



PHOTO: AFP

Women Maoist rebel soldiers practice a drill near a makeshift camp at Kamlajhora village in Jhapa district, about 575km east from capital Katmandu on Tuesday. Nepal's government and Maoists signed an accord on Tuesday mandating the United Nations to begin monitoring rebel weapons and troops, a key element in their peace process.

Arms accord a strong start for Nepal's peace process

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's "new era" of peace is off to a strong start with the central government and Maoists signing an additional accord mandating UN monitoring of the rebel army, officials and analysts said yesterday.

The issue of "arms management" was one of the toughest in the peace process, which crossed a landmark last week with the two sides signing a deal designed to bring the rebels out of the hills and jungles and into the mainstream.

On Tuesday they signed another pact calling on the United Nations to monitor a rebel pledge to confine their fighters to camps in seven

areas of the country and lock up their weapons -- albeit whilst retaining the keys.

"It sends a very positive signal about the momentum of the peace process in Nepal," said Ian Martin, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's personal representative to Nepal's peace process.

Local analysts agreed the signs were that the Maoists, whose decade-old "people's war" has led to at least 12,500 deaths in the impoverished Himalayan nation, were serious about peace.

"The Maoists' promise to lock up weapons under UN monitoring will be a relief for thousands of Nepalis who have been living under a con-

stant fear of guns and violence," Indrajit Rai, a conflict expert who teaches military science at Nepal's army college, told AFP.

The former insurgents control large swathes of the countryside and claim to have 35,000 fighters, but other estimates put their numbers at closer to 12,000. In recent weeks they have faced fresh accusations of forcibly recruiting new cadres to swell their numbers.

"The deal is another significant step in ending the armed conflict. Now there is a strong indication that the former rebels will not use weapons again for political purposes," Rai said.

UN extends mandate for US-led forces in Iraq

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Tuesday unanimously approved an Iraqi request for extending the mandate of the US-led multinational force in war-torn Iraq until the end of 2007 amid a flurry of diplomacy to end the bloodshed.

The 15-member council adopted a US-drafted resolution extending the mandate of the 160,000-strong multinational force, as set forth in Resolution 1546 voted in 2004, until December 31, 2007.

The extension had been requested by Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in a letter sent to the council on November 11.

Tuesday's vote came amid a flurry of international diplomacy aimed at stabilising Iraq, which is in the throes of deadly sectarian violence.

US President George W. Bush and Maliki were scheduled to hold crucial talks in Amman Wednesday and Thursday on the escalating violence in Iraq.

The council made it clear that the mandate of the multinational force "shall be reviewed at the request of the government of Iraq or no later than June 15 2007, and declares that it will terminate this mandate earlier if requested by the government of Iraq."

The resolution, co-sponsored by

the United States, Japan, Britain, Denmark and Slovakia, also extended until December 31 next year the arrangements for depositing into the Development Fund for Iraq proceeds from export sales of petroleum, petroleum products and natural gas and for monitoring the Fund by the International Advisory and Monitoring Board.

"We are obviously very pleased with the adoption of Resolution 1723 unanimously extending the mandate of the multinational force in Iraq for another year," US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton told reporters after the vote.

Soren conviction rocks Indian parliament

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Parliament was in uproar yesterday over conviction of Coal Minister Shibu Soren in abduction and murder case of his private secretary as opposition BJP scolded the government.

Both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha were rocked on the issue as soon as proceedings began Wednesday morning as the opposition demanded the removal of other "tainted" ministers.

Members of the treasury and opposition benches traded charges in the Lok Sabha where Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi were present.

The House had to be adjourned due to the din as Speaker Somnath Chatterjee's repeated appeals for order failed.

Tigers isolated in move for own state in Lanka

US leads int'l calls for fresh peace talks

AFP, Colombo

A rebel bid for an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka has run into outright international rejection with the United States leading calls for new peace talks and an end to bloodshed.

Neither peace broker Norway nor regional power India offered any support to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who appealed for international recognition for a renewed separatist struggle.

LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, accusing Sri Lanka of waging war under cover of peace talks, said Monday the 2.5-million Tamil minority were left "with no

other option but an independent state".

He went back on a 2002 pledge to accept a federal solution to the ethnic conflict, which led to a ceasefire and years of Norwegian-sponsored peace talks.

The US, which outlawed the rebels as terrorists in 1997, took a hard line against Prabhakaran's vow to build Tamils their own state in the north and east of the island.

US ambassador Robert Blake said Washington "strongly disagrees" with the rebels, and ruled out a military solution.

"There is a very clear alternative, which is for the LTTE to renounce terrorism, to give up violence and to

join in negotiating a peaceful solution to Sri Lanka's conflict that will satisfy the aspirations of all of the country's people," Blake said Tuesday night.

In Washington, state department spokesman Sean McCormack also hit out at the LTTE, which declared the peace process "defunct" under repeated attacks by Colombo's forces.

"We condemn the Tamil Tigers for fuelling violence and hostility. Violence and terrorism do nothing to advance the resolution of the conflict," he said.

"We're pressing both sides, the government as well as the Tigers, to honour the ceasefire agreement

and return to a dialogue that will move the nation toward peace."

India, which pulled a peacekeeping force out of Sri Lanka in 1990 after losing 1,200 soldiers, said the speech changed nothing.

"The LTTE is still banned and Prabhakaran is still a wanted man in India," where 60 million Tamils live, a foreign ministry official said.

"India is concerned about the violence in Sri Lanka and has urged both parties to resume talks. India stands for the unity and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka."

However an Indian diplomat, who asked not to be named, also put some blame on the Colombo government.

Nato leaders adopt blueprint for future

AFP, Riga

Nato leaders adopted yesterday a blueprint for the military alliance's future, laying the foundation for member countries to develop their forces to deal with security threats over the next decade.

Despite its dreary title, the "Comprehensive Political Guidance" forms part of Nato's mission statement and provides a framework for an organisation built for the Cold War-era to adapt to modern-day security threats.

"It's important because putting it into action properly will put more usable military capacity at the disposal of the alliance, in terms of allowing it to complete its new missions," said a senior Nato diplomat.

"Success depends on transforming our capabilities to do the job we've got to do," he said.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has shifted from being a largely static machine founded in 1949 to counter the Soviets to a highly mobile coalition keen to make a global response to threats outside its usual transatlantic area of operations. Nato now leads some 32,000 troops in Afghanistan, has thou-

sands more soldiers in the Balkans, is training the Iraqi military and, in an unusual step, undertook disaster relief operations following the earthquake in Kashmir a year ago.

Together with the Strategic Concept, drawn up in 1999, the five-page text approved Wednesday reaffirms Nato's commitment to its "core purpose" -- the collective defence of its 26 member countries.

But it also warns of the need to be prepared for a wide range of operations.

"Nato must retain the ability to conduct the full range of its missions, from high to low intensity, placing special focus on the most likely operations, being responsive to current and future operational requirements, and still able to conduct the most demanding operations."

Those tasks would include dealing with conventional military confrontations but "especially asymmetric threats and risks" like terrorism and "crisis response", wherever the problems might arise, the document said.



PHOTO: AFP

French President Jacques Chirac (2ndL) holds his head as German Chancellor Angela Merkel (2ndR) talks with German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (R) during the Nato Summit working session in Riga, Latvia yesterday.

'Israel losing patience over truce violation'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel warned yesterday that the Jewish state was losing patience over Palestinian rocket attacks that have continued to violate a tentative four-day ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

The warnings come amid a flurry of diplomatic efforts to shore up the truce, with Egypt's intelligence chief Omar Suleiman in Israel and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to meet Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas Thursday.

"The test period accorded by the prime minister to the Palestinians is nearing the end," said Tzahi Hanegbi, a key ally of premier Ehud Olmert and chairman of parliament's influential defence and foreign affairs committee.

"The prime minister said the policy of restraint will only last a few days," the MP added, speaking on public radio.

Militants in Gaza fired isolated rockets towards southern Israel on each of the first three days of the truce, violating an accord brokered after 400 Palestinians and three Israelis died were killed in Gaza in five months.



PHOTO: AFP

Scottish teenager Molly Campbell (R) and her brother Adam Ahmed Rana arrive for a court hearing in Lahore yesterday.

Pak court orders repatriation of Scottish girl to her mother

AFP, Lahore

A Scottish schoolgirl at the centre of an international custody fight must return to her mother in Britain, a Pakistani court ruled yesterday.

"Molly Campbell will be given in the custody of a female officer of the British High Commission within seven days to make arrangements for her onward travel to Scotland," said Lahore High Court judge Mian Saqib Nisar.

The 12-year-old's mother Louise Campbell had filed an appeal after Molly's father Sajjad Ahmed Rana won a case here in September barring the Pakistani government from repatriating the girl to Britain.

Molly, who also has the Muslim name Misbah Iram Ahmad Rana, fled from her Scottish mother in Stornoway in Scotland's remote Western Isles in August to be with her father in Pakistan.

Her mother claimed the girl had been abducted and would be subjected to a forced Muslim marriage, but Molly herself has previously said she wants to stay in Pakistan and denied she was under any pressure to marry.

Her father said he and his daughter were "devastated" after the court upheld the appeal by Molly's mother and vowed to appeal.

"I don't want to comment on the court verdict but I feel devastated by the judgement. I will go to appeal in the supreme court within seven days," Rana told reporters.