

THAI PRINCE LEADS CYCLING EVENT 'FOR DAD'

BANGKOK: Thailand's crown prince led a mass cycle in Bangkok yesterday at a symbolic event to honour his father King Bhumibol Adulyadej and highlight his role as heir apparent amid increasing anxiety over his dad's health. Clad in lycra, a helmet and sunglasses, Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, 63, headed the cyclists at the "Bike for Dad" event - a rare public appearance for the prince - which follows a similar event in August for his elderly mother Queen Sirikit.

The mass cycles, broadcast live on every Thai television channel, have been billed as a chance to promote unity among Thais 18 months after a coup swept away the civilian government - the latest episode in a seemingly endless succession of elections and coups. They also give the twice-divorced prince a chance to bolster his image, promoting himself as a dutiful son, and crucially, that he has the strong backing of the armed forces, who joined him at the event.

"I am delighted that the Crown Prince graciously inaugurates the 'Bike for Dad'... to honour the King on his 88th birthday," coup-making army chief turned premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha said. Prayut and top military and political leaders, all clad in yellow in a nod to the King's official colour, followed the

Prince among an expected 100,000 cyclists on a 29-km route through the capital.

Nationwide, more than half a million people are expected to take part, topping the 136,411 people at the "Bike for Mom" cycle. "I am happy to stop work because I love the king. With all my heart I wish the king good health," said Supab Jarupoom, a 68-year-old butcher from Bangkok, wearing a Thai flag headband and with a photo of the King on his bicycle.

Prince Centre Stage

The king is revered among many Thais but has been in hospital for much of the last two years and is rarely seen in public. Vajiralongkorn has yet to attain such popularity and his ability to operate as a unifying force ostensibly above the political fray is untested. In recent years, the crown prince has spent much of his time away from the public eye. But he has stepped in at some official ceremonies as his father's health declines.

The cycling events have thrust Vajiralongkorn centre stage at a time of heightened concern over his father's health and country's future. "Though the activity intends to praise the king as father of the



BANGKOK: Thai Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn rides a bicycle as he leads a mass cycle event to honor his father King Bhumibol Adulyadej yesterday. — AFP

nation, some might interpret the activity as bestowing greater monarch-to-be legitimacy upon the crown prince," Thai politics expert Paul Chambers told AFP.

For much of the last decade Thailand has been rocked by political instability partially fuelled by jostling among the country's elites for influence as the king's reign enters

its twilight years. Bhumibol and his family are protected by one of the world's harshest lese majeste laws, making criticism of the monarchy or public debate about its role in society all but impossible. Prosecutions have surged since last May's coup, with a Thai man arrested this week for 'liking' a doctored photo of the king. — AFP

TWO KOREAS HOLD HIGH-LEVEL TALKS

NEIGHBORS SEEK TO EASE TENSIONS

SEOUL: North and South Korea sat down to rare, high-level talks yesterday, aimed at building on an August agreement to ease cross-border tensions after a flare-up brought them to the brink of an armed conflict. Although any dialogue between the

end of the 1950-53 Korean conflict. The last such sit-down, with the mandate to discuss a range of inter-Korean issues, took place nearly two years ago. "Let's take a crucial first step to pave the way for reunification. I hope various pending issues will be solved one by

one by the talks which, in the past, have often run deep into the night or over several days. The meeting was held on the North Korean side of the border in the jointly-run Kaesong industrial zone - which opened in 2004 and has survived as a rare symbol of inter-Korean cooperation.

Breaking Down Barriers

Jon said the talks were an opportunity to overcome the decades of mistrust and confrontation. "Let's make efforts to break down the barrier, fill up the cracks and make a new and wide road together," he said. Analysts say a positive result would see the two sides simply agreeing to continue the dialogue and offering some encouraging noises about future cooperation. "The outcome this time could have a significant impact on the path the overall inter-Korea relationship takes next year," said Cheong Seong-Chang, an analyst at the Sejong Institute think tank in Seoul.

The elephant in the room for any North-South dialogue is Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program. But while Seoul may well raise the issue of denuclearization, experts said the two sides were likely to focus on more achievable targets. "The North's denuclearization needs to be seen as the ultimate goal of inter-Korea dialogue, not a pre-condition of it," said Kim Keun-Shik, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul. The talks came a day after North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un said the country had developed a hydrogen bomb - a claim greeted with skepticism by US and South Korean intelligence officials. There was no set agenda in Kaesong, but both sides have clear, if not necessarily complementary priorities. — AFP



KAESONG: South Korean Vice-Unification Minister Hwang Boo-Gi (left), Seoul's chief delegate for high-level talks with North Korea, shakes hands with his North Korean counterpart Jon Jong-Su during their meeting at this joint industrial zone on the North Korean side of the border yesterday. — AFP

two Koreas is welcomed as a positive step, past experience suggests the talks - being held at the vice-minister level - are unlikely to produce a significant breakthrough.

Previous efforts to establish a regular dialogue have tended to falter after an initial meeting -reflecting decades of animosity and mistrust between two countries that have remained technically at war since the

one," South Korea's chief delegate Hwang Boo-Gi told his North Korean counterpart Jon Jong-Su as they shook hands.

The morning session lasted just 30 minutes with the two delegation heads delivering prepared statements. After a lengthy consultation with their respective capitals, they resumed discussions in the early evening. There was no set agenda or time-

BILLIONAIRE HEAD OF FOSUN GROUP 'DISAPPEARS'

BEIJING: The billionaire chairman of one of China's biggest private-sector conglomerates, Club Med owner Fosun, has disappeared from public view and is being questioned over a corruption inquiry, reports said, as shares in the group's companies were suspended yesterday. Guo Guangchang, 48, dubbed "China's Warren Buffett", has been out of contact since Thursday, respected business magazine Caixin reported on its website. Police took Guo away at one of Shanghai's airports, Caixin cited social media postings as saying, without making clear whether he was under investigation himself or assisting a probe. "Many linked his disappearance to an investigation by the authorities," the official Xinhua news agency reported.

Since coming to power Chinese President Xi Jinping has waged a much-publicized anti-corruption campaign that has ensnared a long list of officials, including the country's former security chief Zhou Yongkang. It has largely been confined to within the ruling Communist Party - with critics saying it has been used for internal faction-fighting - and Guo would be by far the highest-profile businessman to fall if he is brought down by it. Chinese authorities have also launched wide-ranging probes into the financial sector following a market rout earlier this year when a debt-fuelled bubble - encouraged by officials - burst. Guo is China's 17th richest person with a net worth of \$5.6 billion, according to Bloomberg News. He is a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a debating chamber that is part of the Communist Party-controlled governmental structure.

The Fosun Group is one of the country's biggest private companies and its flagship subsidiary, Fosun International, has net assets of 50 billion yuan (\$7.8 billion). Fosun has interests in property, finance, pharmaceuticals, steel and entertainment, and has been aggressively buying assets in Europe and North America. It bought renowned French holiday company Club Med earlier this year and in April was part of a consortium that acquired Canadian entertainment juggernaut Cirque du Soleil. It also has a stake in British-based tour operator Thomas Cook. — AFP



Guo Guangchang