



PHOTO: AFP

Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa (R) administers oath of office to five newly appointed ministers (from L to R) Shambindra Nath Shukla for Civil Aviation, Buddhi Man Tamang for Tourism and Culture, Hari Bahadur Basnet for Physical Planning and Public Works, Kamal Thapa for Education and Sports, and Prakash Chandra Lohani for Communications and Information as King Gynendra (2nd from R) looks on at Narayanhity Royal Palace in Kathmandu on Thursday. The five full ministers and the state minister were inducted into the government led by Thapa on Wednesday.

Nepali PM 'may reinstate parliament'

Kathmandu appoints team for talks with Maoists

BBC ONLINE, Colombo

Nepal's new Prime Minister, Surya Bahadur Thapa, has suggested he may be ready to reinstate the dissolved parliament.

Newspapers quote Mr Thapa as saying he is open for talks with the opposition parties about the matter, which was a key opposition demand.

Five of the six parties in the dissolved parliament have been engaged in anti-government protests over such a demand.

On Tuesday, Thapa formed his cabinet, naming six ministers from his own party.

The opposition parties say Thapa's appointment was unconstitutional, and have vowed to step up protests until their demands are met.

Their protests forced Thapa's predecessor, Lokendra Bahadur Chand, to step down two weeks ago. All the new cabinet members are from Thapa's right-wing Rastriya Prajatantra Party.

Five have served as ministers in the past. A palace statement said Thapa had kept several key portfolios for himself, including home, defence and foreign affairs.

The king had sought national consensus to end the crippling political instability and resolve a bloody seven-year Maoist rebellion.

AFP adds: The Nepalese government Thursday appointed a two-member peace dialogue team to hold talks with the Maoists to end the ongoing insurgency in the country, state-run radio announced.

*Minister for Finance Prakash Chandra Lohani and

Communications and Information Minister Kamal Thapa were appointed as new members of the peace dialogue team to hold talks with the Maoists," the radio said.

The appointment was made after a cabinet meeting of the new government Thursday.

The council of ministers, headed by Surya Bahadur Thapa, was expanded on Wednesday evening by inducting six new ministers, including a junior minister.

The six ministers took an oath of office Thursday evening.

The former government-appointed dialogue team, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Badri Prasad Mandal, was dissolved last month following the resignation of prime minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand.

The Maoists and the government held two rounds of peace talks in April to solve the current political problem in Nepal.

They are expected to meet for the third time soon but the date for the meeting has not yet been fixed.

The Maoist team is headed by its top leader Babu Ram Bhattarai.

Among the demands of the rebels and accepted by the government was the restriction of movement of the army to just five kilometres from their barracks but this move has enraged the military.

The insurgents have been demanding a communist republic in Nepal since 1996 and the uprising has so far claimed over 7,800 lives.

The two sides announced a ceasefire in January to pave the way for the peace talks. 3

Myanmar 'has no grudge' for Suu Kyi

BBC ONLINE, Yangon

A member of Myanmar's military government has said the junta "bears no grudge" towards the detained opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

Deputy Foreign Minister Khin Maung Win, quoted by the semi-official Myanmar Times, said the authorities would do everything in their power to achieve reconciliation with her.

The opposition leader has been held in what Myanmar's rulers describe as protective custody, since clashes between her followers and government supporters on 30 May.

Despite widespread calls for her release, both Malaysia and China warned on Friday against putting too much pressure on the Burmese authorities.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, one of the Myanmar Government's staunchest allies, said it would not be "very constructive if we keep pressing people".

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan said the people of Myanmar were capable of dealing with their own problems.

But other countries have been quick to criticise Aung San Suu Kyi's detention.

Khin Maung Win urged "the international community not to further complicate the prevailing situation in the country," was quoted as saying by the Myanmar Times.

Musharraf optimistic on Kashmir settlement

Islamabad raps Advani

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf has said he was optimistic Pakistan and India would be able to work out a peaceful solution to the long running dispute over the Himalayan region of Kashmir, reports said Friday.

"We are and will remain optimistic about achieving a negotiated settlement to the dispute," he said in an interview to Saudi daily Okaz, which was carried Friday by the official Associated Press of Pakistan.

The Muslim-majority Kashmir state has been at the centre of tensions between the South Asian neighbours since the subcontinent was divided in 1947. Kashmir's status was never resolved during the bloody partition.

The region has since been claimed by both countries and split between them. The countries have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir.

New Delhi accuses Pakistan of sponsoring Muslim militants to wage a proxy war against Indian rule since 1989.

Pakistan says Kashmiris must be allowed to choose between rule by Pakistan or India, as United Nations Security Council resolutions since 1948 have demanded, and accuses Indian troops of widespread rape, torture, extrajudicial killings and arbitrary arrests.

The nuclear rivals have been exchanging peace moves since Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee offered a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan on April 18 after a 17-month deadlock.

Musharraf said Pakistan and India did not enjoy the best of relations but "at least we have agreed to talk to each other and hopefully we will gradually move forward with time."

Meanwhile, Pakistan on Thursday slammed Indian Deputy Premier Lal Krishna Advani's allegations of its involvement in terrorism, saying that such statements were unhelpful in promoting the nascent peace process between rival nuclear neighbours.

Foreign ministry spokesman Masood Khan in a statement said Advani's assertion was "factually incorrect and uncalled for."

It was "contrary to the Indian Prime Minister's offer of friendship and dialogue to resolve all outstanding issues, including the core issue of Jammu and Kashmir," he said.

Advani on Wednesday urged the United States to help New Delhi battle the threat of Islamic "terrorism" from Pakistan.

"The epicenter of international terrorism lies in India's immediate neighbourhood. It gives me no joy in pointing fingers, but the involvement of Pakistan can no longer be ignored," he told the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles.

Rejecting the charge, the Pakistani spokesman said: "Pakistan is in the forefront of the fight against terrorism. It is a key ally in the international war on terrorism."

"No country in the world has done more than Pakistan in combating this menace. Such remarks coming from an Indian leader were unhelpful," he said, adding that the two countries "should remain focused on the dialogue and peace process."

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee offered a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan on April 18, raising hopes for an India-Pakistan dialogue.

Responding to the offer, Pakistan Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali spoke to Vajpayee, ending a 17-month deadlock between the nuclear capable rivals.

The two sides have since re-appointed envoys and are due to revive train, air and bus links.

India accuses Pakistan of supporting "cross-border terrorism" in the disputed region of the Kashmir. Islamabad denies the charge, saying the struggle in Kashmir is indigenous, involving the right to self rule.

Rivals scuffle as Pak lawyers pass resolution against Musharraf

AFP, Lahore

Scuffles broke out between rival groups at a meeting of Pakistani lawyers here Friday called to condemn the rewriting of the constitution by President and army chief General Pervez Musharraf, witnesses said.

A group of pro-Musharraf lawyers shouted slogans when the Lahore High Court Bar Association president Hafiz Abdur Rehman Ansari tabled a resolution to intensify the struggle against Musharraf's constitutional amendments.

During the uproar, a majority of the lawyers passed the resolution, despite heated opposition from a dissent faction.

The resolution denounced Lahore Bar Association president Mansoorur Rehman Afridi and another lawyer, Arif Chaudhry, for having invited Musharraf to a "sham" convention in the eastern city at the weekend.

At the meeting, Musharraf declared he would remain in uniform as long as he deemed necessary.

The resolution also demanded that sovereignty of the parliament

must be established by undoing the constitutional amendments, which they said were arbitrarily introduced by Musharraf.

The lawyers resolved to invite all opposition leaders to the forum in order "to intensify the struggle for the restoration of real democracy, supremacy of the parliament, sanctity of the constitution and independence of the judiciary".

Musharraf, the army chief who seized power in October 1999, declared himself president in June 2001 and two months before last year's elections unilaterally extended his mandates as president and army chief until 2007.

Musharraf's dual posts have been under fire from the lawyers' community as well as opposition parties led by a six-party headline Islamic alliance of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA).

They want him to give up both posts and submit to a standard presidential election by lawmakers. The parties have brought the eight-month old parliament to a virtual standstill through their protests.



PHOTO: AFP

Anti and Pro-Musharraf lawyers scuffle outside of the High Court in Lahore on Friday. Scuffles broke out between rival groups at a meeting of Pakistani lawyers called to condemn the rewriting of the constitution by President and army chief General Pervez Musharraf.

Chandrika warns of war

US asks Tigers to resume talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's party warned Friday that the country could be slipping back to war as Tamil Tiger rebels keep up their boycott of peace talks.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA), which sits as the opposition in parliament, said it wanted the government to ensure that security forces were capable of meeting any security threat.

"We want to be sure that the security apparatus can face any situation that the country may face in the near future," PA spokesman Sarath Amunugama told reporters here.

Talks between Colombo and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have remained deadlocked for over seven weeks

with no sign of an end to the impasse.

Last week, the PA warned that Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is leading the government's peace drive, could fall victim to a rebel assassination bid.

"I hope and pray sincerely that he does not have to pay the price," said former foreign minister and Kumaratunga's international affairs advisor, Lakshman Kadirgamar.

Despite the deadlock in the Norwegian-backed peace process, both the government and the Tamil Tigers have pledged to honour a ceasefire that has been in place since February 23 last year.

Meanwhile, the United States Friday asked Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels to end their boycott of peace talks and immediately resume negotiations with the Colombo

government.

The US embassy said the Tamil Tigers missed an "important opportunity" by staying away from a crucial donors' conference, which closed in Tokyo Tuesday with Sri Lanka getting pledges of 4.5 billion dollars in aid.

"The issues that this organisation continues to raise through public announcements are exactly the types of issues that should be settled around a negotiating table," embassy spokeswoman Cody Taylor said.

She said the US and the other co-chairs of the Tokyo donors' conference -- Japan, Norway and the European Union -- had urged the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to attend the "highly successful donors conference".



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan's opposition MPs walk out from a parliamentary session in the Assembly (Lower House) in Islamabad on Thursday. The opposition parties walked out of the parliamentary budget debate for a third day running on Thursday, as the conflict between President Pervez Musharraf and hardline Islamists intensified. The 13.8 billion dollar budget for 2003-2004 is being debated after it was tabled in the House on June 7 above a din of raucous opposition protests.