

Nepali truce looks shaky after breakdown of talks

Maoists urged not to take up guns again

AFP, Nepalgunj

In this dusty town on the edge of Nepal's Maoist country, rebel activists and ordinary people alike sense the kingdom's half-year truce may be in its final days after the collapse of negotiations.

Nepalgunj, a densely populated trading and industrial town on the southwestern border with India, is the closest urban center to the impoverished stretches controlled by the Maoists -- and was chosen by the rebels as the venue for a long-delayed third round of talks.

The negotiations went on for three days before being suspended Tuesday amid Maoist protests over the army's killing of at least 17 of their cadres.

"Now it seems everything is over," said rickshaw driver Ganga Lal Chaudhari. "There will be bloodshed now -- to the dismay of everyone."

Janaki Devi, a shopkeeper, also feared a return to the violence that has left at least 7,800 people dead in

seven years.

"I'm terrified that the killings will resume now," she said. "It's no use killing one another as Maoists and policemen and soldiers are all Nepalese."

The Maoists launched their "people's war" in 1996 with the aim of toppling the constitutional monarchy but entered a ceasefire with the government in January 29 and began peace talks.

The third round of negotiations took three months to organize and were hampered from the start as the rebels demanded elections for a constituent assembly to rewrite Nepal's basic law and the revamping of the army.

Information Minister Kamal Thapa announced Tuesday that the talks in and around Nepalgunj were "suspended" and that the ceasefire was still in force.

But the rebels, speaking on their home turf, made apparent to the government that they had the power

to call off the truce.

"If the government side does not bring about radical changes in the proposals pertaining to the constituent assembly elections and agree to place the army under the people's mandate, the peace dialogue is likely to drift away," said Padma Ratna Tuladhar, a Maoist-appointed "facilitator" of the peace process.

"It is only with the insistence of the Maoist facilitators that Tuesday's meeting concluded peacefully without breaking the ceasefire agreement," Tuladhar told AFP.

A particular point of contention in the peace talks was the killing of at least 17 rebels at the weekend in the eastern village of Toramba in the worst violence under the ceasefire.

While the army says the guerrillas fired first, the Maoists have demanded a written explanation and apology, with rebel negotiator Baburam Bhattarai saying "dark clouds" were looming over the peace process.

A long-delayed third round of peace talks between the Maoists and the government broke down Tuesday as the rebels pressed for an assembly to rewrite the constitution and demanded an apology for the killing of at least 17 its cadres by the army at the weekend.

Meanwhile, the leader of Nepal's opposition movement has called on the Maoist rebels to uphold a ceasefire despite the breakdown of peace talks, his party said Thursday.

Madhav Kumar Nepal, the consensus candidate for the five opposition parties waging a campaign against the government, called on both sides to keep the peace.

"Whatever the reasons may be for the stalling of peace talks, there should not be a resumption of hostilities between the two sides," Madhav Kumar Nepal told activists of his party Wednesday in the southwestern district of Bhairahawa, party members said.



Indian policemen raise batons to beat a Socialist Unity Center of India (SUCI) protestor (L) during a demonstration following a call of a 24 hours general strike by the leftist political party in Kolkata yesterday. The city was largely affected by the strike called by SUCI to protest the hike of medical education fees, vehicle taxes and power tariffs.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan 'not shy' of meeting of Musharraf, Vajpayee

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan is not against a meeting between its president, Pervez Musharraf, and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on the sidelines of a UN General Assembly meeting next month, Pakistan's envoy here said.

"We are not shy of a meeting," high commissioner (ambassador) Aziz Ahmed Khan said in an interview with the Hindu newspaper published Thursday.

"Of course there should be a mutual desire to have that meeting," said the envoy, who took up his post in July following a thaw in relations between the two nuclear-ready neighbours.

The last time Musharraf and Vajpayee had any direct contact was at a South Asian regional summit in January 2002 in Kathmandu when, to the obvious annoyance of the Indian leader, the

Pakistani president marched up to him from the podium and shook his hand.

Since then, whenever the two leaders have appeared at the same international forums -- at the UN and a regional conference in Almaty last year and at the NAM summit in Kuala Lumpur this year -- they have not so much as made even eye contact with each other.

Instead they have used the meetings as platforms to snipe away at each other -- Musharraf raising the dispute over Kashmir, Vajpayee accusing Pakistan of sponsoring "cross-border terrorism" in the insurgency-torn state.

However, bilateral ties, which reached another low after an attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001 by gunmen New Delhi claims were sponsored by Islamabad, have begun to improve in recent months.

Since Vajpayee made a sur-

prise offer of a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan while touring Kashmir in April, diplomatic ties have been restored, bus links have resumed and talks are under way for restarting air services.

India has not immediately reacted to Khan's statement, but since Vajpayee's olive branch on April 18 New Delhi has been at pains to stress much groundwork needs to be done before bilateral meetings can be held.

Khan in the interview also said Pakistan was ready to discuss Indian concerns about militancy it claims Islamabad is backing in Kashmir, but as part of a "composite dialogue" process that was agreed in 1997 which would also include subjects such as trade and the future of divided Kashmir.

"Let the Indian delegation sit across the table and talk about these things," Khan said.

Hambali denies plotting APEC summit attack

AFP, Sydney

Hambali, the captured leader of al-Qaeda's southeast Asian operations, has denied reports he planned to bomb a 21-nation summit in Bangkok to be attended by US President George W. Bush, The Australian newspaper reported Thursday.

The paper, quoting an Asian intelligence officer who has questioned Hambali since his capture in Thailand last week, said the militant was plotting instead to bomb foreign embassies and other targets in Bangkok.

Thai officials earlier said Hambali had been planning an attack on the October summit meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation group, APEC.

And US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said at the weekend that there were still concerns Hambali's group could target the summit.

But the officer quoted by The Australian said Hambali denied this.

"He told us he is looking at other targets, not APEC," the officer said on Wednesday. He told The Australian possible targets included foreign missions "like your embassy" and the US embassy.

Delhi to convene all party meet over bill to ban cow slaughter

PTI, New Delhi

Government on Thursday deferred introduction of the Bill to prevent cow slaughter and will convene an all-party meeting to arrive at a consensus, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj told the Lok Sabha.

Amid protests from Opposition benches, Swaraj said the government has decided to defer the introduction of the Prevention of Cruelty to Cows Bill, 2003, and an all-party meeting will be convened soon.

The decision came following uproarious scenes in the House as soon as Speaker Manohar Joshi asked Agriculture Minister Rajnath Singh to move the Bill.

As several opposition members vehemently protested against the Government move, the Speaker adjourned the House for ten minutes.

Bashir says 'terrorist' US stage-managed his terror trial

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir yesterday emotionally denied any knowledge of the terror group he is accused of leading and said the "terrorist state of America" had stage-managed his treason trial.

Bashir, in a fiery defence speech, also warned judges they will go to hell if they convict him and told prosecutors to repent for aiding "the infidel enemies of Islam."

Prosecutors say Bashir heads the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) regional terror group, which is believed linked to al-Qaeda.

JI is blamed for a string of deadly bombings in recent years, including the Bali attack last October which killed 202 people and this month's hotel Jakarta hotel blast in which 12 people died.

Libya begins transferring Lockerbie cash

UN looks for lifting of sanctions

AFP, Tripoli

Libya Wednesday began transferring 2.7 billion dollars in Lockerbie compensation to a Swiss escrow account as the UN Security Council turned its attention to the quid pro quo lifting of sanctions.

The money being deposited at the Swiss-based Bank for International Settlements will be used to compensate the families of those killed in the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, the US State Department said.

"We understand that Libya has begun the transfer of the 2.7 billion dollars into the escrow account," spokesman Richard Boucher said.

He could not say how long the transfer would take but said the bank expected it to be finished by Friday at the latest.

A British-sponsored draft resolution calling for the sanctions to be

"This is a very large sum of money, the transfer is not just one push of the button and it will probably take until Thursday and perhaps even Friday to complete," Boucher said.

A week ago Libya agreed to a compensation deal under which it will pay up to 10 million dollars to each of the Lockerbie families, with the first payment of four million dollars to be released once UN sanctions against it are lifted.

The UN Security Council meanwhile left it to Britain and France to thrash out the timing for the eventual lifting of sanctions imposed on Libya after the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, the quid pro quo for the compensation payment.

A British-sponsored draft resolution calling for the sanctions to be

permanently withdrawn was one of the main items on the agenda of a closed-door council meeting that was overshadowed by Tuesday's deadly bomb attack on the UN headquarters in Baghdad.

Syria, which holds the rotating presidency of the Security Council, said the discussion had little to do with the actual text of the resolution.

"There is unanimity on the need to lift sanctions; everybody supported that," said Syrian deputy ambassador Fayssal Mekdad. "The only issue that was debated is the timing of taking action on the draft resolution."

Britain and the United States, who jointly brokered a deal with Libya over the Lockerbie issue, want the resolution to be put to a vote as soon as possible.

700 bandh supporters arrested in West Bengal

PTI, Kolkata

Police resorted to lathicharge and arrested over 700 supporters of Socialist Unity Centre of India and CPI (ML-Liberation), the sponsors of the 24-hour West Bengal bandh which evoked partial response.

IGP (Law and Order) Chayan Mukherjee told reporters in Kolkata that so far 712 supporters of SUCI and CPI-ML (Liberation), including 17, women were arrested from different parts of the state for obstructing rail and road traffic.

Of the 712 arrested 647 belonged to SUCI while 65 were CPI-ML (Liberation) activists.

The IGP said the situation was peaceful with no untoward incident reported from anywhere in the state.

In the metropolis, police resorted to lathicharge at Hazra to disperse a procession of SUCI supporters in support of the bandh.

SUCI alleged that two of their supporters were injured in the police action.

Indian SC asks govt to release Pak prisoners

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday ordered federal authorities to free incarcerated Pakistani nationals who have already served their full term in prison.

The court set September 2 as the deadline for New Delhi to pass "appropriate orders," the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

"The Supreme Court directs the release and deportation of those Pakistani prisoners who have served out their sentence in India and are not detained under any orders passed under the Foreigners Act," the news agency quoted the order as saying.

Thursday's landmark judgement came two days after the apex court asked India's Attorney-General the grounds for detaining 11 Pakistani nationals in prisons for over a decade.

The judiciary sought the query after the state administration of Indian Kashmir offered details of the 11 Pakistani nationals held in various prisons following their detention under a tough law.

Pak opposition demands independent Kargil probe

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan's senior opposition leader Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan has insisted that an independent commission be set up to probe the factors responsible for the 1999 Kargil war with India and to make this report public.

Khan, deputy parliamentary leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, made this demand through a statement, adding that the commission should comprise of impartial judges, The News reported.

He said that if this commission was not set up, the Musharraf regime would have to accept his challenge of debating the matter live on television.

Describing the Kargil operation as a tragic episode in Pakistan's history, he said the nation to be fully informed about all facts pertaining to it.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah (L) talks to the press after Pakistan's Foreign Minister Mahmood Kasuri's arrival for talks in Kabul yesterday. Kasuri arrived on an official visit over a series of bloody attacks in Afghanistan. Kabul blames Taliban insurgents for these attacks who are hiding in Pakistan's western tribal belt.

Pak F-16 dues settled: US

ANI, Islamabad

The US has claimed that it has settled Pakistan's outstanding dues of \$350 million for the purchase of 40 F-16 aircraft two years ago.

The News quoted sources in Washington as saying that the US had returned the F-16 amount through several installments, and that no interest was paid for keeping the dues in the US treasury for over 15 years.

Islamabad would have to make fresh payments if it wanted some more of these aircraft, the paper quoted the sources as saying.

They claimed that the dues were adjusted by offering Pakistan 0.3 million tons of wheat and imposition of a soybean sale.

Pakistan paid for the F-16 aircraft in the 1980s. However, the US government refused to deliver the planes following Pakistan's decision to advance its nuclear programme.

Not only was the delivery stopped, but also Pakistan was asked to pay storage charges for these fighter jets.

Pak FM in Kabul for talks on volatile border, trade

AFP, Kabul

Kabul is expected to confront Pakistan's visiting foreign minister Thursday over a series of bloody attacks it blames on Taliban insurgents hiding out in Pakistan's western tribal lands. The two-day visit by Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, who flew into the Afghan capital just after 11:00 am (0630 GMT), comes after one of the deadliest weeks to blight war-ravaged Afghanistan since the radical Taliban militia were driven from power 20 months ago.

Factional fighting and intensified attacks against aid workers, soldiers and officials have claimed about 100 lives and led to a suspension of crucial relief operations in some areas of the country.

Kasuri headed straight from Kabul airport to talks with his Afghan counterpart Abdullah Abdullah.

He is also due to meet President Hamid Karzai, Defence Minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim, and former king Mohammed Zahir Shah later Thursday, a Pakistani official said.

"He will reiterate Pakistan's desire that there will be more concerted efforts to curb the terrorism in the two countries," the official told AFP in Islamabad, adding that trade and economic cooperation were also on the agenda.

Alleged cross-border attacks by suspected Taliban guerrillas "will certainly be discussed with (Kasuri)," Karzai's spokesman Jawed Ludin said Monday.

"Cross-border activities are one of the very common trends we see in some of the terrorist activities that happen in Afghanistan these days," Ludin was speaking a day after hundreds of militants on trucks stormed the Afghan border town of Barmal. At least 22 people were killed when they attacked the local government office.

Ludin, echoing countless Afghan officials, said the assailants came from Pakistan, just 16 kilometers (10 miles) away, which once nurtured and supported the Taliban.



PHOTO: AFP

The Secretary General of the LTTE S. Puleedevan (L) arrives at his hotel yesterday in Paris. The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are due to open a closed-door week-long discussion starting Thursday with their constitutional and legal experts.