

Maoists, Nepal PM to hold peace talks soon

Govt pledges to set free hundreds of rebels

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Premier Girija Prasad Koirala and Maoist rebel leader Prachanda will soon hold historic peace talks...

"Our chairman Prachanda said that the high-level talks with Prime Minister Koirala should be held soon..."

Home Minister Krishna Sitaula had earlier Monday indicated that the talks, which would be the first face-to-face meeting...

"Both the government and the Maoists are very positive about the peace process. It is heading in the right direction..."



PHOTO: AFP

The chief negotiator for Nepal's rebel Maoists, Krishna Bahadur Mahara addresses the media in Kathmandu yesterday.

who on Sunday paid a flying visit to a remote western hamlet to meet Prachanda and his second in command Baburam Bhattarai.

Since the Maoists began their "people's war" a decade ago, at least 12,500 people have been killed.

Nepal's new government and the rebels have been observing a ceasefire since King Gyanendra restored democracy in April following weeks of protests.

The rebels and the new government have agreed to a ceasefire code of conduct and have already held one day of preliminary peace talks.

Rebel spokesman Mahara said the government has agreed to free hundreds of rebel prisoners in a bid to boost the peace process.

"The government has assured us that they will release 350 of our comrades Monday and drop charges against them. After these releases there will still be around 250 in prison," he said.

11 people killed in Kashmir violence

AFP, Srinagar

Eleven people died and dozens were injured in violence across Indian Kashmir yesterday, including eight labourers shot dead by suspected Islamic militants...

The labourers from the northern state of Bihar were shot dead by suspected rebels in the southern district of Anantnag...

None of the dozen groups fighting Indian rule in mainly Muslim Kashmir claimed responsibility for the attack.

In the southern city of Jammu a man was killed and 20 injured, four seriously, when suspected Islamic rebels launched a grenade attack at a bus station crowded with Hindu pilgrims.

Those caught in the blast were standing near a counter opened to register devotees for the annual pilgrimage to the icy Armanath cave shrine in southern Kashmir...

He added, however, that none of the scores of devotees waiting to get out on the pilgrimage was among the casualties.

7 al-Qaeda 'terrorists' killed in US air raid

4 Iraqi soldiers killed in bombing

AFP, Baghdad/Baquba

The US military said seven "terrorists" linked to al-Qaeda leaders in Iraq were killed during an air strike yesterday near the restive Iraqi city of Baquba.

The strike also left two children dead.

"Coalition forces killed seven terrorists, wounded three, and detained an additional two terrorists during a raid in the vicinity of Baquba June 12," the military said in a statement.

"The targeted terrorists have been linked to previous coalition operations and had ties to senior al-Qaeda leaders across Iraq. Intelligence also indicates this particular terrorist cell is involved in the facilitation of foreign fighters in the area."

The military said coalition forces received enemy machine gun fire from a rooftop upon arriving at the objective.

"Two other individuals with AK-47s had been seen fleeing that area just prior to the assault. Coalition aircraft supporting the ground force immediately suppressed the enemy fire, killing seven."

It said there were numerous women and children on the scene. Following the assault, coalition troops discovered two children had been killed. One child was wounded and evacuated for treatment, the military said.

It added that troops secured one rocket propelled grenade launcher, five rockets, nine AK-47 assault rifles and 20 loaded ammunition magazines.

On Wednesday al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed near Baquba in an air-strike.

Witnesses said the raid left a total of nine killed.

Mohammed Abbas, a relative of the victims, said the raid was triggered following an error on part of the local guard in the village of Hashmiyah, west of Baquba, where the air strike was carried out.

"We were sleeping on the rooftop at midnight when one of the local guards fired in the air as he saw individuals who he thought were insurgents... unfortunately they turned out to be US troops on foot patrol," he said.

"The US forces responded fiercely and struck several houses

first and later concentrated on one house. We later discovered that nine members of the house, including seven children and youngsters were killed while four members are missing."

Another witness Shahin Abdullah at the local hospital where the bodies were brought described the US attacks as "fierce."

Earlier two employees of Iraq's oil ministry were killed when the bus they were travelling on in Baghdad's southern Al-Dora district was hit by a roadside bomb Monday, an interior ministry official said.

In a separate incident in Baghdad's northern Shuala neighbourhood, gunmen wounded two teachers, a man and woman.

Four Iraqi army soldiers were killed late Sunday when a suicide car bomber blew himself up at a newly set up checkpoint outside the restive city of Baquba, police said Monday.

The attack occurred at around 8:00 pm (1600 GMT) on a highway between Baquba and Al-Ghalabiyah, a town 25km west of Baquba.

27 Taliban killed in Afghan clashes

AFP, Kandahar

Afghan and coalition troops killed 27 suspected Taliban, including a man believed to be related to the movement's leader, in clashes in Afghanistan, a military general said yesterday.

Fifteen suspected militants were killed when Afghan security forces backed by the US-led coalition attacked their hideout in the southern province of Uruzgan on Sunday, General Rahmatullah Raufi said.

The dead included a man "most likely" to be a brother-in-law of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, Raufi said.

"Among the dead whose bodies were left in the battlefield there is one guy called Amanullah who is most likely to be Mullah Omar's brother-in-law and was in charge of the Taliban's finances in the province," he said.

Items found in the man's pockets and statements from villagers

indicated that he was Omar's brother-in-law, Raufi said.

A man who often speaks to the media as a Taliban spokesman, Mohammad Hanif, confirmed the battle but said none of the movement's fighters, including Omar's brother-in-law, had died.

Twelve other suspected Taliban were killed the same day in neighbouring Kandahar province when coalition warplanes bombed a building in which militants were taking refuge, Raufi said.

They had been hiding out in a room used to dry grapes into raisins.

"Following the bombardment we launched an operation and captured six Taliban in the area," he told AFP. Uruzgan and Kandahar are among the provinces worst hit by an insurgency that has in the past weeks seen the most intense fighting since the Taliban were removed from government in late 2001.

India, US seek to finalise nuke deal draft

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian and US officials began talks yesterday in an attempt to finalise the draft of a landmark civilian nuclear agreement that is struggling to win the approval of the US Congress.

Both sides have exchanged drafts of the pact over the past few months and the three-day talks are aimed at helping achieve a final consensus, officials said.

"These talks are crucial but there may not be any major announcement at the end of it as both sides will have to go back to their governments for more consultations," one Indian official said.

The nuclear deal, agreed in principle last July to permit US civil nuclear technology sales to India for the first time in three decades, has run into trouble in Washington.

US Congressmen and non-proliferation experts have criticized the deal, saying it encourages atomic weapons proliferation and gives away too much to India, which has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

5 die in Pakistani bomb blast

AFP, Quetta

At least five people were killed and 17 wounded when a powerful bomb exploded yesterday outside a grocery shop in the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta, police said.

The device apparently planted on a bicycle went off during the morning rush hour at an intersection usually crowded with commuters, city police chief Wazir Khan Nasser told AFP.

Witnesses said the shop and a nearby hotel were badly damaged. Blood was splattered on the floor and slippers scattered on the road, as panic gripped the area after the blast.

No one claimed responsibility. Baluchistan province, of which Quetta is the capital, is in the midst of an insurgency by militant tribesmen who want more autonomy.

"Three people died on the spot and two others expired in the hospital," Nasser said, adding that one of the dead was a woman.

At least 17 injured people have

been admitted to Quetta's Civil Hospital, with at least five in a serious condition, he said.

Police and security forces have cordoned off the area and a bomb disposal squad was trying to identify the type of explosive used in the blast, Nasser said.

Citing witnesses, he said a man came to the area at about 10:30 am (0530 GMT) and disappeared after parking his bicycle. "There was a huge blast soon after he left."

A pushcart belonging to a fruit vendor was blown to pieces. City Mayor Mir Maqbool Lehri told AFP the blast site was very close to a police station but there were no police casualties.

Similar acts in the past have been blamed on the tribal militants and a linked rebel group called the Baluchistan Liberation Army, which was banned earlier this year.

They want a greater share of the desert province's rich oil and gas reserves and a reduction in the power of the federal government.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani policemen examine the blast site after an explosion in Quetta yesterday. At least five people were killed and 17 wounded when a powerful bomb exploded outside a grocery shop in the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli rescue teams search for survivors following a train accident yesterday south of the Israeli coastal city of Netanya. At least five people were killed in the train crash.

5 killed in Israeli train collision

AFP, Netanya

Five people were killed and more than 70 others wounded in a train crash Monday near the Israeli coastal city of Netanya, police said.

"Five people were killed and 71 wounded," local police commander Menashe Arviv told reporters at the scene of the crash.

The crash occurred when a train travelling from Tel Aviv to Haifa struck a lorry, which was stuck on the rail line.

Four carriages, including the driver's cabin, were forced off the rails by the impact of the collision as the train travelled between the commercial capital Tel Aviv and the main northern port city of Haifa.

Rescuers from the fire service, backed up by soldiers, could be seen using metal cutters to gain access to the handful of passengers who had not been able to make their own way out of the carriages but the vast majority had managed to walk away unscathed.

Police said three people had died as a result of the accident.

A spokesman for the Magen David Adom ambulance service told AFP that 75 others were injured.

"There are four to five people still stuck inside the main carriage and our teams are now giving them first aid support," Alon Fridman told AFP at the scene.

A total of 57 ambulances had rushed to the scene after reports of the crash were first received.

Although medical sources had initially spoken of more than 150 people being wounded, it soon became apparent that the vast majority were suffering either from shock or minor injuries.

Fridman said that the rescue services were able to react rapidly to the emergency as they were already on a state of readiness over fears of a possible attack by Palestinian militants wanting to avenge the recent deaths of eight civilians on the Gaza Strip seafloor.

Lanka accuses Tigers of 'intransigence'

AFP, Oslo

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera on Monday accused the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of intransigence after the recent breakdown in talks between the two sides.

The rebels on Thursday aborted a two-day meeting in Oslo with Colombo representatives arranged by Norway to discuss the safety of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) overseeing a fragile truce.

"Unfortunately it has been the intransigence of the LTTE which has resulted in this impasse," Samaraweera told reporters in Oslo after a meeting with Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Store.

"They (the LTTE) showed their intransigence by leaving the country without actually discussing the problems at hand," added

Samaraweera, whose visit had had been planned prior to the failure of the talks.

The minister reaffirmed Sri Lanka's commitment to the peace process but insisted that there were many complex issues to resolve.

"There are no easy answers, no shortcuts," he said.

Samaraweera is the first Sri Lankan government minister to visit Norway since Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse took power in November.

The minister was due to meet Norway's international development minister and envoy to the Sri Lankan peace process, Erik Solheim, and Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg later on Monday.

Samaraweera was also scheduled to have an audience with Norwegian King Harald, before leaving Norway on Thursday.



Roshan Goonetilleke

Lanka's new air chief follows in father's flight path

AFP, Colombo

Air Vice Marshal Roshan Goonetilleke took command of Sri Lanka's air force yesterday, 25 years after his father retired from the post.

Goonetilleke, 50, inspected an honour guard before being handed the command at a ceremony in Colombo.

Among those attending was Goonetilleke's father, retired air vice marshal Harry Goonetilleke, 76, who was the head of the air force from 1976 to 1981.

"It is a great day," said the retired air chief.

"But it is also a day filled with joy and sorrow. Joy because my son took over the command of the air force I had commanded 25 years ago and sad because my second son is not here to see this."

Goonetilleke's second son Shirantha, who was also an air force officer, was killed when an Avro fixed-wing aircraft he piloted was shot down by Tamil Tiger rebels in April 1995.

Both father and son started their careers in the air force acadets and ended up as commanders.

US drives world military spending to new high

AFP, Stockholm

Global military spending shot to a record high in 2005, with the United States accounting for nearly half the total, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) said yesterday.

Military spending reached 1.118 trillion dollars (885 billion euros) in 2005, or 173 dollars for every person on earth. This was an increase of 3.4 percent from 2004, it said in its annual report.

Most of the annual rise was due to increased US spending, which was boosted by conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also by the effects of hurricanes Katrina and Rita which hit the United States last year.

"We see a clear rise in arms production, arms trade, as well as a big increase in military expenditure," SIPRI director Alyson Bailes told AFP.

The USA is responsible for 48 percent of the world total, distantly followed by the UK, France, Japan and China with four to five percent each, SIPRI noted.

US President George W. Bush's "proclivity" to use military force appeared undiminished and was restrained only by its costly presence in Iraq.

"The Bush administration's proclivity to use force unilaterally seems unchanged, but the Iraqi turmoil prevents it from going beyond occasional hints of further 'pre-emptive' use of force," SIPRI said.

Rising world prices of minerals and fossil fuels freed up resources for military spending in producer countries, boosting purchases by Algeria, Azerbaijan, Russia and Saudi Arabia.

China and India, as emerging economic world powers, also contributed to the spending spree although their purchases were still just a fraction of that of the United States, SIPRI said.

Russia remained the world's top supplier of weapons, a spot it has held since 2001, accounting for around 30 percent of worldwide weapons sales, followed by the United States, France, Germany and Britain.

Rights group blasts China's 'irresponsible' arms trade

AFP, London

A leading human rights group has called China one of the world's most reckless arms exporters with one billion dollars in annual trade fuelling violence in countries like Sudan, Nepal and Myanmar.

"China is fast emerging as one of the world's biggest, most secretive and irresponsible arms exporters," Amnesty International said in a press release to accompany a report Sunday on the global arms trade.

The report accused China of helping to sustain brutal conflicts, criminal violence and other grave rights violations around the world, and indicated the possible involvement of Western companies in making some of the weapons.

"China describes its approach to arms export licensing as 'cautious and responsible', yet the reality couldn't be further from the truth," said Helen Hughes, Amnesty International's arms control researcher.

'US-led war on terror increases risk of terrorist attacks'

AFP, London

The US-led "war on terror" is increasing the risk of terrorist attacks and distracting governments from greater threats to global security such as climate change, a think-tank warned in a report yesterday.

The Oxford Research Group urged countries, especially the United States and Britain, to rethink their security policies to counter future instability.

"The war on terror is a dangerous diversion and prevents the international community from responding effectively to the most likely causes of future conflict," a press statement about the report said.

The US and British governments insist there is no alternative, but "there is abundant evidence that the 'war on terror' is proving

deeply counterproductive -- making the risk of future terrorist attacks on the scale of New York, Madrid or London more not less likely," it said.

The report, "Global Responses to Global Threats: Sustainable Security for the 21st Century", was referring to the September 11, 2001 suicide aircraft hijackings in the United States, the Spanish train bombings on March 11, 2004 and the London suicide attacks on July 7 last year.

Instead of terrorism, the report cited climate change; competition over resources; socio-economic marginalisation and global militarisation as the main threats to peace and the likely causes of future conflict.

These issues "are far more important than the current focus on the 'war on terror'", the authors of the 18-month study concluded.

Table with 3 columns: Item, Price in Rupees, Price in Dollars. Items include Dal, Petrol, Diesel, Bajaj, Bajaj Scooter, and Bajaj Cycle.



PHOTO: AFP

Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) President Rajnath Singh (L) talks with Indian Leader of Opposition and BJP leader L. K. Advani (C) during a protest in New Delhi yesterday as former Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (R) looks on. Senior BJP leaders took part in a protest against the price hike of fuel and other essentials.