



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese protesters look on as a riot policeman throws stones towards them during a protest in Kathmandu yesterday on the second day of a four-day strike.

CRACKDOWN ON OPPOSITION

Nepal faces mounting int'l criticism

AFP, Kathmandu

A crackdown on anti-royal protesters has sparked a new wave of international criticism against Nepal with the United States, European Union, India and Japan all voicing concern.

A four-day general strike called by opposition parties ousted when King Gyanendra took direct control 14 months ago paralysed Nepal for a second day Friday.

The opposition parties have vowed to go ahead with plans for a major rally in Kathmandu on Saturday, despite a ban on public meetings and mass arrests.

More than 300 people have been arrested for defying the ban, activists said, and arrests continued

Friday morning with a dozen people taken away at a protest in the capital, an AFP reporter said.

"The arrests and harassment of pro-democracy activists violate their fundamental civil rights," US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said in Washington.

Powerful neighbour India called the arrests "counter-productive," and called on the royal government to free the hundreds of activists detained in recent days.

"We urge the immediate release of those arrested and a return to the path of dialogue and reconciliation," an official government statement said Thursday.

The European Union and Japan raised similar concerns, calling on Gyanendra's government to allow

peaceful protests, stop the arrests and free those already detained.

Rights group Amnesty International called on the government to halt the arrests.

"Targeting leaders of the peaceful political opposition is not only wrong, it is dangerous," said Purna Sen, Amnesty's Asia-Pacific Director.

"Squeezing the space for legitimate political activity heightens the risk of violent confrontation and human rights abuse," Sen said.

UN chief Kofi Annan on Wednesday urged the Kathmandu authorities not to deny citizens their right to peaceful protest and expressed concern as the arrests started.

LIBBY SAYS

Bush okayed leaks on Iraq intelligence

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush took more heat yesterday after indicted former top White House aide I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby revealed in court papers that the US leader had authorised intelligence leaks ahead of the war in Iraq.

The disclosure came as a federal prosecutor continues to investigate the leaking of the identity of a CIA agent, Valerie Plame, in 2003 after her diplomat husband criticized the Bush administration's rationale for the war.

Libby, who is currently facing charges of obstruction and lying in the investigation, is suspected of having revealed Plame's job as an undercover CIA agent to a reporter — a federal crime in the United States.

Benazir is new fish in oil-for-food dragnet

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan's anti-corruption bureau has alleged former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's involvement in the United Nations oil-for-food scandal in Iraq.

"Benazir Bhutto gave a two million commission to the regime of Saddam Hussein to win contracts worth 115 million dollars through two Sharjah-based companies she registered in 2000 and 2001," Hassan Waseem Afzal, Chairman of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) alleged.

60 feared dead as bus plunges into river in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

Two people were killed and at least 58 feared dead after a bus swerved off a mountain road and hurtled into a fast-flowing river in Indian Kashmir on Friday, police said.

Rescuers recovered two bodies from the accident site where only the top of the bus was visible in the icy waters of the Chenab river, police said.

The bus travelling from the remote town of Gulab Ghar to Jammu, winter capital of Indian Kashmir, was believed to be carrying at least 60 passengers, said police superintendent Gulbir Singh.

EU suspends funding for Palestinian govt

Hamas under mounting pressure

AFP, Brussels

The European Union announced yesterday the suspension of direct funding to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority, upping pressure on the militant group to renounce violence and recognise Israel.

But Hamas immediately rebuffed the move and vowed not to surrender to "blackmail" from the European bloc, the biggest donor of aid to the cash-strapped Palestinians.

The European Commission, which announced the suspension, said it expects EU foreign ministers to discuss what to do next at regular talks in Luxembourg next Monday.

"For the time being there are no payments to or through the Palestinian Authority," said Emma Udwin, a spokeswoman for EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

"I expect...that the message from ministers will be an endorsement of

that," said a British official, requesting anonymity.

The Islamic group's stunning election victory in January has left the EU, which sends around 500 million euros (600 million dollars) a year to the territories, with a huge dilemma at a desperate time for many Palestinians.

While the United States immediately announced a suspension of aid, the EU has held off from making any decisions, apparently hoping that Hamas will moderate its positions as the realities of government responsibility sink in.

But it warned that it could not provide aid to a Hamas-led government unless the group renounces violence, recognises Israel and agrees to abide by previously made Palestinian agreements.

The new Hamas-led cabinet took office at the end of March.

On Friday, the EU commission, while confirming that EU aid payments had been cut, underlined that governments of the 25-nation bloc

have to decide what to do next.

"While this decision making process is underway, as is fitting for the commission, we are assuming our responsibilities and we are adopting a policy of maximum prudence," said Udwin.

Of the 500 million euros annually to the Palestinians, about half comes from the collective EU pot, the rest being paid by individual EU governments.

Hamas responded quickly to the EU announcement.

"We will not accept such a blackmail," government spokesman Ghazi Hamad told reporters, speaking in English. "Hamas was elected democratically and the Palestinian people are punished for their choice."

But EU officials underlined that the bloc does not want to harm ordinary Palestinians. "We need to find a way of ensuring we continue to meet the needs of the Palestinian people," said one.

Some diplomats were cautious

about exactly what the ministers are likely to agree next week.

"It will be discussed on Monday, but nothing has been decided. We can't prejudice the conclusions of the discussions," said one EU source. "It's a possibility, not a certainty," said one.

The commission spokeswoman underlined that Hamas must meet the three key commitments set by the international community: renounce violence, recognise Israel and abide by previous Palestinian accords.

"That has not yet happened. The EU will need to develop some new strategies, some new measures, some new decisions about how to address itself to this new situation," she said.

Brussels says European taxpayers need to know that their money is not going to terrorists. "It is our responsibility to defend the financial interests of the community and that is what we are doing," said the spokeswoman.

Fresh killing in Lanka mars peace move

AFP, Colombo

A pro-Tamil Tiger activist and two police guards were shot dead in Sri Lanka's volatile east yesterday as Norway's top peace envoys left the island following a new bid to salvage a truce, police said.

Vanniasingham Vigneswaran, who spearheaded the Tamil Resurgence Movement, a known front organisation of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was gunned down in the town of Trincomalee, police said.

His movement had often clashed with the Sinhalese majority groups in Trincomalee where he opposed the erection of a Buddhist statue last year. He had also led several strike actions in the area in support of the Tigers.

Police in the multi-ethnic port town said investigations were at a very early stage and it was unclear who carried out the attack.

The killing came as Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim and his deputy Jon Hanssen-Bauer left the island after separate talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse and the Tiger leadership on saving their ceasefire.

The Norwegian peace brokers

who travelled to neighbouring India to brief New Delhi on Friday about Oslo's latest peace moves in Sri Lanka had warned that escalating violence could undermine efforts to hold a fresh round of talks this month.

The talks, tentatively scheduled for April 19, were thrown into doubt after the Tigers insisted that Colombo should deliver on a promise made at a previous meeting in Switzerland last February to stop the paramilitary activities of rival Tamil groups.

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

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 paramilitary units.

The Tiger proxy Tamil National Alliance (TNA) had planned to nominate Vigneswaran to replace a TNA legislator who was shot dead by an anti-Tiger gunman on Christmas day, the pro-rebel Tamilnet website said.

Iran to defend rights to nuke to its 'last drop of blood'

AFP, Tehran

Iran will defend its controversial nuclear programme to its "last drop of blood" and refuse to suspend uranium enrichment as demanded by the UN Security Council, a senior cleric said yesterday.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, meanwhile, flew in to Iran to visit its uranium enrichment facility and other sites, an official of the Islamic republic's atomic energy agency said.

Mohammad Saidi, the Iranian

agency's vice president, said the inspectors would start work on Saturday and visit the enrichment facility in Natanz and uranium conversion plant in Isfahan.

"We want our rights and nothing more, and we will resist until our last drop of blood," Hojatol-eslam Ahmad Khatami said in a Friday prayer sermon broadcast on state radio.

"They want to create a crisis. The Security Council, which ought to be an instrument of justice, wants to create insecurity and injustice," the

ultra-conservative cleric charged.

"They have set a one-month deadline for us to suspend our research on enrichment. They can set a one-month delay, one for a year or whatever they want. We will not renounce our rights."

A non-binding statement approved unanimously by the world body on March 29 gave the Islamic republic 30 days to abandon the sensitive nuclear work, but without issuing a threat of sanctions.

Bush admits Iraq mistakes

REUTERS, Charlotte

President George W. Bush admitted on Thursday the US military made mistakes in Iraq but defended his domestic eavesdropping programme, insisting to a hostile questioner he had no reason to apologise for it.

Beset by low approval ratings dragged down by pessimism over Iraq, Bush also signalled impatience with Iraqi leaders and urged them to break their deadlock and form a national unity government seen as crucial to averting sectarian civil war.

Trying to rally sagging US support for the war, Bush went to a Republican Southern stronghold for the latest in a series of speeches meant to convince an increasingly sceptical public that he has a winning strategy in Iraq.

In some of his frankest language so far, Bush responded to a question on what he could have done differently in Iraq by acknowledging the United States could have moved faster in training Iraqi troops and police.

He said Iraqi security forces were

originally trained to handle external threats but instead the threat came from inside the country, from al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

"In retrospect, we could've done better," Bush said. But he insisted the overall US strategy in Iraq had been correct.

Bush said he was "just as disappointed as everybody else was" about erroneous pre-war US intelligence on Iraq. US officials had said they had evidence that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction but none were found.

Bush also said the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison "hurt us in the international arena particularly in the Muslim world."

Bush played to a mostly sympathetic college audience of more than 900 in Charlotte, North Carolina. But as he stood atop a stage in a town-hall format, one questioner launched into a scathing attack of the kind Bush has rarely faced at public events where attendance is often tightly controlled.

'India's nuke plan under threat'

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

BJP leader and former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee warned Thursday that acceding to the Waiver Authority Bill, currently awaiting US Congress approval, was likely to adversely dent India's nuclear capabilities vis-à-vis "our nuclear-armed neighbours", Pakistan and China.

Pointing to a loophole in the Indo-US nuclear deal, he said India had given more concessions than making gains.

The Waiver Bill, Vajpayee said, was more "stringent" than the CTBT and unlike Pakistan and China would not grant India "waiver in perpetuity".

"The least the government of India should do is to insist that there should be an all-time waiver by the US President as in the case of China. Further, India should retain the right to conduct nuclear tests if any other country, such as China or

Pakistan, were to do so," he said.

What was shocking, Vajpayee said, was the "fact that if the President of US determines that India has 'detonated a nuclear explosive device' after this enactment by the US Congress, such waiver shall be terminated".

He warned that as and when the waiver Bill was passed it would "convert a voluntary moratorium on further tests by India into a legally binding commitment for all times to come, without any possibility of withdrawal under special circumstances, as provided for in the CTBT".

"This position is not acceptable," he added.

Also he said that it was unacceptable that the US President should constantly monitor whether India was complying with "conditionality built into the Act".

He said according to "reliable estimates" separation cost for India's military and civilian nuclear facilities would be "heavy".