

Nepal set to seal arms deal with Maoists

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's multi-party government and Maoist guerrillas are set to seal a long-awaited deal yesterday on supervision of rebel arms, a key move towards rescuing a faltering peace process, negotiators said.

An agreement was expected to be signed at a meeting between Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and rebel chief Prachanda, Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara said.

Senior leaders of the ruling seven-party alliance were also due to attend the meeting scheduled to begin at 4 p.m. (1015 GMT).

"We have almost reached an agreement on arms management and the monarchy," Mahara, who is also a rebel negotiator, told Reuters.

The Maoists and the government, formed soon after King Gyanendra handed power back to political parties in April, are observing a ceasefire and began peace talks in May.

But the process was dogged by the rebels' refusal to disarm their fighters before elections for a con-



PHOTO: AFP
Maoist Chairman, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, popularly known as "Prachanda", (L) sits with his colleague Ram Bahadur Thapa (Badal) at a Sine-artists meeting, prior to holding peace talks with Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala in Kathmandu yesterday.

stituent assembly planned for 2007 to map out the country's future and decide the fate of the monarchy.

Mahara said the Maoists were now ready to lock up arms held by the 35,000-strong rebel army in temporary camps, where the fighters will also be stationed, under UN supervision.

"The key will remain with us," he said, adding that an equal number of arms held by the Nepali army would also be locked up separately.

"Mechanisms will be installed to send signals to UN monitors if the lock is opened or weapons are removed," said Ram Chandra Poudel, a leader of the Nepali Congress party, the biggest in the ruling coalition.

Sites for camps for the guerrillas would be identified soon and the UN would prepare a list of rebel arms, Poudel said.

Rebel spokesman Mahara said an agreement to keep the monarchy until next year's elections was also close. Rebels had been demanding the monarchy be immediately abolished or suspended, but have agreed it should remain until the assembly meets.

Rare planetary treat for astronomers

AFP, Paris

Astronomers in the Americas, East Asia and Australasia will get a rare daylight treat this week when Mercury passes in a direct line between the Earth and the Sun, a "transit" that will next occur on May 9, 2016.

Skygazers will be able to see Mercury, the closest planet to the Sun, creep across the solar disk as a tiny black dot.

The whole five-hour transit, from 1912 GMT on Wednesday to 0010 GMT on Thursday, can be visible from the western coast of the United States, Canada, New Zealand, southeastern Australia, and the archipelagoes of the South Pacific.

Part of the transit will be visible before sunset on Wednesday in the rest of the Americas and after sunrise on Thursday in East Asia and the rest of Australia.

It will not be visible in Europe, Africa, the Middle East or in Asia west of Burma.

The only other planet that makes a transit from Earth's perspective is Venus, the second planet from the Sun. The last Venusian crossing was in June 2004.

Troops, Tigers trade fires

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military and Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday accused each other of initiating artillery attacks in the island's restive east as both sides braced for a major offensive in the region.

"Ground and intelligence sources have confirmed that the Tigers are preparing to launch a major offensive

south of Maavilaru, Kadjuwatte and Mankerni areas," the defence ministry said in a statement.

The military said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had launched artillery salvos aimed at trapping civilians and had prevented food supplies from reaching several rebel-held villages.

"Continuous Tiger artillery shelling

and mortar fire from Kadiraweli and Vakarakai towards the Kadjuwatta and Mankerni army camps have prevented food supplies reaching Vakarakai," the ministry said.

The LTTE denied the charge and said it was the security forces who started shelling rebel-held areas and carried out an air attack on Monday afternoon.

ME newspapers warns of Saddam verdict fallout

AFP, Tehran

Middle East newspapers were divided yesterday over the legitimacy of the death sentence imposed on Saddam Hussein but were unanimous in warning of the verdict's repercussions on an already chaotic Iraq.

The ousted dictator's former foes in Iran and Kuwait revelled in vengeful glee while Palestinians mourned the man who championed their cause, but editorialists were often cautious in their assessment of the trial.

Jubilant headlines such as "The Noose for the Dictator" or "A Joyous Iraq" were splashed across the front pages of Iranian newspapers on Monday.

"The death sentence handed down against Saddam is the minimum penalty for his crimes which created many crises in the region, and divided the Iraqi people and the Islamic nations," former foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi wrote in the Hamshari daily.

Yet the Iranian press was careful not to give Washington any credit for the trial and pointed out

that the United States backed Saddam's regime during the bloody 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war.

"It appears the US occupation forces are seeking to block the Iran-Iraq war question from examination by the court," the state-run Iran daily said in an editorial.

Many newspapers across the region were also suspicious of the timing of the verdict, which came on the eve of midterm US elections, which have seen President George W. Bush under fire over his policies in Iraq.

MUSHARRAF TO MUSLIMS

Change West's view

AP, Islamabad

The Muslim world must correct Western misperceptions created by "semilliterate clerics" about Islam as a religion that fosters militant extremism, Pakistan's president said yesterday.

"We need to inform the world of the reality of Islam," President Gen. Pervez Musharraf told a meeting of the World Islamic Economic Forum.

"Semilliterate clerics who hold sway over the masses (have contributed) to the rise of extremism in the Muslim world as opposed to moderation," he said. "This is the unfortunate reality because this is the critical malaise which spawns

terrorism."

"These radical clerics reinforce the Western misperception that Islam as a religion believes in militancy and intolerance," Musharraf said.

In a wide-ranging speech, Musharraf painted a bleak picture of the economic prospects facing the world's 57 Muslim nations, pointing out that their combined gross national products were less than the GNP of a single European nation, Germany.

He said this was partially due to the low levels of education in the Muslim world.

Russia urges Europe to revise Iran sanction bid

AFP, United Nations

Western countries that want to punish Iran for its refusal to suspend uranium enrichment are again facing reluctance on the part of Russia and China to grant support, with Moscow demanding a softening of a draft UN resolution.

More than two months after the UN-imposed deadline of August 31 expired, it is still not possible to say when the UN Security Council will act.

The United States is pushing for

quick sanctions. But according to many diplomats, the negotiations promise to be long and difficult.

China and Russia are reluctant to impose strict penalties on Iran, with which they maintain important economic and commercial ties.

On Friday, Moscow proposed changes to a European draft resolution that the US Ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, called substantial during an informal meeting of the five permanent members of the Security Council (China, the United States, France,

Britain, Russia) and Germany.

Consequently, according to Bolton, the United States would also like to propose changes, and ambassadors will have to consult their respective capitals during the weekend to be able to resume discussions probably next week.

The draft, drawn by Europeans in cooperation with the United States, calls for economic and commercial sanctions against Iran.

But it has been rejected by Russia in his initial form.

Iran's military plays down US threat

AFP, Tehran

The head of Iran's elite revolutionary guards, currently overseeing 10 days of war games, said he did not see the United States as currently posing a military threat to the Islamic republic.

"Under the current circumstances the Americans are already involved in Iraq and Afghanistan. We do not anticipate any military threat from them but naturally we do have defence and deterrent plans," said Yahya

Rahim Safavi.

"The revolutionary guards and the armed forces both enjoy great defence and deterrent ability," he told Iran's Arabic-language television channel Al-Alam in an interview late on Sunday.

"I find it unlikely they (the United States) will cause us any problems because they know their forces within a range of 2,000 kilometres (1,200 miles) could be endangered," he said, referring to the range of Iran's longer-range Shahab-3 missile.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian leftist activist carries an effigy of US President George W. Bush prior to setting it alight during a demonstration in Kolkata yesterday. Hundreds of activists took part in the rally against the court verdict pronouncing 'death sentence' for former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

UN summit seeks ways to stave off climate disaster

AFP, Nairobi

A UN conference exploring ways of avoiding disaster from global warming opened here Monday faced with faltering efforts to cut deadly greenhouse gases.

The summit in the Kenyan capital will also discuss what steps to take after the UN Kyoto treaty on greenhouse gas emissions expires in 2012, and will seek to convince top polluters outside the treaty to do more to stop climate change.

Around 6,000 delegates over two weeks will press for political decisions and review scientific findings during the 12th session of

the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

"Climate change is rapidly emerging as one of the most serious threats that humanity has ever faced," Kenyan Vice President Moody Awori told experts and government officials at the opening session.

"There is a great task ahead of us."

At the first such summit in sub-Saharan Africa -- one of the regions hit hardest by global warming -- countries whose leaders signed the Kyoto Protocol but whose parliaments failed to ratify it will be put under the spotlight.