

# SOUTH CHINA SEA Dispute escalates

China, Philippines stage naval drills

AFP, Beijing

China staged three days of military exercises in the South China Sea and plans to boost its offshore maritime patrol force, state media said yesterday, as tensions with its neighbours simmer.

China has competing claims with Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei over potentially resource-rich areas in the South China Sea which have flared in recent weeks.

Beijing has pledged it will not resort to force to resolve the lingering maritime territorial disputes, after the Philippines this week sought help from the United States and Vietnam staged live-fire military exercises.

According to the Global Times, 14 Chinese navy vessels recently staged drills in waters near China's southern tropical island of Hainan, including anti-submarine manoeuvres and the beach landing of troops.

## Four troops shot dead in Thai south

AFP, Bangkok

Unknown gunmen shot and killed four soldiers on motor-bike patrol in Thailand's insurgency-plagued south, police said yesterday.

The troops, aged between 21 and 48, died at the scene after at least four assailants opened fire from two pick-up trucks in Pattani province on Thursday evening. A teenage girl who was walking past was wounded in the attack.

Earlier on Thursday in Yala provincial town, a roadside bomb blast injured a police officer and an official from the highways department.

## UN official calls for aid to North Korea

AFP, Sydney

A senior United Nations official yesterday called for urgent aid to North Korea, pleading with international donors to overlook political difficulties in the face of a humanitarian crisis.

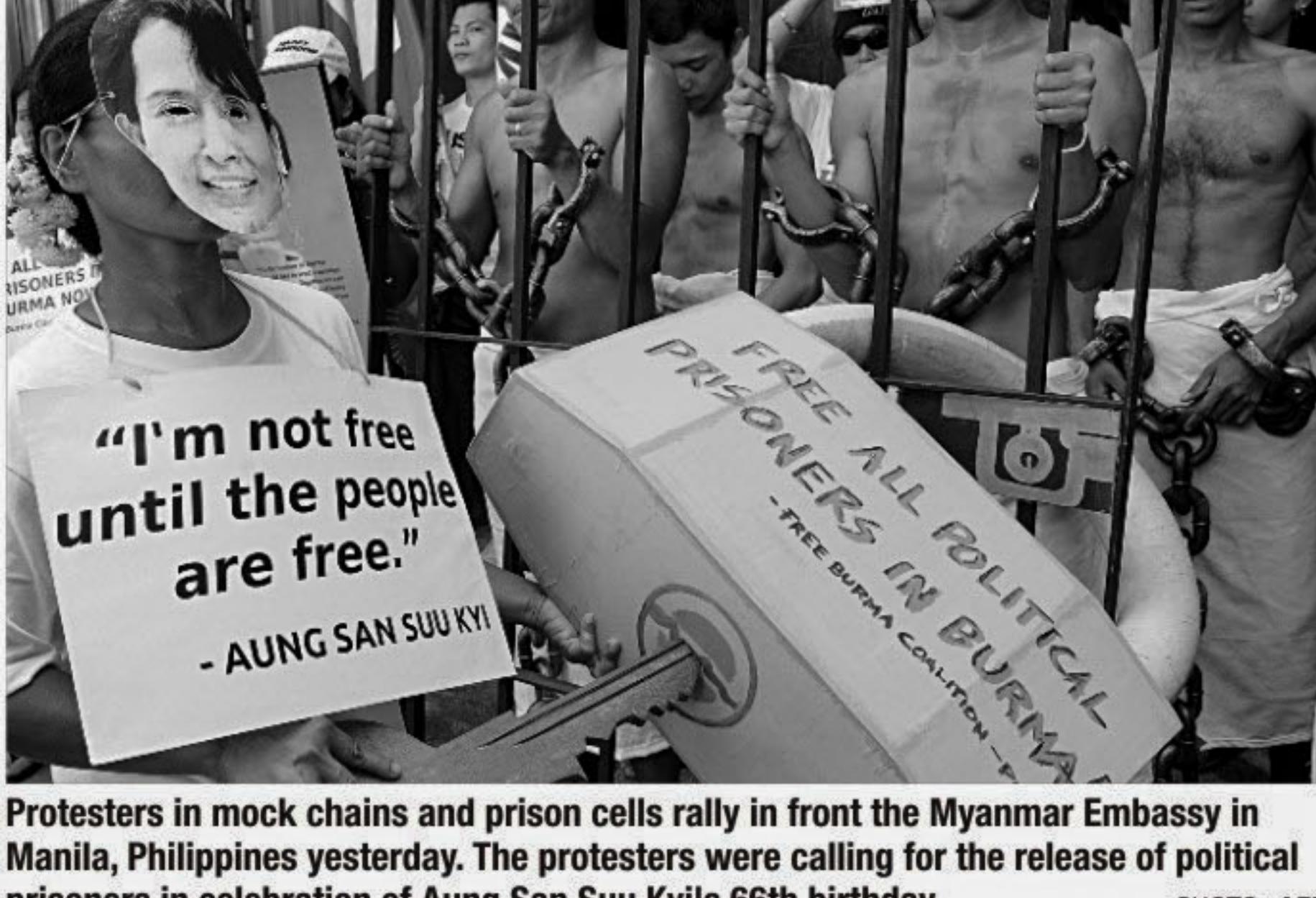
Valerie Amos, head of the UN Office of Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs, said of the estimated US\$210 million needed to confront dire food shortages in the communist state, only about 15 percent had been pledged.

"In North Korea we're facing a situation where about six million people are in danger of not getting enough to eat," Baroness Amos told AFP from Canberra.

"We are really facing a very, very serious situation."

In Washington, the House of Representatives voted on Wednesday to bar US food aid to North Korea saying the assistance would prop up the communist regime instead of feeding the hungry.

"Politically it's a very closed society, and we know of problems there in terms of governance, inclusivity and openness. But at the end of the day it is the people who are suffering who matter," said Amos.



Protesters in mock chains and prison cells rally in front of the Myanmar Embassy in Manila, Philippines yesterday. The protesters were calling for the release of political prisoners in celebration of Aung San Suu Kyi's 66th birthday.



## Nepal begins first census in 20 years

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal began its first nationwide census in 20 years yesterday, mapping its population and towns for the first time since the end of its decade-long civil war that claimed an estimated 16,000 lives.

Enumerators from the census bureau conducted the first count at the households of Nepal's president, vice-president and prime minister, launching a campaign that will end on June 28.

For the first time, respondents will be able to class themselves as "transgender" rather than male or female following a 2007 Supreme Court ruling to guarantee the rights of transgender, gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

## Japan to clean radioactive water

AFP, Tokyo

Emergency crews at Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant yesterday prepared to start decontaminating more than 100,000 tonnes of highly radioactive water from three months of reactor cooling operations.

Embattled operator Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) said the system, which employs US and French technology, would go fully operational by the evening after a water leak during a test run the previous night had been fixed.

The operation kicks off months after a 9.0 magnitude quake triggered a tsunami that smashed into the plant. The wave knocked out reactor cooling systems, which sparked meltdowns, explosions and radiation leaks.

The system is designed to remove caesium and other radioactive materials as well as oil and sea salt from about 1,200 tonnes of water a day, using equipment from France's Areva group and Kurion Inc of the United States.

Japan's government has said it will soon evacuate more households near radiation "hot-spots" outside that zone, especially pregnant women and children, without specifying when and from where people would be asked to move.

With little space left for more water, and the rainy season threatening to add to the volume, TEPCO is racing against time to start the decontamination system and prevent new leaks or emergency dumps into the Pacific Ocean.

## Six killed in Vietnam gold mine accident

AFP, Hanoi

Six people died when an illegal gold mine collapsed in central Vietnam, a government official said yesterday, in the latest incident of its kind.

The accident in Quang Nam province occurred during heavy rains last Sunday, said local official Pham Thi Nhu, who added that authorities had only now learned of it because the mine is in a remote forest.

Quang Nam is known for illegal gold extraction.

Nhu said the victims were members of an ethnic minority, a segment of the population which the United Nations says is far more likely to live in poverty.

In early May local media reported that five people died when another illegal gold mine collapsed.



South Korean Catholics participate in a special service for peace on the Korean Peninsula at Imjingak peace park near the inter-Korean border in Paju yesterday. About 20,000 South Korean Catholics attended the service for the peace and reunification of the Korean peninsula.

PHOTO: AFP

## Philippines hails landmark maids treaty

AFP, Manila

The Philippines, which sends out tens of thousands of maids to work abroad every year, yesterday hailed a landmark International Labour Organisation treaty giving protection to domestic workers.

President Benigno Aquino's government had been one of the main proponents, foreign department spokesman Ed Malaya told AFP.

The Geneva-based ILO passed the treaty giving protection to an estimated 52.6 million domestic workers across the world on Thursday.

The new convention would ensure domestic workers enjoy conditions "not less favourable" than other workers.

The call to defy the ban that spread through Facebook and Twitter is the largest en masse action since November 1990, when a group of 47 Saudi women were arrested and severely punished after demonstrating in cars.

"I took King Fahd Road (Riyadh artery)

and then Olaya Street, along with my husband, I decided that the car for today is

mine," Maha al-Qahtani tweeted.

Women in Saudi Arabia face an array of constraints, ranging from having to cover from head to toe in public and needing a male guardian's permission to travel, to having restricted access to jobs because of strict segregation rules.

Her husband Mohammed al-Qahtani tweeted that she carried her necessary belongings "ready to go to prison without fear."

Another woman posted online a video of her driving after midnight Thursday as the first woman to answer the call for protest.

"All that we need is to run our errands without depending on drivers," said the unnamed woman in the video. "I believe that the society is ready to welcome us."

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