

Nepali PM resigns to defuse political crisis

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's embattled Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa announced yesterday he had resigned in "the interests of the nation" to try to defuse a mounting crisis over the country's political future.

Thapa's resignation follows widespread opposition-led street protests demanding that King Gyanendra replace his hand-picked royalist government with an all-party administration and hold general elections.

In an address broadcast on state-run radio and television, Thapa said he had quit to "pave the way for national consensus (and) to preserve the constitutional monarchy, multi-party democracy and the larger interests of the nation."

He added that to ensure national stability, general elections should be held as soon as possible and that peace talks with Maoist rebels who have been waging an increasingly bloody battle to overthrow the monarchy should be restarted.

"For 11 months I tried my best to forge a national reconciliation," he said. "But due to the stubborn stance taken by the protesting parties, it has not been possible to create a consensus," adding that "clashes and controversy intensified."

State-run media said King Gyanendra had accepted Thapa's resignation but had asked him to remain as caretaker prime minister until he could be replaced.

Opposition party leaders in the impoverished Himalayan nation wedged between India and China were delighted by Thapa's resignation.

"The first step of our movement has been successful with the

removal of Prime Minister Thapa," said Bharat Mohan Adhikari, leader of the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML), one of the main parties spearheading the demonstrations that have brought thousands into the streets.

"We've yet to achieve the major goal of transferring sovereign rights from the king to the people," he said. "(But) after the prime minister's removal, a conducive atmosphere has been created for a dialogue with the king."

The king has promised to hold general elections by April 2005, but the opposition wants them conducted by a neutral, multi-party government.

The protests began after Gyanendra fired the elected government in October 2002, accusing it of incompetence in crushing the Maoist revolt, and installed an administration made up of royal appointees.

The political crisis escalated sharply last month as students and opposition parties staged daily demonstrations calling for restoration of elected rule.

Thousands of people have been arrested and hundreds injured since the pro-democracy campaign was stepped up April 1.

Thapa's resignation follows a call by representatives of 20 donor countries and six world agencies at a meeting in Kathmandu urging Gyanendra to restore democracy and seek peace with the Maoists, who have been fighting since 1996 to install a communist republic in a conflict that has claimed over 9,500 lives.

CTG ARMS HAUL CID raid on to nab suspects

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, City

CID police raided different areas in the city Thursday night to nab the prime suspects, including Hafizur Rahman, in the largest ever arms haul case but returned empty-handed.

CID (Criminal Investigation Department) sources said they have found some clues to indicate the suspects are hiding in the city.

Police have attached the movable properties from Hafiz's village house and optical shop near the Police Headquarters at Laldighi following a court order.

Alleged robber Syed Nur, arrested from Hafiz's shop, was sent to jail custody after he was produced before court yesterday, court sources said.

Kotwali police said Nur was involved in many robbery cases in Patiya and other places and had a link with Hafiz doing criminal acts.

CID officials hope they will make a dramatic headway in their probe when the prime suspects are held.

"We're trying our best to nab them at any cost as soon as possible," said CID Additional Superintendent of Police Kabir Uddin.

Meanwhile, the Court of Metropolitan Sessions Judge is expected to give verdict today on the government's appeal to equip the elite Rapid Action Battalion with the hauled weapons to run anti-crime operation.

President, PM

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and prayed for eternal peace of the departed soul.

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan has also condemned the killing.

In a statement yesterday, Bhuiyan said: "We are stunned and shocked at the killing of Ahsanullah Master."

He said the killers would be brought to justice and directed police and local administration to nab the culprits.

Denouncing arson attacks at different parts of Gazipur, he said the real incident could not be hushed up through such activities.

"The government will thwart with iron hand any conspiracy to create anarchy," he said.

He urged the Awami League leaders and workers to cooperate with the government in hunting down the killers.

The BNP leader also prayed for salvation of the departed soul and conveyed sympathy to the bereaved family members.

Municipal polls

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suffered minor injuries in a clash between the supporters of two rival candidates' in Banaripara municipal polls.

The election was held here without any major disturbance but ruling BNP cadres tried to cast fake votes and were resisted.

The cadres abused some journalists as they made an attempt to pick S Mizanul Islam, Madaripur correspondent of a daily and Proshika's senior field manager of Madaripur. However, police dispersed the cadres and took Mizanul to safe custody.

Our Kushtia correspondent reports: The chairman candidates of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) and Jamaat-e-Islami of Bheramara raised allegations against a BNP lawmaker and BNP-backed candidate of violating electoral rules in the upcoming elections.

Karachi mosque

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we have to defend ourselves."

The mosque is inside the compound of a historic school, the Sindh Madarsatul Islam (Sindh School of Islam), where Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, received his early education.

An employee of a brokerage house said he heard two explosions. "Our office on the 14th floor was shaken," he said. "We saw plumes of smoke, blood and bodies."

In March, 44 people were killed and 150 wounded in an attack on a Shi'ite mosque in the southwestern city of Quetta that was blamed on Sunni militants.

Earlier yesterday, three people were wounded in Quetta, capital of southwestern Baluchistan province, when a small bomb exploded opposite a hotel due to host a weekend investment conference.

Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali had been expected at the city's Serena Hotel today to chair the meeting.

However, Jamali cancelled his plans to attend before the blast due to commitments in Islamabad, said Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed.

The chief minister of Baluchistan, Jam Mir Mohammad Yusuf, called the explosion an attempt to sabotage the meeting.

Police said the blast was caused by a small time-bomb attached to a bicycle and Baluchistan chief minister Jam Mir Mohammad Yusuf called it an attempt to sabotage the meeting.



Two activists run to safety when police teargassed a protest demonstration on Bangabandhu Avenue in the city after the killing of Awami League lawmaker Ahsanullah Master in Tongi.

Skid Ghat traders to prevent bringing Ershad's coffin

QUAZI AMANULLAH, Khulna

Local traders have decided to prevent family members and relatives of condemned criminal Ershad Shikder from taking his coffin to Skid Ghat that once was a haven for his criminal activities.

They have formed a Resistance Committee comprising over 100 traders of Khulna Bazar and adjoining Skid Ghat to prevent bringing his coffin to the area where he committed 47 murders, raped many and obstructed normal economic activities for personal gains, convenor of the committee said.

To express their hatred for the criminal, traders have also planned to throw shoes at his coffin, the convenor added, seeking not to be named.

Relatives of people killed and victims of rape and other atrocities committed by Ershad over 20 years have also expressed their solidarity with the committee.

Ershad's execution is scheduled

for May 10 in Khulna District Jail.

The committee has called for public execution of the condemned criminal at the local Circuit House ground.

It also demanded confiscation of all his movable and immovable property and distribution of that among families of the victims of his atrocities.

Ershad's first wife Khodeja and another person - 'Indian' Moti - should be arrested immediately as they have information about more than 100 illegal arms Ershad possessed, the committee said.

Meanwhile, Khulna District Jail authorities will send another letter to Swarna Kamol, Ershad's palatial house, asking his wife, sons and daughter to turn up at the visitor's room of the jail on May 10 at 10:00 am to meet him for the last time. Earlier on Thursday, a letter in this regard was sent to his wife.

Cop charged with rape suspended

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Sub-inspector (SI) Naru Gopal Saha of Sonadanga Police Station has been suspended on charge of raping a newly married girl on Wednesday night.

The 18-year-old victim told Inspector Matur Rahman, investigation officer of the case, that SI Naru picked her and her husband on charge of looting gold ornaments and Tk 50,000 before her elopement. The SI also beat up her husband when he refuted the allegation, she said.

The victim is now undergoing treatment in safe custody, the IO said. Her husband said that he is being threatened to withdraw the case.

Mobile operators

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company's marketing and sales division, said his post-paid customers' extra amounts would be adjusted in their current month's bill.

"We will also compensate by adding extra minutes proportionate to the overcharged amounts on prepaid accounts."

But subscribers have refuted the mobile operators' newspaper notice about the delayed implementation of BTTB's reduced NWD and ISD tariffs.

"The operators' obscure announcement cannot override the government's tariff reduction plan," said Principal Hosne Ara Shahed of Sher-e-Bangla Girls' College in Dhaka's Tikatulya. She added that instead of such a general notice, subscribers should have been sent letters by courier, which would have reflected professional customer service.

"There is no logic in overcharging mobile users for the same services being offered at half the rate for fixed telephone subscribers," said photographer Chanchal Mahmood. He also demanded that the mobile operators reinstate the free service for incoming calls from BTTB's network, as offered originally.

Fariidul Haque, general manager of Grameen Telecom's Village Phone programme, suggested that mobile operators follow BTTB's long distance tariff reduction. "Such tariff significantly helps our poverty reduction programme," said the 35 percent shareholder of GrameenPhone.

"We shall certainly protect consumer rights," said Syed Marghub Murshed, chairman of the BTRC. He said the telecom regulator is taking necessary steps to prevent any exploitation by any operator.

Tongi lurches

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in the industrial town of Tongi to prevent a mob's bid to torch a train.

A ceramic trader, Al Amin, was also bullet-hit. The 20-year-old is undergoing treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Police teargassed angry crowds on Bangabandhu Avenue in Dhaka that houses the main opposition party's headquarters. The high-profile killing also sent a ripple of violence as far as Munshiganj.

Police clubbed the opposition adherents on Bangabandhu Avenue as they tried to take out a protest procession.

Police also lobbied at least 10 teargas canisters to prevent the angry opposition leaders and workers from staging demonstrations after they blocked all roads to Bangabandhu Avenue with barbed-wire fences.

Angry activists damaged a car near Noor Hossain Square and police used batons to disperse opposition workers there. Security was tightened around busy points in the capital where tension ran high in the wake of the killing.

UNB reports from Munshiganj: Police teargassed and clubbed processions of AL activists, injuring at least eight of them in Srinagar upazila. The injured are being treated in a local hospital.

AL calls hartal

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mourn the killing with a three-day programme from today. As part of the programme, the AL and its front organisations will bring out mourning processions across the country on May 10. National and party flags will fly at half mast above all party offices across the country while party leaders and workers will wear black badges.

Jail the deceased lawmaker would not be taken to the South Plaza of the Jatiya Sangsad as the party believes Ahsanullah was killed under direction of government high ups.

"We don't want any participation of the killers in his janaza," he said. Expressing deep shock over the killing, the meeting demanded immediate arrest of and punishment to the killers.

AL presidium member Suranjit Sengupta, who was also present at the briefing, described Ahsanullah's murder as a planned political killing and said Prime Minister Khaleda Zia should resign admitting responsibility for it.

Senior party leaders including Abus Samad Azaad, Amir Hossain Amu, Obaidul Kader, Mukul Bose, Akhtaruzzaman and Rahmat Ali were present at the briefing.

Tagore

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Museum will organise a three-day book fair at the academy premises on this occasion.

Local administrations in various parts of the country including Shiladaha of Kushtia that cherishes memories of the poet, will organise colourful programmes to mark the occasion.

Newspapers will publish special articles and radio and television channels will air special programmes marking the anniversary.

President Professor Dr Iajuddin Ahmed and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia issued separate messages on the occasion paying homage to the great poet.

The President in his message said Rabindranath Tagore, a luminary in world literature, conveyed to the world the thoughts, consciousness and the essence of life of the countrymen through his writings.

Truth, beauty and universality were always dominant in his creative works, Dr Iajuddin said.

He said Tagore's valuable contributions enriched all branches of literature, including poetry, short story, novel, drama, essay, linguistics and the art of painting. Throughout his life, he strove to establish a peaceful society by rising above parochial thoughts, the president added.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in her message paid rich tribute to Rabindranath Tagore, the composer of the National Anthem of Bangladesh.

She said: "Tagore is not only one of the greatest moulders of our aesthetic life, but is also one of the epoch-making best sons of Bangla literature and culture."

The prime minister said Bangladesh was one of the greatest sources of Tagore's literary creations while his proximity to the working class here had inspired him with a deep sense of life.

Few metres

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Jubo League leader Mohon collapsed on the stage with blood gushing out from their bodies," said another witness, seeking anonymity.

Some of the assailants then walked to the front of the stage from where more than 250 workers of the Shechchhabak League, volunteers' wing of the main opposition party, and other participants ran for cover in an apparent attempt to "inspect their success".

The perpetrators soon melted into the crowds - some lying in the ground, some running for cover and some trying to comprehend the situation from a few metres away.

"On hearing the explosions, I thought people were blasting firecrackers in joy. I came out of my house only to see that people are carrying blood-smear Master shahab (Ahsanullah) and five to six others onto a microbus," said another housewife.

BDF meet

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secretaries will directly respond to questions to be raised by donor representatives - the reason, sources said, the government did not prepare any written report as it did for the last two meets. The World Bank and the IMF will submit two reports at the meet.

Saifur Rahman told journalists at his Gulshan home yesterday the government made substantial progress in all areas, including governance and law and order.

Despite "political unsuitability", the government succeeded in implementing many reform commitments. "I hope the donors would understand that improvement doesn't come overnight. Donors should also note that we have progressed in certain areas despite many hurdles."

The finance minister said the government would have made more progress in the non-economic sectors if there had been no political instability.

Dhaka is hosting the BDF meet, held in Paris earlier, for the fourth time, with the first in 1973, second in 1977 and third in 2003.

A World Bank press release says the forum moved away from making financial pledges and developed a tradition of substantive discussion of development issues where the government and development partners take lessons from the past, review progress and work together to decide on priorities and future directions.

B Chy expects BNP lawmakers to join his party

UNB, Dhaka

Former president AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury has predicted that incumbent and former lawmakers from ruling BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) and other parties would join his new party Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB) being launched Tuesday.

"We hope lawmakers from the BNP and other parties will seriously consider joining the BDB in due course and a number of ex-lawmakers with good reputation will also join," he said in an exclusive interview with the UNB at his Baridhara office Thursday night.

"In addition, effective, honest and patriotic members of the civil society, freedom fighters, ex-servicemen, lawyers, businessmen, industrialists, economists, committed social workers and professionals will join us."

Chowdhury, who had to quit the presidency in June 2002 after falling out with the BNP, would not say how many ruling party lawmakers could join his new party, which has the professed objective of introducing an alternative political stream.

Calling the present state of governance the "worst" of its kind, the former president said people urgently want change of power by democratic and constitutional means.

Expressing his disappointment at the government's "brutal attitude" towards its political opponents, he said "the state of democracy is very painful, if not dead; democracy is being kept alive on saline and oxygen" while the government becomes "more virulent and violent" to protect its power.

"The government is in a state of confusion and suffering from a syndrome of phobia and mania and therefore does not see the truth," he said, adding such a situation might soon lead to "a failed state".

During nearly an hour-long interview, he focussed on the prime election pledges of the BNP and its failures, acrimonious politics, anti-corruption commission, 14th constitution amendment bill, future election as well as his party's philosophy on issues of governance.

Member-Secretary of the BDB Major (rtd) Abdul Mannan, who resigned from parliament and defected from the BNP, was present during the interview.

In reply to a question, Chowdhury observed that the

government and its administration completely failed to curb corruption and terrorism, the twin cardinal election pledges of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

"But what do we see now? Corruption is all-pervasive and those in the government and their men are involved in most cases of corruption."

He said the spread of terrorism has surpassed all records. "We've seen terrorism in the past too and that's why I made the TV programme 'Sabash Bangladesh' when we were startled and pained to see a man cut up in 12 pieces. But today we see father and son sliced into 180 pieces or more."

Chowdhury met families of some of the victims whose skin was peeled off or bones smashed by criminals. "Such acts are innumerable in villages, townships and cities."

He said the BNP failed to fulfil yet another election commitment to alleviate poverty, maintaining that the level of poverty has remained the same. "Whatever has been done is insignificant. Poverty in the Chittagong Hill Tracts or Kurigram remains unchanged, plight of the poor in char areas or victims of river erosion could not be removed."

To another question, he said the key factors leading to the government's failure are crime, corruption, poverty, failure of the government machinery and installation of an alternate power centre seen as more powerful than the government itself.

Expressing surprise over the delay in making the anti-corruption commission functional, he demanded that the selection committee of the commission be named immediately and the whole legal process completed within the next two months.

"When so many laws are being enacted in quick succession, I don't know why the government, even after two and a half years, fails to set up the anti-corruption commission, which was a major election pledge of the prime minister."

Asked if he would demand midterm polls, Chowdhury said he would discuss the matter within his party forum, but hastened to add: "Yes, there is a feeling that people certainly do want a change of government urgently. It's true, and it has to be in a democratic way according to the constitution."

Rumsfeld set to testify

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who will challenge Bush for the presidency later this year.

Kerry, who served with distinction in Vietnam, said while campaigning in Colton, California, that if he were president, "I would not be the last to know what is going on in my command" but "I will demand accountability for those who serve and I will take responsibility for their actions."

Bush made clear that he had been angered by Rumsfeld's failure to inform him earlier of the abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, but emphasised that Rumsfeld was "an important part of my cabinet," and said "he'll stay in my cabinet".

Rumsfeld was to testify yesterday to the armed forces committees of the US Senate and the House of Representatives in what was expected to be a bruising encounter.

Six soldiers have already been charged over the abuse scandal, and six officers and noncommissioned soldiers have received reprimands which effectively end their military careers, and several Democratic politicians have called for Rumsfeld's resignation.

"No other action, no other words, would send as strong a signal to the world that the United States is serious about fixing what is wrong in Iraq," said Representative James McGovern, a Democrat from Massachusetts.

The New York Times yesterday said that Bush "should start showing the state of his own heart by demanding the resignation of his secretary of defense".

General Richard Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was also to testify before the committees and was expected to be grilled as to whether the abuses were perpetrated by individual soldiers who went off the rails or whether they indicated a problem with the system as a whole.

On Thursday, the House approved 365 to 50 a resolution deploring the prisoner abuse and demanding "swift justice" for those who took part.

In Britain, where the army has cast doubt on similar photos purporting to show British troops abusing Iraqi detainees, fresh allegations surfaced yesterday in the mass-circulation Daily Mirror.

The paper quoted an unnamed reservist as saying that he had seen four incidents of prisoners being punched and kicked by soldiers in the Queen's Lancashire Regiment and that he had reported them to

military police.

A defence ministry spokesman confirmed that "the Royal Military Police have spoken to him and will take that investigation forward as they see fit".

But the spokesman said "this is a new soldier with what might be new allegations" and added "this has not got anything to do with the photo story last week".

In Iraq, the violence continued, with a series of pre-dawn explosions yesterday on the northeast fringes of the Shia holy city of Najaf, where US forces were closing in on followers of Shia Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr, who has been holed up in the city for over a month.

US Administrator Paul Bremer appointed a new provincial governor for Najaf on Thursday, in what was seen as an attempt to marginalize Sadr.

In a message which has yet to be authenticated, bin Laden offered "a reward of 10,000 grammes of gold to whoever kills the occupier Bremer or his deputy, the commander of US forces or his deputy in Iraq."

The message went on to offer the same reward to "whoever kills Kofi Annan, the head of the Iraq mission or his envoys, including Lakhdar Brahimi".

It also said it was "the duty of the Iraqis to launch jihad, not only against the crusaders but also against the government of rene-gades and those who assist it".

2 PBCP outlaws

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gougued out.

The officer-in-charge of Batiaghata Police Station said the outlaws were caught and lynched when they were making preparation to commit robbery at Koyabazar. Four others of the gang managed to escape.

Police sent the bodies to Khulna Medical College Hospital for autopsy.

In another incident, Khanjahan Ali police yesterday recovered bullet-hit body of a PBCP cadre from Matanganda.

Police said the victim is Shamimul Bashar Sohel, 30, son of late Abdul Hamid Shaikh of Chandanmahal in Diglohia.

Sohel, who was a listed criminal and accused of four murder charges had close links with Juba Dal, police said. The motive of the murder could not be known.

AL lawmaker

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examinations this year, was standing near the stage when a bullet hit him in the head.

Critically injured Babu, a class six student of the school, suffered two bullets in the head and left leg while Shechchhabak League activist Jamal Hossain received bullets in the left hand and back of his head.

All the casualties were taken to Tongi Hospital and later shifted to Chest Diseases Hospital at Mohakhali.

Master was moved to Combined Military Hospital and his relatives claimed that no doctors were available there to see him. He died there at about 3:10pm.

"No-one of the attackers are local people, they must have been hired," injured Jamal said at the DMCH, adding: "I will recognise the killers if I see them again."

Jobaidda Begum, a housewife from Tongi, claimed that she saw about 15 unknown youths walking to the conference venue minutes before the killing.