

India presses Nepal to restore democracy

REUTERS, Kathmandu

India stepped up pressure on Nepal's King Gyanendra yesterday to restore democracy, sending a special envoy and its top diplomat to hold talks with the monarch to try to defuse a fortnight of crippling protests.

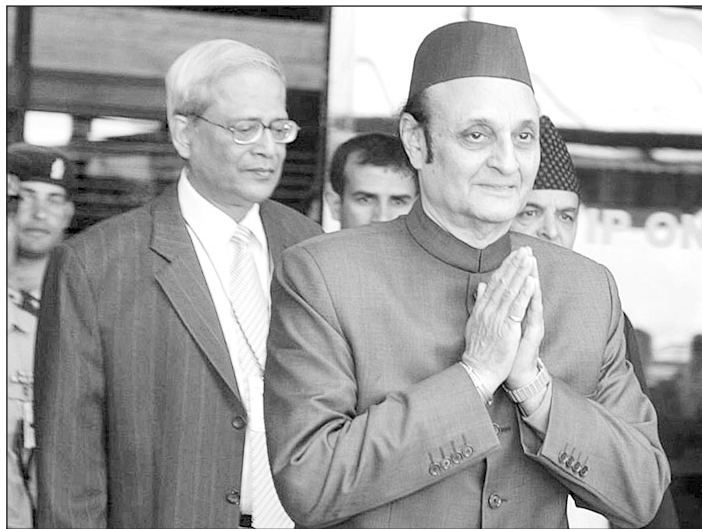
A woman hit on the face by a tear gas shell during a protest died on Tuesday, taking the death toll in the campaign to six. Hundreds have been wounded in police action against protesters and hundreds of others arrested.

The anti-monarchy campaign by a seven-party alliance has brought the kingdom to a standstill with nationwide street protests and a general strike, which has stopped the movement of food and fuel. Giant neighbour India has expressed worry because of the long, porous border it shares with Nepal.

"I bring prayers and hope that Nepal will get out of the present difficult situation and return to peace and prosperity," the Indian envoy, Karan Singh, told reporters at Kathmandu's airport.

Earlier, Singh told an Indian TV channel: "It is not our intention to interfere in the internal affairs of another country but the last thing that we would want is for Nepal to dissolve into chaos because India's vital security interests are involved."

"Our human interests are involved. There's an open border between Nepal and India and our commitment to parliamentary democracy is there."



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's special envoy to Nepal Karan Singh greets media representatives upon his arrival at The Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu yesterday.

Singh is the scion of the royal family of Kashmir and is related to King Gyanendra by marriage. He was to meet political representatives later on Wednesday and call on the king on Thursday.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran, the country's top diplomat, is also in Kathmandu and might accompany Singh when he calls on the king, local officials said.

Diplomats have said events are moving toward a climax.

One flashpoint could come on Thursday at mass rallies called by the political parties, which have

vowed to bring out hundreds of thousands of people on the streets.

Sporadic protests took place in the capital and other towns on Wednesday but activists appeared to be reserving their strength for Thursday.

About 250 school and university teachers were arrested when they staged a rally in the western town of Pokhara, where authorities have clamped a curfew to block anti-monarchy demonstrations.

Fifty teachers were arrested in a protest in Kathmandu. The United States and India

have called repeatedly for the restoration of democracy.

King Gyanendra sacked the government and assumed full power in February 2005, vowing to crush a decade-old Maoist revolt in which more than 13,000 people have died.

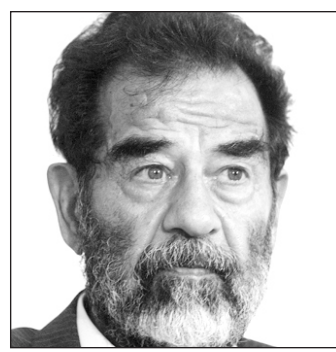
He has offered to hold elections by April next year, but activists say he cannot be trusted and should immediately hand over power to an all-party government.

The king came under further pressure on Tuesday when three top human rights groups called for international sanctions against the monarch and top Nepali officials, accusing them of being "impervious to the suffering" of the Nepalese people.

"He (the king) and his officials have been responsible for serious human rights violations, including the arbitrary arrest and detention of thousands of critics, torture and ill-treatment of detainees..." Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists said in a statement.

Despite the pressure, the World Bank's representative to the country said the economy could hold out for months even if Nepal was internationally isolated.

"How long has Burma (Myanmar) survived?" Ken-ichi Ohashi said in an interview with Reuters. "I think evidence is pretty clear that if a country decides to endure some hardship, the economy just doesn't collapse very easily."



Judge rules Saddam signatures 'authentic'

AFP, Baghdad

The trial of Saddam Hussein for crimes against humanity resumed yesterday, with the chief judge ruling that signatures linking the ousted Iraqi leader to a massacre in the 1980s were authentic.

Saddam, dressed in a grey suit and white shirt, took his seat in the dock after a two-day recess, with his seven co-defendants also in court.

The spotlight remained on Saddam's alleged signature on documents linked to the execution of 148 Shias from the village of Dujiil in the mid-1980s following a failed bid to assassinate him.

Abdel Rahman had adjourned the trial on Monday after only an hour to allow the prosecution more time to prove that the signatures were those of Saddam and his half-brother, Barzan Ibrahim Hassan al-Tikriti.

Chief prosecutor Jaafar al-Mussawi had presented a report by three handwriting experts that he said proved those claims.

Saddam lawyer Khalil Dulaimi contested the report, demanding that a neutral body make a judgement on the authenticity of the signatures.

Khamis al-Obeidi, another defence lawyer, said the experts were interior ministry employees "and not neutral. They are against the former regime."

The documents came from the Revolutionary Command Council, the former regime's highest decision-making body.

Fresh bid to salvage Lankan ceasefire

10 more killed in violence

AFP, Colombo

At least 10 new killings were reported yesterday in Sri Lanka's embattled north and east as Norway's new peace envoy launched a fresh attempt to salvage the island's tottering ceasefire.

Two Claymore mine attacks also rocked the troubled regions Wednesday, wounding at least four people including two civilians, police said.

A foreign national, believed to be a Southeast Asian, was among those wounded Wednesday, police said adding that his vehicle was hit by a Claymore mine in the northern district of Vavuniya.

A spokesman said two sailors were wounded when their water tanker was hit by a land mine while two civilians were injured when their truck was caught up in a mine attack in the island's north.

The Norwegian emissary Jon Hanssen-Bauer bought forward his

meeting with Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake to Tuesday, shortly after arriving here amid an upsurge in violence which the government blames on Tamil Tiger rebels.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) accused the government of unleashing violence against civilians in areas where the island's minority Tamils are concentrated.

"Sri Lankan military forces and paramilitary groups are continuing with violence against Tamil civilians, killing five in separate incidents within five hours on Monday," the LTTE said in a statement Wednesday.

Police said five more people were found on Wednesday shot dead in the northern peninsula of Jaffna. The pro-rebel Tamilnet website said the victims had been gunned down by security forces on Tuesday night.

"The five civilians were..."

ordered to run through the Tharavai area, an open terrain near the camp (in the peninsula), shot and killed by the Sri Lanka army," the Tamilnet said.

There was no immediate word from the military about the allegations.

The killings came as Hanssen-Bauer met with the prime minister. "There was a meeting last night between the prime minister and the Norwegian envoy," a spokesman for the premier's office said without giving details.

As Hanssen-Bauer arrived Tuesday, Colombo agreed to helicopter transport for Tiger rebels in a bid to clear the way for truce talks in Switzerland next week.

Colombo's top official handling the peace process, Palitha Kohona, said they told the Norwegian peace broker the LTTE could charter a helicopter to transport their field commanders for a central committee meeting.

Thais vote for Senate amid lingering crisis

AFP, Bangkok

Thais cast ballots yesterday to elect a new Senate with the country still mired in political crisis after snap polls earlier this month that led prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra to step aside.

Polls closed at 3:00 pm (0800 GMT) after seven hours of voting. In restive southern provinces where an Islamic insurgency has raged for two years, militants staged a series of attacks around polling stations, killing two policemen and wounding nine others, police said.

In the rest of the country the election, like the campaigning for the non-partisan Senate, was far more subdued than the run-up to the April 2 elections when Thailand was rattled by street protests and an opposition boycott.

The snap polls failed to fill all 500 seats in the lower house, casting doubt on when parliament will convene and forcing by-elections in 40 constituencies on Sunday.

Even though his party won that election, Thaksin said he would not accept the post of prime minister when parliament reconvenes in the hope of heading off further protests.

Strict election rules prevent most campaigning for the Senate race, meaning Wednesday's vote has been relatively low-key.

The 1,477 candidates for 200 Senate seats are barred from holding rallies and from joining political parties.

But newspapers have been vocal in their concerns over dozens of candidates who are married to members of Thaksin's party, raising fears over a so-called "Chamber of Husbands and Wives".

ruling party officials, including those of Thaksin, also fill the ballots for the 200 seats in a body that was designed to be politically neutral.

Exit polls, which were conducted only in Bangkok, showed that five of the 18 seats to represent the capital were won by activists who helped organise the anti-Thaksin campaign.

Other winners in Bangkok included a movie star and a former governor, the exit poll showed.

Parnthep Pourpongpan, a

spokesman for the protest movement, said the election results would be closely scrutinized for any links to the outgoing premier's Thai Rak Thai party.

"We think that senators are supposed to be neutral under the law. We think that they are not supposed to be the nominee of political parties or political people," he said.



A woman casts her vote to elect a new Senate at a poll station in Bangkok yesterday.

Shia cleric, driver burned to death in Pakistan

AFP, Multan

A leading Shia Muslim cleric and his driver were burned to death in Pakistan when gunmen shot at their car, hitting the fuel tank and causing it to explode, police said Wednesday.

Two attackers on a motorbike sprayed bullets at the vehicle of 50-year-old cleric Fazal Hussain Alvi near the central industrial city of Faisalabad late Tuesday, senior police officer Mian Muhammad Idrees said.

The bodies were charred beyond recognition after the car went up in flames. Alvi's family identified him by his wooden leg, Idrees said.

He said it was a "targeted killing" but added that it was too early to tell whether it was a sectarian killing or the result of some personal rivalry.

Angry Shias tried to stage a protest after the attack on Alvi, who was known as an impassioned speaker, but were stopped by local authorities.

The Shia political party Tehrik-i-Jafaria quoted its chief Sajid Naqvi as calling it a sectarian killing. "I think Pakistan's rulers have failed to combat terrorism in this country," he said.

Police have been put on alert and security has been beefed up around Sunni and Shia mosques, a police official said on condition of anonymity.

The attack came a week after a suicide bomber killed 57 people, including the top leadership of a moderate Sunni Muslim party, during a gathering in Karachi last week to mark the Prophet Mohammad's birthday.

Indian envoy to NZ stripped of credentials

AFP, New Delhi

India has stripped its controversial high commissioner to New Zealand of his credentials and named his successor yesterday, but refused to say why.

Yesterday, the accreditation of Harish Kumar Dogra was withdrawn, "said foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna. Adding that the New Zealand high commission (embassy) in New Delhi as well as the foreign office in Wellington had been told.

Sarna said Dogra's successor, K. P. Ernest, will "shortly" take up the post as India's ambassador to New Zealand.

"Dogra was recalled on March 1 and he indicated that he'd come back by the first week of April, and thereafter said he will return on April 15, but he has failed to adhere to his own schedule and continues to stay on in New Zealand," Sarna said.

The spokesman declined to specify why the senior diplomat, who handed over his duties to his deputy last week, had been recalled.

"I cannot go into charges and counter-charges... Dogra has been recalled under ministry of external affairs rules," he told reporters.



Chinese President Hu Jintao (L) jokes with Microsoft chairman Bill Gates (R) and CEO Steve Ballmer (C) during a visit to Microsoft headquarters in Redmond, Washington on Tuesday.

Hu promotes closer ties on US trip

REUTERS, Seattle

Chinese President Hu Jintao touted deepening US-China ties as he prepared to tour a major US exporter on Wednesday before a White House summit expected to touch on trade frictions and Iran's nuclear programme.

Hu dined on Tuesday night with about 100 US political and corporate leaders at the home of Bill Gates, whose Microsoft Corp. has been a major victim of Chinese software piracy. In a meeting earlier with Gates, Hu reiterated China would move against software pirates.

"US industry groups estimate 90 percent of DVDs, music CDs and software sold in China are pirated. The intellectual property issue is also expected to be on the agenda at Hu's meeting on Thursday with President George W. Bush.

Attendees at Tuesday's dinner, hosted by Washington state Gov. Chris Gregoire at Gates' \$100

million lakeside mansion, included executives from Boeing Co, a leading exporter, which Hu will visit on Wednesday. China recently signed a deal with the company to buy 80 737 jets worth about \$4 billion.

In remarks at the dinner, Hu stressed the expanding relationship between China and the United States.

"Today, many cargo ships are very busy crossing the Pacific Ocean, laden with the rich fruit of our strong trade ties and friendship between our two peoples," Hu said.

"I am sure that with the further deepening of China's reform and opening up, we are going to see an even broader prospect for the economic cooperation and trade between China and Washington state and China and the United States as a whole."

Before Hu's visit, China sought to quell US trade complaints by signing contracts worth \$16.2 billion,

while Vice Premier Wu Yi visited the United States last week. The US trade deficit with China totaled \$202 billion last year.

The official spokesman for the Chinese delegation, Liu Jianchao, told reporters the results of the vice premier's US trip were "very positive."

US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick said Beijing had been "agonisingly slow" in meeting US demands to reform its currency, US officials say the yuan is undervalued, making Chinese exports artificially cheap.

The Chinese spokesman said the currency issue was certain to be discussed in coming days.

Bush said on Tuesday he would bring up Iran's nuclear programme at his White House lunch with Hu. The American president wants China to agree to putting more pressure on Tehran through the UN Security Council, something Beijing is resisting.

Safeguards for refugees under threat: UN

REUTERS, London

International safeguards for refugees are under threat from tighter asylum restrictions, growing intolerance and terrorism fears, a UN agency said on Wednesday.

"Core elements of refugee status... are being questioned. More and more, asylum seekers are portrayed not as refugees fleeing persecution and entitled to sanctuary, but rather as illegal migrants, potential terrorists and criminals -- or at a minimum, as bogus," a report by UN refugee agency UNHCR said.

Basic principles underpinning international protection of refugees "have come under increasing threat," the report said.

"In a world which has grown increasingly hostile to asylum and refugees," the very relevance of the UN convention on refugees had been questioned, it said.

The report said there was a tendency to criminalize migrants, including asylum seekers, by asso-

ciating them with people smugglers and traffickers.

States were responsible for controlling their borders, but they remained "obliged to provide basic safety and assistance to those deemed in need of international protection," it said.

Following the September 11 attacks, states had increasingly invoked security concerns to justify new laws that affected asylum seekers and refugees, the report said.

Border controls had been tightened in many parts of the world, while the grounds for the detention and expulsion of foreign nationals had been broadened, it said.

The report conceded that "it would be naive to believe that terrorists have ignored the opportunity to consider how (asylum) systems might be exploited."

But it said asylum seekers were closely scrutinized and this did not seem the most promising way for a terrorist to enter a country unde-

TECTED. The report on "The State of the World's Refugees" said there had been a sharp drop in the worldwide number of refugees and asylum seekers over the past five years.

The number of refugees -- 9.2 million at the start of 2005 -- was down from nearly 18 million in 1992 and was the lowest in 25 years, the report said.

This was mainly due to a drop in armed conflicts and several large-scale repatriations. More than 4 million people had gone home to Afghanistan in recent years and hundreds of thousands more to Angola, Sierra Leone, Burundi and Liberia, it said.

Even so, there are still millions of refugees for whom no solutions are in sight, the report said, citing 33 groups of at least 25,000 refugees in exile for five years or more.

Aceh separatist leaders return home after 30 years in exile

AFP, Banda Aceh

Leaders of the former separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) touched down in their home province in Indonesia Wednesday after 30 years in exile, the latest step forward in a much-hailed peace process.

An airport official confirmed that the group of nine, including former "prime minister" Malik Mahmud, "foreign minister" Zaini Abdullah and spokesman Bakhtiar Abdullah, had arrived at Banda Aceh's airport.

They were due to be whisked to the former GAM headquarters where a small traditional welcoming ceremony would be staged by ex-GAM members, an official told EIShinta radio earlier in the day.

"Since 1976 we have not yet returned home. Thank God we are now safely here and hopefully we will continue with the journey to Banda Aceh," Bakhtiar Abdullah told reporters at Medan airport earlier in the day during a stopover.

Dead Sea now really dying

AFP, Ein Gedi

It has survived since Biblical times - but now the Dead Sea may really be dying.

The bare, sun-baked landscape around the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth, has always been fed by the fresh water of the Jordan River.

But now the Jordan's waters are systematically diverted for agricultural and hydroelectric projects. An evaporation basin to obtain Dead Sea minerals has lowered the level one meter (three feet) per year for two decades.

According to environmentalists, the whole area, which is bordered by Israel, Jordan and the West Bank, is headed for ecological disaster.

"The ecological situation is catastrophic," says Gideon Bromberg of Friends of the Earth Israel. "In 50 years, the Dead Sea has lost a third of its surface area and its water level is continuing to drop rapidly."

"For the time being nothing concrete has been undertaken," he

says, adding that the Dead Sea has lost 98 percent of the fresh water it previously had from the Jordan.

Every year new cracks appear in the seabed, draining more waters away. Lucrative thermal spas such as those at Ein Gedi in Israel have seen the salty waters retreat two kilometres (about one and a half miles).

"We have discovered 1,650 holes and crevasses, some of them dozens of metres deep," says Eli Raz, a geologist specialising in the Dead Sea.

The holes are mainly caused by rain water coming down from surrounding mountains and dissolving salt crystals that had previously plugged access to underground caverns.

Raz said the holes are mainly in inaccessible areas and are not yet threatening infrastructure such as buildings and roads.

For millennia, those roads have led tourists to the Dead Sea to enjoy the sparse beauty of the surroundings and the health benefits of the mineral-rich water -- and

officials must now try to find a way to keep those waters from disappearing forever.

Last July, the World Bank approved a feasibility study for a plan to build a 200-kilometre (120-mile) canal to bring water from the Red Sea to the south.

The two-year study by Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians is to cost 15.5 million dollars and will be financed by foreign donors.

If the feasibility study gives the go-ahead, the project will take around five years to complete.

Its second phase involves building power generation and water desalination plants to supply electricity and fresh water to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Experts say the Dead Sea needs some two billion cubic metres (528 billion gallons) of water annually from the Red Sea because 66 billion cubic metres (17.4 trillion gallons) have evaporated through industrial use.

But since the victory of Islamist militant movement Hamas in

January's Palestinian elections, Israel has cut virtually all contacts with the Palestinian Authority, further complicating the delicate situation.

Moreover, some ecologists are concerned that the canal project will cause more damage than good, upsetting the Dead Sea's delicate equilibrium by bringing salt water in to replace the depleted supply of fresh water.

Some 50 kilometres (30 miles) long by 17 kilometres wide at its broadest point, the Dead Sea's water level is 412 metres below the Mediterranean Sea and is famed as the saltiest body of water in the world, around 10 times more saline than the oceans.

Both Israel and Jordan have set up nature reserves around the Dead Sea, home to ibexes, camels, foxes and the occasional leopard.

The area is also famous for having preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls in caves that served as libraries on the sea's northern shore for 2,000 years.