

Egypt resort suicide attacks kill 18

AFP, Dahab

Suicide bombers killed 18 people including foreigners and wounded scores more when they blew themselves up in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Dahab, officials said yesterday.

An Egyptian security official said eight people had already been arrested in connection with Monday's attacks, which ripped through the town at the height of the holiday season.

The bombings were the third attack against Sinai resorts in 18 months and drew condemnation from across the globe, while President Hosni Mubarak vowed to punish the perpetrators of these "heinous acts of terrorism."

Health and security officials said 12 Egyptians and six foreigners were killed, revising an earlier count of 23. A Swiss national, a Russian, a Lebanese and a five-year-old German child were among the victims.

The bombs hit the Ghazala supermarket and two restaurants in

the busiest part of Dahab, bringing scenes of chaos to this popular destination for divers and backpackers whose name means gold in Arabic.

"It was like war," said Michael Hartlich, a German doctor who was holidaying in Dahab. "I'd never seen anything like it before, a child, a baby, blood everywhere, the smell of burnt skin, of burnt hair."

"A boy died in my arms, he had severe chest injuries, he was sitting in a Chinese restaurant, he was only 10," Hartlich told AFP, still in a state of shock several hours after the blasts.

Egyptian state television initially said the blasts were detonated by remote control but a security official confirmed to AFP Tuesday that suicide bombers were to blame for at least two of the explosions.

"Around 7:00 pm (1600 GMT), we heard three explosions close to the seaford alongside a supermarket in the centre of Dahab," French tourist Frederic Mingeon told AFP.



The official limousine of Sri Lanka's Army Commander Sarath Fonseka moments after a suicide bomb explosion blamed on the Tamil Tiger rebels killed 10 of Fonseka's body guards and critically wounded him in Colombo yesterday.

'Human bomb' hits Lanka army HQ

Army chief critically wounded, 10 others killed

AFP, Colombo

A Tamil Tiger suicide bomber pretending to be pregnant blew herself up Tuesday seriously wounding Sri Lanka's army chief and killing 10 others, police and doctors said.

More than 30 people were also injured by the blast inside the high security zone of Colombo's main military base, police said.

The attack on Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka's convoy was another blow to the island's troubled peace process and a blood-soaked truce.

Fonseka was riding in a silver Peugeot 406 which had three gold stars marked on a red background indicating it was his vehicle.

He was escorted by Land Rover Defender jeeps packed with armed soldiers and heavily armed motor-

cycle outriders, one of whom kicked the woman bomber as she tried to get near the convoy, a military official said.

"Five of his bodyguards who escorted the car on motorcycles were killed on the spot," a police official said.

"The commander was critically wounded," police chief Chandra Fernando told AFP. "The attack was well within the army headquarters."

Doctors at the main National Hospital said 10 people were killed, but defence ministry spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said he could confirm only eight deaths.

A doctor who treated the army chief said he was in a "stable" condition after surgery to remove shrapnel from his chest and abdomen.

Sri Lanka's military blamed a woman from the Liberation Tigers of

Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the suicide bombing, but there was no immediate reaction from the group.

"A powerful blast activated by a woman Tamil Tiger suicide bomber claimed the lives of several army and civil personnel near the military hospital gate this afternoon," the army said in a statement.

It was the biggest suicide bombing blamed on the LTTE since they entered into a Norwegian-arranged truce with the Colombo government in February 2002.

Tigers are known for suicide blasts and their band of "Black Tiger" cadres have announced carrying out nearly 200 attacks since the first suicide bombing in July 1987.

Political landscape shifts in Nepal

Big challenges lie ahead

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's political landscape shifted dramatically with King Gyanendra's climbdown to end 14 months of absolute rule, but the kingdom remains gripped by uncertainty.

While political parties on Tuesday celebrated "people power" and Nepalis danced in the streets, Maoist rebels rejected the king's offer to recall parliament as a ploy to save "his autocratic monarchy" and called new protests.

The Maoist response to the king's speech Monday underscored the massive challenges facing the seven-party alliance in charting a new democratic course for the impoverished Himalayan nation and bringing the rebels into the mainstream, analysts said. "One battle has ended and the real one has begun," said South Asian expert S.D. Muni of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

The Maoists, who have been fighting a deadly decade-long insurgency to oust the monarchy

and install a communist republic, had backed the pro-democracy movement on the basis of a 12-point deal struck with the parties last November.

They said Gyanendra's speech had not addressed their key demand for elections for a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution that would decide the king's future role and vowed blockades of the capital and other big centres.

"Those parties who have welcomed and supported the king's address have broken the 12-point understanding and have breached the aspirations of the Nepali people," said Maoist leader Prachanda, a former schoolteacher known as the "Fierce One".

Gyanendra made no mention of the constituent assembly but said his address was aimed at following the parties' political "roadmap."

Parliament will reconvene Friday after four years with a new interim government led by three-times prime minister G.P. Koirala who was the choice of the opposition alliance.

The alliance has already said the parliament's main task will be to pave the way for elections for the constituent assembly. A senior opposition leader said before the Maoists' announcement it would declare a ceasefire with the rebels and remove their terrorist tag.

"The political parties should take their responsibility seriously and perform twin tasks of carrying the monarchy and Maoists with them," said Krishna V. Rajan, former Indian ambassador to Nepal.

Analysts said failure by the parties to bring the rebels into the mainstream -- as well as to avoid falling back into their traditional bickering ways -- would have serious consequences for a country whose economy has been battered by years of political turmoil.

"If they break the alliance, they (the Maoists) can go back to war. The political parties have no way to control them and the king would exploit the situation," said Muni, a professor of politics.

US, India lead praise for Nepal king U-turn

AFP, Hong Kong

The United States and India yesterday led praise for King Gyanendra's decision to recall Nepal's parliament, and appealed for the restoration of full democracy as soon as possible.

US State Department spokesman Adam Ereli, speaking in Washington after the king's announcement late Monday following weeks of violent protests, said the king should now return to the sidelines.

"We believe that he should now hand power over to the parties and assume a ceremonial role in his country's governance," he said.

Ereli also called on Nepals political parties to "step up to their responsibilities and cooperate to turn the peoples demands for democracy and good governance into reality."

He also said that after 10 years of fighting, Maoists rebels "must end their violent attacks and join a peaceful political process."

"Through these steps, stability,

peace and democracy can be restored in Nepal," Ereli said, adding that the United States and the international community stood ready to help.

Japan, a key donor to Nepal, expressed concern about the situation in the country and called for an end to street demonstrations now that the king had agreed to restore parliament.

"Japan hopes that the restoration of democracy will be realised peacefully, and calls upon all parties to act with self-restraint," the Japanese foreign ministry said in a statement.

"Japan also hopes that the parties involved will continue their dialogue to the end so as to find a solution which meets the expectation of the Nepalese people," it added.

India, which shares a border with the Himalayan nation, said it was satisfied with the king's announcement and that it hoped political parties in the kingdom would accept the decision.

Nepal reposes faith in old guard Koirala

REUTERS, Kathmandu

When Nepal's main political parties named four-time prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala yesterday to head a new government in the troubled nation, the wheel had come full circle for the veteran politician.

In 1991, Koirala became Nepal's first elected prime minister in 30 years when his social democratic Nepali Congress won elections after then King Birendra gave in to a popular and violent demand for multi-party democracy.

A similar mass campaign this month against King Gyanendra, -- Birendra's brother who grabbed power last year -- culminated in the monarch agreeing to step down and reinstating a dissolved parliament, leading to Koirala's return.

In the intervening decade-and-a-half, Koirala, 84, has watched Nepal plunge from the heady days of a new democracy to the brink of

chaos. He has himself been prime minister four times, reflecting the political instability that plagued the nation since 1991.

With the impoverished Himalayan kingdom staring at severe political, economic and humanitarian crises left in the wake of 15 years of turmoil, Koirala's fifth time as prime minister is expected to be his most challenging. "It was a nascent democracy. We all made mistakes, myself also," Koirala told Reuters less than two weeks ago.

"But democracy is a system to address the mistakes also. People have realised it. In future, we will not make those mistakes," he said, referring to the misrule and corruption that plagued Nepali politics under multi-party democracy.

Analysts describe the chain-smoking, former trade union leader as stubborn, inflexible and sometimes, inarticulate.

However, the politician who

never went to college is also credited with introducing sweeping economic reforms and privatisation in the face of communist objections.

Nearly 60 years ago, Koirala organised a labour strike in a jute mill against the then hereditary prime minister from the Rana family and, as punishment, had to walk for 45 days from his hometown, Biratnagar, in east Nepal, to Kathmandu.

Years later, when King Mahendra, father of the present monarch, banned political parties in 1960, Koirala spent seven years in jail and later went into exile in neighbouring India for opposing absolute monarchy.

That spirit seems very much alive despite his failing health which has forced him to remain confined to his bungalow in an upmarket Kathmandu neighbourhood.



Nepalese pro-democracy activists celebrate after Nepal's King Gyanendra announced the end of 14 months of absolute rule and restored parliament, which was dissolved in 2002, in Kathmandu yesterday. Tens of thousands of people flocked to the centre of Nepal's capital to celebrate "Victory Day" over their king where a day earlier protesters fought pitched battles with police.

Testing is new wrinkle in Indo-US nuke deal

REUTERS, Washington

The United States will stick to its insistence that India adhere to a moratorium on testing atomic weapons as part of a deal that would give India access to US and foreign nuclear technology for the first time in three decades, senior officials said on Monday.

The testing issue has emerged as the latest wrinkle in the deal, which includes supplying nuclear fuel and reactors to meet India's civilian energy needs.

US Ambassador to India David Mulford expressed confidence the testing issue would be successfully resolved, but acknowledged that Congress may not vote on the deal until after the November election.

The agreement "is being worked on and there will have to be some sort of wording arrangement (on testing), which has not been agreed. It's a matter to be discussed" with India, he told the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative thinktank.

A senior US official close to the negotiations who spoke anonymously

told Reuters: "In working out this bilateral agreement, we're going to have to arrive at language -- and I think we can work this out with the Indians."

He insisted the administration is "not rolling back on that commitment ... We're going to maintain our insistence on the moratorium."

The nuclear agreement, underpinning a dramatic improvement in ties between the United States and India has raised concerns that it weakens efforts to curb the spread of nuclear weapons.

India has not signed the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and has produced nuclear weapons outside international standards.

In an agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation last July 18, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a unilateral declaration that India would maintain a voluntary moratorium on nuclear weapons testing.

The two sides are negotiating a more detailed peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement required by US law, which includes reference to the testing moratorium.

Militants ambush Pak army convoy

4 soldiers, 3 rebels killed

REUTERS, AFP, Peshawar/Miranshah

Pro-Taliban militants ambushed a Pakistani army convoy in the restive North Waziristan tribal region, killing seven soldiers and rebels, officials said yesterday.

The convoy came under attack on Monday in the mountains near the main town of Miranshah while heading toward Beermal on the Afghan border.

Four soldiers and three militants were killed.

"They first detonated an explosive with remote control on the roadside and then opened fire on the convoy," an intelligence official told Reuters.

He said eight soldiers were wounded in the fighting that lasted for an hour.

"Miscreants attacked a convoy of security forces late Monday that resulted in some casualties," chief military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP.

Local officials said the clash left

two soldiers and three militants dead and on Tuesday, helicopter gunships pounded Pyekhel village, the launching point for the militants' attack.

Also late Monday, security forces in Miranshah opened fire on a group of militants after they fired several rockets at a paramilitary checkpoint.

The retaliatory fire resulted in the death of a tribesman, who was one of a group of locals watching a football match in the suburbs of the town, a local official said.

The rugged Waziristan region has been scene of fierce battles between Islamist militants and security forces over the past two years. Close to 300 people have been killed in clashes in recent weeks.

Many al-Qaeda militants and their Taliban allies fled to Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal belt after they were chased out of Afghanistan by US-backed forces in 2001. al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is believed to have passed through Waziristan during his escape.