

Malaysia's Anwar confident opposition will survive



ANWAR

KUALA LUMPUR (AFP) — Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, who faces trial this month on corruption charges, said his Pakatan Rakyat alliance would survive even if he is convicted and jailed.

Anwar has rejected the allegations leveled by a 23-year-old former aide as a conspiracy to derail his plan to topple the government.

He was found guilty of separate corruption charges a decade ago in a case widely seen as politically motivated. In 2004 the corruption conviction was overturned, allowing Anwar to go free after six years in jail.

"There is no question of the Pakatan Rakyat continuing, surviving. It will continue to defend the rights of the people and challenge the government, gaining strength from any conviction made against me," Anwar told AFP.

"In fact I think a conviction against me will enrage a lot of people," he said after a political rally late Tuesday.

"I am ready for all eventualities and prepared to face attacks -- expect the best and prepare for the worst."

Anwar addressed a crowd of more than 2,000 supporters in a stadium outside the capital in a three-hour rally organized by his opposition alliance to show their solidarity for him.

Anwar's Keadilan party has joined forces with the conservative Islamic party PAS and the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party in an alliance which gained unprecedented ground against the ruling coalition in national polls a year ago.

Khmer Rouge jail survivor weeps over lost wife

PHNOM PENH (AFP) — A distraught survivor of the Khmer Rouge's main prison told Cambodia's war crimes court Wednesday how he lost his wife and torturers beat him bloody in an attempt to make him confess to being a CIA spy.

Bou Meng, 68, one of only a handful of people to live through the communist regime's Tuol Sleng jail, stopped several times to compose himself as he told the UN-backed tribunal that blood from his many lashes flowed to the floor.

"(My torturer) asked me to count the lashes. And when I got to 10 lashes he said, 'How can you get to 10 lashes? You've only had one lash,'" Bou Meng said, taking out a handkerchief to wipe his eyes.

Bou Meng, who escaped death when put to work painting Khmer Rouge propaganda, is the third survivor to testify at the trial of Tuol Sleng chief Duch, accused of overseeing the torture and extermination of 15,000 people.

"Everytime they beat me up, they asked me questions. When did I join the CIA and who introduced me to the CIA network? ... I did not know what a CIA agent or network was, so how could I respond?" he added.

Mumbai gets India's first regional base for anti-terror troops

MUMBAI (AFP) — India's first regional unit for specialist anti-terror troops has opened in Mumbai, fulfilling a government pledge after criticisms of the military's slow response to last year's attacks on the city.

The hub for some 250 National Security Guard (NSG) commandos, opened by Home Minister P. Chidambaram on Tuesday evening, is the first of four new centers across the country.

The others in Kolkata, eastern India, and the southern cities of Chennai and Hyderabad open on Wednesday.

Security officials say the new base -- temporarily housed near Mumbai's international airport until a permanent facility nearby is operational next year -- will reduce incident response times drastically.

But security analysts said India still has a long way to go to improve its counter-terrorism capabilities, despite an increase in defense spending since last year.

Ajai Sahni, editor of the South Asian Intelligence Review and executive director of the Institute for Conflict Management in New Delhi, described the regional NSG units as a "token" response.

"Any terrorist attack realizes its potential within the first few minutes," he told AFP.



Several months after Mumbai tragedy in which many lost their lives, the Indian government has formed new anti-terror troops to cope with terrorism in this country.

"If you have a unit in north Mumbai and south Mumbai is attacked, in the 45 minutes to two hours it takes to get there, the terrorists have already done their worst."

Better training and equipment for India's overstretched and underfunded local police to help them contain the situation as the first line of defense would be a more viable

option, he added. "We're still committed to the 'Rambo' model. We think a handful of strong, well-trained men can take on the world. That might happen in films but it's nonsense in reality," he added.

Nicknamed the "Black Cats", the NSG is modeled on the British Army's elite Special Air Service (SAS) and the GSG-9, the special-

ist operations unit of the German police.

The Indian government recommended setting up regional units after the November 26-29 Mumbai attacks, which saw 10 Islamist extremist gunmen kill 166 people and injure more than 300 others in a 60-hour killing spree.

NSG troops only arrived in India's financial capital on the morn-

ing of November 27 -- some 10 hours after the first shots were fired.

Counter-terrorism experts say that any rapid reaction force should be on the scene with 30 to 60 minutes.

The slow response was blamed on organizational and logistical difficulties in getting commandos from their base south of Delhi to Mumbai, as the NSG has no aircraft of its own.

Praveen Swami, a terrorism analyst and associate editor at The Hindu English-language newspaper, said the new regional units were "a welcome but very, very small step".

"It's at the sharp end that there's a real problem, the mundane, every day point of delivery," he told AFP.

"When you have these large terrorist attacks, the real problem is not getting the special units in, it's been the first responders, the police and other emergency services, being able to deal with it."

State governments were slowly realizing the need to improve local policing, after a wave of Islamist extremist attacks across India last year, he added.

In Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital, nearly 300 commandos are currently being trained for the state's new counter-terrorism unit, called Force One.

Meanwhile, five special squads of 200 Mumbai Police officers -- all trained to use AK-47 assault rifles and equipped with bullet-proof jackets and vehicles -- are to be stationed across the city as a rapid response force.

But problems remain: neither the 40,000-strong Mumbai Police -- responsible for a city of 18 million -- nor the NSG has its own helicopters for the quick transportation of officers and troops.

Australia PM defends 'hardline' refugee approach

SYDNEY (AFP) — Australia's Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has defended his "hardline and sensible approach" to refugee policy, after a people smuggling boat was intercepted with almost 200 on board.

Rudd has come under sustained political attack over a surge in illegal entrants making for Australia this year, with a 15th boat carrying 194 asylum seekers intercepted off the northwest coast on Sunday.

It was the biggest boatload of asylum seekers to arrive in Australia in eight years, taking the total arrivals since January to 825. A total of 179 boatpeople were intercepted in the whole of last year.

Indonesian and Malaysian officials told local media up to 10,000 more boatpeople were waiting in Malaysia to travel to Australia, and the opposition party has blamed Rudd for taking a "soft" stance on refugees.

But the center-left leader, who relaxed the previous conservative government's policy of locking up boatpeople for years at a time, said he was taking a methodical, hardline approach to the problem.

"The government has introduced hundreds of millions of dol-



KEVIN RUDD

lars worth of new measures to work at country of origin, to work at our cop on the beat, the navy on the high seas," Rudd told commercial radio.

"(There is) also a hardline system which says, if this is not a bona fide asylum seeker then they go back, go back to the country concerned."

Rudd said a great deal of work was being done behind the scenes in countries of origin such as Indo-

nesia and Malaysia to address the people smuggling issue.

"I am not going to underestimate the problem," he said.

"It's there, it's real, it's growing around the world, but we intend to be hardline and sensible in the way in which we handle it."

More than 20 boats have arrived in Australia since Rudd's Labor government rolled back restrictive measures that regularly left asylum seekers, including children, locked up for years in immigration centers.

Under the new system, introduced last September, claims must be processed swiftly, with mandatory six-monthly independent case reviews.

Oxfam calls on G8 to increase aid to poor farmers

WASHINGTON (Reuters) — Leaders from the world's industrialized economies should commit to increasing investment in agriculture in poor countries when they meet in Italy next week, global development group Oxfam said on Tuesday.

In a new report, Oxfam said agricultural assistance by Group of Eight donor countries had fallen sharply, to around \$5 billion a year in 2007 from \$20 billion in the 1980s.

The G8, which comprises the United States, Britain, Germany, Italy, France, Russia, Canada and Japan, will meet on July 8-10 to discuss international issues.

"A substantial increase in long-term agriculture investments is loose change compared to ongoing investments in rich countries or the trillions of dollars spent globally this year on the financial bailout," said the report's author, Emily Alpert.

"Strengthening the agricultural sectors of developing countries is a crucial part of the long-term solution to the world's food, financial and climate crises," she added.

A devastating crisis in food prices last year, which led to increased hunger, malnutrition and the risk of social unrest in many poor countries, illustrated why investment in agriculture was necessary to boost global food supplies, Oxfam added.

Years of underinvestment have caused stagnating yields, degraded lands and a scarcity of fresh water in poor countries,



African nations expect G8 countries to support them.

it said.

Investment by donors, national governments and the private sector in poor countries should target women and help improve knowledge about environmentally-sustainable farming methods in the wake of climate changes, the report said.

In Africa, governments spend on average 4.5 percent of their budgets on agriculture, the report said.

While Africa and other poor regions are attracting agri-dollars from Asia and the Middle East countries worried about their own food security, there is concern among development groups that local populations will be marginalized by deals that do not take their needs into account.

Alpert said agricultural investment must include the poor who live in marginalized areas and it was important that donors and governments filled the gap left by the private sector.

"Despite perceived low returns on investing in marginalized areas by donors and the private sector, investing in developing country agriculture pays for itself by reducing poverty," she said, adding that it also boosted income and local economies.

"A healthy agricultural sector acts as a multiplier in local economies, leading eventually to higher wages and vibrant rural markets where farmers and workers spend their earnings."



FOCUS

Fight club toughens up U.S. marines in Afghan desert

By Ben Sheppard

CAMP DWYER, Afghanistan (AFP) -- Two U.S. marines kick and punch each other in a cloud of dust as their shaven-headed instructor bellows "Fight, fight, fight!"

Under the blazing hot sun, they grapple in a ring drawn in the sand as their fellow soldiers shout encouragement.

It is an afternoon session of physical training in the Afghanistan desert for some of the U.S. soldiers recently sent to take on the Taliban insurgency.

Part of the preparation for war is the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP), a form of combat that combines disciplines including karate, kick-boxing and taekwondo.

Each contender is kitted out with head protection, a gum guard, a groin guard and shin pads.

On the instructor's orders, they touch gloves and then flail wildly at one another in two two-minute rounds of unconfined aggression.

MCMAP, introduced in 2002, is compulsory in the marines and officers say performance in the ring may soon be linked to chances of promotion.

"It prepares troops physically and mentally to take on the enemy, and it strengthens their moral character," said instructor Staff Sergeant Richard Near, 25.

"Techniques learnt here can help them kill opponents taller and stronger than themselves."

After each bout, two exhausted soldiers hand over their kit to the next set of fighters. One man emerges spitting blood after a mouth cut.

"It is a real adrenaline rush," said Chris Raggio, 29, after staggering from the ring. "It is good practice on how to take a blow, how to defend yourself. The aggression has to be combined with skills."

"You get badly bruised, especially on the legs but the injuries aren't that serious."

One fighter who attracts particular support is Gunnery Sergeant Tanya James, who is a MCMAP brown belt -- one step below the top black-belt category.

She takes on male marines and regularly beats them, though today's session has been only for training and no winners are declared.

"A strict rule is that no man holds back when fighting a girl," James, 32, said. "That is very important. Guys love fighting me and I like fighting them."

James, who landed in Afghanistan in late May, and the other MCMAP fighters are among the 21,000 extra troops being deployed in the country as part of the United States' new strategy to defeat the Taliban.

Currently billeted in hastily-built camps in the deserts of Helmand province, they expect to soon come into contact with Taliban in the south of the province.