



Nepalese people walk past police barbed wire along a Kathmandu street yesterday. Nepali security forces battling Maoist rebels will be told to uphold human rights but guerrillas face tough action if they refuse King Gyanendra's call for peace talks, the kingdom's army chief General Pyar Jung Thapa warned.

## 'Pressure mounts on king to back down'

AFP, New Delhi

India is putting pressure on Nepal's King Gyanendra to back down from his "royal coup" but may be forced to back him, fearful of a Maoist rebel victory in the Himalayan nation, analysts and military officers said yesterday.

While New Delhi believes a military solution is not the answer to the insurgency, it has a vital stake in helping quell the revolt as it fears Maoist violence could spill into parts of India where radical leftist groups are powerful and create "a red corridor" from Nepal, analysts say.

"It's in India's interest to bolster and help Nepal's military as it has been doing for so many years because of the Maoist problem in India and the links between the rebels in Nepal and India," said Rahul Bedi, a New Delhi-based analyst for Jane's Defence Weekly.

New Delhi has expressed "grave

concern" at the dismissal of Nepal's government by Gyanendra who has pledged to restore democracy in three years in the impoverished Himalayan nation wedged between India and China.

"India is leaning on the king by putting subtle military and economic pressure on him. Since Thursday, no high-speed diesel supplies have been sent up from India to Nepal," said an army commander, who did not want to be named.

"The Royal Nepal army is dependent on fuel supplies from India -- all choppers and infantry combat vehicles run on high-speed diesel," he told AFP.

There was no official confirmation, but Indian transport officials said queues of trucks were idling in front of key Indo-Nepal border checkpoints in Raxaul, Jobani, Nepalganj, Nautanwa and Jaynagar.

The Times of India newspaper

reported India's new army chief General Joginder Jaswant Singh turned down an invitation from his counterpart General Pyar Jung Thapa to visit Nepal in what it said was "yet another indication of India's critical stand."

However, army sources said India had kept back-door negotiation channels open and was urging the king not to risk any major offensive against the Maoists unless he was sure to win.

New Delhi is also pressing the king to launch talks to end the increasingly savage conflict that has claimed 11,000 lives since 1996, they said.

India, along with the United States and Britain, has been an important backer of Nepal in its drive to crush the insurgency that has sapped the nation's already weak economy.

## Nepali army mulls tough action against rebels

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepali security forces battling Maoist rebels will be told to uphold human rights but guerrillas face tough action if they refuse King Gyanendra's call for peace talks, the kingdom's army chief warned yesterday. In an apparent bid to calm international fears of human rights abuses following Gyanendra's seizure of power and imposition of emergency rule, the army chief said forces will be "given directives" about "international law and the Geneva Convention" on treatment of prisoners of war.

Security forces should not "harbour any illusions about ... having unlimited powers during the state of emergency," said army chief of staff General Pyar Jung Thapa said in the state-run newspaper Rising Nepal.

At the same time, Thapa warned the army would pursue "a more

vigorous offensive" ... if the Maoists neglect the (talks') call of His Majesty."

Gyanendra fired the government Tuesday for failing to hold elections and quell the insurgency by Maoists, who want to topple the monarchy and install a communist republic, and named a loyalist cabinet under his "chairmanship."

He has pledged to restore multiparty democracy in three years.

Apart from heavy security, there was no sign of the political crisis in Kathmandu. The ancient capital's winding streets were jammed with traffic and schools, shops and businesses were open.

There has been no rebel response to the king's call for talks but after he seized power, Maoist leader Prachanda denounced him as a "national betrayer" and called for a broad political front with those opposing "feudal autocracy."

## OIL-FOR-FOOD SCAM Annan vows action against UN staff

REUTERS, United Nations

A probe into the UN oil-for-food programme for Iraq said the director of the operation got oil allocations for a firm run by a friend, and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan vowed to discipline him.

Benon Sevan, who ran the humanitarian program, was accused in a report from Paul Volcker, the former head of the US Federal Reserve, of soliciting and getting the allocations for a trading firm connected to the family of former Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

A second official, Joseph Stephanides, now director of Security Council affairs, was alleged to have intervened in selecting large contractors for the program he helped organize in 1996, before Sevan took over in late 1997.

Annan said he too would be disciplined and that if criminal acts were committed, diplomatic immunity would be lifted.

The oil-for-food program, which began in December 1996 and

ended in November 2003, allowed Saddam Hussein's government to sell oil in order to buy humanitarian goods. It was intended to ease the life of ordinary Iraqis under 1990 UN sanctions.

The fraud allegations have cast a shadow over the world body and Annan himself, who chose Volcker to lead an independent investigation.

"I think it is a fact that Mr. Sevan placed himself in a grave and continuing conflict of interest situation that violated explicit UN rules and violated the standards of integrity essential to a high-level international civil servant," Volcker told a news conference.

Sevan, a Cypriot, issued his own statement.

"Mr Sevan never took a penny," his lawyer Eric Lewis said. "Unfortunately, in the current political climate, the Independent Inquiry Committee needs to find someone to blame."

## CORRUPTION IN AID Lankan tsunami survivors take to streets

AFP, Colombo

Hundreds of tsunami survivors in Sri Lanka took to the streets in southern Matara district yesterday to protest corrupt aid distribution, police said.

The demonstration came as the government admitted 70 percent of victims had yet to receive any state help.

About 400 people staged a noisy demonstration in Matara to denounce officials responsible for distributing aid.

"The crowd was peaceful but they were shouting slogans against corrupt officials," a local police officer said when contacted by telephone.

"They are angry because they have been overlooked or aid is slow in reaching them."

Some 960,000 people are officially listed as being entitled to tsunami relief after the December 26 disaster.

The government has ordered public servants to work during holidays to speed up relief efforts after admitting that 70 percent of the survivors had not received any state aid five weeks after the catastrophe.

## Republicans express doubt on Bush's social security plan

AP, Washington

Congressional Republicans are expressing doubt that President Bush's plan for personal accounts in Social Security can win approval, saying lawmakers fear the political consequences of voting major change to the popular retirement programme.

Some suggested that Bush jettison the central feature of his plan, which is to let younger workers divert part of their Social Security payroll taxes to private retirement accounts.

"Politically speaking, right now it's probably not doable," Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said Thursday, citing lack of Democratic support.

"We should take this year to study the issue and come up with solutions," said Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine. She said there was no consensus for action now and that she had not made up her own mind.

Her Maine colleague, Republican Sen. Olympia Snowe, has said outright that she opposes diverting the program's taxes to pay

for personal accounts. Snowe serves on the Senate Finance Committee that would handle any Social Security legislation, making the task before Republicans more daunting.

Not a single Senate Democrat has endorsed Bush's proposal.

That stands in stark contrast to legislation cutting taxes, setting new standards in education and adding prescription drugs to Medicare. In each of these cases, the president had at least one prominent Democrat on board early.

Under Senate rules, supporters would need 60 votes for their plan if Democrats try to block it. That means proponents would have to persuade at least a few Democrats to join them if the plan is to become law.

That was partly the reason behind a two-day tour to five states that Bush began Thursday to sell his Social Security program. Each state is represented in the Senate by at least one Democrat who GOP strategists believe might back the president's proposal.



British Prime Minister Tony Blair walks with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the start of their meeting at No. 10 Downing Street in London yesterday. Rice met with Blair for talks on Iraq and the Middle East at the start of her week-long tour of Europe, Israel and the West Bank.

## Britain, US still at odds over lifting China's arms embargo

AFP, London

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her British counterpart Jack Straw said yesterday their countries continued to disagree over whether the European Union should lift its ban on selling arms to China.

"We want to ensure (along with EU partners) that the justifiable anxieties of the United States are factored into any decisions that we take," Straw said at a joint press conference in London.

Rice, making her first visit as the top US diplomat, said the two had not broached the issue on Friday but remained opposed.

As with any disagreement between allies, she said, the governments would work to "find a way to talk about them openly."

Britain backed an EU initiative to lift the 15-year-long embargo, which was imposed in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

In December, European Union leaders declared their "political will" to lift the arms embargo on China, while also stressing that Beijing must respect human rights and regional stability.



Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga (F) delivers a speech in Colombo yesterday to mark the country's 57th independence anniversary while heads of the navy, Daya Sandagiri (L) army chief Shantha Kottegoda (C) and airforce commander Donald Perera (R) stand behind her.

## Chandrika for ethnic unity to rebuild Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga called yesterday for ethnic unity to rebuild the tsunami-hit nation as a modern, progressive state in an address to the nation during scaled-down freedom day celebrations.

Speaking at the Independence Square public park here, Kumaratunga urged a unified approach to tackle the December 26 tragedy that killed nearly 31,000 people and initially left a million homeless.

"I appeal to all Sri Lankans, in all sincerity, that we should draw the lessons from the massive geographical upheaval to unite with those who we consider our enemies to rebuild our nation into a modern, progressive and truly Sri Lankan state," Kumaratunga said.

After initial cooperation between the government and the rebel Tamil Tigers over tsunami relief, a row over control of international aid has sparked new tensions.

Talks to set up a joint panel to handle foreign aid remain inconclusive after seven rounds of discussions, according to the Tigers, who have waged a 30-year war for an independent Tamil homeland that has cost at least 60,000 lives.

Kumaratunga used the occasion Friday to reiterate that government aid was reaching all regions of the country.

"In less than one hour after the disaster we commenced to send food and other relief items to the north, south, east and west without discrimination to any religion or community," she stressed.

Describing the tsunami disaster as Sri Lanka's "most devastating experience in living memory", the president praised the nation's resilience.

But she said the task ahead was massive as the country, which usually builds less than 5,000 houses annually, now has to build 75,000 new homes and repair another 150,000.

"Thousands upon thousands of houses, buildings that we built through the centuries were swept away. Not only were many centuries of our sweat and effort ravaged but also a significant portion of our history," she said.

The country also observed a moment's silence for its national heroes as well as those who died in the tsunamis.

In the wake of the tsunamis, Sri Lanka's anniversary celebrations were lacking the usual pomp and pageantry, with displays of military hardware as well as cultural shows being taken off the agenda of celebrations at Independence Square.

Hundreds of survivors, meanwhile, took to streets in the southern Sri Lankan district of Matara to protest corruption in aid distribution. The government has acknowledged that 70 percent of victims have yet to receive any state help.

The government has ordered public servants to work during holidays to speed up relief efforts.

## GUANTANAMO RULING Judge allows US govt to appeal

REUTERS, Washington

A federal judge on Thursday allowed the Bush administration to immediately appeal her ruling that Guantanamo Bay prisoners have constitutional rights and that the military tribunals to review their cases were constitutionally flawed.

US District Judge Joyce Hens Green also put on hold her ruling so it would not take effect immediately while the administration appeals to the US Court of Appeals.

In a sharp rebuke for the administration, Green ruled on Monday that the prisoners at the US military base at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba have the constitutional right not to be deprived of liberty without due process of law.

She ruled that the special military tribunals to determine the status of each Guantanamo detainee as an "enemy combatant" failed to satisfy constitutional requirements of due process under the law.

Green ruled the procedures failed to give the detainees access to material evidence and failed to let lawyers help them when the government refused to disclose classified information.

## Sadr belittles election, demands US pullout

AFP, REUTERS, Kufa/ Baghdad

Iraqi Shia rebel cleric Moqtada Sadr called yesterday on his community's senior religious leaders to insist on a timeline for a US troop withdrawal and belittled last week's historic vote.

"This is a message from Sayed Moqtada. I call on all religious and political powers that pushed towards the elections and took part in them to issue an official statement calling for a timetable for the withdrawal of the occupation forces from Iraq," Sayed Hashim Abu Ragheef told faithful gathered for Friday prayers in the Shia city of Kufa.

The firebrand cleric gave notice that he would no longer hold his tongue about political developments in Iraq after keeping quiet for months, according to a statement Ragheef read from Sadr to thousands of worshippers.

"I stood aside for the elections and did not stand against them as I did not want to show disobedience

toward the Marjiahay (senior clerics). I did not join these elections so that I wouldn't be one of the West's pawns."

"The West is so proud that they have held the elections but I would ask: who is responsible for the blood that day?" he asked.

Sadr was referring to the death of at least 36 civilians in attacks on Sunday as Iraqis went to the polls in the first free elections since the downfall of Saddam Hussein after the US-led invasion of March 2003.

Millions of Shias, who make up about 60 percent of the population, voted in an affirmation of the political process championed by the towering Shia religious figure, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Sadr's Mehdi Army militia battled US troops for seven months last year before laying their arms down in October.

Reuters adds: The number of attacks on US and Iraqi security forces has declined significantly in the five days since millions of Iraqis

braved threats to vote, the US military said yesterday, but the insurgency remains dangerous.

There were 125 attacks on US and coalition forces on election day, and nearly as many in the days running up to Sunday's vote, but since then attacks have dropped sharply.

"The attacks were down significantly in the first three days and we have reason to believe that's been the case over the past two days, although we don't have figures yet," said Lieutenant-Colonel Steve Boylan, a spokesman in Baghdad.

"There's no way of knowing if this is going to be a continuing trend -- we can't foretell what the insurgency is going to do -- and we don't want to raise expectations."

Underscoring the danger, police sources said an Italian journalist was kidnapped in Baghdad Friday as she conducted interviews on the street.

## PRISON ABUSE Rumsfeld says he offered to resign twice

AP, Washington

Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld says he submitted his resignation twice to President Bush during last year's Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal.

"I felt that he ought to make the decision as to whether or not I stayed on," Rumsfeld said Thursday on CNN's "Larry King Live" program. "He made that decision and said he did want me to stay on."

Rumsfeld indicated that he felt a measure of responsibility for the scandal. At a Senate hearing in May, Rumsfeld said the abuses occurred on his watch and "I take full responsibility."

"The problem is, this kind of thing occurs in prisons across the country and across the world," he said. "And you have to know it's going to be a possibility. And therefore the training and the discipline and the doctrine has to be such that you anticipate that risk. And clearly, that wasn't done to the extent it should."

## Thaksin expected to win strong mandate for anti-poverty agenda

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra will likely win a strong mandate this weekend to push his political agenda in a second term, especially if he is spared the succession of crises that marked his first, analysts said.

Thaksin swept into office in a landslide victory in 2001, promising to improve the lot of impoverished villagers.

He has generally received high marks for implementing his proposals, even as a string of unforeseen crises demanded his government's urgent attention, from outbreaks of SARS and bird flu, to a bloody Islamic insurgency and the tsunami's unprecedented devastation.

But his grand ambition to eradicate poverty by 2009 remains the great unsolved challenge -- one he will face growing pressure to meet,

especially if his Thai Rak Thai party wins the large majority it hopes for in tomorrow's polls.

"He will have a strong mandate," said Chaiwat Khamchoo, former dean of political science at Chulalongkorn University. "He will be more confident to promote his policy."

Sukhothai Thammathirat University political analyst Thawee Suraritkul said "people expect the government to follow through on its promise to find a solutions for the problems of poverty, and they are likely to receive solutions. This government has done what it promised in the last four years."

Thaksin's economic program successfully gave a shot in the arm to the rural economy, with low-rate loan schemes and health care programmes, as well as a slew of public works projects.



A street-side vendor prepares drinks beside an election campaign poster of Thailand's incumbent prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra yesterday in Bangkok. The face of Thai politics has changed in the past four years, with Thailand's oldest party in turmoil and a colorful new cast of politicians taking the spotlight, but traditions like vote buying and fraud remain rife.

## 4 officials found guilty of forced labour Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

A Myanmar court has made an unprecedented ruling convicting four officials of forcing villagers to work on a road project, sentencing them to prison for up to 16 months, a UN official said yesterday.

Residents in Kawhmu township outside the capital filed the complaints against the four village-level officials last year, accusing them of forcing villagers to help build a road, said Richard Horsey, the International Labor Organisation liaison officer here.

The trials ran for more than six months, and on Monday the court found the four officials guilty and gave them each eight-month sentences. One was found guilty on two counts and was ordered to serve two consecutive eight-month sentences, Horsey said.

"This is the first time. Never has anyone in this country been found guilty and given a prison sentence for forced labor," he said.