

Nepali Maoists extend truce to boost peace

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels plan to extend a ceasefire that expired yesterday in a bid to boost peace talks that have slowed due to differences over the future of the monarchy and the management of rebel arms, a spokesman said.

The Maoists had declared a three-month ceasefire in April, after weeks of street protests forced King Gyanendra to cede power to a multi-party government.

It was extended in July by another three months and is due to expire at midnight (1815 GMT).

"There is no question of breaking it now. We'll extend it. A formal announcement will be made later today (Sunday)," Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara told Reuters.

The multi-party government and Maoists began talks in May aimed at ending a decade-old conflict in

which more than 13,000 people have died.

"Our talks are going on positively. If there is a consensus with the government we are in favour of signing a formal ceasefire agreement," Mahara said. "For the present the existing truce will be extended."

Mahara's comments came hours after rebel chief Prachanda had an informal meeting with Premier Girija Prasad Koirala to try and narrow differences before the rebels join an interim government as part of a power sharing pact.

Under the deal, the interim government will supervise elections for an assembly that will decide the fate of Nepal's monarchy.

But differences over how to manage the rebels' weapons as well as handling the status of the king during the run-up to the polls had dogged dialogue between the two parties over the past six

months.

The Maoists have been fighting to set up a communist republic in the impoverished Himalayan nation since 1996, but now say they will honour the outcome of the elections and accept the political future mapped out by the new assembly.

Earlier Nepal's government and Maoist rebels said they were hopeful of striking a deal to bring the insurgents into government and end a 10-year revolt in upcoming talks.

Discussions between Nepal's government and Maoists were postponed last weekend amid wrangling over how to move the political process forward.

But since then both sides have reported progress in informal discussions.

"We're hopeful the upcoming talks will finalize all pending issues as we're engaged in informal talks with the rebels to narrow down differences," Ramesh Lekhak, a

member of the government negotiating team, told AFP on Friday.

His view was echoed by the Maoists.

"We're expecting the upcoming talks to be productive and historic. During our informal talks, we've found the seven-party ruling alliance more sincere in seeking to resolve the political deadlock," said rebel negotiator Dev Gurung.

The minister said that the next date for talks would be soon announced by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala.

The two sides have already agreed to hold elections by mid-2007 for a body that will rewrite the constitution and decide on whether the monarchy can stay.

But they remain at odds over what to do with rebel weapons.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian woman gestures as she remembers victims of the Sarojini Nagar bomb blast in New Delhi yesterday during a prayer ceremony at the site of the blast on the first anniversary of the blasts. India's capital has observed the first anniversary of serial bomb blasts at crowded market places, which took place on October 29, 2005.

22 killed in Pak bus and tanker collision

AFP, Multan

At least 22 people were killed and 20 others injured Sunday when a bus collided with an oil tanker in central Pakistan, police said.

"Sixteen passengers were killed on the spot, while six others died in hospital," district police officer Rai Tahir told AFP.

The injured including women and children were rushed to hospital, he said.

The collision occurred in Hamzaywali village near Muzaffargarh district, some 60 kilometers (37 miles) southwest of the city of Multan as the bus was overtaking another bus and hit the oil tanker head on, Tahir said.

Pakistan has the world's third highest death rate from road accidents. Vehicles are often overloaded and poorly maintained while many roads are treacherous.

Man arrested for email threat to kill Indian PM, president

AFP, Thiruvananthapuram

Police yesterday arrested a man in southern India for sending an email threatening to kill Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Abdul Kalam.

"The man, Akbar Raj, has confessed to the crime," Raman Srivastava, police chief of southern Kerala state, told reporters in state capital Thiruvananthapuram.

The investigation had not revealed the man was linked to terrorist groups, he said, without revealing his motive for the threat.

Police tracked him through an Internet cafe he had used several days ago.

Singh is due to visit Kerala on Wednesday to celebrate the golden jubilee of the state's founding.

Bootleg liquor kills 23 in Pakistan

AFP, Multan

At least 23 people have died this week after drinking home-made liquor in central Pakistan, police and hospital officials said Saturday.

Seventeen people died in hospital in the central city of Multan in the last two days, while six people died at their homes, doctor Fahim Javed of the city's main Nishtar hospital said.

Javed said most of the people died after suffering severe liver damage.

Multan police chief Munir Ahmed Chishti said most of the people were poor labourers aged in their 20s who mixed locally made liquor with a chemical to enhance its effects.

Qaeda threatens Canada over Afghanistan

AFP, Ottawa

The al-Qaeda network has threatened Canada with terrorist attacks if Ottawa fails to withdraw its troops deployed in Afghanistan, the National Post reported on Saturday.

The threat was issued by a member of the al-Qaeda information and strategy committee, Hossam Abdul Raouf, in a document written in July, the Toronto newspaper paper said.

Raouf wrote that the Canadians "will either be forced to withdraw their forces or face an operation similar to New York, Madrid, London."

The document was obtained and translated by a US non-profit organisation, the SITE Institute, that monitors the Internet for terrorist threats, the paper said.

"Despite the strong increasing opposition to spread its forces in the fire of south Afghanistan, it seems that they (Canadians) will not learn the lesson easily," Raouf wrote.

The document condemns Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper for keeping troops in Afghanistan and refers to Canada's "fanatic adherence to Christianity" and its alleged attempts to "damage the Muslims" and support for a "Christian crusade" against al-Qaeda.

Close to 2,500 Canadian soldiers are deployed in the Kandahar region in southern Afghanistan, fighting Taliban insurgents.



PHOTO: AFP
A Sri Lankan man reads the newspaper on the streets of Colombo yesterday. At least five people were killed in clashes in north and east Sri Lanka overnight, police and defence officials said as the government and rebel Tamil Tigers held peace talks in Geneva.

Official arrested under India's new domestic abuse law

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian official was arrested under a new law against domestic abuse for allegedly torturing his wife, a report said Saturday, in the first case of enforcement of the legislation introduced this week.

Police arrested Joseph, an employee of the Tamil Nadu State Water Board in southern India, for allegedly beating and then attacking his wife, Benedict Mary, with a sharp-edged umbrella on October 25 after an argument over money, the Press Trust of India said.

Mary, a school teacher, suffered injuries to her nose and neck and was in hospital, the report quoted local administrator G. Umaganapathy Sastri as saying.

India's Domestic Violence Act 2005, which came into effect on Thursday, aims to protect women against physical, mental and verbal abuse by husbands and live-in partners.

Violators face up to a year in prison and a fine of 20,000 rupees (435 dollars).

According to the Indian government's National Crime Records Bureau, at least 58,400 women complained to police of cruelty by their husbands in 2004.

Rights activists have dismissed the legislation as a "half-hearted" attempt by the government to tackle the problem but lawyers backing the law say it will set a standard on fighting domestic abuse.

Little progress in Lankan talks

5 more killed in violence

AFP, Geneva/Colombo

Sri Lanka's warring parties were wrapping up two days of crunch talks in Geneva yesterday with both sides reporting little progress despite foreign pressure to save a collapsing peace process.

Peace broker Norway struggled to clinch a deal over new dates for two more rounds of face-to-face negotiations in December and January, but the parties were bogged down over details, diplomats close to the talks said.

Tamil Tiger rebels said the outcome of the first day with government representatives was "zero", with no agreement on their key demand and they accused government forces of preparing for a fresh offensive.

"I would say there was no progress after day one," their chief negotiator, SP Thamiselvan said. "We did not hear of any steps that would indicate progress. The progress was zero."

He said the "core issue" for his Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was to address the humanitarian needs of Tamils affected by the recent fighting and the re-opening of the single highway into the northern Jaffna peninsula.

A Sri Lankan government delegate, who declined to be named, said that no progress had been made Saturday and noted that there

was little scope for compromise as they met for the first time in eight months.

The negotiator said: "The government delegation is not in a position to agree to the LTTE demands because of the military implications."

The LTTE's military spokesman, Rasiah Ilanthiryan, who is also in Geneva for the talks, said government troops were preparing to launch a major offensive against rebel-held territory in Jaffna.

"There is a heavy troop build up along the front lines at Muhamalai, Nagarkovil and Kilali," Ilanthiryan told AFP. "This could have serious consequences for the entire peace process."

He said both sides were exchanging artillery and mortar fire, but he did not have details of casualties.

The Sri Lankan military has also accused the Tigers of launching long-range attacks against security forces in a bid to draw fire from them.

The resurgence in violence since the last talks in Switzerland eight months ago has claimed about 3,000 lives and forced more than 200,000 to flee their homes, according to relief agencies.

At least five people were killed in clashes overnight, Sri Lankan police and defence officials said Sunday.

Two suspected rebels were

found dead after police repulsed an attack on their patrol late Saturday, officials said.

A third Tiger fighter was gunned down when an unidentified man stormed into a hospital ward in northern Anuradhapura town where he had been recovering from stab wounds and opened fire, police said.

Two soldiers were killed by rebel gunfire in a separate skirmish in the northern Jaffna peninsula Saturday, defence officials said.

Hopes of a breakthrough in the peace talks were raised Saturday when the Sri Lankan government climbed down from its rigid position and agreed to consider sharing power in a system similar to the current situation in neighbouring India.

The government has opposed a federal system, although a previous administration in December 2002 agreed with the Tigers to work towards granting extensive devolution of power within a federal constitution.

However, the Tigers said there was no firm offer on the table by the government during the discussions at the Geneva International Conference Centre on Saturday.

Women's seat reservation bill uphill task: Sonia

PTI, CHAKUR, Maharashtra

Congress President Sonia Gandhi on Sunday hinted that passage of the women's reservation bill in Parliament would be an uphill task, saying that "she has to convince several people from within and outside the Congress" on the issue.

"I am trying my best. But you must keep in mind that I have to persuade (Union Ministers) Lalu Prasad, (Dayanidhi) Maran and (Anbumani) Ramadoss. I also have to convince some members of our party," she said while addressing a Congress Workers Convention in Chakur on Sunday

afternoon.

"It is true that women got reservation in Panchayat bodies due to late Rajiv Gandhi," she said.

Referring to remarks made earlier during the function by Rajni Patil, Chairperson of the Central Social Welfare Board, on the issue of women's reservation, Gandhi said, "I am also trying my best (for the passage of the bill)." Gandhi asked Congress workers to work hard and with dedication to make the party stronger.

"Party men are the real strength of the Congress. If you work with dedication, the party would be able to face the chal-

lenges ahead," she said.

Referring to demands made by various district Congress presidents of Marathwada region, she said she would make all efforts to redress their problems, including those faced by farmers.

Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil, Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, state Congress President Prabha Rau, party General Secretary in charge of Maharashtra Margaret Alva and Secretary Siddharth Patel were present on the occasion.

Mediterranean states call for renewed ME peace process

AFP, Madrid

Ministers from 11 states attending a Mediterranean Forum meeting in the southern Spanish city of Alicante on Saturday called for the launching of a "new and credible" Middle East peace process, a diplomatic source said.

In an "Alicante Declaration" the countries, which did not include Israel, also called for measures to defuse the current tension in the region and backed a mooted Spanish plan for a Mideast peace conference, similar to one, which Madrid hosted in 1991.

Washington has received the idea coolly and Spanish Foreign

Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos said it was too early to talk about fixing a date. Israel did not take part in the meeting.

Earlier this week Moratinos told the Spanish parliament that current tensions required a major initiative, along the lines of the 1991 conference, which drew together Israel and Arab states under the aegis of the United States and the Soviet Union. The conference set out a framework for a Middle East peace process and opened the way to the 1993 Oslo accords on Palestinian self-rule.

Saturday's declaration proposed to "reactivate and revise" the peace "roadmap."

Blair facing two-front attack on Iraq, Afghan policies

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's military policies were attacked on two fronts Sunday as a leaked memo linked them with terrorism at home and his favourite general called the Afghanistan war "cuckoo."

Leaked cabinet documents published in The Sunday Telegraph apparently acknowledge that Britain's troop deployments in both Iraq and Afghanistan have fuelled terrorism in Britain.

Presented to a cabinet committee on security earlier this month and circulated among ministers and security chiefs, the papers say that actions overseas must in future be designed to reduce the threat of terrorism.

Their contents undermine Blair's denials that Britain's actions in Iraq

and Afghanistan trigger terrorist attacks against Britain. Four British Muslim suicide bombers killed themselves and 52 London commuters in July last year.

The documents say demand a "significant reduction in the number and intensity of the regional conflicts that fuel terror activity" and set out a list of perfect scenarios in a series of trouble spots 10 years from now.

They call for stability for Iraq and Afghanistan, Israel to live in "peaceful coexistence" with its Arab neighbours and Iran to be devoid of nuclear weapons.

They also say that there should be "no new failed states, dictatorships or wars" in the Middle East and South Asia.



PHOTO: AFP
A Pakistani policeman inspects the blast site in Quetta on Saturday. A bomb exploded at a marketplace in southwest Pakistan, killing one person and leaving eight others injured.