

# US to reward further Myanmar reforms

Obama offers fresh start, hails Suu Kyi as inspiration

AFP, Yangon

US President Barack Obama offered Myanmar a new era in relations if it reforms and promised democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi his eternal support in letters hand-delivered by his top diplomat yesterday.

The high-stakes personal intervention in a country long regarded by the West as a pariah state came during a historic visit by Hillary Clinton, the first US secretary of state to set foot in the isolated nation for 50 years.

In a message to President Thein Sein, Obama offered a "new phase" in ties and requested "tangible outcomes" from a political reform effort which Washington is testing before deciding its next step.

Obama also thanked Suu Kyi for her "inspiration" to people around the world in a separate letter to the fellow Nobel Peace Prize winner.

He wrote: "Thank you for the inspiration you provide all of us around the world who share the values of democracy, human rights and justice. We stand by you now and always."

The country formerly known as Burma has surprised observers with a series of reformist moves in the past year including releasing Suu Kyi -- whom Hillary met yesterday for a private dinner in the main city



PHOTO: AFP

**Myanmar President Thein Sein shakes hands with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a meeting at the President's Office in Naypyidaw, Myanmar yesterday.**

Yangon -- holding dialogue with the opposition and freeing some political prisoners.

Obama told Thein Sein, a former general, that Washington wanted to "explore how the United States can support and advance your

efforts to transition to democracy and promote protection of human rights".

US officials said the message, released by Hillary's aides, aimed to signal that Obama was ready to invest personal prestige in

## REFORM IN MYANMAR

- ⇒ **7 Nov 2010:** First polls in 20 years
- ⇒ **13 Nov:** Suu Kyi freed from house arrest
- ⇒ **30 Mar 2011:** Transfer of power to new government
- ⇒ **6 Oct:** Human rights commission established
- ⇒ **12 Oct:** More than 200 political prisoners freed
- ⇒ **13 Oct:** New labour laws allowing unions passed
- ⇒ **17 Nov:** Myanmar granted Asean chair in 2014
- ⇒ **18 Nov:** Suu Kyi's NLD rejoins political process

engaging Myanmar.

The letter did not mention the words "Myanmar" or "Burma", thereby bypassing the controversy over the impoverished Southeast Asian state's true name.

In her landmark talks, Hillary won promises of further reforms from Thein Sein and offered cautious incentives to encourage new action, saying more needed to be done before US sanctions could be lifted.

"The United States is prepared to walk the path of reform with you if you keep moving in the right direction," Hillary said.

Thein Sein, who took charge in March after Myanmar nominally ended decades of military rule, himself hailed a "new chapter in relations" as he met Hillary at his imposing palace decked out with chandeliers and gold-leaf chairs.

"These are incremental steps and we are prepared to go further if reforms maintain momentum. In that spirit, we are discussing what it will take to upgrade diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors," Clinton told reporters.

Hillary has also urged Myanmar to free all political prisoners, estimated by activists to number between 500 and more than 1,600, and pressed the government to end long-running ethnic conflicts.

## Burma or Myanmar, what's in a name?

AFP, Naypyidaw

Some call the country Myanmar, others call it Burma, but for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on a landmark visit, there was a better solution -- call it nothing.

Paying the first visit by a top US official in more than 50 years in a bid to push reform, Clinton faced a variety of obstacles but none required as much linguistic jujitsu as not mentioning the nation's name.

In public remarks in the showcase capital Naypyidaw, she only employed the term Burma but said it sparingly, generally saying simply, "this country."

The military leaders of "this country" changed the official name two decades ago to Myanmar, saying that the old term Burma was a sorry legacy of British colonialism and implied that the ethnically torn land belonged only to the Burman majority.

The opposition and exiles fiercely opposed the change, seeing it as a symbolic step to create an entirely new country, and the United States has stood in solidarity by officially calling the nation Burma.

Aides to Clinton acknowledged that she faced an unhappy choice -- offending her hosts by using a name they reject or angering US lawmakers and exiles who consistently call the country Burma.

## ATTACK ON UK EMBASSY

# EU to tighten Iran sanctions

AFP, Brussels

Britain urged Europe to isolate Iran financially as EU foreign ministers gathered to agree sweeping new measures against Tehran due to fresh concerns over its secret nuclear programme.

Thanking European Union countries for their "emphatic support" following the storming of Britain's embassy in Iran, Foreign Secretary William Hague said "I hope we will agree today additional measures that will be an intensification of the economic pressure on Iran."

"Peaceful legitimate economic pressure particularly to increase the isolation of the Iranian financial sector," he added.

Backing moves to tighten the financial noose, German counterpart Guido Westerwelle said the aim must be "to dry up Iran's financial sources."

Pressed into action following the publication of a new report on Iran's contested nuclear activity, the ministers are expected to slap an assets freeze and travel ban on a fur-

ther 143 Iranian companies and 37 people.

The measures will concern "those associated with or providing support to Iran's proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities," an EU document said.

Much of the international community fears Iran's nuclear programme masks a drive for a weapons capability, though Tehran says it serves peaceful civilian energy and medical purposes only.

Urging the EU's 27 states "to ratchet up sanctions" in the light of the attacks on the British embassy, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who leads global talks on Iran's nuclear issue, said it was time "to make it clear to Iran that we are very serious."

But Europe remains divided over extending the blacklist to the country's oil sector or freezing the assets of its central bank.

Britain, France and Germany and Sweden favour a bar on buying oil from Iran, but with Spain, Greece and Italy significantly dependent on this resource "there will be no oil sanctions" announced Thursday, an EU diplomat told AFP.



## No Iran strike 'for the moment'

Says Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak yesterday ruled out a strike against Iran's nuclear facilities "for the moment," in remarks to public radio, but said that the Jewish state would keep all options open.

"We have no intention of acting for the moment... We should not engage in war when it is not necessary, but there may come a time or another when we are forced to face tests," Barak said.

"Our position has not changed on three points: A nuclear Iran is unacceptable, we are determined to stop that, and all options are on the table," he added.

Israel and much of the international community fears that Iran's nuclear programme masks a drive for a weapons capability. Tehran denies any such ambition.

Israel has pushed Washington and the EU for tough sanctions against Tehran, but warned that it would not allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons, and that military action to stop the programme remained an option.

## Parishad victim, others happy

FROM PAGE 1

The new provisions in the law curtailed a parishad's authorities to write annual performance reports of officials working with local departments of different ministries transferred to the upazila parishads. And it vested authority in the chairman alone to do so.

Through the above changes the chairmen seem to have been empowered over the parishads, although in the ideal situation of a decentralisation of powers the chairmen are supposed to be accountable to the parishads.

The upazila level government officials need not be

worried about the latest changes to the upazila parishads act. The new provision has made an Upazila Nirbahi Officer, popularly known as UNO, was made principal executive officer, instead of secretary, to the upazila parishad. Being principal executive officer, s/he will provide the parishads with secretarial assistance, implement parishads' decisions and ensure financial discipline, and perform other activities stipulated under the rules.

Moreover, the changes have opened the window for government officials to be appointed as administrators to run the upazila parishads until they are formed through elections and also in the case of the posts of chairman and two-vice chairmen falling vacant

Before the changes, there were provisions that allowed only elected representatives, including chairmen, vice-chairmen and members of the parishads, to run these local government bodies.

Through the changes, the government has taken back some authority from the parishads into its hands, which authority will finally be exercised by its field level officials and in some cases by the central bureaucracy.

The upazila parishads were given importance regarding transfer and functions of institutions run by the parishads as the government needed the consent of the parishads to take those institutions or functions under its own control and management. But after the changes in the law, the government will not seek the consent of the upazila parishads to do so. Rather it will do the tasks on the advice of the high-powered committee led by the cabinet secretary.

After the changes in the law, the upazila parishads also lose their authority to donate, sell, exchange, lease, achieve or transfer properties. From now the parishads will need central government permission to do so.

The new provisions seem to have gone against the government's oft-preached political stand of political empowerment of women by doing away with its own proposal of making women members of the parishads chiefs of one-third of the 18 standing committees. The changes brought in by parliament say vice-chairmen of the parishads will be made chiefs of the standing committees. This sudden change in the bill, which was placed in parliament in December last year, might have made the vice-chairmen "happy" too.

Despite bringing about the changes, the government has returned to the Election Commission the authority to fix the time frame for holding the upazila elections. The changes have also imposed a ban on war criminals convicted by a national or international tribunal on contesting elections.

Constituted through elections in January 2009, the upazila parishads have not yet started functioning in full swing due to "the government's indifference and bureaucrats' opposition".

Besides, lawmakers have been made advisers to the upazila parishads and empowered to interfere in their activities.

Elected chairmen and vice-chairmen of upazila parishads have been demanding making the parishads functional. In the face of their agitation and to bring about some changes in the upazila parishad act, the government passed the bill last Tuesday. But after the passage of the bill, many upazila parishads' chairmen expressed scepticism about making the parishads' functional. As he analyses the changes, local government expert Prof Tofail Ahmed says the latest amendments to the law will not bring about major positive results and the ongoing stalemate will continue.

## Dhaka tuned to ICT

FROM PAGE 1

Netherlands stand in the main exhibition area.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated eAsia, 2011, by clicking on a laptop.

"Our goal is to harness the power of appropriate information and communication technology to achieve development targets in education, health, employment, poverty reduction and economic development as well as empowerment of toiling masses," she said, adding that IT should be used to bolster the standard of living of ordinary citizens.

She said the government had been familiarising the new generation with technology.

She noted that there was strong demand for IT-skilled

manpower at home and abroad. She said such skilled manpower would contribute immensely to the manpower export of the country.

She said she hoped to build a nation devoid of any digital divide, irrespective of rich and poor, educated and uneducated.

"We have already taken measures to establish ICT Park. We have set up National Data Centre at Bangladesh Computer Council."

Hasina said the government was also expanding e-governance and had taken initiatives to increase the bandwidth of submarine cables, enhance access to internet services and introduce 3G mobile service, besides arranging ICT training for professionals.

## S Arabia accused of repression

AFP, Dubai

Amnesty International has accused Saudi Arabia of conducting a campaign of repression against protesters and reformists since the Arab Spring erupted, in a newly published report.

"The last nine months has seen a new wave of repression in Saudi Arabia as authorities have cracked down on protesters and reformists on security grounds," the rights watchdog said in a statement issued late Wednesday.

The report also accused the Gulf state of having "carried out a crackdown on Shia Muslims."

## Malaysia adopts poll reforms

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's parliament yesterday adopted electoral reforms including several demands made by leaders of a mass rally that alleged poll fraud.

The panel recommended the use of indelible ink, allowing absentee voting, cleaning up the electoral roll to remove deceased voters and other steps to reduce the risk of cheating.

With general elections widely expected next year, tens of thousands of people took to the streets of the capital Kuala Lumpur in July calling for reforms of the electoral system. Police broke up the rally with tear gas and water cannon and arrested 1,600 people.

## Bird flu outbreaks in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese health workers have culled hundreds of chickens and ducks following the first reported outbreak of bird flu in the capital Kathmandu, a government official said yesterday.

The outbreak was discovered after a local poultry farmer told health officials that 90 of his chickens had suddenly died.

Nepal's first reported outbreak of bird flu in poultry was in January 2009.

## Faster green cards for IT workers

PTI, Washington

In a move that may allow more highly skilled immigrants from India and China to obtain the so-called green cards faster, the US House of Representatives has passed a bill modifying the visa system.

The Fairness for High-Skilled Immigration Act (HR 3012), eliminating per-country caps on employment-based visas and instituting a first come first served system, drew broad, bipartisan support, passing the House with a vote of 389-15 Tuesday.

Currently, immigration law limits employment-based green cards allowing permanent residence for citizens from any one country to no more than seven per cent of the total green cards approved each year.

were successful, he said.

Mahboob Zaman, president of Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), said, "So far representatives from 34 countries have arrived...If we can satisfy them, the IT industry of the country will reap the benefits."

Having chatted with some foreign delegates, Mahboob said they were not aware of what was being done here in Bangladesh.

The event has been jointly organised by Bangladesh Computer Council and ICT division of the science and ICT ministry along with India's Centre for Science, Development and Media Studies. Access to Information Programme is also a co-organiser.

The prime minister visited a few stalls and released a commemorative stamp on eAsia conference.

State Minister for ICT Yeafesh Osman presided over the inaugural session.

Munir Hasan, consultant of the ICT ministry, said the main objective of the event was to focus on Dhaka as a knowledge and conference hub while branding local products around the globe.

He said there should be synchronisation between the new generation and technology and eAsia event was doing that successfully. At least 10,000 students went to the fair yesterday. It was very encouraging that on the first day ten seminars were organised and all those

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