

Myanmar president meets ethnic rebels

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's president held his first meeting with Karen rebels yesterday, officials said, as the government intensifies efforts to bolster peace with the country's oldest insurgent group.

The meeting is the latest sign that Myanmar is keen to cement a ceasefire in the war-torn eastern state, amid pressure from the international community to end ethnic conflict as it considers lifting sanctions to reward recent reforms. Delegates from the Karen National Union (KNU) met President Thein Sein in the capital Naypyidaw, according to unnamed officials, following negotiations with ministers in Yangon on Friday.

"It was the first meeting between the president and the KNU leaders," an official with links to the peace talks told AFP.

The official said six delegates -- including members of the armed wing of the group -- were taken "by special flight" for the landmark meeting, which lasted about 90 minutes.

The KNU members have since returned to



Thein Sein

Yangon and are due to meet opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi today, a week after she swept to victory in historic by-elections with her party -- seen as the culmination of burgeoning reforms by the government. Those changes, brought about since direct military rule ended last year, also saw the regime sign January's ceasefire with the KNU, whose armed wing has been battling the government since 1949.

Myanmar has also inked a number of similar deals with other rebels.

Myanmar has been gripped by civil war in parts of the country since independence from colonial rule in 1948 and the military used the conflict to justify an iron-fisted dictatorship that lasted for nearly half a century.

A commitment to end ethnic conflict across Myanmar was included in the 13-point peace plan negotiated by the group and government officials on Friday as part of efforts to find a political settlement to the fighting.



Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi walks out of her National League for Democracy (NLD) headquarters after attending a meeting of the NLD campaign committee with newly-elected NLD candidates in the April 1 by-elections in Yangon yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

OVER ITALIAN HOSTAGE Maoists warn of 'extreme steps'

AFP, Bhubaneswar

Maoist rebels holding an Italian tour guide hostage in India have threatened "extreme steps" unless their demand for the release of their jailed comrades is met by Tuesday.

The rebels in the eastern state of Orissa did not specify in a tape recording sent to media late on Friday what they might do, but in the past Maoists have mutilated and killed their captives.

It is however the first time that the rebels have targeted foreigners.

"We want a clear-cut written commitment from the government concerning our demands. We won't release the Italian national until then," rebel leader Sabyasachi Panda said in the audio message received by AFP.

NEWS IN brief

Key Chinese dissident dies in US

AFP, Washington

Chinese dissident Fang Lizhi, a key figure in the pro-democracy movement behind the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, has died in the United States, fellow dissident Wang Dan said yesterday.

Fang, an internationally renowned professor of astrophysics, was granted refuge at the US embassy in Beijing for one year following the protests and was forced into exile in 1990.

He was dismissed from his job as vice-president of the University of Science and Technology of China because of his fight for democracy and human rights and for publicly supporting the Tiananmen protests.

Wang wrote that Fang, who was 76, "had inspired the '89 generation and awoken in the people their yearning for human rights and democracy."

Hamas executes 3 in Gaza

REUTERS, Gaza

Islamist group Hamas executed three men yesterday, hanging two convicted murderers and a Gazan found guilty of collaborating with Israel, the Hamas-run ministry of interior said.

It did not name the men and gave few details of the allegations against them, but said one of trio was convicted of kidnapping a boy, raping him and then killing him.

It denounced the man who helped Israel as a "traitor". The ministry said in a statement the families of the murder victims had refused to offer an amnesty to the killers.

Since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, at least 11 prisoners have been executed and more than 30 death sentences have been handed down by the courts, including to numerous people charged with helping the Israeli security forces.

Egypt's former VP aims to run for president

BBC ONLINE

Egypt's former vice-president, Omar Suleiman, on Friday expressed his intention to be a candidate in Egypt's presidential elections next month.

He had previously ruled himself out of the race, but changed his mind after demonstrators urged him to run.

Suleiman served as Hosni Mubarak's vice-president before Mubarak was ousted last year.

Salafist candidate Hazem Abu Ismail, and Khairat al-Shater from the Muslim Brotherhood, are also in the race.

In a statement to supporters, Suleiman said he would run if he could get the 30,000 signatures needed by yesterday.

Students rough up

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9:00am. At one stage, the students physically assaulted the doctor and dragged him out of the ward.

Informed, DMCH Director Brig Gen Md Mostafizur Rahman and DMC Principal Prof Deen Mohammad rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control.

Later, they sat with the students and the doctor in the director's office. There, both parties agreed to patch things up, hospital sources said.

Speaking to The Daily Star in return for anonymity, a doctor of ward-112 said that a student named Jewel led the attack. Earlier on Wednesday night, he brought his uncle to the hospital. The next morning, he had a heated argument with two duty doctors over the way his uncle was being treated.

Contacted, Jewel said he

had requested Dr Monwar to take care of his uncle properly, introducing himself as a student of the medical college. But, he claimed, Monwar showed no interest and instead had misbehaved with him and his uncle.

"I didn't argue with him as my relative was admitted there," said Jewel who would not disclose his full name.

"We were compelled to transfer our patient to a private hospital due to his misbehaviour," he added.

Jewel claimed that he and some other students had gone to the ward yesterday morning to ask the doctor why he had misbehaved with Jewel Thursday morning. They got locked in an argument and eventually came to blows.

The hospital director told reporters that it was a misunderstanding and that both groups had agreed to bury the hatchet.

Fire breaks out at Assam refinery Ulfa claims responsibility

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

A major fire broke out at Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL) in northeastern Indian state of Assam yesterday and insurgent outfit Ulfa claimed responsibility for triggering a blast which led to the blaze.

There was, however, no casualty in the incident. A loud sound of explosion was heard from the hydrogen cracker plant area of the refinery in Golaghat district at around 6:35pm and a fire broke out which could be seen from a distance of 15 to 20 kms in the district.

In an email to Press Trust of India news agency, Ulfa's central publicity committee member Joy Asom claimed the outfit had carried out the blast with a 'Magnetic Time Device' on the occasion of its Raising Day today as part of its "continuous armed struggle".

Senior police officials, however, said it was "highly unlikely that it was an act of sabotage" as the fire broke out "in the middle of the plant area and was probably due to a technical fault though the exact cause of the fire is yet to be ascertained".

Ulfa further claimed it had used the same device earlier in two other refineries in Assam last year but these claims, too, were refuted by both police and refinery authorities with inquiries revealing that in both cases the fire was caused due to technical defects.

A senior NRL official told PTI that there was no casualty or injury as the plant was automated and there was minimum deployment of human resources in the area.

No caretaker govt

FROM PAGE 1

were held in the last three years under the present government. Nobody can say there was any [troubling] incident... people cast their votes without any hindrance. Such elections were never held in the country," she said.

"We've ensured people's voting rights in the last three years, people now can cast their votes in favour of the candidates of their choice," said Hasina, also the president of the ruling Awami League.

She was addressing a view exchange meeting with the party's grassroots-level leaders from Lalmonirhat district at her official residence Gono Bhaban.

About opposition leader Khaleda Zia's demand for caretaker government, Hasina said, "She (Khaleda) has now gone crazy for the caretaker government system though once she had said that only mad and children could be neutral."

In this connection, the premier recalled the "horrible" two years of the last caretaker government regime where "everyone was tortured".

"With her (Khaleda), some high-profile people are crying for the caretaker government. These people never get votes in elections and can't give their parties any footing. Now they're talking too much. Can the opposition leader give any instance of holding elections during her tenure without rigging?" Hasina questioned.

"Can you (Khaleda) tell me about one election during your time that was held without rigging? But, we held numerous elections without any unwanted incidents," she said.

Regarding the Teesta water-sharing issue, Hasina said the government would surely ink a deal with India in

this regard.

She said the government has told the Indian government to include Bangladeshi representatives in the feasibility study group to be sure the construction of Tipaimukh dam would not harm Bangladesh.

"It's our responsibility to take care of the country's interests. We'll also be careful that the Tipaimukh dam is not affecting Bangladesh. We'll do that without any hesitation," she asserted.

Talking about the relations with neighbouring India, Hasina said that her government after assuming office managed the Indian government to open the Tin Bigha Corridor for round-the-clock movement of the residents of Angarpota and Dahagram enclaves.

She said the government is working to improve the socio-economic condition of the people of this region through maintaining good relations with the neighbours.

Hasina went on: "The government has also completed the border demarcation process with India and has been able to reclaim additional 17,000 acres of land."

About bilateral trade with India, the prime minister said the Indian government has allowed 46 items to enter its market from Bangladesh without duty.

Turning to BNP's rule, she said, "They (BNP) never worked for resolving any problem as they were engaged in killing and corruption."

On the trial of war criminals, she said this trial must be held in this country, no matter the opposition leader likes it or not. "We've started the trial and it'll be completed."

Central and grassroots-level leaders from Lalmonirhat were present at the meeting.

Go for proper

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In the keynote speech, Rear Admiral (ret'd) Mohammad Khurshed Alam said Bangladesh needs to create awareness about maritime management among people.

"We need a policy not just to ensure security and explore resources but to take decisions during disasters, accidents and salvage operations in the sea."

He said the policy should give emphasis on improvement of navigation of river routes.

"We can carry containers from Dhaka to our Chittagong and Mongla ports at a much cheaper rate through river routes."

Formulation of a proper maritime policy and its implementation would help achieve that, Khurshed said.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith said Bangladesh needs to make the best use of its sea resources.

"It is not possible for us to explore seabed resources at this moment, as we lack the capacity to do that," he said.

He said the government would continue to provide financial support to the

maritime sector.

Navy Chief Rear Admiral Zahir Uddin said the people are "politically sea blind", as no governments from 1991 to 2008 gave importance to the Navy.

"The budget for the Navy was always much less than the other two forces."

However, the present government has been giving emphasis on the Navy, he said. The Navy chief urged the government to purchase an Oceanographic Survey and Research vessel for \$100 million to increase its capacity for sea research.

Maj Gen (ret'd) AMSA Amin said Bangladesh needs to build awareness among its people about the country's maritime boundary.

Bangladesh lags far behind other South Asian countries such as India and Pakistan in the maritime sector, he said.

The speakers also urged the government to increase the capacity of Bangladesh Shipping Council. The government agency that started its journey with 25 ships after the independence now has only eight ships.

Zardari to arrive India today

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari arrives here today on a day-long visit to India when he will hold a one-on-one meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh before flying to Ajmer to pay obeisance at the shrine of Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti.

No aides will be present from either side at the meeting between Zardari and Singh to be held at the prime minister's official Race Course Road residence here.

The meeting will be followed by a lunch Singh hosts for Zardari which will be attended by select guests on both sides.

During his stay India, Zardari will be accompanied by his 23-year-old son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Interior Minister Rehman Malik, foreign secretary and senior officials and the Pakistani media.

"Though there is no structured agenda but the leaders are expected to focus on bilateral issues," Indian officials said yesterday.

"...all bilateral issues are likely to be discussed..." Indian External Affairs Minister SM Krishna has said.

Ahead of the visit, the two countries have sparred over Saeed with Islamabad maintaining that they have not received any "concrete" proof against Saeed, founder of Jamat-ud-Dawa, and New Delhi asserting that no amount of denial by them can exonerate him.

Zardari had last met Singh on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Russia in 2009.



Asif Ali Zardari

SANDEE



Call for Research Concept notes

Economics of Natural Resource Use and Environmental Change

Deadline 27th May 2012

The South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics (SANDEE) is a regional network that provides research support to South Asian researchers and institutions interested in the inter-connection among development, natural resource use and the environment. SANDEE is currently inviting research concept notes on the Economics of Natural Resource Use and Environmental Change in South Asia. Concept notes, if accepted, will lead to an invitation to submit a full research proposal.

SANDEE requests research concept notes in three prioritized areas:

Ecosystems Management: Ecosystems provide a variety of provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural services that are being lost at an accelerating rate. Research on ecosystems management will focus on: a) understanding the implications of ecosystem changes for economic and social systems; b) identifying trade-offs, i.e. the costs and benefits to different stakeholders (particularly the poor), from conserving ecosystems services; and c) examining different institutional arrangements to manage ecosystem services.

Economics of Climate Change: With climate change, South Asia is expected to get warmer and witness more extreme events. SANDEE's climate portfolio will support research on: a) valuation of the impacts of climate change; b) evaluation of adaptation and mitigation strategies, particularly those that offer local co-benefits and c) examination of institutions and policies that need to be in place for low carbon growth and long-term adjustment to climate change.

Policies and Instruments for Greener Growth: Governments and NGOs in South Asia put forward a variety of policies and regulations to manage local to global environmental problems. In order to ensure that these strategies are effective, this thematic area will emphasize: a) program evaluation of the impacts of environmental policies, regulations and programs; and, b) assessment of the economic incentives associated with different regulatory and market mechanisms and their contribution to policy compliance.

While SANDEE's focus is on environmental management, proposals have to include a strong economics component. Multi-disciplinary projects with a robust economic focus are encouraged. Institutional affiliation is required for receiving support. Concept notes will be evaluated on their academic merit and policy significance.

SANDEE will collect proposals throughout the year. However, to be considered for our next research competition, please send concept notes by May 27th, 2012. The average grant size in recent years has been 20,000 USD for one to two year projects. Larger grants will be considered if a multidisciplinary team of natural and social scientists are involved and there is a clear identification of roles and tasks. Please upload concept notes on SANDEE's website at www.sandeeonline.org. For any additional queries, please contact us at research@sandeeonline.org.