



Nepalese people read newspapers on the peace breakthrough forged between the government and Maoist rebels in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's governing parties and Maoist rebels clinched a historic peace deal early Wednesday that will see the movement join an interim administration and end their bloody 10-year insurgency.

Nepal govt, Maoists clinch peace deal

King's future uncertain

AFP, Kathmandu

A cloud hung over the future of Nepal's god-king Gyanendra yesterday after Maoist republican rebels and the government clinched a historic peace agreement.

The deal capped five tumultuous years since Gyanendra, 60, was vaulted to the throne by the massacre of his brother and most of the royal family staged by a drink-and-drug fuelled crown prince who later killed himself.

King Gyanendra's Shah dynasty has a 238-year history in Nepal, and while the rebel Maoists insist they want a democratic republic, others still see the monarchy as important for the tiny country wedged between

India and China.

But even if Gyanendra remains monarch, he has already been reduced to a ceremonial role, stripped of his political powers and job as head of the army.

The government has also passed legislation turning the world's once only Hindu kingdom into a secular state.

Nepal's kings have for centuries been revered as incarnations of the Hindu Lord Vishnu, the god of protection.

But republican sentiment has climbed sharply since Gyanendra sacked the government and seized direct power in February 2005 in what he said was a bid to crush the Maoist rebellion that has claimed

over 12,500 lives.

Massive pro-democracy protests in which crowds burnt him effigy and called him a "murderer" forced him to restore parliament last April.

Since then the Maoists and the government have been inching towards Tuesday's deal under which the rebels would form part of the government.

The rebels, fighting for the past decade to make Nepal a republic, have agreed to abide by the outcome of a people's assembly that will decide the monarchy's future.

Since Gyanendra handed back power to parliament, the once high-profile monarch has virtually disappeared from public view. The royal motorcades that used to clog streets

of the capital have halted as have his whistlestop helicopter tours of rural areas.

Gyanendra's isolation was apparent in June when he marked his 60th birthday without the usual crowds of schoolchildren at the event and government ministers skipped the ceremony.

The rotund monarch has been far less popular than his brother King Birendra, slain in what came to be known as the "Palace Massacre" that left ten royals dead.

Shocked Nepalis found the official verdict that Crown Prince Dipendra was responsible for the massacre hard to believe, and Maoist rebels accused the king of stage-managing the killings.

Truck plunges into river in central India, 29 dead

AFP, Bhopal

At least 29 people were killed and 40 injured yesterday when a truck carrying farm workers plunged into a river in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, officials said.

The overcrowded truck lost control while negotiating a narrow bridge and plummeted into the river in Hoshangabad, 80km from state capital Bhopal, district administrator KK Singh said.

"The accident occurred when the truck driver lost control while avoiding a head-on collision with another vehicle on the bridge," Singh said by telephone from Hoshangabad.

The victims were farm workers travelling from the village of Bankhedhi to nearby Pipariya town when the crash occurred, he said, adding that 15 of the injured were hospitalised in critical condition.

Iraqi Sunnis threaten to quit political process

46 killed in Iraq as curfew lifted

AFP, Baghdad

The main Sunni bloc in Iraq's parliament threatened yesterday to abandon the political process and take up arms if the Shia-dominated government continues to ignore its calls to dismantle militias.

Salim Abdallah, spokesman for the National Concord Front, a bloc of three Sunni parties holding 44 seats in parliament, told AFP his group had delivered a message to the government two weeks ago about dissolving the militias.

"If they do not respond to this request, we may abandon the political process and have no other choice but to take up arms," he said.

Abdallah made the statement shortly before entering a closed-door session of the parliament presided over by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, flanked by his ministers of defence and interior.

Parliamentarians peppered the three officials with questions about Iraq's fragile political and security situations, with a number of Sunni politicians reiterating Abdallah's concern, although in a less strident fashion.

The session was adjourned before all the deputies' questions could be answered, and the premier

promised to preside over another session on Sunday with his security ministers.

Meanwhile, at least 46 people died in attacks yesterday as violence returned to Baghdad and other flashpoint regions of Iraq after the lifting of a curfew imposed during the sentencing of ousted dictator Saddam Hussein.

The deadliest attack came 30km south of the capital in Mahmudiyah where a car bomb exploded in the centre of a popular market, killing six people and wounding another 26, security sources said.



Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton of New York gets a hug from her husband former president Bill Clinton after winning her 2nd term.

Hillary win opens door for her White House race

AFP, Washington

Hillary Clinton easily secured reelection as New York senator, opening the door for a much talked about, but still undeclared, bid for the White House in 2008.

The former First Lady won by a landslide in the overwhelmingly Democratic state with almost 67 percent of the vote. Her Republican opponent, John Spencer, picked up just over 30 percent.

The focus ahead of Tuesday's vote had been not on whether Clinton would win reelection, but whether she would seek the Democratic Party's nomination for the presidency in two years.

Flanked by husband, former president Bill Clinton, she told screaming supporters in her acceptance speech at a plush New York hotel late Tuesday: "I am prepared to roll up my sleeves and get to work."

"The message couldn't be clearer: that it is time for a new course," she said, speaking as the Democrats won control of the House of Representatives from the Republicans.

"We believe in our country and we're going to take it back, starting tonight."

Hamas threatens 'acts' to avenge Gaza killing

AFP, Damascus

Khaled Meshaal, the exiled political supremo of Hamas, warned Wednesday that the ruling Palestinian Islamist movement would avenge an Israeli attack that killed 18 people in Gaza.

"We denounce this massacre. We do not denounce simply by words, but by acts. The resistance does not talk, it acts," Meshaal said from his base in Damascus.

"I am expressing the political position (of Hamas): the heroes of the resistance on Palestinian land and all of our people will respond by acts," he said.

Eighteen Palestinians, including women and children, were killed Wednesday after Israeli shells damaged five homes in Beit Hanun in an attack condemned by the international community and Palestinian leadership.

Israel expressed regret for the attack, which it said was aimed at an area from where rockets had been fired at the Jewish state.

Meshaal, however, called for Israeli leaders to be tried for "war crimes" over the shelling.

"Israel has committed crimes for decades ... The Arab nation should demand to put the leaders of the enemy (Israel) before an international tribunal for war crimes," he said.

"The Zionists have surpassed all that

the Nazis committed during the 1930s and 1940s," charged Meshaal, whose movement has respected a de facto truce on suicide attacks inside Israel since early 2005.

Meshaal said the "Zionist entity and American administration" were responsible for "these odious massacres".

"Hamas and the resistance movements will express our solidarity with Beit Hanun in words and with acts. We will stand at their side until victory and until we put an end to the unjust occupation," he said.

Meshaal was among three Hamas officials - all Jordanian citizens - who were expelled from the kingdom in 1999 after being accused of threatening its security and stability.

Two years earlier, Jordan saved Meshaal's life when officers of Israel's Mossad foreign intelligence service carried out a botched attempt to poison him in Amman.

Then-king Hussein secured the antidote from Israel with a threat to sever the kingdom's 1994 peace treaty with the Jewish state.

Jordan has had a sometimes rocky relationship with Hamas, which does not recognise Israel and is boycotted as a terrorist organisation by the European Union and United States.



A Palestinian man carries an injured child into the Beit Lahia hospital in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday. Eighteen Palestinians were killed and more than 20 wounded when Israeli shells struck houses in the flashpoint northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Hanun.

'65 civilians killed in Lanka army firing'

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

At least 65 civilians were killed and over 100 injured yesterday in heavy shelling by government forces in eastern Sri Lanka, Tamil rebels and local residents said, marking the heaviest reported casualties since the collapse of peace talks last month.

The military said the Tigers had been firing at military camps in the area since early morning, injuring five soldiers, and that troops had retaliated with artillery and mortar bomb fire, but had no details of any civilian casualties.

A team of Nordic truce monitors was on the way to the site of the incident in Kathiraveli in the eastern district of Batticaloa, the latest in a litany of clashes amid a new chapter of the island's two-decade civil war.

"They have hit a camp for displaced. So far 65 have died and 125 are injured -- all civilians," S Puleedevan, head of the Tigers' Peace Secretariat, told Reuters by satellite phone.

Puleedevan said he was visiting the northern town of Pooneryn, near the army-held Jaffna peninsula, with the head of the island's Nordic truce monitoring mission, and that the army was also firing artillery at them there.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan military have clashed repeatedly in the north and east in recent months, since peace talks collapsed in late October.

The air force has repeatedly bombed Tiger areas since the talks failed.

World sees Democrats' win as Bush rejection

AP, Tokyo

Democratic gains in Congress were seen around the world Wednesday as a rejection of the US war in Iraq that led some observers to expect a reassessment of the American course there.

The shift in power also was seen as a signal in some capitals that the United States would put a greater emphasis on trade policy and human rights.

Many watching the election said the results were a significant blow to President Bush's presidency.

"Although his term will not end within the next year, I think Bush is already turning into a lame duck," Yuzo Yamamoto, 60, the manager of a Tokyo business consulting firm, said as Democrats won control of the House and challenged Republican dominance in the Senate in midterm

elections Tuesday. Outside observers saw the bloodshed in Iraq as the major driving force behind the Democrats' success.

"Voters have punished the Republicans. They are not happy with the way the leadership has handled the Iraq war," said Chandra Muzaffar, president of the Malaysia-based think-tank International Movement for a Just World.

Bush's foreign critics cheered in Vietnam, and in Muslim-dominated countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

"The Republicans lost in the election because the American voters are now fed up and bored with the war," said Vitaya Wisetrat, a prominent, anti-American Muslim cleric in Thailand. "The American people now realise that Bush is the big liar."