

Maoists vow more attacks ahead of Nepali polls

Late-night curfew imposed in Kathmandu

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels said yesterday they would step up attacks in the run-up to municipal polls next month, after weekend clashes killed at least 12 police around the capital.

The government tightened security in the Kathmandu Valley following the killings and announced a curfew covering more than a million people.

"We urge all to be prepared for our military actions and storm of agitation," said Ananta, a Maoist commander, in an emailed statement.

He said an alliance with seven opposition parties who also oppose the February 8 local polls remains in place, despite the death

of 45 people since the Maoists ended their unilateral ceasefire two weeks ago.

A late-night curfew has been imposed in Kathmandu and the adjoining city of Patan, authorities said Monday evening.

"A curfew has been imposed inside the ring road from 11 pm to 4 am due to security reasons," said Sushil Ghimiri, chief district officer of Kathmandu.

The curfew will be enforced by armed police and the army and they are authorised to shoot people breaking it.

The area where the curfew has been imposed has around 1.4 million residents.

As part of tighter security, troops and police have been mobi-

lized in the valley to undertake strict stop and search operations, state-run Radio Nepal quoted a home ministry statement as saying.

The opposition parties had asked the rebels to shun violence but the Maoist commander said the attacks would continue.

"We reiterate our party's commitment to work in unity with the seven parliamentary parties, civil society and all democratic and leftist forces to end feudal monarchy and establish a democratic republic," said Ananta.

"We have given a big slap to the regime of the king, who is trying to gain legitimacy by holding farcical municipal polls. We have begun our mission to strike the enemy's head (urban centers)," the rebel

commander said.

Government officials and election organizers have said the polls would go ahead despite the threats and boycott.

The king sacked the government in February 2005, saying it had failed to stem the decade-long insurgency, and assumed absolute power.

In the face of international calls to restore democracy, he has outlined his own 'road map to peace' under which the municipal elections will be followed by national elections some time before April 2007.

Since the Maoists began their 'people's war' in 1996 at least 12,000 people have been killed and 100,000 have been displaced.



A group of pro-leftist students shout anti-king slogans and call for a boycott of the forthcoming local elections in a rally in Kathmandu yesterday. The voting is scheduled for February 8 in 53 municipalities and five cities, with 1.9 million of Nepal's 13 million voters on the electoral roll.

Zawahri missed dinner that prompted US strike

REUTERS, Islamabad

A dinner invitation to al-Qaeda's second-in-command triggered a US airstrike in Pakistan but Ayman al-Zawahri failed to show up, Pakistani intelligence officials said Sunday.

Pakistan condemned Friday's strike, which killed at least 18 people, including women and children, and summoned US ambassador Ryan Crocker to protest.

There were anti-American demonstrations in several towns and cities Sunday, and supporters of Islamist and secular parties mustered close to 10,000 people for a rally in the southern city of Karachi.

The Foreign Ministry said Saturday that foreigners had been near the village of Damadola in the Bajaur region bordering Afghanistan and were the probable target.



A Palestinian boy wearing a Hamas banner takes part in a rally yesterday ahead of the January 25 Palestinian parliamentary elections in Gaza City. The United States warned the Palestinians that inclusion of the militant group Hamas in any new government could affect US-backed efforts to establish an independent Palestinian state.

24 killed in twin Afghan suicide bombings

AFP, Kandahar

A suicide bomber riding a motorbike blew himself up in the Afghan border town of Spin Boldak yesterday, killing 20 people while another four killed in a separate bombing, a provincial governor said.

"Twenty people were killed and around 20 others were wounded after a suicide bomber on a motorcycle detonated himself half an hour ago in Spin Boldak town bazaar," said Asadullah Khalid, governor of Kandahar province.

The bombing in Spin Boldak, a border crossing with Pakistan, came hours after a suspected Taliban suicide car bombing in Kandahar city killed three soldiers and a civilian.

The attack in the troubled southern city of Kandahar, a former hotbed of the ousted Taliban regime, came one day after another car bomb in the same city claimed the lives of a senior Canadian diplomat and two Afghans.

Foreign Affairs Political Director Glyn Berry "was killed in a terrorist attack on a PRT (provincial recon-

struction team) convoy," said Peter Harder, deputy minister of Canada's foreign affairs.

Berry, who previously worked in Canada's Pakistan High Commission, in Washington and at the United Nations in New York, was the political director and senior civilian member of Canada's PRT in southern Afghanistan, he added.

"An explosives-laden vehicle rammed into an Afghan National Army (ANA) convoy which martyred three ANA soldiers and wounded five ANA soldiers," defence ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi told AFP.

"It was a suicide attack," he said, adding that he had no information on civilian casualties.

Captain Mohibul Rehman of the ANA also confirmed the attack, which happened at around 2:55pm (10:25 GMT).

"A suicide bomber detonated himself close to an Afghan National Army vehicle in the city which took (the) lives of three ANA soldiers and wounded another four soldiers," he said.

Breakthrough unlikely in Indo-Pak talks

Foreign secretary-level talks start today

AFP, New Delhi

India will propose fresh ideas to infuse momentum into the latest round of peace talks with arch-rival Pakistan starting today, an official said, but analysts warned that a breakthrough on Kashmir is unlikely.

"There will be fresh ideas on the table," when the two foreign secretaries - the most senior foreign ministry officials - meet in New Delhi Tuesday and Wednesday for the third round of talks, the senior Indian official said.

The talks would include increased contacts between the people of the two countries, the official said on condition of anonymity.

The moves are aimed at breathing new life into the peace process that has shown signs of stalling since its launch in

January 2004.

Indian foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna said the foreign secretaries would discuss the Kashmir dispute and ways to maintain peace and security, besides setting the agenda for a meeting between the two foreign ministers later this year.

The launch of new transport links between India and Pakistan and the two zones of Kashmir will also be discussed, he said.

Two rounds of official-level talks and several summits between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf have brought many symbolic steps, including cross-border bus services and the resumption of sporting ties. But there has been little progress on the Kashmir dispute -- the cause of two of the three wars

between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan since 1947. Each country hold part of the territory but claims it in full.

India says confidence-building measures are needed because Pakistan has not kept a promise to stop violence by Islamic militants based in Pakistani-held territory who are battling New Delhi's rule in Kashmir.

The October 8 South Asian quake exposed the deep-seated mistrust between the two when both sides took weeks to agree to open up their disputed border to allow Kashmiris to check on their relatives.

Recent bombings in New Delhi and a shooting last month in India's southern technology hub of Bangalore, both blamed by New Delhi on Pakistani militants, strained ties ahead of the third talks.

Rocket fire downs US chopper in Iraq

5 cops killed in attacks

AFP, AP, Baghdad

A US helicopter crashed north of Baghdad yesterday with two pilots on board, a military spokesman said, amid reports that the aircraft was hit by rocket fire.

Also, a car bomb detonated next to a police convoy, killing a 6-year-old child and five police officers.

The car blew up in Muqdadiya, about 96 km north of the capital, a police joint operations center and a local hospital said. Najim Abid, a medic at Muqdadiya general hospital, said five policemen and a child were killed by the blast, which injured sixteen civilians and three policemen.

The news came as Iraq's electoral commission prepared to announce the long-awaited results of a fraud probe into last month's general election, the first for a permanent government since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

There was no news on the fate of the two-man crew after the US

helicopter crashed at 8.20 am (05:20 GMT), a military spokesman said.

"The cause of the accident is under investigation," he told AFP.

A journalist for Dubai-based Al-Arabiya television station, speaking from the scene, said the helicopter plunged to earth in a ball of flames after being hit by a rocket.

Monday's incident was the third US helicopter crash in Iraq this month.

Two US pilots were killed on Friday when their reconnaissance helicopter was apparently shot down in the north of the country, while eight US soldiers and four civilians perished a week earlier when their Black Hawk helicopter crashed near the restive town of Tal Afar in northwestern Iraq.

Iraqi and US officials hope the creation of a unified government following elections a month ago will help to undermine the insurgency.

But the final results of the

December 15 poll have been delayed by some 1,800 fraud complaints made largely by Sunni-backed and secular parties.

The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq said it would release its findings into the claims at a press conference Monday.

The probe focused on 50 of the most serious ballot-rigging allegations, which may have had some minor impact on the final results, officials said.

A group of foreign monitors was also expected to publish the findings of its own separate investigation into the vote on Thursday.

Both announcements are seen as crucial to give further credibility to the election, with negotiations on forming a new four-year government delayed by the slow release of the certified results.

Initial results last month suggested that the country's Shia majority, led by the United Iraqi Alliance coalition, came out on top.

Indian court bans entry to French warship

REUTERS, New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Monday barred a decommissioned French warship, due for scrapping in Gujarat, from entering the country's waters until a report by a team of environment experts.

The aircraft carrier Clemenceau left France in December for the massive Alang ship-breaking yard amid protests from the environmental group Greenpeace.

The ship says the 27,000-tonne ship contains hundreds of tonnes of hazardous material, including 500 tonnes of toxic asbestos which could pose a risk to the health of scrap workers.

A two-judge bench said it would decide on Feb. 13 - after examining the final report by the Supreme Court Monitoring Committee on Hazardous Wastes - if the Clemenceau could enter Alang.

The monitoring panel, which reports to the apex court, had previously recommended the vessel not be allowed to enter India because of the toxic waste it carried.



Indian army soldiers patrol near the killing spot of a top militant in Pattan, a village in the northern Indian Kashmir's Khor valley some 28kms north of Srinagar. Abdullah Bhai alias Abu Huzafa, a member of hardline militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba and believed to be the mastermind of the New Delhi serial bombings, was killed by Indian troops yesterday.

Prince Charles to assume more official functions

AFP, London

Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne, is to assume more official duties from his mother Queen Elizabeth II who will be 80 in April. The Times newspaper reported yesterday.

The queen and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh who will himself turn 85 in June want to spend less time in London and more at Windsor Castle, 40km west of the capital, the paper said.

Charles will get more access to government documents, meet more often with ministers and welcome more foreign dignitaries and ambassadors, according to the report.

The queen will continue her official weekly meetings with the Prime Minister Tony Blair. Blair had just two private audiences with Charles, the Prince of Wales, last year.

Queen Elizabeth carried out 378 official duties in Britain last year, compared to 466 in 1979.

This year she plans at least two major foreign trips, to Australia in April and to Singapore at a date yet to be fixed.

Killing continues in Lanka amid peace move

REUTERS, Colombo

Two men were shot dead in eastern Sri Lanka yesterday in violence ahead of visits by US and Norwegian envoys trying to halt a slide back to civil war between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels.

On Friday, Nordic truce monitors questioned whether the 2002 ceasefire that halted two decades of fighting still held. Later that night, a bomb ripped through one of their vehicles in the first attack on monitors, but no-one was nearby.

"It was definitely not intended to kill anyone," said Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) spokeswoman Helen Olafsdottir.

"We cannot rule out that it was someone trying to scare us away. We are not pulling out -- it would send a strong message that if anyone threw a firecracker in our direction we would leave."

More than 100 people have died in violence in the past month, SLMM says, including dozens of troops in suspected Tiger claymore fragmentation mine ambushes and attacks in minority Tamil dominated areas of the island's north and east.

But the recent violence pales in comparison to the two decades of war that preceded the ceasefire, killing more than 64,000 and leaving the north and east -- also one of the areas worst hit by the 2004 tsunami -- impoverished and destroyed.

Police said two Tamil men had been shot dead in the eastern Muslim town of Akkaraipattu -- scene of tensions between Tamils and Muslims -- while the army said it had recovered two claymores on the army-held but Tamil-dominated Jaffna peninsula.

With Tiger rebels widely believed to be operating behind government lines and the rebels saying a break-away rebel faction in the east is now government-backed, it is difficult to tell who slain individuals are or who killed them.



Socialist Bachelet wins Chilean presidency

AP, Santiago

A socialist doctor and former political prisoner was elected Sunday as the country's first female president, defeating a conservative multimillionaire opponent in a race that reflected Latin America's increasingly leftward tilt.

The victory of Michelle Bachelet a political prisoner during the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet and defence minister in the current administration extends the rule of the market-friendly, centre-left coalition that has governed since the end of Pinochet's 1973-90 rule.

Pipeline blown up ahead of Manmohan's Assam trip

AFP, Guwahati

Suspected separatists blew up an oil pipeline in India's northeastern state of Assam before Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's scheduled two-day visit to the region yesterday, police said.

A police spokesman said suspected militants of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) late Sunday blasted a crude oil pipeline near Palasguri village in the western Chirang district, 220km from Assam's main city Guwahati.

"The pipeline belonging to the Indian Oil Corporation was damaged in the blast and two fire tenders fought for nearly an hour to bring the blaze under control," police official A. Das said.

The district magistrate of Chirang, Jiten Borgohari, said he suspected ULFA carried out the blast to make their presence felt before the prime minister's visit. No one has claimed responsibility.

The blast disrupted supply to the Bongaigaon refinery in western Assam although restoration work was under way, an oil corporation official said.

Singh was due to launch a series of development projects in the state, as well as to lay the foundation stone of a 30 billion rupee (675 million dollar) power plant at Salakati in western Assam.

Salakati is close to the site of Sunday's blast.

"Security forces have been put on high alert across the state in view of the blast and the prime minister's visit," Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi told AFP.

ULFA has been fighting for an independent Assamese homeland since 1979.

Sharon blinks his eyes: Hospital

AFP, Jerusalem

Ariel Sharon blinked his eyes in front of members of his family yesterday but medics treating the coma-stricken Israeli premier said it was too early to assess the significance of the development.

A spokeswoman for the Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem, where Sharon has been treated since he suffered a massive brain haemorrhage on January 4, said members of his family spotted the 77-year-old blinking both of his eyes.

"He blinked -- both eyes -- but the medical significance of this is not clear," Yael Bossam-Levy told AFP.

"Only the family saw it, no doctors were in the room," she added.

Medical sources earlier said on condition of anonymity that Sharon had appeared to shed a tear while listening to a tape of his grandson.

Sharon's elder son Gilad was understood to be in the room at the time.

Top Republican raises impeachment over surveillance flap

AFP, Washington

A top US Republican senator on Sunday for the first time mentioned impeachment in connection with President George W. Bush's authorisation of electronic surveillance inside the United States without a court warrant.

Arlen Specter, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, cautioned it was too early to draw any conclusions as his committee gears up for public hearings into the growing controversy early next month.

But in his appearance on ABC's "This Week" program, Specter insisted the Senate was not going to give the president what he called "a blank check."

When asked what could happen if lawmakers find Bush in violation of the law, Specter answered: "Impeachment is a remedy. After impeachment, you could have a criminal prosecution, but the principal remedy under our society is to pay a political price."

He made it a point to clarify, however, that he was speaking theoretically and was "not suggesting remotely that there's any basis" for a presidential impeachment at this moment.

The controversy erupted last month after the New York Times reported that Bush had repeatedly authorized the National Security Agency to monitor overseas telephone calls and e-mail traffic to and from people living in the United States without requisite permission from a secret court.

Under the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, the government can conduct such surveillance only for 72 hours as it seeks a warrant for continued monitoring.

Bush has blasted the disclosure as harmful to national security and vowing to continue the wiretaps, arguing he had the right to authorize them under his constitutional war powers as well as a resolution passed by Congress in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.