



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese opposition activists throw stones as policemen take cover at Kalanki in Kathmandu yesterday. Sporadic clashes erupted after Nepal's beleaguered King Gyanendra imposed a fresh curfew on the capital as the opposition vowed to bring an end to his absolute rule over the Himalayan country.

King fights for throne

AFP, Kathmandu

The King of Nepal's refusal to release his firm grip on power has helped unite a fractious opposition and threatened his survival as exalted head of the country, analysts said.

King Gyanendra faces weeks of continued pressure after he gave some ground Friday by offering to return power to the people—but was dramatically rejected by some 300,000 Nepalis who took to the streets.

Political scientist Professor S.M. Habibullah, of Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University, said Nepal was just "at the beginning" of a protest movement to try to shift power from the monarch to the politicians.

King Gyanendra Friday asked the seven-party opposition alliance to choose a prime minister but politicians refused as he still retained the power to sack political leaders and take outright control of

the country.

"The hub of politics is not outside the palace," said Habibullah. "The political parties have already said: we're not ready to take the gift (accept the offer) of the king."

The opposition have stepped up their demands for the reinstatement of parliament, suspended by King Gyanendra in 2002, and the creation of a constituent assembly to decide the future of the monarchy.

"If he goes for the constituent assembly that's going to be the end of the monarch" in his current guise, said one diplomatic source.

But if the protests continue "it will take him a while to get to the stage where he realises he has absolutely no choice," the source said.

King Gyanendra may seek to drive a wedge between the Maoists and the seven-party alliance that is promoting a general strike that has virtually paralysed the impoverished Himalayan kingdom since November 6, analysts said.

The Maoists, who have fought a

bloody 10-year insurgency that has left more than 12,500 dead, struck a loose deal with the opposition in November last year.

The politicians agreed to the key Maoist demand for a referendum on the constitution while the rebels agreed to cooperate with the parties.

The seven-party alliance has stuck even though the parties range from the hard left to others who want the king to retain a ceremonial role under any new system.

It has also survived a clampdown during April by King Gyanendra that has seen more than a dozen killed, hundreds wounded and even more arrested.

"The kind of repression that has taken place has united the political parties," said South Asian analyst Sukh Deo Muni.

Analysts said the king could try to exploit the often tempestuous relationships between the alliance to weaken their campaign.

Even while running the country before King Gyanendra seized total

control in February last year, Nepal was marked by inter-party feuding and political deadlock.

"The king may try to disintegrate the seven-party alliance," said Mahendra Lama, professor of South Asian Studies at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University.

"The king will try to play the parties against the Maoists. It will be a very, very untenable position.

"If the king becomes obstinate, people may look for the demise of this institution," he said, even though the monarch is traditionally revered as the incarnation of the God Vishnu, the protector.

"The writing is clearly on the wall. If the king remains obstinate this could very well be the case."

There were early signs of the tactic of division in the editorial of Sunday's state-run newspaper, The Rising Nepal, which warned of a "historic blunder" if the opposition parties failed to form a new government.

Tight security for Kashmir elections

AFP, Srinagar

Tight security was in place ahead of special local elections in four Indian Kashmir districts after militant separatists threatened to attack candidates and voters, police said Sunday.

"We have made adequate security arrangements for peaceful by-elections," senior police officer K. Rajinder Kumar told reporters.

The special voting, or by-election, to fill four vacant state assembly seats in Kashmir is due to be held Monday. Three politicians have already been killed by suspected Islamic rebels during the campaigns and several candidates have escaped assassination attempts.

Kashmir Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad is one of the 17 candidates running for the four seats. About 288,000 people are eligible to vote in the four districts.

Azad, standing for India's federal ruling Congress party, took the reins of the disputed territory in November.

India voices support for Nepali parties

China calls for calm

AFP, New Delhi

India expressed support on Saturday for Nepal's seven-party opposition political alliance in what analysts said was a face-saving exercise after New Delhi initially welcomed King Gyanendra's offer.

The government's statement came after Indian newspapers described New Delhi as hailing the monarch's declaration late Friday that he would give up the absolute powers he seized last year.

On Saturday, however, New Delhi said the press reaction to its statement in which it said it "welcomes his (the king's) intention to transfer all executive power of the state" had been a "misrepresentation" of India's stand.

"There is no question of India's commitment to democracy in Nepal. I want this message to go very loud and clear," foreign secretary Shyam

Saran told reporters in New Delhi.

"We support the view of the (seven-party) alliance that restoration of peace and multi-party democracy in Nepal is the need of the hour," he said.

Praising the political parties for leading a peaceful pro-democracy movement, Saran said a statement by the alliance earlier Saturday rejecting the king's offer was a reiteration of the parties' long-stated agenda.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, however, said the king's proposal was a "step in the right direction".

"There should be a government in place which exercises all the executive powers. The process has begun," Singh told reporters aboard his aircraft on his way to Germany for a three-day visit.

He said India could not "afford" to see Nepal become a "failed state".

Analysts said the government's latest statement about Nepal was aimed at controlling damage done by its support for the king's offer.

Meanwhile, China urged calm in restive Nepal Sunday, while welcoming the speech of King Gyanendra that offered to hand power back to the people, the foreign ministry said.

"Nepal is a good friendly neighbour of China, we sincerely hope the situation in Nepal will quickly recover calm and that the political situation will become stable," ministry spokesman Qin Gang said in a statement.

"We welcome the nationally televised speech of King Gyanendra and we think that the king's speech will help the political forces in Nepal to engage in dialogue and realize political reconciliation."

4 killed as Pak tribals refuse to disarm

REUTERS, Peshawar

A paramilitary trooper and three tribesmen were killed on Sunday in a shoot-out in a restive Pakistani tribal region, as authorities tried to enforce a ban on carrying arms, officials said.

The firefight broke out near Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, where close to 300 people have died in clashes between security forces and pro-Taliban tribal militants since early March.

Tribesmen in a minibus opened fire after being ordered to hand over weapons at a checkpoint near a cemetery on the outskirts of the town.

"Four men were killed, including three attackers and one Frontier Corps trooper, in an exchange of fire at the cemetery checkpoint," an intelligence official told Reuters.

He described the attackers as militants, and said two others had

been arrested.

There is widespread support for the Taliban and al-Qaeda among the deeply-conservative tribesmen and the ban on carrying arms in public has struck another nerve.

The fiercely independent Pashtun tribes of the area regard a display of weapons as part of their cultural identity, and Kalashnikovs and bandoliers are commonly referred to as "Pashtun jewellery".

After the clash, shopkeepers pulled down shutters in the main bazaar and helicopter gunships hovered overhead.

Hours earlier, militants distributed leaflets through the town urging tribesmen not to surrender weapons.

The leaflets urged paramilitary troops, who are drawn from the tribes, to desert and fight against "Zionism and Christianity" instead of taking sides with "infidels".

Fighting escalates in Afghanistan

AP, Kandahar

Afghan security forces surrounded Taliban fighters hiding in a village in southern Afghanistan yesterday, launching a gunbattle that killed at least three militants and a police officer.

Elsewhere in the region, Taliban militants attacked an Afghan construction company working for coalition forces, killing a security guard.

The fighting came as visiting British Defence Secretary John Reid said coalition troops must maintain their offensive against Taliban and al-Qaeda militants to prevent their return to power.

"The greatest danger of all for the people of Afghanistan and the people of the United Kingdom would be if Afghanistan ever again came under the rule of a Taliban regime prepared to protect al-Qaeda or terrorist groups," Reid told reporters in the capital, Kabul.

Afghan police and soldiers fought Taliban militants in the volatile Gelan district of southern Ghazni province about 75 miles southwest of Kabul, said provincial Gov. Haji Sher Alam. Three Taliban fighters and a policeman were killed, he told The Associated Press.

The attack on the construction company occurred on the Uruzgan-Kandahar highway near a southern Kandahar village where four Canadian soldiers were killed in a suspected Taliban roadside bombing a day earlier.

PM seeks Germany's support for Indo-US civilian nuke deal

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA, Hannover

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has expressed optimism that Germany would respond positively to India's energy requirements by extending support to the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal.

In an interview with German weekly Die Handelsblatt, Dr Singh said nuclear energy will help India meet its growing energy requirements. "If our requirements for oil and gas increase, it will exercise enormous pressure on the World market price and increase competition for diminishing reserves," he added.

"I hope we will be able to convince Germany to look at this issue for mutual benefit," Dr Singh said.

Germany has expressed reservations on the Indo-US deal while France, Russia and the UK have extended full support.

The Prime Minister regretted protectionist policies of the West and said the World trade system continues to damage emerging countries. Agricultural protectionism, especially in the EU and the US, deprives us of export opportunities, he added.

"We know that developing countries cannot shape the world trade system freely in accordance with their needs. We should therefore use all available opportunities. At

the same time, the Doha Round should become a real development round. This is a litmus test whether old protectionism will raise its head. This will hinder our progress and also adversely affect the rest of the World," Dr Singh said.

When asked whether India and China, the two Asian giants, would become rivals over the long term, Dr Singh said, "We do not view China as a rival, but as a friend. The World is big enough to accommodate the growth ambitions of both the countries".

He acknowledged that India and China were making progress regarding resolution of the boundary issue. "Cooperation between the two most populous and fast growing economies is important for peace in the region and the world," he added.

He said the Indian economy was growing at an average rate of six per cent. In the next five years, India is set to achieve a growth rate of 10 per cent, he added.

He said investment rate would soon grow to 35 to 36 per cent. "We need such a growth that we are able to create sufficient number of jobs and generate resources for investing in infrastructure, health, education and environment, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese President Hu Jintao addresses the Shura Council in Riyadh yesterday. Jintao discussed with Saudi leaders during his current visit a proposal to set up a strategic oil reserve in China fed by Saudi supplies.