

Undocumented US immigrants plan more protests

AFP, Washington

The recent unprecedented wave of demonstrations across the United States has given a new sense of empowerment to undocumented workers, who promise more dramatic protests in coming weeks.

Immigrants' rights advocates, elated by the resounding success of Monday's "National Day of Action," which drew as many as one million protesters across the United States, now are planning a national boycott which they hope will have an even greater resonance.

Organisers are planning the

May 1 "Great American Boycott," urging illegal immigrants -- who cannot vote and who have only limited political power -- to flex their economic muscle.

Protesters are being urged to refrain from shopping, and to stay away from school and work.

"We are expecting that with this national boycott we will be able to further gain some respect, dignity, and improve the lot of the immigrant community," said Javier Rodriguez, a Los Angeles-based activist who is the boycott's spokesman.

"The undocumented community (are) the people that take care of

their children, the people that care of the elderly, and the sick, who serve their food, who pick their fruit and their vegetables. We are rebuilding New Orleans. ... We are everywhere," he said in a recent interview with Fox News.

The kickoff day for the strike is May 1, international "Labour Day."

"On May 1 ... those people that don't have documents and their families and their allies will show America once again that they are human beings and they are orderly."

Political observers said the recent protests of mark the coming-of-age in particular for US Hispanics -- now the largest US ethnic minority -- and will make it harder for politicians to ignore the Latino vote.

As Jaime Contreras, president of the National Capital Immigrant Coalition, told the at a protest in Washington on Monday: "I have a message for all of the politicians in Congress and ... our president. Today we march, tomorrow we vote!"

The historic protests were meant to apply pressure on US lawmakers who are considering election-year reforms in immigration laws.

The proposed legislation runs the gamut from granting millions of undocumented immigrants the chance to become US citizens; to making illegal entry to this country a felony; to booting out illegal immigrants and erecting a fence on the southern US border, making it harder for people to enter illegally in the future.

Organisers said the newly-energized immigrants' rights movement also is giving a shot in the arm to tired progressive movements across the country, particularly organised labour, which has seen shrinking membership and a number of political setbacks in recent years.

"This is an issue that all working people and progressive organisations must embrace," said the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) labour union in a statement.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters rally in downtown Los Angeles, California for immigrant rights as part of a national "Day of Action" on Monday. Hundreds of thousands of people rallied in cities across the US, calling for dignity and rights for millions of illegal immigrants living and working in the US.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese security forces charge protesters on the fourth consecutive day-time curfew in Kathmandu on Tuesday. The demonstrators marched the streets shouting "Down with King Gyanendra!"

Daytime curfew in Nepal goes but arrests continue

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal lifted yesterday a daytime curfew clamped on the capital but arrested more demonstrators, including 25 journalists, as protests continued against King Gyanendra's absolute rule.

"The daytime curfew ... in Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts has been lifted until further notice," a newsreader on state-run Nepal Television said. A curfew remains in place at night.

The royal government also reiterated a willingness to talk with political parties spearheading the most intense spate of protests to restore democracy since King Gyanendra seized power 14 months ago.

The king "has from the very outset emphasized on talks to resolve the problem," government spokesman Shrish Shumsher Rana was quoted as saying in the state-run Rising Nepal newspaper.

There was no reaction from oppo-

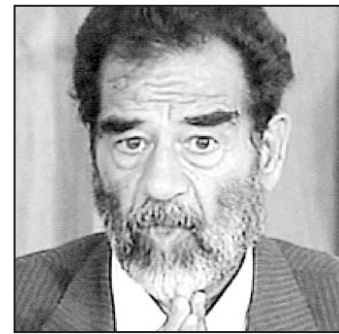
sition parties, but analysts said the monarch was becoming increasingly isolated by the protests and strike action coupled with increasingly strident international criticism.

Opposition parties said they planned to hold a rally later Wednesday to mark the deaths of three protesters shot dead by troops at the weekend.

"The seven-party alliance is holding a gathering to pay tribute to those martyrs who were killed in demonstrations," said Kashinath Adhikari, a protest leader from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist).

Protests were banned in the area of the capital where the alliance planned to hold its meeting so the parties said they were bracing for more arrests and clashes.

Further demonstrations were also expected in Gongabu, on the outskirts of the capital, where thousands of demonstrators clashed with police Tuesday and five protesters were treated for shotgun wounds.



AFP, Baghdad

Trial session held without Saddam

AFP, Baghdad

The trial of Saddam Hussein on charges of crimes against humanity resumed yesterday for a brief ten minute session without the deposed leader or any of the other seven defendants present.

Chief judge Rauf Abdel Rahman adjourned the session to April 17 after the shortest session of the trial since it began in October.

"The trial is adjourned to April 17 for experts to verify the signatures of the defendants who were not in the court today," Abdel Rahman said.

"We adjourn to give the experts time to accomplish their task of verifying the signatures."

He said the signatures of defendants Saddam, Barzan Ibrahim Tikriti, Ali Daeh Ali, Abdullah Khadem Ruweid, Mezhar Abdullah Ruweid have to be verified.

The prosecution has presented enormous volumes of documents with signatures of Saddam and other defendants linking them to the massacre of 148 Shias from Dujail village in the mid-1980s.

Lankan blasts kill 30, cast cloud over peace talks

AFP, Colombo

A bomb ripped through a vegetable market in northeastern Sri Lanka yesterday, killing nine people in the latest of a series of blasts which have cast a cloud over upcoming peace talks.

At least 50 other people were injured in the port town of Trincomalee when a bomb rigged up to a bicycle exploded, hours after a Claymore mine attack killed two constables in the same district.

Thirty people have now been killed in four blasts since Monday, dimming hopes for talks scheduled for next week between Colombo and Tamil Tiger rebels in Switzerland to save their faltering ceasefire.

The Dutch government, on behalf of the European Union, condemned the latest violence and urged the parties to honour pledges made during earlier talks in Geneva in February to uphold the truce in place since 2002.

"Recent violent incidents illustrate a flagrant disregard for the commitments made by the parties at Geneva and place in serious jeopardy the upcoming talks in Geneva," the embassy said.

"The attacks must be seen as an

attempt to derail the upcoming ceasefire talks in Geneva."

International concern mounted for Sri Lanka's peace efforts yesterday as the third landmine attack in as many days killed 21

Two policemen died in a suspected Tamil Tiger landmine blast in the restive northeast on Wednesday as peace brokers and Scandinavian truce monitors kept up a bid to save the faltering ceasefire.

Police said two constables were killed on the spot while two others were injured after their truck was ambushed with a Claymore mine, a surface-mounted explosive device which scatters pellets like bullets.

The policemen were on their way to Trincomalee to buy provisions for colleagues stationed further north of the main city in the coastal district, police said.

"It is the Tigers who have carried out the attack," a Trincomalee police official said, referring to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"Two men were killed on the spot and the other two in the truck were injured," he said. "They have been taken to the Trincomalee hospital."

IRAQ BRIBES INQUIRY

Australian PM faces grilling

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister John Howard was summoned for questioning yesterday at an official inquiry into the payment of sanctions-busting bribes to Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Howard, who will be the first prime minister in almost a quarter of a century to appear before a commission of inquiry, said in a statement he was "happy" to comply.

The commission is probing the role of national wheat exporter AWB, formerly the government's Australian Wheat Board, in the corruption of the UN's oil-for-food programme in Iraq.

A UN-backed report last year said AWB paid 220 million US dollars in bribes to obtain 2.3 billion dollars in contracts from Baghdad in breach of sanctions against the former dictator's regime.

The commissioner, former judge Terence Cole, has heard evidence since the inquiry opened in January

that the government was warned repeatedly that AWB was paying bribes to Baghdad.

Howard, a conservative ally of US President George W. Bush who sent Australian troops into Iraq to help topple Saddam in 2003, has publicly denied knowing that kickbacks were paid.

The prime minister follows his top lieutenants -- Deputy Prime Minister Mark Vaile, who is also trade minister, and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer -- into the witness box.

Vaile on Monday and Downer on Tuesday were asked what they knew of the bribes and when they knew it, and Howard is expected to face similar questions.

Both ministers have been ridiculed in the Australian media for saying they did not recall seeing more than 20 diplomatic cables over a period of years, which warned of possible problems with AWB's Iraqi contracts.

Prodi vows to reunite Italy after polls win

Berlusconi refuses to concede

AFP, Rome

Romano Prodi insisted yesterday that he could reunite a bitterly divided Italy as Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi came under intense pressure to accept defeat after the country's closest vote in living memory.

Pressing ahead with plans to form Italy's first centre-left government in five years, Prodi said his leftist coalition's victory was "clear" and played down fears the knife-edge result could make the nation ungovernable.

But the country's political future has become mired in chaos and confusion after Berlusconi refused to concede defeat for his centre-right coalition.

He cited "many irregularities" in voting for the upper Senate and the tiny 25,000-vote margin in the lower house and has demanded a close check of 43,000 contested ballots before Italy's top court signs off on the result.

Prodi -- who was to have his first post-election news conference at 3:00 pm (1300 GMT) Wednesday -- said in an interview with France's Europe 1 radio that "victory is now clear in both houses of parliament."

He said he was "certain" of becoming Italy's next prime minister.

The 66-year-old former presi-



Romano Prodi

dent of the EU Commission dismissed the idea of a German-style "grand coalition" of left and right, as suggested by Berlusconi in the event that the recount resulted in a split parliament.

"This is not something specific to Italy. Germany is cut in two, France is cut in two," he said.

"So long as there is growth and clear ideas, we will reunite the country."

Prodi also recalled the narrow margin that separated US President George W. Bush from Democrat rival Al Gore in the 2000 election in the United States.

His first priority will be to kick-start a stagnant economy and convince international financial markets that, despite governing a

disparate coalition, which ranges from moderate Catholics to Communists, he can provide a stable government.

But James Newell, an Italian politics specialist at Salford University in England, said the razor-thin margin of victory would leave a Prodi government with "little legitimacy."

"They will be exposed to constant attack by the opposition who can claim the support of half the country," he said.

Prodi said Berlusconi had "no chance" of succeeding President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, whose mandate ends in May.

He also said he hoped for a "strong alliance with France" and for President Jacques Chirac to give a "new impulse" to European integration during the last year of his mandate, despite last year's rejection by French voters of the EU constitution.

Asked about the crisis sparked by the French government's contested youth contract, he said Italy faced "the same problem of a fear of precariousness."

The country's top daily Corriere della Sera issued a stern call for unity, saying that division over the result "seems to have cast a dark cloud over the future of the country."

Israel declares end to Sharon rule

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli government signalled a formal end to the tumultuous five-year rule of Ariel Sharon on Tuesday, declaring the comatose prime minister permanently incapacitated.

The announcement was made at a cabinet meeting which saw his deputy and recent election winner Ehud Olmert -- handed the reins of power after Sharon's massive stroke on January 4 -- confirmed in the post of acting prime minister.

Olmert is currently putting together a new coalition government which will be tasked with

setting the final borders of the Jewish state by pulling tens of thousands of settlers out of the occupied West Bank in a follow-up to Sharon's decision to uproot Jews from the Gaza Strip last summer.

The change in status will actually come into effect on April 14, at the end of a 100-day period laid down by law.

The government decision was moved forward due to the week-long Jewish Passover holiday which starts Wednesday.

After ministers unanimously approved the move, Olmert said he hoped that his own status as acting premier would not last long.

5 more US troops killed in Iraq

AP, Baghdad

The US military reported the deaths of five more soldiers, including three killed Tuesday in a roadside bombing north of the capital.

The US military also announced the deaths of two other Americans in combat Sunday. One suffered fatal wounds in Anbar province west of Baghdad and the other was killed by a roadside bomb near Balad, the military said.

On Wednesday, gunmen in Baghdad hunted down three different government employees and shot them dead on their way to work, police said.