



Supporters of India's ruling Congress Party chief and chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government Sonia Gandhi shout anti-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) slogans in front of Sonia's residence in New Delhi yesterday. Sonia Gandhi announced she had resigned from parliament following opposition allegations she had held other salaried posts.

TIGERS SAY

Colombo endangering talks

AFP, Colombo

The Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday accused Sri Lanka of endangering efforts to end ethnic bloodshed by imposing fresh conditions on their political activity.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the government had forbidden the rebels from flying their own flags on offices they want

to re-open in military-held areas of the island's north-east, and had said children should not take part in Tiger celebrations.

The guerrillas who closed their political offices amid an escalation of violence late last year had wanted to go back after last month's talks at a Swiss village where they agreed to scale down attacks against each other.

"The army does not want us to have our own flag at our political offices and wants to prohibit children taking part in our celebrations," a Tiger official in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi said when contacted by telephone.

He said the conditions were unacceptable and were a violation of the agreements reached in Switzerland.

Tigers abducting fewer children, says UN

REUTERS, Colombo

Children are still being kidnapped by Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers to train as fighters, the UN children's agency Unicef says, but the abductions appear to be less frequent four years into a ceasefire.

The number of children taken by the Tigers has fallen every year since a 2002 ceasefire halted two decades of civil war, Unicef senior programme co-ordinator Yasmin Ali Haque said, but child recruitment was still continuing at an unacceptable level.

"Most of them are forcible," she told Reuters in an interview late on Wednesday in Unicef's Colombo office.

"Children going home from school are apprehended. They're sat behind a motorcycle and then they're off. They're gone."

Asean envoy in Myanmar for HR inspection

AFP, Yangon

Asean's special envoy to Myanmar arrived in the capital Yangon yesterday to press the military junta on democracy and human rights, according to security sources.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar, who was welcomed by Myanmar's foreign minister Nyan Win, will meet with top junta officials but has been blocked from seeing jailed democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Arrest warrant issued for Indian artist MF Husain

AFP, New Delhi

A court has issued an arrest warrant for M.F. Husain, India's best-known artist, after he failed to appear in a case related to his depiction of a nude "Mother India", a report said yesterday.

An activist in the city of Indore, in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, had filed a case there against the artist, saying that his painting offended the sentiments of Hindus, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

The artist's lawyers had asked for the case to be moved to the capital New Delhi, expressing fears about the painter's safety in the central state.

Famed tortoise no more

AFP, Kolkata

Zoo officials in Kolkata said yesterday a famed 225-year-old tortoise brought to the eastern Indian city during the rule of the British East India Company has died.

The giant Aldabra tortoise was one of several brought by British seamen from the Seychelles Islands as gifts to Robert Clive of the East India Company in 1875. It died after a string of illnesses, Kolkata Zoo director Subir Chowdhury told AFP Thursday.

"Adwaitya (The Only One), who delighted the zoo visitors for 131 years, died on Wednesday morning," Chowdhury said. "His shell will be preserved in the zoo. All zoo employees are saddened by his death."

Maoists, parties try to turn up heat on Nepal king

Communist leader detained after raid at home

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

The government calls it an "unholy alliance" but Nepal's Maoist rebels and political parties are working together for the first time to turn up the heat on King Gyanendra who seized power last year.

The rebels are flexing their military muscles by stepping up attacks on towns and police posts. At least 55 people have died this week alone, since the Maoists abandoned a six-day road blockade of the country's main towns on Sunday.

They are also throwing their weight behind a general strike and series of protests called by the political parties from April 6. It is the first real indication of coordination on the ground since the rebels and the parties formed a loose alliance in November to force King Gyanendra to relinquish his powers.

"They want to press the king from both sides," said defence analyst Indrajit Rai.

Analysts say the rebels know they can never hope for a military victory, but want to keep the pot boiling. They abandoned a unilateral ceasefire in January after the government refused to match it.

"They demonstrate their military strength to give a message that their willingness to be part of the (peace) process is not due to weakness," said Yubaraj Ghimire, editor of the Samay weekly magazine.

Nepali political leaders and the rebels held a series of meetings in New Delhi last year, culminating in November's announcement of a loose alliance to end "the autocratic monarchy".

The 12-point deal included a rebel commitment to eventually rejoin the political mainstream as well as allowing political parties to

operate freely in the countryside where the rebels hold sway.

The two sides reaffirmed their "strong commitment" to the deal last Sunday.

Focus will now shift to the April strike and the latest in a long series of protests called by the main political parties. Demonstrations have become an almost daily occurrence in Nepal's temple-studded capital Kathmandu, with hundreds or thousands of people chanting slogans against the king.

But the rallies have not captured the public imagination and come close to the 1990 pro-democracy protests that forced Gyanendra's brother to end decades of absolute monarchy and introduce multi-party democracy.

The political parties were widely criticised for corruption and misrule when they had the chance to run the

country, and this has undermined their ability to bring people onto the streets.

While the parties' track record is unimpressive, the king is not popular either and looks increasingly isolated both politically and diplomatically, analysts say.

"Morally and constitutionally, the king is getting weaker," Ghimire said.

Meanwhile, police arrested yesterday the head of the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist in the capital where he had been under house arrest since mid January, a party source said.

The arrest of Madhav Kumar Nepal, general secretary of the party, followed a raid on his home Wednesday by armed police who seized phones, communication equipment and documents.

Afghans probe killings after Pak complaint

REUTERS, Kandahar

Afghan authorities have launched an investigation into the killing of 16 men an army officer described as Taliban but who Pakistan said were its citizens visiting Afghanistan for a holiday.

The incident could further strain relations between the key US allies in the war on terrorism after a sharp deterioration in ties over Afghan accusations Taliban fighters were finding sanctuary in Pakistan.

General Abdul Raziq, an Afghan army officer in the border town of Spin Boldak, said on Wednesday his forces had killed 16 Taliban after surrounding them in mountains, 8 km east of the town, near the Pakistani border.

But many residents of Spin Boldak, in Afghanistan's southern Kandahar province, dismissed that explanation and organised a strike on Thursday to protest against the killings.

"We have sent a team to investigate the matter," Assadullah Khalid, the governor of Kandahar province, said on Thursday.

"If what residents say is true, then the culprits will be punished,"

he said.

Afghanistan has seen a surge in bomb and other attacks by Taliban insurgents and their militant allies in recent months. The Taliban have vowed to launch a spring offensive against foreign forces and the Western-backed government.

Pakistani Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao said those killed were Pakistanis visiting Afghanistan for a traditional new year holiday.

"They were all Pakistanis who had gone for Now Rouz," Sherpao told a Pakistani television channel, referring to the holiday.

He said one of those killed was wanted by Pakistani authorities but added: "They were not Taliban".

A Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said the government had asked Afghanistan about the incident and had been told authorities were investigating.

General Raziq said that two Taliban commanders, Mullah Atta Jan and Shish Noorzai, known to have organised suicide attacks and ambushes, were among those killed by his troops.

'India is a prime US foreign policy priority'

AFP, Washington

India now is a "singularly important" US foreign policy priority, a senior Washington official said Wednesday, pointing to flourishing economic and political ties and this month's landmark bilateral nuclear deal.

"The relationship between India and the United States is singularly important for our society and for the future of American foreign policy," Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns told reporters.

"We think, frankly, that one of the most important strategic initiatives of the United States in the last few years has been the opening to India," Burns said.

He made his remarks as Washington dispatched two senior officials to Vienna to sell its controversial nuclear deal with India to the Nuclear Suppliers Group of 44 member states, which seeks to supervise trade in potential nuclear weapons materials.

Richard Boucher, US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, and Stephen Rademaker, Assistant Secretary of State for International, Security and Nonproliferation, were due to brief members of the group on Thursday about on Washington's plan to provide key US nuclear technology to India, Burns said.

He told reporters in Washington Wednesday that the United States was hopeful about the outcome of the briefings to the group, also

known as the NSG.

"My very strong sense is that what we're going to hear tomorrow is a lot of countries are going to wait and see if the United States government is able to convince the US Congress to pass the necessary legislation to allow this deal to go forward," Burns said.

"I think that there'll be a very strong tide of support in the NSG in favour of this, but that's probably a few months away," he said.

The US-India Civilian Nuclear Agreement, sealed on March 3 by US President George W. Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during a visit by the US leader to New Delhi, would give energy-starved India access to long-denied civilian nuclear technology in return for placing a majority of its nuclear reactors under international inspection.

The agreement, which also places 14 of India's 22 nuclear power reactors under international safeguards, was the cornerstone of Bush's three-day trip to India earlier this month.

"This deal with India is exceptional and it's unique to India, because India is in a unique place. It's a country that wants to come in to a system and live by the world's rules," Burns said.

He said Washington not only is paying more attention to its bilateral relationship with Delhi, but is focusing more energy and attention on the entire Indian subcontinent.

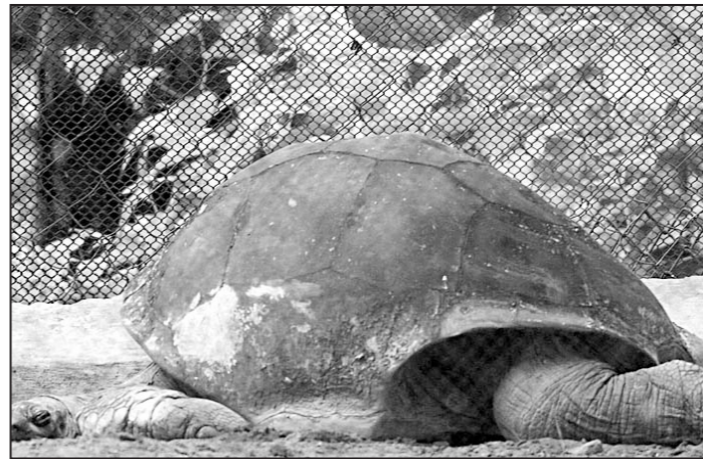


PHOTO: AFP

File picture taken on April 25, 2005 of a giant Aldabra tortoise resting inside its cage at the Alipore Zoological Garden in Kolkata. The nearly 225-year-old tortoise, possibly the oldest animal on earth, died in the zoo on Wednesday after it suffered a string of illnesses, zoo officials said.