

## Pakistan test fires missile

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan successfully test-fired a short-range nuclear-capable ballistic missile on Sunday, a military statement said.

It said the Hatf-II/Abdali ground-to-ground missile had a range of 200 km and could carry "nuclear and other types of warheads".

"All planned technical parameters were validated," the statement said. It gave no more details nor the site of the test, which was announced as President Pervez Musharraf was due to leave for a five-day state visit to China.

In a reference to neighbouring countries, the statement said advance notice of the test had been given to "all concerned".

Pakistan and India have fought three wars since winning independence from British rule in 1947 and went to the brink of a fourth in 2002.

Both have regularly carried out missile tests despite warming bilateral relations over the past two years.

# Nepali king invites parties for talks

## Maoists call for indefinite strike from April 3

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra made his first formal approach to the country's estranged political parties yesterday, urging them to join talks and try to put democracy back on track.

"We, therefore, call on all willing political parties to come forth to fully activate, at the earliest, the stalled democratic process in the greater interest of the nation," Gyanendra said in a national democracy day statement.

The king also urged anti-monarchy Maoist rebels to shun violence and rejoin the mainstream.

"Let us listen to others, put across our views, do away with discord and enhance mutual understanding; let us consolidate peace and democracy," he said.

"We can't hold talks in a vacuum," Sushil Koirala, a senior leader of the Nepali Congress party, the biggest group in the seven-party alliance protesting

against the king, said in a brief comment. He did not elaborate.

There was no immediate response from the rebels, who had called on Saturday for an indefinite nationwide strike against the king from April 3.

Maoist chief Prachanda, who uses only one name, and his deputy Baburam Bhattarai said the rebels would also enforce a blockade of the capital Kathmandu and other main towns from March 14 to try and bring down king.

"We believe the blockade and the strike, though temporarily painful, will give lasting relief for generations to come," the underground rebel leaders said in an emailed statement.

They asked transporters, factories, businesses, schools and offices to close indefinitely during the strike.

"We urge for and expect willing and active participation of the people in this historic and decisive

movement," they said.

In the past, the Maoists have enforced closures and blockaded Kathmandu for several days, disrupting the supply of essential goods to the city of more than 1.5 million people.

In an interview with the BBC broadcast earlier this month, Prachanda said the king would ultimately be exiled or executed by a "people's court".

More than 13,000 people have died in the conflict since 1996.

In November, the rebels, who are fighting to set up a communist state, formed a loose alliance to restore democracy with seven main political parties sidelined by King Gyanendra.

Nepal's donors including the United States have urged the political parties and the king to unite against the guerrillas.

On February 8, the royalist government held municipal elections saying the polls could lead to

national elections next year but a low turnout and a boycott by the political parties marred the vote.

"This is the time to deal a final blow to the discredited royal regime," the leaders said.

Gyanendra plunged the Himalayan kingdom into turmoil in February 2005 when he seized absolute power, firing the government, jailing politicians and suspending civil liberties including media freedom.

King Gyanendra has justified his seizure of power, which included jailing politicians, suspension of some civil liberties and media curbs as necessary to crush the 10-year-old Maoist revolt. But violence has continued unabated.

In the most recent violence, a leading human rights group said on Saturday a senior Nepali official kidnapped by the Maoists had died of an asthma attack while in their custody.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese political activists shout slogans as they brandish banners and placards during a protest march in Kathmandu yesterday. Soldiers and armed police provided tight security for official Democracy Day celebrations in Nepal while pro-democracy activists vowed to hold protests against the king who grabbed power a year ago.

## Lanka govt heads for talks with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's peace delegations were headed yesterday for talks in Geneva after a prisoner swap aimed at building confidence ahead of a crucial meeting to save their troubled truce, officials said.

Government delegates began leaving from Saturday night and were expected in Switzerland later Sunday while the Tamil Tiger negotiators were already in place for the two-day discussions starting Wednesday, officials said.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on Saturday freed a government policeman they had been holding for five months and said the release was to mark the start of face-to-face negotiations after three years.

"As a gesture of goodwill, the national leader (of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran) ordered the release of a Sri Lankan policeman," the rebels said in a statement.

The move came a day after the Sri Lankan government released four Tamil Tiger suspects who had been in custody for allegedly spying on a naval facility in the island's northeast.

## Pak leader in China to boost ties

AFP, Beijing

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf arrived in China yesterday on a visit that analysts said would focus on anti-terrorism cooperation, trade and technological assistance.

The five-day visit will not likely be overshadowed by Wednesday's killing of three Chinese engineers by suspected tribal rebels in Pakistan's restive Baluchistan province, they said.

"It's a side issue. The security of Chinese nationals has been an ongoing issue," Gilles Guiheux, director of the Hong Kong-based French Centre for Research on Contemporary China, told AFP Sunday.

Strategic and nuclear issues will be the focus, he said.

But the murders nonetheless are an embarrassment for Musharraf, particularly at a time when China is improving relations with Pakistan's nuclear rival India, analysts said.

"The killings of Chinese engineers ahead of his visit to China on Sunday clearly look interlinked," said Moonis Ahmar, professor of international relations at Karachi University.

The attack was the second in the volatile province targeting Chinese after three engineers helping to develop a deep-sea port in Baluchistan were killed in May 2004 in a car bomb attack.

Still, the attacks will unlikely harm long-term relations as both sides stand to gain from maintaining strong ties.

"It's been a longstanding relationship and the Chinese attach a great deal of importance to it. Pakistan's been a good client, a good purchaser of Chinese goods," said Ralph Cossa, president of the Pacific Forum CSIS in Honolulu. China's good relations with Pakistan also help it gain leverage over India, Islamabad's longtime rival.

Beijing also looks to Islamabad for assistance in crushing a separatist movement among its ethnic Uighur Muslims, some of whom have fled across the border to Pakistan where they joined training camps.

"There's very good intelligence exchanged between China and Pakistan in this area. I'm sure China is very interested in whatever information Pakistan can provide on al-Qaeda and separatist groups," said Cossa.

Pakistan meanwhile is looking to China for more economic and technological assistance, he said.

"The Chinese have been pretty forthcoming in this area," he said.

China has long been Pakistan's strongest ally and provides its neighbour with development funding and assistance, such as help building infrastructure, as well as weapons, and the development of its own combat aircraft.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (R) welcomed by Chinese officials at Beijing's airport yesterday. Analysts say the visit will focus on Sino-Pak anti-terrorism cooperation, trade and technological assistance.