

## INDONESIANS KEEP PRIDE IN OBAMA LINK EVEN AS HIGH HOPES DIM

**JAKARTA:** As Barack Obama's presidency nears its end, Indonesians still speak with pride of the childhood years he spent in their country, though much of the enthusiasm has faded along with the impossibly high expectations of what the first African-American president would achieve. A fan club, books, a statue, a cafe and even a movie were all part of the mania for Obama in the world's most populous Muslim nation after he was elected president in 2008.

Many Indonesians believed he would change the world and their country, with its deep-seated problems of poverty, corruption and communal conflict. Obama is still known here by his childhood nickname Barry and as the "Menteng Kid," a reference to the upscale Jakarta neighborhood where he lived with his mother and Indonesian stepfather from ages 6 to 10.

### Menteng 01 elementary

"We had great expectations about him that were not realized," said Sonni Gondokusumo, who was one of Obama's classmates at Menteng 01 elementary school and a neighbor, and is now a lawyer in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital. Obama is set to travel to Asia for the last time as president, visiting China for a Group of 20 meeting and Laos for a regional summit, but not Indonesia. His

first of two visits to the country as president was in 2010, taking Obama-mania to new heights that included an Indonesian look-alike becoming a national celebrity.

Gondokusumo fondly recalled how a young Obama played at his house and joined him in Muslim prayers wearing a traditional Indonesian sarong that kept falling off, causing much laughter. "Initially, we expected Barry will make a difference," Gondokusumo said. "To be honest, there is no significant contribution to this country." Widiyanto Cahyono, another of Obama's former classmates, nodded in agreement. He said he initially had believed that Obama's emotional connection to Islam through childhood friends and a Muslim stepfather would lead to a world of greater tolerance. But now he realizes he had naively projected all his hopes onto Obama.

"Obama has a better understanding of Islam and his religious tolerance is genuine," said Cahyono, who sat next to Obama in fourth grade. "But it is a pity nothing has changed," he added, pointing to American policy in the Middle East. He recalled Obama attending Islamic study class at the Menteng school, but said that instead of listening to the teacher, the future president acted cool by doodling a superhero in his notebook.



**JAKARTA:** A man opens the gate of the former house of US President Barack Obama in Jakarta, Indonesia. — AP

### A sense of pride

Even though the sky-high hopes for what Obama would achieve have faded, there is still a sense of connection in Indonesia to an important individual who helped shaped the world in the formative years of the 21st century. "With Obama, there's a sense of pride," Cahyono said. "He is very special for us." A statue of Obama as

a child now stands outside the Menteng school, intended as an enduring reminder of the school's one-time pupil. Back in 2008, students watched the US election results on television and erupted into cheers when they learned Obama was headed to the White House.

Eight years later, students chatter enthusiastically about the pride they take

in attending the school where Obama once studied. Nine-year-old Mentari Malarangeng, a third-grade student, said Obama is her idol. "I heard from my grandmother that Obama was a good student, loud and confident when he talked," she said. Her classmate Abdillah Kurdi said the school became famous because of Obama and gets many visitors who want to see where he sat. "I want to be a president like him," he said. "I'm so proud of him." The school's principal, Edi Kusyanto, said about 40 to 60 mainly foreign tourists visit the school every month.

A picture of an adult Obama standing beside an American flag is displayed prominently in his former third-grade classroom, with current students pointing to a desk in the next-to-last row as Obama's. Two big photos of the president adorn the school's lobby. Kusyanto said the statue of a young Obama, erected in 2010, is a permanent fixture, because he is part of the school's history.

"The statue inspires and motivates the children every day," said Kusyanto, who has high hopes that Obama will visit the school after his presidency ends. "He tried," Kusyanto said when asked of Obama's legacy. "Unlike his predecessor's legacy of war in Iraq, Obama tried to change the world to be a better place." — AP

## News

in brief

### Gabon opponent cries fraud as poll count favors Bongo

**LIBREVILLE:** A count by Gabon's electoral commission yesterday suggested incumbent Ali Bongo had narrowly beaten challenger Jean Ping in a presidential election that Ping's camp denounced as fraudulent and said the Gabonese will not accept. A senior source in the commission and a member of the body allied to Ping's camp confirmed the commission numbers gave Bongo a 49.85 percent share of the vote to Ping's 48.16 percent. The electoral commission was scheduled to release the results of Saturday's poll on Tuesday evening, but by 11.15 am the following day, the panel was still in a closed-door meeting. "This is a masquerade," a commission member for Ping's party, Paul Marie Gondjout, told Reuters outside the commission. The opposition demanded a recount of one province that showed a turnout of 99.98 percent. The party yesterday claimed to have an independent tally showing Ping won 59 percent of the vote versus 38 percent for Bongo, with only one province left to count—a claim the government condemned as an effort to destabilize the country.



**LIBREVILLE:** A supporter of the opposition candidate Jean Ping sleeps at the party headquarters after having spent the night waiting for the Presidential Election result in Libreville. — AFP

### Woman charged with biting off officer's ear

**SALEM:** A Massachusetts woman charged with biting off a portion of a rookie police officer's ear during her arrest outside a Salem bar has been held without bail. Emma Wiley pleaded not guilty Monday in charges including mayhem, assault and battery causing serious bodily injury, assault and battery on a police officer and resisting arrest. Prosecutors say Patrolwoman Jessica Rondinelli responded to reports of a fight outside a city bar at about 1 am Sunday. The police report says while Rondinelli was putting the 19-year-old Wiley in a cruiser, Wiley bit off a piece of the officer's ear. Doctors were unable to re-attach it. Wiley's attorney said his client is a Salem State University student who suffers from depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Rondinelli's first police shift was July 1.

### Teenager killed in fresh Indian Kashmir clashes

**SRINAGAR:** A teenager was shot dead in Indian-administered Kashmir yesterday as thousands of protesters engaged in fresh clashes with security forces after weeks of deadly violence, police and witnesses said. Paramilitary troops fired live rounds as residents demonstrated against an earlier raid by soldiers searching for protest leaders in the northern village of Nadihal, a police officer said on condition of anonymity. "The boy died in the firing. Five other protesters also received bullet injuries," the officer, who is not authorized to speak to the media said. Locals said he was aged 18. Protesters also clashed with troops who fired shotgun pellets and tear gas in other areas of the northern Himalayan region including in the main city of Srinagar, another senior police officer and witnesses said. "We have reports about 50 protesters were injured in Anantnag, mostly with pellets," the police officer said of the southern town.

### Australia's Turnbull hit over same-sex marriage

**CANBERRA:** Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull came under pressure over same-sex marriage and from within his own party yesterday as parliament returned for the first time since a poor showing by his coalition government in elections last month. Turnbull's Liberal-National coalition was reduced to a razor-thin one-vote majority in the lower house after an early poll to break a deadlock in the upper house Senate backfired. The centre-left opposition Labor Party immediately dug in its heels over the government's proposal to hold a national plebiscite on same-sex marriage, which it considers expensive and unnecessary. Labor, which wants a vote on the issue in parliament, has garnered enough support to block the plebiscite. "We would not be true to ourselves if we said 'we think this is a terrible idea but, all right, have a plebiscite,'" Labor Party Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen told Sky News. "We can recognize marriage equality, that's our job."

## 'DAY OF THE DISAPPEARED'

### SOUTH ASIA'S TORTUROUS WAIT FOR THE MISSING

**NEW DELHI:** Shova Bhatta vividly remembers the morning 16 years ago, when five men came to her grocery shop on the outskirts of the Nepali capital and took her husband Shyam. "They asked him to accompany them and promised that he would be back after answering some questions," said Bhatta. "My husband told me not to worry and that he would return soon because he had not done any harm to anyone." But 29-year-old Shyam never came back. His wife insists he was kidnapped by Maoist rebels fighting to topple the feudal monarchy during the Himalayan nation's decade-long civil war which ended in 2006.

The mother of two is left in limbo, fluctuating between the hope of seeing him alive and the agony of believing he is dead. "I still don't know if they killed him. I don't know if he is still alive," she said. "If he is dead, I want his body as proof so I can carry out our traditional last rites." Hundreds of thousands of families around the world on Tuesday marked the "International Day of the Disappeared"—aimed at drawing attention to people gone missing amid conflict, disasters, migration or state oppression.

Despite the vast numbers of missing, humanitarian workers say scant attention is given to the plight of their families who spend years seeking the truth. "This is a tragedy affecting millions, but it remains vastly unacknowledged and underreported. Such indifference is extremely disturbing," said Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). "Disappearances are often a sensitive social and political issue, but that is no excuse for inaction. Governments must generate the political will necessary to provide answers."

### Child soldiers, migrants, prisoners

There are no accurate figures on the number of people missing but the ICRC, which works in more than 60 countries, estimates there are likely hundreds of thousands of victims. They include combatants missing in action and children separated from their families when fleeing their homes or forced to join armed groups as well as prisoners and migrants. The num-



**BOGOTA:** Aide Murad holds a photo of her brother William Murad, missing since 2001, during an event to mark the International Day of the Disappeared in Bogota, Colombia. — AP

bers of missing people is high in South Asia, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives and is home to one fifth of humanity, say activists.

The region is vulnerable to earthquakes and floods which force hundreds of thousands from their homes annually, and it has witnessed violent conflicts. These include Sri Lanka's 26-year-long war pitting ethnic Tamils against state forces, a crackdown by India forces on people in the disputed region of Kashmir and alleged state violations against people in Pakistan's Baloch region. There are also disappearances of political activists, human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers who criticize or voice dissent against regimes, corporations or other powerful players.

This month, rights groups accused Bangladesh of illegally detaining sons of members of two main opposition political parties. Authorities claim they do have no knowledge of the disappearances. Bangladeshi rights group Odhikar says

287 people have disappeared after being picked up by men claiming to be law enforcement over the last seven years. Of these, 38 were found dead, 132 surfaced alive and the fate of 117 people remains unknown, it said.

### Missing young men

In Wunigam village in Indian administered Kashmir's Bandipore district, Hajra Begam, 70, hopes her missing son Bashir will knock at the door one day. "When my son was taken by the army from his bakery, he had still had flour stuck to his hands," said Begam, adding she and her husband were dependent on Bashir's earnings. "The army told us later that he ran away from their custody, but we don't believe them. The army did not take only our source of living, but also our Bashir."

According to activists, more than 8,000 people have gone missing in this volatile region bordering Pakistan, where security forces are battling a separatist insurgency. Almost all young men, they include mili-

tants, former militants, civilians and Kashmiris working for security forces, activists say. Families gather every year to mark the International Day of the Disappeared, said Parveena Ahanter, founder of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), whose son went missing in the early 1990s. "It gives us some solace when many of us get together and listen to each other."

### Lack of political will

Experts say there is a lack of political will to address the issue, often because governments are implicated and investigations can be biased, flawed and lengthy. In Sri Lanka, some 65,000 people are missing from its civil conflict with separatist Tamil Tigers which ended in 2009 as well as a Marxist insurrection between 1987 and 1989, according to government figures. The government has set up an office to investigate but families accuse Colombo of not doing enough. In Nepal, almost 1,400 people are missing, says the National Network of the Families of the Disappeared and Missing, accusing both state forces and Maoist rebels of committing abuses.

The war ended in 2006 under a United Nations-brokered peace deal in which both sides agreed to address war crimes within six months. The government only established two panels last year to investigate disappearances. The panels have collected thousands of complaints and have until February to finish their work. "I am in total confusion about his fate," said Ruby Shrestha whose husband went missing more than 13 years ago. "I don't think he is alive. But there is no evidence of his death either."

Humanitarian workers say governments must step up their responses, develop legal frameworks and procedures to account for the missing and provide support to families. "Those with influence and in a position to help should take the opportunity of the International Day of the Disappeared to recommit themselves to this issue," said Maurer. "To remain in the dark, not knowing what has happened to someone you love," Maurer said. "Imagine the pain this must cause." — Reuters

## GRAFT-BUSTING GRANDMA JAILING CORRUPT PHILIPPINE POLITICIANS

**MANILA:** The Philippines' top graft-buster, a fearless grandmother who has sued politicians from the president down in her quest to rid her country of corruption, laughs in the face of death threats-literally. Ombudsman Conchita Carpio-Morales, 75, chuckled as she recounted to AFP how she was reluctantly obliged to put up a higher fence around her house after a grenade with her initials on it was discovered by her property in 2012.

"I'm not scared," she said, her eyes flashing as she thumped her hand on the desk in her office. The people she investigates "are the



**MANILA:** Philippine Ombudsman Conchita Carpio-Morales reacts, whilst holding some paperwork at the Office of the Ombudsman in Manila. — AFP

ones who are intimidated—that's why they are trying to scare me". Fighting corruption is dangerous work in the graft-plagued Philippines, where witnesses—even judges—are gunned down and convicted politicians are freed and re-elected.

After four decades in the country's notoriously corrupt judiciary, Morales was looking forward to retirement when former president Benigno Aquino asked her to head a special body to prosecute corrupt officials as part of his centrepiece anti-graft crusade. Her "moral

courage and commitment to justice in taking head-on one of the most intractable problems in the Philippines," is set to be recognized when she will be awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award-Asia's version of the Nobel. "She is, quite simply, an inspiring public servant," the judges said.

### Indict 'sacred cows'

Born into a family of honest lawyers, Morales had a slow and tricky rise through the ranks due to her incorruptibility, but finally made it to the Supreme Court, where she became the first female magistrate to swear in a president in 2010. A tireless worker, she now puts in 12-hour days, six days a week at the Ombudsman-Sundays are reserved for the grandchildren-and her discipline is credited with boosting the office's conviction rate to 75 percent from just 41 percent when she took office in 2011.

Despite progress under Aquino, fighting "endemic" corruption in the Philippines is an uphill battle, she said, adding that corruption flourishes when people think they can get away with it. "We file cases against top government officials," she said. When the "so-called sacred cows are indicted, that should give a signal to people to be more cautious," she added. Her biggest frustration came when the Supreme Court freed ex-president Gloria Arroyo and powerful former senator Juan Ponce Enrile despite what Morales insists was solid evidence of graft. The pair had pleaded ill-health for years and were detained in government hospitals but it was all an act, Morales said: "after you are free... you swagger!" Her tenaciousness has earned her many enemies, including former vice president Jejomar Binay, who called her "stupid" after she charged him with taking huge kickbacks when he was mayor. — AFP

## MYANMAR'S DELICATE PEACE PROCESS: 4 THINGS TO KNOW

**NAYPYIDAW:** After almost 70 years of violence, Myanmar's new civilian government is holding a major conference this week aimed at brokering peace with ethnic groups that have fought the state since its birth. Here are four things to know about the talks:

### What are the talks about?

Since its 1948 independence from British colonial rule, Myanmar has been locked in simmering warfare with a diverse cast of ethnic rebels fighting for control over their lands. By getting all the main players to the table—rebel leaders, lawmakers and the top army brass—Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi hopes to reshape the former military dictatorship as a federal democracy. The conference is also personal for the Nobel laureate. Suu Kyi is looking to channel the spirit of a 1947 agreement signed by her independence hero father that granted autonomy to several ethnic minority states. This week's peace summit has been dubbed the '21st Century Panglong' in reference to that deal, which fell apart after Suu Kyi's father was assassinated, but which remains the closest modern Myanmar has come to being a unified state.

### Why are they happening?

Suu Kyi has stressed that peace is vital to the political and economic revival she hopes will take root in a nation pummeled by 50 years of military repression. Many people in conflict zones live in grinding poverty, despite the rich reserves of jade and tin, and huge forests of prized teak wood that cover their lands. Control over these lucrative resources lies at the heart of many of the battles, and could be further complicated as

foreign businesses pile into the emerging nation, seeking a slice of the pie.

### The main roadblocks

After decades of fighting and tortuous debate, it is still unclear what a federal Myanmar would look like. Several insurgent groups refused to commit to eventual disarmament ahead of the conference, as demanded by the military, while others are still actively locked in combat with state troops. The army's legacy of brutal warfare and repression has left many ethnic minorities wary of the generals, who still control powerful branches of the government and economy. Many fear the Tatmadaw, as the Myanmar army is known, will renege on any deal that hurts its interests. Meanwhile, some powerful rebel militias that run the lawless border regions, have shown little interest in any deal.

### The wider repercussions

Ending the fighting would not only be an extraordinary feat for the fledgling democracy, but a significant step towards opening up Myanmar's poor but fast-growing economy. A peace deal could pave the way for foreign players to bring billions of dollars in aid to the conflict zones and provide the basic services now lacking in many areas. Peace would also open up the north of the country to regional behemoth China, which has been pushing several vast energy and infrastructure projects. But this might be a double-edged sword. The concern is that many of these, particularly planned hydroelectric dams in Kachin and Shan states, could devastate local communities and severely damage the environment. — AFP