

Parties press Maoists to end Nepal blockade

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's main political parties piled fresh pressure yesterday on Maoist rebels to end an indefinite road blockade that has raised prices and crippled life across the Himalayan nation this week.

The blockade called by the anti-monarchy rebels, fighting to set up a communist state in the world's only Hindu nation, has left roads across Nepal nearly deserted since Tuesday.

Highways remained deserted yesterday and some towns reported shortages of perishable goods, as a Maoist-dictated strike hobbled Nepal for a fifth day.

The rebels ordered all vehicles to be kept off roads in and out of the capital, district headquarters and other towns in a bid to oust King Gyanendra, who sacked the government and seized direct control a

year ago.

By lunchtime Saturday, only around 100 vehicles, had left the Kathmandu valley, home to 1.7 million people, said a police officer on condition of anonymity. Usually between 2,500 and 3,000 vehicles leave the valley daily.

Maoists also plan to follow it up with a general strike from April 3 to press King Gyanendra, who seized power last year, to end his rule.

But Nepal's seven main political parties, who have a loose alliance with the guerrillas against the king, have urged the Maoists to call off the blockade saying it was hurting ordinary people.

The parties also fear that the royalist government could use the blockade as an excuse to crack down on a peaceful anti-king rally they plan on April 8.

"That is why all seven parties

have individually as well as collectively appealed to the Maoists to withdraw their protests," said Sushil Koirala, a top leader of the Nepali Congress party, the biggest of the seven groups.

"I am hopeful that the Maoists will respond to our appeal and call it off," he said.

The Maoists have mainly relied on fear to enforce the blockade.

But some media reports said they had also set up barriers in several places using rocks and logs to block roads, forcing vehicles to stay off and stranding thousands.

"The blockade has already disrupted movement of people and they are unable to attend our ongoing protests against the king in several places," Koirala said.

'Indo-US nuke deal upsets regional balance of power'

AP, Islamabad

President Bush's decision to seek Congressional support for a plan to share civilian nuclear technology with India could upset the balance of power in the region, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said.

The Foreign Ministry said Bush, who visited the South Asian neighbours earlier this month, should have offered both Islamabad and New Delhi similar deals to enhance their respective nuclear programmes.

The US plan will "only encourage India to continue its weapons programme without any constraint or inhibition," the ministry said in a statement Friday.

Congress must either amend US law or approve an exception for India if the agreement is to go ahead. American law currently restricts the trade of nuclear material

and equipment to countries that have not submitted to full nuclear inspections, which India has not done.

"The grant of (such a) waiver as a special case will have serious implications for the security environment in South Asia as well as for international nonproliferation efforts," the statement said.

Pakistan is a key US ally in its war on terror, but Washington is refusing to share civilian nuclear technology with it, fearing it may not be able to keep the technology from other countries.

Pakistan became a nuclear power in 1998 when it conducted underground tests in response to India's nuclear tests, but the international community was alarmed in 2004 when top Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan admitted supplying Iran, North Korea and Libya with sensitive technology.

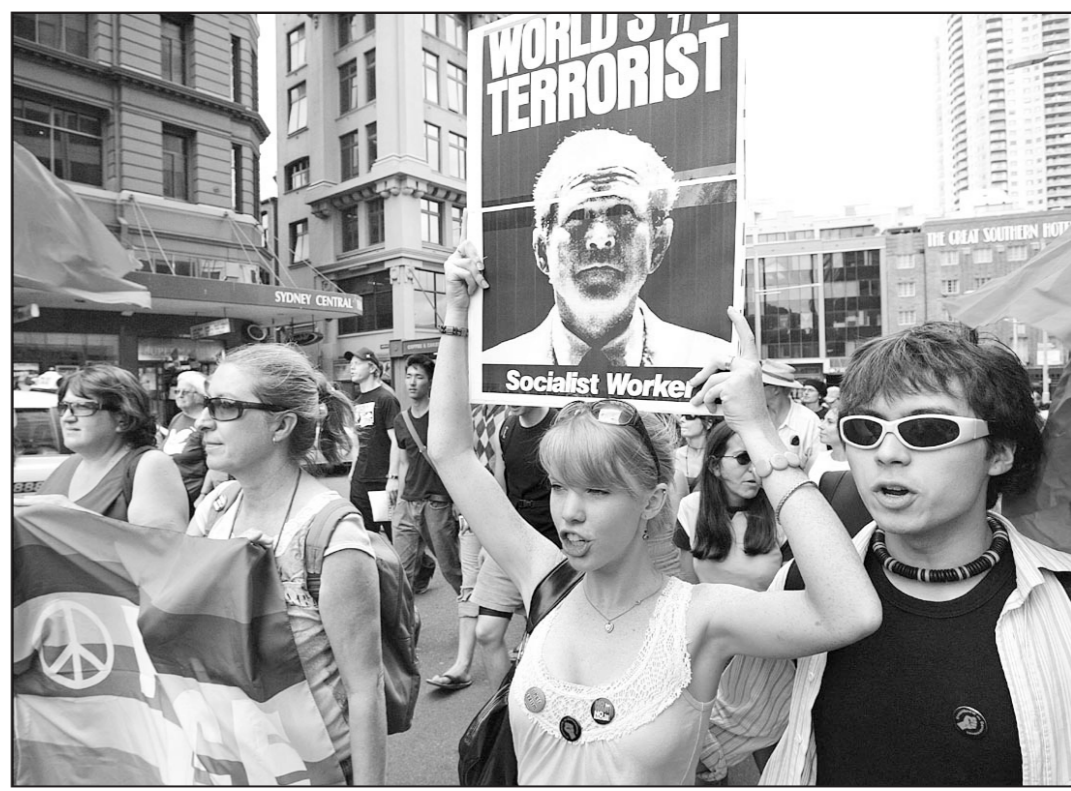


PHOTO: AFP
Socialist students join a peace march through the streets of Sydney yesterday against the war in Iraq. Several thousand people from a coalition of students, greens, Quakers, and left-wing organisations demanded an end to Australian military presence in Iraq as anti-war protesters took to streets across the world.



PHOTO: AFP
Female Nepalese workers carry sacks of produce at a vegetable market in the Kalimati District of Kathmandu yesterday on the fifth-day of blockage called by Maoist rebels. The price of vegetables and fruits in the Himalayan Kingdom has increased by between 10 to 25 percent as transportation organisers are charging more than double the normal rates.

Bombs, bullets greet Shias on pilgrimage

Two US soldiers killed in attack

AP, AFP, Baghdad

The Muslim pilgrims' road to the holy city of Karbala was a highway of bullets and bombs for Shias on Friday. Drive-by shootings and roadside and bus bombs killed or wounded 19 people, ratcheting up the sectarian tensions gripping Iraq.

Security forces, including US armoured reinforcements, girded for more bloodshed leading up to Monday's Shia holiday. And north of Baghdad, in the Sunni Triangle, a two-day-old operation involving 1,500 US and Iraqi troops swept through an area near Samarra in search of insurgents.

It was in Samarra that the insurgent bombing of a Shia shrine last month ignited days of violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims. More than 500 people died.

In fresh violence two US soldiers were killed by indirect fire in a base northwest of the central Iraqi city of Tikrit, the US military reported yesterday.

An "indirect fire attack" on Thursday killed the two soldiers and wounded a third, all members of the 101st Airborne Division, which is responsible for occupying

the northern half of the country.

The deaths come as the 101st, together with Iraqi troops, are sweeping through a 100 square mile patch of agricultural land between Samarra and Tikrit in a major operation searching for insurgents.

Authorities had feared new attacks as tens of thousands of Shias, many dressed in black and carrying religious banners, converge on Karbala, 50 miles south of the capital, for Monday's 40th and final day of mourning for Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson.

The US military announced this week it was dispatching a fresh battalion of the 2nd Brigade, 1st Armoured Division, about 700 troops, to Iraq from its base in Kuwait to provide extra security for Shia holy cities and Baghdad during this period.

Friday's bloodshed in Baghdad began as groups of faithful, many of them parents with children in tow, trekked down city streets headed for the southbound highway to Karbala.

Protesters hold anti-war rallies across the world

AP, Sydney

Anti-war demonstrators held rallies across the globe yesterday to protest the war in Iraq as campaigners marked the third anniversary of the US-led invasion with a demand that coalition troops pull out.

Around 500 protesters marched through central Sydney, chanting "End the war now and 'Troops out of Iraq.'" Many campaigners waved placards branding President Bush the "World's No. 1 Terrorist" or expressing concerns that Iran could be the next country to face invasion.

"Iraq is a quagmire and has been a humanitarian disaster for the Iraqis," said Jean Parker, a member of the Australian branch of the Stop the War Coalition, which organised the march. "There is no way forward without ending the occupation."

Opposition to the war is still evident in Australia, which has some 1,300 troops in and around Iraq. Visiting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was heckled by campaigners in Sydney this week, who said she had "blood on her hands."

But Saturday's protest was small, compared to the mass demonstrations that swept across the country in the buildup to the invasion the largest Australia had seen since

joining US forces in the Vietnam War.

In Tokyo, about 2,000 people rallied in a downtown park, carrying signs saying "Stop the Occupation" as they listened to a series of anti-war speeches, said Takeshiko Tsukushi, a member of World Peace Now, which helped plan the rally. Tokyo police were unable to immediately confirm the number in attendance.

"The war is illegal under international law," Tsukushi said. "We want the immediate withdrawal of the Self Defence Forces and from Iraq along with all foreign troops."

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is a staunch supporter of the US-led coalition in Japan and dispatched 600 troops to the southern city of Samawah in 2004 to purify water and carry out other humanitarian tasks. The Cabinet approved an extension of that mission in December, authorising soldiers to stay in Iraq through the end of the year.

But public opinion polls show the majority of Japanese oppose the mission, which has been criticised as a violation of the country's pacifist constitution. Many say the deployment has made Japan a target for terrorism.

In Turkey, thousands gathered in

Istanbul for protests. Other anti-war protests were planned in the cities of Izmir, Trabzon and the capital, Ankara.

Opposition to the war is nearly universal in Turkey and cuts across all political stripes.

"Murderer USA," read a sign unfurled by a communist in Taksim Square in Istanbul.

"USA, go home!" said red and black signs carried by hundreds of the some 5,000 protesters gathered in Kadikoy on the city's Asian coast.

Turkey is Iraq's northern neighbour and the only Muslim-majority member of the Nato military alliance. Historically close relations with the US were severely strained after the Turkish parliament refused to allow US troops to launch operations into Iraq from Turkish territory.

US military planners said the move complicated operations by shutting down the US option of opening a northern front in the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Since the war, support for the United States has plummeted in Turkey.

Demonstrations were also expected across Europe.

Pressure mounts on Thai PM with call for king to intervene

AFP, Bangkok

Pressure on Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra is mounting as two influential organisations called on the nation's revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej to intervene and break a political deadlock.

The Press Council of Thailand and the Lawyers Council of Thailand joined growing calls for a resolution to the months of wrangling and mass rallies calling for Thaksin's resignation.

"We ask people from all sectors to present the facts in order to create a mass consensus that will allow the king to exercise his rights under (the constitution) for the sake of country," they said in a joint statement.

"This crisis has created unprecedented confrontation and division,"

they said.

Thaksin has been at the centre of a political storm since late January, when his family sold the telecoms conglomerate he founded to Singaporean investors in a tax-free 1.9 billion dollar deal.

The two independent councils accused Thaksin of jeopardising national security by selling off sensitive telecoms assets, describing it as a crime which carried a punishment of 10 years imprisonment under the criminal code.

Thai regulators have found only minor violations in the sale of Shin Corp, and the Constitutional Court has declined to investigate the matter, but accusations linger that it breached ethical norms.



PHOTO: AFP
A Kenyan activists of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) demonstrates against dead rivers around the world at the IV World Water Forum on Friday in Mexico City. The Forum opened in Thursday with a dire warning to urgently improve global water management and an admission little has improved since the last such gathering in 2003.