

## Nepal govt, Maoists sign crucial arms accord

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government and Maoists signed an accord Tuesday mandating the United Nations to begin monitoring rebel weapons and troops, a key element in their peace process.

"We have signed a 12-page agreement on disarmament. There are many issues covered in the agreement, including verification of the Maoist army and weapons, and the role we would like the United Nations to take in monitoring," Pradeep Gyawali, a government negotiator, told journalists.

The agreement was handed over to a UN representative immediately after being signed, an AFP reporter at the scene said.

The former rebels welcomed the arms accord.

"We have shown our strong commitment and sincerity to end the armed conflict," Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara told journalists.

"This (agreement) has opened the doors for political transformation, but we are aware of the challenges that lie ahead," Mahara said. The former rebels and government signed a landmark peace deal last week that will see the Maoists join the government, after placing their army and weapons in camps under UN monitoring.

Nepal's home minister praised the rebels for signing the arms agreement that would clear the way for the former insurgents to enter an interim parliament.

"I would like to thank the Maoist leaders for their strong determination and understanding in making the peace process successful," Krishna Prasad Sitaula said after the signing in a hotel in Kathmandu.

The Maoists were due to join a new interim government Sunday, but that was delayed amid detailed talks on how the Maoists should lock up their guns. The government also wants Maoist soldiers in camps before the former insurgents are granted 73 seats in a new 330-seat parliament.

"The management of Maoist arms is a very sensitive issue. Over the past few days, we have been consulting with the Maoists and UN representatives to reach this crucial agreement," Sitaula said.

"The government wants the rebel army and army to be confined in cantonments before they (rebels) can join the government," Deputy Prime Minister Amik Shcherchan also said.

"Once the issue of arms management is sorted out it will pave the way for finalising the interim constitution and formation of the interim government," Shcherchan said.

Under last week's landmark pact, the former rebel army will be confined to camps in seven areas across Nepal.

Soldiers have already started gathering at the sites and the government Monday pledged a further 1.3 million dollars -- on top of an initial grant of 945,000 dollars -- to the Maoists for their camps.



President of Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapakse (R) holds a meeting with United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government Chairperson Sonia Gandhi (L) in New Delhi yesterday. Rajapakse is on a five-day official visit to India.

## Indian minister convicted of murder

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A court here yesterday convicted India's coal minister and a leading tribal leader Shibu Soren of kidnap and murder of his former private secretary Shashi Nath Jha 12 years ago.

Additional Sessions Judge B R Kedia found 62-year-old Soren, who is also the chief of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha party, guilty of kidnapping and conspiring to kill his secretary.

Others convicted in the case are --Nand Kishore Mehtaalias Nandu, Shaileendra Bhattacharya, Pashupati Nath Mehtaalias Posho and Ajay Kumar Mehta alias Dillip.

However, the court acquitted two others Sunil Khaware and Asish Thakur. Soren was present in the court when the judge pronounced the verdict. Soon after the court order, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sought Soren's resignation from his cabinet.



Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei gestures as he talks with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani (L) during a meeting in Tehran yesterday.

## US-led forces must leave Iraq

Iran tells Talabani

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei told visiting Iraqi President Jalal Talabani yesterday that US-led forces had to leave Iraq if security was to be restored in the violence-riven country. "The first step to solve the security issue in Iraq is the exit of the occupiers from this country and leaving the security issues to the people-based Iraqi government," Khamenei was quoted as saying by state television.

"Americans will absolutely not succeed in Iraq and the continuation of Iraq's occupation is not a mouthful that Americans can swallow," Khamenei said during a meeting with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani.

"The main reason for the current situation in Iraq is the US policies that are being carried out by some intermediaries," the Iranian leader

said. He put the blame for Iraq's insecurity on "some US agents in the region who are mediators of these policies".

"Reinforcing terrorist groups and inflaming the wave of insecurity and killings in Iraq will be very dangerous for the US agents and the region," Khamenei said.

He also pledged that the Islamic republic would come to Iraq's assistance if requested.

"If the Iraqi government asks, Iran will not refrain from any action to establish stability and security in this country."

"Americans will absolutely not succeed in Iraq and the continuation of Iraq's occupation is not a mouthful that Americans can swallow," Khamenei told him.

## Lanka president calls for direct talks with Tigers

AFP, New Delhi

Sri Lanka's president said yesterday he was ready to hold direct talks with the leader of the Tamil Tigers, the day after the rebel supreme dismissed a four-year peace process and called for an independent Tamil state.

"I always tell him why do you need others to get involved in this -- let us talk," Mahinda Rajapakse said in an interview with India's New Delhi Television.

On Monday, Velupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), accused the Colombo government of waging war on Tamils under the cover of a peace process brokered by Norway since 2002.

The 2.5 million minority were left "with no other option but an independent state", Prabhakaran declared in an annual speech.

But Rajapakse said that "I have not taken it seriously because he has always been saying these things."

"He always wanted to kill people," the president told NDTV. Rajapakse arrived in India Saturday for a five-day visit. He met

with Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee and will meet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh Wednesday.

On Sunday Rajapakse said he would ask India to consider joint patrols of their maritime border in a bid to halt smuggling and cross-border terrorism by the Tamil rebels.

"I will be explaining my position to them, we want joint patrolling with India in the sea because not only arms are being smuggled into our country, but drugs are also coming," Rajapakse said.

"If Tigers get stronger, that will be also a threat not only to Sri Lanka but also to the world," Rajapakse said after laying a foundation stone for the Indo-Sri Lanka Human Rights Centre in New Delhi.

India has resisted Sri Lanka's calls to crackdown on the rebels, who have strong links to the Tamil majority southern state of Tamil Nadu and were blamed in the suicide bomber assassination of prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991 in the state.

## Flaws in Saddam trial make detention 'arbitrary'

Says UN rights group

AFP, Geneva

Saddam Hussein's trial fell so far short of international standards that his detention was "arbitrary", and as such the death sentence should not be carried out, a working party of the United Nations Human Rights Council said yesterday.

"The non-observance of the relevant international standards during Mr. Hussein's trial was of such gravity as to confer Mr. Hussein's deprivation of liberty an arbitrary character," the Council's working group on arbitrary detention said in a statement.

It urged the Iraqi government "to refrain from carrying out the sentence of death by hanging imposed in a proceeding, which does not meet applicable standards of a fair trial."

## Israel says ready to free prisoners

REUTERS, Sde Boker

Israel is ready to release many jailed Palestinians in return for a soldier seized by militants in June, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced on Monday, saying he was reaching out for peace.

In a major policy speech, Olmert offered to ease travel restrictions on Palestinians and free up frozen funds if violence against Israel ended. He repeated his readiness to give up some occupied land for an eventual peace agreement.

"We are ready and willing to pursue this path, and persevere until we reach the sought-after solution," Olmert said.

Within hours of Olmert's

address, Palestinian militants in Gaza fired rockets into the Israeli border town of Sderot, despite a ceasefire declared on Sunday. Nobody was hurt.

Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, part of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction, claimed responsibility for the attack, which followed the killing of two Palestinians in an Israeli raid in the West Bank, where a truce is not in effect. "In response to the prime minister extending his hand in peace, we see what some Palestinian factions are giving in return," Olmert spokeswoman Miri Eisinsaid.

Both Olmert and Abbas are under growing US pressure to show progress on ending decades of conflict.

The US State Department said Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Olmert to welcome his speech.

"I think this, combined with the announcement of a ceasefire, are certainly welcome developments, certainly potentially promising," said State Department spokesman Sean McCormack of Olmert's speech.

A State Department official said Rice may meet both Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas separately while she is in the region accompanying President George W. Bush to Jordan this week. But the official said this was not yet definite.

## Iran must suspend enrichment before talks with US: Bush

AFP, Tallinn

The United States supports talks between the Iraqi government and its neighbours but will not talk directly to Tehran unless it suspends uranium enrichment, US President George W. Bush said yesterday. "Iraq is a sovereign nation which is conducting its own foreign policy," Bush said in Estonia, shortly before heading to neighbouring Latvia for a summit of Nato leaders.

Iran and Syria are accused of fomenting the spiralling sectarian unrest in Iraq, and it was thought the United States might seek talks with both countries in its desperation to stop Iraq sliding into full-blown civil war.

as key players in Lebanon. Instead, Iraqi leaders have themselves held talks with Tehran and Damascus, with Iraq's President Jalal Talabani meeting Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Monday.

"I hope the talks yield results," Bush said. "One result that Iraq would like to see is for the Iranians to leave their country alone. If Iran is going to be involved they ought to be involved in a constructive way."

But he added: "As far as the United States goes, Iran knows how to get to the table with us and that is to do that which they said they would do, which is verifiably suspend their (uranium) enrichment programmes."

## Iraq almost in a state of civil war: Annan

US media calls Iraq strife a 'civil war'

AFP, United Nations

UN chief Kofi Annan said Monday that Iraq was already "almost" in a state of civil war or would soon be if drastic steps are not taken to halt the spiral of deadly sectarian violence there.

Asked by a reporter whether Iraq was in the midst of a civil war, the outgoing UN secretary general replied: "I think given the developments in the ground, unless something is done drastically and urgently to arrest the deteriorating situation, we could be there, in fact we are almost there."

hours before he was due to confer with the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan US panel co-chaired by former secretary of state James Baker, a Republican, and Lee Hamilton, a former Democratic lawmaker.

Annan's spokesman Stephane Dujarric said the discussions via a teleconference would be held at the request of the 10-member commission.

The panel favours launching direct talks with Iran and Syria on how to stabilise Iraq but is divided on whether to set a timetable for a withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, according to the New York Times. It was tasked by US President

George W. Bush's administration with coming up with strategic options for Iraq.

Annan has long urged Washington to initiate a dialogue with Tehran and Damascus but Bush has so far refused.

Meanwhile some leading US media have decided to call the violence raging in Iraq a "civil war," despite White House insistence that the strife has not reached that stage.

NBC News became the latest news organisation to decide to use the term on Monday, saying the violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims combined with the government's inability to quell the strife fit the definition of civil war.

## EU, Arab leaders voice hopes of breakthrough for ME peace

AFP, Tampere

European Union and Arab leaders meeting in Finland yesterday expressed hopes of a breakthrough in the Middle East peace process following recent statements by Israel and Hamas and a three-day old ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

"There is a latent hope based on the recent developments" between Israel and the Palestinians, the secretary general of the Arab League, Amr Mussa, told reporters as he summarised the mood of a meeting between EU and Mediterranean region foreign ministers in Tampere, Finland, that has been dominated by talks on the situation in the Middle East.

Nabil Shaath, a special envoy for Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, agreed, saying the chances of renewing the peace process had

improved in recent days.

"A few days ago these prospects did not exist, today there are prospects," he said.

Both Shaath and Mussa said the main reasons for the optimism were the ceasefire agreed and implemented at the weekend between Israel and the Palestinians, and a speech by Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal on Saturday indicating Hamas was ready to agree to a Palestinian state within 1967 borders, seen as an implicit recognition of Israel's statehood.

An offer by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to tear down settlements and pull out of the Palestinian territories was also cited.

"This would be a good point of departure," Mussa said.

## Iraqi militants claim downing US F16

17 killed violence

REUTERS, AFP, Dubai Baghdad

Two Iraqi militant groups claimed to have downed a US F16 plane in retaliation for what they said was the US army's killing of tens of Iraqis while 17 more people were killed in violence yesterday.

Al Jazeera television said yesterday it was quoting a joint statement from the Mujahideen Army and the Mujahideen Shura Council, in which they claimed the attack.

The Pentagon had no immediate comment on the claim, which Al Jazeera said came in a statement posted on the Internet.

Meanwhile, insurgents killed up to 17 people in Iraq on Tuesday, including two in a triple car bomb attack at a Baghdad hospital, security sources said.



Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga talks next to Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the Riga Arena during the inauguration of the Nato Summit Transformation Exhibition on the sideline of the Nato Summit in Riga, Latvia yesterday.

## Allies deserting US in Iraq quagmire

AFP, Washington

A debate over whether to set a timetable for a phased withdrawal of US forces from Iraq is being pre-empted by key US allies who have announced plans to scale back their own forces over the next year, analysts say.

The latest and most important to announce was Britain, whose defence minister said Monday the 7,100-member British contingent will be scaled back "by a matter of thousands" by the end of next year.

Poland, which commands a 2,000-strong multi-national division

in southern Iraq, said Monday that its 880-man contingent will be out of Iraq by late 2007.

Italy, once a mainstay of the coalition force with 3,000 troops in Iraq, has withdrawn all but 60 to 70 troops from the country and those will be gone by early December, said Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi.

Even as Washington debates what to do next, intensifying political pressure in coalition countries and a steadily worsening situation in Iraq are combining to narrow options and force decisions at an ever quickening pace.

"The implication we might draw from the decision of Italy, Poland, Britain to scale down or withdraw completely is that the situation was hopeless," said Loren Thompson, director of the Lexington Institute.

"It's rare for countries to bail out of high successful campaigns. Usually people retreat because they are facing a defeat, either of the military or their strategy," he said.

While the loss of the Italian and Polish contingents had been expected, news that thousands of British troops will be departing is a blow to Washington as it struggles to keep Iraq from unravelling.

Michael O'Hanlon, an analyst at the Brookings Institute, said it is a sign that the special relationship that has produced close US-British collaboration in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq may be coming to an end.

It may mean, he said, that "Britain has decided to de-couple itself from the United States on the grounds that they are going to have to look out for themselves."

"Even if the United States has decided to stay its course, they don't want any part of that," he said.

Pentagon reaction to the development was subdued.

"The United Kingdom is a great ally in the war on terrorism and we appreciate its contributions in the war on Iraq," said Lieutenant Colonel Mark Ballesteros, a Pentagon spokesman.

The British announcement appeared likely to throw fuel on the US debate over how to turn responsibility for security over to Iraqis -- and draw down US forces -- without precipitating an outright collapse of the Iraqi government or full-blown civil war.