

Suu Kyi launches bid for parliament

EU may begin to lift Myanmar sanctions

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi launched her historic bid for a seat in parliament yesterday in the latest sign of change in the country after the end of decades of outright military rule.

Meanwhile, European Union is mulling whether to begin lifting sanctions against Myanmar as soon as February to encourage reforms, EU diplomats said yesterday.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner is standing in April 1 by-elections seen as a major test of the regime's reform credentials following a surprising series of conciliatory gestures by the new nominally civilian government.

The pro-democracy icon submitted her registration to stand in a rural constituency in Kawhmu near Yangon, an area devastated by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, to the delight of crowds of supporters waiting outside.

"Aung San Suu Kyi was the first member of the NLD to register. She's going to run for

the lower house," a senior party official, Win Htein, told AFP.

The NLD was stripped of its status as a legal political party in 2010 because it boycotted a controversial national election, saying the rules were unfair.

Suu Kyi hinted at the weekend that she could take a position in the government but said it "depends on the circumstances".

The April polls are to fill places vacated by those elected in the 2010 polls who have since become ministers and deputy ministers in the government.

Meanwhile, Aid for the southeast Asian nation is also under consideration, as well as a visit soon by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, her spokesman Michael Mann told AFP.

"In the light of developments in the country, we have launched a general review of our policies," he added. The decision is to be decided at talks between EU foreign ministers in Brussels on Monday.



Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi registers to run as a candidate in upcoming by-elections at the Thanlyin township election commission office on the outskirts of Yangon yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan rejects US envoy visit

BBC ONLINE

Pakistan has rejected US special envoy Marc Grossman's request to visit the country, a senior official said yesterday, highlighting the increased tensions between the uneasy allies.

"Ambassador Grossman asked to visit Pakistan but we conveyed to him that it was not possible at the moment," a senior government official, who declined to be named, told Reuters.

Relations between Islamabad and Washington are at the lowest point in years, dragged down by a Nato cross-border air attack which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers on November 26.

The growing tension threatens to set back peace efforts in neighboring Afghanistan, where the United States is gradually withdrawing troops after a decade of war.

War with Iran: A US dilemma

TIME ONLINE

It's unlikely that President Barack Obama intends to go to the polls in November with the United States engaged in a hot war with Iran, but there is a growing danger that events could conspire to make the decision for him.

The Wall Street Journal reported Friday that "US defence leaders are increasingly concerned that Israel is preparing to take military action against Iran, over US objections, and have stepped up contingency planning to safeguard US facilities in the region in case of a conflict."

The Journal also reported that Administration officials from President Obama have urged their Israeli counterparts to refrain from unilateral military action. The Israeli response, says the paper, has been "non-committal." Indeed, US Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen Martin Dempsey is due to visit Israel on Thursday with the purpose, according to Israeli reports, of ascertaining Israel's intentions.

The Iranians would likely hold the US accountable for any Israeli military action, and any retaliation

against US assets (or even attacks on Israel) might prompt the US to escalate the confrontation in order to disable Iran's military capability and perhaps strike at its nuclear program in the process.

Restraint by Israel on unilateral action by escalating sanctions pressure has been a dominant theme of the Obama Administration's Iran policy. And current and former Administration officials have said that President Obama would take military action if other methods failed to stop Iran building a nuclear weapon, although the US intelligence assessment is that Iran has not yet decided, let alone treated by the Iranians as a sign that the US and its partners are seeking to overthrow the clerical regime. The Washington Post caused a stir last week by reporting that it had been

than the White House is, putting the brakes on a sanctions policy to which Iran may respond as if to an act of war carries a heavy political cost to the president.

The realization that the Administration's options are being narrowed by the actions of others may account for the vehemence with which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last week condemned the murder of an Iranian nuclear scientist in Tehran. The general assumption, both in Tehran and in Western capitals,

told by a "senior US intelligence official" that the goal of the new sanctions was, indeed, to bring down the regime in Tehran.

President Obama appears to have little say over whether Israel attacks Iran, but even his control over US sanctions policy may be less than he might like.

In an election year in which painting Obama as weak on Iran is the centerpiece of the Republican foreign policy discussion, and with congressional Democrats far more hawkish on the issue than the White House is, putting the brakes on a sanctions policy to which Iran may respond as if to an act of war carries a heavy political cost to the president.

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is that Israel is behind the attacks.

Even more alarming, if true, were the claims made in Foreign Policy magazine by military analyst Mark Perry, last week, alleging that an internal CIA assessment had concluded that Israeli Mossad agents masqueraded as CIA operatives while recruiting members of a Sunni jihadist group to wage proxy operations in Iran.

Defence Secretary Leon Panetta has repeatedly warned Iran that closing the Strait, through which some 40% of global oil traffic passes, is a "red line" that would draw a military response. The New York Times reported Friday that the US had used a secret channel to send that same message to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

But the sanctions have pushed Iran to the wire and experts have indicated that Iran's retaliation of some sort is imminent. If things move the way it is moving, war may rage over the Gulf again. A war that President Obama hoped to avoid.

Iran attack would be 'catastrophe': Russia

Moscow defies West on Syria crisis

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday rejected the tough Western strategy over the Iran and Syria crises, warning that a military strike on Iran would be a "catastrophe"

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov indicated that Russia was prepared to wield its veto on the UN Security Council, as Moscow sharpens its foreign policy line ahead of Vladimir Putin's planned return to the Kremlin this year.

He also accused the West of trying to suffocate the Iranian economy and incite popular discontent with new sanctions such as a proposed oil embargo.

"As for the chances of this catastrophe happening, you would have to ask those constantly mentioning it as an option that remains on the table," Lavrov said when asked about the chances of military action.

Lavrov said the chances of war were too dire to contemplate because they would incite inter-communal tensions in the region and flood neighbouring countries with Iranian refugees.

Moscow's initial relations with the

Islamic republic in the 1980s were tense but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, ties warmed rapidly, based on common energy interests and a shared distrust of the West.

As well as opposing the use of sanctions against two of the most controversial regimes in the Middle East, Lavrov also sternly warned against the consequences of military intervention in the Iran and Syria crises.

"For us, the red line is fairly clearly drawn. We will not support any sanctions" against Syria, Lavrov said, complaining that the West had already introduced measures against Damascus without consulting Russia or China.

Moscow has insisted the Syrian opposition is as much to blame for the violence as the regime, a position it has tried to assert in a UN Security Council resolution that has received a cool Western reception.

Lavrov indicated that Russia would use its UN Security Council veto to block any proposals for military intervention in Syria, following a suggestion by Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani to send in Arab troops.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sites go dark to protest anti-piracy law

BBC ONLINE

Thousands of internet sites yesterday took part in a "blackout" protest against anti-piracy laws being discussed by US lawmakers.

The Wikipedia encyclopedia and blogging service WordPress are among the highest profile pages to remove material.

Google is showing solidarity by placing a black box over its logo when US-based users visit its site.

Visitors to Wikipedia's English-language site are greeted by a dark page with white text that says: "Imagine a world without free knowledge... The US Congress is considering legislation that could fatally damage the free and open internet. For 24 hours, to raise awareness, we are blacking out Wikipedia."

If users try to access its other pages via search sites, the text briefly flashes up before being replaced by the protest page. However, people have been sharing workarounds to disable the redirect.

WordPress's homepage displays a video which claims that Sopra "breaks the internet" and asks users to add their name to a petition asking Congress to stop the bill.

"The authors of the legislation don't seem to really understand how the internet works," the site's co-founder, Matt Mullenweg told the BBC.

Across the globe, several Pirate Party sites have been taken offline. The political parties - which advocate reform of copyright laws - took the action in the UK, Spain, Sweden, Argentina, Canada and elsewhere.

The US news website Politico estimated that 7,000 sites were involved by early Wednesday morning.



A rescuer is being lowered on the cruise liner Costa Concordia aground in front of the harbour of the Giglio island after hitting underwater rocks on January 13. The search of the capsized ship has been suspended as emergency workers fear that the ship could slip from its resting place on a rocky shelf and slip into deeper waters.

PHOTO: AFP

Disasters cost \$366b in 2011: UN

AFP, Geneva

Natural disasters such as the huge earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan caused a record \$366 billion damage in 2011, the UN disaster risk reduction agency UNISDR said on Wednesday.

A total of 29,782 people were killed in 302 disasters last year, the body said.

Storms and floods accounted for up to 70 percent of catastrophes but earthquakes were the biggest killer.

Figures released by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) and the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction showed quakes claimed 20,943 lives, most of them in Japan.

The earthquake and tsunami that sparked the Fukushima nuclear plant catastrophe in March was also the costliest disaster, causing damage worth \$210 billion.

This was followed by the floods that hit Thailand from August to December which cost the country \$40 billion.

The number of disasters was down on 2010, when 385 occurred, according to CRED figures.

However 2011 practically saw a tripling in costs from \$123.9 billion recorded in the previous 12 months.

In addition to the Japan earthquake, the centre cited the floods in Brazil in January, the quake that hit New Zealand in February, and Hurricane Irene in the United States in August and September.

The Brazil floods were the deadliest in the country's history, taking 900 lives.

Fifteen die in south India cold snap

BBC ONLINE

At least 15 people have died in an unprecedented cold wave sweeping through south India.

The deaths were reported from Andhra Pradesh state, where temperatures dipped to 1C in the coastal districts and in parts of the Telangana region, meteorological officials said.

Some parts of neighbouring Karnataka state also saw temperatures drop to their lowest in over 100 years.

Much of north India has also been hit by extreme cold weather conditions.

The tribal region of Lambasingi in Andhra Pradesh is in the throes of a cold snap with temperatures dipping to 1C on Tuesday. Adilabad shivered as the mercury fell to 4C, down from 15C last week.

Madikeri in neighbouring Karnataka recorded its coldest weather in 132 years with temperatures plummeting to 4.8C.

The popular hill station of Mysore experienced its coldest day in 120 years with temperatures dipping to 7.7C. The state capital Bangalore recorded a low of 12C.

Southern India rarely experiences cold weather and with homes not centrally heated like buildings in the West, conditions can be miserable.

Northern India is also experiencing severe cold weather.

Israel raid kills two in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

An Israeli air raid on the northern Gaza Strip killed two Palestinians and wounded a third yesterday, a spokesman for the Hamas-run emergency services told AFP.

"We recovered one martyr and two other people with injuries after the air raid carried out by occupation aircraft in Beit Hanun," spokesman Adham Abu Selmiya told AFP, naming the dead man as Mohammed Abu Awda, 23.

One of those who had been in critical condition died later of his wounds, he said, naming him as Khaled al-Zaanin, 17.

The strike hit a field used by Hamas militants just east of Beit Hanun, Palestinian security sources said.

Obama eyes regime change in Syria

EU decides to impose fresh sanctions

AFP, Damascus

US President Barack Obama vowed to redouble efforts to force a change of regime in Syria as the UN Security Council struggled to agree on a resolution on Damascus's crackdown on dissent.

Meanwhile, Syria faces more sanctions from European Union, EU diplomats said yesterday as the regime accused Qatar for aiding rebels with arms.

Obama said concerns about the crackdown on demonstrators by President Bashar al-Assad's forces had been "uppermost" in talks with visiting Jordanian King Abdullah II on Tuesday.

"We continue to see unacceptable levels of violence inside that country," Obama said.

"We will continue to consult very closely with Jordan to create the kind of international pressure and environment that

encourage the current Syrian regime to step aside so that a more democratic process and transition can take place inside of Syria."

The US president thanked King Abdullah for being the first Arab leader to call publicly for Assad to go and for taking part in Arab League efforts to mitigate the crisis.

His comments came after Assad's government rejected a proposal to deploy Arab forces to halt unrest in Syria, where the UN estimates more than 5,400 people have been killed in the crackdown since March.

The Arab League is due to discuss the crisis in Syria on Saturday and Sunday, and is expected to discuss the future of its widely criticised observer mission.

And European Union foreign ministers are set to slap fresh sanctions on Syria next week, adding 22 individuals and eight companies to an existing blacklist.



Shock of a lifetime

BBC ONLINE

An Indian teacher got the shock of his life when he checked his bank account online and found 490b rupees (\$9.8b).

Parijat Saha expected his balance to be \$200 and could not believe his eyes - but a check at an ATM confirmed his billionaire status, on paper at least.

The honest Saha rang the State Bank of India (SBI) to point out the error.

Red-faced bank officials would not comment, but sources say the funds were "uncleared" and he could not have withdrawn the money if he had tried.

Saha's monthly salary as a school teacher in the eastern state of West Bengal is 35,000 rupees (\$700).

But his account balance of \$9.8b is closer to India's annual education budget of \$11.5bn.

"On Sunday evening, when I was checking my savings account balance on the internet, I was expecting an amount of a little more than 10,000 rupees (\$200)," Saha, who lives in the town of Balurghat in South Dinajpur district, told the BBC.

The billions he found there instead have left him in shock.

The government-run bank - motto "Safe Banking with SBI" - has not explained what happened.

The bank's regional headquarters in Calcutta and national headquarters in Mumbai have been alerted and officials are trying to figure out what went wrong, sources in the bank say.