ali district of the country's volatile Helmand Province, and brings the number of British forces personnel who have died in Afghanistan to 229.

A Helmand police official said the attacker was a policeman. Nato said the soldiers had been at an Afghan police checkpoint when an individual picked up his weapon and began firing. The alliance said the attacker's motives were unclear, and that the incident was being investigated by Afghan authorities and Britain's Royal Military Police.

"The death of five brave soldiers in a single incident is a terrible loss," British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said.

"They fought to make Afghanistan more secure, but above all to make Britain safer from the terrorism and extremism which continues to threaten us from the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan," he said.

Brown insisted he remained committed to ensuring his country's troops had "the best possible support and equipment and the right strategy, backed by our international partners, and by a new Afghan government ready to play its part in confronting the challenges Afghanistan faces."

Speaking to reporters in Kabul, former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, who was the main challenger to President Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan's recent fraud-marred election, expressed condolences to the soldiers' families.

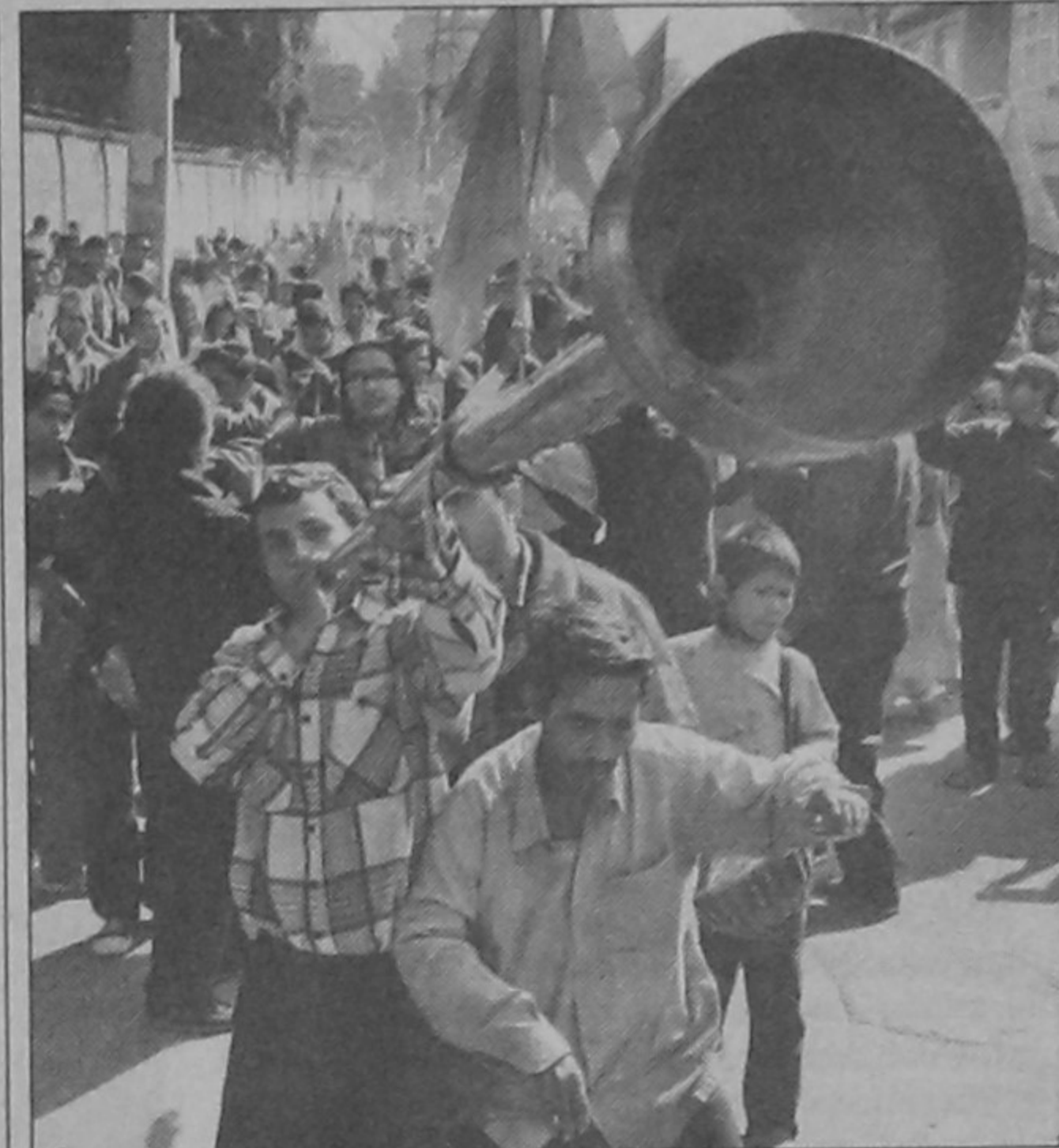


PHOTO: AFP

Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) supporters dance during a protest against the government outside the government administration building at Singha Durbar in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's Maoists launched their protests aimed at destabilising the government in a dispute over the military that led to the Maoists' fall from power in May.

Outlaw dons call shots from India

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and retreated instantly. They later considered themselves 'fortunate' to find Zafar's body in a water body a few kilometres from their village next week.

During the phone conversations Shahin said they gave "death penalty" to Zafar two years ago at their self-styled court on charge of helping police arrest a bodyguard of GMF boss Aminul Islam Mukul.

Zafar's friend was talking about the horror at a restaurant in Bottoli on the outskirts of the town. Suddenly he sensed a waiter "spying" on him and whispered to this correspondent, "Leave the place immediately. The waiter might be a paid agent of Mukul-Shahin. We'll be in trouble then."

The network of different active outlawed outfits in 10 southwestern districts, especially in Kuchit, Jhenidah, Chuadanga and Meherpur, is very strong. Sources say their men have infiltrated every place -- from remote villages to government offices and from roadside restaurants to police stations.

The armed cadres of these outlawed groups have long been engaged in murder, drugs traf-

ficking, robbery, extortion, abduction and controlling tenders.

The people in the region have often witnessed murder of sons and rape of daughters before parents and burning of people alive in the blaze of brick kilns. After committing a murder the outlaws even dumped sliced parts of the bodies in the victims' houses and sometimes the severed limbs in front of government offices. For this brutal works they have separate killing groups.

Not less than 285 people were killed in the 10 southwest districts this year, most of them at the hands of rival groups. The slide in law and order prompted the government to crack down on the outlaws on August 22 and since then 62 were killed in 'shootouts'.

The death toll in so-called shootouts increased significantly since the crackdown as only 11 suspected outlaws died in that manner earlier this year.

The law and order also marks significant improvement, but people are still frightened as kingpins of the outlawed groups are still at large.

According to Rapid Action Battalion, thirteen factions of armed communist groups and

as many gangs named after the ringleaders concerned are operating in 23 districts of Khulna, Rajshahi, Dhaka and Barisal divisions.

A dangerous situation prevails in Kushtia, Chuadanga, Meherpur and Jhenidah where JSD Gonobahini, GMF and Biplabi Communist Party, Red Flag faction of Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP-M-L) are active.

Abdur Rashid Malitha alias Dada Tapan-led Janajuddha faction of PBCP was also a strong group in the region but has weakened after the arrest and death of Tapan and his second-in-command.

Rab says these outlawed groups possess a huge number of firearms including sophisticated M16 and AK47 rifles, but no-one knows exactly how many weapons they have.

UNWRITTEN LAW

To win a tender bid, contractors must give at least 15 percent of the project money to the outlaws in the southwestern region where it has become an unwritten law.

"It doesn't matter who you are or which party you belong to. You must give them at least 15 percent of the project money three months prior to a tender

process to win the bid," says a construction contractor in Kushtia wishing anonymity.

Sources say the tender bids are awarded after talks between outlawed party chiefs and some local influential ruling party leaders. In return, the political party leaders also get a certain percentage of the project money, the sources add.

Allegations are rife that district Awami League General Secretary Azgor Ali and sadar Jubo League Organising Secretary Mominur Rahman Momiz visited India a couple of months ago to meet GMF top leaders Mukul and Shahin.

It is alleged the objective of the meeting was to settle tender for Tk 18 crore development projects of Roads & Highways Department.

Momiz and his partners have recently won a Tk 2.8 crore tender bid as no-one else dared to compete, sources say.

Contacted, Azgor and Momiz denied all the allegations and claimed they had gone to India on treatment purpose.

Momiz initially denied winning any tender for an RHD project but later admitted that his partner Sarwar got a Tk 2.8 crore work order.

Controversy clouds PDB's rental bid

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four power projects by submitting fake claims which were not cross-checked.

The sources add the power board is likely to land with contracts that will fail to deliver plants just like what happened in the past.

Different rental power contractors have not yet delivered PDB more than 100 megawatt power though their deadline to do so expired more than a year ago. The PDB could not even collect full penalty money from these defaulters as the latter resorted to court injunctions.

The PDB had initially decided to complete its evaluation within three days by working round the clock. But due to various issues that keep on popping up, this process is now being delayed.

"This has happened because PDB under pressure from the higher authorities had relaxed the bid criterion so much that ambitious but inexperienced companies can chip in," quips a PDB high official.

The seven primarily lowest bidders are Otobi along with three partners for Bheramara 100 mw diesel plant, Asian Entech for Syedpur 50 mw diesel, Asian Entech for Katakhal diesel plant and Rahim Afroz for Thakurgaon 50 mw diesel plant, Rahim Afroz for Jamalpur 30 mw

heavy fuel oil (HFO) plant, Coastal Saba for 50 mw Barisal HFO and Otobi for Noapara 100 mw.

The PDB has not yet decided anything about Madanganj 100 mw HFO plant.

The board had earlier promised that it would pick bidders able to really deliver power plants in time. To ensure it PDB would strictly check whether the bidders own power plant equipment. Besides, PDB followed a rule that no single company would be awarded with more than two power projects.

Asian Entech and Otobi, which are actually partners in different power projects, are dominating the primary selection. Asian Entech is partnering with Otobi in the Bibiyana 450 mw power project.

While Otobi is the country's largest furniture manufacturer, it has no experience in power projects. Sources say it is showing experience of a Chinese company as its 20 percent partner in the bids.

In November last year, Asian Entech was awarded with a 50 mw HFO plant in Sikabaha in Chittagong which was supposed to be commissioned in July-August. It could not launch the plant till date.

Sources say the PDB tender committees overlooked some serious anomalies in the bid documents of Otobi in both Bheramara and Noapara pro-

jects. As required by the tender terms, Otobi's bids did not provide power plant equipment serial numbers as a proof that it owned these units.

The sources add in the Bheramara project Otobi provided the letter of firm commitment from a Chinese company named Tellhow Sci-Tech Co stating that Tellhow owned a 110 mw diesel-fired power plant, which it has committed to supply to Otobi for the Bheramara project.

However, the sources claim the plant, which is not in operation for the last one year, is actually owned by another company named Hui Yang Power Generation Company.

Otobi also provided End user certificate of a Chinese company on a letterhead having no contact information. The letterhead written in Chinese reads Guangdong Guang-Dian Power Grid Group Co. But this company changed its name to "Guangdong Power Grid Company" in 2005.

One of Otobi's partners, local Supreme Marketing Company, claims to have net stake worth Tk 10.28 crore for Bheramara and Noapara projects. But this company neither submitted TIN certificate nor filed tax returns in the last four years.

Finally, Otobi did not properly fill up the PDB form for programme schedule, known as G7 in both its tender documents.

In its diesel bid, it stated 270 days will be required for commissioning of its plant and in HFO bid it stated 120 days.

But PDB's schedule for diesel plant is 120 days and HFO 270 days. As per the bid rule, if the G7 form is not properly filled up, the bid is subjected to rejection.

In dealing with the bid for Katakhal plant, the tender committee at first found selected Shasha Denims as the lowest bidder. Shasha Denims is yet another partner of Asian Entech. However, it was later found that Shasha Denims forgot to provide the bid bond.

The committee then switched to the next lowest bidder Summit Power. But it was soon found that Summit offered to install a land-based power unit, while the bid sought a barge-mounted one.

Following this finding, the committee stalled evaluating bids for this site. Till yesterday, the committee could not decide about the next course of action on this matter.

"In many cases the lowest bidders have cited the efficiency of power plant machinery which the actual manufacturers themselves do not claim. Rental power is costly. The evaluation committee should not rush its decision based on half-baked review of tender documents," comments an official concerned.



PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama's half brother Mark Ndesandjo holds a press conference prior to a book launch in Guangzhou yesterday. Ndesandjo who has lived in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen has broken his silence and launched his debut novel.

Obama's half brother recalls abusive father

AP, Guangzhou

President Barack Obama's half brother has broken his media silence to discuss his new novel the semi-autobiographical story of an abusive parent patterned on their late father, the mostly absent figure Obama wrote about in his own memoir.

In his first interview, Mark Ndesandjo told The Associated Press that he wrote "Nairobi to Shenzhen" in part to raise awareness of domestic violence.

"My father beat my mother and my father beat me, and you don't do that," said Ndesandjo, whose mother, Ruth Nidesand, was Barack Obama Sr.'s third wife. "It's something which I think affected me for a long time, and it's something that I've just recently come to terms with."

Like his novel's main character, Ndesandjo had an American mother who is Jewish and who divorced his Kenyan father. The novel, which goes on sale Wednesday by the self-publishing company Aventure Press, is one of several books in the works by relatives of the president.

President Obama's parents separated two years after he was born in Hawaii in 1961. The senior Obama, a Kenyan exchange student, divorced the president's mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, in 1964 and had at least six other children in his native Kenya.

Indian PM reaches out to tribal groups

AFP, New Delhi

India's prime minister yesterday appealed for better protection of indigenous tribal groups who have been courted by increasingly active Maoist rebels.

Mannohan Singh told chief ministers of India's 29 states to end harassment of tribal people, who often face widespread exploitation and discrimination from government and local officials.

"There has been a systemic failure in giving the tribals a stake in the modern economic processes," Singh said in New Delhi.