

# US meets Taliban for talks in Qatar

Kabul to hold talks in Saudi soon

AFP, Kabul

Taliban negotiators have begun holding preliminary talks with US officials in Qatar on plans for peace negotiations aimed at ending the decade-long war in Afghanistan, a former Taliban official said yesterday.

"The actual peace talks have not yet begun -- they are in the process of trust-building and obviously this will take some time," Mawlawi Qalamuddin told AFP.

Qalamuddin, who once led the Taliban's feared religious police when the hardline Islamists were in power, is now a member of the High Peace Council appointed by the government of President Hamid Karzai.

Meanwhile, BBC reported that the Afghan government is planning to meet the Taliban in Saudi Arabia in an attempt to jump-start peace talks.

The landmark meeting will come in the coming weeks, according to Western and Afghan officials.

The Taliban have refused previously to recognise the government of President

Hamid Karzai. Senior officials in Kabul say the Taliban have agreed to the meeting.

The Taliban, ousted from power by a US-led invasion in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, announced earlier this month that they planned to set up a political office in Qatar ahead of talks with Washington.

Qalamuddin said the delegation already in the Gulf state included Mohammad Tayeb Agha, a close ally and secretary of Taliban leader Mullah Omar, and Shahabuddin Delawar, the Taliban's former ambassador to Riyadh.

"At the moment the delegation is holding preliminary talks. You need to build some trust before starting talks."

One of the trust-building measures demanded by the Taliban is the release of five of its members from Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, while Washington wants the insurgents to renounce violence.

Another sign of a thaw between the two countries came with the announcement yesterday that Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar will visit Kabul on Wednesday.



Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi waves to supporters as she leaves after addressing a gathering as part of her campaign trail on the outskirts of Myanmar's southern city of Dawei yesterday.

# Suu Kyi calls for changes to constitution

REUTERS, Dawei

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday called for changes to the military-drafted constitution in her first political trip since ending a boycott of the country's political system last year and announcing plans to run for parliament.

Thousands of people lined the roads shouting "Long live mother Suu" as her motorcade moved through the rural coastal region of Dawei about 615 km south of her home city, Yangon.

The trip, only her fourth outside Yangon since her release from years of house arrest in November 2010, demonstrates the increasingly central role of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate as Myanmar emerges from half a century of isolation.

"There are certain laws which are obstacles to the freedom of the people and we will strive to abolish these laws within the framework of the parliament," Suu Kyi said to cheers from supporters after meeting officials of her National League for Democracy party in Dawei.

Her yesterday's address offered the most extensive detail yet of the policies she would bring to parliament.

In particular, she said she wanted to revise a 2008 army-drafted constitution that gives the military wide-ranging powers, including the ability to appoint key cabinet members, take control of the country in a state of emergency and occupy a quarter of the seats in parliament.

Suu Kyi and her allies are contesting 48 seats in various legislatures including the 440-seat lower house in by-elections that could give political credibility to Myanmar and help advance the end of Western sanctions.

# There will never be a coup

says Pak prime minister

APP, Davos

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said on Saturday there was no chance of a military coup because the army favoured democracy and stability in the country.

In an interaction with the media here on the sidelines of the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum, he said: "I don't think there will be a coup in Pakistan ever. There is no threat to democracy."

The prime minister said no state institution, military or people wanted a coup and all were in favour of democracy.

He said Pakistan today is a functioning democracy with a fully empowered parliament. "We have a vibrant civil society, free media and an independent judiciary."

Gilani said the international media was taking a keen interest in the change in Islamabad's ties with Washington



after the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers in a Nato attack on two military posts on Nov 26.

The incident was a "turning point" and caused bad blood between the two governments, Gilani said.

The prime minister said the Defence Committee of the Cabinet decided to redefine terms of engagement with the United States and, as an initial move, cut off supplies for Nato-led forces in Afghanistan, got the Shamsi airbase vacated and boycotted the Bonn conference on Afghanistan.

In reply to a question, Gilani said former president Musharraf took decisions without taking the nation into confidence. "If there is no support of the public no one can win a war."

When asked about the presence of the late al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, he said it was a global failure of intelligence agencies.

The Pak prime minister stressed Pakistan wanted good relations with all its neighbours and if India had any information, it should share it with Pakistan.

He termed Dr Singh a "genuine person" and said he (Singh) too was desirous of resolving all issues with Pakistan, including Kashmir.

The prime minister said Pakistan attached importance to its relations with Afghanistan as a peaceful and stable neighbour was in "our strategic interest".

He said Pakistan was cooperating with its partners in Saarc and ECO for promoting economic collaboration.

# ARMY CHIEF'S AGE ROW India takes tough stand

PTI, New Delhi

Ahead of the Supreme Court hearing on the subject, the Ministry of Defence has written to the Adjutant General's (AG) branch of the Army to correct its record to show the year of birth of Army Chief General VK Singh as 1950 contrary to his stand that he was born one year later.

The letter was issued to the AG's branch last week to correct its record and show May 10, 1950 as the date of birth, sources said.

The AG's branch, which is the official record keeper in the service, has maintained Gen Singh's date of birth as May 10, 1951, although the Military Secretary's branch records it as May 10, 1950.

# A journey to the heart of Islam

AFP, London

It is a rite that all followers of Islam are supposed to perform at least once in a lifetime, yet for the rest of the globe the hajj is veiled in mystery.

Now the British Museum in London has opened the first ever major exhibition on the pilgrimage, to give non-Muslims a glimpse of the heart of this world religion.

"This exhibition is for everybody, Muslims and non-Muslims, everyone who wants to know more about this extraordinary phenomenon, which is one of the great religious manifestations of the world," said Neil MacGregor, the director of the museum.

It has taken three years and deals with museums around the world to bring together the exhibition.

The show uses priceless artefacts, video footage, personal audio recordings and photographs to explore the history, journeys and experiences of millions of pilgrims who travel from around the world to reach the holy city of Mecca every year.

For centuries the hajj was an epic undertaking involving weeks of travel on foot or on the back of a camel, in convoys across mountains and deserts; or months at sea across the Indian Ocean at risk from shipwreck or pirates.

"Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam" opened at the British Museum on January 26, and will run until April 15.

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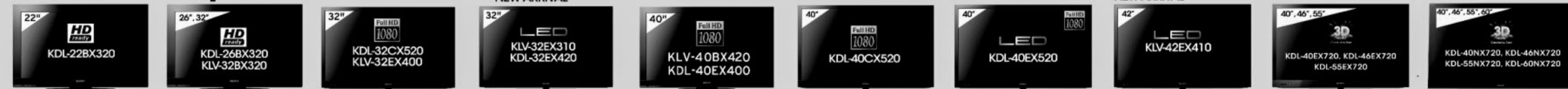
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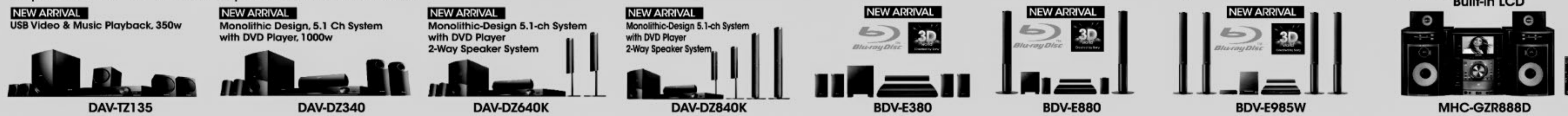
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