

PM, Maoists to meet for Nepali peace talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government and Maoist leaders are expected this weekend to get down to some tough talking on sensitive issues such as arms control and an interim parliament in a second round of talks aimed at ending a decade of bloody insurgency, officials said yesterday.

The talks, which will include leaders of Nepal's seven main political parties, are slated for Friday but officials said they could be delayed a few days as the government has asked for time to do further groundwork.

The Maoists have placed on the agenda the prickly issues of arms control and the replacement of the House of Representatives with an interim parliament in which they, too, have seats.

Political parties, however, are divided on whether the issue of an interim parliament should be tack-



PHOTO: AFP

The Chief of Army Staff, Pyar Jung Thapa (C) is pictured with senior Nepali government officials during the oath of allegiance ceremony in the Parliament Secretariat in Kathmandu yesterday.

led at this stage.

"It is too early to enter into the issue of formation of an interim parliament without resolving the issues of arms management. The issue of forming an interim parlia-

ment won't be discussed in the summit talks," Ram Baran Yadav, general secretary of Nepal's biggest party, the Nepali Congress, told AFP.

However, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal-

Unified Marxist Leninist reached a deal last week with the rebels on forming an interim parliament and other party officials said the issue will indeed be discussed.

Parliament, without seats for the Maoists, was reinstated in April after weeks of often violent protests forced King Gyanendra to relinquish direct rule. The protests were organised by the sidelined political parties and the rebels.

At the previous high-level meeting in mid-June between Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and rebel leaders, the two sides agreed to frame an interim constitution that would allow the rebels to join an interim government.

Since then the Maoists have added a demand that an interim parliament that is representative of all strata of society, including civil as well as themselves, should be formed until a constituent assembly is elected.

Indo-US nuke deal approval a foregone conclusion Says Bush admn

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

The Bush Administration has said Congressional approval of the India-US nuclear deal was a foregone conclusion, going by the overwhelming support for the enabling bill in the foreign relations committees.

"So far the votes have been overwhelmingly in favour in committees, and we'll just have to see how it proceeds. I mean, that's a no-brainer," White House spokesman Tony Snow said.

President George Bush supports the agreement, and he had made it clear to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as also to members of Congress, he said.

Two separate draft bills approving the Indo-US nuclear deal, as cleared by the respective foreign relations committees of the two Houses, are expected to come up for vote next week in the House of Representatives and the Senate.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani human rights activist Asma Jahangir (C) and others hold placards as they chant slogans during a protest against Israel in Lahore Wednesday for attacks in Lebanon and Gaza Strip.

Afghan forces retake dists

AFP, Kandahar

Hundreds of troops were scouring southernmost Afghanistan for Taliban fighters Wednesday after securing two districts the militants had overrun more than 24 hours earlier.

Afghan flags were again flying above the headquarters of the remote desert districts of Garmser and Naway-i-Barakzayi in Helmand province after Taliban rebels hauled them down late Monday, the defence ministry said.

Coalition and Afghan troops entered and secured the Naway southwards to Garmser, security of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, villagers said the militants had fled before the troops arrived, a coalition statement said.

"The Afghan army hoisted the flag of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Naway district yesterday and in Garmser today," said defence ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi. "Only two soldiers were wounded."

The coalition said the forces had met almost no resistance.

In Naway town, just 20km south of the provincial capital Lashkar Gah, villagers said the militants had fled before the troops arrived, a coalition statement said.

"The police station and a school had been damaged by the extremists and many school books were destroyed. Two caches of mines and rocket propelled grenades were left behind by the fleeing Taliban," it said.

Congress seeks to block film on Sonia

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress party has served a legal notice on film director Jagmohan Mundhra to stop him making a film on the party's Italian-born chief Sonia Gandhi, an official said yesterday.

"We have served a legal notice," an official in the party's media office told AFP, asking not to be named.

He did not give any details but the Indian media reported that the notice had also been sent to the film's producer Sunanda Murlu Manohar and journalist Rasheed Kidwai, on whose book the film is based.

The director had earlier said that Gandhi, widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, was aware of the film but not involved in the project.

Bhutanese refugees draft parallel constitution

REUTERS, Guwahati

Bhutanese refugees exiled in Nepal, who say their country's first-ever constitution gives too much power to the monarchy, have drafted a parallel one, hoping it will bring democracy and help them return home.

Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuck has been slowly pulling his isolated mountain state into the modern world and a new draft constitution was drawn up in 2005, which would surrender some of the king's powers to an elected parliament.

But thousands of Bhutanese refugees, who live in camps in eastern Nepal, argue the new constitution still allows Wangchuck to appoint key officials like the parliamentary speaker, election commissioner and chief justice.

They say this will allow him to continue to impose his own authority, without seeking advice or approval from cabinet or parliament. "The regime's constitution is

mainly strengthening the king's absoluteness. We want the king to be within the constitution not outside the constitution," Thinley Penjore, leader of the Bhutanese Movement Steering Committee, told Reuters on Wednesday.

"So we felt it necessary to re-draft the constitution to allow the king to exercise powers on the advice of the cabinet."

But government officials said they only recognised the constitution introduced by the king and that the parallel document drafted by the refugees was unlikely to be accepted.

Wangchuck kicked out hundreds of Bhutanese of Nepali origin from the tiny Buddhist kingdom in the early 1990s, after they complained about racial discrimination and campaigned for democracy. Tens of thousands have since joined them in exile in Nepal.

Myanmar to confront angry neighbours, US at Asian security meet

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Military-ruled Myanmar will face a grilling over its refusal to shift to democracy next week when it confronts angry neighbours and long-time foe the United States at Asia's top security forum.

Frustrated Southeast Asian nations whose attempts to push for change have been ignored by the Yangon regime say it is now up to the United Nations and regional power China to negotiate an end to four decades of military rule.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is expected to lead the criticism here, last year rebuked the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), which is hosting the talks for not doing enough to censure the Myanmar junta.

Stung into action, Asean unleashed unprecedented criticism of the regime, demanding it accept reforms and release opposition

leader Aung San Suu Kyi -- but was met with silence.

"I think they have treated us shabbily," said Malaysia's Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar who was snubbed when he visited Yangon in March as Asean's envoy and was refused a request to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi.

"I think in our case it was almost aborted before it started. They didn't give the opportunity for Asean, there's a lack of confidence and even of trust in Asean," he told AFP.

Shortly afterwards the junta allowed UN Under Secretary General Ibrahim Gambari to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, and hold talks with the its reclusive leader Senior General Than Shwe outside the new capital of Pyinmana.

Syed Hamid said that as a result, Asean was largely abandoning its campaign to push for change in Myanmar, which has been run by the military for four decades.