

Israel must declare nuke bomb: Rohani

AFP, United Nations

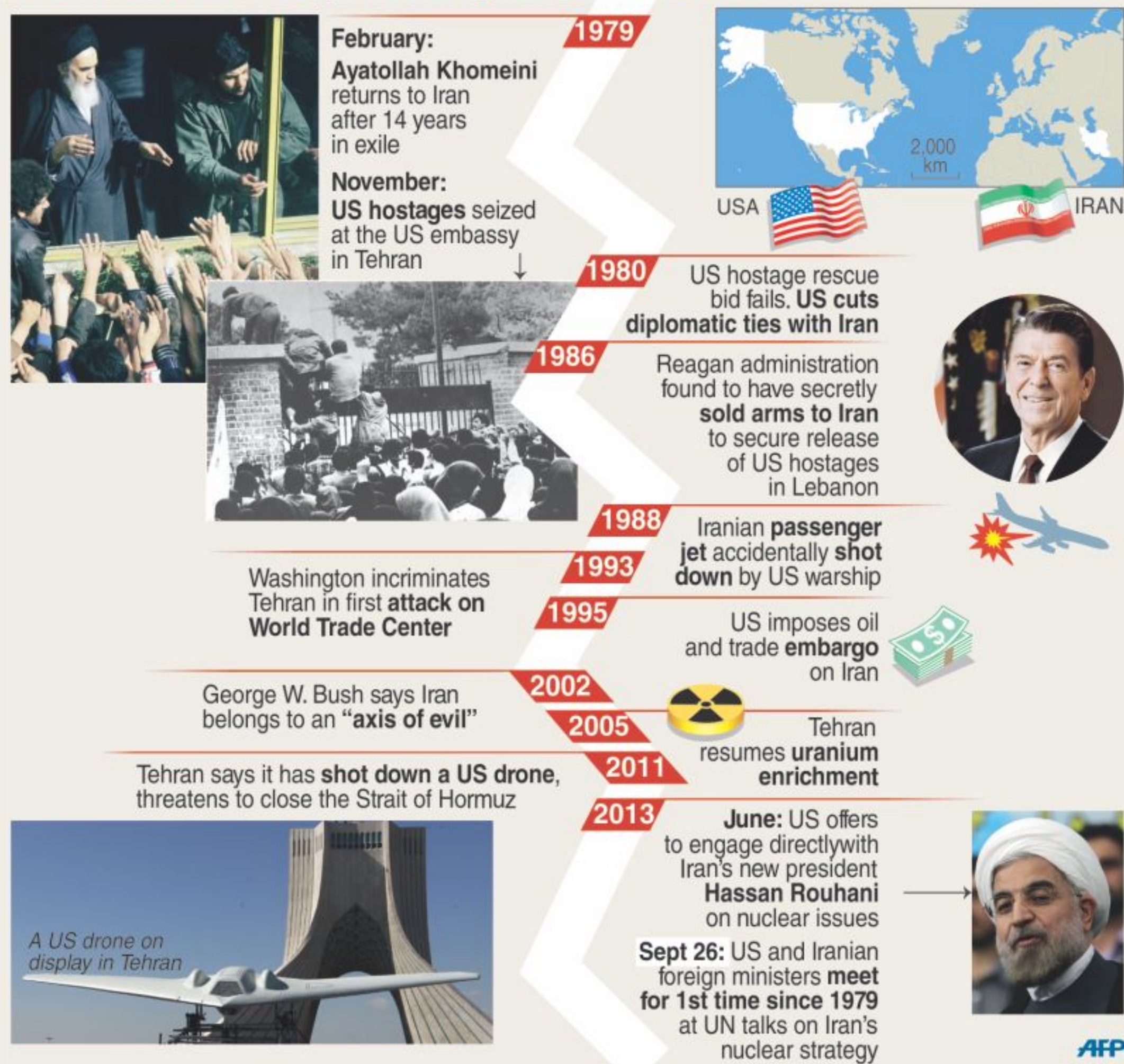
Iranian leader Hassan Rouhani yesterday called on Israel to admit it has a nuclear bomb ahead of a landmark meeting between Iranian and western foreign ministers.

He said Iran's arch-foe Israel should join the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which aims to contain the spread of nuclear weapons. Israel has never declared a nuclear bomb but is widely suspected to have several.

Rohani, speaking as current leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, highlighted the failure of attempts to organize a Middle East nuclear free zone.

"No nation should possess nuclear weapons, since there are no right hands for these wrong weapons," said Rouhani, who also met with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Thursday.

US-Iran: a long history of tensions



US, Iran gear up for historic nuke talks

Rohani, with Khamenei's backing, eyes deal soon

AFP, United Nations

With the eyes of the world upon them, the United States and Iran was set to have one of their highest-level meetings yesterday since the 1979 revolution as their foreign ministers join talks on Tehran's suspect nuclear program.

And while officials are saying that no bilateral talks are planned between US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif, there remains the chance for a quick tete-a-tete in the corridor.

Zarif will be the first Iranian foreign minister to sit down with his counterparts from the five permanent members of the UN Security -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany to discuss Iran's nuclear program.

The Iranian delegation will only join part of the talks being hosted by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton however, and no-one is keen to raise hopes of a breakthrough in the dragging negotiations. Indeed the encounter with European, Russian and Chinese foreign ministers is set to be brief.

But diplomats say yesterday's meeting will give them the first chance to take the measure of the new Iranian leadership which took office in August.

And they insist it will give the Iranians the opportunity to prove there is some substance behind Rohani's charm offensive, and his claims that Iran is only seeking to pursue a peaceful civilian nuclear energy program.

And in an interview with The Washington Post, Rohani said he hoped to reach an agreement on the nuclear program within three months, insisting he had the full backing of the country's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to broker a deal.

"The only way forward is for a timeline to be inserted into the negotiations that's short -- and wrap it up. That is a decision of my government, that short is necessary to settle the nuclear file," he said.

"If it's three months that would be Iran's choice, if it's six months that's still good. It's a question of months not years."

Sudan riots kill 29 in three days

AFP, Khartoum

Fresh rioting erupted in Sudan yesterday as protests sparked by a government decision to scrap fuel subsidies raged into a fourth day and medics reported an overall toll of 29 people killed.

As the protests escalated, the largest since President Omar al-Bashir seized power in 1989, the leader wanted for war crimes and genocide cancelled a planned trip to the UN General Assembly.

Thursday's rioting erupted in the Inqaz district south of Khartoum where some 3,000 people marched on the main road, burned tyres and hurled stones at passing cars, witnesses said.

Police responded with tear gas and rubber bullets, the sources said, but there were no immediate reports of casualties.

Earlier on Thursday, a hospital source in Khartoum's twin city of Omdurman told AFP that "we have received the bodies of 21 people" since the protests first broke out on Monday, adding that all were "civilians".

Another eight people were killed in other regions, witnesses and families said.

The new protests came after anti-riot forces deployed from the early morning at major road intersections in the capital, an AFP correspondent said.

There had been rioting in several Khartoum districts on Wednesday, some near the city centre, and public transport ground to a halt.

The demonstrations continued late into Wednesday night and spread to new neighbourhoods.

Assad vows to respect chemical weapon deal

Russia offers to guard arsenals as UN inches closer to resolution

AFP, Damascus

Syria is committed to a deal to hand over its chemical weapons, President Bashar al-Assad said in an interview, as major powers inched closer to a UN resolution enshrining the agreement.

Meanwhile, Russia yesterday said it was willing to join international efforts to safeguard Syria's chemical weapons during their destruction under an agreement brokered with Washington.

"When the process of eliminating the chemical weapons reaches its active phase, it will be necessary to provide for the safety of the sites where (the weapons) will be destroyed," said Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov.

"The Russian side is ready to help guard these sites" in Syria, Russian news agencies quoted Ryabkov as saying.

The Syrian president, in the interview with Venezuelan television station Telesur broadcast Wednesday, said he saw "no obstacles" to a plan under which Damascus will relinquish its chemical arms.

Assad told Telesur that his government was committed to the Chemical Weapons Convention,

which it signed as part of the US-Russian agreement on the destruction of its chemical arsenal.

Syria agreed to turn over its chemical arsenal under a deal thrashed out following an August 21 sarin attack in the suburbs of Damascus, which killed hundreds of people, preventing a US-led attack.

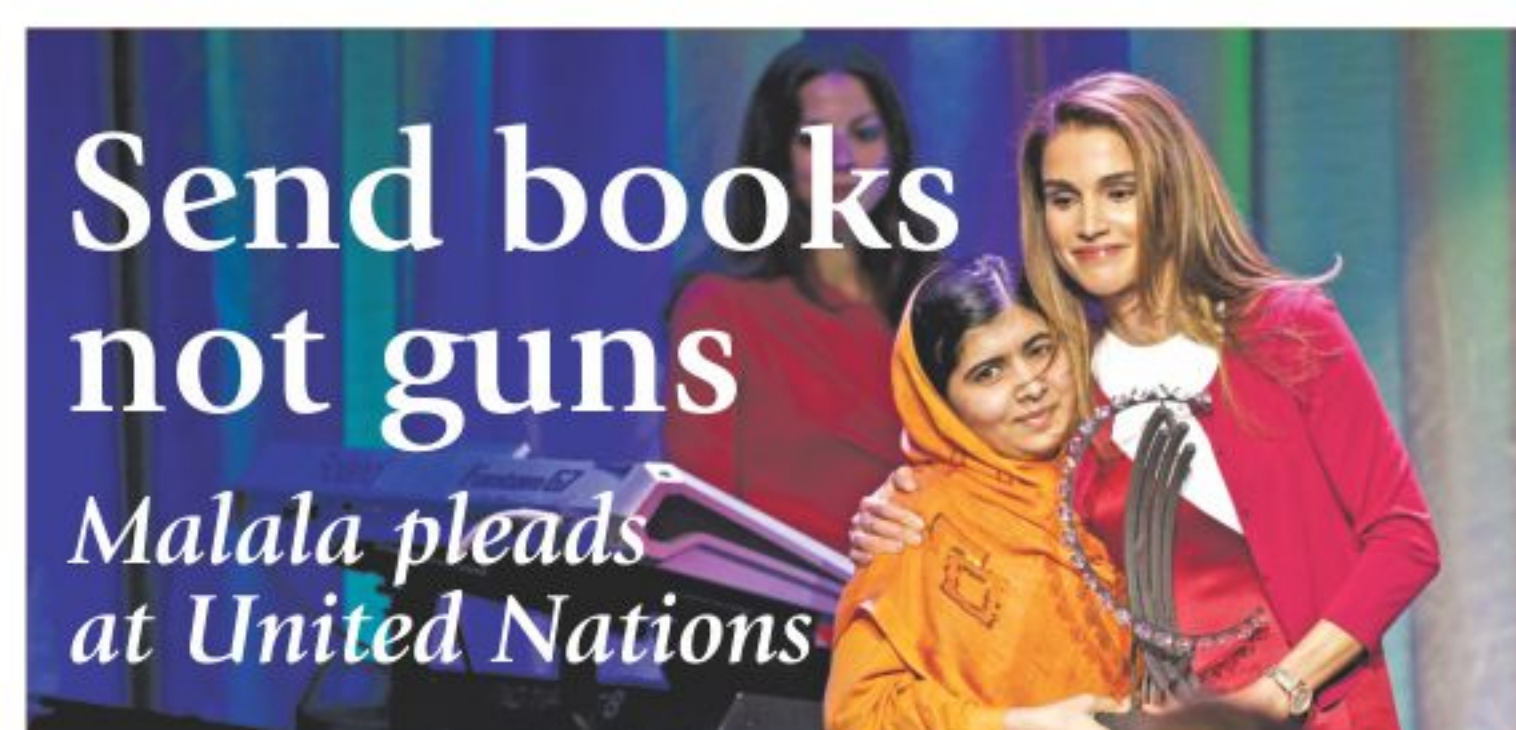
The deal halted talk of a US assault, but Assad said it was "the possibility of aggression is always there".

"This time the pretext is chemical weapons, next time it will be something else," he said.

At the United Nations, meanwhile, the permanent members of the Security Council made progress on a resolution enshrining the chemical weapons deal.

Some western envoys said important progress has been made on the resolution. One said there was agreement on "the main points" of a text which could be put to the 15-member Security Council.

The envoy said it could result in a resolution that allows for a later vote on sanctions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter if Syria fails to honour the Russia-US plan.



AFP, United Nations

With a maturity and poise that belied her tender years, Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani teen shot by the Taliban for championing girls' education stood by world leaders on Wednesday and called for books not guns.

"Instead of sending weapons, instead of sending tanks to Afghanistan and all these countries which are suffering from terrorism, send books," she pleaded.

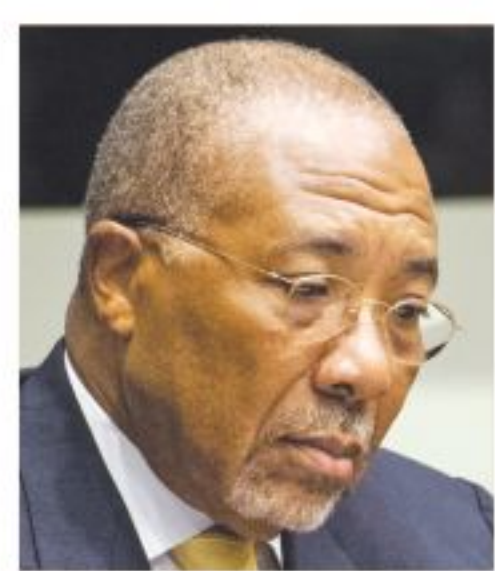
"Instead of sending tanks send pens," she urged, her hair modestly covered by a scarf as she took part in the first anniversary of the Global Education First initiative at the United Nations in New York.

In October last year, Malala was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman as she was on her way to school in her usual bus in an attack that drew worldwide condemnation.

Now she has become a global advocate for the right of all children, and in particular girls, to have a proper education.

"Instead of sending soldiers, send teachers," Malala argued at an event attended by Nobel peace laureate Desmond Tutu, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Croatian premier Ivo Josipovic.

According to the United Nations, some 57 million children around the world of elementary school age are denied an education -- and 52 percent of them are girls.



Court upholds Taylor's 50-year sentence

AFP, Leidschendam

A UN-backed appeals court yesterday upheld Liberian ex-president and warlord Charles Taylor's 50-year sentence for arming rebels during Sierra Leone's brutal 1990s civil war.

"The appeals chamber... affirms the sentence of 50 years in prison and orders that the sentence be imposed immediately,"

judge George King told the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) in The Hague.

The landmark ruling marks the end of the road for the former west African strongman's marathon case spanning seven years.

He will now most likely spend the rest of his life in a foreign prison, possibly in Britain.

His historic sentence on 11 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity was the first handed down by an international court against a former head of state since the Nazi trials at Nuremberg in 1946.

Taylor, 65, was found guilty in 2012 of supporting rebels from neighbouring Sierra Leone who waged a campaign of terror during a civil war that claimed 120,000 lives between 1991 and 2002, in exchange for "blood diamonds" mined by slave labour.

Arrested and transferred to The Hague in mid-2006 Taylor was sentenced in May last year for "some of the most heinous crimes in human history". As Liberia's president from 1997 to 2003, Taylor aided and abetted neighbouring Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels by supplying guns and ammunition during the conflict, known for its mutilations, drugged child soldiers and sex slaves, trial judges found.



Visitors look at an 18-metre tall inflatable duck after its move to Lake Kunming at the historic Summer Palace in Beijing yesterday. The duck designed by Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman is to be displayed at Beijing's Garden Expo Park and the Summer Palace, from September to October as part of a world tour of 13 cities across 10 countries.

PHOTO: AFP

Mandela doing much better

AFP, Johannesburg

Global anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela, who is recovering at home after spending nearly three months in hospital, is said to be doing "much better" and sitting up on his bed, his grandson was quoted as saying yesterday.

Mbuso Mandela told The New Age newspaper that the 95-year-old statesman was "sitting up and looking around" and had spent the Tuesday public holiday surrounded by family.

He stressed that Mandela was "much better" and not completely bed-ridden.

Mandela is receiving intensive care for a respiratory illness at his Johannesburg home where he returned after being discharged on September 1. He had spent 86 days in a Pretoria hospital.

NSA spied on Luther King, Ali: Report

AFP, Washington

The National Security Agency eavesdropped on civil rights icon Martin Luther King and heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali as well as other leading critics of the Vietnam War in a secret program later deemed "disreputable," declassified documents revealed Wednesday.

The six-year spying program, dubbed "Minaret," had been exposed in the 1970s but the targets of the surveillance had been kept secret until now.

The documents showed the NSA tracked King and his colleague Whitney Young, boxing star Ali, journalists from the New York Times and the Washington Post, and two members of Congress, Senator Frank Church of Idaho and Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee.

The declassified NSA historical account of the episode called the spying "disreputable if not outright illegal."

The documents were published after the government panel overseeing classification ruled in favor of researchers at George Washington University who had long sought the release of the secret papers.

The intensity of anti-war dissent at home led President Lyndon Johnson to ask US intelligence agencies in 1967 to find out if some protests were fueled by foreign powers. The NSA worked with other spy agencies to draw up "watch lists" of anti-war critics to tap their overseas phone calls.

The program continued after Richard Nixon entered the White House in 1969, and historians say it reflected a climate of paranoia pervading his presidency.

KENYA MALL ATTACK

Interpol launches global hunt for 'White Widow'

AFP, London

The British woman dubbed the "White Widow" was at the centre of a worldwide hunt yesterday after Interpol issued an international arrest notice in the wake of the Kenya shopping mall attack.

Samantha Lewthwaite, a 29-year-old Muslim convert, was married to Germaine Lindsay, one of four Islamist suicide bombers who attacked the London transport network in July 7, 2005, killing 52 people.

The Interpol red notice, issued at Kenya's request, says the mother-of-three is "wanted by Kenya on charges of being in possession of explosives and confessed to commit a felony dating back to December 2011."

But while it did not specifically mention the bloody four-day mall siege in Nairobi by Somalia's al-Qaeda-linked Al-Shebab move-

ment -- which ended Tuesday -- it follows widespread media speculation over Lewthwaite's possible role in the massacre.

Kenya's foreign minister said a British woman was among the Westgate Mall attackers although President Uhuru Kenyatta later said the reports could not be confirmed.

The notice said Kenyan authorities wanted other member nations to be "aware of this danger posed by this woman, not just across the region but also worldwide."

The Interpol notice requires member states to detain the suspect pending extradition procedures.

The daughter of a British soldier, Samantha Louise Lewthwaite professed herself appalled when her Jamaican-born husband detonated a rucksack full of explosives and blew himself up on a London Underground train at Russell Square station on July 7, 2005, killing 26 people.



How not to love nature: Shove a coal plant

TIME ONLINE

Man-eating tigers have long provided the best defence for the Sundarbans, the planet's largest mangrove forest and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Each year between 20 to 50 people are recorded killed within the reserve's shrinking boundaries, striking fear into would-be poachers and anyone looking to carve out more turf in this small, overpopulated country. These days, however, environmentalists are alarmed by a more insidious threat to the park's future: a massive 1,320-MW coal-fired power plant that's due to be constructed just 14km away, in Rampal.

The government insists that the project, a joint venture with India's state-owned National Thermal Power Corp., is needed to bring affordable electricity to one of the poorest corners of Bangladesh amid rising demand and energy costs. But opponents counter that operating a coal plant so close to an ecologically critical area will devastate waterways and vegetation that support a range of extraordinary wildlife, from river dolphins to the iconic royal Bengal tiger. In a low-lying and already flood-prone country, there are additional fears that without the natural buffer the mangrove offers, people will be even more vulnerable to severe weather.

"No sane person in the world would agree to this project," says Kallol Mustafa, an engineer and member of a newly formed protection committee.

To bolster their case, critics are quick to point to a coal-fired plant of similar size that was constructed in 1979 in Fayette, Texas, with pledges from authorities

that damage would be negligible on the area's agriculture. The authorities were wrong: in 2010, scientists reported that the roughly 30,000 tons of sulfur dioxide emitted by the plant each year was killing vegetation across the state, provoking a public outcry that has since pressured the Texas power authority into taking steps to shut the plant down. The proposed plant at Rampal, by comparison, is projected to discharge some 52,000 tons of sulfur dioxide annually.

Some broader concerns over projected emissions



were acknowledged in a government-sponsored impact assessment published in January. But the report classified the region as "residential and rural" rather than ecologically critical, lowering the bar for emission levels deemed permissible by the environment ministry. Critics say this decision has been compounded by lack of transparency on fundamental questions surrounding the project, such as how waste and processed water would be treated to reduce pollution.

At the same time, there is anger over neighboring India's willingness to help bankroll an environmentally dubious power project in Bangladesh after falling

short at home. In recent years, India, which is home to about a third of the Sundarbans forest, has seen two major coal power plants halted in the states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh because of more strictly enforced legal barriers and large protests. "It is hypocrisy. They were stopped in their own country so they are violating the law in other countries," says Moshahida Sultana Ritu, an economist at the University of Dhaka.

Azizur Rahman, the Rampal project's first director and now a government consultant, dismisses the notion that national laws have been flouted for political reasons. He says oil- and gas-powered electricity is simply too costly, leaving no alternative to coal for future energy security, and insists "there is no [outside] pressure -- the Indian government follows its own guidelines, and we follow ours."

Yet given Bangladesh's lackluster environmental record, there are plenty of skeptics. Designated water sanctuaries are threatened by rampant shipping, and -- according to a recent study by the Dhaka-based Soil Resource Development Institute -- logging, shrimp farming and other forms of human encroachment have shrunk the forest by nearly 50,000 hectares over the past decade.

This week, protesters are making a 400-km march from Dhaka to Rampal in a bid to draw greater attention to what's at stake. Abdullah Abu Diyan, a conservationist and veteran guide, says: "It's the only patch of forest left in Bangladesh that you can truly call a forest," he says. "If it goes, we will have generation after generation that will not care after the environment because you only care about things that you can touch, feel and love."