

REWARD FOR MYANMAR REFORMS

US to relax sanctions

AFP, Washington

The United States said Wednesday it will ease restrictions on investment to Myanmar and quickly appoint an ambassador as it seeks to boost reformers who allowed landmark elections in the long-closed nation.

In its latest gestures under a three-year diplomatic drive on Myanmar, the United States said it would step up aid and allow select officials to visit but stopped short of easing the bulk of two decades' worth of biting sanctions.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hailed the "leadership and courage" of President Thein Sein after the opposition swept Sunday's by-elections, giving Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi her first seat in parliament.

"The United States will stand with the reformers and the democrats both inside the government and in the larger civil society as they work together for that more hopeful future that is the right of every single person," Hillary told reporters.

She said the United States would start



MasterCard, Visa and American Express are never accepted.

Hillary -- who paid a landmark visit to Myanmar in December -- said the United States would complete formalities "in the coming days" to send an ambassador, completing a promised upgrade to full relations after a two-decade gap.

In other steps, the US Agency for International Development will set up a mission inside Myanmar to look at boosting its \$35 million in annual aid and private US organizations will be allowed to conduct a greater range of work inside Myanmar, including on health and education.

But Myanmar will stay under a number of tough sanctions set by the US Congress including a ban on its key exports such as jade.

China calls for lifting of all sanctions

AFP, Beijing

easing restrictions on US investment and financial services in areas seen supporting reforms in the country formerly known as Burma.

Officials said they were deciding the exact measures and timeframe but that one priority would be to allow the use of credit cards in Myanmar, one of the few nations where

The call came after Washington said it would ease restrictions on investment to

Myanmar and step up aid, but stopped short of easing the bulk of two decades' worth of biting sanctions.

"China has noted that some Western countries have expressed the will to partially lift sanctions against Myanmar," said foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei during a regular press briefing.

"We call on all parties concerned to completely lift their sanctions against Myanmar."

New clashes as UN team arrives in Syria

Annan expects ceasefire on April 12

BBC ONLINE

China yesterday reiterated its call for all international sanctions on Myanmar to be lifted, after landmark elections in the long-closed nation gave Aung San Suu Kyi her first seat in parliament.

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12 April.

Meanwhile the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said that Syrian officials had agreed to it having an "expanded presence" in the country.

The UN says the conflict has cost

more than 9,000 lives since it began a year ago. The Syrian government blames violence on "terrorist gangs" and says some 3,000 members of the security forces have been killed.

Activists say dozens of people have been killed in recent clashes.

The human rights group Amnesty International said it had counted 232 deaths since Syria accepted Annan's six-point peace plan last week.

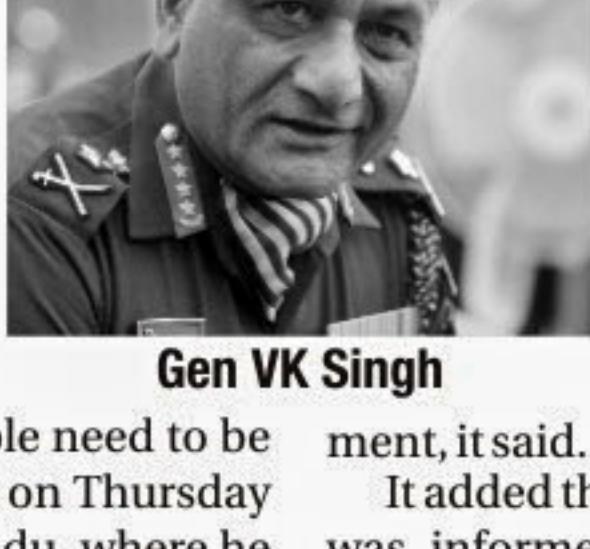
The BBC's Jim Muir in Beirut says activists are giving the clear impression that the Syrian regime is having a final crack at rebels before the ceasefire deadline.

Speaking in Geneva yesterday, Annan's spokesman, Ahmad Fawzi, told reporters their team was trying to verify Syria's assertion that it has withdrawn some troops.

Fawzi added that Annan will travel to Iran on 11 April, the day after a partial ceasefire is due, to try to win further regional support for his peace plan.

India army chief slams 'stupid' coup plot report

BBC ONLINE



Gen VK Singh

"routine".

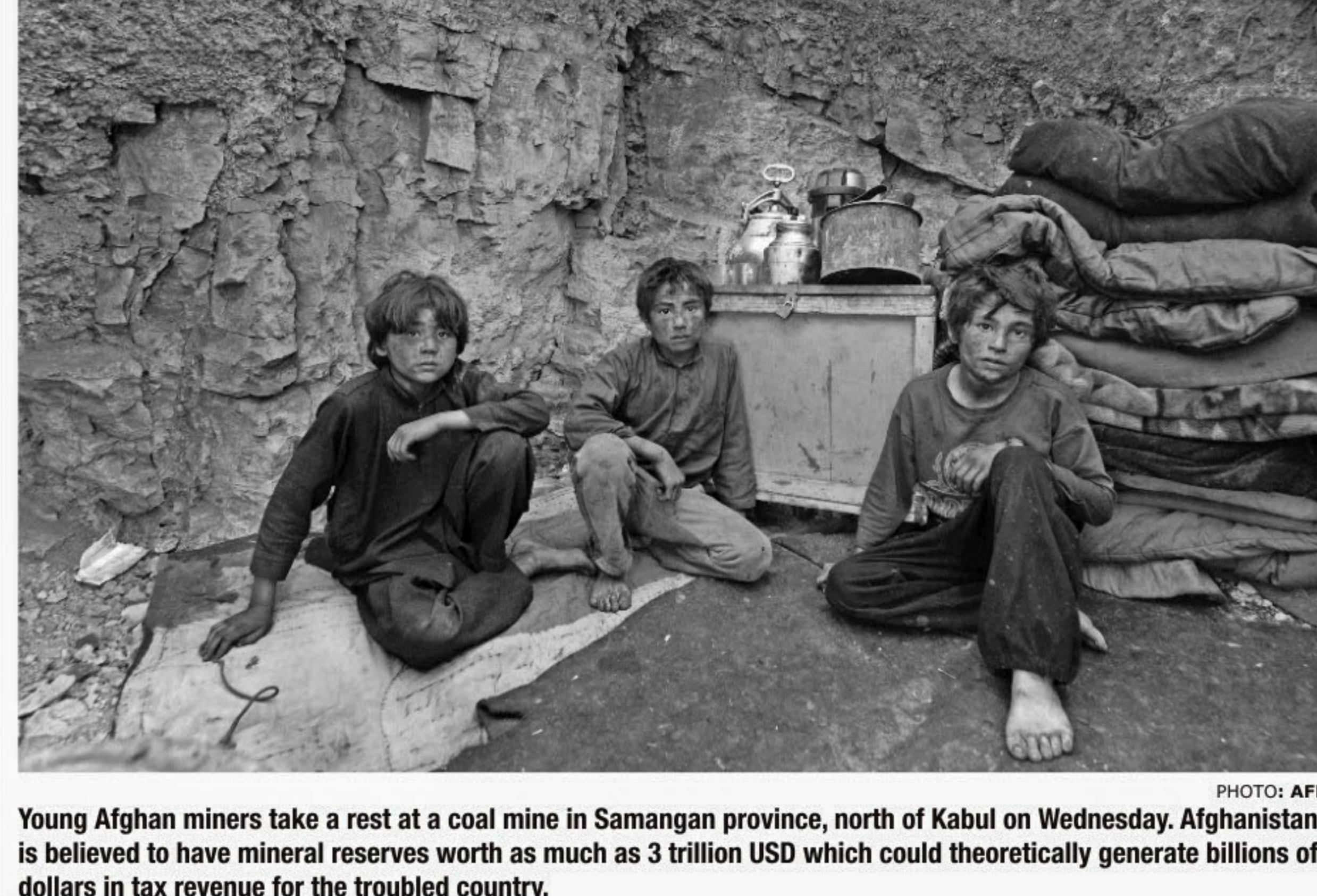
The Indian Express report said the incident took place on the night of 16 January - the day Gen Singh filed a case in the Supreme Court in an acrimonious row with the government over his age.

The movement caused considerable alarm and consternation in the government, it said.

It added that Defence Minister AK Antony was informed, Prime Minister Singh was woken up early on 17 January and Defence Secretary Shashi Kant Sharma was called back from a trip to Malaysia.

The army told the newspaper that the units were engaged in a routine exercise to test their mobility in fog and did not need to warn the government in advance.

The Indian Express has stood by the report and said it is a "meticulous reconstruction and a very sober interpretation of the movement of two key army units" towards Delhi.



Young Afghan miners take a rest at a coal mine in Samangan province, north of Kabul on Wednesday. Afghanistan is believed to have mineral reserves worth as much as 3 trillion USD which could theoretically generate billions of dollars in tax revenue for the troubled country.

PHOTO: AFP

Attacks on Afghan police kill 10

AFP, Kabul

A suicide bomber killed two policemen in Afghanistan yesterday, hours after a Taliban attack on a police post on the other side of the insurgency-hit nation left eight dead, officials said.

Provincial spokesman for Badakhshan, said, "A suicide attacker targeted a group of local police forces in Keshm district today killing the commander of local police in the district and one of his bodyguards."

Earlier, Naqibullah Farahi, spokesman for the western province of Farah, said Taliban gunmen had killed eight local policemen in an attack on a remote post in Khaki Safed district late on Wednesday.

Taliban claimed responsibility for that attack.

NEWS IN brief

Kuwait-Iraq flights to resume

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq has approved a request from Kuwait's Jazeera Airways to operate services to Baghdad and Najaf, more than 20 years after direct flights between the neighbours were halted, officials said yesterday.

"We agreed yesterday to the request of the Kuwait Jazeera Airways company to (begin) flights from Kuwait to Iraq," said Nasser Hussein Bandar, the head of Iraq's civil aviation authority.

Bandar said Jazeera Airways, which was founded in 2004, had requested four flights a week to Baghdad and four more to the central Iraqi city of Najaf.

Karim al-Nuri, an adviser to Iraq's transport minister, confirmed that a deal was approved.

Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, after which flights between the Iraq and its small neighbour were

FAO says world food prices stable in March

AFP, Rome

World food prices, after rising for two months, levelled out in March but stayed high, the UN's food agency said today.

The FAO Food Price Index, which measures the monthly change in prices of a basket of food commodities, averaged 216 points in March, almost flat from 215 in February, said the Food and Agricultural Organisation.

Food prices spiked in 2007-2008 and again last year when they reached record levels, with the FAO index peaking at 232 last March.

Rising food prices, which can stoke social unrest, have been blamed on a mix of factors, from high energy and fertiliser prices to climatic factors and loss of farmland, to changing diets and the growth of the biofuel sector.

TURBULENT TIES
Pakistan, US still far from deal

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday indicated it was still far from reaching an agreement with the United States on how to patch up turbulent relations after a series of major crises.

One day after a senior US diplomat held a further round of talks in Islamabad, Pakistan's foreign ministry said both sides were still at odds over US drone strikes and attacks that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers in November.

Ministry spokesman Abdul Basit confirmed that both sides were discussing a framework agreement that would tax Nato convoys transiting to Afghanistan and resume compensation payments to Pakistan for fighting Islamist militants.

Pakistan's relations with the United States nosedived in 2011. In January that year a CIA operative killed two Pakistanis, in May a covert US raid killed Osama bin Laden and then came the November strikes.

The air strikes brought relations to their lowest point as a furious Pakistan shut its Afghan border to Nato supplies and evicted US personnel from an air base reportedly used as a hub by US drones.

Although high-level contacts have now resumed, a formal resetting of the relationship is on hold until the Pakistani parliament finishes debating recommendations on how best to protect Islamabad's interests.

2G SCAM IN INDIA
SC rejects telecoms appeal

BBC ONLINE

India's Supreme Court on Wednesday rejected appeals by telecommunications companies to reconsider a landmark judgement cancelling 122 licences that were awarded in 2008.

These firms have nearly 70 million subscribers.

February's judgement said that they would need to transfer to other operators within the next four months.

However, the court agreed to hear a petition by the government seeking clarification on its judgement.

The government has told the court that more than 69 million subscribers could face service disruption as a fresh auction of the licences was not possible by 2 June, the deadline set by the court.

Libya warns violence could delay elections

AFP, Tripoli

Libyan authorities warned on Wednesday that insecurity could cause a delay of elections for a constituent assembly and demanded an immediate halt to violence in the west of the country.

"Lack of stability could affect the decision of holding elections on time," government spokesman Nasser al-Manaa told journalists in Tripoli.

He stressed that all government ministries were working towards holding the vote for constituent assembly as scheduled in June, but that continued violence could push the ruling National Transitional Council to push back the date.

The remarks came at the close of a third day of clashes near the border of Tunisia which he said has claimed 18 lives and left 250 people wounded.

The fighting pitted armed Berber groups from Zuwarah against gunmen from the neighbouring Arab towns of Regdalin and Jamil.

The flare-up in the west of the country comes hot at the heels of violent tribal clashes in the southern cities of Kufra and Sabha.

The interim government has struggled to impose its authority with several militias holding onto their arms and refusing to follow commands.

"Freedom does not have to mean chaos and rights should not be claimed by picking up arms," Manaa stressed, urging all parties to act with restraint.

Cuba arrests 43 in crackdown

AFP, Havana

At least 43 Cuban dissidents have been arrested in areas near where Pope Benedict XVI visited last week, dissidents said Tuesday, as the United States urged their immediate release.

"We have been able to confirm that 43 opposition members have been detained -- 10 women and 33 men -- in a crackdown on Monday in the Santiago de Cuba area. All remain under arrest," said Elizardo Sanchez, head of the outlawed but tolerated Cuban Human Rights and National Reconciliation Commission.

The commission on Monday reported 25 detentions but its figure on detentions near Santiago de Cuba -- Cuba's second-largest city -- has kept rising.

Brazil seeks \$10.9 b from Chevron for second spill

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

A Brazilian prosecutor is demanding that Chevron and the oil drilling contractor Transocean pay \$10.9 billion for a second offshore spill last month, the US oil giant said Wednesday.

The new penalty sought -- 20 billion reals, or \$10.9 billion -- is arbitrary, speculative and not based on facts, Chevron said in a statement sent to AFP.

On March 4, an oil spill was detected at a depth of 1,300 meters not far from the site of a bigger spill that occurred last November in the Chevron-operated Frade field located off Rio de Janeiro state.

State prosecutors had already filed legal action against Chevron and Transocean over the November incident, also seeking \$11 billion.

Chevron dismissed the charges as "outrageous and without merit" and vowed to defend itself and

Mali slips into chaos despite rebel ceasefire

AFP, Bamako

Fears mounted yesterday that al-Qaeda-linked Islamists were turning Mali into a rogue state despite the announcement by Tuareg rebels that their 10-week military offensive was complete.

As the Tuareg trumpeted the success of a decades-old struggle to "liberate" their homeland, their fundamentalist comrades-turned-rivals began imposing sharia in northern Mali, also leaving an embattled junta looking very vulnerable in Bamako.

The UN Security Council on Wednesday called for an immediate ceasefire but proposed no firm action to reverse a sequence that has seen a country hailed as a democratic success story descend into chaos in barely two weeks.

The world body also condemned the coup by a group of low-ranking army officers who took control of the capital Bamako on March 22 and ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré just weeks before he was due to step down.

The United States, which had grown increasingly concerned since the collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya scattered weapons across the region, engaged talks with

Algeria, the most powerful of Mali's seven neighbours.

Former colonial power France has voiced fears that while the Tuaregs' territorial claims could be addressed through negotiation, the Islamist advance is a threat to the entire region.

Residents and security sources said the Islamists have chased the Tuareg group Azawad National Liberation Movement (MNLA) out of Timbuktu, burning their flag and replacing it with their black jihad flag.

The junta, which came to power in what some observers have described as "an accidental coup", was struggling to assert its authority.

In an interview with the French dailies Le Monde and Liberation published Thursday, Captain Amadou Sanogo begged Western powers to help him counter the Islamist push in the north.

"If the great powers are able to cross oceans to battle fundamentalist structures in Afghanistan, what's stopping them coming to us? Our committee wants the best for the country," he said.

Fight for WB job hots up
Ex-managers back Nigerian for president

AFP, Washington



the International Monetary Fund, the Bank's sister institution.

The World Bank plans to select the successor to outgoing president Robert Zoellick by April 20, the start of its spring meetings with the IMF.

Writing in their personal capacity ahead of the candidate interviews next week, the ex-Bank officials said "we care too much for the institution and for its historic development mission not to speak up."

While the other two candidates also have strong qualifications, "she would be the outstanding World Bank president the times call for," it added.

Ocampo, an economics professor at Columbia University in New York who has written extensively on growth and development issues, is being endorsed by a global cross-section of economists.

The favored US candidate for the post, Kim, is supported by Canada, Japan and South Korea, where he was born.