

Nepali rebels, govt accept draft interim constitution

Annan seeks more talks on UN aid plan

AFP, REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's government and rebel Maoists accepted a draft interim constitution late Friday, which was lauded by rebel and government officials, but avoided key political issues.

"This interim constitution will be crucial in establishing a new Nepal," said Krishna Prasad Sitaula, Nepal's home minister, after rebel and government officials formally accepted the constitution from the drafting committee.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and Maoist leaders reached a landmark agreement in mid-June to prepare an interim constitution that is aimed at allowing the rebels, who have led a 10-year insurgency, to join the government.

The exercise was expected to take 15 days but dragged as the parties and Maoists failed to agree on the monarchy's future.

Under Nepal's 1990 constitution, the king was the supreme

commander of the 90,000-strong Nepal Army, and had the powers to dissolve parliament.

Three weeks of widespread protests organised by sidelined political parties and rebel Maoists forced King Gyanendra's climbdown and the reinstatement of parliament earlier this year.

The 172-article interim constitution makes no mention of the role of the monarchy or the future of Nepal's army, but these issues will be addressed separately by government and rebel leaders, the home minister said.

"High-level talks between the seven-party alliance and Maoist leaders will be held soon. The talks will reach agreements in certain political issues to be included in the interim constitution," Sitaula said.

The rebels - who began a "people's war" in the impoverished Himalayan nation in 1996 that has killed at least 12,500 people - also praised the draft constitution despite

the sidestepping of key issues.

"It's a breakthrough in taking the peace process ahead," Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara told journalists.

"We, by agreeing with the political parties to bring the old constitution to an end, have come to the present state from the people's war to establish a new Nepal," the spokesman said.

Since the king ended his period of direct rule, the rebels and government have been observing a ceasefire and have agreed to hold elections to a body that will rewrite Nepal's constitution permanently.

The interim constitution states that "sovereign rights and executive powers are vested in the people," and proposes the establishment of a body to oversee the planned elections of the constitution redrafting committee.

"We have included a provision to set up a three-member Constituent Assembly Court to oversee all the

election process," said Laxman Prasad Aryal, coordinator of the interim constitution drafting panel.

"The Court, which will be an organ of the Supreme Court, will make decisions regarding the disputes that may emerge during the polls," he said.

Meanwhile, Nepal's government and Maoist rebels agree on the main elements of how the United Nations can help their country recover after a decade of conflict, but more work is needed before UN aid can begin, the United Nations said on Friday.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan has asked veteran diplomat Ian Martin of Britain to begin consulting with all concerned parties "in order to build on the common understanding that now exists, so that detailed planning for UN assistance may proceed," a UN spokesman said in New York.



Coordinator of the Interim Constitution drafting panel and former Supreme Court Justice Laxman Prasad Aryal (C), Nepalese Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula (L) and Maoist peace talk leader Krishna Bahadur Mahara (R) address a joint press conference following the presentation of a draft interim constitution at the Peace Secretariat in Kathmandu on Friday. Nepal's government and rebel Maoists accepted the draft interim constitution which avoided key political issues, but was lauded by rebel and government officials.

Uganda, LRA rebels sign temporary truce

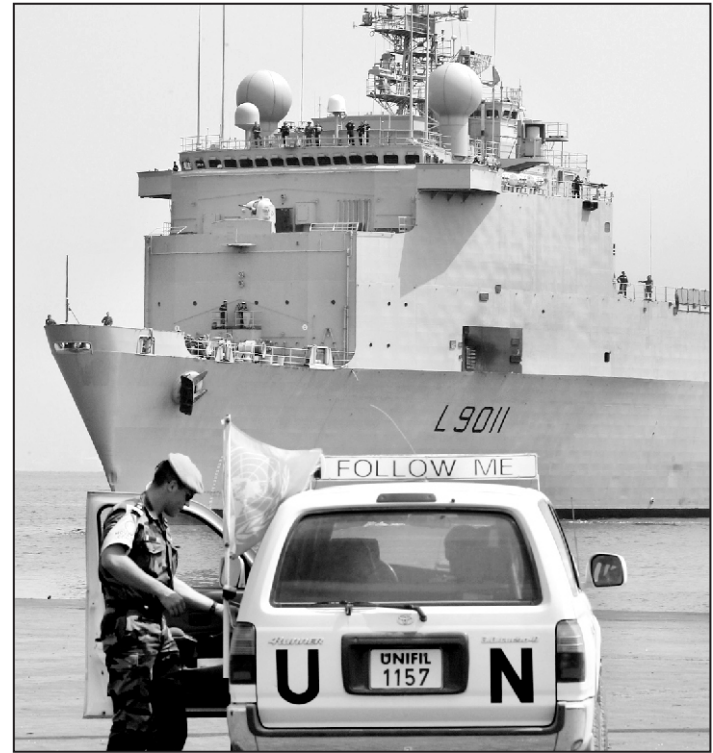
AFP, Juba

The Ugandan government and northern rebels yesterday signed a temporary truce at peace talks aimed at ending nearly two-decades of deadly insurgency, an AFP correspondent reported.

The cessation of hostilities that will take effect on Tuesday at 6.00 am (0300 GMT) was signed by the head of the government delegation, Ugandan Interior Minister Ruhakana Rugunda, and LRA delegation chief Martin Ojor in the capital of the semi-autonomous region of southern Sudan.

Under the deal, LRA fighters must gather in two camps supervised by a neutral force. Kampala will guarantee the safety of rebel fighters travelling to the sites and arrange for their welfare under the care and guard of forces from the ex-rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLM).

One site is in Uganda's northern border with southern Sudan and the other on southern Sudan's western border with the Democratic Republic of Congo.



French UN soldier stands guard as the French warship "Foudre" approaches from the Beirut harbour to land heavy trucks and equipments for the Engineers yesterday. Israel and Lebanon both welcomed an EU pledge to contribute up to 7,000 troops to a beefed-up UN peacekeeping mission capable of enforcing the fragile truce with Hezbollah.

EU takes new role in ME with UN mission

AFP, Brussels

European support for the UN force in Lebanon has thrust Europe into a major new political role in the Middle East, a region where it has traditionally been better known as a rich aid donor, officials and analysts said.

With nearly 7,000 soldiers pledged for the UN force in Lebanon, Europe's commitment marks an "historic opportunity," said Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos, himself a former special EU envoy to the region.

"The time has come for European efforts to relaunch peace in the Middle East," he said Friday after his EU counterparts met in Brussels with UN chief Kofi Annan.

"Europeans are gaining more in credibility, in presence and engagement in the future of this region, which is our region," he said.

Italy, which will be the force's biggest contributor with up to 3,000 soldiers and which will take over its command next February from

France, was hopeful that the commitment would mark a new era of EU influence in the region.

"It's the first time that Europe assumes such a strong responsibility in the region and we hope there will be a change, not only for the stabilisation of the border between Israel and Lebanon, but also to push peace in the whole region," said Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema.

European countries promised at the meeting of the 25-nation bloc's foreign ministers on Friday to provide not only the core of the expanded UN force, which is due to total up to 15,000 peacekeepers.

Until now, the EU's role in the Middle East has largely been limited to providing aid and trying to play the honest broker in the volatile region's many conflicts.

But the Centre for European Reform's foreign policy director, Mark Leonard, said that the presence of a large number of European troops not only reinforced Europe's credibility with regional players, but

could also mark the beginning of a new "strategic" role.

"The EU has not behaved in a very strategic way in the past, it has not used the resources that it's put into the region toward political goals and increasing its leverage," he said from London.

"But if several members states are directly exposed and have troops on the ground, the EU will have both more credibility but will also behave in a more strategic way," he added.

Europe's new found role comes as the United States standing in the region takes a battering due its staunch support for Israel, its difficulties in Iraq and Iran's defiance to back down on its nuclear ambitions.

"For us, the Middle East is a question of stability, our stability. We are so close while for the Americans it's different," said Cristina Gallach, spokeswoman for EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

Red Cross evacuates foreigners from Jaffna

Aid doled out as 6 troops killed in blast

REUTERS, Jaffna

The Red Cross evacuated foreigners from Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna peninsula and distributed aid there on Saturday after a two week siege, but the army said a bomb left by withdrawing rebels killed six soldiers.

The fighting between Tamil Tiger rebels and government forces, the first ground battles since a 2002 ceasefire, has displaced more than 200,000 people and cut off half a million people in Jaffna from essential supplies. Shortages are rising.

A Red Cross-flagged cargo ship that arrived off Jaffna on Thursday night was unloading around 1,500 tonnes of food, the first shipment since fighting blocked road access two weeks ago.

A ferry also bearing the Red Cross flag was due to load the first 150 of an estimated 500 people, mostly aid staff and other foreign nationals, who are to be evacuated

from the peninsula to the northeastern port of Trincomalee and then the capital.

Intermittent artillery fire could be heard in Jaffna overnight. The military said rebels had withdrawn from some previously captured army positions but had left an improvised bomb.

"The troops were consolidating the position and checking," said army spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarsinghe. "A soldier just put his foot on it and it exploded. Six are dead, four wounded."

Army-held Jaffna lies on the northern tip of the island republic, cut off from the rest of the country by rebel territory. During the truce, however, goods were allowed across.

The historical capital of Sri Lanka's Tamil, Jaffna has changed hands several times in two decades of civil war and is seen as a key Tiger goal in their fight for a separate Tamil homeland.

The only other routes into Jaffna are by air or sea but the Palaly air base is believed to be within range of rebel artillery and rebel Sea Tigers threaten shipping.

Military aircraft fly in metres above the surface of the sea and only stay on the ground long enough for reinforcements to jump down and for the wounded and the dead to be loaded.

In the capital, Colombo, police Special Task Force troopers raided houses near the international airport on Saturday, seizing fragmentation mines, assault rifles and detonators that they suspected the Tigers planned to use for attacks. Sixteen men and two women were arrested.

But in what appeared to be a rare sign of flexibility, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) agreed to release a policeman held prisoner since September 2005 after a request from unarmed Nordic ceasefire monitors.

Peacekeeping boom strains UN

REUTERS, United Nations

Plans to greatly expand UN peacekeeping with missions in Sudan and Lebanon are raising fears the world body may be unable to handle the load as it tries to regain credibility after a series of scandals.

UN peacekeeping troops and spending could reach all-time highs as the United States and Britain push to send as many as 24,000 troops and police to Sudan's Darfur region, and a force of 15,000 is now being pieced together to enforce a shaky cease-fire in southern Lebanon.

More than 110,000 UN troops and police could be on the ground in the coming months, an increase of 50 percent, at a time the world body already faces serious operational challenges and spending is tight.

UN uniformed peacekeepers now number about 73,000, and the peacekeeping budget for the current year has mushroomed to \$4.75 billion. This comes at a time the

United States, which funds about a quarter of that budget, faces election-year pressure to slash deficits.

The Department of Peacekeeping Operations has a staff of just 600 to handle planning, logistics, command and control, legal woes, communications and travel. That is too few people to support troop numbers in the six figures, said Lee Feinstein of the Council on Foreign Relations.

"They are simply not equipped to do it," Feinstein said. "That's not to disparage them. That is the result of the deliberate choices of the membership."

The UN peacekeeping department declined comment, but other UN officials acknowledged it would be difficult for the current peacekeeping staff to support that many troops.

"We do what we can, but we may need additional resources down the line," said UN spokesman Farhan Haq.

Fatah agrees to form unity govt with Hamas

REUTERS, Amman

Leaders of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah movement endorsed yesterday a national unity government with the rival Hamas group to end feuding they say Israel has exploited to stall on Middle East peace pledges.

Veteran Fatah leader Nabil Shaath said at the end of three days of talks in Amman that the 17-member Central Committee, the governing body of the long dominant movement, now sought a national unity government with the Islamist group which defeated Fatah in January elections.

"Palestinian blood is sacred and we will not allow any infighting and have agreed to work toward a national unity government," Shaath told reporters.

"A national unity government will strengthen our hands to face the Israeli occupation," Shaath added.

Abbas and Hamas agreed last

week to restart negotiations on a unity government in the hope of easing a Western aid embargo imposed to pressure the militant group to recognize Israel and renounce violence.

Palestinians fear that if discussions between Hamas and Fatah failed, there is a danger of a return to a violent power struggle that followed the elections.

Other Palestinian leaders said the Israeli failure to achieve a military victory in Lebanon by eliminating Lebanese Hezbollah guerrillas had given impetus to renewed efforts to unify ranks against a common enemy - Israel.

"The Israeli supremacy is gone ... they cannot do whatever they want after Lebanon," said Hani al-Hassan, an old guard Fatah politician.

Leaders of Fatah said they did not intend to put any conditions for joining a coalition government with Hamas but insisted there had to be a pragmatic approach toward resuming peace talks with Israel.



Lebanese children play near their tent amid the rubble of their home in the southern Lebanese town of Sidqin Friday following a blistering month-long Israeli offensive against Hezbollah fighters.

N Korea will not rule out nuclear test

AP, Seoul

North Korea will not rule out a nuclear test as long as Washington is hostile toward Pyongyang, a newspaper linked to the communist nation said yesterday.

There are growing concerns, bolstered by reports of suspicious activity, that Pyongyang may be planning to follow up its recent missile launches with a nuclear test. Pyongyang claims to have nuclear weapons but hasn't performed any known test.

"We can't say for sure that North Korea will not conduct a nuclear test as part of strengthening its self-defence," said Choson Sinbo, a newspaper published in Japan by a pro-North Korean association linked to the Pyongyang regime.

"The full responsibility for this lies with the US, which regards any forces that don't agree with or submit to its logic or actions as evil," the paper said, accusing Washington of trying to topple the North's communist regime.



Sunni and Shia Sheikhs sit together in Baghdad yesterday as several hundred hereditary chieftains -- the leaders of the tribes to which all Iraqis owe varying degrees of allegiance -- met with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and senior officials in a hotel in the capital.

Iraqi PM looks to tribes for unity

7 more killed in violence

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki urged hundreds of tribal leaders gathered in Baghdad yesterday to unite to end the bitter sectarian bloodshed between Sunnis and Shias that has raised fears of civil war.

"Iraq needs all of its sons during this stage. There is no difference between Sunnis and Shias," he told the meeting, the first in a series to promote dialogue between the warring sects as part of his national reconciliation program.

Washington says a major security crackdown by Iraqi and American troops in Baghdad, where the communal bloodshed is worst, is not a durable solution to Iraq's instability and must be accompanied by movement on the political front.

"Yes, we differ in opinion and that's a healthy sign but we must hold dialogue to solve our problems," Maliki said.

"The liberation of the nation from any foreign hand cannot be without national unity, the unity that our forefathers built during hundreds of years."

Shia Muslims, the majority sect in Iraq, were oppressed under Saddam Hussein but now lead the government of national unity. Minority Sunnis were politically dominant under Saddam and form the backbone of the three-year-old insurgency.

Police, meanwhile, found seven bodies of men shot dead in apparent sectarian killings in northern Iraq, while rebels killed an Iraqi soldier in a roadside bomb attack in the same area, police said.

Four handcuffed and bullet-riddled bodies were found on the highway between the northern cities of Kirkuk and Tikrit, while three bodies were recovered from near Tikrit.

2 French soldiers, 23 Taliban killed in attacks

AFP, Kabul

A rebel ambush killed two French soldiers in eastern Afghanistan while a British airstrike destroyed an insurgent convoy positioning for attack in the south, killing about 23 fighters, officials said yesterday.

Taliban also stormed government and police posts in two southern districts, sparking gun battles lasting hours, which left six rebels dead and two policemen missing, Afghan officials said.

The ambush occurred when a bomb struck a French special forces unit patrolling in the eastern province of Laghman on Friday as part of a US-led coalition hunting down Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters, the coalition said.

The attackers then opened fire on the soldiers with small arms and machine guns, it said in a statement.

The coalition blamed the attack on "extremists", who could include various anti-government forces.

The defence ministry in Paris said the attackers were from the extremist Taliban movement.

Two French soldiers were also wounded in the ambush and were in stable condition at a hospital in the main US military base at Bagram, near Kabul, the coalition said.

The US-led coalition in Afghanistan said Saturday it had killed a known Taliban commander and 15 other militants in a precision air strike on the leadership of the extremist movement.

The rebels, involved in attacks on civilians and security forces, were targeted in an engagement in the southern province of Uruzgan on Friday, it said in a statement.

"Coalition forces engaged Taliban leadership with joint fires, killing a known Taliban commander and 15 other militants," the statement said.

Foreign and Afghan troops are battling an insurgency which has grown each year since the Islamist

Taliban government was driven from power in late 2001 for harboring the al-Qaeda terror network.

Much of the violence is focussed on southern Afghanistan where troops from a Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) took over from the coalition on July 31 and have faced a series of deadly attacks.

Isaf forces spotted a convoy of insurgents moving into position for attack in Helmand province on Friday and called in British aircraft, which bombed the men, killing at least seven, the force said in a statement Saturday.

The strike was in the Musa Qala district, where British and Afghan troops replaced a Danish contingent of 100 soldiers in the past few days.

The base had suffered daily Taliban attacks, a spokesman for the Danish armed forces said in Copenhagen on Thursday, adding that the turnaround was routine.