



Nepal's Maoists call off airport blockade

KATHMANDU (AFP) — Nepal's opposition Maoists have called off a blockade of the country's main airport after coming under international pressure over the planned protest, a party spokesman said Wednesday.

Envoys from the United States, Russia and the European Union had Tuesday urged Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal to call off the airport shutdown, saying it would escalate tensions and harm tourism during the peak season.

"The international community asked our party to withhold this program so we respected their request," Maoist spokesman Dinanath Sharma told AFP.

Nepal's army and police have been placed on high alert after the Maoists last week announced a fortnight of nationwide demonstrations aimed at destabilizing the new coalition government.

The former rebels, who fought a 10-year civil war against the state before winning 2008 elections, quit the government in May after a row with the president over the country's army chief.

They now want the president to apologize for blocking Dahal's attempt to sack the head of the army and have vowed to bring the capital Kathmandu to a standstill on November 10 unless their demands are met.

Rebels ban musical ringtones on phones

NAIROBI (Reuters) — Sacdiyo Sheeq used to love listening to Bollywood movie songs on her mobile telephone.

But since hardline al Shabaab insurgents seized the southern Somali port of Kismayu, the 25-year-old's life has changed.

"Al Shabaab wants our ringtones to be only a Muslim cleric reading the Hadith or Koranic verse," she told Reuters.

"I used to listen to my favorite Indian songs on my cell phone, but now I have just thrown that memory away."

Al Shabaab, which Washington says is al Qaeda's proxy in the failed Horn of Africa state, wants to topple the UN-backed government and impose its own strict version of Sharia law.

The heavily armed group controls much of the south and parts of the capital Mogadishu, and courts run by its clerics have ordered executions, floggings and amputations in recent months.

It has also banned movies, dancing at wedding ceremonies and playing or watching soccer in the areas under its control.

"We do not tolerate anything that may corrupt the people," al Shabaab's spokesman in Kismayu, Sheikh Hassan Yaqub, told Reuters by telephone. "We don't allow anything that goes against our religion, especially music and videos."

Ali Mahamud Yusuf, 19, fled his home in Kismayu after he was whipped in public last week by al Shabaab gunmen who had caught him listening to music and watching videos on his phone.

"I am still suffering from the 25 lashes," Yusuf said. "They accused me of rejecting religion. I don't want to tell you where I am now for security reasons. I am scared."

Fighting has killed 19,000 Somalis since the start of 2007, and while some residents credit the insurgents with restoring a semblance of order in some areas, al Shabaab's strict rules have alienated many Somalis who are traditionally moderate Muslims.

U.S. envoy in rare talks with Suu Kyi, Myanmar PM

By Hla Hla Htay

YANGON (AFP) — The most senior U.S. official to visit Myanmar for a decade and a half met democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi and the ruling junta's premier Wednesday as Washington seeks a new era of engagement with the regime.

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell and his deputy Scot Marciel arrived in Myanmar on Tuesday to push forward the Obama administration's revised policy on Myanmar.

Nobel Laureate Suu Kyi was allowed a rare break from detention when she appeared with Campbell before the media at the U.S. official's luxury hotel in the former capital Yangon, an AFP reporter saw.

Dressed in maroon traditional dress, the 64-year-old opposition leader smiled but said nothing to waiting reporters as she headed into the meeting in a hotel room.

Suu Kyi had her house arrest extended by another 18 months in August after a bizarre incident in which a U.S. man swam uninvited to her lakeside home, effectively ruling her out of elections due in 2010.

Campbell and Marciel earlier Wednesday held talks with Prime Minister Thein Sein in the remote administrative capital Naypyidaw, Myanmar officials said on condition of anonymity. Details of the talks



were not immediately available.

Myanmar officials said the U.S. delegation was not expected to meet reclusive junta leader Than Shwe. State media said that when the U.S. envoys arrived he was in southern Myanmar inspecting aid efforts after last year's Cyclone Nargis.

Campbell is the highest ranking U.S. official to travel to Myanmar -- formerly known as Burma -- since Madeleine Albright went as U.S.

ambassador to the United Nations in 1995 during Bill Clinton's presidency.

The two-day trip is a follow-up to discussions in New York in September between U.S. and Myanmar officials, the highest-level U.S. contact with the regime in nearly a decade.

The Obama administration in September announced a dramatic change in U.S. policy because isolating Myanmar had failed, but said it would not

ease sanctions without progress on democracy and human rights.

U.S. State Department spokesman Ian Kelly said overnight that the current visit was the "first step, or I guess I should say the second step in the beginning of a dialogue with Burma."

Asked what Campbell discussed on Tuesday in talks with the information minister and local organizations, Kelly said: "They laid out the

way we see this relationship going forward, how we should structure this dialogue, but they were mainly in a listening mode."

September's talks had called for free and fair elections and the release of Suu Kyi, but also dealt with U.S. concerns about Myanmar's possible military links with nuclear-armed North Korea.

Nyan Win, a spokesman for Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, has said the visit is the "start of direct engagement between the U.S. and Myanmar government" but added that the party was not expecting any "big change".

Suu Kyi will be discussed when Obama meets Southeast Asian leaders at a regional summit in Singapore in mid-November, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Tuesday, adding that Thein Sein was expected to attend.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) favors engagement but has been accused of going soft on Myanmar's generals.

In August, leader Than Shwe held an unprecedented meeting with visiting U.S. senator Jim Webb which yielded the release of John Yettaw, the American man who swam to Suu Kyi's lakeside house.

Thein Sein told Asian leaders at a summit in Thailand last month that the junta sees a role for Suu Kyi in fostering reconciliation ahead of the promised elections next year and could ease restrictions on her.

The junta refused to acknowledge the NLD's landslide win in Myanmar's last elections, in 1990. The United States toughened sanctions after the regime cracked down on protests led by Buddhist monks in 2007.

Diplomatic blunders behind Afghan vote chaos

By Chris Otton

KABUL (AFP) — The 10 weeks of chaos that dogged Afghanistan's tumultuous election were accompanied by a string of diplomatic blunders that ended with the scrapping of a run-off imposed on President Hamid Karzai.

The decision to announce that November 7's run-off would not take place came after UN chief Ban Ki-moon flew to Kabul to persuade the country's nominally independent election commission not to stage a one-hour race.

Yet less than two weeks earlier, the United Nations was at the forefront of international arm-twisting designed to force Karzai into a second round despite his protestations that he won fair and square the first time.

"It's been the biggest mistake by the international community in the last eight years," said Nasrullah Stanikzai, an analyst at Kabul University.

"There's been no coordination between the United States and the Europeans... And they don't have good coordination with the Afghan government."

Karzai was catapulted to power in late 2001 after U.S.-led coalition forces toppled the Taliban.

But warm relations between Washington and Kabul have steadily declined, with Karzai humiliated when he was reluctantly forced to announce his participation in the run-off, flanked by U.S. Senator John Kerry and UN envoy Kai Eide.

But while diplomats managed to persuade Karzai to stand in a run-off, praising his "statesmanship", they failed to nail down the participation of Abdullah Abdullah, runner-up in the first round who quit the contest on Sunday.

There had been expectations that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would fly to Afghanistan over the weekend after a trip to neighboring Pakistan.

But Clinton never made it to Kabul and was in Abu Dhabi by the time Abdullah's camp was making it clear that their man would not take part.

Asked whether the outcome of a run-off with only one candidate would result in a legitimate government, Clinton appeared unfazed by such as prospect, saying such situations were "not unprecedented" and occur in the United States.



But after the election commission decided to scrap the poll, the U.S. embassy in Kabul said it welcomed the cancellation.

A European diplomat said the pressure on Karzai to compete in the second round was prompted by a desire to make him acknowledge the large-scale fraud that dogged the first round.

"What was important was to make Karzai admit he had not won in the first round," said the diplomat.

However, Karzai was then able to keep the electoral institutions, which oversaw the rigging in August, intact for the second round -- prompting Abdullah to conclude the contest would again be tilted against him.

Peter Galbraith, Eide's deputy until a major fallout after the first round, says it was clear that fraud would have played "as large a part in the presidential runoff voting as it did in the original August balloting".

"Eide is the victim of his past passivity," he wrote in the LA Times. Haroun Mir, head of Afghanistan's Centre for Research and Policy Studies, said the UN made a series of mistakes and was guilty of "a lack of management and incompetence", with Eide failing to tackle concerns about vote-rigging.

"Eide wanted to cover up to show the process was successful," he told AFP.

The sight of Karzai announcing the run-off alongside Kerry and Eide also reinforced the perception in Afghanistan that the president was taking his orders from foreign powers.

Faheem Dashty, editor of The Kabul Weekly, said such an overt display of influence was unfortunate.

"For a young democracy such as ours, there is a need sometimes for pressure," he told AFP.

"But when the pressure is so public and open, this gives a very negative impression to the people of Afghanistan that we are not independent," he said.

Mir said, however, that the United States knew exactly what they were doing by putting Karzai in his place as it wanted him weakened.

"Now I think Karzai is very weak and he is not able to fight back when there is pressure on him," said Mir. "I think this is what the U.S. wanted from the beginning."

Vietnam storm death toll rises to 57

HANOI, Vietnam (AP) — The death toll from Tropical Storm Mirinae rose to 57 in Vietnam on Wednesday as authorities stepped up rescue and relief operations in the affected central regions.

In the hardest-hit province of Phu Yen, 24 more deaths were reported as information trickled in from isolated areas, disaster official Dang Thi Lanh said Wednesday. An additional 18 people were reported missing.

The storm and flooding left another 18 people dead and seven others missing, according to disaster officials and the government's Web site.

Soldiers using speed boats continued

to move people from flooded homes and provide victims with instant noodles and water, Lanh said.

Authorities have evacuated nearly 15,000 people from Phu Yen, where the water began to recede Wednesday. A day earlier, many families scrambled to rooftops to escape the overflowing Ha Thanh River.

In the neighboring province of Binh Dinh, two military helicopters continued to drop food and water to villagers still stranded in isolated areas, said Ho Quoc Dung, deputy chairman of the provincial People's Committee.

The storm and flooding also left 52

people injured, destroyed or damaged 14,000 homes, and damaged about 12,400 acres (5,000 hectares) of rice and other crops, according to the national committee for flood and storm control.

Mirinae hit the Philippines with typhoon strength over the weekend, killing 20 people before losing strength as it moved across the South China Sea toward Vietnam.

Both Vietnam and the Philippines were still recovering from Typhoon Ketsana, which brought the Philippine capital of Manila its worst flooding in 40 years when it struck in September. Ketsana killed 160 people in Vietnam.



Fiji embroiled in diplomatic row with Australia and New Zealand

The South Pacific island nation of Fiji is embroiled in another diplomatic row with Australia and New Zealand after expelling their top envoys over a spat about travel visas.

Frank Bainimarama, the self-appointed military leader who has ruled Fiji since the December 2006 coup, yesterday issued a 24-hour order for the ambassadors of Australia and New Zealand to leave the island over travel sanctions the two countries had imposed on people linked to the military regime.

He accused the two countries of sabotaging nation-building efforts by refusing to grant visas to Fijian judges.

In retaliation, Australia and New Zealand made near simultaneous announcements earlier today that they had expelled the Fijian ambassadors to their countries.

The Australian Prime Minister Rudd said he aimed to continue his government's headline stance against Mr. Bainimarama's leadership in order to maintain stability in the South Pacific region.

"We're not about to simply allow a coup culture to spread," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Mr. Rudd added that Australia would not allow what has happened in Fiji to become "some sort of norm for the Pacific at large".

"This man, Bainimarama, has undertaken a military coup, suspended the constitution, refused to hold fresh elections and sacked the judiciary and appointed his," Mr. Rudd said.

Fiji's acting high commissioner to Australia, Kamlesh Kumar Arya, and the acting head of mission in Wellington, Mr. Kuliniya Seru Savou, have both been ordered to return to Suva.

Mr. Bainimarama has been at loggerheads with Australia and New Zealand since the two regional powers led condemnation of the military leader's 2006 overthrow of the elected government.

The two nations pushed successfully for Fiji to be suspended from key international groups including the Commonwealth and from the Pacific Islands Forum for failing to return to democracy since its latest coup in 2006.

New Zealand's foreign minister Murray McCully said that diplomatic relations with Fiji are "roughly the same they have been for the last couple of years, unfortunately".

"We have had our ups and downs and unfortunately they are down," Mr. McCully said.

Mr. Bainimarama claimed the heads of the Australian and New Zealand diplomatic missions had refused to engage with the government and were waging "a negative campaign against the government and people of Fiji".

"We are suspended from the Commonwealth. Australia and New Zealand have suspended us from the (Pacific Islands) Forum," Mr. Bainimarama told New Zealand's Radio Tarana.

"So it really doesn't make any difference. But... we can't afford to be bullied."

It is the third time New Zealand's top envoy to Fiji has been expelled since the 2006 coup, but the first expulsion of Australia's senior diplomat.

(Source: TIMESONLINE)