

# Nepali protests greet win of all the king's men

## US slams vote as 'hollow' exercise

AFP, Kathmandu

Pro-royal candidates swept elections in Nepal that were marred by violence and a major boycott, preliminary results showed yesterday as new protests erupted over the polls.

Police fired rounds of tear gas at around two-dozen student protesters shouting anti-king slogans near the palace in the ancient capital Kathmandu a day after the polls, which saw a record low turnout.

Witnesses said some 500 people crying "Hang the murderers" also massed on Kathmandu's outskirts to protest the army shooting of a protester in west Nepal during the vote, which the king said would be a step to restore democracy by April 2007.

With ballots counted in nearly half the 36 municipalities where polls were held Wednesday, candidates mainly from pro-royal parties won the day.

The elections, boycotted by opposition parties and disrupted by

Maoist rebels, were marked by record low turnout of 21 per cent, the election commission said.

The elections were condemned by the United States as a "hollow attempt to legitimise power" by Gyanendra, who seized power a year ago in what he said was a bid to quell the 10-year insurgency by the rebels.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said the polls were marred by the government's detention of many political activists, restrictive media coverage, violence by Maoist rebels and a lack of monitors.

"This is the lowest turnout in the history of elections conducted in Nepal," election commission spokesman Tejmundi Bajracharya told AFP, attributing the small voter participation to "unfavourable conditions."

The rebels had threatened to "take action" against anyone taking part, while a rebel-called general strike shut down much of the country in the run-up to the vote.

The Rastriya Prajatantra Party

(Kamal Thapa) led by Home Minister Kamal Thapa won mayors' seats in 10 municipalities, and independent candidates – many believed to be backers of the king – won seven, according to the early results. One seat went to the royalist Nepal Sadhwana party.

Gyanendra sacked the government a year ago and took full power, accusing the government of incompetence in failing to end the Maoist insurgency that has claimed 12,500 lives since 1996.

Opposition parties and the Maoists entered a loose alliance against the monarchy last year that has held despite the deaths of more than 140 people since the rebels ended a unilateral ceasefire in early January.

"The election is a state-managed farce. It can only damage the future of the country," said Kapil Shrestha, politics professor at Tribhuvan University and human rights activist.

"His roadmap toward democracy has led to ruin," Shrestha said. "He has shown his stubbornness

and arrogance with a medieval state of mind."

"The only effective way to deal with the threat posed by Maoists is to restore democracy in Nepal," US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters in Washington on Wednesday.

"We call upon the king to release all political detainees and initiate a dialogue with the political parties," he said.

The state-run Rising Nepal newspaper lauded the election's "peaceful conclusion" while the independent Kathmandu Post and Himalayan Times featured front-page stories about the low turnout and poll protests.

Over half the seats up for grabs remained empty due to a dearth of candidates while in 22 municipalities, mayors were acclaimed after no other people ran.

The low turnout reflected people's distrust of the king, said Dhruva Adhikary, president of the Nepal Press Institute.



Nepalese activists of seven opposition parties shout anti-king slogans yesterday in Kathmandu during a demonstration held against the army killing of a protester during municipal elections on Wednesday in Dang district in western Nepal.

# Lanka eyes prisoner swap with Tigers

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers are considering a prisoner swap to pave the way for trust building at talks this month that could be the island's last chance for peace, a government negotiator said yesterday.

"The Tigers are holding two police constables we are hoping will be released before talks begin," Trade Minister and peace envoy Jeyaraj Fernando said in an interview in the midst of preparations for the talks in Switzerland.

"The Tigers have requested some people be released ... a reciprocal prisoner exchange."

The talks due to be held in or near Geneva on Feb. 22-23 are seen as a last ditch bid to halt attacks that have killed around 200 soldiers, civilians and rebels in two months and threatened to upend a 2002 truce and rekindle a two-decade civil war.

Beaten up by the Tamil Tigers a year ago during a post-tsunami visit to the island's north, Fernando said he knows only too well the gulf that divides the rebels and the majority-Sinhalese south.

"Without building trust, there's no point in talking," the envoy,

himself descended from Indian Tamils who moved to Sri Lanka 300 years ago, said.

The talks could be the first step in what envoys say will be a long haul towards a final settlement to an armed struggle the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) began in earnest in 1983 to fight what many Tamils see as discrimination by successive Sinhalese governments.

"These are not peace talks. We are going to try and have a working arrangement with the LTTE and then later we can have peace talks," Fernando said. "Trust must come first."

"If both sides are genuine, if the LTTE is genuine, then these talks can be successful, he added. "Despite all the attacks, all the killings, I think the Tigers are genuine."

The Tigers insist the talks must focus on implementation to the letter of the existing ceasefire – in particular a clause that stipulates the state must disarm paramilitaries the rebels say are attacking them.

They want the government to disarm a renegade rebel faction led by a breakaway commander called Karuna, suspected to be behind a series of attacks in parts of the north and east.



Iraqi Shia Muslim worshippers with faces soaked in blood stand in front of a huge portrait of Imam Hussein, grandson of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM), during Ashura ceremony in Baghdad yesterday. Hundreds of thousands of Shias, many beating their heads with knives, marked the mourning ceremony of Ashura amid tight security to prevent Sunni insurgent attacks.

# Taliban issue warning over cartoons

## Protests ease

AFP, Copenhagen

Muslim protests over cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) subsided yesterday but a Taliban commander in Afghanistan warned that 100 militants have enlisted as suicide bombers and Denmark said it feared for the safety of its troops in Iraq.

Afghan authorities arrested more than 40 Pakistani workers for inciting violence during a protest on Wednesday against the cartoons in which four people were killed.

The men were arrested with their Arab boss in Qalat in southern Zabul province where police opened fire to quell rampaging demonstrators.

"The protests were supposed to be peaceful. But we have proof that these men were involved in turning it to violence," provincial spokes-

man Gulab Shah Alikhil told AFP.

The deaths in Qalat took to 11 the toll from five days of protests in Afghanistan against the cartoons, which have appeared in several international newspapers, most of them European. One person has also died in protests in Somalia and one in Lebanon.

No further violence was reported Thursday.

But Mullah Dadullah, one of the Taliban's most senior military commanders in Afghanistan, warned that 100 militants have enlisted to become suicide bombers in Afghanistan since the appearance of "blasphemous" cartoons.

He also said his Islamic extremist group had offered a reward of 100 kilograms (220 pounds) of gold to anyone who killed people responsible for the drawings.

# Musharraf to visit China to cement ties

REUTERS, Beijing

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf will make a state visit to China from Feb. 19 to strengthen relations at a time when their traditional ties have been tested by new regional currents.

Pakistan served as a go-between when China and the United States began exploring diplomatic ties in the early 1970s, and it long served as China's strategic counterweight to India in south Asia.

China is one of Pakistan's largest aid donors.

But China has also been pursuing warmer relations with India – Pakistan's longtime rival – and has been in talks with New Delhi aimed at ending long-running territorial disputes.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Kong Qian said the 5-day visit was very important, adding the two countries had a friendship that could endure "all weather".

Musharraf will hold talks with Chinese President Hu Jintao, and also sign a series of deals, Kong told a regular news conference.

# Egyptian diplomat seized in Gaza

## 3 Palestinians killed

AFP, Jerusalem

An Egyptian diplomat became Thursday the most high-profile victim of a kidnapping spree in the Gaza Strip, as Israeli soldiers shot dead three Palestinian militants in two separate incidents.

The diplomat, named by Egypt's representative offices in Gaza City as Hossam al-Mussell, was heading toward his office in the Al-Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City when masked gunmen seized him and drove away, police sources said.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and a spokesman for the radical movement Hamas, which won last month's legislative polls, both condemned the kidnapping, the first of a diplomat in the territory.

Abbas ordered an urgent manhunt for Mussell's captors, calling

the seizure "foreign to the traditions of the Palestinian people."

Hamas's spokesman in Gaza, Sami Abu Zuhri, told AFP that "those who carry out such acts are seeking to hurt our people and damage distinguished relations that link the Egyptian and Palestinian people."

No militant group immediately claimed responsibility for snatching Mussell, described by Egyptian officials as a military advisor to the diplomatic mission.

Earlier, Israeli soldiers shot dead two Palestinian militants as they staged a pre-dawn attack at the Erez crossing between northern Gaza and southern Israel.

The attack was the first on the main crossing point from Gaza since troops and Jewish settlers were pulled out of the territory last summer.

# Indian police reopen nearly 1,600 cases on Gujarat riots

AFP, Ahmedabad

Indian police have reopened nearly 1,600 cases related to communal violence in the western state of Gujarat in 2002 in which some 2,000 people were killed, a top official said.

Police will also hold inquiries into the conduct of 41 police officials who investigated the bloodletting.

The move comes after India's Supreme Court asked police in Gujarat to reinvestigate 2,020 cases it had closed.

"We have sent a fresh monthly report to the Supreme Court. The report says we have reopened 1,594 cases, of which 13 are fresh cases," said Gujarat police director general A.K. Bhargava, who heads a committee probing the riots.

Human rights groups accuse the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya

Janata Party state government of turning a blind eye to the riots, in which Muslims were targeted.

They also accuse the police of helping the rioting mobs and hushing up police cases against the accused after the violence.

Bhargava said police had also made 640 fresh arrests in connection with the deadly clashes in Gujarat.

The violence was sparked in February 2002 when a Muslim mob was accused of torching a train carriage in the town of Godhra, killing 59 Hindu pilgrims. Officials later found the fire was an accident.

In December, residents of the village of Lunavada unearthed what they said was possibly a mass grave, containing the remains and clothes of eight people.

Federal authorities were to conduct DNA tests on the skeletons to find out whether they were the remains of Gujarat victims.

# Indo-US nuke deal runs into troubled waters

REUTERS, New Delhi

A landmark nuclear cooperation deal between India and the United States has run into serious trouble, with Washington playing hard ball and India's atomic energy establishment raising objections to the terms of the deal.

Now Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has a tough choice to make – override his own scientific establishment or suffer a serious loss of face when President George W. Bush visits his country in early March.

"The government is debating this very seriously," said foreign policy expert C. Raja Mohan. "Some big decisions have to be taken."

The deal, agreed in principle when Singh visited Washington last July, would offer India access to nuclear technology and reactors – at a stroke removing much of the stigma India attracted when it conducted nuclear tests in 1974

and 1998.

In return, New Delhi offered to separate its civilian and military nuclear programmes – and place the civilian part under international supervision.

But that is where the deal could come unstuck.

The US administration, under pressure from a hesitant Congress, wants to see more of India's programme under international supervision than New Delhi is offering.

At the heart of the debate is a prototype Fast Breeder Programme, which would process plutonium from spent fuel from India's existing Heavy Water reactors.

The chief of India's Department of Atomic Energy Anil Kakodkar went public with his objections in a newspaper interview published in full on Wednesday. Placing the Fast Breeder under international supervision would "shackle" his scientists and leave the country dependent on imported uranium, he said.

"Both from the point of view of maintaining long-term energy security and for maintaining the 'minimum credible deterrent', the Fast Breeder Programme just cannot be put on the civilian list," he said. "This is not in our strategic interest."

Nonsense say the deal's supporters. DAE, long a secretive and isolationist organisation, is simply scared of opening up, ignoring long-term strategic goals for its own narrow interests.

"There is a very strong turf battle going on," said Dr Harsh V. Pant, a lecturer in defence studies at King's College, London. "The scientific establishment wants to defend its turf."

Singh, already under fire from his Communist allies over the deal, has promised to address parliament later this month about the deal. Promising to defend India's national interest, he vowed there was "no question of bending" to American demands.



A member of the Palestinian security forces mans a checkpoint at the Erez crossing, northern Gaza Strip yesterday. Three Palestinians were killed yesterday after a pre-dawn attack on Israeli soldiers guarding the main crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

# Nerve agent scare at US Capitol

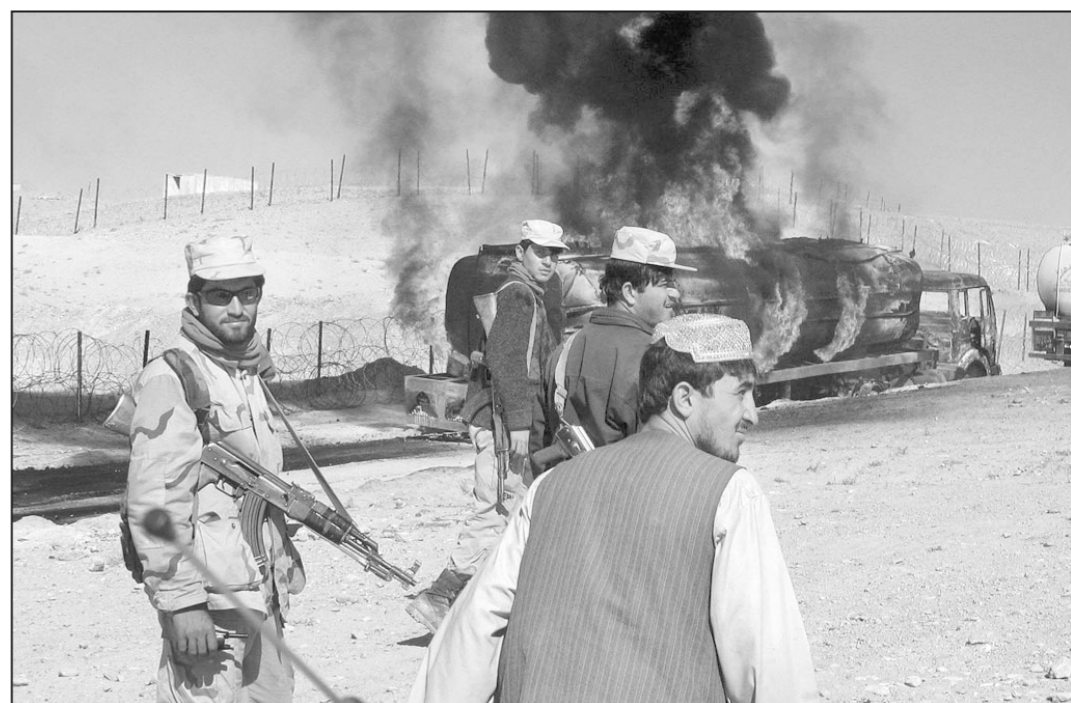
AFP, Washington

Washington authorities said a nerve agent scare, which forced the evacuation of a Senate office building Wednesday night, was a "false alarm" after white powder found in the building tested negative.

Scores of senators and Senate staffers were rushed from their offices after a sensor in the building's attic set off an alarm indicating the suspected presence of a dangerous nerve agent in the building, said Capitol Police sergeant Kimberly Schneider.

"All the test results are actually negative, so that's very good news," Schneider told reporters about three hours after the Russell Senate Office Building was evacuated.

"We have a good outcome tonight, so we are all very happy about this," she said.



Afghan army soldiers stand near a burning truck outside a US military base in Qalat on Wednesday. The truck was set alight by protestors offended by the publication of cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) in European dailies.

US SAYS

# Syria, Iran are stoking anti-West sentiment

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday accused Syria and Iran of using the international row over cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) to incite anti-West sentiment and violence for their own purposes.

As Washington grappled with mounting anger among Muslims over publication of the caricatures in Western newspapers, President George W. Bush condemned the violence while admonishing the media to be more "thoughtful" of others.

But Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sharpened the political dimension of the controversy by charging Iran and Syria, two frequent targets of the Bush administration, with stoking sectarian feelings.

Emerging from talks with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Rice said some Muslim countries were

behaving responsibly but "there are governments that have also used this opportunity to incite violence."

"I don't have any doubt that ... Iran and Syria have gone out of their way to inflame sentiments and to use this to their own purposes. And the world ought to call them on it," she said.

Rice went further than previous US statements which accused Tehran and Damascus of not doing enough to rein in the violent protests over the satirical images of Mohammed first published in a Danish paper.

"Nothing justifies the violence that has broken out in which many innocent people have been injured," she said. "Nothing justifies the burning of diplomatic facilities or threats to diplomatic facilities around the world."

The United States and Europe have recently assailed Iran over its

nuclear programme and pressured Syria over its involvement in Lebanon and alleged role in the killing of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri.

Bush, meeting at the White House with Jordan's King Abdullah, said: "I call upon the governments around the world to stop the violence, to be respectful, to protect property, to protect the lives of innocent diplomats."

In his first public remarks on the global furor, Bush said he and Abdullah both rejected violence as a way to express discontent with the press. But the US president had a stern message for the media as well.

"We believe in a free press, and also recognise that with freedom comes responsibilities, that with freedom comes the responsibility to be thoughtful about others," he told reporters in the Oval Office.