

Nepal govt clears out all the king's men

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's new government is clearing out all the king's men, recalling ambassadors and accepting the resignation of dozens of royally appointed officials.

The cabinet on Sunday night revoked all appointments made by King Gyanendra since parliament was dissolved in 2002. In addition, 12 royally appointed ambassadors including those to the United States, India, Britain and China, were recalled.

The decisions were implemented with "immediate effect" Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat told AFP.

Gyanendra was forced to end his absolute rule of the Himalayan nation last month, after weeks of massive protests crippled Nepal, killing 19 protesters and injuring

hundreds.

Opposition parties in concert with rebel Maoists claimed a "people's victory" over the monarch, and the new government and rebels have both declared ceasefires and outlined plans to form a constituent assembly, a body to amend the constitution and clip the powers of the king.

The attorney general, heads of the national planning and women's commissions, and the chairmen of the state-run television station and news agency have all already resigned, the Rising Nepal reported Monday.

In parliament on Sunday, MP's demanded the resignation of the chief justice and the suspension of the heads of the security forces.

To date, the new interim government has appointed only a core cabinet of seven members who

replaced dozens of the king's ministers.

Scores of hastily vacated positions in the administration remain unfilled.

However with fears widespread of a return to the cronyism that has long plagued Nepal, the head of the national journalists association warned that new government appointments should be made on merit, not connections.

"We have witnessed in the past that the political parties have recruited people with political affiliations. This should not be repeated," said Bishnu Nishuri, president of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists.

The sweeping of the decks is a natural progression after the mass protests brought the political parties back into government, said Kapil Shrestha, a professor of politics at

Tribhuvan University

"Now the parties should not damage their image in the public while making new appointments. They should be careful and responsible and give the chance to deserving ones," Shrestha said.

Last week, the government annulled the results of controversial local elections held in February as part of Gyanendra's ill-fated "roadmap to democracy," prompting concern by some diplomats that rebel Maoists could increase their influence in rural areas.

"That's quite dangerous because it leaves a gap for the Maoists which will give them more local control, so when it comes to constituent assembly elections, through fair means or foul, they will have more influence," said a Western diplomat on condition of anonymity.



Last US survivor of Titanic sinking dies

AP, Boston

Lillian Gertrud Asplund was just 5 years old when she and her family boarded the Titanic in Southampton, England, on their way back to Massachusetts.

That night in 1912, she lost her father and three brothers including a fraternal twin when the "practically unsinkable" ship went down in the Atlantic after hitting an iceberg.

Asplund, the last American survivor of the sinking of the Titanic, died Saturday at her home in Shrewsbury, said Ronald E. Johnson, vice president of the Nordgren Memorial Chapel in Worcester, Mass.

Asplund's mother, Selma, and another brother, Felix, who was 3, also survived the Titanic sinking in the early morning of April 15, 1912.

At least two other survivors are living, but they were too young to remember what happened. Barbara Joyce West Dainton of Truro, England, was 10 months old and Elizabeth Gladys "Millvina" Dean of Southampton, England, was 2 months old.

Selma Asplund told her daughter it was not good to talk about the catastrophe, and she rarely did.

Eight killed in Thai disco fire

AFP, Bangkok

At least eight people were killed and 54 injured after a fire engulfed a disco in the Thai seaside resort town of Pattaya, police said yesterday.

The fire destroyed the Route 999 nightclub in Pattaya, 150km south-east of Bangkok, late Sunday shortly after the disco opened and as staff were in a meeting.

"A technician was repairing the air conditioner, using a small welding torch to connect two strips of metal. But the torch accidentally fell and kept burning until the gas ran

out," police Lieutenant General Jongrak Juthanon said.

The technician was among the dead. The seven others were staff members.

Police said seven of the 54 injured were in critical condition suffering from burns and smoke inhalation.

The fire destroyed the 30-million-baht (800,000-dollar) disco which opened for business four months ago after expensive sound-proofing of the building, police said.

Sonia set for landslide by-election win

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi was set for a landslide victory yesterday in a by-election aimed at bringing her back to parliament after she resigned to calm a political storm.

But sizzling temperatures kept people indoors and only 40 percent of some one million registered voters turned out in her home constituency of Rae Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh state, electoral officials announced.

"It's the heat that kept people indoors," a Congress party spokes-

man said as the temperature touched 42 degrees Celsius (107 degrees Fahrenheit) in Rae Bareilly, a bastion of India's Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.

The voting was marred by a solitary incident in which unidentified gunmen shot at a rival political activist, police said.

The Italian-born 59-year-old widow of assassinated former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi had won the seat in 2004 parliamentary elections that brought her party to power in a coalition government.

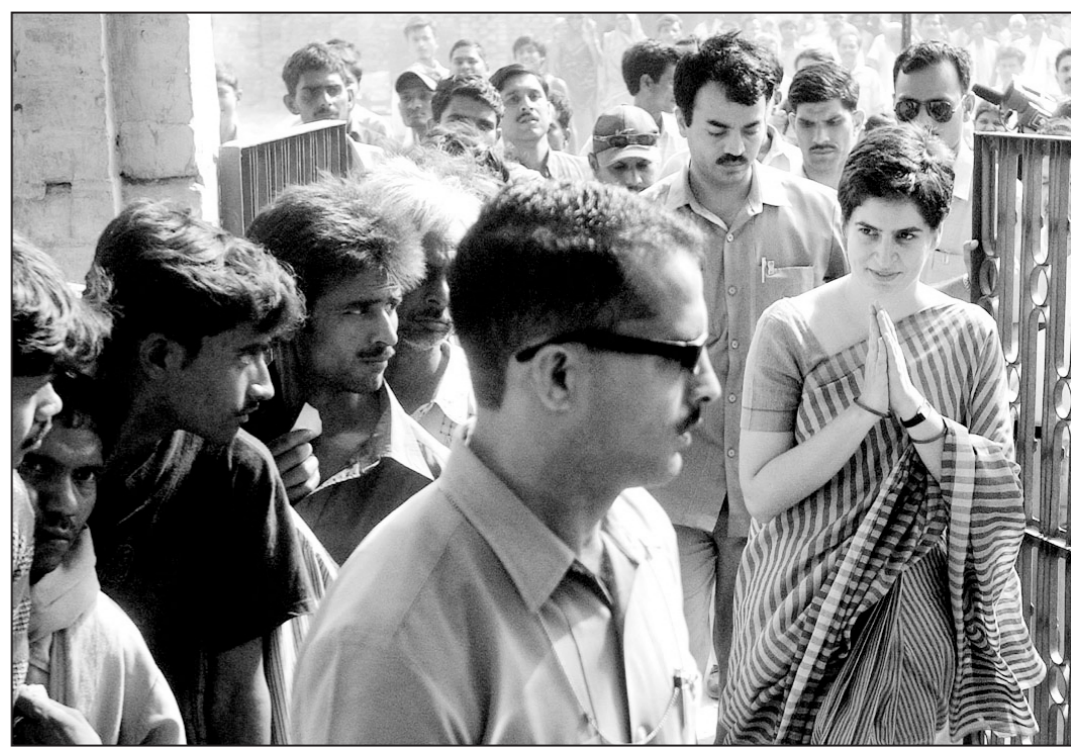


PHOTO: AFP
Priyanka Gandhi, (R) polling agent and daughter of India's Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, greets voters standing in a queue to cast their vote as she enters a polling station during the by-election taking place in Uttar Pradesh's Rae Bareilly constituency yesterday.

Moves on for compromise on Iran resolution

AFP, Vienna

A compromise over a draft UN resolution against Iran's nuclear programme may hinge on invoking only part of a crucial UN clause on threats to international peace and security, diplomats told AFP yesterday.

The 15-member UN Security Council is bargaining over a Franco-British draft resolution that would legally require Iran to freeze all uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities.

Iran has refused to comply with a

previous Council injunction to do this as it says its nuclear work is a peaceful effort to generate electricity.

But the United States charges Iran is secretly developing nuclear weapons and seeks a tough Council resolution that could open the door to sanctions, and even military actions.

Iranian allies Russia and China fear such an escalation of the crisis, particularly from the draft resolution's reference to Chapter Seven of the UN charter, which concerns handling threats to international

peace and security and can authorise economic sanctions or military attack as a last resort.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak said Saturday the Franco-British draft, which is backed by the United States and Germany, "requires major changes".

A senior European diplomat said the West was working to see if there could be "something that has one or two articles from Chapter 7, enough so that the resolution still has a legally binding character."

Japanese envoy pushes for Lankan peace

LTTE factional fighting kills 11

AFP, Colombo

At least 11 people were killed in factional fighting in Sri Lanka yesterday, defence sources said, as a Japanese envoy sought to salvage the island's faltering peace process.

A breakaway faction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) launched a pre-dawn attack against a base of the main guerrilla group in the northeastern district of Trincomalee, the sources said.

There was no word from the Tigers or the faction led by V. Muralitharan, better known as Colonel Karuna. But the sources who gave the casualty figure said the attack appeared to be retaliation for an LTTE attack on Karuna's

forces last month.

The pro-LTTE Nitharsanam.com website said the mainstream guerrillas were able to repel the attack by the Karuna faction, which they alleged was supported by government forces. The military denies any involvement.

"An attempt by paramilitaries backed by the Sri Lanka army failed," Nitharsanam said, adding that Tiger rebels captured several guns from the attack force. It did not give casualty figures for either side.

The defence ministry said it had no details because the fighting was in rebel-held territory.

The reports of violence emerged as Japanese envoy Yasushi Akashi met President Mahinda Rajapakse.

"They discussed the present state of the peace process for about an hour," a spokesman for Rajapakse's office said, without giving details.

Colombo is seeking international help to revive talks with the Tigers, who are fighting for a homeland for minority Tamils.

Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera was visiting neighbouring India to brief officials about efforts to salvage a Norwegian-brokered truce signed four years ago.

India's Junior Foreign Minister Anand Sharma "expressed the hope that the parties would resume talks at the earliest," the Indian foreign ministry said after Samaraweera's briefing.

Hamas vows to prevent civil war after 3 killed

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian prime minister Ismail Haniya vowed yesterday not to allow a civil war to break out after clashes between his Hamas movement and the rival Fatah faction left three dead and 11 wounded.

The clashes, the worst since Hamas trounced the former ruling Fatah in January's election, broke out near the southern Gaza Strip town of Khan Yunis following a series of tit-for-tat kidnappings, police and witnesses told AFP.

Two followers of Fatah and one Hamas activist, all in their 20s, were killed in the violence in the village of Abasan, according to hospital officials.

A local security official was injured and in a serious condition in

hospital. The sources said at least one anti-tank rocket was fired.

Relations between the two groups have been strained for weeks, with about 30 people already injured in inter-faction clashes last month.

Despite ending Fatah's longstanding grip on power, Hamas does not control the security services, which are the responsibility of Palestinian Authority president and de facto Fatah leader Mahmud Abbas.

The overall leader of Hamas, the Damascus-based Khaled Meshaal, last month accused Abbas and Fatah of plotting against the movement, which is under massive pressure after the West cut aid payments to the Palestinian Authority.

Thai court ruling no solution to crisis

Say experts

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai court's decision to scrap controversial elections and order new ones is only a small step towards ending the country's months-long political crisis, experts and analysts said yesterday.

The Constitutional Court ruling nullifying last month's elections has broken the deadlock that left Thailand without a working parliament and led Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to resign, they said.

"But it's only a small step forward

and we have a lot of obstacles remaining," said analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak from Chulalongkorn University.

New elections could be delayed if the Election Commissioners bowed to demands to resign after the court ruled that the April 2 polls were unfair and breached the constitution.

Selecting new commissioners quickly to organise fresh polls would be difficult as the new Senate tasked with the job has yet to take office after elections last month, Thitinan said.

Parliament has been unable to convene to form a new government because the polls failed to fill all seats in the lower house due to an opposition boycott, leaving Thailand in political limbo.

Thaksin had called those polls in hopes of ending months of mass street protests by demonstrators accusing him of corruption and abuse of power.

Instead, the elections plunged the country into a constitutional crisis after the opposition boycott and a major protest vote against Thaksin's rule.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse talks (R) with the Japanese special envoy Yasushi Akashi (L) in Colombo yesterday. Japanese envoy Yasushi Akashi, who arrived in the island nation at the weekend, met Rajapakse after talks with Palitha Kohona, head of the government's peace secretariat on Sunday.

Bush mulls closure of Guantanamo

REUTERS, Berlin

President George W. Bush said he would like to close the US-run prison at Guantanamo Bay -- a step urged by several US allies -- but was awaiting a Supreme Court ruling on how suspects held there might be tried.

"Of course Guantanamo is a delicate issue for people. I would like to close the camp and put the prisoners on trial," Bush said in comments to German television to be broadcast on Sunday night. The interview was recorded last week.

Human-rights groups have accused the United States of mistreating Guantanamo detainees through cruel interrogation methods, a charge denied by the US government.

They also criticise the indefinite detention of suspects captured

since the military prison was opened in 2002 at the US naval base in Cuba, as part of the Bush administration's war on terrorism.

Bush was asked by the German public television station ARD how the United States could restore its human-rights image following reports of prisoner abuse.

"Our top court must still rule on whether they should go before a civil or military court," he said.

"They will get their day in court. One can't say that of the people that they killed. They didn't give these people the opportunity for a fair trial."

The quotes were translated by Reuters from a German transcript.

The US Supreme Court is expected to rule by the end of June on whether military tribunals of foreign terrorist suspects can proceed.

Iraqi leaders set to finalise cabinet

Insurgents kill 13

AFP, Baghdad

Thirteen people were killed in rebel attacks yesterday as Iraqi leaders were holding last-minute talks to form a new government in the hope it will help curb raging sectarian bloodshed.

Five people died in a car bomb attack in Baghdad's central Zawr Park and another five were killed in a mortar attack in central Baghdad's Al-Tehran square, an interior ministry official said.

Three Iraqis were shot dead in separate rebel attacks.

Against a backdrop of violence, representatives of the country's parliamentary blocs met President Jalal Talabani to finalise the line-up of the first permanent government of

the post-Saddam Hussein era, almost five months after a landmark election.

Although the details of Monday's political meeting were not known immediately, a source close to the negotiations said that prime minister designate Nuri al-Maliki was expected to announce the new cabinet soon.

Following his nomination, Maliki had said he would form the cabinet by May 10 and had pledged to appoint independent candidates to head the country's important security posts.

The leaders of the dominant Shia United Iraqi Alliance were in a meeting Monday to name its candidate for the crucial interior ministry, the source said.