

Zardari flies to Dubai amid crisis

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari was in Dubai yesterday for a brief visit to attend a wedding and possibly have a health check, a close aide told AFP.

The trip, which the aide said would last one day, comes as the government faces a worsening row with the country's powerful military and is embroiled in court proceedings that threatens the top civilian leaders.

"He will return Friday," he said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to media.

US sends 2nd warship near Gulf

Russia says US strike on Iran a 'real danger'; Japan cuts Iran oil import

AFP, Washington

A second US aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, has arrived in the Gulf region, the Pentagon said Wednesday, calling the move "routine" and denying any link to mounting tensions with Iran.

Backed by a cruiser, destroyer and with almost 80 planes and helicopters on board, the USS Carl Vinson carrier strike group "arrived in the US 5th Fleet area of responsibility (AOR)" on January 9, a Fifth Fleet statement said.

"Her deployment in that area is routine, long-planned -- there's nothing unusual about that," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said.

Despite the Pentagon's denials of a build-up in the region, the USS Abraham Lincoln was in the Indian Ocean and en route to join the Carl Vinson, according to the US Navy.

Meanwhile, Russian Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev has warned that military escalation is likely in Iran, with "real danger" of a US strike.

"There is a likelihood of military escalation of the conflict, and Israel

is pushing the Americans towards it," Patrushev said in an interview published yesterday on the website of the daily Kommersant.

"There is a real danger of a US military strike on Iran," the senior Russian official said.

International confrontation over Iran's nuclear program has grown more tense as threats and counter-threats are being increasingly backed with displays of military muscle.

Meanwhile, the assassination of an Iranian nuclear scientist sparked deep fury in Tehran yesterday against prime suspect Israel and the United States, which said it had nothing to do with the murder.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Wednesday "categorically" denied any US involvement in

the bombing.

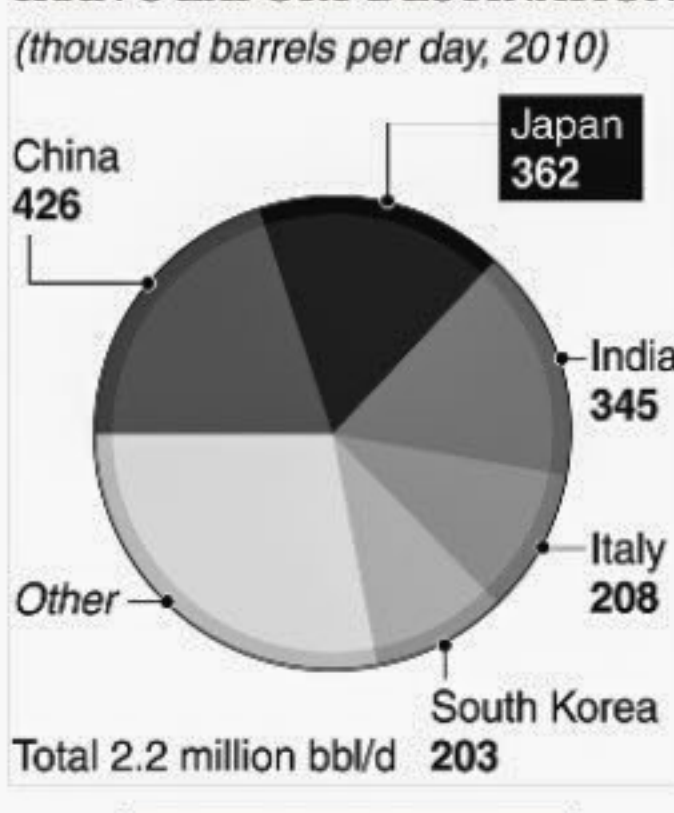
Some headline newspapers even called for retaliatory action, with one, Keyhan, saying in an editorial that "assassinations of Israeli officials and military are achievable."

In a letter demanding a strong condemnation from the UN Security Council, Iran said it had evidence unnamed "foreign quarters" were behind the killing of scientist Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan. He was killed by a car bomb on Wednesday.

Western nations, with the United States at the fore, are steadily ratcheting up sanctions on Iran with the aim of fracturing its oil-dependent economy.

Iran has responded by saying it

IRAN'S EXPORT DESTINATION (thousand barrels per day, 2010)



US marines abuse video causes outrage

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan government and the Taliban condemned yesterday a video purporting to show US Marines urinating on the corpses of insurgents, but the Islamists backed negotiations to end their 10-year war.

If authentic, the images -- which conjure up previous abuses committed by US troops during the decade-long war -- could spark deep anger and resentment in Afghanistan and the wider Muslim world.

President Hamid Karzai said in a statement that "the government of Afghanistan is deeply disturbed" of what it called "desecrating dead bodies of three Afghans".

The Taliban, who have made recent moves to talk an end to the war, described the apparent abuse as "an inhumane and savage act by the American soldiers in Afghanistan".

But spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed added that he did not think it would derail peace negotiations with the US "which at this stage are mainly about prisoner exchange".

The Pentagon said the US military is investigating the authenticity of the video and the Marine Corps said the actions were not consistent with its core values.

Nato forces in Afghanistan also condemned the video.

The footage shows four men in military fatigues appearing to urinate on three apparently lifeless men. They have brown skin, bare feet and are dressed in loose-fitting outfits. One appears to be covered in blood. The men in military fatigues seem to be aware they are being filmed.

Clues in DNA reveal how long we'll live

DAILY MAIL ONLINE

Scientists have found a way to predict how long someone will live by measuring their genes as a baby.

Life expectancy is written into our DNA and is there to be seen from the day we are born.

It all depends on the length of the telomeres, which are described as 'acting like the plastic ends on shoelaces' to protect chromosomes from wear and tear.

Telomeres are thought to hold the key to ageing.

Put simply, the longer your telomeres, the longer you will live - dependent, of course, on not dying accidentally, from disease or from lifestyle factors.

It was known they could be shortened by life choices, including smoking and stress. But this is the first indication that our lifespans might be predetermined from birth.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, right, and his Cuban counterpart Raul Castro attend a welcoming ceremony in Havana yesterday. Ahmadinejad arrived in Cuba for talks with Castro as the Islamic republic is aiming to boost its ties with Latin America.

US further reduces staff in Syria

AFP, Washington

The United States said Wednesday it would reduce the number of staff at its embassy in Damascus amid fears for their safety over the Syrian government's deadly crackdown on pro-democracy protests.

The orders were contained in a new US State Department travel warning, an update to one issued in October in which staff were restricted and family members asked to leave.

France demanded an investigation into death of the journalist, identified by his employer France 2 television as 43-year-old Gilles Jacquier, while the US accused Syria of failing to provide an environment hospitable to the media.

Jacquier was killed when a rocket hit the flashpoint central city of Homs killing six more civilians.

Nuke stockpiles are not secure

Five minutes to midnight

One degree closer to nuclear destruction, say the keepers of the "Doomsday clock"

Emerging concerns

- Refusal to engage in global action on climate change
- Trend to reject or diminish scientific warnings
- Risks highlighted by Japan's Fukushima nuclear accident



The clock

A symbolic warning set up in 1947 by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, to measure proximity to global nuclear destruction

Close calls History since inception



AFP

Source: BAS

Myanmar signs peace deal with ethnic rebels

Announces new prisoner amnesty

REUTERS, Pa-an

Myanmar's government signed a ceasefire with ethnic Karen rebels yesterday to try to end one of the world's longest-running insurgencies, part of its efforts to resolve all conflicts with separatist groups.

Meanwhile, in a late development, Myanmar's president granted amnesty to more than 600 people jailed across the country, an official said, although whether any political prisoners were included was not initially known.

The government and the 19-member Karen National Union (KNU) delegation agreed in principle to 11 points and signed two broad agreements to end hostilities between the military and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and start dialogue towards a political settlement to a 62-year conflict.

The ceasefire could be a small step towards the lifting of two decades of sanctions imposed on Myanmar by the European Union and the United States, which have made peace with ethnic militias a pre-requisite for a review of the embargoes.

Peace talks have been held on six occasions since 1949, but no lasting agreement has been reached.

Five killed in Ctg

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(Chittagong Division).

Iqbal had been living on the top floor of the building "Masum Kutir" with his wife and two younger brothers. His brother Afran Iqbal, 11, and nephew Shaon came to visit them after school examinations.

Iqbal's brothers Afran and Jubaer Iqbal, 28, escaped the fire as they climbed down the building from the balcony using a piece of a cloth.

On information, five fire-fighting units rushed to the spot and put out the blaze after two-hour effort.

Jaasim said the thick smoke got trapped inside the building as the main gate on the ground floor and the door to the roof were closed.

Smoke might have spread to the top floor after Shaon,

whose body was found on the staircase, opened the apartment door to escape, Jasim said.

The bodies were sent to Chittagong Medical College Hospital where grieving relatives of the victims gathered in the morning.

Hearing the news, Tamanna's father Abdul Hannan Siddique rushed to the hospital from his village in Satkania upazila.

"My daughter was expecting a child next month but everything is finished now," said Hannan with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Tamanna, student of Economics at Haji Md Mohsin College, and Iqbal got married only ten months back, said Hannan.

He said Tamanna was ill and could not sit for a test on January 10 before master's

final year exams.

Her classmate Tanjina Nasrin, who went to the CMCH morgue, said Tamanna was a bit sad for failing to take the test. But she was very happy that she would be a mother soon.

TEENAGER HELPS SAVE LIVES

College student Fahim, a tenant on the building's first floor, helped as many as 17 people escape the fire.

He woke up to the noise of an explosion at about 3:00am and ran to the kitchen to find out what happened. He saw a blaze flaring up the department store on the ground floor.

Fahim then opened the apartment door to get out but found the staircase filled with thick smoke. He shut the door.

He woke up his family

members and rushed to the balcony on the building's front side. He called out the house owner on the second floor.

"All nine members of my family climbed down through the adjoining tin-roof of another department store beside the garage. Six family members of the house owner came down to our balcony using a piece of cloth and then got down to the street," he said.

"At that moment, we saw Iqbal's two brothers crying for help at their balcony. We told them to climb down using a piece of cloth."

Iqbal's younger brothers Jubaer, and Afran managed to climb down from third floor with their help, said Fahim.

Zillur to take initiative

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office, Ashraf bitterly criticised the main opposition BNP for raising the issue of restoring the caretaker government system at its talks with the president on Wednesday since, he said, it was not on the agenda.

Explaining the president's proposal, Asraf said, "He might promulgate an ordinance providing for constitution of the next election commission or he may send a proposal to parliament to enact a law to this end."

"None of the successive governments in the last 40 years (since independence) came up to enact the law. But we told the honourable president that the present AL government will support his proposal to this end," said Ashraf, also LGRD minister.

Besides, the AL team informed the president that the party will welcome any initiative taken by him for holding free and fair polls, he said.

The president initiated the talks with the political parties, excepting Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, as the five-year tenure of the present EC expires next month.

Starting on December 22, the much-talked about dialogue ended yesterday.

All the 23 political parties that joined the talks stressed strengthening the EC for holding free and fair polls.

Of them, 12 parties including BNP urged the president to take initiative for restoration of the caretaker system although it was not on the agenda of the dialogue.

Six parties -- AL, Jatiya Party, Shamyabadi Dal, Ganatantrik Islami Oikya Jote, Islami Oikya Jote and Islamic Front -- opposed the

CG system either at the dialogue or outside.

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Workers Party, Jatiya Party-JP and National Awami Party did not say anything on this issue at the talks.

But Tarikat Federation had proposed formation of an interim government with the incumbent prime minister heading it.

The caretaker system was scrapped through the 15th amendment to the constitution last year, triggering criticism from different quarters.

Asked about BNP's demand at the dialogue for restoring the caretaker system before the formation of the next EC, Ashraf said at the briefing the Election Commission is a constitutional body, and tenure of the present EC will expire in mid-February. So, there must be continuity of the constitutional body.

Besides, it has already been proved that free and fair polls can be held under the present political government, he said.

Asked whether AL will join if the president calls for talks on the caretaker government issue, Ashraf said, "We'll welcome any such initiative taken by the president."

Replying to a question, he said BNP joined the talks with the president to escape people's wrath. "It is clear that their objective was not good."

31st BCS

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candidates are in general cadre, 1,011 in technical cadre and rest of the candidates are placed in both cadres.

The viva voce examinations will be held on February 6.