



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese women shop as security personnel stand guard in a busy market place at Ason in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's royal government has tightened security in the capital to thwart infiltration by Maoist rebels ahead of massive pro-democracy protests planned for April.

Tight security in Kathmandu to thwart Maoist infiltration

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's royal government has tightened security in the capital to thwart infiltration by Maoist rebels ahead of massive pro-democracy protests planned for next month, a spokesman said yesterday.

"We have introduced tight security measures to avoid any kind of terrorist activities in the capital as the seven parties' so-called peaceful movement is just two weeks away," said government spokesman Shrish Shumshere Rana.

"The move was taken as we have reason to suspect they (Maoists) are infiltrating and we are

cautious that they will penetrate in the (Kathmandu) valley."

Nepal's sidelined political parties reached an agreement with Maoist rebels last week to hold a mass pro-democracy protest in early April against King Gyanendra, who seized absolute power in February 2005.

The agreement calls for a "huge peaceful demonstration" in the capital on April 8 against Gyanendra as well as a general strike nationwide April 6 to 9.

"Security patrols have been increased while stringent security checks and search operations have been initiated in order to make the security system of the

Kathmandu Valley stronger and effective," the government-run Rising Nepal reported Sunday, quoting the home ministry.

The ministry also told people to carry identity cards and be prepared for security checks throughout Kathmandu and adjoining suburbs.

The warning came after suspected Maoists bombed the house of Toran Bahadur Gurung, assistant minister for general administration, in Kathmandu Saturday evening.

Nobody was injured but the blast damaged a vehicle and the house, police said.

6 Maoists killed in Indian gunbattle

REUTERS, Raipur

Policemen shot dead six Maoist guerrillas in Chhattisgarh yesterday, two days after the rebels set off a landmine killing 13 people.

Police said that the gunbattle took place in the Dantewada area, 500km south of state capital Raipur, after the rebels shot dead a police officer.

Nearly a dozen guerrillas were wounded in the fighting but they were taken away by their comrades into dense forests nearby where police had launched a combing operation, police officer S.K. Paswan said.

The gunbattle followed Friday's attack when the rebels blew up a jeep, apparently mistaking it for a police vehicle, killing 13 people, mostly tribes people and local traders.

India, Iran stress need for close relations

AFP, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Iranian Vice President Rahim Mashae Saturday held talks in New Delhi during which they stressed the need to strengthen bilateral ties, particularly in the energy sector.

"They agreed on the need for an early meeting of the India-Iran Joint Commission," the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement said, referring to a special committee set up to explore ways to expand bilateral ties.

"The two leaders emphasized the importance they attach to the civilisation ties between the two countries and need for further strengthening bilateral cooperation, particularly in the energy sector," it said.

Gunboat sinking may push Lanka back to war

6 Tigers, 8 sailors killed

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka could slide back to war following the suicide bombing of a navy gunboat that killed eight sailors, foreign ceasefire monitors warned yesterday, as the military launched a probe into the incident.

The Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) said they could not accept a denial by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of involvement in Saturday's attack against the gunboat.

"The LTTE have denied any involvement," the SLMM said in a statement, even though official Tiger websites did not comment on the incident, the worst since the two

sides agreed last month to uphold their fragile truce.

"However, based on SLMM's previous experience ... we feel that we cannot at this stage rule out their involvement."

The SLMM asked the Tiger guerrillas, who are known for their trade-mark suicide bombings, to fully cooperate with the investigation into Saturday's incident at the Gulf of Mannar.

The defence ministry said the gunboat was blown out of the water as it approached a Tamil Tiger trawler off the island's northwestern coast.

"There is a probe underway to establish how the gunboat was hit," a defence official said. "The initial

report from the navy is that six Tigers on the trawler blasted themselves and the impact of that explosion sank the gunboat."

The navy was on a mission to check gun running in the area, officials said, adding that the gunboat had searched four other trawlers before it was blown up. There had been reports of rebel gun running in the area, officials said.

The Scandinavian monitors said there was a "dangerous escalation of violence" despite the two sides agreeing during talks in Switzerland last month to scale down attacks against each other.

"If the parties do not take responsibility (for maintaining the ceasefire) we fear that the situation

could become gradually worse resulting in an escalation beyond what we had in December and January," the SLMM said, referring to a rise in violence that claimed at least 153 lives.

The mission, which said it was still investigating Saturday's incident, urged both the government and the Tigers to live up to the pledges they gave last month to uphold their troubled truce in place since February 23, 2002.

The incident is the first major attack since the two sides met in Switzerland and agreed to abide by the ceasefire to prevent a return to a civil war that has claimed at least 60,000 lives since 1972.

INDIAN OFFICE OF PROFIT EC gearing to handle fallout of controversy

PTI, New Delhi

With disqualification petitions flooding it, the Election Commission is gearing itself to handle the fallout of the controversy over the office of profit.

The EC will also take up NDA's battle against one of the Election Commissioners Navin Chawla.

Congress President Sonia Gandhi's action of resigning her Lok Sabha seat may have made the petitions for her disqualification infructuous but the complaints against the other incumbent MPs, the most high profile of which Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee, are still alive and are hanging as the sword of

Damocles over their head.

The Commission has already taken notice of the petitions received against 10 CPI(M) MPs, including the Speaker, and others and in most of the cases it has sought more information from the petitions because "details were lacking", sources said.

Specifically the Commission has asked the petitioners including Mukul Roy of the Trinamool Congress to give details like the date of appointment of the MPs to the office said to be held by them along with documentary evidence to substantiate their contention that they were offices of profit.

Laden a big supporter of Nawaz Sharif

Media report says

PTI, New Delhi

A top Pakistani politician has claimed that Osama bin Laden was willing to "buy parliamentarians" in 1990 to ensure Nawaz Sharif's election as Prime Minister, according to a media report.

Quoting an interview of Qazi Hussain Ahmed, leader of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal and Jamaat-e-Islami, the 'Daily News' said "Osama was willing in 1990 to buy loyalties of parliamentarians to ensure Nawaz Sharif's election as Prime Minister."

"Laden had said that if there was a way to buy votes, he was willing to pay for them," the report said.

Qazi "revealed that he repeatedly met Osama and that the Al-Qaeda leader had visited him at Mansoor, the Jamaat headquarters in Lahore".

He said Osama was "a big supporter of Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) and Nawaz Sharif" and was "also interested in a deal with the Jamaat", which Qazi had declined because he did not agree with

Osama's "methods".

The report said following Qazi's interview, the Jamaat "has done some damage control ... Stating the meetings with Osama had taken place when he was based in Peshawar and was allowed to move freely in Pakistan as a fighter against the Soviet Union (in Afghanistan)".

The 'Daily News' said "the truth, however, is that the meetings related to the post-1988 period when the Pakistan People's Party came to power and was then toppled. The IJI, of which Jamaat-e-Islami was a part, came to power in 1990".

"This was facilitated, according to Air Marshal Asghar Khan's petition pending in the Pakistan Supreme Court, by the ISI which provided the election funds," the newspaper said adding Benazir Bhutto "too has accused Nawaz Sharif of taking money from Osama to oust her from power".

Troops, tribal militants clash in Pakistan

REUTERS, AFP, Quetta

Three tribal militants and a paramilitary trooper were killed in a clash in the troubled Pakistani province of Baluchistan yesterday, officials said.

The gunbattle took place near Loti town, where a natural gas field run by the state-owned Oil and Gas Development Co Ltd. is located.

The militants also attacked a natural gas pipeline near Loti, the top administration official in the area, Abdul Samad Lasi, told Reuters. Two militants were killed, he said.

Another government official said one paramilitary trooper was also killed.

Baluch militants have been

waging a low-level insurgency in the resource-rich southwest province for decades for greater political and economic autonomy.

They have intensified attacks in recent months, on government targets such as natural gas and transport facilities.

The attacks follow a crackdown by Pakistan security forces on Baluch rebels after a rocket attack on Dec. 14 when President Pervez Musharraf was visiting the town of Kohlu in the area.

Baluchistan nationalists say hundreds of people have been killed in clashes but analysts say this could be an exaggeration.

Earlier Pakistani Police Saturday arrested nearly 60 tribesmen sus-

pected of involvement in attacks on security forces and government installations in the southwestern province of Baluchistan, police said.

Police detained some 57 suspects including 24 arrested in a raid on a camp run by rebels from the Marri tribe near the provincial capital Quetta, city police officer Mujibur Rehman said.

The 33 other men were picked up during raids at different neighbourhoods just outside Quetta, Rehman said.

Sparsely-populated Baluchistan province has been in the grip of a sporadic insurgency blamed on tribal groups pressing for greater autonomy and a share in the income from the region's vast natural resources.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani protesters shout slogans as they stand outside the Afghan consulate during a demonstration in Quetta Saturday. Pakistani police used batons to disperse hundreds of people after they attacked the Afghan consulate to protest the killing of 16 nationals by Afghan security forces.