

Children of war return to Japanese prison camp in China

WEIFANG: Two dozen Britons and Americans who spent their childhood as prisoners of Japan's military in an internment camp in eastern China returned yesterday to mark the 60th anniversary of their liberation at the close of World War II.

Many cried as they entered the compound, a former Presbyterian missionary school that held some 1,500 people from December 1941 to their release on Aug. 17, 1945. Sitting under a misty rain, surrounded by about 3,000 Chinese schoolchildren and local residents, they watched as firecrackers exploded over the stage, releasing small parachutes that floated to the ground in memory of the American soldiers who rescued them. "I am overwhelmed," said Joyce Bradbury, 77, a British writer whose family had spent several generations as merchants in China. Bradbury, who now lives in Sydney, Australia, was 13 when she entered the camp. The memorial comes amid massive official efforts to remind China's people, and the rest of the world, of Japanese wartime atrocities amid modern tensions between Beijing and Tokyo.

Many Chinese believe Japan has never truly shown remorse for offenses committed during its invasion of China, including germ warfare experiments and the sexual slavery of thousands of women.

Mary Previte, a state legislator in New Jersey, was the 7-year-old daughter of missionaries when she was taken from her boarding school in China and sent to the camp. "We found ourselves crammed into a world of gut-wrenching hunger, guard dogs, bayonet drills, prisoner numbers and badges, daily roll calls, bed bugs, flies and unspeakable sanitation," Previte said.

The camp in Weifang was made up of European-style brick buildings surrounded by fields and trees. The surrounding Chinese village was tiny half a century ago but has expanded to some 8.6 million people. The local government has converted part of the facility into a museum of the internment camp, with books, photos, clothing and other items donated by its survivors. The buildings are surrounded by a waterfall, several pagodas and a sculpture depicting the liberation of the camp. "Several months ago this was a desert place with lots of garbage," said Hu Guizhu, a 50-year-old junior high school teacher in Weifang.

"We hope many foreign friends will come here to visit, to talk business. This is the aim," Hu said.

Many former internees echoed Chinese sentiments that Japan has failed to do enough to atone for wartime brutalities, and said they felt great sympathy for the Chinese. "The Japanese won't admit to the atrocities (they've) done to the Chinese people," said Bradbury. "Japan never admitted doing any wrong. It was denial, denial." Historical resentments between Japan and China are particularly raw now amid tensions over Japan's campaign for a permanent UN Security Council seat and a struggle for control of possible oil and gas resources in disputed seas.

"Chinese media give too much attention to the horrors of World War II, including movies of the war, without giving enough attention to (the) Japanese trend toward peace after the war," said Ezra Vogel, an East Asian historian at Harvard University.

Former inmate Douglas Sadler, a 77-year-old Briton, said the Western prisoners at the Weifang camp were sheltered from the worst atrocities of the war and learned only later of the millions of Chinese killed by Japanese forces. "We weren't mistreated," said Sadler, whose parents were missionaries in China at the time of the invasion. "It might have been the safest place for us." —AP

Australia expresses anger over reduction of sentences

Indonesia cuts jail terms for Bashir, other convicts

JAKARTA: Indonesia yesterday reduced jail terms of several people convicted under anti-terrorism laws, including militant cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, as part of the regular prisoner remission programme marking Independence Day. Australia had asked Indonesia not to reduce the jail sentence of Bashir, who is serving 30 months for his role in the 2002 Bali bar bombings that killed 202 people, including 88 Australians. Indonesia also cut jail terms of 19 other inmates convicted for the Bali bombings. Most of the remissions are around a few months with Bashir getting a 135-day reduction.

But the five main convicts in the case did not get any reduction in their sentences. Three of them have been sentenced to death and two have been jailed for life.

Bashir's leading lawyer, M. Mahendradatta, told Reuters: "He will come out around June next year. He should have received a seven-month cut but because of external pressure, he could not get the maximum remission."

The remission coincides with Bashir's 67th birthday. He was convicted in March and given a 30-month jail sentence for conspiracy related to the Bali bombings.

But he was acquitted of charges that he led the Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah network, ordered the Bali bombings or was involved in a 2003 blast at Jakarta's JW Marriott Hotel that killed 12 people.

Indonesia's Supreme Court on Aug 6 rejected an appeal by Bashir to have his conviction overturned.

Australians have expressed anger over the reduction of terror sentences with some labelling them as insulting to the families of the victims.

Indonesia regularly cuts jail terms of prisoners on Aug 17, the country's Independence Day.

Such privileges are not given to prisoners who have been sentenced to life or put on death row.

This year, on the 60th anniversary of the Southeast Asian nation's independence, thousands of inmates across the world's fourth most populous country, received remissions.

In Aceh, hundreds of jailed rebels from the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) also received remissions with almost 300 of them being released. The Aug. 15 truce between Indonesia and GAM boosted the sentence reductions and releases.

The truce also promises amnesty for all GAM members jailed for treason. The amnesty will begin later this month.

Many high-profile Indonesian convicts also received term cuts, including Hutomo "Tommy" Mandala Putra, the youngest son of former president Suharto. Tommy is serving time for masterminding the murder of a Supreme Court judge in 2001 and already had his 15-year jail term cut to 10 years by the Supreme Court in June. —Reuters



JAKARTA: Jailed militant Islamic cleric Abu Bakar Bashir ponders during a prayer at Cipinang prison in Jakarta in this Jan. 13, 2004, file photo. Bashir and at least 17 others were convicted in the 2002 Bali bombings. —AP

Australia immigration policy under attack

SYDNEY: Australia's tough immigration detention policy came under renewed attack yesterday after the government revealed that 56 people, who were in the country legally, had been detained over the past five years.

Leader of the small, left-leaning Democrats party, Lyn Allison, said the detentions were proof the tough immigration policy was flawed and needed to be changed.

"I think it's very alarming ... the laws are somehow encouraging our public servants to do the wrong thing," Allison told reporters.

Australia is a nation built on immigration but it has one of the world's strictest policies against illegal immigrants, holding them and people who overstay their visas in remote outback camps, sometimes for years as their cases are decided.

Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone told parliament on Tuesday that between July 2000 and April 2005, 56 people who had been held in detention centres for at least three weeks, some longer, had eventually been found to be in Australia legal.

However, Vanstone defended the detentions, saying it was necessary to determine a person's immigration status, but conceded some cases could have been decided in less time.

"If you had a reasonable suspicion at the time that someone was unlawful you've rightfully detained them," Vanstone told reporters yesterday.

An official inquiry is underway into some 200 cases of possible wrongful detention between 2000 and 2005. —Reuters

Philippines foils truck bomb plot on US embassy

MANILA: Philippine authorities earlier this year thwarted a plot by Islamic militants to mount a truck bomb attack on the US embassy in Manila, National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales told AFP yesterday.

The plot by the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) would have involved "an attack on the US embassy using a 1,000-kilogramme (2,200-pound) truck bomb," Gonzales said in an interview.

He said the explosives were recovered after Daud Santos, a Muslim convert who is allegedly a member of the JI-linked Abu Sayyaf group, was arrested in a police raid in Manila in March.

The embassies of Australia and Britain, key US allies in the "war on terror," were also eyed as targets, Gonzales said.

"The 1,000-kilo bomb was not just a blueprint. It was a fact. We just happened to get lucky that time," Gonzales said.

"We know the Australian and British embassies, which are housed in high rise buildings, and the US embassy on Manila Bay and one upmarket shopping mall in Manila are targets," he said.

He added that Santos was now free on bail, highlighting Manila's failure to pass an anti-terrorist law that would enable the government to hold terrorist suspects for longer periods.

Under existing laws, suspects detained for possessing explosives can post bail while the judiciary determines their guilt.

At that time of Santos's arrest, the British embassy warned its citizens not to travel in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, a hotbed of Muslim militancy.

"We believe that terrorists are in the final stages of planning an attack. However, attacks could occur at any time, anywhere in the Philippines," the embassy said in its bulletin in March.

Gonzales also said that military operations in Mindanao over the past year have seen the destruction of JI training camps and the virtual elimination of the Abu Sayyaf.

"Their leaders are on the run and we have them confined to the Liguasan marshlands in the Cotabato basin region of Mindanao," he said.

He said much of the recent campaign against the JI in Mindanao has been helped by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which is in talks with the Philippine government to settle the long, drawn out Muslim insurgency in the south.

Philippine troops launched operations yesterday against a Muslim militant group with links to the Al-Qaeda network, the army said.

The operations in Manila and the southern island of Mindanao targeted the Abu Sayyaf, a group blamed for a string of kidnappings and bombings including an attack on a ferry last year which killed over 100 people. —AFP



MANILA: This file photo dated 11 September 2003 shows an anti-terrorist police commando manning a machine gun mounted on a jeep outside the US embassy in Manila. Philippine National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales told AFP yesterday that Philippine authorities earlier this year thwarted a plot by Islamic militants to mount a truck bomb attack on the US embassy in Manila. —AFP



JAKARTA: Escorted by honour guards, flag bearer Dona Olianda Vitri, center, of Aceh province carries an Indonesian National Red-White flag to be hoisted during celebrations of the 60th anniversary of Indonesia's independence at the presidential palace in Jakarta, Indonesia, yesterday. On Monday, the government and rebels in Aceh province signed a peace agreement to end three decades of separatist fighting, moving Indonesia closer to tackling the conflicts that have wracked the country since the downfall of the dictator Suharto in 1998. —AP

N Korean communists meet South's president

SEOUL: North Korean officials had a rare meeting with South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun yesterday, rounding out a visit that showed ties between the old foes were warming despite conflict over Pyongyang's nuclear programmes.

Senior communist party official Kim Ki-nam and another party official, Rim Tong-ok, were the highest-ranking North Koreans to visit the presidential office in more than a decade, an official from South Korea's Unification Ministry said.

"President Roh stressed that the South and North must work together to achieve substantive progress on resolving the nuclear problem when the fourth round of six-party talks resumes at the end of August," spokesman Kim Mansoo said in a statement.

It was not clear whether or how Kim responded, but he has been silent on the subject during four days in South Korea, despite some strong words from South Koreans demanding Pyongyang drop the weapons programmes.

Kim, who is also a vice chairman of the North's agency that handles affairs with the South, led a delegation of 182 party officials, scholars and workers to celebrations in the South to mark the 60th anniversary of liberation from Japanese rule.

"A visit by North Koreans to the presidential Blue House itself is rare," a Unification Ministry official said, adding past visits to the presidential office in recent years have been by lower-ranking officials.

During their four-day visit, Kim Ki-nam also held an unprece-

dented meeting with South Korean parliamentarians although he again skirted talks on Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons and international efforts to stop it.

Kim also paid respects at the national cemetery for South Korean soldiers who perished in the Korean War—another first.

Roh conveyed his thanks to North Korean Kim Jong-il for making the decision to return to the six-party nuclear talks aimed at persuading North Korea to end its nuclear weapons programmes in exchange for security guarantees and economic aid.

Russia's Interfax news agency quoted a senior Russian official as saying Kim Jong-il was positive about the talks, which adjourned on Aug. 7 after 13 days of inconclusive negotiations and will reconvene on Aug. 29.

South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon said on Wednesday Seoul explained to the North Koreans the need to see a quick resolution to the crisis.

The two Koreas are technically at war under a truce that ended the 1950-53 war, but have forged closer ties since the meeting of their leaders five years ago and in particular in recent months.

Ban said he would travel to Washington and meet with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to discuss whether the North should eventually have the right to a civilian nuclear programme.

The issue was a key stumbling block at the talks. Ban also said bilateral contacts between the North and the United States in the next two weeks were possible. — Reuters



KYUNGJU REPUBLIC OF KOREA: North Korean chief delegate Kim Ki-Nam (centre) gestures as South Korean Unification Minister Chung Dong-Young (left) looks on while visiting the Bulguk Temple that was designated in 1995 as the world cultural heritage by the UNESCO in Kyungju, southeast of Seoul, yesterday. —AFP

Australian man feared dead in crocodile attack

SYDNEY: A 60-year-old Australian man was missing and feared dead after a crocodile attacked his canoe while he was on a fishing trip with his wife, authorities said yesterday.

There has been no trace of the man since Tuesday's attack in a waterhole in the country's tropical north known as "croc country" about 1,560 km (970 miles) from Brisbane, despite a search on boats and a helicopter.

"He was taken out of the canoe by the arm as he tried to fend the crocodile off," a police spokesman said.

The man's wife was able to swim ashore and then drove to a remote station to call for help.

The wetlands area, where the attack took place, is a breeding area for saltwater and estuarine crocodiles. Sign posts throughout the area warn of the dangers of crocodile attacks.

Crocodile hunter Mick Pittman said that it had probably been unwise for the couple to be fishing in a canoe.

"When you're fishing out of a canoe they're pretty game. I'd never go up nowhere near an estuarine river where there's crocs because the first thing he'll do is come up and give you a wallop," Pittman told Australian Broadcasting Corp. radio.

A crocodile attacked a camping site on the Normanby River last October and tried to drag away a 34-year-old man but the man was saved when a 60-year-old woman jumped on its head. About a dozen people have been killed in crocodile attacks in Australia in the past 20 years. —Reuters