



Nepali PM, Maoists meet to salvage peace process

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Leaders of Nepal's ruling seven-party alliance and Maoist rebels began talks yesterday in a bid to rescue a peace process stalled by differences over disarming the guerrillas and the future of the monarchy.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and other party leaders formally met rebel chief Prachanda and top aides for the first time in nearly four months after the Maoist chief threatened to launch street protests if the talks were further delayed.

Officials said the talks, taking place in Koirala's high-security official residence in Kathmandu, would be held over the next few days.

Outside the venue, about two dozen people held placards reading

"Dissolve parliament, create an interim legislature" and "Beware of foreign interference."

"We need patience," Koirala told reporters on Friday. "Everything will be positive and we will try to find a solution to all problems."

Nepal's interim government, formed after King Gyanendra restored democracy following mass protests in April, and the Maoists, who have been waging a deadly insurgency to topple the monarchy, have been in peace talks for nearly five months.

In June, they struck a power-sharing deal envisaging an interim constitution, a temporary parliament and an interim cabinet, including rebel participation, within a month.

But none of these has yet been implemented.

"Yes, these matters are on the agenda. Leaders are expected to make a decision on them," one

government negotiator said.

The interim government, which the Maoists are expected to join, is to supervise elections to a special assembly to draw up a new constitution, a key rebel condition to end their revolt.

"The government is wavering in implementing the deal," Prachanda said on Friday. "It is trying to avoid progressive change in the country."

The peace process has remained stuck over two key issues -- management of arms held by the guerrillas and the future role of the monarchy in Nepal.

The government wants the Maoists to disarm before elections are held for the special assembly some time next year. But the rebels say they are only willing to keep their arms and armies in their camps under UN supervision.

On the monarchy, the rebels see

no role for the king in the new government, but some political parties say the monarch should have a ceremonial role, pending a final decision by the assembly.

Analysts said both sides were under pressure from the people to steer the peace process to a successful conclusion.

"Activists of seven political parties and Maoists must put pressure on their leaders and stop them from snatching the smiles of the Nepalis," said Rajdhani, a Nepali daily, in an editorial.

Earlier talks with the Maoists collapsed in 2001 and 2003 as the then governments refused the key rebel demand for constituent assembly elections.

7 militants, two soldiers killed in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

Indian troops yesterday shot dead seven Islamic militants in two gunbattles in restive Indian Kashmir, while a senior army officer and a soldier were also killed, officials said.

The first firefight took place in the Sownain region of Poonch district, 240km northwest of Jammu, Kashmir's winter capital, spokesman Colonel RK Chibber said.

"The infiltration bid has been successfully foiled with the killing of three militants," he said, adding that one soldier was also killed in the incident.

The second gunbattle took place in Bakhtoor in the northern Gurez region of Indian Kashmir, more than 100km north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

"It was a routine cordon and search operation in which four militants and an officer of the rank of lieutenant colonel were killed," he said. Three soldiers were injured in the operation.

Nato commander to talk with Musharraf

'Afghan insurgent attacks halved'

AFP, London

The commander of Nato troops in Afghanistan is to travel to Pakistan in the coming days for talks with President Pervez Musharraf over the Taliban insurgency, the Nato-led force said here yesterday.

Britain's General David Richards, who last week became commander of foreign troops across Afghanistan, is to hold "full and frank" discussions with the Pakistan leader, a spokesman for the force said.

The International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) would not give a date for the visit to Islamabad for security reasons. Britain's Sunday Times newspaper said the trip was due on Monday.

Isaf also dismissed the newspaper's claim that Richards would

"confront" Musharraf about the insurgency and try to persuade him to rein in his military intelligence service, alleged by some to be involved in training Taliban.

"It would be entirely inaccurate to describe the visit to Pakistan as a confrontation," Nato civilian representative Mark Laitly said.

"The visit is intended to work at developing cooperation between the two nations on the military side."

"Not in any sense are we telling Pakistan what to do -- that would be entirely inappropriate," he added.

The Sunday Times said Richards had videos and satellite pictures of Taliban training camps inside Pakistan, and had compiled the addresses of senior Taliban figures.

Isaf on Thursday took command of foreign soldiers who had been under

the US-led coalition in the east of Afghanistan, extending its authority across the whole of the country.

With the transfer of command, Richards became the commander of an expanded Isaf force now numbering 31,000 troops from 37 nations.

Meanwhile, the number of insurgent attacks in southern Afghanistan has halved in the past month and the incidents that have occurred have been less ferocious than previously, the Nato-led force said yesterday.

But the Taliban are still a dangerous threat with their use of suicide and improvised bombings likely to increase even further, Nato spokesman Mark Laitly told reporters.

Hu to cement power as China's communist elite charts future

AFP, Beijing

China's Communist Party elite convened yesterday behind closed doors for a four-day policy huddle that will shape the country's direction, with President Hu Jintao likely to use the occasion to consolidate power.

As 500 members of the party's Central Committee and other top cadres met in Beijing for the biggest political event of the year, observers were hoping for subtle hints about the future course of the world's most populous country.

"The directions of Hu or the party's political reform agenda is akin to trying to make the party more like Singapore's government, technocratic and efficient," said Sun Yan, a China expert at The City University of New York.

"The buzz word is good govern-

ance, not democracy," she said.

Top-level political rivalry is usually kept far from public view in China, but the meeting could briefly offer insights into interecine battles at the highest rungs of power.

Last month Shanghai party boss Chen Liangyu was sacked, officially because of corruption charges, but he is also largely seen to have been a victim of a Hu power play.

The plenum could see moves to evict Chen completely from the political hierarchy, marking a decisive defeat for a group of leaders closely associated with the city of Shanghai and former president Jiang Zemin.

"It's all political even if it's not political," said Ralph Cossa from Hawaii-based think-tank Pacific Forum CSIS.



Visiting Japanese new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2nd L) is welcomed by Chinese President Hu Jintao (R) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Japan's new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe held historic talks with China's leaders as both sides pledged to heal damaged ties, but North Korea cast a shadow over the summit.

Myanmar vows to 'crush' opposition to charter talks

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military rulers yesterday vowed to "crush" any opposition to their dragging constitutional talks, which are set to resume this week.

The remarks came less than two weeks after the arrest of six pro-democracy activists, and as the junta prepares to open a new round of charter talks Tuesday among its handpicked delegates at the National Convention outside Yangon.

"We will crush whoever intends to destroy the National Convention," the information minister, Brigadier General Kyaw Hsann, told reporters.

Asked if the junta planned to crush the opposition National League for Democracy, Kyaw Hsann said, "we are very good-hearted and very patient," but also accused the party of trying to take a "shortcut to grab power."

The NLD won 1990 elections in a landslide, but has never been

allowed to govern. Since then, the party's leader, Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, has spent more than a decade under house arrest.

The junta has insisted on writing a new constitution before opening a parliament, but after 13 years of talks, the process is still dragging along with no tangible results.

NLD members have boycotted the National Convention, insisting that Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners be freed first.

"The NLD asked to open a parliament, using the results of the 1990 election, and to have dialogue with the government. They are using a shortcut to grab power and to destroy the National Convention," Kyaw Hsann said.

"The NLD is using confrontation and destructive policies, so we have no reason to meet with the NLD for dialogue at this time," he said. "The National Convention is the best place for discussion."

Two killed in Hindu-Muslim clashes in Indian town

REUTERS, Bangalore

Hindu-Muslim clashes over the slaughter of cows, which are revered by Hindus, have killed two people and wounded dozens in a southern Indian city, police said yesterday.

Riots erupted in the coastal city of Mangalore, about 320km west of the IT hub of Bangalore, on Wednesday after a group of right-wing Hindu activists intercepted a vehicle carrying cows and buffaloes to an abattoir, local media reported.

More than 60 people have since been wounded as mobs pelted stones at each other and burned shops.

India peacekeepers draw inspiration from Gandhi

AFP, Ibi El-Saqi

In south Lebanon where Hezbollah militants fought with Israeli troops in July and August, India's UN peacekeepers draw inspiration from pacifist independence hero Mahatma Gandhi.

The 650-strong contingent, which maintained its positions throughout the 34-day conflict, has erected a bust of Gandhi in a small square in the heart of the village of Ibi el-Saqi, where they maintain an immaculate garden.

Commanders of the Indian contingent, whose headquarters are in the village, say that the troops try to apply Gandhi's teachings in the peacekeeping duties they have carried out in the area since 1998.

"Gandhi park was based on the life of Mahatma Gandhi who tried to educate the people that through non-violent means one can resist and still win without firing a bullet, without slapping, without threatening anyone," Major Saurabh Pandey told AFP.

Japan warns N Korea on nuclear tests

AP, Seoul

Tensions mounted over North Korea's threat to test its first atomic bomb, with shots ringing out Saturday along the border with South Korea and Japan warning of harsh sanctions if Pyongyang goes nuclear.

With a possible test expected as early as Sunday, the UN Security Council issued a stern statement Friday urging the country to abandon its nuclear ambitions and warning of unspecified consequences if the isolated communist regime does not comply.

Jittery nations have warned a test would unravel regional security

and possibly trigger an arms race.

A midday incursion Saturday by North Korean troops into the southern side of the no-man's-land separating North and South Korea only stoked the unease.

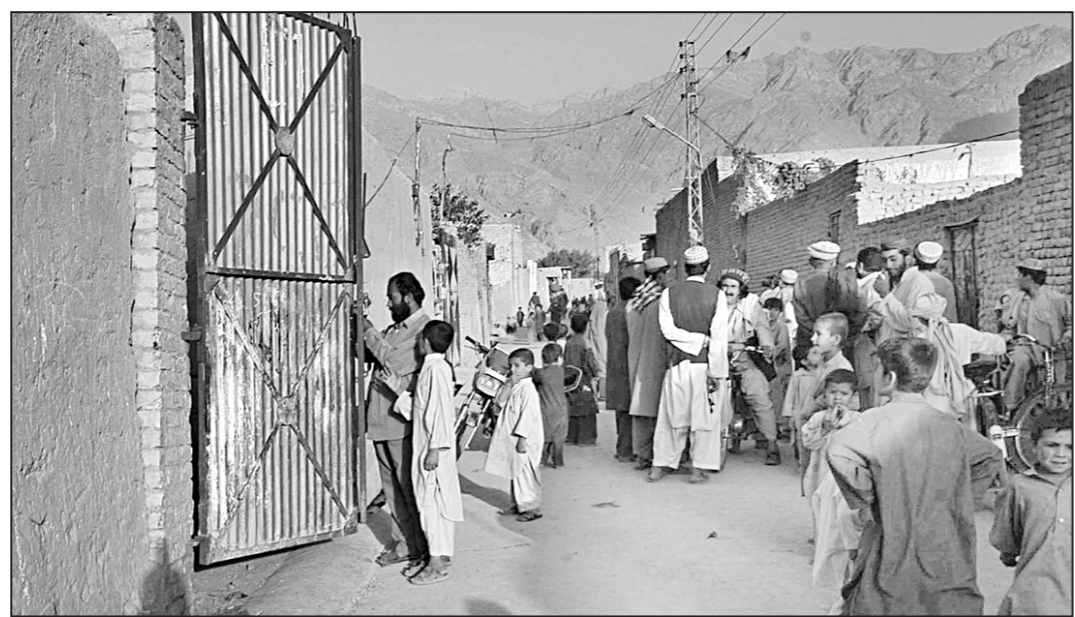
South Korean soldiers rattled off 40 warning shots at the five communist troops who crossed the centre line of the Demilitarised Zone.

It was unclear whether the North Korean advance was intended as a provocation, or was an attempt to go fishing at a nearby stream, an official at South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said on condition of anonymity, citing official policy. No one was hurt, and the North Koreans retreated.

While such border skirmishes are not unheard of, they are relatively rare. Saturday's incursion was only the second this year, the official said.

Meanwhile, world powers were stepping up diplomatic efforts to avert a nuclear test. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe left for Beijing Sunday for talks with Chinese President Hu Jintao and will then go on to Seoul for talks with South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun the following day.

"North Korea must stop its nuclear tests," Abe demanded as he was leaving for his summit. "I will discuss the situation with leaders of both countries to achieve that goal,"



Pakistani men gather outside the house (L) Saturday where police said 30 Afghan Taliban were arrested from Pashunabad district of Quetta, the capital of the restive province. Pakistani police said they had arrested 45 suspected Taliban fighters in Baluchistan province bordering Afghanistan.

Dengue infects hundreds more in India

REUTERS, New Delhi

An outbreak of dengue fever has spread to more states with hundreds of additional cases of the mosquito-borne infection being reported, officials said on Saturday.

Eight more people died over the past two days taking the death toll to 46, while the number of infected people rose by more than 400 to 3,331.

The disease, which began spreading in late August and was first detected in the national capital New Delhi, has now been reported from 12 of the country's 29 states.

The new states include Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala in the south, Gujarat in the west, and West Bengal in the east.

"It's a serious problem," health secretary PK Hota told Reuters.

"It is certainly a failure because we know this will happen each year but still we can not take adequate action against it."

Dengue cases peak in October, a prime time for mosquitoes to breed after the end of monsoon rains.

Delhi has reported 18 deaths and the highest number of infections, which are close to 1,000.

Civic authorities in the city have

been running a campaign asking residents to empty their water-coolers and even flower vases to remove breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's son-in-law and two grandsons were admitted to a city hospital with symptoms of dengue, local media reported. Fumigation was carried out at his residence as a result.

The virus, which occurs mainly in the tropics, causes symptoms such as fever, severe headache, joint and muscular pains, vomiting and rashes.