

Anwar snips supporters' pigtails to mark freedom

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Freed Malaysian ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim yesterday chopped off the pigtails of three ardent supporters who had not cut their hair for six years in protest at his imprisonment.

In a light-hearted moment at his home hours after winning a final appeal against his conviction for sodomy, Anwar snipped off waist-length pigtails from three elderly men to loud cheers from his supporters.

The politician, who is suffering from a back injury and is expected to fly to Germany soon for surgery, sat on a chair with his feet up as the three men walked up one by one for the symbolic ceremony to celebrate his surprise release.

"I thought Anwar was a bad person but I found that I was wrong. I felt bad about it and I wanted to do something for him, so I decided to grow my hair long," said one of them, Mohamaded' Rozi Osman, who is in his late 50s.



PHOTO: AFP  
Former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim is surrounded by supporters outside the Palace of Justice courthouse in Putrajaya yesterday after he was set free. Anwar left court a free man to huge cheers from hundreds of supporters after a surprise victory in his appeal against a sodomy conviction.

Koizumi presses claim to Kurils

BBC ONLINE

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi is taking a boat trip to view a group of Russian-held islands that Japan claims as its own.

He is restating a claim to the islands, known in Japan as the Northern Territories and in Russia as the southern Kurils.

They were seized by Soviet troops in the final days of the World War II.

The dispute has long soured relations between Tokyo and Moscow. Russia has reacted angrily to Koizumi's visit.

He was waved off by former residents of the islands as he boarded a coastguard patrol boat for his tour around the disputed territory.

He said he intended to resolve the dispute for the good of Japan and Russia.

The three islands and a cluster of outcrops are now inhabited by a small community of Russian fishermen and their families.

Koizumi said the islands were Japan's inherent territories and no peace treaty would be signed until they were returned.

Nepal in mourning as protests spread

Rioting claims 2 lives

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal observed a day of mourning yesterday for 12 workers murdered in Iraq as protests spread to the west of the Hindu kingdom following two deaths during riots in the capital.

Kathmandu, which suffered tens of thousands of dollars in damage Wednesday when furious crowds torched offices of Arab airlines and businesses, was quiet yesterday with police given shoot-on-sight orders against rioters.

The city's main mosque, the Jama Masjid, was still smouldering as Muslims collected pieces of the Koran burnt when protesters stormed the shrine and gutted it.

But protests spread to the western Nepalese city of Palpa, where police said they fired 12 rounds of

blanks to disperse a crowd of 3,000 people chanting slogans against Iraqi insurgents.

"At least two demonstrators were injured when police used a baton-charge to break up the crowd," a witness said. Police said they feared the protesters would vent their fury by attacking businesses.

Butwal, a city 40km south of Palpa, imposed a curfew as a precaution.

Shops and schools were shut nationwide and the Himalayan kingdom's twin-triangle sun-and-moon flag was flown at half mast in official mourning for the victims of the worst hostage massacre in post-war Iraq.

Maoist rebels, who rule much of the countryside and claim to be fighting on behalf of the poor to

abolish the monarchy, chastised authorities over the hostage deaths.

"The government has made a big blunder," said a statement by Maoist chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as Prachanda, or "The Fierce."

"Through a short-sighted policy the government is encouraging Nepalese to go abroad only to lose their innocent lives," Prachanda said.

Nepal, which is not part of the US-led coalition in Iraq, is one of the world's poorest countries, fuelling an exodus of tens of thousands of young people to low-level and often risky work overseas.

The riots erupted hours after an Islamist website published grisly footage of the killings of the Nepalese, who had flown to Jordan in hopes of being cooks and cleaners.

Taiwan won't sacrifice sovereignty to improve ties with China: Chen

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan will not sacrifice its sovereignty, safety and dignity to improve relations with rival China, President Chen Shui-bian said yesterday.

Chen, currently on a state visit to Panama, made the remarks in a pre-recorded televised speech marking Soldiers' Day Friday.

"We have been seeking peace in the Taiwan Strait and have taken various goodwill moves trying to help normalise cross-strait ties," Chen said.

The Taiwan leader Tuesday cancelled a military exercise scheduled for September 9 in a goodwill gesture after China reportedly scrapped a similar drill.

However, Chen said China's "blindness to cross-strait status quo" has caused disputes between the two sides and become the main obstacle to improving relations.

"The government pursues goodwill, reconciliation, active coopera-

tion and permanent peace across the Taiwan Strait, but we will never sacrifice national sovereignty, safety and dignity as the price to better cross-strait ties."

China and Taiwan split in 1949 at the end of a civil war but Beijing still considers the island part of it territory to be reunified, by force if necessary.

Since Chen was inaugurated in May for a second term, China has stressed its long-standing vow to invade Taiwan should it declare formal independence.

Taiwan has to "be prepared for war in order to deter war" by strengthening its defence capabilities, Chen said.

He again criticized China for trying to rationalise its attempt to take the island by force with a proposed unification law, under which Taiwan is considered a "special political region" of the mainland.

Norway mounts move to salvage Lankan peace

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's peacebroker Norway has mounted a fresh bid to salvage the island's faltering peace process that has been further undermined by brinkmanship by the two antagonists, sources said Wednesday.

Norway's top peace envoy Erik Solheim met with the main Tamil Tiger peace negotiator in London, Anton Balasingham, Tuesday and discussed ways to jumpstart talks between the two warring parties, the diplomatic sources said.

Balasingham told the Tamil daily, the Sudaroli, the future of the peace process was in the hands of President Chandrika Kumaratunga and there was no point blaming his Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"It is absurd to (say) again and again the LTTE is killing here and there," he was quoted as saying. "It is better for her to show her goodwill and give new life to the peace process." There was no immediate word from the Norwegians on Tuesday's meeting with Balasingham.

Nepali Maoists want to talk only with king

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels fighting to overthrow Nepal's monarchy say they will only accept peace talks directly with King Gyanendra and under international oversight.

The guerrillas, who control much of the countryside and imposed a blockade on the capital Kathmandu for a week in August, also claimed to be raising more fighters for their "People's Liberation Army."

Maoist chief Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who is better known as Prachanda, or "The Fierce," denounced Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba as part of the "old order."

Deuba's government on Tuesday renewed a call for peace talks and said it was forming an experts committee to help arrange them.

"If there is reliable international mediation we are prepared to hold dialogue with the king directly but not with a mere servant of the old power," said a statement by Prachanda issued late Wednesday.

Nepal's civil war has claimed 10,000 lives since 1996. The

Maoists have called in the past for talks to be supervised by the United Nations.

Prachanda said 100,000 people "are undergoing guerrilla war training."

"The People's Liberation Army has expanded from seven to nine brigades and from 21 to 29 battalions," he said without specifying the number.

Independent analysts estimate the Maoist fighting strength at fewer than 15,000.

The rebels lifted their blockade of Kathmandu on August 25 but said it would be reimposed in a month unless the government meets its demands, including an end to the guerrillas' classification as a terrorist group.

The blockade, enforced without any visible rebel presence, sent prices soaring in Kathmandu, even though there were no shortages of goods and thousands of vehicles defied the ban on traffic in and out of the capital.

Deuba is despised by the Maoists for leading a crackdown on the rebels after peace talks collapsed in November 2001.



PHOTO: AFP  
A Nepalese riot policeman looks on as Muslim men gather together charred remains of the holy Quran outside a damaged mosque in Kathmandu yesterday.

US condemns in 'strongest terms' slaying of Nepali hostages

AFP, Washington

The United States condemned "in the strongest terms" the killing of 12 Nepalese by their abductors in Iraq, saying the murders showed the contempt armed groups in Iraq had for their own people.

"The United States condemns in the strongest terms the murder of Nepalese hostages in Iraq," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said in a statement.

"This latest murder of civilians engaged in helping with Iraq's reconstruction by a militant group demonstrates the contempt these armed groups have for the Iraqi people," he added.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell "spoke... with Prime Minister Deuba to offer our condolences to the government of Nepal, the people of Nepal and the families of the victims," Boucher said.

"The United States is committed to ensuring the stability of Iraq, and will continue to work closely with the Iraqi government to end terrorist violence, and bring the perpetrators to justice," the spokesman concluded.

Indo-Pak FMs to talk Kashmir peace

7 killed in violence

AFP, New Delhi

Months of steady rapprochement between India and Pakistan leading to renewed transport, diplomatic and transport ties culminate this weekend in the first ministerial-level talks in three years between nuclear-armed rivals bitterly divided over Kashmir.

With much of the spadework on secondary issues already done, Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri will sit down in New Delhi on Sunday to discuss the issue at the core of the decades-old dispute -- the former princely state of Kashmir.

The process was set in motion in April last year by then prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee when he extended a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan during a visit to the Indian zone of Kashmir.

A few months earlier the two neighbours almost came to war following a bloody attack on India's parliament by gunmen New Delhi claimed were sponsored by Islamabad.

Pakistan denied the charges but the issue of what India terms "cross

border terrorism" -- an insurgency in Indian Kashmir by Islamic militants which has claimed at least 40,000 lives in the past 15 years -- continues to rankle and will be Singh's main focus at the talks.

India says the rebels are sponsored by Pakistan but for Islamabad the bloodletting is a result of an indigenous movement started by Kashmiris themselves.

Meanwhile, Indian troops gunned down four suspected Islamic militants along the de facto Kashmir border dividing nuclear-armed India and Pakistan while rebels killed three people and injured 11, police said yesterday.

The renewed violence comes before weekend talks in New Delhi between the foreign ministers of the two nations in a new push to end their decades-old Kashmir dispute.

Police said three of the rebels were shot in the Trikunda sector of southern Rajouri district after crossing into Indian Kashmir, and a fourth in northern Kupwara district. Both areas border Pakistan-administered Kashmir and are favoured infiltration routes.

Indian hostages await joyful welcome

AFP, Makraun Kalan

Biwi Jaspal Kaur bustled around in her kitchen yesterday planning a grand meal for her son Sukhdev Singh, one of three Indian hostages set free by Iraqi insurgents after a six-week ordeal.

"I don't know what to cook. I wish I could cook everything Sukhdev likes," 60-year-old Kaur said in her home village of Makraun Kalan, some 300km miles north of New Delhi.

Singh was freed along with compatriots Tilak Raj and Antaryami, three Kenyans and an Egyptian after a Kuwaiti transport firm that employed them paid a hefty ransom to their captors.

The sleepy hamlet in the northern state of Punjab is counting down for the return of Sukhdev Singh, a 26-year-old trucker who was abducted along with the six others on July 21.

"Everyone is looking at their watches. Everyone is wanting the sun to go down and come up tomorrow when my brother will come home," said the Sikh driver's elder brother, Harvinder Singh.

Strangers greeted journalists like long-lost relatives and everyone spoke of the big party they will hold in Singh's honour.



PHOTO: AFP  
India's ambassador to Kuwait Swashpawan Singh (L) bids farewell yesterday to former Indian hostages released in Iraq Wednesday before they leave the Indian embassy in Kuwait City on their way to the airport for repatriation back home.