

MILITARY TALKS

South Korea rejects North's call

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea yesterday rejected a push by the North to bring forward military talks by 10 days, saying it was not enough time to prepare for their first dialogue since the North's deadly attack against a border island last year.

Pyongyang sent a message to the South's defense ministry at the weekend calling for the preliminary talks, which Seoul has suggested take place at the Panmunjom truce village on February 11, to start today.

It was not immediately clear why the North wanted an earlier date.

Talks at the military and political level between the rival Koreas are routinely set after proposals and counterproposals as the two sides vie for higher bargaining positions and rarely break down over scheduling conflicts.

Such trouble is not anticipated this time either, a defense ministry official said.

North Korea has agreed to discuss the shelling of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong in November and the sinking of a South Korean navy ship in March that Seoul blames on Pyongyang.

Pyongyang says the South provoked the

island attack by test-firing shells into its waters, and says it had nothing to do with the sinking of Cheonan warship.

The working-level preliminary talks are meant to set the agenda for a more senior meeting, possibly at the ministerial level.

Tensions have risen on the divided peninsula over the past 12 months, with the two attacks on the South as well as the North's revelations of big advances in its nuclear program.

But the main allies of the two Koreas -- the United States and China -- have nudged the neighbors back to the negotiating table to defuse tensions in a region which is responsible for one-sixth of the world's economy.

South Korea wants to take a two-track approach to dialogue with the North -- one to discuss the two attacks, and the other to see how to move forward on the stalled six-party aid-for-disarmament talks.

Pyongyang has yet to respond to the South's proposal for bilateral nuclear talks.

The North also said it wants to return to six-party talks with regional powers aimed at compensating it in return for a pledge to end its nuclear ambitions in a move analysts see as an attempt to secure aid to help its struggling economy.

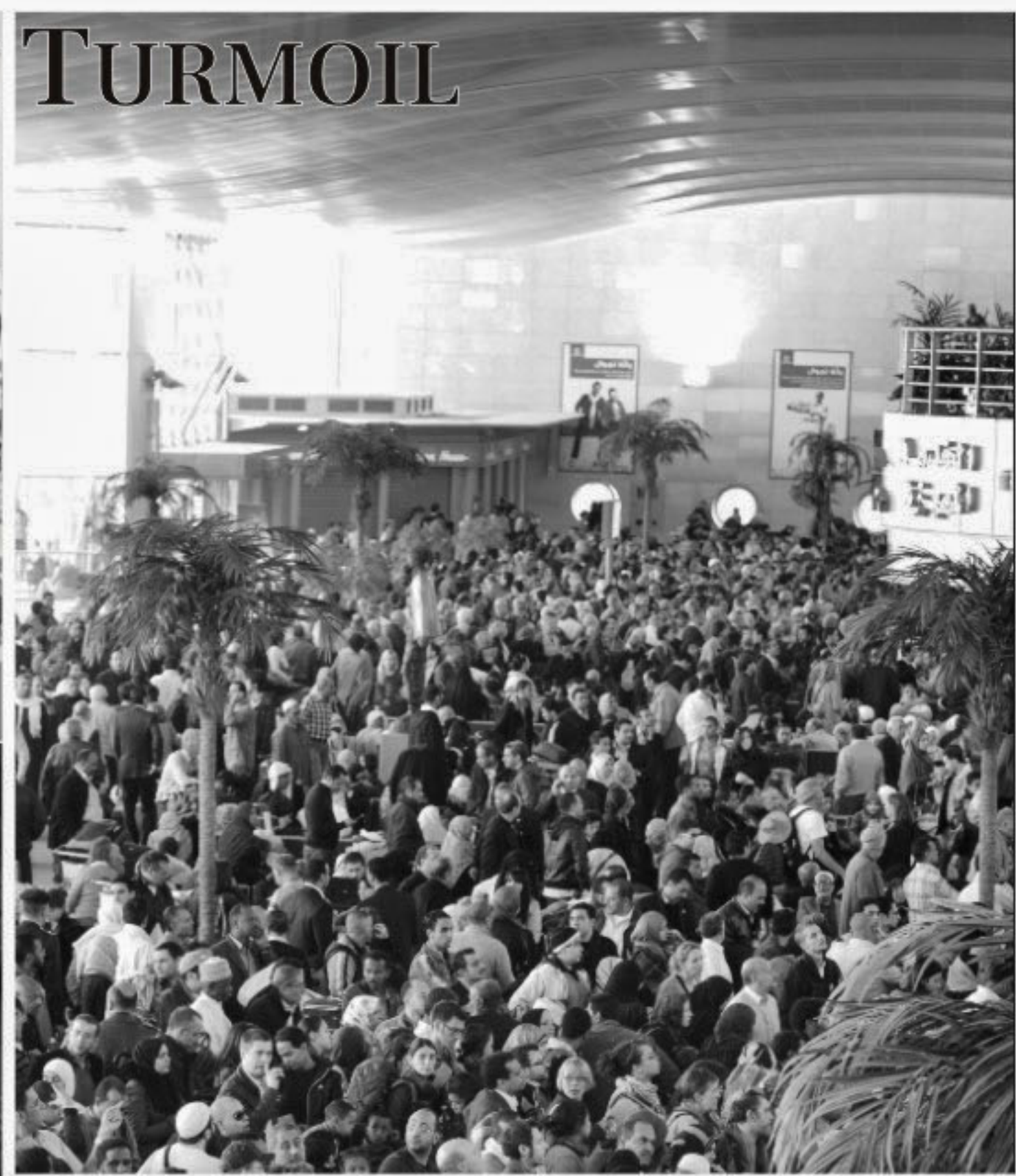


PHOTO: AFP

(Clock wise from top left) An image grab taken from Egyptian state television Al-Masriya shows members from Egypt's new cabinet being sworn in by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (R) in Cairo yesterday. People gather in Cairo's international airport while waiting to check-in for their flights as they try to leave Egypt following days of violent anti-government protests. Egyptian soldiers try to protect a civilian from angry protestors who thought he was a plainclothes policeman at Tahrir square.

SSC exams start today

FROM PAGE 1

Nurul Islam Nahid yesterday said the government has taken all-out measures to ensure a peaceful environment and prevent cheating at the examination centres.

At a pre-examination press briefing at the Secretariat, he said more and more students are appearing in the exams every year, which shows people are realising the necessity of academic education.

Besides, the government is trying to encourage students to continue school by providing free textbooks, stipends and other incentives, he added.

This year the number of examinees under ten education boards including Madrasa Education Board and Technical Education Board is higher by around

1.08 lakh. Some 6,78,293 male and 6,36,709 female students will sit the examinations at 2,181 centres.

Around 29 percent of the students, who were registered in class IX as regular students, did not fill in the form to sit the exams. Some 10,30,938 regular with 2,82,153 irregular students are likely to take the SSC and equivalent exams.

Asked about the drop-outs, Nahid said they still have next two years to take the exams.

The minister, however, said the dropout rate came down to 39.51 in 2010 from 42.15 in 2009.

"We are waging a kind of movement to bring the drop out rate to a minimum," Nahid said. But the long-standing practice and the country's socio-economic condition make it difficult to

achieve the goal.

A total of 3,00,898 examinees under Dhaka board, 1,30,688 under Rajshahi, 1,16,400 under Comilla, 1,30,638 under Jessore, 76,959 under Chittagong, 61,828 under Barisal, 48,527 under Sylhet, and 1,25,922 under Dinajpur boards will sit the SSC exam.

Some 2,39,771 students under madrasa and 83,431 under technical education boards will also take the exams.

This year, 261 students are sitting the exams at seven overseas centres.

Nahid mentioned that the education ministry has requested the power ministry to ensure smooth electricity supply during this month for the students' sake.

The minister will visit Mohammadpur High School in the capital today.

Greedy regimes stirred Arab anger

Say analysts

AFP, Baghdad

Behind the uprisings that began in Tunisia and spread to Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East is Arab anger at absolute regimes which ruled their states as personal domains, political analysts say.

"A corrupt elite backed by Western countries emerged with an incredible arrogance," said Burhan Ghalion, director of the Centre for Contemporary Oriental Studies at the Sorbonne University in Paris.

"Its sole motivation was the accumulation of wealth, unlike predecessors who had showed a willingness to change the lives of the disadvantaged," he said.

This month's uprising in Tunisia inspired the ongoing revolt in Egypt, analysts say, prompting speculation that the Arab world is on the threshold of a period of greater democracy.

"It is the failure of a model that combined

a wild opening of the market with medieval despotism, in addition to leaders who cling to power for more than 30 years and want their offspring to succeed them," Ghalion said.

"This is a provocation to the people," added Ghalion, who is of Syrian origin and a professor of political sociology.

In the words of the Democracy Index 2010 published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) in London, "the Middle East and North Africa remains the most repressive region in the world with 16 out of 20 countries in the region are categorised as authoritarian."

Among Arab governments, Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority were classified as "hybrid regimes," which combine elements of democracy and non-democracy -- and all Arab countries ranked in the second half of the EIU's league table of 167 countries worldwide.

China restricts news, discussion

AFP, Beijing

Chinese censors are blocking online discussion and sanitising news reports about the unrest in Egypt, in a sign of official unease that the uprising could fuel calls for reform at home.

Keyword searches on the protests returned no results yesterday on microblogs and reader discussion of news reports about Egypt was disabled on major portals as China's pervasive censorship apparatus swung into full gear.

News coverage of the demonstrations against the 30-year rule of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was limited to sparse accounts that largely glossed over the underlying political factors and calls for democracy.

Coverage instead stressed Cairo's lawlessness and the need for order -- echoing calls by China's foreign ministry -- and the government's plan to send two chartered jets to Cairo to bring home more than 500 stranded Chinese.

Photos from Egypt were conspicuously absent from major Chinese newspapers, while yesterday's state news broadcast omitted footage of protests, instead showing Mubarak meeting top officials.

Mayhem in Munshiganj

FROM PAGE 1

The Arial Beel Rakkha Committee enforced blockade on the highway around 9:00am as per its announcement on January 26.

People from Sreenagar of Munshiganj and Nawabganj and Dohar upazilas of Dhaka started gathering at Hashara bus stand from 7:15am, said locals adding that by 11:00am, there were over 30,000 people, many of whom were carrying bamboo and wooden sticks.

The demonstrators blocked the highway near Hashara by putting logs and setting fire to tyres and firewood. They scattered over 10km area from Chhonbari in Sreenagar to Kuchiamora in Sirajdikhan upazila.

When a procession of the demonstrators reached Chhonbari on its way to Sreenagar Bazar around 11:00am, police intercepted it.

"The programme was going peacefully until suddenly a group of people attacked police prompting them to use water cannon," Lt Col Ahsan, commanding officer of Rab-11, told The Daily Star.

In a press release, the Arial Beel Rakkha Committee condemned the attack on police and journalists by an unruly crowd during the procession.

Police fired rubber bullets and lobbed teargas canisters to disperse the demonstrators, said Shakhawat Hossain, officer-in-charge of Sreenagar Police Station. None was injured in the firing, he claimed.

However, our photographer reported from the spot that Shafiuddin Bitu, chief photographer of the Bangla daily Naya Diganta, received a bullet in his leg.

Several incidents of chases and counter chases took place during the clashes.

While police were trying to disperse the protesters, a group of people attacked the Hashara police outpost situated about 10 km from Arial Beel.

"People with sticks and machetes attacked our outpost and locked our men in burning rooms," Ozear Rahman, in-charge of the outpost, told The Daily Star.

The protesters vandalised all the eight rooms of the outpost before setting them ablaze, he said, adding, "We only managed to save our firearms but lost nineteen bullets."

Witness Sheikh Al Amin said locals rushed to save the trapped policemen. Reinforcement from nearby outpost also rushed to the spot and lobbed teargas canisters to disperse the protesters. The demonstrators answered with brickbats.

When police were returning from the spot, some demonstrators caught SI Motiur Rahman and another policeman between Hashara and Nimtoli point and attacked them with sharp weapons and sticks.

Meanwhile, when a vehicle, which the law enforcers had been using to fire teargas, stopped due to technical faults, the angry mob vandalised it. They also beat up four policemen in the vehicle.

The protesters also beat up photojournalist Sajid Hossain and reporter Golam Murtuza of the Bangla daily Prothom Alo while they were covering the incident. The protesters also set fire to their motorcycle.

At around 3:00pm, Shajahan Badal, convener of the Arial Beel Rakkha Committee, and Iqbal Hossain Master, chairman of Barokhalunion parishad, asked the demonstrators to leave the area.

The demonstrators then put up the blockade.

Vehicular movement on Dhaka-Mawa highway resumed around 4:00pm, an hour after the law enforcer took the situation under control.

Saiful Islam, Munshiganj additional police superintendent, told The Daily Star that at least 70 policemen were injured, of whom 30 had been admitted to different hospitals.

Six injured policemen -- SI Kamal Pasha, 32, havildars Monir Hossain, 40, and Abul Kalam, 35, Nayek Mofizul Islam, 30, and constables Anwar Hossain, 30, and Azan Mia, 30, -- were undergoing treatment at DMCH.

And SI Abdul Amin, 28, Nayek Gazir Rahman, 45, and constables Abdul Haque, 35, and Shahabuddin, 50, have been admitted to Mitford Hospital.

SI Motiur, son of Golam Rasul, hailed from Naogaon sadar and was posted at Rajarbagh Police Lines. His body has been kept at Sir Salimullah Medical College morgue.

Health Minister AFM Ruhul Haque, Inspector General of Police Hassan Mahmood Khandker and Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police Benazir Ahmed visited the injured cops at the hospitals.

Talking to reporters at Mitford Hospital, the IGP said the policemen did what they were supposed to do.

Md Shafiqul Islam, Munshiganj superintendent of police, said about 500 policemen had been deployed from Chanbari to Kuchiamora to maintain law and order.

However, talking to The Daily Star, Arial Beel Rakkha Committee leader Shahjahan Badal said the blockade was also a protest to police action on them at Muktangan in the capital on January 26 and filing of a case

against 4,026 of their people.

On January 26, police tried to bar supporters of the committee from joining a protest rally at Muktangan. The incident triggered clashes between demonstrators and police that left at least 30 people injured and 20 vehicles and 30 shops vandalised in Dhaka and Munshiganj. The government has decided to build the airport in an area that includes thousand acres of agricultural land and part of a wetland, Arial Beel.

ALMP BASHES BNP CHIEF Shukumar Ranjan Ghosh, Awami League lawmaker from Munshiganj-3, held BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia responsible for yesterday's violence. "Following directives from Khaleda, Chhatra Dal and Jubo Dal activists instigated locals to demonstrate against the proposed airport."

He was addressing a press conference at AL President Sheikh Hasina's political office in Dhanmondi yesterday.

He said the administration and police showed maximum tolerance despite "unruly behaviour of the protesters".

Sagfuta Yasmin Emili, treasury bench whip, alleged BNP distributed huge money in the Arial Beel locality to have the protest taken a violent turn.

BNP REACTION On the other hand, BNP Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain yesterday blamed the government for yesterday's clash.

"Government has created chaotic situation there in a planned way by imposing its whim on the people," he told reporters after a meeting of leaders at the party's Naya Palatan office.

A new airport, Delwar said, is unnecessary. "The airport will be built only to loot money and to name it

after father of the prime minister," he added.

Expressing solidarity with the protesters, the BNP leader said they will call movement if the government does not stop "anti-people activities" in Munsiganj.

As per the meeting decision, BNP will stage demonstration tomorrow protesting share market crash, deterioration of law and order and municipality polls rigging, and also demanding resignation of election commissioners.

Replying a question, the BNP secretary general said his party will return to the House if congenial atmosphere is created. "Our parliamentary party will take decision about joining parliament.... But it's not true that we are returning to parliament to protect membership."

Urdu or Bangla

FROM PAGE 1

India, that even as some well-known Muslim intellectuals went around suggesting that Urdu be the lingua franca of Pakistan, there were on the other side of the fence leading Bangalee scholars who believed that Bangla should be the language of the state. The Bangalees of eastern Bengal would, after all, constitute the largest component of the overall population of Pakistan. Dr Muhammad Shahidullah argued in an article in the daily Azad, published from Kolkata, that adopting Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan would undermine the Bangalees.

The argument in favour of Bangla really took off when Abdul Haq made it clear in articles in June and July 1947 that Bangla ought to be Pakistan's state language. In June 1947, Abul Mansur Ahmed-edited the weekly Millat in an editorial adopted a similar position. Likewise, quite a few other periodicals and daily newspapers articulated the idea, on the basis of the probable composition of the Pakistani state, that Bangla take pride of place as the language of the state. And that was not all. In the election manifesto of the Muslim League in 1946, Abul Hashim placed the case for Bangla in unequivocal terms. Similar was the position of the Gono Azadi League in July 1947.

Following the establishment of Pakistan on 14 August 1947, a chorus of voices seemed to be speaking up for Bangla as the state language. It is notable that the Tomaddun Majlish took a leading position in this regard. The founder of the group, Prof Abul Kashem, brought together a collection of articles in defence of Bangla in the booklet, Rashtrabhasha Bangla Na Urdu? Among the more prominent contributors to the work were Prof Quazi Motahar Hossain and Abul Mansur Ahmed.

Helping world's poor is a good investment

Says Bill Gates

AP, Seattle

Bill Gates says he feels a responsibility to speak up for the world's poorest because they're likely to be hit hard as economic woes force governments to reduce contributions to foreign aid.

In his third annual letter, issued yesterday, the co-chairman of the world's largest

charitable foundation expressed concern about budget cuts to the programmes that transfer dollars from rich nations to poor ones, providing medical assistance, food aid, vaccines and other help.

The Microsoft co-founder and chairman says in the 24-page letter that not only is helping the poor with their medical needs and giving them the tools to be self-sufficient the right thing to do, it's also a



good investment.

"Securing the conditions that will lead to a healthy, prosperous future for everyone is a goal I believe we all share," wrote the co-chair of the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

In the letter, Mr. Gates outlines the ways helping people saves money over the long term. From cutting the cost to

treat the sick by preventing their illnesses to increasing a child's earning potential and future contribution to society through education. He said British Prime Minister David Cameron gives him hope that not all countries have forgotten about the needs of the poor, noting that the United Kingdom has kept its promise to grow foreign aid spending despite the need to cut other programmes.

Somali pirates move eastward

Says Indian Coast Guard

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Somali pirates have begun moving towards India, which is investigating if the pirates have any links with Pakistan-based terror groups, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) said here yesterday.

ICG Director General Anil Chopra said the pirates, now operating eastwards from their country, posed a threat to all the merchant vessels passing through the high seas between India and the Maldives.

"When piracy is (happening) so close to India, there would be speculation about any such linkages (between them and Pakistan-based groups). Intelligence agencies are investigating all the people who are captured to establish if there is connection between them," he told reporters.

The 15 Somalis apprehended from a sunken pirate mothership near Lakshadweep on January 28 are being interrogated by Indian security agencies in Mumbai.

In the recent past, activities of pirates around Lakshadweep have increased and they were also successful in hijacking a Bangladeshi-flagged merchant vessel about 90 nautical miles off Kochi and 80 nautical miles off Minicoy.

Chopra said that due to increased presence of navies from around the world in the Gulf Of Aden, pirates have extended their area of operation and have started moving eastwards.