

Nepal crisis deepens

Anti-king demonstrators defy curfew; 3 killed, 800 jailed so far

AP, Katmandu

Security forces fired tear gas and beat protesters with batons to break up democracy rallies yesterday as the political crisis deepened in this Himalayan nation.

The clashes took place in the Kalanki and Dhumbbarahi neighbourhoods of the capital of Katmandu, where demonstrators marched despite a daytime curfew. Protesters staged similar rallies in other neighbourhoods and suburbs to demand that Nepal's king relinquish control over the government.

Three protesters have been killed and more than 800 jailed, mostly without charge, during four days of demonstrations that for the first time Sunday brought thousands of workers, professionals and business people into the streets alongside students and political activists.

An alliance of seven major

political parties with vocal backing from Maoist rebels is demanding King Gyanendra restore democracy. The king dismissed an interim government and seized power more than a year ago.

Neither side has shown a willingness to back down, and the royal government said it may have to use even more force to restore order, alleging that insurgents had infiltrated political protests and fired on security forces over the weekend.

Four suspected rebels were arrested along with other protesters, and used gun cartridges were discovered at protest sites, Home Minister Kamal Thapa said Sunday. The seven-party opposition rejected the allegation, saying their protests were peaceful.

"This is baseless. He says he found cartridges. Anyone could have thrown them there," senior Nepali Congress party leader Ram Sharan Mahat told The Associated

Press on Monday. "This is a peaceful movement. By alleging that Maoists have become part of it, the government is trying to legitimise its oppression."

However, the protesters have not been entirely peaceful.

Thousands of youth have hurled bricks and stones at police, injuring many.

"Ideally, I would have preferred an entirely peaceful movement," Mahat said. "But these are young people. If you provoke them, they will hit back. We have all done it."

The government extended a weekend curfew in Katmandu to Monday, but with reduced hours. Daytime curfews also continued in the towns of Pokhara and Bharatpur.

One demonstrator was killed Sunday in Banepa, just east of Katmandu, when security forces fired on protesters who were hurling stones and shouting slogans. A

Defence Ministry statement said soldiers had to open fire to control the situation.

Two protesters were killed Saturday during similar protests.

Saturday was the anniversary of the introduction of democracy in Nepal 16 years ago when dozens of protesters were shot by police, boosting anti-royal sentiment and forcing the late king Birendra to yield much of his authority.

Gyanendra abruptly ended that era last year when he claimed direct control over the government, arguing he needed to bring order to a corrupt political scene and end a communist insurgency that has killed nearly 13,000 people in the past decade.

Many Nepalis at first welcomed the king's move. But the insurgency has since only worsened and the economy has faltered, fuelling discontent.

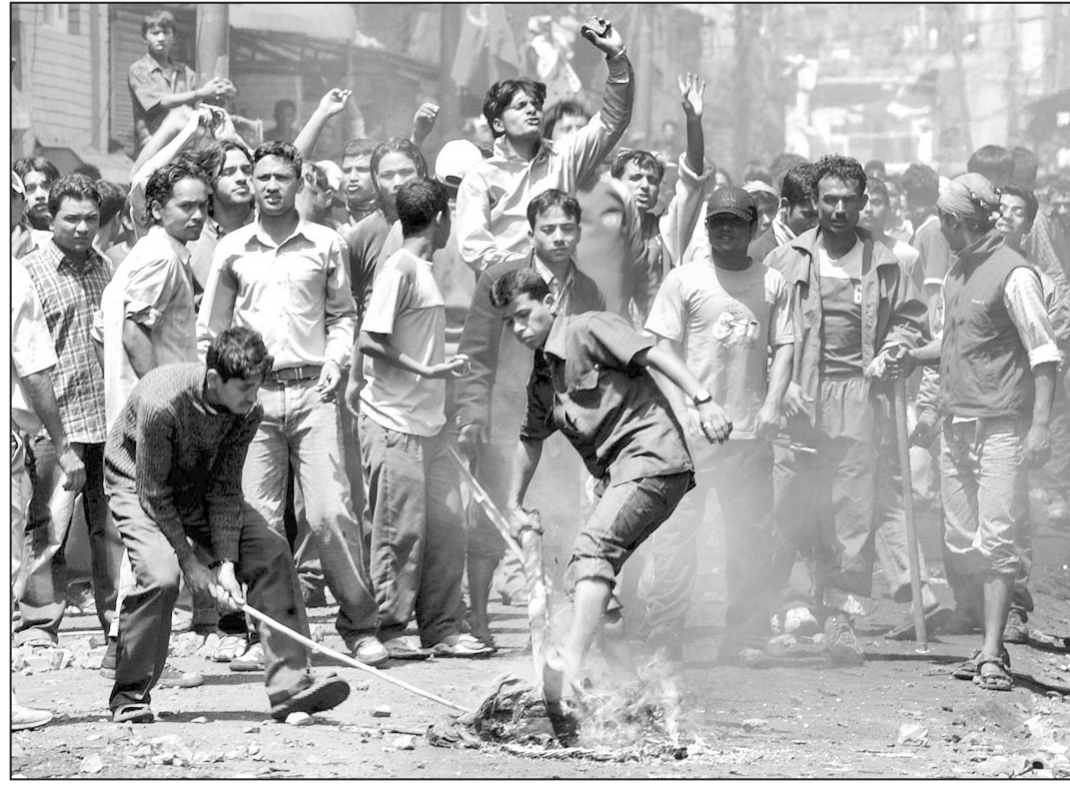


PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese opposition activists chant slogans during a demonstration in Gongabu in the Kathmandu Valley yesterday. The Nepalese government declared a daytime curfew and kept shoot-on-sight orders in place for the third consecutive day as it battled to contain a wave of protests against Nepal's King Gyanendra.

Delhi, Kabul ink 2 accords to boost ties

\$50m aid for Afghans

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India yesterday announced a 50 million dollar aid to Afghanistan and the two countries signed two agreements on cooperation in education and rural development after visiting Afghan President Hamid Karzai held talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Terrorism and resurgence of the ousted Taliban topped the agenda of talks between Karzai and Singh at the Hyderabad House here and the two sides agreed to pool in knowledge and experience in combating the problem.

Officials said the regrouping of the Taliban threatens the entire region and not Afghanistan alone.

The convergence between New Delhi and Kabul on security issue assumes significance as Afghanistan is threatened by the Taliban and al-Qaeda within the country and on its border to the east while India too faces the problem of cross-border terrorism, officials here point out.

Donors meet Tigers to save peace talks

Blast kills 4 soldiers, 2 aid workers

AFP, Colombo

Envoys from Sri Lanka's international donors went yesterday to meet Tamil Tiger rebels in a bid to keep peace talks due to be held in Switzerland from April 19 on track, officials said.

The ambassadors of Norway, Japan and the European Union (EU) flew north to rebel political headquarters at Kilinochchi to see the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In fresh violence, at least four Sri Lankan soldiers and two civilians were killed in a landmine blast blamed on the Tamil Tigers in the northern Jaffna province yesterday, defence officials said.

Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe, Sri Lanka's military spokesman, said an army truck was caught in the

"mine explosion killing four and seriously injuring two more soldiers at Mirusuvil, Jaffna."

He said that two aid workers attached to a non-governmental organisation were also killed in the explosion.

The blast happened as Sri Lanka's international donors were urging the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to attend the April 19-21 talks in Geneva aimed at salvaging a fragile Norwegian-brokered truce.

Norwegian embassy spokesman Tom Knappskog said the diplomats would "stress the importance of taking the process forward to further meetings, of building deeper confidence and ultimately of realising substantive progress on the peace process".

Diplomats said the ambassadors

representing the co-chairs of the peace process would urge the LTTE to attend the three-day truce talks despite renewed tensions.

The co-chairs are concerned about the government of Sri Lanka's and LTTE's preparations for the second round of ceasefire talks scheduled for later this month in Geneva and the important implications that the outcome of that meeting will have for the wider peace process, an EU statement said.

The ambassadors were expected to convey government guarantees of safe passage for the Tigers, diplomats said.

Meanwhile, tension remained high Monday in the eastern town of Batticaloa where both the LTTE and Karuna group were holding separate protests, officials said.

Assam votes in final leg of elections

Teacher killed in violence

AFP, Guwahati

A schoolteacher was killed and a paramilitary soldier abducted from a polling station in India's insurgency-hit Assam yesterday as the second stage of a state assembly election ended.

Police said the teacher was gunned down in Kokrajhar district, 220km from the state capital Guwahati.

"We feel the killing was done to settle political scores and that it was not insurgency-related," a police spokesman said.

The paramilitary soldier, abducted at gunpoint by insurgents, had been guarding a polling station against possible fraud in eastern Karbi Anglong district, the spokesman added.

The poll was held in two rounds for security reasons. In the first phase of the ballot on April 3, turnout

touched 75 percent.

"Polling in the last phase of elections concluded with preliminary estimates indicating a turnout of about 60 to 65 percent," an election official told AFP.

The results from both phases of voting are due on May 11.

Despite the relative calm during the elections in a state where at least a dozen insurgent groups operate, the authorities deployed at least 50,000 police and paramilitary troops for Monday's vote. At least 10,000 people have been killed in the past two decades.

New Delhi is in talks with representatives of Assam's main rebel group, the United Liberation Front of Asom.

The main parties contesting the polls are the nationally-ruling Congress party and the opposition right-wing party, Asom Gana Parishad.

Hospital blast kills 19 in China

AFP, Beijing

A powerful explosion at a hospital complex in northern China's Shanxi province yesterday killed at least 19 people with up to a dozen more missing, state media and local police reported.

The incident happened at Yuanping city's Xuangang Coal Power Company's staff hospital around 2:25 am (1825 GMT Sunday), with 19 bodies found by Monday afternoon and two people seriously injured, China Central Television reported.

The explosion occurred in a garage at the hospital and damaged buildings within one square kilometre (0.4 square miles), Xinhua news agency and a local policeman said, without giving a reason for the blast.

A doctor at the hospital, who declined to give his name, said a two-storey building which housed the garage and a small residential quarters was "completely flattened".

Israel tightens squeeze on Hamas govt

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel followed up its pledge to cut all contacts with the new Hamas-led Palestinian Authority by ordering the symbolic closure yesterday of a security liaison office in the West Bank town of Jericho.

The Palestinian officers who had been working alongside Israeli counterparts in the office at the entrance to the town were given until noon to pack their bags in the latest sign of the total breakdown in relations between the two sides since the Islamist group formed its first government last month.

An army statement said that the move was "in accordance with a decision made by the political echelon" and comes following a new pledge by Israel's acting premier Ehud Olmert to have no links at all with the Hamas regime.

"Israel will not hold ties with the Palestinian Authority which is a hostile authority," he said on Sunday during a meeting with security chiefs.

Olmert has consistently said that he would have no contact with a Hamas-led government but the move to cut contacts at such a low-level as the district coordinating office indicates a new determination to make life as difficult as possible for Hamas to govern properly.

Israel has also instituted a boycott of foreign diplomats who meet any members of the new government, although officials who meet with the moderate Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas will not be shunned.

As part of the diplomatic drive to isolate Hamas—which has been behind dozens of suicide attacks in the five-year uprising—the European Union and United States have cut funding to the Palestinian Authority.

The decision by the EU to freeze funding was expected to be rubber-stamped later in the day at a meeting of foreign ministers in Luxembourg, despite the fierce protests of the already cash-strapped Palestinian Authority.

US may be playing up Zarqawi's role in Iraq

AFP, Washington

The US military is exaggerating the role of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, possibly to help tie the war to the group blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks, The Washington Post reported in its yesterday edition.

Citing internal military documents and unnamed officers, the Post said Zarqawi's profile had been raised in a way that some military intelligence officials believe may have overstated his importance.

The documents state that the US propaganda campaign aims to turn Iraqis against Zarqawi, a Jordanian, by playing on their perceived dislike of foreigners, the report said.

US authorities claim some success with that effort, noting that some tribal Iraqi insurgents have attacked Zarqawi loyalists, The Post said.

For the past two years, US military leaders have been using Iraqi media and other outlets in Baghdad to publicize Zarqawi's role in the insurgency.

4 doctors killed in Taliban attacks

AFP, Kabul

Fresh attacks linked to Taliban insurgents killed eight people in insurgency-hit Afghanistan, officials said Monday, with four of the dead working as doctors in a remote province.

The four doctors and their driver - all Afghans - were killed in the normally calm western province of Badghis when unidentified attackers stormed a health clinic late Sunday, a provincial governor said Monday.

Governor Anayatullah Anayat blamed the attack on the clinic, funded by a range of foreign non-government organisations, on "enemies of the government and peace", a term often used to refer to Taliban fighters.

Badghis has seen little of the violence that is plaguing southern and eastern Afghanistan. Those regions experience near daily attacks, mostly suicide attacks and roadside bomb blasts.