

Pope receives letter from Ahmadinejad

AP, Vatican City

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has sent a letter to the pope thanking him for opposing a Florida pastor's threat to burn the Quran and calling for cooperation against secularism, the Vatican and the Iranian presidency said Saturday.

The Vatican said Pope Benedict XVI had received the letter during a brief meeting with one of Iran's vice presidents at the end of his weekly general audience Wednesday. Vatican spokesman the Rev. Federico Lombardi did not release the contents of the message.

But the website of the Iranian presidency quoted Ahmadinejad as thanking the pope "for your condemnation of an unwise move by a Florida church." The pope and several other Christian leaders were among those urging the pastor to reconsider his plan to burn the Quran on the 9/11 anniversary. The plan was eventually called off.

The website also quoted the letter as denouncing "secularism, Western extremist humanism, and the man's growing tendency toward material life and blaming them for the 'decline of human society'."

"Close cooperation and interaction among divine religions to halt such destructive moves is an absolute necessity," the letter said, according to the website.

Chinese Nobel Prize winner's wife detained

She meets the jailed laureate and informs him about Peace Prize winning: Activists

CNN ONLINE, AFP, Jinzhou

The wife of 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo has been detained in her apartment in Beijing, China, and is not allowed to see people or use her telephone, a human rights group citing her attorney said yesterday.

Liu Xia, the wife of Liu Xiaobo, has not been charged with a crime, said Freedom Now, a US-based group.

"Liu Xia is under enormous pressure," said Dr Yang Jianli, a member of Liu Xiaobo's defense team and a human rights specialist with Freedom Now. "We hope that world leaders will immediately condemn this shameful act by the Chinese government and urge Liu Xia's immediate and unconditional release."

She was able to tell her jailed husband he had won the prize, the group said, adding that he cried upon hearing the news.

The couple met on Sunday afternoon, the Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy said in a faxed statement, citing Liu Xiaobo's mother-in-law.

Liu, the first Chinese citizen to win the Nobel Peace Prize, is a 54-year-old writer imprisoned since December after authoring Charter 08, a manifesto signed by thousands seeking greater rights in the communist nation.

Immediately after he was announced the winner on Friday, his wife Liu Xia told AFP that police were arranging to take her to Liu's prison in northeast China, where she hoped to inform him of the award.

Since then her mobile phone has been switched off and her whereabouts unknown.

Liu Xiaobo's lawyers have also been unable to contact the Beijing-based Liu Xia since she disappeared into police custody Friday night.

"We have been unable to contact her, so we do not know where she is," lawyer Ding Xikui told AFP.

"We are concerned about her safety. We believe that they (police) are taking her to see Liu Xiaobo, but we have no way of confirming this."

Liu is serving an 11-year jail sentence for subversion at Jinzhou prison in the northeast province of Liaoning.

Roads to the prison were blocked by police Sunday, with only officials or residents allowed into a large area around the jail.

Police and officials at the roadblock refused to tell journalists why they were not permitted to approach the prison and politely urged them to leave the area. Telephones at the prison went unanswered.

Liu is one of three people to have been awarded the prize while being jailed by their own government. The other two are Myanmar's Aung Sang Suu Kyi in 1991 and German pacifist Carl von Ossietzky in 1935.

The selection of Liu as this year's laureate has enraged the Chinese government, which called the dissident a "criminal" and slammed the award as a violation of Nobel ideals and a discredit to the Peace Prize.

Leaders around the world including US President Barack Obama -- last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner -- lauded the 2010 winner and called on the Chinese government to release him immediately.

US mid-term polls to be costliest ever

AFP, Washington

US November mid-term elections are on track to be the costliest ever after controversial high court rulings opened the way for shadowy donors to flood key races with cash aimed at shaping the outcome.

"This will easily set spending records for US mid-term elections," according to Dave Levinthal, spokesman for the Independent Center for Responsive Politics that tracks the influence of money in US politics.

The centre puts the price tag for this election cycle at about 3.4 billion dollars and rising, compared to 2.9 billion for the 2006 mid-terms, 2.2 billion for the 2006 mid-terms, and 1.6 billion for the mid-terms in 1998.

Analysts have given Republicans strong odds of gaining the 39 seats they need to retake the House of Representatives, and even along shot at capturing the 10 seats they need to seize the Senate.

All 435 House of Representatives seats are up for grabs in the election, as are 37 of the 100 Senate seats and many key governorships.

The cash totals include all money spent by Senate and House candidates, political parties, and independent interest groups, which have proliferated this year after a pair of US Supreme Court rulings lifted campaign finance curbs.

MANDELA'S LETTERS SHOW JAIL HEARTBREAK I'm no saint, says S Africa's hero

AFP, Johannesburg

A new collection of Nelson Mandela's private papers reveals his years of heartache at missing his family while in prison and his wariness at becoming idolised, in excerpts published yesterday.

The book "Conversations with Myself" goes on sale Tuesday, but passages printed in British and South African papers show his thoughts on everything from the danger of corruption in power to his personal grief at the death of his son.

Decades worth of letters, diaries and private recordings were distilled by his eponymous Foundation in a project that purports to show the private man behind the global icon.

Now 92, the man who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his struggle against the white-minority apartheid government says he doesn't want to be remembered as a larger-than-life saint.

"One issue that deeply worried me in prison was the false image I unwittingly projected to the outside world; of being regarded as a saint," he said in an excerpt printed in South Africa's Sunday Times.

"I never was one, even on the basis of the earthly definition of a saint as a sinner who keeps trying."

Mandela was detained for 27 years for resisting apartheid rule. He was released in 1990 and led negotiations with the government that culminated in his election as the country's first black president in 1994.

He stepped down in 1999, after serving one term in office. He now appears frail and makes few public appearances since retiring from public life in 2004.

He remains deeply revered in South Africa,

and although he has spoken publicly about his shortcomings, critical talk is almost non-existent about the man known fondly by his clan name Madiba.

The book appears to invite a more rounded discussion of his life, while also focusing on the enormous personal sacrifices required by his devotion to the liberation struggle.

"As a young man, I combined all the weaknesses, errors and indiscretions of a country boy, whose range of vision and experience was influenced mainly by events in the area in which I grew up and the colleges to which I was sent," he wrote, according to the South African paper.

"I relied on arrogance to hide my weaknesses," he added.

In letters written to his family while in prison, Mandela wrote that he felt "soaked in gall" by being powerless to help his then-wife Winnie and his children, according to Britain's Sunday Times.

"I feel I have been soaked in gall, every part of me, my flesh, bloodstream, bone and soul, so bitter am I to be completely powerless to help you in the rough and fierce ordeals you are going through," he wrote to Winnie Mandela in August 1970.

When Winnie was also jailed for a time in 1969, he wrote to his daughters Zeni and Zindi, then aged nine and 10 that "now she and Daddy are away in jail."

"It may be months or even years before you see her again. For long you may live like orphans without your own home and parents, without the natural love, affection and protection Mummy used to give you."

The letters also reveal his sometimes stormy relations with Winnie, whom he divorced after his release from prison.



N Korea's heir debuts at giant military parade

REUTERS, Pyongyang

Secretive North Korea's leader-in-waiting, the youngest son of ailing ruler Kim Jong-il, took centre stage during a massive military parade yesterday, his public appearing being broadcast live for the first time.

Kim Jong-un stood near his father on the dais, clapping and saluting thousands of goose-stepping soldiers, and reviewing missiles, tanks and artillery rockets.

The young Kim's prominent role at the parade in Pyongyang's Kim Il-sung Square marked his military 'coming out' and served to boost his standing in one of the world's largest armies.

Until his appointment as a general last month -- along with his naming to a key political post -- little was known about the young Kim other than that he was educated in Switzerland.

"The future of our country is rosy and bright because Kim Jong-un was elected vice chairman of the military commission of the Workers' Party," said a government official, who asked not to be identified.

"We have a proverb in Korean that great teachers produce great students and great parents produce great children."

"Kim Jong-il is healthy enough to lead our country and to give spot guidance in every field including economic, agricultural, industrial, military and arts."

Kim Jong-il, 68, is believed to have suffered a stroke in 2008 but he has shown no sign of losing his grip on power and was reappointed last month as secretary-general of the ruling Workers' Party.

He stood for over an hour during the parade and waved to the crowds, but limped noticeably and reached to the balcony for support.

State television broadcast the parade live, giving North Koreans their first real look at their next leader, known only to be his mid to late 20s.

A stable succession would be a relief to North Korea's economically powerful neighbors -- China, South Korea and Japan -- which worry that a regime collapse could result in massive refugee flows and domestic unrest.

6 MONTHS ON FROM FATAL CLASH Red Shirts rally in Bangkok

AFP, Bangkok

About 6,000 "Red Shirt" protesters rallied in Bangkok yesterday to mark six months since a night of bloody clashes with the army, which left 25 people dead, during their two-month-long street protests.

Anti-government Red Shirts began with a Buddhist ceremony near the capital's Lumpini Park, before leaving to join fellow demonstrators near Democracy Monument, the main site of violence on April 10.

Police said an estimated 6,000 joined the non-violent rally, and more than 1,000 police were on hand to ensure security in the city, which has been rattled by a series of explosions since the protests ended in May.

The group, dressed in trademark red attire and carrying banners and flags, lay roses, flowers and pictures of those who died in the violence by the monument, where they were due to light candles before dispersing.

The Reds, mostly supporters of fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra who was ousted in a 2006 coup, took to the streets in mid-March demanding snap polls to replace the current government, which they say is undemocratic and elitist.

April 10 saw the first fatalities of the rally as troops attempted in vain to clear them from Bangkok's historic district.

The ensuing clashes were Thailand's worst political violence in almost two decades, killing 25 and wounding more than 800.

US vows to save ME peace talks

AFP, Sirte

The United States pledged to keep working to rescue Middle East peace talks after Arab ministers gave it one month from Friday to secure a change of heart from Israel over Jewish settlement building.

The ministers, meeting in Sirte, Libya, made it clear that the direct talks with the Palestinians relaunched just last month would collapse if Israel did not halt settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank.

The Arab League Follow-up Committee said it would meet "in a month to review the alternatives proposed by (Palestinian president Mahmoud) Abbas to determine the necessary steps to be taken on this."

The committee of 13 foreign ministers urged Washington to pursue efforts in the meantime to stop Israeli settlement activity. It added that it "supports the position of the Palestinian president calling for a total cessation of settlement to allow the resumption of direct negotiations."

Abbas spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina said the statement "offers huge support for the position of president Abbas."

"The committee will convene again in a month to study the alternatives, which gives the US administration a chance between now and then to try to find a solution to the settlements issue," he said.

Washington expressed appreciation for the ministers' statement of support for its efforts.

"We will continue to work with the parties, and all our international partners, to advance negotiations toward a two-state solution and encourage the parties to take constructive actions toward that end," State Department spokesman Philip J Crowley said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office declined comment on Saturday.

However, public radio quoted an unnamed official close to Netanyahu as saying Israel was satisfied with the decision not to immediately pull the plug on talks, welcoming the move as a "victory for pragmatism."

Netanyahu has made no move to renew the freeze, partly because he does not have the support for it in his mostly right-wing coalition. For the Palestinians, Jewish settlements are a major threat to the establishment of a viable future state in the West Bank, and they see the freezing of settlements as a crucial test of Israel's intentions.

Chile miners' rescue mission to start on Wednesday

Drillers complete escape shaft

AP, San Jose Mine

After more than two months trapped deep in a Chilean mine, 33 miners are enjoying yesterday tantalizingly close to rescue. Drillers have completed an escape shaft, and Chile's mining minister says a video inspection shows the hole's walls are firm enough to allow the men to be hoisted out as early as Wednesday.

Officials said late Saturday that workers first must reinforce the top few hundred feet (almost 100 meters) of the tunnel and had begun welding steel pipes for that purpose.

The completion of the 28-inch (71-centimeter)-diameter escape shaft Saturday morning caused bedlam in the tent city known as "Camp Hope," where the miners' relatives had held vigil for an agonizing 66 days since a cave-in sealed off the gold and copper mine Aug 5.

The miners videotaped the piston-powered hammer drill's breakthrough at 2,041 feet (622 meters) underground and could be seen cheering and embracing, the drillers said.

On the surface, the rescuers chanted, danced and sprayed champagne so excitedly that some of their hardhats tumbled off.

Later, a video inspection of the shaft gave rescuers enough confidence in the tunnel's stability that they decided they will encase only its first 315 feet (96 meters).

The plan is to insert 16 sections of half-inch (1.27 centimeter)-thick steel pipe into the top of the hole, which curves like a water fall at first before becoming nearly vertical for most of its descent into a chamber deep in the mine. That work would begin immediately, Mining Minister Laurence Golborne said.

Then an escape capsule built by Chilean naval engineers, its spring-loaded wheels

pressing against the hole's walls, can be lowered into it via a winch and the trapped miners brought up one by one.

"All rescues have their risks," Golborne said. "You can never say that an accident couldn't happen."

Golborne and other government officials had insisted that determining whether to encase the whole shaft, only part of it or none of it would be a technical decision, based on the evidence and the expertise of a team of eight geologists and mining engineers.

Encasing the full shaft would have added another week or so before the rescue could begin if it could actually be done.

While the possibility of an accident can never be ruled out, the hole "is in very good condition, and doesn't need to be cased completely," Golborne said.

The political consequences were inescapable. Chile's success story would evaporate if a miner should get stuck on the way up for reasons that might have been avoided.

Some miners' families wanted the entire shaft lined with pipe, but some engineers involved said the risk of the capsule getting jammed in the unreinforced hole was less than the risk of the

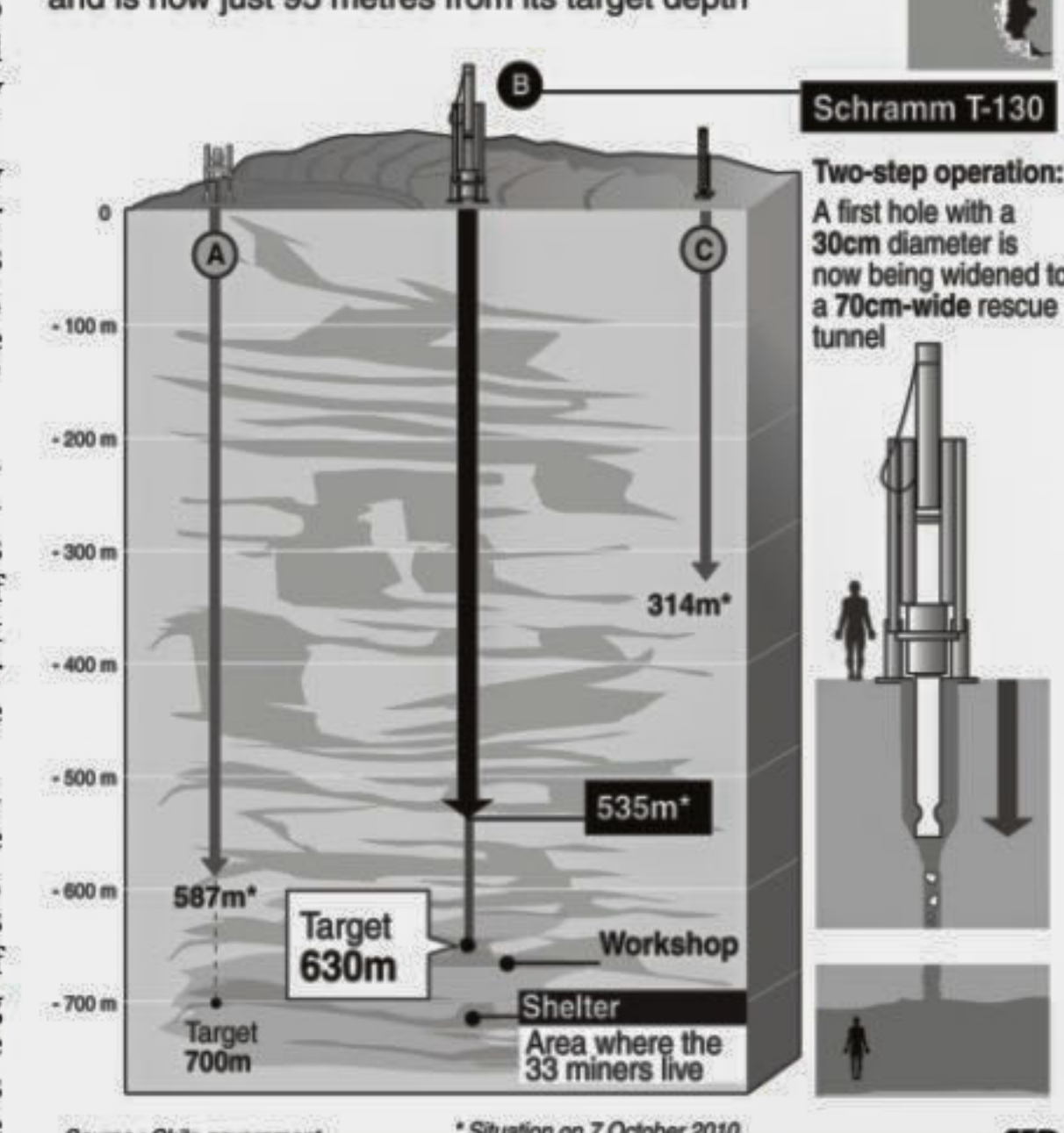
pipes getting jammed and ruining their hard-won exit route.

Many experts doubted whether encasing the entire shaft was even possible.

"Based on my experiences it cannot be done. Nor does it need to be done," Brandon Fisher, president of the US company that built the drill that broke through, told The Associated Press on Saturday.

Ordeal nearly over for Chile's trapped miners

The Schramm T-130 drill has made the fastest progress and is now just 95 metres from its target depth



Hungary races to build dam as reservoir crack widens

REUTERS, Budapest

Workers raced to build an emergency dam in western Hungary yesterday as cracks in a reservoir widened, threatening to unleash a second torrent of toxic sludge on the village of Kolontar and nearby rivers.

About one million cubic meters of the waste material leaked out of the alumina plant reservoir into villages and waterways earlier this week, killing seven people, injuring 123 and fouling rivers including a local branch of the Danube.

Kolontar was evacuated on Saturday after cracks appeared in the northern wall of the reservoir, threatening a second spill of the toxic red sludge.

News agency MTI cited environment state secretary Zoltan Illes as saying a 25-meter-long crack in the weakened wall had widened slightly by Sunday morning.

Tibor Dobson, spokesman of disaster crews at the scene, said

workers had laid down the groundwork of a new, 4- to 5-meter (13- to 16.5-foot) high dam in Kolontar to ward off any fresh flood of the sludge, which tore through neighbouring areas on Monday, toppling cars and wreaking havoc in houses.