

'Nepali Maoists hunt for arms in India'

AFP, Sanauli

Maoist rebels from Nepal are infiltrating the Indian border in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh to purchase weapons for their armed struggle, police said yesterday.

"The Special Task Force of the Uttar Pradesh police has been asked to investigate and keep a vigil on the attempts being made by Nepali Maoists to cross the border to acquire weapons and other materials," Yashpal Singh, head of the counter-insurgency unit, told AFP Thursday.

Singh said that Indian intelligence agencies had specific information about attempts being made by the Maoists to obtain arms in India.

India and Nepal share a porous 1,700km border.

Advani starts 'yatra' with appeal to Muslims

PTI, Rajkot

Sixteen years after his landmark 'Ram Rath' yatra which changed the contours of Indian politics, senior BJP leader LK Advani on Thursday embarked on his sixth yatra invoking Lord Ram and appealing to Muslims to abandon their claim over the disputed site in Ayodhya.

The launch of the 6,000 km long 'Bharat Suraksha Yatra' on Ram Navami day in the presence of Hindutva poster boy and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, Chief Ministers of other party-ruled states and senior BJP leaders was replete with ideological symbols including portraits of Lord Ram and a hooded terrorist in the background, Advani aiming an arrow from a large bow, blowing of conch shells and chanting of Vedichymns.

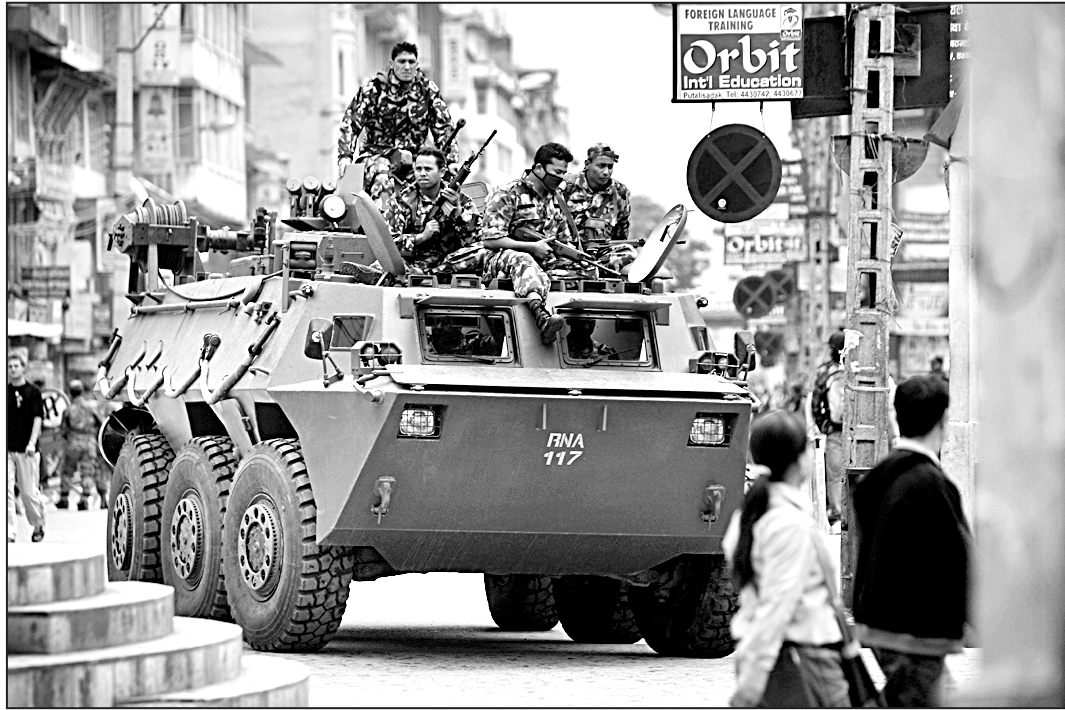
Pakistani Shia leader escapes assassination

AFP, Karachi

A prominent Shia Muslim leader escaped an assassination attempt Thursday in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi, police said.

Hassan Turabi, the provincial chief of Islami Tehrik, Pakistan's main Shia group, escaped without injury when a bomb hidden under a fruit cart exploded yards away as he climbed into his car outside his Karachi home.

Two bodyguards and a passer-by were injured in the incident which occurred in the eastern neighbourhood of the port city, an area which has seen frequent sectarian attacks blamed on militants from the majority Sunni Muslim community.



Nepalese soldiers use an armoured personnel carrier to patrol a street in Kathmandu yesterday on the first day of a four-day strike. Anti-government demonstrators kicked off the strike to protest against King Gyanendra and call for the restoration of democracy more than a year after he seized absolute power.

PHOTO: AFP

Strike cripples Nepal

Maoists raid town, kill 17, army helicopter shot down

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

A fierce attack on a town by Maoist guerrillas left 17 people dead in Nepal, hours before a general strike over the king's grip on power shut down the Himalayan nation yesterday, authorities said.

The leftist rebels, who have been fighting for the last decade to topple the monarchy, struck Malangwa, a town 350 km southeast of Kathmandu, late on Wednesday.

They fired at soldiers guarding government offices and security posts and attacked a jail, freeing more than 100 inmates -- among them some of their comrades -- before fleeing.

Five policemen and four guerrillas were killed in the fighting, local authorities said.

"The body of a Maoist in combat dress is lying in front of my house,"

Yadav Subedi, a Malangwa resident, told Reuters by phone.

Some policemen and senior bureaucrats were missing after the fighting, Subedi and local journalist Rajesh Mishra said.

A Russian-built Mi-17 army helicopter sent to the area with troops crashed near Malangwa, killing eight of the 10 soldiers on board, an army officer said. The other two men were missing.

"I saw the helicopter broken into three pieces in a field. Many government buildings are on fire or are smouldering. Unexploded bombs are strewn around," Mishra said.

"People are terror-struck. No one has come out."

But rebels claimed on their website that the helicopter was shot down, marking "the first time the People's Liberation Army has shot down an army helicopter."

This information could not be verified and the army said only that investigations had begun after the helicopter crashed in an "accident."

News of the raid came as a four-day nationwide strike called by opponents of King Gyanendra shut the Hindu kingdom down.

Nepal's seven main political parties, which called the strike, have vowed to defy a government ban on protests to launch what they expect to be a decisive campaign for democracy.

Although the guerrillas, who are fighting to establish a communist state, are supporting the political groups as part of a pact against the king, they are not participating in the protests and the rallies are expected to be largely peaceful.

Roads across the country of 26 million people were deserted as the strike began. Businesses and

schools were shut despite the government's call on people not to heed the strike call.

In the capital, Kathmandu, the centre of the campaign, hundreds of riot police and soldiers, some of them in armoured vehicles, patrolled deserted streets, while activists burned tyres on roads to enforce the closure.

Police said at least four cars were smashed by protesters for defying the strike. Young boys played cricket or cycled on what normally are packed thoroughfares.

Pro-democracy protests have become routine since King Gyanendra sacked the government and took power in February 2005, saying politicians had failed to quell the insurgency and hold national elections.

Lanka govt offers safe passage for Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka gave security guarantees to Tiger rebels travelling to Switzerland for talks on saving their faltering ceasefire, a Norwegian minister said here yesterday after talks with the president.

Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim said President Mahinda Rajapakse agreed to Tamil Tiger demands for safe passage to Switzerland amid doubts if talks scheduled for April 19 will go ahead.

"The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) asked for clear-cut guarantees," Solheim told the Foreign Correspondents' Association here.

"The president gave clear guarantees that no harm will happen to the LTTE."

The next round of talks was thrown into doubt after the Tigers insisted that Colombo should deliver on a promise made at talks in Switzerland in February to stop the activities of rival Tamils.

"We urge both to stick to the letter of the agreement and deliver on what was promised," Solheim said.

He said the two "major issues" since the February talks were the suspected Tiger involvement in a suicide attack against a navy boat and Tamil demands that Sri Lanka disarm para-military units.

However, Solheim said a positive

development was the de-escalation of violence since mid-December and January when at least 153 people were killed, but they wanted violence to be "zero."

Norway's new peace envoy, Jon Hanssen-Bauer, who had a separate meeting with the LTTE leadership in the rebel-held north on Wednesday, said talks on the truce could lead to discussing more contentious political issues.

"Confidence building measures should be implemented, preferably, before the (next) Geneva talks," Hanssen-Bauer said. "The implementation of the ceasefire will open the door for other serious (political) issues to be discussed."

Trial resumes in Saddam's absence

AFP, Baghdad

The trial of Saddam Hussein over the massacre of Shia villagers resumed yesterday in absence of the deposed leader, who in a fiery tirade the day before dismissed evidence linking him to the killings.

The hearing began with a single defendant in the dock, Awad Ahmad al-Bander, the former chief judge of the revolutionary court and deputy head of Saddam's office, who was recalled for further cross-examination.

It was not immediately known why Saddam was not in court.

Bander is one of Saddam's seven co-defendants accused over the massacre of 148 Shias from the village of Dujail after an attempt on the Iraqi leader's life there in 1982.

'US N-bill rejection would affect ties with India'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

If the US Congress rejects an amendment to proliferation control laws to facilitate the civil nuclear deal with India, it would affect the entire range of bilateral ties, the State Department has said.

In a written response to a set of 82 questions raised by Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the State Department said, "The initiative to reach civil nuclear cooperation with India recasts one of the most divisive issues in our relationship, and is viewed by many in India as a litmus

test for our strategic partnership.

"If Congress does not approve provisions for India related to nuclear energy, it is likely that the nuclear issue will continue to constrain our diplomatic relationship, as well as our strategic, commercial, defence and scientific ties, thereby having a negative impact on many of the bilateral activities mentioned in the July 18 Joint Statement."

The answers to Lugar's questions were published on his website on Wednesday even as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice testified during a hearing by the committee under him.

Asked specifically if Indian officials had said they would treat

the US different in the event of such a failure, the department said, "Indian officials have not stated that they will treat the US differently if Congress does not take action."

"They have, however, expressed concern about achieving extensive advances in the future of US-India relations if either side does not complete its Joint Statement commitments."

Rice on Wednesday urged Congress to expeditiously approve the draft legislation aimed at facilitating the civil nuclear deal with India, saying this would bring New Delhi into the non-proliferation regime.

Top Zarqawi aide captured

10 killed in Iraq car bombing

AFP, Baghdad/ Najaf

The US military announced yesterday it had caught a top aide to al-Qaeda's Iraq frontman Abu Musab al-Zarqawi wanted over the kidnapping of Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena last year while 10 Iraqis were killed in car bombing in Najaf.

The military said a massive manhunt by Iraqi and US forces led to the arrest of Muhammad Hila Hammad Ubaydi, also known as Abu Ayman.

He was caught on March 7 but his arrest was not immediately announced pending a DNA test, which "confirmed this is Abu

Ayman," the military said.

Ayman, a former aide to the intelligence chief during Saddam Hussein's regime, was captured in southern Baghdad's Al-Mahmudiyah neighbourhood, the military said.

He was also the leader of the Secret Islamic Army, a militant outfit operating in the northern Babil province, it said, adding "he had strong ties to terror leader Zarqawi."

The military said he is also the prime suspect in the kidnapping of Sgrena and is responsible for a series of assassination attempts on Iraqi government and Iraqi security force officials.

The Sgrena kidnapping in February 2005 drew worldwide attention when US soldiers shot dead an Italian agent shepherding her to safety after she was freed.

In Najaf at least 10 people were killed, including four women, and 42 wounded when a car bomb blew up yesterday near a cemetery in Iraq's holiest Shia city, medics and security officials said.

"Four of the 10 killed are women," said Issa Mohammed, head of the Najaf morgue. "Some of the bodies are completely charred."

Olmert tasked with forming Israeli govt

AFP, Jerusalem

Acting premier Ehud Olmert was yesterday tasked by President Moshe Katsav with establishing Israel's next government, ushering in a broad coalition set to redraw the borders of the Jewish state.

Olmert, who was made acting leader three months ago when his mentor and predecessor Ariel Sharon suffered a massive stroke, led Kadima to a narrow win in last week's election and is hoping to form a broad-based coalition.

"I am honoured to announce that I have decided to task Ehud Olmert with forming the next government," Katsav told a news conference following talks with the Kadima party leader at his official residence in Jerusalem.



President of the All India Congress Committee Sonia Gandhi (C) is presented with a traditional Assamese Japi (hat) yesterday by supporters at an election campaign rally in Nagoan, 120km from Guwahati. The rally was held prior to the second phase of Assam's assembly elections, which will be held on April 10.

Israel briefly arrests Palestinian minister

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinian minister for Jerusalem affairs in the Hamas-led government was briefly arrested by Israeli security yesterday on the outskirts of the holy city, Hamas and police sources said.

The sources said Khaled Abu Arafah was released from a police station in the Jewish settlement of Maale Adumim more than five hours after he was detained at a checkpoint at the entrance to al-Azaria, a suburb of east Jerusalem which is technically part of the occupied West Bank.

An official in the prime minister's office, which has responsibility for the domestic intelligence service Shin Beth, said Abu Arafah had been detained as he was barred from entering the West Bank.

Hamas sources said Israeli

police had accused him of "illegally entering an area under Palestinian control".

Witnesses said police had manhandled Abu Arafah out of the car he was travelling in with two other people before bundling him into a jeep.

His bodyguard was also briefly detained and later released.

The 45-year-old minister is one of the main Hamas officials in the Jerusalem area where he lives. He has been arrested by Israel several times in the past.

Like other Palestinians resident in east Jerusalem, Abu Arafah holds a blue Israeli identity card that authorises freedom of movement.

Hamas sources had said Abu Arafah, one of the 24 ministers in the Hamas-dominated cabinet, which was sworn in last week, had been travelling to al-Azaria to inaugurate new political offices.

US diplomacy puts focus on Pak polls

REUTERS, Islamabad

During a visit to Pakistan on Wednesday the State Department's new overseer of US relations in South Asia stressed Washington's interest in seeing fair elections next year and an eventual return to civilian rule.

Richard Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, said President Pervez Musharraf's retention of his role as army chief was an important issue for both the Pakistani people and the United States.

"We firmly believe in civilian rule, in civilian control of the military, but how this particular issue is going to be addressed... I think we'll just have to see," Boucher told a news conference following a meeting with Musharraf.

After coming to power in a coup seven years ago, General Musharraf was treated as a virtual pariah by the United States, until his cooperation in the war on terrorism was needed following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington.

Since then he has become a firm ally, and in a visit to Islamabad last month, President George W. Bush said he was assured of Musharraf's commitment to developing democracy in Pakistan, and noted several characteristics of a flourishing democracy including Pakistan's lively media.

Boucher singled out for special mention a meeting with Qazi Muhammad Farooq, Pakistan's new chairman of the Election Commission.