

## Maoists lift blockade

Nepali parties reach accord with rebels for massive anti-king protests

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels in Nepal said yesterday they have called off a six-day transport blockade which they had ordered as part of an attempt to topple the royal government.

The Maoists said the blockade, which has sent prices soaring and caused fuel shortages, would end Monday.

"We have decided to lift the blockade and other programmes of strikes, keeping in view the developing and intensifying of the joint movement for democracy, after reaching a new understanding with the seven-party alliance," said a statement.

The seven opposition parties, which have formed a loose alliance with the Maoists aimed at restoring democracy, had appealed for an end to the blockade which they said was

hitting ordinary people hard.

The statement, signed by Maoist chief Prachanda and Maoist politburo member Baburam Bhattari, said they made their decision following appeals from various quarters.

The blockade ordered in major towns brought transport to a near-halt.

The Maoists also announced that they fully support the protest programmes of the seven parties scheduled to be organized next month.

Earlier Nepal's leading parties yesterday reached an agreement with Maoist rebels to hold a mass pro-democracy protest next month and called on them to end a transport blockade amid looming fuel shortages.

The agreement calls for a "huge peaceful demonstration" in the capital on April 8 against King

Gyanendra, who seized power a year ago, as well as a general strike April 6 to 9.

"We have reached an understanding that the mass movement is the only alternative to end the ongoing conflict and restore full democracy in Nepal," a statement signed by the top leaders of a seven-party alliance said.

The statement came at the end of a meeting held at the residence of Nepali Congress president Girija Prasad Koirala in Kathmandu.

It was the second agreement the sidelined political parties have reached with the rebels. In November, the two sides formed a loose alliance aimed at calling for the restoration of democracy and minimizing violence.



A Nepalese petrol station attendant (R) prepares to fill the tanks of waiting motorcyclists at a government run petrol station in Kathmandu yesterday. Highways in Nepal were near-deserted and gasoline shortages loomed in the Kathmandu Valley as a transport blockade called by Maoist rebels hobbled the nation for the sixth straight day.

PHOTO: AFP

## Indo-Pak sleuths to hold talks tomorrow

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Sleuths from India and Pakistan will thrash out issues relating to human trafficking, counterfeit currency and organised crime in the first such meeting of the heads of criminal investigation units from tomorrow.

The two-day technical level talks between India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) will be held after a gap of nearly 17 years.

The last contact with the FIA was in 1989 on the sidelines of home secretary level talks and at that time the former CBI director, AP Mukherjee, visited Pakistan. We intend to revive contacts and see if we can build on the positives," said a senior CBI official.

A four-member team headed by FIA director Tariq Parvez is expected to arrive in Delhi late Monday.

"This visit is path-breaking and we

hope to make the best of these talks," said the CBI source.

Senior CBI officials said that both sides were expected to appoint nodal officers for future interactions and also discuss issues relating to Interpol related matters.

"Clearly, we are meeting after a long time. The first day of talks will be exploratory but we will get down to critical issues once we have broken the ice," said the CBI source.

CBI officials did not want to comment whether the issue of wanted persons in the 1993 serial blasts in Mumbai would be taken up during the talks but hinted that it would depend on how the deliberations progressed.

India had forwarded a list of 20 most wanted criminals to Pakistan in 2002, including mob boss Dawood Ibrahim, Tiger Memon and Mohammed Dossa - all wanted for the '93 blasts - who have reportedly taken refuge there.

## Protesters reject calls for talks with Thai PM

AFP, Bangkok

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said yesterday that Thailand's political deadlock could spark a new financial crisis, amid growing concerns over elections just two weeks away.

"The prolonged protest has destroyed confidence among investors and tourists," Thaksin said as he visited a Bangkok market to meet voters.

"If the political uncertainty remains for the next two or three months, Thailand will fall into another financial crisis," he said.

A financial crisis began in Thailand in July 1997 with the

devaluation of the baht and spread to much of East Asia.

Since street protests demanding Thaksin's resignation over claims of corruption began in early February, the government has scaled back its growth forecasts for the year by a quarter-point.

Thaksin last week said he might consider stepping aside for long enough to allow for constitutional reforms sought by the opposition, before holding new elections.

But on Sunday he insisted that the April 2 snap elections must go ahead, despite an opposition boycott and doubts over whether the polls can produce a new parliament.

## Suicide bomber killed in attack on French convoy in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar

A suicide car bomber was killed yesterday when he rammed his vehicle into a coalition convoy in southern Afghanistan, officials and witnesses said.

A local police commander in the restive Spin Boldak district of Kandahar province said the convoy was made up several vehicles of French troops operating under the US-led coalition in the region.

"No one but the attacker was killed in the explosion. It was a suicide car bomb," said the commander, who asked not to be named.

## Maoists open new battle front in India

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, DANTEWADA, Chhattisgarh

A vast thickly forested area in the heart of India has become the country's bloodiest war zone, with hundreds of security personnel pitted against Maoist guerrillas and impoverished tribespersons caught in between.

Chhattisgarh politicians and officials say that some 45,000 tribal people, assisted by paramilitary troops and police, have taken on the Maoists in the 10,238 sq km territory in Dantewada district in this central Indian state.

Shedding all inhibitions, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is arming and financing men and women who have thrown their lot with the state in the campaign against the outlawed Communist Party of India-Maoist.

The militias are putting up a tough fight against the more motivated guerrillas - but taking heavy casualties too.

The 86 deaths in Dantewada this year, including that of 20 policemen, is much higher than the fatalities reported in violence-hit Jammu and Kashmir and the northeast region put together, officials say.

In the process, Dantewada, which borders Maharashtra, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, is witnessing an armed campaign not seen in the history of the country's four decades old Maoist movement.

The state government, which

enjoys the backing of the main opposition Congress party as well as New Delhi in its fight against the Maoists, says it is determined to crush the guerrillas who have set up a parallel administration in much of the sprawling district.

Officials admit that the Maoists enjoy sway over 12,000 sq km in the Bastar region's Abujmahar forest. The rebels have planted landmines all around, and not a single policeman dares to enter the zone.

The government-sponsored militias seek to woo local tribes in the name of "Salwa Judum" (Peace Mission) that was launched in June last year by opposition leader Mahendra Karma of the Congress who now tops the guerrillas' hit list of "class enemies".

"We have no option. The Salwa Judum movement has begun. The tribal people have to come to us or stay with the Maoists. There is no middle path," Karma told IANS.

Dantewada's 1.1 million people are mostly tribal. The area has one of the world's largest iron ore reserves with stocks that can feed India's fast growing steel industry for the next few centuries.

Dotted with hills and covered by forests, it is also one of India's most impoverished regions. The tribals inhabiting the 1,349 villages mainly depend on hunting, forest products and agriculture for their humble living.

## 2 Britons jailed for abusing Indian children

AFP, Mumbai

Two British men were sentenced to six years in jail by an Indian court for sexually abusing street children at shelters they ran in the financial capital of Mumbai, reports said yesterday.

Duncan Grant, 62, and Allan Waters, 52, who both once served in the British navy, had sex with a number of boys who turned up hungry and homeless at their homes, according to the court.

Judge P.S. Paranjape said the sentences were designed to "wipe out India's name from the map of sex-tourism" and to demonstrate "India was no more a destination for them in future".

## Tigers raise fresh doubts over talks

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels have renewed allegations that Sri Lanka has failed to disarm paramilitary units, and raised fresh doubts over the status of peace talks planned in Switzerland next month.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a message posted on their website accused Colombo of going back on a pledge to neutralise the units in line with an agreement reached last month.

"Ground realities dictate that the government's obligations in this matter yet remain on paper," the LTTE's official website said. "Inten-

tions that remain as promises in paper do not count when it comes to building confidence."

The rebels said the failure to disarm paramilitary units could imperil a second round of talks planned for April 19.

For its part, the Sri Lankan government Sunday accused Tiger rebels of conscripting more child soldiers in violation of a fragile truce in place since February 2002.

The defence ministry in a statement said two more children were recruited a week ago in the restive eastern district of Batticaloa but the parents did not come forward until the weekend for fear of guerrilla reprisals.