



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese opposition activists stage a small demonstration against King Gyanendra's power grab in Kathmandu yesterday. A suspected rebel bomb killed one policeman and wounded four others on the second day of a general strike called by Maoists to disrupt local elections scheduled for February 8.

PROSECUTOR SAYS Saddam could be forced to attend trial

REUTERS, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein may be forced to appear in court when his trial resumes next week, the chief prosecutor said yesterday, expressing frustration at the former leader's persistent boycotting of proceedings.

Ja'afar Moussawi also confirmed that Saddam's defence team had been barred from visiting him and seven co-accused in jail, saying the lawyers had lost that right when they stormed out of court last week after clashing with the chief judge.

Saddam's chief counsel, Khalil Dulaimi, said on Sunday the team had been prevented from seeing their client and accused the court of being interested only in Saddam's speedy conviction.

Saddam and some of his former top aides have not attended the last two court sessions, having followed the lead of their defence counsel who walked out of court on January 29. Three minor Baath party officials were barred from the last session for "causing chaos" outside the courtroom.

The trial has been beset by delays, postponements and court-

room chaos since it began in October.

The lawyers staged the walkout after a tough new chief judge, Raouf Abdel Rahman, ejected a member of their team and one of the defendants for refusing to be quiet.

Moussawi said the court would "take the appropriate action" if there was another no-show when the trial resumes on February 13.

Asked if forcing Saddam to attend was an option, he said: "Yes, this can be done under Iraqi law." But he did not specify whether that might mean physically dragging him into court.

Moussawi said if the defence team wanted to visit Saddam and his co-defendants they would have to apply through the court.

"The defence team has withdrawn. If they wanted to see their clients, why did they withdraw from the court?" he asked.

The defence has called for judge Abdel Rahman to step down, accusing him of bias against their clients, who are charged with the killing of 148 men from the Shia town of Dujail after a bid to assassinate Saddam there in 1982.

Bombing marks day 2 of Nepali strike

AFP, Kathmandu

A suspected rebel bomb killed a policeman and wounded four others in Nepal yesterday on the second day of a general strike called by Maoists to disrupt the country's first poll since a royal takeover a year ago.

The rebels have threatened to increase attacks in the run-up to Wednesday's local elections, which King Gyanendra's government insisted would go ahead despite claims the poll is aimed at justifying his seizure of full power.

The latest violence came as most shops were shuttered in the capital Kathmandu, after the beginning of the strike on Sunday brought towns across the Himalayan kingdom to a standstill.

Few vehicles were out on the roads Monday, and many that were covered up their registration plates to prevent identification. Extra police were posted at major intersections and riot police drove through the city.

The strike also badly hit the important southwest regional centre of Nepalgunj near the border with India, according to Bholi Mohat, regional coordinator for human rights group Informal Sector Service Centre in the town.

"Today the strike is very effective. There are no civilian vehicles on the road, only rickshaws," said Mohat.

Lanka tense as Norway tries to save peace bid

REUTERS, Colombo

Protesters burned barricades at Tamil Tiger checkpoints in east Sri Lanka yesterday and tsunami aid workers stayed inside as peace broker Norway tried again to patch up a shaky peace process and arrange crunch talks.

Relief officials said the protests were in response to the reported abductions of staff from an aid group closely tied to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who blame the government for the incident and say it will delay talks scheduled in Geneva for mid-February.

"It seems they're not letting people cross into Tiger-controlled areas," said Helen Olafsdottir, spokeswoman for the Nordic-staffed mission monitoring a 2002 ceasefire. "They're burning tyres at the crossing points."

The barricades appeared to be limited to the east, she said. Sri

Lanka had seemed to be stepping back from the brink of civil war in late January when the two sides agreed to meet in Switzerland and talk about stopping violence that had killed more than 200 people in two months.

But after the reported abduction of 10 workers from the Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), effectively the relief arm of the de facto Tamil state, the rebels said they would not accept the government's suggested dates of Feb. 15 and 16, and were aiming for talks at the end of the month instead.

If the talks fail or are cancelled, diplomats say, it would be difficult to avoid going back to a two-decade civil war that has already killed more than 64,000 people. Norway said Solheim was due to meet chief rebel negotiator Anton Balasingham later on Monday in London to try to resolve the new impasse.

Israel will work with Abbas, not Hamas

AP, AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's acting prime minister, Ehud Olmert, said yesterday he will work with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas as long as he does not join forces with Hamas.

Olmert also said Israel would continue transferring monthly tax payments to the Palestinian Authority as long as Hamas was not in control. Hamas won parliamentary elections earlier this month, but has not yet begun forming a government.

"We have decided to transfer the funds to the Palestinians as long as they are not led by a government formed by Hamas and as long as they decide to work towards stability," Olmert said in a speech in Israel's commercial capital Tel Aviv.

"I have no interest in harming Palestinian Authority chairman Abu Mazen as long as he doesn't cooperate with Hamas and as long as the Palestinian government isn't led by Hamas," Olmert said Monday.

Abbas is widely known as Abu Mazen.

He spoke a day after Israel agreed Sunday to transfer \$54 million in desperately needed tax money to the Palestinian Authority, but said it might freeze payments after the Islamic Hamas group forms the next Palestinian government.

Israel's monthly transfer of the taxes and customs duties it collects on behalf of the Palestinians is crucial to the functioning of the Palestinian Authority. Halting the payments would deepen the government's financial crisis and add to the growing international pressure on Hamas to renounce violence and recognise Israel before it takes power.

Olmert had initially justified the freeze on the grounds that he wanted to ensure the money does not get in the hands of "terrorists", a reference to Hamas, which won a January 25 general election.

Schools closed after 3 killed in Thai south

AFP, Yala

More than 100 schools were closed in Thailand's south yesterday after at least six suspected Muslim militants gunned down three members of the security forces at a market, police said.

The gunmen shot two police officers as they shopped at the market in Yala province then killed a paramilitary officer at the scene who opened fire in retaliation, district police officer Sarawoot Mahardchai said.

"The killers were walking with villagers at the market before they started shooting at the policemen," he told AFP.

"It seems like the attackers especially targeted the policemen," said Sarawoot. "We believe that they are suspected Muslim

militants trying to worsen the violence and unrest in the south."

Education Minister Chaturon Chaisaeng said that more than 100 schools in Yala would be closed for one week starting from Monday due to security concerns.

"We are aware that teachers have become the main target of the attacks in the south," said the minister who is due to visit Yala on Thursday to discuss safety measures.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who has been criticised for failing to quell the violence in the south, said he would go there to evaluate the situation following his current trip to the northern city of Chiang Mai.

"When I finish the mission in the north, I will follow (Justice Minister) Chidchai Vanasatidya to the south," he said.

Global Muslim ire over cartoons escalates

5 protesters killed in Afghanistan, Lebanon & Somalia

AFP, BBC, Jajalabad/ Copenhagen

Global protests over cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) escalated yesterday, with five demonstrators killed in Afghanistan, Somalia and Lebanon and warning shots fired outside a US consulate in Indonesia.

After a weekend that saw Denmark's embassies torched in Lebanon and Syria, fury over the images continued to spread with protests held across Afghanistan as well as in Indian-held Kashmir, Indonesia, Lebanon, Iran and Thailand.

Three people died after police in Afghanistan fired on protesters when a police station came under attack, a government spokesman said.

In Somalia, a 14-year-old boy was shot dead and several others were injured after protesters attacked the police.

In Lebanon, one person died and

almost 50 people were wounded during rioting in the capital Beirut which saw the Danish consulate set ablaze, police said Monday.

One of the demonstrators involved in torching the mission was found dead in the staircase of the building, which was attacked by crowds of protestors on Sunday amid fury over the cartoons which are seen as blasphemous by Muslims.

Earlier Denmark issued a list of 14 Muslim countries which travellers should avoid following violent protests against the publication of cartoons.

The foreign ministry has already advised Danish nationals to leave those countries immediately.

The 14 countries listed as places to avoid are Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

French Foreign Minister Philippe

Douste-Blazy called for calm as the Arab world seethes over the cartoons which first appeared in a Danish daily and have been reprinted by several publications in Europe, Australia and Malaysia.

"Let's us calm things down. We have had enough hate and intolerance," he said on French radio. "There is not a religion in the world that condones killing, or the burning of flags."

In the capital Kabul about 300 people marched on Denmark's embassy where they torched a Danish flag and threw stones at the embassy, shouting "Death to Denmark, death to Norway, death to America, death to Bush."

Around 1,000 protestors also gathered in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif and burnt the flags of France, Denmark and Norway. Hundreds protested in Kandahar, while more than 5,000 marched in Parwan province near Kabul.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan demonstrators burn Danish flags during a protest in front of the Danish embassy in Kabul yesterday. Fresh protests against cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) erupted across globe with five people killed during clashes in Afghanistan, Somalia and Lebanon.

Boycott by parties hits Nepal polls credibility

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Revolt-torn Nepal holds municipal polls this week, the country's first elections in nearly seven years, but a boycott by key political parties and rebel threats are expected to rob the vote of credibility.

For King Gyanendra, who sacked the government and took executive power one year ago, Wednesday's polls are an attempt to signal that he is serious about restoring democracy and is laying the ground for parliamentary elections by April 2007.

But the seven mainstream political parties in the impoverished Himalayan kingdom and Maoist rebels, fighting since 1996 to topple the monarchy, see it as a move by the king to legitimise his rule and

sideline popular democratic groups.

"The seven-party alliance represents about 90-95 percent of the old parliament," said a Kathmandu-based diplomat. "Their boycotting the municipal polls puts a very big question mark over whether these elections will be free, fair and credible."

The rebels have stepped up violence ahead of the vote, killing two election hopefuls, shooting and wounding another and setting off bombs in the houses and vehicles of candidates.

One policeman was killed and four wounded on Monday when their vehicle hit a landmine near Mahendranagar in western Nepal, police said.

Security was stepped up in Kathmandu after soldiers late on

Sunday defused a bomb, apparently left by Maoists, under a bridge in an upmarket area, authorities said.

The violence came as a week-long nationwide general strike called by the rebels entered its second day. The stoppage has closed down transport services, businesses and educational institutions and brought life to a halt across the country.

Fear of being targeted by the rebels has hurt participation in the polls.

Of more than 4,100 posts at issue in 58 municipal councils, there are no candidates for more than 2,100. Nearly 650 candidates pulled out after filing their papers and dozens have resigned after being elected unopposed.