



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Hindu devotees worship the sun god presenting offerings to the ocean on Makar Sankranti, a Hindu holy day marking the winter solstice when the sun transits from Sagittarius to Capricorn, along the ocean front in Port Blair yesterday. In the aftermath of last month's tsunami, devotees of India's Andaman and Nicobar islands state, were restricted to the shore though normally they go out to sea by boat to present offerings to the sun and the ocean.

Nepal presses ahead with elections

Maoist rebels spurn talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government said yesterday it was determined to go ahead with long-delayed elections in the insurgency-racked Himalayan nation after Maoist rebels spurned an ultimatum to resume peace talks.

"There's no other option except to declare elections," government spokesman Mohammad Mohsin told AFP. "Those who don't agree should quit the government."

Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba had said he would hold polls if the rebels did not agree to resume talks by Thursday midnight to end the deadly nine-year revolt aimed at ousting the monarchy and installing a communist republic.

Maoists who control wide swathes of rural Nepal rejected the demand and warned they would sabotage the polls. They want elections held instead for a constituent

assembly to draft a new constitution that would decide the monarchy's future.

King Gyanendra dismissed parliament in 2002 and assumed executive powers amid deepening political turmoil and spiralling violence in Nepal where nearly half the population live below the poverty line.

An official close to Deuba quoted him as telling a cabinet meeting late Thursday that, "We have to go for general elections now."

But there was disagreement within the multi-party ruling coalition formed by Deuba about staging polls before talks with the rebels.

"We think we should make one more earnest effort to bring the Maoists to the negotiating table," said Bharat Mohan Adhikari, deputy premier and senior leader of the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UMI).

Many analysts also doubt polls can be held amid daily battles between Maoists and security forces in what has become one of the world's deadliest civil conflicts, claiming more than 11,000 lives since 1996.

Now analysts say Deuba has little choice but to go ahead with the polls if he wants to keep his job.

Gyanendra has been pressing for elections amid mounting international and domestic pressure for the restoration of democracy.

Since dismissing parliament, Gyanendra has ruled through a series of prime ministers he has appointed and who have been viewed as his puppets by many in the country. He

Pakistan evacuates foreigners after sectarian violence

AFP, Gilgit

Pakistani authorities have helped 36 foreigners leave a Himalayan town which is under curfew following a flare-up of sectarian violence, officials said yesterday.

Among those evacuated from Gilgit -- where a prominent Shia religious leader was to be buried Friday following a fatal ambush -- are 14 South Koreans, five Chinese, one Japanese and 16 Afghans, a local official told AFP.

The authorities have also shifted 70 Chinese construction engineers and workers from the construction site of a hydro-electric project near Gilgit to a safer location, he said.

"We are not forcing the foreigners to leave the area, those who have decided to stay on are being provided security," he added.

Gilgit, the gateway town to the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges, has been under a shoot-on-sight curfew since the violence in which 17 people died broke out on Saturday.

Cleric Agha Ziauddin died in hospital on Thursday and his body was due to be flown back to Gilgit on Friday amid tight security.



PHOTO: AFP
British Prime Minister Tony Blair (R) greets former US Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry inside his official residence at No. 10 Downing Street in London yesterday before talks.

Threat of disease fades

But agencies on guard in tsunami zone

REUTERS, Banda Aceh

The threat of disease decimating survivors of Asia's tsunami has receded but aid agencies are remaining on their guard, the UN said yesterday as doctors reported children dying from pneumonia.

Indonesia found almost 4,000 more bodies of tsunami victims, taking the global death toll from the disaster above 160,000. Despite that increase, signs of recovery were emerging.

Life was starting to return to normal in towns and villages on battered Indian Ocean coasts with markets reopening and fishermen casting their nets at sea again after the Dec. 26 earthquake and the tsunami that triggered.

Worries were fading that the death toll could double if disease broke out in afflicted areas, but aid agencies said they must keep up their guard and were acting to prevent malaria in the Indonesian province of Aceh that was worst hit by the wave.

"There are no alarm bells ringing, but we cannot slacken our efforts. The threat is still there," Margareta Wahlstrom, the UN special coordinator for the disaster, told reporters in Jakarta after returning from Banda Aceh, the provincial capital.

In Indonesia at least 110,000 people died and many thousands more are missing after the earthquake off the coast of northern Sumatra island.

Environmental experts say southeast Asia's mangroves -- many of which have been ripped out to make room for shrimp and fish farms -- could have helped to slow the tsunami by providing a barrier between the killer waves and land.

Kaban said Indonesia would revive its mangrove coastal defenses, earmarking 600,000 hectares for revitalisation.

"The tsunami in Aceh made us see the need to speed up this process," Kaban said.

About 700,000 people were made homeless in Aceh and many survivors were now living in makeshift camps.

While countries race to set up a permanent Indian Ocean warning

Indonesia seeks peace with Aceh rebels

AFP, Banda Aceh

Indonesia said yesterday it was seeking a lasting peace with separatists in Aceh province, where security concerns over a long-running civil war are affecting efforts to aid tsunami survivors.

Vice President Yusuf Kalla said during a visit to the devastated province, where many of Indonesia's 110,000 disaster victims perished, that the government had made tentative contact with the rebel group and wanted a long-term deal.

His comments came a day after exiled leaders of the Free Aceh Rebel movement sent word from Sweden that they wanted to sit down for ceasefire talks to ensure the safety of foreign humanitarian workers in the province.

Meanwhile pressure mounted on Indonesia to scrap a three-month deadline for the withdrawal of foreign military aid missions announced by Kalla. The United

Nations said the scale of disaster could require their help for far longer.

Speaking in Banda Aceh, the battered capital of the province at the northern tip of Sumatra island, Kalla told reporters the government was making "efforts" to arrange talks with the rebels to secure a permanent peace.

"It is hard to conclude but the steps towards that are now being built," he said. "Later we will arrange to solve the conflict, smoothly, cleverly and with dignity."

Indonesia struck an accord with the rebels three years ago but the agreement fell apart in May 2003, prompting the government to launch a major military campaign in Aceh.

Since taking office last October, new President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has said he wants to explore non-military solutions to nearly three decades of conflict in Aceh, but has so far failed to propose concrete solutions.

POWELL SAYS

Iraqi polls failure may embolden insurgents

AFP, Washington/ Baghdad

Deadly attacks against Iraq's Shia Muslims multiplied ahead of elections that the majority community is expected to win, as US Secretary of State Colin Powell warned that an unrepresentative vote could ultimately "embolden" insurgents.

Amid relentless violence across the country that claimed the lives of over a dozen Iraqis in 24 hours, warnings intensified that the country risked sliding into civil war between its various faiths and being broken up.

Seven people were killed, including four policemen, and 38 others were wounded in a bomb attack late on Thursday outside a Shia mosque in the town of Khan Bani Said north of Baghdad.

That attack came after an aide to

Iraq's top Shia leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the aide's son and four bodyguards were murdered Wednesday night after they left prayers in the lawless Sunni-majority town of Salman Pak, southeast of the capital.

The spate of attacks against Shias reinforced fears of sectarian strife leading up to and after Iraq's landmark January 30 vote, which Shia movements are expected to win easily and most Sunni groups have pledged to boycott.

Many fear that the Sunnis will feel excluded from the process and could vent their frustration through violence. Outgoing chief US diplomat Powell again emphasised the importance of all groups taking part if the vote is to succeed.

"I think the Sunnis want to have an opportunity to speak, with

respect to how they wish to be led," he told PBS radio. "And so I think a successful election will be an election where most of the population has gotten a chance to vote."

Powell expressed confidence that "there will be sufficient turnout so that you get a sense of what the Sunnis want to do" and suggested a setback for the transition to self-rule.

But he warned the elections would not end the violence in Iraq and said "the insurgents might become more emboldened" if the ballot turns out to be less than successful.

An even starker warning came from Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif, who warned of civil war and the eventual break-up of Iraq if the situation does not improve.

US to consider backing India's UNSC berth

AFP, New Delhi

The United States will consider supporting India for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council after examining a second report on reforming the world body, the US' envoy said Thursday.

Ambassador David Mulford told a press conference that the US administration would take up the issue after UN Secretary General Kofi Annan issued his own report on the issue in March.

"The US Congress reflects various democratic views. And, on this issue the administration will also take into account the views of the US Congress," he said.

Mulford's remarks came shortly after a four-member US congressional delegation, currently touring India, expressed support for India being given permanent membership of the Security Council with veto power.

China to hold talks with Taiwan over direct air links in Macau today

AFP, Beijing

China will hold talks with Taiwan today on plans to allow direct flights between mainland China and the island over the Chinese New Year holidays, state television said yesterday.

"The delegation of the Taipei Airlines Association Chairman Lo Ta-hsin and Pu's delegation will hold negotiations on January 15 in Macau over technical and business issues of the 2005 Spring Festival charter flights," China Central Television reported.

Chaozhou, the executive director of the China Civil Aviation Association, and a delegation were travelling to Macau Friday, it said.

Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council said Thursday it proposed the plan to hold talks with China this weekend.

Taiwan has banned direct transport exchanges since it split from China in 1949 after a civil war on the mainland. China considers the island part of its territory awaiting reunification, by force if necessary.

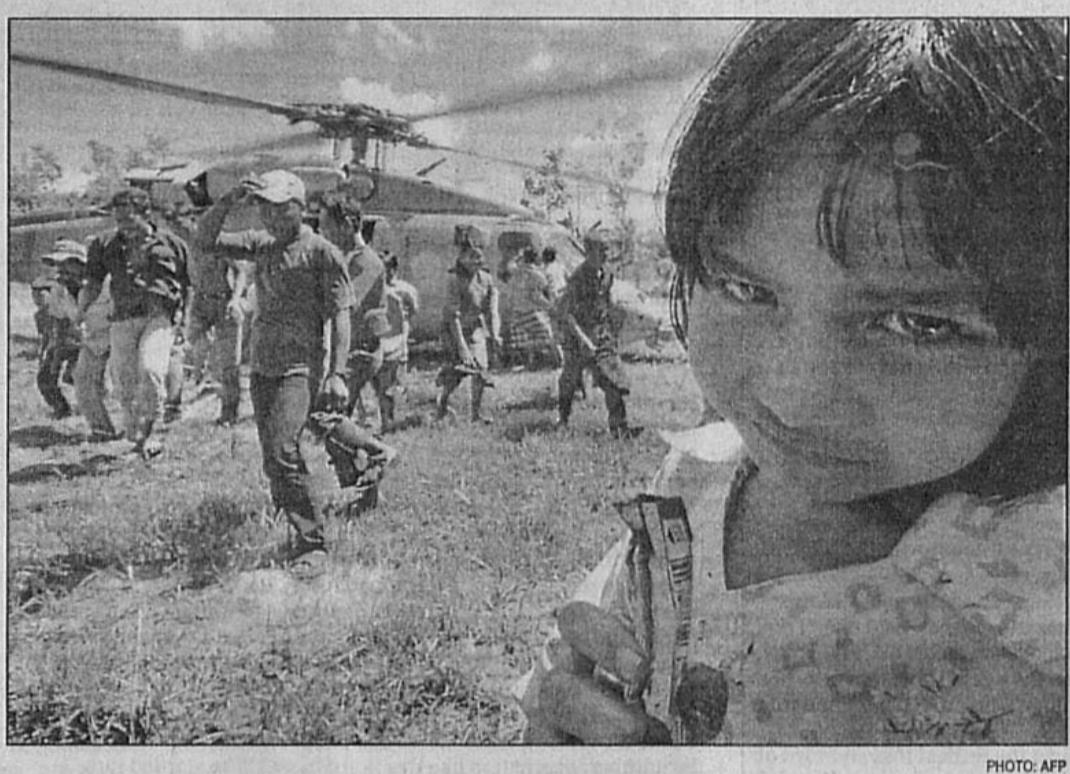


PHOTO: AFP
An Indonesian tsunami disaster victim (R) holds a chocolate bar as others gather in front of a US Seahawk helicopter to get relief goods in Suak Beka, west coast of Aceh province yesterday. The United Nations urged Indonesia not to impose a deadline on foreign troops providing relief assistance in tsunami-hit Aceh province, while US President George W. Bush predicted that US aid would help defeat Islamic extremists.

Pak tribal violence casts shadow on gas pipelines

AFP, Karachi

A series of violent attacks on the energy infrastructure in Pakistan's strategic southwest could have a major backlash on various multi-billion gas pipeline projects, industry experts said.

Pakistan this week sent more than 1,000 troops to the country's largest gasfield in poverty-stricken Baluchistan province and closed the main plant there after a series of clashes with tribesmen left eight people dead.

Violence erupted five days ago at the state-run Sui gas facility, which the tribesmen -- who have long campaigned for more royalties and jobs from the plant -- said followed the alleged gang rape of a woman doctor.

"This is something of concern to everybody," Asian Development Bank (ADB) country chief Marshuk Ali Shah said, as the tribe's chieftain predicted a major military assault.

The resource-rich province is a potential staging point for a number of gas pipeline projects, which have been proposed to satisfy the demands of energy-hungry South Asia.

One would carry gas from Iran to India while another parallel project would go from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan, and then possibly to India again.

But dissatisfaction is ripening among ethnic Baluch tribes, who blame Islamabad of purposely depriving them of the economic benefits from the natural gas and political rights they say they are guaranteed by the constitution.

A low-level uprising has been brewing for years in the region and similar attacks on the Sui gasfields two years ago caused winter gas shortages for millions of Pakistanis.

"These projects are of no good for us -- they are only a source of earning money for Islamabad" by selling gas to India, said influential tribal chief Nawab Akbar Bugti, the province's former governor and chief minister.

Energy industry representatives say that Pakistan will suffer if it cannot show that it is capable of policing its own power and natural resources infrastructure.

"This is very bad. It is not in the interests of Pakistan and will have very bad impacts on foreign investment," said Pakistan Exploration and Production Companies Association spokesman Jameel Hasan.

The Indian security forces were

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH SAYS

Asia hesitant to ease HR curb despite rapid growth

AFP, Washington

Developing Asian nations led by China are reluctant to ease curbs on freedom and improve on their human rights record despite rapid economic growth, Human Rights Watch said Thursday as it released its annual world report.

"In Asia, economic growth has not witnessed an equal amount of human rights advances," said Sam Zarif, the New York-based group's deputy director for Asia.

The rights watchdog said that in China in 2004, government promises of legal and political reform were undermined by official corruption, media censorship and enduring restrictions on freedom of expression.

Zarif said India, another Asian giant, was increasingly asserting economically and politically as a regional power "but the world is now waiting to see if it will also start acting like a world power in terms of respect for human rights."

The Indian security forces were

accused of serious human rights abuses not just in conflict zones such as Kashmir, but also when dealing with criminal suspects and detainees.

India's Aids problem and its discrimination against victims was highlighted in the report. The government estimates 5.1 million people are infected with HIV, the virus which causes Aids, though many experts suggest the number is much higher.

India's neighbour Pakistan saw a rise in sectarian violence, mistreatment of women and religious minorities, and arbitrary detention of political opponents last year, Human Rights Watch said.

Since General Pervez Musharraf seized office five years ago, Pakistan's military has "acted with increasing impunity to enforce its writ over the state and to protect its grip on Pakistan's economic resources, especially land."

The report also said Islamabad showed lack of due process in the

conduct of its so-called "war on terror" in collaboration with the United States.

Resource-rich Southeast Asia's human rights record also took a knock in 2004 with Thailand's brutal crackdown on Muslim insurgents, the harassment of dissidents in Vietnam, resurgence of military power in Indonesia and denial of basic freedom in Myanmar, Human Rights Watch said.

Prominent human rights concerns in Malaysia include arbitrary detention of alleged militants under the draconian Internal Security Act, restrictions on media freedom, constraints on judicial independence and abuses against refugees and migrants, Human Rights Watch said.

In Myanmar, political reform and national reconciliation remain elusive, Human Rights Watch said.

Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi is still under house arrest and the activities of her political party, the National League for Democracy, remain curtailed.

US INTELLIGENCE REPORT

Globalisation driving sweeping changes in world order

AFP, Washington

Forces of globalisation are ushering in an age of pervasive insecurity, eroding the relative power of the United States, driving the rise of Asian powers and enabling loose networks of extremists to exploit resentment among those left behind, a US intelligence study released Thursday finds.

The study by the National Intelligence Council, called "Mapping the Global Future," also concludes the world is likely to witness impressive, but unevenly distributed, economic growth in the period through 2020. It rated the likelihood of great power conflict as lower than at any point in the last century.