

Obama takes oath for 2nd term

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama took the oath of office yesterday to begin a second term threatened by strife at home and abroad and amid inaugural rituals lacking the hope and historic promise of 2009.

Obama, with a slight smile, took the oath at an intimate, private ceremony in the Blue Room of the White House lasting less than a minute, raising his right arm and placing his left hand on a family Bible.

The president solemnly swore to "faithfully execute the office of President of the United States" and to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, so help me God."

Chief Justice Roberts, who stumbled when swearing in Obama to open his first term in 2009, read each line of the oath out loud, before the president repeated words first intoned by George Washington, 224 years ago.

After the ceremony, Obama hugged his wife, and children Malia, 14 and Sasha, 11 before quipping: "I did it" to his youngest daughter.

Obama will take the oath of office for a second time at a time-honored outdoor public ceremony at the US Capitol on Monday.

Vice President Joe Biden was sworn in before his boss at an early morning ceremony at his official residence, before the two laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery.

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor -- picked by Obama to be the first Hispanic judge to sit on the top court in his first term -- made her own slice of history by leading Biden as he took the oath.

Obama, 51, will embark on a second term at



US President Barack Obama takes the oath of office from US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts as first lady Michelle Obama holds the bible in the Blue Room of the White House yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

a time of deep partisan division in Washington, and will face foreign crises testing his legacy, including Iran's nuclear program and resurgent Islamist militancy in North Africa.

Senior aide David Plouffe said the president would use his second inaugural address before an expected 500,000 plus crowd -- much smaller than in 2009 -- to stress the national truths Americans share.

Obama's second inauguration, which comes courtesy of an election win over Republican Mitt Romney in November, lacks the historical resonance of January 20, 2009,

when he was sworn in as the first black American president.

Since then, a graying Obama has struggled to accelerate a weak economic recovery, failed to meet hugely elevated expectations for his presidency and waged a political war of attrition with Republicans.

The second term "curse" often strikes: Richard Nixon resigned, Bill Clinton was impeached, George W. Bush's image was shattered by Iraq and Hurricane Katrina and Ronald Reagan's legacy was marred by the Iran-Contra scandal.

Rahul Gandhi promises to 'transform' India

AFP, Jaipur

Rahul Gandhi, often tagged India's "prime minister-in-waiting", said he would "transform" the country after he was promoted to second-in-command of the ruling Congress party.

Members of the Congress Working Committee earlier approved a motion making Rahul -- the son, grandson and great-grandson of Indian prime ministers -- second in the party's hierarchy after his mother, party president Sonia Gandhi.

"I have great experience," the 42-year-old scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty said in the northern Indian city of Jaipur, at a party meeting held to prepare for general elections due in 2014.

"Together we will transform the country," he said in his speech accepting the post of Congress vice president, according

to the Press Trust of India news agency.

"It is a great party," he said.

He yesterday delivered a powerful call for change to meet the aspirations of the nation's "young and impatient" population.

"We have to rethink and transform our system and the country," Gandhi, 42, told party members as Congress ended a three-day brainstorming session in the northwestern city of Jaipur ahead of 2014 elections.

Congress must listen to the voice of a "young and impatient" India to ensure they do not feel alienated from the political system, he said.

The move could propel the long-anticipated accession to power of Rahul Gandhi, who has long been the party's unofficial candidate to succeed Manmohan Singh, 80, as prime minister of the Congress-led national government.



KACHIN CEASEFIRE

Govt accused of flouting truce

AFP, Yangon

Kachin ethnic minority rebels in war-torn northern Myanmar accused the military of launching a fresh attack yesterday, just days after a ceasefire pledge by the country's reformist government.

The clashes came despite a new offer by President Thein Sein of peace talks to end Myanmar's last active civil war.

A source said the military was battling to retake control of a strategically important hilltop just several kilometres away from the KIA headquarters in Laiza.

App is there

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It's common to see children as young as eight or nine hard at work.

And it's no different in Colombia, where an estimated 1.5 million children between the ages of five and 17 work in such situations for more than 15 hours a week. Nearly nine percent of kids aged five to 14 work, a 2011 government census found. Though the government was able to document the scope of child labour in Colombia, finding lasting solutions to end the practice, which can keep kids out of school and place them in dangerous work environments, has proved challenging around the globe.

But in Colombia, a new smart phone crowd sourcing application is helping authorities and researchers tackle the problem. Whenever users see a child working they can take a picture with their phone and log the location, which the app sends to the country's child welfare agency.

The app, available for iPhone, Android, and BlackBerry phones, is called "Yo digo: Aquí Estoy" (I say: I'm here), and it also goes by the name KidRescue.

"It's a tool that puts the power to report child labour in the palm of anyone's hands," says Mauricio García, of the Colombian Family Welfare

Institute (ICBF), which receives the information, including photos, global positioning system coordinates, and other details, sent by users.

Since ICBF started using the information gathered by the app last February, about 3,800 reports have been filed, and not all of them from cell phone users in Colombia.

"We've gotten reports from Asia and Africa, because anyone can download the app from their phone's app store," says Claudia Aparicio, head of Fundación Telefónica in Colombia, the organisation that spearheaded the crowd sourcing project as part of a broader campaign to fight child labour in Latin America.

The information is used principally to identify regions or parts of towns that are problem areas, and the times and periods when child labour is most common.

ICBF takes the detailed information sent by users and sends it to agency social workers and psychologists on the ground who try to verify the information. Once a child labourer is identified, officials verify whether the child is enrolled in school, and may call the parents and children in for counselling.

Still, the app has helped get more than 60 children across the country off the streets and back in school, according to Aparicio. She says the Colombia experience is a pilot and eventually the app may be used by welfare agencies around the globe to help the estimated 150 million child workers worldwide reclaim their childhood.

Father sues

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Mymensingh. Dulal Mia, father of the victim, filed the murder case with Mymensingh Kotwali Police Station, said Officer-in-Charge Abu Md Fazlul Karim. The accused include BAU BCL president Shamsuddin Al Azad and general secretary Rafiqzaman Emon.

Three BCL activists and students of the fisheries

department of BAU -- Joyatish Banik, Imran Sarker and Tarek Aziz -- and an outsider Rafiqul Islam, who had been picked up by police overnight were shown arrested in the case, the OC said.

Besides, the BAU authorities served show-cause notices to 40 BCL activists, asking them to explain in seven days their role in the gun violence.

ALGERIA HOSTAGE CRISIS

More deaths feared after 25 hostage bodies found

AFP, In Amenas

The death toll of foreign and Algerian workers taken hostage during a siege at a desert gas facility may rise from 25, an Algerian minister warned yesterday.

Algerian forces found the bodies of 25 hostages yesterday and witnesses said nine Japanese captives had been executed.

Communications Minister Mohamed Said earlier told a radio station: "I fear that it (the toll) may be revised upward".

It was not immediately clear if the 23 were included in Sunday's 25 toll.

Governments scrambled to track down their missing citizens as more details emerged of the deadly showdown after Islamists of the "Signatories in Blood" group raided the plant, demanding an end to French military intervention in Mali.

Nine Japanese were killed in the 4-day hostage crisis, an Algerian source told AFP.

Norway's Statoil said the situation remains "unresolved" for five of its employees.

A company statement said searches were underway inside the In Amenas complex, in the surrounding desert area, hospitals, In Amenas itself "and other villages and towns where it is possible that people could have been transported."

Thirty-two kidnappers were also killed

in the 72-hour stand-off, and the army freed 685 Algerian workers and 107 foreigners, said Algeria's interior ministry.

The gunmen, whose leader is Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former al-Qaeda commander, first killed a Briton and an Algerian on a bus before taking hundreds hostage at the plant.

Most hostages were freed on Thursday when Algerian forces launched a first res-



Mokhtar Belmokhtar is the mastermind behind the hostage crisis.

cue operation which was initially widely condemned as hasty by the West, where leaders later had a change of heart, focusing their criticism on the jihadists.

Monitoring group IntelCenter said the hostage-taking was the largest since the 2008 Mumbai attack, and the biggest by jihadists since hundreds were killed in a Moscow theatre in 2002 and at a school in the Russian town of Beslan in 2004.

Country for sale! | Liberia is selling itself slice by slice

AFP, Monrovia

Liberia is selling itself slice by slice nine years after a terrible civil conflict finally came to an end, offering valuable resources to the highest bidder even though that could kindle tension among a population that often feels it is being sold out.

The chairman of the Liberia Land Commission, Othello Brandy, says that 57.5 percent of the nation's territory has been allotted via concessions, for a total of 5.6 million hectares (13.8 million acres), of which a little more than one million hectares represented agricultural land.

Alfred Brownell, a lawyer who founded the non-governmental organisation Green Advocates estimates that at least 120 foreign companies have signed concessions contracts in Liberia, a country the size of Portugal that was colonised by freed black slaves from the United States.

"Over the last six years it has been an avalanche," Brownell said, before explaining that Liberia, a western Africa country that suffered 15 years of war from 1989 to 2003, lacked the expertise to develop by itself.



"There is no capacity of absorption in Liberia, no skills, no trained people," Brownell noted, "we will depend on foreign experts."

The lawyer defends Liberian communities that are affected by palm oil plantations and warns: "If we get back to war, it will be on land."

The United Nations warned in early December of the potential for land conflicts.

But Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, annulled many controversial deals but has also signed new ones covering agricultural, forestry, mineral and offshore oil resources.

An early example of a Liberian concession was one signed in 1926 with US tyre maker Firestone which acquired the rights to a half million hectares near Monrovia, but ended up producing "not even a rubber band," according to Brownell.

In southern Liberia, 220,000 hectares have been ceded for 93 years to the Indonesian group Golden Veroleum Liberia (GVL) to produce palm oil, and on which around 200 families now live.

Grabbing with a difference

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tures one after another. To accommodate these structures the organisations also chopped down an unspecified number of trees.

It all started in 2005 with an apparently humble initiative of the Gulshan Society to develop the park into a decent public place from its neglected past.

The Gulshan Society in 2005 signed a five-year renewable agreement with Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk), the park's original owner, and took over its management. But one of the first things the society did after taking over the managerial role was to build a concrete bungalow by the lake in the name of having its own office.

"The precedence of building was started by the very people who should have been its caretakers,

entrusted for proper landscaping and keeping it clean," said a resident and regular user of the park requesting not to be named.

Naser Khan, chairman of Paribesh Banchao Andolan, said he had visited the park.

"The way every organisation is building concrete structures in a public park is unacceptable," Naser Khan said, adding, "It is also unacceptable that people should make their individual living room on public space."

Despite this undue concrete intervention, the Gulshan Society has nonetheless brought back some life to this surviving public space. Wide and decent walkways were laid, lawns cleaned and the near-dead lake was excavated. The officials of the Gulshan Society told The Daily Star that they were helpless

before the people who built the structures.

They said they had received a notice from Rajuk, in which they were asked to demolish all illegal structures on the park. The president of Gulshan Society, Rafiq Ahmed Siddique, said Rajuk should demolish the structures including the one that houses their own office.

The society's vice-president, Rahmat Ullah, said their office structure was built as a work shed for maintenance of the park. "The aggression of all the groups coming to build structures could not be stopped despite our efforts," he added.

Residents in this posh area said when some people protested against the construction, they were humiliated in public.

The influential groups of

people then came in phases. The Joggers' Club was followed by The Joggers' Society. Then came The Runners' Club followed by The Runners' Society. There is the Lake Club. Now almost each one of these organisations has their own concrete structure on the park and more is sure to follow.

The Gulshan Society officials said recently they were taken aback when a group of people entered the park with a dozen plastic chairs and a table and earmarked a strip of large green space for their own "sitting arrangement".

"Every structure you see here started with groups of people coming here with chairs and tables and then within a month or two they built something," said a young employee of the Gulshan Society. "We had a

village, died of a bullet injury he sustained during a clash between BCL factions.

The central committee of BCL, student body associated with the ruling Awami League, in its immediate response dissolved the BAU unit.

Two committees have been formed to investigate Saturday's violence and subsequent attack on university dormitories by angry

people of nearby villages over the boy's death.

Meanwhile, Rabbi was laid to rest at his family graveyard following a namaz-e-janaza after Asr prayers.

Earlier in the day, the Samajtantrik Chhatra Front and the Bangladesh Chhatra Union formed human chains in front of Mymensingh Press Club, protesting the boy's death.

Society that built the largest structure spending a substantial amount of money, claimed that they were involved with the park since 2002, much earlier than others. "We have rid the park of all the nuisance that prevailed here. "Can you show me anything in our structure that looks ugly?" he asked.

Rajuk Chairman Nurul Huda said nobody has the right to build anything on a public park without prior approval of the planners. "This is a ploy to grab the park," he added.

"These are all illegally built structures which we will demolish very soon," Nurul Huda said. "We entrusted the Gulshan Society because we lacked manpower to maintain the public park and these structures are a breach of our agreement," he added.