



Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (C) looks on as his Malaysian counterpart Abdullah Badawi (R) greets Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri (L) before a meeting on the sideline of the Fifth Summit of the Developing Eight (D8) in Nusa Dua yesterday.

4 ex-ministers loyal to Nepal king arrested

Maoists ask govt to free rebels before talks

AFP, REUTERS, Kathmandu

Four ministers appointed by Nepal's king during his 14 months of absolute rule were arrested and detained for 90 days on the orders of the new government Friday, relatives, police and media said.

There was no immediate comment from the home ministry, but a family member of former government spokesman Shrish Shumshere Rana said he was being held on charges of plotting against the new administration.

"He has been accused of conspiring against the current government," said the relative on condition

of anonymity.

The relative added that Rana was arrested by plainclothes police on Friday afternoon.

Former Home Minister Kamal Thapa and ex-Foreign Minister Ramesh Nath Pandey were arrested at around the same time, according to police and family members.

"My father has been served a 90-day arrest warrant and has been taken to police barracks," said Pandey's son Nischal Nath Pandey. Local media said the three were arrested on the orders of the home ministry.

Former local development

minister Tanka Dhakal was the fourth man detained Friday, state-run media reported.

Two senior Maoist leaders, just released from jail, urged Nepal's new government on Friday to free hundreds of their jailed comrades before starting peace talks to end a decade-long revolt.

But Matrika Yadav and Suresh Ale Magar, who were released on Thursday, said Maoist prisoners should be first be freed and information provided about hundreds of others who they said had disappeared after being detained by security forces on suspicion of being a Maoist or a supporter.

Heatwave kills 51 in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

A scorching heatwave in central Pakistan has killed at least 51 people in the past week, with temperatures rising as high as 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit), officials said yesterday.

At least 19 people have died since Thursday in the central province of Punjab, where authorities reported 31 deaths earlier this week, health officials said.

Another person died in the largely desert, southwestern province of Baluchistan on Wednesday.

Hundreds of people have also been admitted to hospitals after fainting due to heatstroke and gastroenteritis, officials said.

Top meteorological department official Qamaruz Zaman said hot and dry weather was likely to continue in most parts of the country until May 18.

He said the mercury hit 50C in Jacobabad in southern Sindh province and Sibbi in Baluchistan this week. In Punjab, temperatures reached 46C in Multan and 43C in Lahore on Thursday, while in Islamabad it was 41C.

Tigers threaten monitors after naval clash

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels have told Nordic truce monitors they travel aboard navy ships at their peril after the worst military confrontation since a 2002 truce halted two decades of civil war.

A flotilla of rebel boats attacked a transport ship carrying hundreds of servicemen on Thursday and sank a navy fast-attack vessel. The military said 17 sailors and 50 Tigers died in the attack that later prompted air strikes on rebel territory, but both sides say the ceasefire still holds.

The transporter was carrying a truce monitor and flying the monitors' flag when the military says suicide rebels attacked them. The Tigers say their fighters were conducting a naval exercise when they were fired upon by the navy.

The monitors accused the

Tigers of a gross violation of the ceasefire and said they had no rights at sea, which is considered under government control.

"SLMM monitors are used by the Sri Lankan Navy as human shields," the rebels said in a letter posted on their official Web site www.lteps.org overnight, referring to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission.

"We urge you for the last time not to be on board Sri Lankan naval vessels until further notice from us. If you choose to ignore our warning and request, we are not responsible for the consequences," it added. "Please take this as the last warning to you."

Chief monitor Major General Ulf Henricsson traveled to Kilinochchi on Friday for emergency talks with Tiger political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan.

Bombings and land and sea clashes have killed about 270

people in the past month. The island was quiet early on Friday as both sides assessed the damage after daybreak.

The government said the bombing raids by fighter jets and helicopter gunships near the Tigers' northern stronghold were a "limited response" to the naval battle, and would not be repeated on Friday unless the armed forces were again attacked.

The Tigers, who are fighting for a separate homeland for ethnic Tamils in the north and east, have withdrawn from peace talks indefinitely, and warned ominously on Tuesday that Sri Lanka was moving towards the "fringes" of war.

The clash came after a rash of attacks in April, one of the bloodiest months since the ceasefire halted a war that killed over 64,000 people, and after a Japanese peace envoy had made an abortive bid to coax the

Tigers to return to peace talks.

Residents in the army-held northern enclave of Jaffna, near the site of the aerial bombing raid were rattled.

"The situation is scary. It's killing our normal life," said 24-year-old pharmaceutical salesman Tilan Thevadasan. "It seems as though war will erupt again. If it does, I will go to Colombo."

While the truce still holds on paper, recent sporadic violence looks a lot like periods of the war and diplomats and analysts expect to see continued low-intensity conflict.

"If either side had wanted to go for a full-on war, they have had ample opportunity and excuses to do so by now," said one diplomat, asking not to be named. "I expect to see more of the same. The danger is that things could spiral out of control."

Congress to tie up with Bodo rebels to form govt in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

India's ruling Congress party said yesterday it would rely on former separatist rebels to form a government in Assam state in the restive northeast after losing its majority there.

The Bodo People's Progressive Front (BPPF) -- previously the separatist Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) -- won their first ever 11 seats in Thursday's provincial elections in Assam.

"The BPPF will be part of the government when we assume office sometime next week," Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi said.

The move will give the Congress party, which heads the national coalition in New Delhi, a wafer-thin

majority of 64 seats in the 126-seat Assam legislature. The party had 71 seats in the previous state assembly.

The disbanded BLT, which fought for a homeland for Assam's primitive Bodo tribe was noted for blowing up trains, including one in 1999 that killed 33 passengers. But last year it signed a peace deal with New Delhi and joined mainstream politics, forming the BPPF.

"We do not see any contradictions in allying with them," Gogoi said.

The BPPF's leader Hagrama Mohilary said the party wanted "at least three cabinet berths and a junior ministership" in exchange for its support.

Rice, Rumsfeld block access to secret detainees: ICRC

REUTERS, Geneva

The United States has again refused the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to terrorism suspects held in secret detention centres, the humanitarian agency said on Friday.

The overnight statement was issued after talks in Washington between ICRC President Jakob Kellenberger and senior officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley.

"Kellenberger deplored the fact that the US authorities had not moved closer to granting the ICRC access to persons held in undisclosed locations," the Geneva-based agency said.

Fate of Indo-US nuke deal hangs in balance

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA, Washington

Growing differences between the Bush administration and the Congress appear to have created an uncertainty over the fate of the landmark Indo-US civilian nuclear deal.

Surprisingly, the opposition to the deal is being spearheaded by Democrats who were generally seen to be friendly to India.

At a hearing of the House International Relations Committee on Thursday, the fifth in a series, the views of the Democrats have become clearer.

Congressional sources say that some Democrats, who have raised objections to the deal, favour stronger relations between India and the United States, but are reluctant to

hand President George Bush a foreign policy coup so close to the November elections. The landmark civilian nuclear agreement concluded during Bush's visit to India in March, would allow New Delhi to buy sensitive nuclear technology for the first time in three decades and India, in turn, would open up its civilian nuclear reactors to IAEA safeguards.

For the deal to become effective, it must be approved by the Congress and Bush administration has already introduced a legislation to amend the 1954 US Atomic Energy Act for an India-specific waiver, but a sceptical Congress has been holding hearings to elicit the views of experts before putting their seal of approval on the legislation.

Indian airports to mount vigil against 'human bomb'

REUTERS, New Delhi

A "human bomb" could attempt to hijack a plane in India, intelligence agencies have warned, prompting security forces to seek state-of-the-art body scanners, an official said yesterday.

"There is a real possibility of a terrorist inserting RDX or plastic explosives or even a knife into his skin," a top official of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), which protects 54 of India's main airports, told Reuters.

Intelligence agencies had also warned that airports and dockyards were "targets number one" for militants, especially militants fighting Indian rule in the restive Himalayan state of Kashmir, he said.

CISF has asked the government to allow installation of human body scanners at 16 airports in the country categorised as "hypersensitive", the official said.

"Traditional scanners cannot look under the skin so we have decided to go for body scanners," he said.

These scanners use advanced X-Ray technology to draw a skeletal

image of a human body and are considered to be a "fool-proof" measure against hijacking.

"Terrorists are coming out of Kashmir and targeting all over India," the official said, referring to recent suspected militant strikes in the Hindu pilgrimage city of Varanasi and in the southern IT hub of Bangalore.

Earlier this week, police said three suspected militants arrested in western India with a huge cache of weapons and explosives were planning to attack the Kandla Port, India's largest.

The use of body scanners has come in for some criticism in the West as passengers have complained that it amounts to a strip-search and violates their privacy.

The CISF official said his agency planned to address such concerns by using officers of the same gender to scan passengers.

"In any case, it's better than manual frisking. No one will touch your body. All you need to do is pass through this scan and board the aircraft," he said.

"It could make it almost impossible for someone to hijack a plane."

'Qaeda escapee' urges strikes in Europe over cartoons

REUTERS, Dubai

A man believed to be a top al-Qaeda militant who escaped from a US airbase in Afghanistan urged Muslims in an Internet video to launch attacks in Europe as revenge for cartoons that lampooned Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM).

A Web site often used by militants posted a video from a man identified as Abu Yahya al-Libi in which he called for Muslims to "send rivers of blood" down the streets of Denmark, Norway and France for publishing the cartoons that caused a global furor earlier this year.

Abu Yahya al-Libi is believed to be the alias of Libyan Mohammad Hassan who along with three other al-Qaeda militants broke out of the Bagram Air Base last year.

Party quits tortuous Iraq govt talks

US slammed for interference

REUTERS, Baghdad

A small but influential Shia Islamist party said it was pulling out of talks on forming a new Iraqi government yesterday, complaining of US interference.

The withdrawal of the Fadhila party, part of the Alliance bloc, may help end a struggle over the key post of oil minister. The party had been pushing its own candidates against Hussain al-Shahristani, the choice of bigger Alliance groups.

The row over the oil ministry, in control of the world's third biggest reserves of crude and at the heart of efforts to revive Iraq's shattered economy, has been a major reason for delay in efforts to form a government in recent days.

"We will not return to the negoti-

ating table and we have announced our final position. We withdraw from the formation of the government and we will stay in parliament to express the voice of the people," spokesman Sabah al-Saadi told reporters.

He criticised other parties for trying to force candidates for ministries on the Alliance's prime minister-designate, Nuri al-Maliki, as well as pressure from the United States.

Maliki has another 10 days under a one-month constitutional deadline to present his cabinet to parliament.

"The current negotiations are subject to external pressures from the American ambassador in Iraq," Saadi added.



Activist Medha Patkar (R) gestures at a protest rally against the government for demolishing make-shift huts at Mandala in Mankhurd in north central Mumbai yesterday. In a demolition drive conducted on May 9, the workers of Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) razed hundreds of huts during which two girls and three women were rushed to hospital with burn injuries.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian medical students are showered by water cannons during a demonstration in New Delhi yesterday. They were protesting the government recommendation to make a 50 percent reservation for backward classes in the education sector and in government jobs.