

Nepal grinds to a halt as Maoist strike bites

AFP, Kathmandu

A general strike called by Maoist rebels to disrupt controversial elections this week brought towns across Nepal to a standstill yesterday, witnesses said.

In the capital Kathmandu, many traders opened their stores in the morning but later downed shutters, as streets began emptying of vehicular traffic. Soldiers and army personnel launched foot and vehicle patrols.

Police said Kathmandu had been quiet Sunday.

"There have not been any reports of violence in the valley so far. Everything is quiet and normal," said an officer from police headquarters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

In Nepalgunj, 510km west of Kathmandu, the strike brought activities to a standstill, a local journalist said, speaking by telephone from the gateway town to the Maoist dominated mid-western region.

"Normal life has been severely disrupted. Only vehicles belonging to security forces are on the

streets," said Janak Nepal from the town of around 150,000 people close to the Indian border.

In Biratnagar, 540 kilometres east of Kathmandu, the strike also paralysed daily life, another journalist said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"All markets are closed and not a single vehicle is on the streets, and there is a heavy security presence," he said.

The rebels -- who want to depose King Gyanendra and turn the poverty-stricken Himalayan nation into a communist state -- called the week-long strike to disrupt Wednesday's scheduled local elections.

The guerrillas are believed to have killed two candidates and have pledged to step up attacks ahead of polling day.

Tension has risen in Nepal in the run-up to the February 1 first anniversary of Gyanendra's sacking of the elected government, a step he justified by saying he needed emergency powers to quell the Maoist rebel-

lion that has claimed some 12,500 lives since 1996.

Wednesday's polls are part of the king's declared "road map" to democracy. He has pledged they will be followed by general elections in the next 15 months.

But the municipal elections are opposed by the Maoists and opposition parties, who have formed a loose anti-royal alliance. They condemn the polls as a sham aimed at legitimising the king's power grab.

The royal government, which has been rocked by recent street protests, has told Nepalis to ignore the Maoists' strike call and threatened to arrest those who try to stop businesses from opening or who vandalize property.

Despite the security problems, the election will go ahead, Election Commission spokesman Tejmundi Bajracharya told AFP.

"Security agencies have pledged maximum security for the polls so we are confident that elections will be held smoothly, despite the difficult situation," said

Bajracharya.

Elections are taking place only in 36 of Nepal's 58 municipalities. In 22 municipalities, officials have already been appointed as there were not enough candidates to contest the election, the spokesman said.

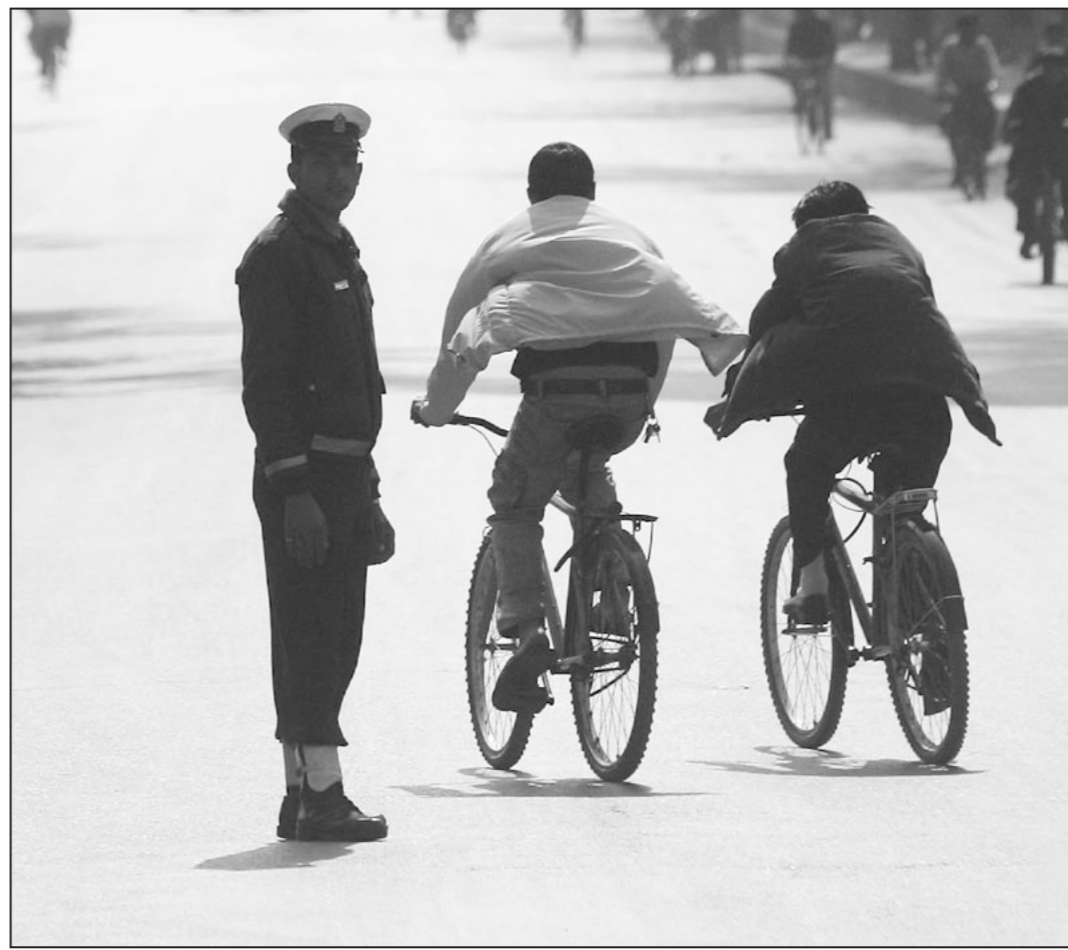
The killings of two candidates meant that voter turnout on Wednesday was likely to be small, the head of a human rights organization said.

"People have been terrified after recent incidents, so turnout will be very thin," said Subodh Pyakurel, chairman of the Informal Sector Service Centre.

There has been a dearth of candidates, and many of those that are standing are under government protection.

By holding the polls, "the king is trying to give legitimacy" to those who "do not represent the actual voice of the people," said Dhurba Hari Adhikari, president of the Nepal Press Institute.

Opposition parties declined to comment on the strike, saying it was too early.



A Nepalese traffic policeman stands in the middle of a traffic-free avenue in Kathmandu while cyclists go by on the first day of a week-long national strike called by Maoist rebels.

British Muslims angered by cartoons

ANSAR AHMED ULLAH, London

British Muslims have been staging angry protests outside the Danish embassy in London for the last two days over the publication of cartoons on Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM).

Friday demonstration in London was very aggressive though it was a bit calmer on Saturday. Demonstrations were also held on Friday outside the BBC office because it showed the cartoons in its news broadcasts.

Anger erupted in London after the cartoons mocking Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM) were reprinted this year in Norway, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Iceland, Switzerland and Holland in defence of freedom of speech.

The cartoons were first published on Sept 30 last year by a Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten.

Demonstrators said Islam forbids the portrayal of Mohammad (SM) as it could lead to idolatry.

One protester said while Muslims respect freedom of speech the newspapers should have been aware of the nature of these cartoons, as they were deeply offensive to the Muslim community.

PHOTO: AFP



A cleric shouts slogans as Lebanese demonstrators set fire to the building housing the Danish consulate in a Christian neighbourhood of Beirut yesterday in the latest violent protest against cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM).

Danish embassies torched as Muslim protests grow

Denmark evacuates nationals from Lebanon, Syria

AFP, Beirut/ Damascus

Denmark evacuated nationals, including diplomatic staff, from Lebanon and Syria at the weekend after angry Muslim mobs torched its embassies in both countries in worsening protests over Western caricatures of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM).

"The situation in Beirut is not under control," the Danish foreign ministry said Sunday, hours after Lebanese demonstrators set fire to its embassy there in clashes that left at least 28 people injured.

Denmark's embassy in the Syrian capital Damascus was similarly torched Saturday, as was the Norwegian mission, prompting condemnation from the European Union.

The attacks "can by no means be legitimised and are utterly unacceptable," Austria, the current holder of the rotating EU presidency, said Sunday.

Nearly 1,000 people also pro-

tested in eastern Afghanistan on Sunday and demanded the expulsion of Danish forces based there as part of a Nato deployment.

There were no reports of Danish casualties in any of the incidents.

But fears grew that other Western citizens and embassies might be targeted, especially those from nations where the controversial editorial cartoons have been reprinted.

Media in Norway, France, Spain and several other countries -- most of them in Europe -- have reproduced some or all of the dozen caricatures first published by Denmark's Jyllands-Posten daily in September.

Muslims and their governments have called the cartoons blasphemous and contrary to Islamic tradition prohibiting depictions of Mohammed.

One of the cartoons shows Hazrat Mohammed (SM) wearing a bomb-shaped turban.

European governments have stressed they have no control over

media in their countries, and have sided with their press's arguments that freedom of expression outweighs respect for religions in their secular societies.

But the row -- which some observers have called "a clash of civilisations" -- shows no sign of dying down.

In Beirut on Sunday, thousands of protesters rampaged through the Christian area of Ashrafiyeh, throwing stones, breaking windows and overturning cars.

They defied police firing tear gas to storm the Danish embassy building using ladders. There they hacked at walls and windows with axes and poles and set the place ablaze, sending thick smoke billowing into the sky.

Denmark's red-and-white flag was set alight.

The embassy itself was empty of Danish diplomats, who had evacuated late Saturday after the similar protest in Syria, where the Danish and Norwegian embassies were set on fire.

Manmohan mulls crisis talks with left allies

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was mulling yesterday whether to hold crisis talks with leftwing allies angry at his government's vote against Iran over its nuclear programme and its airport privatisation plans.

"Prime Minister Manmohan Singh... is considering calling a meeting of the coordination committee before the parliament session to discuss issues like Iran and privatisation," a spokesman for Singh's Congress party, Rajiv Shukla, was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India news agency.

The coordination committee is an interface between the ruling Congress party and its political allies aimed at helping defuse differences over policy.

Leftwing parties Sunday called an emergency meeting after which they demanded a parliamentary debate on India's vote against Iran at a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna.

India, along with the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China were among 26 countries that voted Saturday to refer Iran to the UN Security Council for its alleged nuclear weapons programme.

India's vote came despite a meeting between the communists and Singh last week in which the leftists, who are bitterly opposed to India siding with the US against Iran, had urged the government to abstain from voting.

The communists, with 61 MPs, extend crucial outside support to the Singh government.

After their meeting Sunday, Prakash Karat, chief of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), described India's vote as "regrettable."

"The stand taken by India at the IAEA meeting is not in conformity with the pursuit of an independent foreign policy and maintenance of good relations with Iran which is in our national interests," Karat told reporters.

Series of tragic errors doomed Egypt ferry

AP, Safaga

The series of tragic errors that apparently claimed more than 1,000 lives on an Egyptian ferry escalated when the crew decided to push across the Red Sea despite the fire burning in the aging vessel's parking bay, survivors said Saturday.

The Al-Salaam Boccaccio 98 had sailed only about 20 miles from the Saudi shore, but its crew instead tried to reach Egypt's shores 110 miles away. Only 376 survivors had been rescued by late Saturday.

"We told the crew, 'Let's turn back, let's call for help,' but they refused and said everything was under control," said passenger Ahmed Abdel Wahab, 30, an Egyptian who works in Saudi Arabia.

Passengers began panicking, and crew members locked up some women in their cabins. Wahab and another survivor said, though many others being treated in Safaga hospitals Saturday said that was not true.

As the blaze grew out of control, passengers not locked in their rooms moved to one side of the 35-year-old vessel. An explosion was heard, and high winds helped push the unbalanced ship over. The ship quickly sank with more than 1,400 passengers and crew and 220 cars aboard.

News reports on Saturday said the ship's captain and some of the crew fled their drowning vessel in one of the first lifeboats to launch.

Despite the fire, the ship had managed to get within about 55 miles of the Egyptian port of Hurghada, according to official accounts.

At the port of Safaga the ship's original destination relatives and friends of passengers begged authorities for information. When there was none, some banged on the iron gates trying to storm the docks.

Riot police with truncheons pushed the frantic crowd away from the port compound. Angry relatives threw stones, and some police could be seen hurling them back.

Hamas asserts 'right to self-defence'

3 militants killed in Israeli raids

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas, under mounting international pressure to renounce violence, asserted the Palestinians' "right to self-defence" yesterday after the first Israeli air raids since its shock election victory last month.

Three members of another militant group, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, were killed in a series of overnight air strikes focused on northern Gaza which Israel said were in response to a rocket attack on a kibbutz.

Al-Aqsa, an offshoot of the former ruling Fatah faction, also vowed to hit back at Israel in the aftermath of the strikes, saying suicide bombers were ready to exact their revenge.

One Israeli was killed and another five injured after being stabbed on a minibus near Tel Aviv, although there was no immediate

claim of responsibility.

Ismail Haniya, the radical Islamist movement Hamas's top candidate in the January 25 election, said he had decided not to go to neighbouring Egypt in the aftermath of the Gaza attack. Another senior member of the organisation, Mahmud al-Zahar, did still travel and crossed the Rafah border in mid-morning.

"We condemn this crime, this assassination which only serves to increase the strength and unity of the Palestinian people," Haniya told AFP.

"People have the right to defend themselves in the face of these acts by the occupation."

Hamas, behind dozens of attacks on Israel in the last five years, is under heavy international pressure to renounce the use of violence before forming a new government.



Palestinians gather around the debris of al-Shams club after an Israeli helicopter attack in Gaza City yesterday. Three members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, the militant armed offshoot of the Fatah movement, were killed in an Israeli helicopter attack in Gaza City on Saturday night.

PHOTO: AFP