

Nepal talks postponed amid wrangling

AFP, REUTERS, Kathmandu

Peace talks between Nepal's government and rebel Maoists were postponed yesterday amid fresh wrangling over how to move the political process forward, a minister said yesterday.

"The top leaders of the seven parties decided to postpone today's talks saying that they needed more time to reach consensus on key political issues," Pradeep Gyawali, minister for tourism and a government negotiator, told AFP.

The two sides have been struggling to overcome differences on the role of the monarchy, what to do with rebel weapons and an interim constitution that would allow the rebels to join an interim government.

"We could not reach any conclusions," rebel number-two Baburam Bhattarai told AFP, but added that the peace talks were in no danger of foundering.

"Sunday's failure to reach any decision does not mean that talks are heading backwards," the rebel leader said.

The Maoists have said they will not return to war and Bhattarai vowed Sunday they would stay the course.

"Talks were positive and we will continue until we reach an agreement," he said.

Government negotiator Gyawali said that Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala would fix a new date for talks after consulting with other political leaders.

Sunday's postponement was understandable because of the seriousness of the issues at stake, a political analyst said.

"It is natural that it is taking time because the issues they are dealing with are very complicated and sensitive," said Kapil Shrestha, a political science professor from Nepal's Tribhuvan University.

In talks last week, the two sides agreed to hold elections by mid-2007 for a body that would rewrite the constitution and decide on whether the monarchy can stay.

But the main stumbling block appears to be what should become of the Maoist army.

The main disputes are over disarming the rebel army and the future of the monarchy in the impoverished Himalayan nation.

Sunday's meeting is the fourth in a week between the two leaders and both sides had said they had been "very close" to a breakthrough at the end of each round of previous talks.

"The dialogue is at a crucial stage but is positively moving ahead," said Ram Chandra Poudel, a senior leader of Koirala's Nepali Congress party, the biggest group in the ruling seven-party alliance.

The rebels, who want the monarchy to be abolished, were more cautious.

"We are close to a deal. But there are ups and downs. The

situation is still fluid," Maoist negotiator Dev Gurung said, as middle-level representatives from the two sides met to find a way out of the dispute.

The Maoists have said they are prepared to keep their 35,000-strong People's Liberation Army and weapons in camps supervised by the United Nations, but the multi-party government wants them to disarm.

The rebels, who control large swathes of Nepal's countryside, also want to see Nepal's 90,000-strong army confined to barracks in the run-up to the elections.

A ceasefire has been in effect for the past five months between the government and the rebels since massive street protests forced King Gyanendra to give up 14 months of absolute rule and restore parliament.

and has a self-imposed policy against "possession, production and presence" of nuclear arms in its territory.

Abe, despite his strong support for a greater military role for Japan, on Sunday again ruled out going nuclear in response to North Korea.

But Shoichi Nakagawa, a close aide to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, said he did not for now support an atomic arsenal for Japan, which is the only nation to have suffered nuclear attack.

"I think discussions should be allowed. To ensure Japan will not be attacked, arguments could be made that going nuclear is one option," Nakagawa, the policy chief of the Liberal Democratic Party, told a television talk show.

"I am not advocating it. We will not go nuclear. But discussions over the issue should be allowed," Nakagawa said.

Japan has campaigned for the global abolition of nuclear weapons

Congress brings back 'Garibi Hatao' slogan to woo masses

AFP, New Delhi

It was the slogan that propelled India's then premier Indira Gandhi to her first re-election victory in 1971 by a landslide.

Thirty-five years on, the Congress Party government has brought back "Garibi Hatao" — "Eradicate Poverty".

The government, elected in 2004 on an anti-poverty programme, is hoping the slogan will again work magic and keep the masses in its fold, say analysts.

"The problem is that of showing achievements (on the anti-poverty front)," says Rashed Kidwai, biographer of Congress president Sonia Gandhi, daughter-in-law of Indira who was assassinated in 1984.

"The government's report card does not have much to show. It's also trying to woo its traditional core constituency with an eye on the next national polls due in 2009," Kidwai says.

The government says it used the Indira Gandhi slogan for the restructuring of a package of anti-poverty programmes because it was an easier term to understand than Hindi officials for poverty alleviation.



Wang Guangya, China's Ambassador to the United Nations, joins the Security Council at UN headquarters in New York Saturday as they vote unanimously, 15-0, for a resolution imposing sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear test.

World hails N Korea sanctions vote

But China still wary

AFP, Washington

World leaders broadly hailed UN sanctions yesterday on North Korea over the reclusive country's announced nuclear test, but the consensus was fractious and China said it still had objections.

US President George W Bush said the unanimous Security Council resolution sent "a clear message" to its reclusive leader Kim Jong-Il, a statement echoed in London, Paris, Tokyo and Seoul.

But signs of the intense diplomatic haggling over the scale and nature of the sanctions were evident even after the text was approved in New York, with China — Pyongyang's closest ally — voicing "reservations" about provisions for inspecting cargo going in and out of North Korea.

In contrast, Japan, which had pushed for even tougher measures, said it was considering further action of its own to ratchet up the

pressure on Pyongyang.

In Washington, Bush said the world was united against Kim's atomic programme after its shock October 9 announcement that it had tested a nuclear weapon.

"This action by the United Nations, which was swift and tough, says that we are united in our determination to see to it that the Korean peninsula is nuclear weapons-free," the US president said.

North Korea's UN ambassador Pak Gil Yon condemned the resolution and said the Security Council had ignored the nuclear threat posed by Washington.

"It is gangster-like for the Security Council to have adopted today a coercive resolution while neglecting the nuclear threat and moves for sanctions and pressure of the United States," he said before storming out.

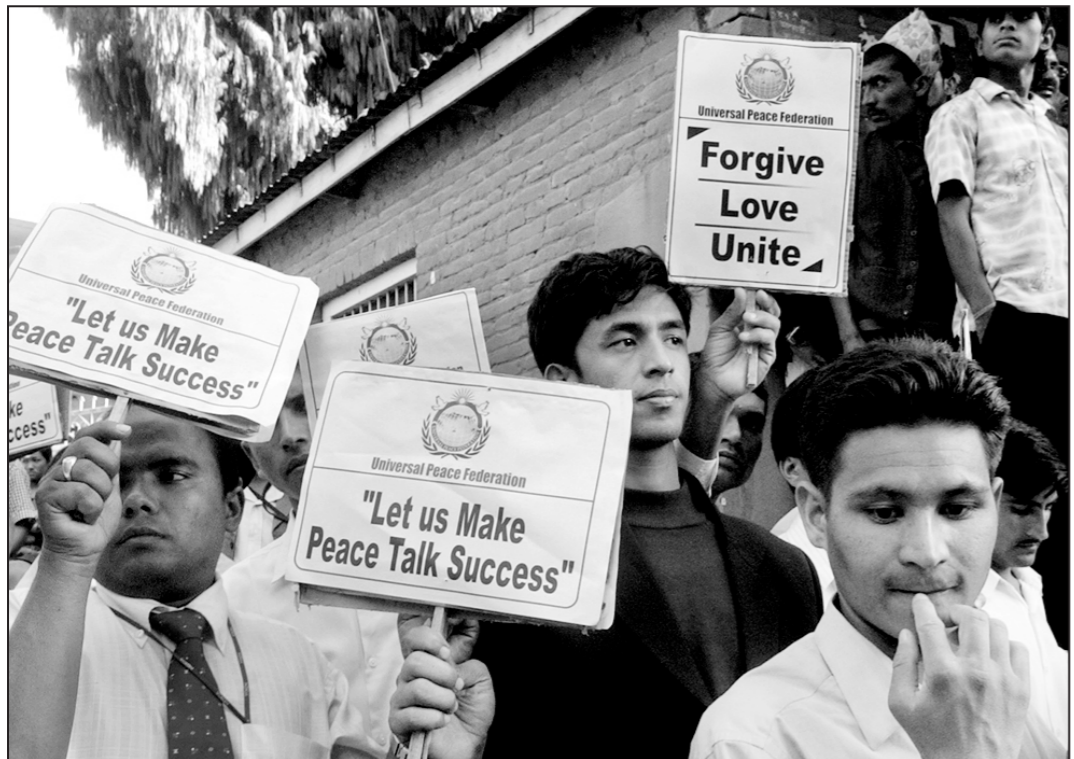
The UN text demands elimination of all North Korean programmes related to weapons of mass destruc-

tion and ballistic missiles, a ban targeting missiles, tanks, large artillery systems, warships and combat aircraft, and provides for the inspection of cargo to and from the state.

It further allows a travel ban on officials working on such programmes and the freezing of funds and economic assets linked to them, as well as slapping an embargo on luxury goods. But it specifically does not include any reference to military action.

China's UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, voiced "reservations" about provisions for cargo inspections, saying Beijing did not approve.

But Japan hailed the UN decision as a "great step forward". Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said Tokyo was considering further measures after slapping a sweeping ban on North Korean imports before the UN vote.



Peoples from various walks of life protest outside venue of peace talks between the government and Maoist rebels as they hold placards in favour of peace and unity in Kathmandu yesterday.

Top Japanese official calls for debate on going nuclear

AFP, Tokyo

The policy chief of Japan's ruling party called yesterday for an active debate on developing atomic weapons due to the nuclear threat from North Korea.

But Shoichi Nakagawa, a close aide to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, said he did not for now support an atomic arsenal for Japan, which is the only nation to have suffered nuclear attack.

"I think discussions should be allowed. To ensure Japan will not be attacked, arguments could be made that going nuclear is one option," Nakagawa, the policy chief of the Liberal Democratic Party, told a television talk show.

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and has a self-imposed policy against "possession, production and presence" of nuclear arms in its territory.

Abe, despite his strong support for a greater military role for Japan, on Sunday again ruled out going nuclear in response to North Korea.

"Even with North Korea declaring it has nuclear weapons, we will maintain our three-point policy against nuclear weapons," Abe said in the western city of Osaka in a campaign stop ahead of a parliamentary by-election next week.

Nakagawa's counterpart in New Komeito, a Buddhist-oriented party in the ruling coalition, said Japan should refuse even to discuss a nuclear option.

"We will not have it," New Komeito policy chief Tetsuo Saito said of a nuclear arsenal.

Push for peace in Lanka ahead of crucial talks

Navy sinks Tiger trawler

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka comes under renewed diplomatic pressure this week to end fighting between government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels amid mounting scepticism over the fate of peace talks planned this month.

A series of visits by envoys and mediators are due in the Indian Ocean island to counsel the warring sides to pull back and focus on rebuilding a tattered peace process.

Yasushi Akashi, the peace envoy of the island's chief financial donor, Japan, will be in Colombo on Sunday followed by mediator Norway's special envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer for his second trip in a month.

US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher is to arrive on Thursday and is expected to convey Washington's support for peace talks and call for an immediate end to hostilities.

Akashi and Hanssen-Bauer are expected to travel to the Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) stronghold of Kilinochchi and meet rebel leaders ahead of the peace talks set for Oct 28-29 in Geneva.

The diplomatic activity is a sign that the international community is willing to support the two sides should they go back to the peace process, said Jehan Perera of the National Peace Council, a non-partisan peace advisory group.

"But their readiness to be supportive by itself will do nothing to make the peace talks successful," he said.

"That is the function of the parties involved and it is only if they are committed and sincere can there be success," Perera said. "At this point of time, I don't see such a commitment."

Sri Lanka has been plunged into a spiral of violence since late July and hundreds of people have been killed as a truce brokered in 2002 now exists only on paper.

More than 65,000 people have been killed since 1983 when the LTTE began fighting for an inde-

pendent Tamil homeland.

Last week, dozens of troops and rebels were killed and hundreds wounded in one of the deadliest battles since the truce.

On Sunday, the Sri Lankan navy shot and sunk a suspected rebel trawler off the country's northwestern coast after its crew failed to heed warnings and opened fire, a spokesman said.

"We presume it was carrying a large quantity of arms and ammunition. There was a huge explosion when we fired in retaliation," naval spokesman Commander DKP Dassanayake said.

Five or six men on the exploded boat were killed while three Sri Lankan sailors sustained gunshot wounds, he added.

Elsewhere, two soldiers were killed and 13 wounded in the northern region of Jaffna when the rebels fired mortars and artillery at army positions overnight, the Defence Ministry said.

Israel threatens to step up deadly Gaza offensive

AFP, Jerusalem

Vowing not to let the Gaza Strip become a "second Lebanon", Israel warned Sunday it will step up an offensive that has killed 22 people in three days in a bid to stop rocket fire and arms smuggling.

"Our policy is clear — we will deploy all our efforts to prevent these firings and this contraband," senior defence ministry official Amos Gilad told army radio.

This will include "ground and air attacks on terrorists and their infrastructure," he added.

Israel says that militants in Gaza are amassing stockpiles of arms smuggled into the impoverished territory through tunnels from neighbouring Egypt.

"Hamas, which is reinforcing itself, constitutes a threat to Israel's security," Gilad said, referring to the Islamic militant movement which dominates the Palestinian government.

"Our priority is now to make it more and more difficult for the continuation of terrorism."

Defence Minister Amir Peretz already approved a first intensification of Israel's three-month-plus

offensive in Gaza on Thursday after rocket fire from the territory hit his southern hometown of Sderot, wounding three people.

At least 22 Palestinians have since been killed and scores more wounded, as Israel pushed tanks and troops, backed by helicopters and drones, into more populated areas of the Gaza Strip.

In the most recent clashes, several dozen Israeli armoured vehicles and bulldozers, rolled two kilometres (more than a mile) into the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanun Saturday evening, closing off its southern entrance.

But Peretz said Israel needed to take further action to prevent Hamas stockpiling weapons as Shiite militant group Hezbollah did in Lebanon ahead of this summer's 34-day conflict.

"We've learned the lessons of Lebanon well," Israel's top-selling daily Yediot Aharonot quoted him as telling a closed-door meeting.

"We will operate against the armament immediately and we will not allow the terrorist organizations to become stronger. Israel is acting to prevent Hamas from joining the Iranian axis of evil."



A man rides on an elephant through floodwaters in Ayutthaya province, north of Bangkok yesterday. Flooding in Thailand began late August following heavy rain from Typhoon Xangsane. So far, 48 people have been killed and thousands forced to flee their homes.

Republican extremists divided country, says Clinton

REUTERS, Des Moines

Former president Bill Clinton told Iowa's Democratic Party faithful on Saturday that the actions of "an extreme sliver" of the Republican Party have backfired and "profoundly divided" the country.

"We've got a big responsibility. Forget about 2008. Forget about the politics. Just go out and find somebody and look them dead in the eye and say 'You know, this is not right... This is America,' Clinton said. "We can do better and this year, it's a job that Democrats have to do alone."

More than 3,500 Iowa Democrats paid \$100 each to attend the fund-raising banquet that kicked off with Clinton's speech. About 50 people paid \$10,000 per couple to attend a private reception with Clinton beforehand.

Republicans, who control the White House and Congress, Clinton charged "paint themselves as pure and the rest of us who don't agree with them as stained" in order to divide the country and stay in power.



South Korean conservative activists shout slogans during an anti-North Korea rally in Seoul yesterday. South Korea, a key economic supporter of its communist neighbour, pledged to enforce new United Nations sanctions on North Korea following its declared nuclear test last week.

Bush keeps revising war justification

AP, Washington

President Bush keeps revising his explanation for why the US is in Iraq, moving from narrow military objectives at first to history-of-civilisation stakes now.

Initially, the rationale was specific: to stop Saddam Hussein from using what Bush claimed were the Iraqi leader's weapons of mass destruction or from selling them to al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups.

But 3 1/2 years later, with no weapons found, still no end in sight and the war a liability for nearly all Republicans on the ballot Nov 7, the justification has become far broader and now includes the expansive "struggle between good and evil."

Republicans seized on North Korea's reported nuclear test last week as further evidence that the

need for strong US leadership extends beyond Iraq.

Bush's changing rhetoric reflects increasing administration efforts to tie the war, increasingly unpopular at home, with the global fight against terrorism, still the president's strongest suit politically.

"We can't tolerate a new terrorist state in the heart of the Middle East, with large oil reserves that could be used to fund its radical ambitions, or used to inflict economic damage on the West," Bush said in a news conference last week in the Rose Garden.

When no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, Bush shifted his war justification to one of liberating Iraqis from a brutal ruler.

UN action on N Korea not a precedent for Iran

AFP, Washington

UN sanctions against North Korea over its declared atomic test demonstrates an unprecedented diplomatic blitz to counter nuclear proliferation but may not necessarily signal impending punitive action on Iran, experts say.

The UN Security Council unanimously agreed Saturday to impose wide-ranging sanctions on North Korea, including inspection of cargo to and from North Korea, less than a week after Pyongyang defied the world by saying it had tested an atomic bomb.

"I can't recall of any case where the United Nations has taken such strong action against another nuclear state," said Joseph Cirincione, a weapons expert and former nuclear proliferation advisor to the US House of Representatives.

US-led actions against recent nuclear renegades India and Pakistan, which also conducted nuclear tests outside the scope of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, were largely unilateral in nature and not spearheaded by the world body, he said.

While US officials were basking in the support from Russia and China for sanctions against their traditional ally North Korea, experts caution against expecting backing from the two communist powers for punitive action against Iran.

"Russia will point out that Iran's case is far less egregious than North Korea's and may well argue that if (the Security Council) takes a confrontational approach," then Iran may be prompted to drop out of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), said Karim Sadjadpour, an analyst at the International Crisis Group, a think tank.

Litterateur Pratibha Basu passes away

PTI, Kolkata

Noted litterateur Pratibha Basu died at a south Kolkata nursing home on Friday after prolonged illness, family sources said.

Basu was 91 and is survived by two daughters. Her only son died earlier.

She was admitted to the nursing home on September 26 following a respiratory tract infection. She died at 5:40am, the family sources said.

Married to litterateur Buddhadeb Basu in 1934, she penned fiction articles, and travelogues in Bangla.

She began her career as writer with her first book Madhabir Janje in 1940 and wrote over 150 titles which brought her fame and recognition.

Basu nee Ranu Shome who was born in Dhaka, took lessons from Kazi Nazrul Islam, Dilip Kumar Roy (son of DL Roy) and Rabindra Nath Tagore.