

## Nepal on 'war footing' to greet S Asian leaders

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's capital was Thursday on a "war footing" -- not as part of its battle against Maoist rebels, but in a race against time to clear mountains of rubbish and construct a massive religious ornament for a summit of South Asian leaders.

Kathmandu has mobilised hundreds of labourers, including civilians living along the ceremonial drive that will be used by leaders attending the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit which opens Friday.

City Planning Commission member Amrit M. Shrestha said the city was working overtime to project a "clean" image as heads of state of government from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka arrive here.

"All the people are working on a war footing," Shrestha said as he stopped at a busy intersection where 120 workers were building a massive religious symbol that is expected to bring good luck to South Asian leaders and Nepal.

Eleven homes were demolished to build the "Ashta Madala" -- an octagon-shaped Hindu religious structure covering a space of 72-by-72 feet (25-by-25 metres) and rising by a couple of feet at the centre.

The structure is surrounded by a moat and includes several Hindu symbols -- marked with crushed metal dyed in blue, green, red, yellow, orange, black and white -- strategically placed to bring good luck to the nation as well as those passing by.

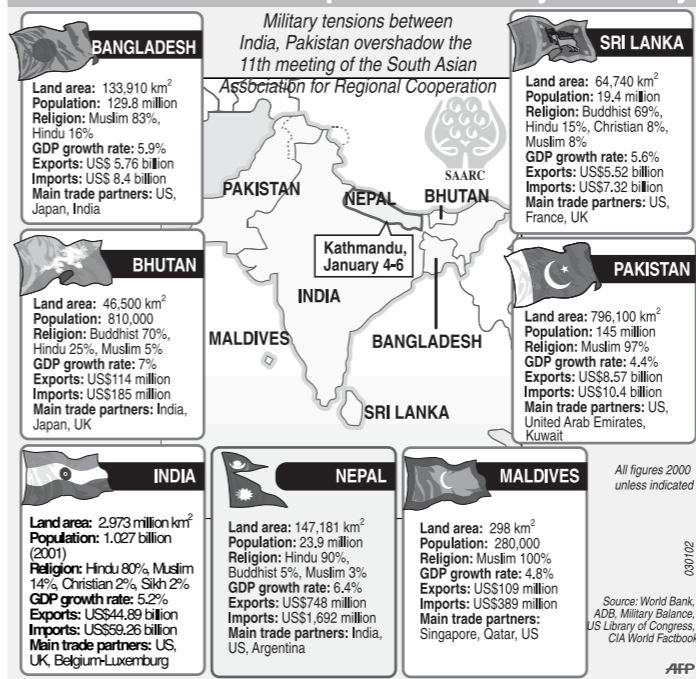
The structure has a "perpetual fountain" and on one side has small statues of the Buddha, who was born in Nepal and is revered in the predominantly Hindu kingdom.

The elaborate structure has cost 40 million Nepalese rupees (500,000 dollars) with 33.7 million rupees as compensation for the 11 buildings that had to be pulled down.

The designer of the new city landmark, Bipin Chitrakar, said the city's mayor, Keshar Staphit, wanted a beautiful structure that would bring good luck to the people and hit on the idea of the holy octagon.

Chitrakar supervised as workmen brought sods of grass to build a carpet of green around the ornament before the VIPs pass by.

## SAARC summit to open after two-year delay



## Powell, Chinese FM talk Indo-Pak tense situation

AFP, Beijing

US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan Thursday appealed for a de-escalation in the tense stand-off between India and Pakistan, Chinese state media said.

In a telephone conversation Powell and Tang expressed their hopes that the two South Asian nuclear rivals would find a peaceful solution to their dispute, the Xinhua news agency reported.

"If the situation spins out of control and results in a major armed conflict, it will not only mean that both India and Pakistan will suffer," Tang said according to Xinhua.

"It will also impact the Afghan peace process and endanger stability and development in South Asia and Asia as a whole," Tang was

quoted by the agency as saying. Powell told Tang the United States was trying to persuade India and Pakistan to exercise restraint and avoid an escalation of the dispute, Xinhua said.

Powell said that even though the circumstances were serious, efforts to defuse the tense situation through political and diplomatic means were making progress, according to Xinhua.

The conversation took place as Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf was expected in China for a brief stopover for talks with his traditional Chinese ally ahead of a key South Asian summit in Nepal.

Musharraf, who left Pakistan Thursday on a China-bound flight, would meet with Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji before attending a banquet.



PHOTO: AFP

Vanuatu residents pose next to a big boulder which damage the road on Thursday in Port Vila after a powerful undersea earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale causing widespread damage to the tiny Pacific nation, police said. There were no reports of deaths, but the government was expected to ask Australia for aid.

## Quake rocks Afghanistan, Pakistan & Vanuatu

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan and Pakistan were jolted Thursday by an earthquake centred on the Hindu Kush region, which sent thousands of people rushing out in panic onto the streets of the Afghan capital Kabul.

The tremor, which Pakistani officials said measured 5.8 on the Richter scale, caused buildings in Kabul to sway for several seconds and buckled fences and walls.

At the labour ministry, hundreds of workers fled outside until the quake had passed. Similar scenes were repeated throughout the city, witnesses said.

In the already-crumbling "old city", residents said masonry was shaken loose from the walls. But after 23 years of conflict, hardly a single building in the capital is in good shape.

The defence ministry said it was gathering information from across the country so it could assess the

extent of the damage, but poor communications were likely to hamper the task.

A senior aide to Defence Minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim, Doctor Gulbuddin, told AFP that officials were yet to receive any reports of significant damage or casualties.

"The earthquake was felt in the provinces of Kabul, Badkshan, Kapisa, Baghlan, Parwan and Takhar," he said.

An Indian seismologist put the intensity at around 6.0 on the Richter scale. The quake was also felt in the Indian capital New Delhi.

Meanwhile, a powerful undersea earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale caused widespread damage to the tiny Pacific nation of Vanuatu, police said Thursday.

There were no reports of deaths but the main bridge at Teoma linking North Efata to Port Vila was destroyed and the wharf cut off by landslides. Other bridges had badly buckled.

## War with Pakistan not a necessity: Indian PM

AFP, Lucknow

War with Pakistan was not a "necessity," Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Thursday, but he ruled out bilateral dialogue until Islamabad ends "cross-border terrorism".

"I don't think war is a necessity. I will put in all efforts to avoid it," Vajpayee told reporters in the northern city of Lucknow.

"If diplomatic methods can be applied to resolve the existing problems, I don't see why we should resort to other means," Vajpayee said, while also ruling out any nuclear first-strike by India amid an intense military build-up on both sides of the border with Pakistan.

"When I said we have a right to defend ourselves, I never meant nuclear weapons. Our nuclear

policies are very clear. We have said no first use."

But Vajpayee also said there could be no bilateral talks with Pakistan until it brings "cross-border terrorism" to a complete halt.

He also made it clear that recent steps taken by Islamabad to crack down on Islamic militant groups blamed for last month's attack on the Indian parliament had not gone far enough.

"We shall be open to a dialogue only when cross-border terrorism is stopped," Vajpayee said, effectively scuppering any hopes of formal bilateral meeting on the sidelines of ongoing South Asian regional talks in Nepal.

Vajpayee cited Wednesday's grenade attack by suspected Muslim militants outside the state

legislature in Indian Kashmir as evidence that Pakistan "has no intention to give up on terrorism."

India and Pakistan have massed tens of thousands of troops on their border in the wake of the December 13 attack on the parliament in New Delhi, which India says was carried out by Pakistan-based militants and sponsored by Pakistani military intelligence.

Tensions have eased slightly in recent days as Pakistan has announced the arrest of more than 100 Islamic extremists.

But Vajpayee said details of the Pakistani crackdown were too sketchy and it was still unclear how many of those arrested were linked to the parliament attack and other "terrorist" activities in India.

## Musharraf rules out extradition of suspects

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf has ruled out extraditing 20 alleged terrorists wanted by India, but said they could be prosecuted under Pakistan's laws, reports said Thursday.

The official Associated Press of Pakistan quoted Musharraf as telling a joint meeting of the National Security Council and the cabinet Wednesday that "the question of handing over anybody to India did not arise."

"The government of Pakistan will examine the evidence and act against those elements under the law of the land," he said.

## US envoy heads back to ME to push for truce

AFP, Jerusalem

US special envoy Anthony Zinni headed back to the Middle East Thursday to seek ways to bring both Israel and the Palestinians back to a durable ceasefire, after a drop in Palestinian violence that has driven deep divisions through the Israeli leadership over how to proceed.

Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer said he had ordered his forces to pull back from four Palestinian towns in the West Bank they had surrounded, just hours before Zinni's arrival.

He gave the order as part of a series of measures "designed to ease the life of the Palestinian population, which have either already been implemented or will be

carried out in the course of the day," a ministry statement said.

The ministry said the orders included a "total end" to the military encirclement of Tulkarem, Qalqilya and Jenin in the north and Hebron in the south.

The Israeli army also withdrew overnight from Jenin, which has been partly occupied since Zinni's last visit sparked a wave of bloody anti-Israeli attacks.

Israel had opened checkpoints near Jenin to mark the start of Zinni's maiden visit on November 26. Hours later, Palestinian gunmen ran amok in the nearby town of Afula, killing two Israelis at the start of an upsurge of violence that scuttled his truce mission.

## Indian officials to meet Naga leaders in Bangkok

AFP, Guwahati

Indian officials are to hold peace talks Friday with exiled tribal rebel leaders in Bangkok, in the latest move to end a 54-year insurgency in the northeastern state of Nagaland.

"The meeting between the two sides is a part of the ongoing peace talks with the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) led by factional leaders Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah," an Indian home ministry official said from New Delhi on Thursday.

The official said a former federal home secretary, K. Padmanabhaiah, would lead the Indian side at the talks in the Thai capital, while Naga leaders Swu and Muivah would represent the NSCN.

At least 30 tribal Naga community leaders, including representatives from the powerful Baptist church, are arriving in Bangkok to participate in the talks between government officials and separatist leaders.

"We have been invited by the NSCN to take part in the talks," M Vero, president of the Naga Hoho, the supreme tribal council in Nagaland, northeastern India, said.

## Militants deny plot to blow up Taj Mahal

AFP, Karachi

Kashmiri militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba Thursday denied reports it had threatened to blow up the Taj Mahal, India's most celebrated monument.

"This is absolutely a concocted story. This is Indian propaganda. Lashkar has not sent an e-mail or issued such a statement," its spokesman Abdullah Sayyaf told AFP.

"Public and private buildings, buses or trains have never been our target," he said, dismissing the affair as "another drama being staged by Indian agencies."



PHOTO: AFP

A nurse checks the pulse of two postal workers who were admitted to Nair Hospital complaining of nausea after opening an envelope containing suspected anthrax powder in Bombay on Wednesday.

## Tigers make major move for peace talks

AP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels have taken their first major step toward peace talks with the Sri Lankan government by inviting Norway to be the facilitator to end the country's protracted civil war, a top Tamil Web site said Thursday.

"I am writing this letter to you to seek your government's continuous engagement as the facilitator to help to find a stable peace and a permanent settlement to the ethnic conflict," the top leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, said in a letter to the Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik.

The text of the letter was posted on the TamilNet Web site, which conveys the Tamil perspective of the conflict.

The first contact with Norway will be established Friday when a Norwegian delegation headed by deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen meets the rebels' top theoretician, Anton Balasingham, in London. The Tamil Tigers are banned from Britain as a terrorist group, but Balasingham holds British citizenship.

Peace prospects were boosted on Christmas Eve when the rebels declared a monthlong ceasefire, and the government agreed to participate.

## Blaze rages across New South Wales

AFP, Sydney

Thousands of residents and tourists faced a second night camping out on beaches and in car parks Thursday to escape bushfires raging across the Australian state of New South Wales.

The fire that stormed through the tourist spot of Sussex Inlet on the Australian south coast Wednesday was now moving towards the towns of Bandalong and Berringer Lake about 10 kilometres (six miles) further south, Shoalhaven Rural Fire Service spokeswoman June Webster said.

## Delhi mulls another bout of diplomatic blitz after summit

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

As India-Pakistan border tension continues, New Delhi will launch a fresh diplomatic offensive at home once Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee returns from SAARC summit in Kathmandu on January 6 with the visits of at least three key foreign leaders lined up.

The first to arrive in New Delhi will be British Prime Minister Tony Blair on January 6 on a "peace mission" to ask India and Pakistan to peacefully resolve their stand-off building up since the December 13 attack on Indian Parliament by Pakistan-based terrorists groups.

A day after Blair reaches the Indian capital, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres arrives for a bilateral visit and it will be followed by the trip of Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji beginning on January 13.

Prime Minister with optimism. Among the western countries, Britain has been the most vocal in calling on Pakistan to go for more effective action against the terrorist groups responsible for the attack on Indian Parliament than it has already taken.

Britain was among the first

### News Analysis

countries to accept the evidence provided by India about the involvement of Pakistan-based terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed in the attack on Parliament.

India is quite happy with the tone and tenor of statements by Blair and his Foreign Secretary Jack Straw about the activities of Pakistan-based terror groups operating against India.

Straw said "there has, in the past, at best been complacency, if not ambiguity, about terrorism from Pakistan into the Indian side of Kashmir and now right into the hear

of Indian democracy." He also said Pakistan "cannot go on turning a blind eye to terrorist activities by simply labeling those terrorists as freedom fighters."

But official sources here said Blair, who also visits Pakistan after the India visit, is certainly not coming as a mediator to defuse the tension between the two neighbors.

This is Blair's second visit to India and Pakistan in three months, his previous trip to the two countries was in October last year when he had come to mobilise support for the international campaign against terrorism in Afghanistan.

India says the attack on Indian Parliament has crossed a limit and it will not be satisfied until adequate action is taken on the ground by Pakistan against terrorists who target India. Considerable significance is also being attached to the visit by the Chinese Prime Minister who arrives here close on the heels of his talks with Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf who will stop in Beijing on his way to SAARC summit.

## 40 killed in prison riot in Brazil

REUTERS, Brasilia

At least 40 inmates were killed in a Brazilian prison riot in an Amazon town as rival gangs fought with knives and guns after a failed escape attempt, police and prison authorities said on Wednesday.

The deadly rebellion at the Urso Branco prison on the outskirts of the town of Porto Velho started as members of the rival gangs were placed in the same pavilion after trying to escape, a spokeswoman from the town's prisons authority said.

Police entered the prison yesterday afternoon and were negotiating the peaceful exit of the inmates. Relatives of the inmates were waiting nervously outside the prison after the fight broke out in the early hours of Wednesday.

There are 900 inmates in the prison.

More than 30 inmates had been killed as the gangs attacked each other with metal bars, knives and guns, although a final count would most likely not be ready until Thursday. One reports said prisoners were killed by hanging, sources said.



PHOTO: AFP

The mother of an inmate tries to get information from a military police officer on Wednesday after a riot at the jail in Porto Velho, in Brazil's Rondonia state. At least 40 inmates were killed when the riot broke out, federal prison authorities said.