

## 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

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.

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

Syrian troops yesterday launched fresh assaults on rebels, activists said, as an envoy of UN mediator Kofi Annan arrived in Damascus to discuss implementing a ceasefire plan.

Activists says several towns, including Homs, Deraa and the Douma suburb of Damascus, have been shelled.

There are also reports of a steep rise in refugees crossing into Turkey.

The UN Security Council has urged Syria to carry out the plan "urgently and visibly", with a ceasefire by 10 April.

It calls on Damascus to pull back its troops and heavy weapons from city centres by that date, and for all parties including the opposition to cease armed violence within 48 hours of this pull-back.

A spokesman for Annan said Syria had already reported some troop withdrawals. The UN expects a full truce by

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.

Foreign media face severe restrictions on reporting in Syria, and it is hard to verify the claims of either side.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights group has reported fresh clashes in the southern village of Kfar Shams and Douma in Damascus, where it said columns of smoke could be seen rising from several buildings.

One activist in Douma, Mohammed Saeed, reported that soldiers were using detainees as human shields.

The opposition also said security forces were trying to storm two villages in northern Aleppo province, close to the Turkish border.

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

The human rights group Amnesty International said it had counted 23 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

India's army chief Gen VK Singh yesterday dismissed as "absolutely stupid" a report that two key army units were moved towards Delhi in January without the government being informed.

"Some people are trying to throw muck at the government and the army. Such people need to be taken to task," Gen Singh said on Thursday from Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, where he is attending a seminar.

On Wednesday, the Indian Express reported that the unexpected movement "had spooked the government".

PM Manmohan Singh has said the report is "alarmist".

The report comes at a time when the government and the army have been involved in a series of disputes.

On Wednesday, the government had rejected the report, saying that the army movements towards the Indian capital were



Gen VK Singh

ment, 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.

"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 govern-

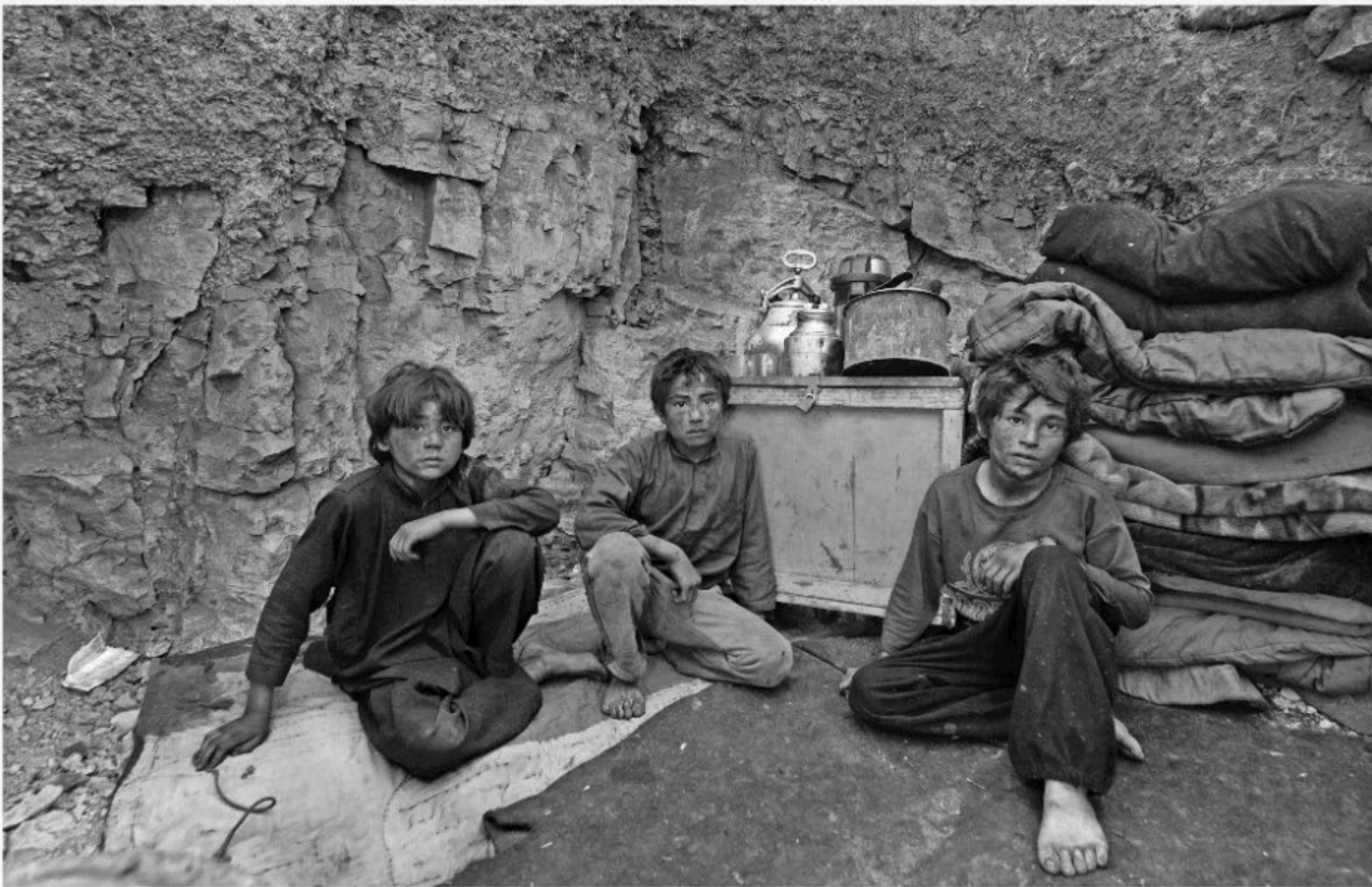


PHOTO: AFP

**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.**

## 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 Kuwaiti 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 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 to the

### 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 metres 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

## 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.

## 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 Toure 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 (MNL) 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, coup leader 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.

## 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.

## Fight for WB job hot up Ex-managers back Nigerian for president

AFP, Washington

A group of former World Bank officials on Wednesday endorsed Africa's candidate to lead the Bank, Nigerian Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.

In an open letter, 39 former managers and economists called on the Bank's executive board to make their decision on merit, when the board considers more than one candidate for the job for the first time.

"We believe that Mrs Okonjo-Iweala has outstanding qualifications across the full range of relevant criteria," they said.

Okonjo-Iweala, a former World Bank managing director, and Jose Antonio Ocampo, a former finance minister of Colombia, are competing with the US nominee Jim Yong Kim, a public health expert and president of Dartmouth College.

Under a tacit agreement, the US picks the World Bank president, always an American, and Europe puts a European at the helm of



Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala

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.