

All set to start Chile mine rescue

REUTERS, Copiapo

Chile's 33 trapped miners are set to travel nearly half a mile through solid rock in a shaft just wider than a man's shoulders, as their two month ordeal after a cave-in draws to an end.

Nervous anticipation grew among the miners' relatives and friends as the mayor of nearby Copiapo said the rescue would begin at 8 pm (2300 GMT), hours ahead of schedule.

The men have spent 68 days in the hot, humid bowels of a gold and copper mine in Chile's northern Atacama desert after an August 5 collapse, and now face a harrowing claustrophobic journey to the surface in specially-made capsules.

Wives, children, parents and friends are waiting on an arid, rocky hillside around 2,050 feet directly above them at a tent settlement dubbed "Camp Hope."

An entire nation, still recovering from a devastating February earthquake, is ready to celebrate.

"Right now I'm calm, though still very anxious. I hope my nerves don't betray me when the rescue starts," said Jessica Salgado, whose husband Alex is trapped below, as the sun rose over the camp.

"The first thing I'm going to do is hug him hard, tell him how much I love him, and how I've missed him all this time," she added. She said Mining Minister Laurence Golborne had told the men's relatives that rescuers could start to raise them from the depths a few hours before his original Tuesday midnight (0300 GMT Wednesday) estimate.

Many miners' relatives staged vigils as the climax neared.

Noemi Donoso, whose 43-year-old son-in-law Samuel Avalos is among the trapped, sat praying in a tent with four family members, their hands joined together to form a circle, singing hymns and chanting "hallelujah" and "glory to God."

Her daughter had just left to have her hair done in a makeshift hairdresser's in another of the camp's tents.

"She went to the salon to get fixed up so she can look pretty when she receives him," Donoso said, as excited school children ran around the camp with face paint on.

Rescuers on Monday successfully tested a capsule, dubbed "Phoenix" after the mythical bird that rose from the ashes, after they partially lined the narrow escape duct with metal tubes to avoid any last-minute disasters.

They originally found the men, miraculously all alive, 17 days after the collapse with a bore hole the width of grapefruit, which then became an umbilical cord used to pass hydration gels, water and food to keep them alive during one of the world's most ambitious rescue operations.



Iron and steel workers demonstrate in the streets of the French southern city of Marseille yesterday as part of a one-day national action against a government retirement reform bill on pensions, edging closer to become a law.

Israeli PM's freeze offer slammed as ploy to stall talks

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's offer of a freeze on settlement building in exchange for Palestinian recognition of Israel's Jewish identity was widely seen yesterday as a ploy to complicate US-backed peace efforts.

Netanyahu on Monday spelled out recognition of Israel as a Jewish state as his price for a renewal of a ban on construction in the occupied West Bank, seen as key to rescuing direct talks relaunched last month.

But the offer was rejected out of hand by the Palestinians, who said it had "nothing to do with the peace process," and was also widely slammed by Israeli politicians and commentators as a political ploy to sabotage the talks.

Netanyahu's proposal was little more than a "major diversionary ploy" cooked up in order to ease the crisis over the expiry of the freeze, the left-leaning Haaretz newspaper said in a scathing editorial.

Top-selling daily Yediot Aharonot said it was "implicit" from Netanyahu's speech that he was "going to do everything to torpedo the negotiations with the Palestinians at their current stage."

"Netanyahu is searching for any possible trick to push the Palestinians into the position of being rejectionists," wrote Shimon Shiffer in an analysis headlined: "The Derailer."

N Korean leader's eldest son opposes dynasty

AP, Beijing



Kim Jong Nam

The eldest son of North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il says he opposes a hereditary transfer of power to a third generation of his family.

The casino-loving eldest son once tipped to succeed him before trying to sneak into Japan to go to Disneyland says he opposes a hereditary transfer of power to his younger half-brother.

While his disapproval is predictable, it's the first public sign of discord in the tightly choreographed succession process, though analysts said Kim Jong Nam has lived outside his native land for so long his opinion will carry little weight.

The chubby 39-year-old Kim, the oldest of three brothers who were in the running to take over secretive North Korea, is the closest thing the country has to a playboy.

Unlike many of his countrymen back home who lack the resources and connections to travel overseas, Kim Jong Nam travels freely and spends much of his time in China or the country's special autonomous region of Macau the centre of Asian gambling with its Las Vegas-style casinos.

He sports the family pot belly and favours newsboy caps, designer shoes and an unshaven face, while frequenting five-star hotels and expensive restaurants.

He told Japan's TV Asahi, in an interview from Beijing aired late Monday and Tuesday, that he is "against third-generation succession,

but I think there were internal factors. If there were internal factors, (we) should abide by them."

Kim added that he hopes his brother will do his best to bring abundance to the lives of North Koreans and that he stands ready to help from abroad, according to a dubbed Japanese-language version of his remarks.

Andrei Lankov, a Russian expert on North Korea at Seoul's Kookmin University, said Kim Jong Nam's remarks were "almost a challenge," but noted he has little influence due to the considerable time he spends abroad and lacks military support.

"I don't see them rallying to Kim Jong Nam," he added, emphasizing that key generals who run the military far prefer Kim Jong Un, who they see as young, inexperienced and thus easy to control.

Kim Jong Un, believed to be 26, appeared with his father at Pyongyang celebrations on Sunday marking the 65th anniversary of the ruling Workers' Party, saluting troops marching past in a massive military parade and waving to the crowd.

The appearance was less than two weeks after he was named to a top political post and promoted to four-star general.

Kim Jong Nam is widely believed to have fallen out of favour as a possible successor after embarrassing the government in 2001 by being caught trying to enter Japan on a fake passport, saying he wanted to visit Tokyo Disneyland.

Qaeda warns to nab Iraqi ministers' families

AP, Baghdad/Sanaa

Qaeda's umbrella group in Iraq has threatened to kidnap family members of Iraqi politicians and ministers unless the wife and children of its slain leader are released from prison.

The Islamic State of Iraq, as the terror network's affiliate is known, demanded in a message posted Tuesday on militant websites that Abu Ayyub al-Masri's family be released.

It purports that the wife and children have been in custody since the joint US-Iraqi air and ground assault near Saddam Hussein's hometown Tikrit in April that killed al-Masri.

Authorities have reported their detention but there has been no word on their whereabouts since.

Qaeda says that unless al-Masri's family is freed, it will kidnap "wives, daughters and sons" of Iraqi politicians and ministers.

Meanwhile, Qaeda's offshoot in Yemen says it's setting up a "new army" to overthrow the country's president.

The threat came in an audio recording posted on militant websites yesterday.

Hillary urges reform in Bosnia

AP, Sarajevo

US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton yesterday challenged all sides in ethnically divided Bosnia to embrace political reform needed for European Union and Nato membership.

Speaking in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, Hillary told university students they should push their leaders to embrace a truly multiethnic society and pledged continued US support toward that goal. Earlier, Hillary urged the country's leadership to make E.U. membership a priority and make the necessary constitutional reforms.

"These reforms are needed for their own sake," she said. "But they are also needed if your country is to fulfil the goal of becoming part of the European Union and Nato."

Hillary told the audience of several hundred students from various universities in Sarajevo, which was the epicentre of the country's bloody 1992-95 civil war, that "now is the time to strengthen democratic institutions, deepen peace between neighbours, and create the conditions for long-term political, economic, and social progress."

"You have come too far, you have too much to lose if you do not overcome these differences," she said.

US officials say one key element of reform, is changing a provision in the constitution that prohibits anyone other than Bosniaks, Serbs or Croats from being president, a limitation that excludes Jews, Roma or other minorities from elected leadership positions.

Fifteen years after the US-brokered Dayton Peace Accords ended that war, Bosnia's three main ethnic groups still disagree over the future of the country. Bosniaks, or Bosnian Muslims, and Croats want reforms to make the weak central government stronger, while Bosnia's Serb community fears that would rob them of their autonomy.

Hillary stressed that she was not trying to impose reform. "You have to do it for yourselves, but the United States will be with you every step of the way."

Hillary noted that since the war, the US had invested about \$1.5 billion to help Bosnia recover and that since President Barack Obama took office a parade of senior American officials had visited, including Vice President Joe Biden last year.



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton speaks yesterday during the inauguration ceremony of the new US Embassy in Sarajevo.

Robert Gates accepts China's invitation

AP, Hanoi

US Defense Secretary Robert Gates sought to patch up damaged military ties with China on Monday, accepting an invitation to visit Beijing next year and arguing that the two militaries should not be hostage to the long-standing US political relationship with Taiwan.

"We don't take sides in this," Gates told reporters in Hanoi. "We don't have any territorial claims of our own."

The comments come as defense ministers from Southeast Asia meet in Vietnam with their counterparts from eight other countries.

Gates avoided a direct confrontation with China over Asian sea disputes that have smaller Southeast Asian nations feeling pushed around. The United States is worried that China's increasingly aggressive claims to disputed island chains could disrupt shipping, or even ignite a shooting war.

Gates said those disputes, which are the backdrop to an Asian security meeting here, should be resolved peacefully through negotiations.

The US defense chief met with a top Chinese general for the first such high-level contact in months. Gates told reporters afterward he had accepted a formal invitation to visit Beijing, Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said the visit would probably come early in 2011.

China had yanked an earlier invitation to Gates and suspended military contact with the United States in January. The moves were meant to protest a \$6.4 billion US arms package for Taiwan, the self-governing island that China claims as its own territory.

The United States once recognized the nationalist Chinese government in exile in Taiwan as China's legitimate leaders, but withdrew that formal support in 1978 when it recognized Beijing's Communist government. The US still sells weapons to Taiwan, however, largely because of political support for Taiwan in Congress.

Taiwan is a political matter that should not trump the practical reasons for military officials in both nations to stay in close contact, Gates said he told Chinese Gen Liang Guanglie.

Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations are looking for US backing as China asserts claims to islands in the South China Sea and muscles its smaller neighbours in other ways.

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