

# Nepal vows crackdown on corruption

## New govt to ensure good governance

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's new government vowed yesterday to crack down on corruption and ensure good governance but said multi-party democracy would only be restored and elections held once it had defeated Maoist rebels.

A cabinet meeting chaired by King Gyanendra adopted a 21-point socio-economic programme focused on "good governance and economic growth", state-run radio announced.

"Property amassed through abuse of authority, smuggling, tax evasion, illegal contract and commission will be seized and nationalised," it said, announcing the decisions of the cabinet.

"Strong action against the guilty will also be taken."

Gyanendra on Tuesday fired the government led by Prime Minister

Sher Bahadur Deuba for failing to organise elections or quell the insurgency by Maoists, who want to topple the monarchy and install a communist republic.

He also named a loyalist cabinet under his "chairmanship", declared a state of emergency and pledged to restore multi-party democracy in three years.

State-run English daily "The Rising Nepal" Saturday outlined other measures the new government planned to take to ensure better governance in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

It said a Royal Commission would be constituted "within 15 days" to investigate corruption while arrangements would be made "of an effective punishment system to bring delays, favouritism, nepotism and bribery to an end".

The government would also

accelerate the process of decentralisation by gradually according villages political, economic, social, administrative and semi-judicial powers, the report said.

The government would set up a land bank and make "judicious distribution of land" to squatters, the landless, peasants and freed bonded labourers.

A long-term programme would be instituted to modernise farming, implement irrigation schemes and boost the production of horticulture, cash crops and livestock.

The government also had plans to develop tourism and provide free education to a percentage of needy students.

It would launch housing schemes "to narrow the existing gap between the rich and the poor in Kathmandu and other big and small cities."



Nepalese soldiers patrol a street in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's King Gyanendra has taken a huge gamble by seizing power in a bid to end a bloody and brutal Maoist rebellion that has tortured the Himalayan kingdom for eight years, analysts say.

# King's power grab a big gamble: Analysts

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra has taken a huge gamble by seizing power in a bid to end a bloody and brutal Maoist rebellion that has tortured the Himalayan kingdom for eight years, analysts say.

If he succeeds, the status of the monarchy will be reinforced to the detriment of democracy; his failure could lead to the ancient monarchy's collapse, they say.

King Gyanendra fired the government on Tuesday, assumed all powers and declared a state of emergency, citing the previous administration's failure to bring peace to a country gripped by civil war since 1996.

The conflict has killed more than 11,000 people and ravaged a population that has suffered at the hands of rebels and government troops alike.

War-weary, ordinary Nepalis interviewed in the capital Kathmandu said that if they had to choose between peace and democracy, for which many have been pressing, they would choose peace.

"The population has been victim-

ised, people are less concerned with politics. They want first peace should prevail," said a pro-monarchy analyst.

The government that King Gyanendra sacked has come in for much criticism, like every administration in place since the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1990 when several political parties were allowed to operate.

"All the governments have collapsed, all the parties quarrel, corruption has become institutionalised," said an official with a human rights group.

"Nepalese cannot believe in democracy," he said.

In the king's favour is that the Maoists have for months been demanding direct negotiations with him, saying he has always been the sole source of power.

Their demand is ironic since the Maoists, split by hardline and moderate factions, are fighting for a communist republic to replace the monarchy. But King Gyanendra's place at the head of the new government that he has appointed could lead the way to such talks.



Buddhist monks ride on a Chao Phraya riverboat in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand, a largely Buddhist nation, goes to the polls today and incumbent Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, expected to win by a landslide, looks poised to become the first Thai leader ever elected to a second term.

# Thais vote today as Thaksin eyes win

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

Give all your votes to me that's what Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra Friday urged voters to do during Thai Rak Thai's last campaign rally before the general election today.

"Where in the world is a single-party government called a dictatorship? What's wrong with it when people have faith in me?" Thaksin rhetorically asked the thousands of people gathered at the Thai Rak Thai rally in the evening.

He was referring to widely held concerns that a one-party government by Thai Rak Thai might imperil Thailand's democracy by undercutting legislative checks and balances.

Flanked by his wife and children as well as party bigwigs and Bangkok candidates, Thaksin exhorted the more than 70,000 people massed in Sanam Luang to vote for Thai Rak Thai both in the constituency and party-list systems if they wanted to see an end to poverty in Thailand.

Standing his ground, he insisted that what Thailand had always

lacked was the kind of decisive political force that the Thai Rak Thai offered and that was why Democrat candidates were lambasting the party.

"Politics has to be based on firm foundations, which can be provided only by people's support," he stressed.

Thaksin urged members of other political parties to abandon politics as a profession and leave it to the Thai Rak Thai to bring happiness to people in Thailand. In the next breath, he urged his listeners to jettison the Democrats in order to teach its members an electoral lesson. "The country doesn't need the service of the Democrats right now, let them be introspective first," he said.

"Democracy does not mean Democrat," Thaksin added, explaining that he himself was a paragon of a true democrat and would soon prove it by staging a primary election within Thai Rak Thai to allow members to nominate their own candidates in future elections.

# 'Guantanamo detainees risk irreparable mind damage'

AFP, Geneva

Conditions at the US detention facility at Guantanamo Naval Base put detainees at risk of psychiatric deterioration with irreversible damage, United Nations experts warned here Friday.

"The conditions of detention, especially of those in solitary confinement, place the detainees at significant risk of psychiatric deterioration, possibly including the development of irreversible psychiatric symptoms," said a joint statement by UN investigators into the detention centre where the United States is currently holding some 550 international terror suspects from more than 20 countries.

Noting that there was no longer any international conflict in Afghanistan or Iraq, the statement quoted the Third Geneva Convention which states that prisoners of war must be released without delay when hostilities end.

# MUSHARRAF WARNS Peace in S Asia not possible without Kashmir solution

AFP, Muzaffarabad

President Pervez Musharraf warned yesterday that peace in South Asia would not be possible if Kashmiris were denied a chance to decide their future.

"Establishment of peace in the region is not possible nor can the confidence-building measures proceed unless the Kashmir issue is resolved in accordance with the wishes and aspirations of the Kashmiris," he said in a message as Pakistan observed a day of "solidarity" with the people of Kashmir.

The message was read out by Sardar Siab Khalid, speaker of the legislature of the Pakistani-administered zone of Kashmir, as bad weather prevented Musharraf from flying to the state capital, Muzaffarabad.

Musharraf, who has initiated a peace process with India to resolve all issues through dialogue, said Kashmiris would have to be included in the dialogue process.

Rallies were held here and elsewhere in Pakistan expressing solidarity with the people of Kashmir fighting Indian rule in the Himalayan state.

"It is the basic right of the Kashmiris to decide their future on their own. I want to make it clear that Kashmir cause is our vital national interest and we cannot think of compromising it," Musharraf said.

Islamic rebels in Indian-held Kashmir launched an insurgency in 1989 which has claimed tens of thousands of lives. Most of the rebels want to join mainly-Muslim Pakistan although some want independence.

# Rice's European trip clouded by Iran

AFP, Berlin

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is in Europe to promote American policies in Iraq and the Middle East, but the start of her first trip as chief diplomat has been dogged by the spectre of Iran.

Two days into her week-long tour, Rice has been besieged by questions about US policy towards the Islamic Republic's suspected nuclear weapons program and bleak human rights record.

She has tried to ease European fears the Americans might launch a pre-emptive military strike and has warded off queries on whether Washington was officially seeking regime change in Tehran.

She has heard suggestions the United States is undermining the nuclear negotiations by keeping quiet, or alternatively compromising the talks by speaking out too loudly on human rights.

The persistent probing and inconclusive US response have forced Rice on the defensive, where she had hoped to put Tehran. "It is the Iranians that are isolated on this issue, not the United States," she pleaded Friday.

This was not entirely the trip envisioned by one of US President George W. Bush's most trusted aides when she embarked on a tour

of eight European capitals, Israel and the West Bank.

The trip, a warm-up to Bush's own European swing later this month, was billed as a fence-mending mission aimed at capitalizing on the success of Iraq's national elections and new momentum in the Middle East peace process.

But on the plane over, Rice turned the focus on Iran with unusually harsh criticism of the mullahs in Tehran, calling their treatment of their people "something to be loathed".

She also raised eyebrows by ducking repeated questions on regime change -- even as her spokesman in Washington was telling reporters that officials "have been very clear that we do not have a policy of regime change toward Iran."

Officials traveling with Rice would neither confirm nor deny whether a new, more muscular policy towards Iran was in the works. But they acknowledged at least a change in tone on the issue of democratic reforms.

"The president and the secretary have made it more explicit that we support the aspirations of the Iranian people to control their own government," said a senior official, who asked not to be named.

# Subhash Bose not killed in plane crash: Judge

AFP, Kolkata

A retired judge inquiring into the mysterious disappearance of a famed Indian freedom fighter said yesterday there was no evidence to support the theory Subhash Chandra Bose had died in a 1945 plane crash in Taiwan.

Bose, also known as "Netaji" (leader), was president of the Congress party and founded the Indian National Army (INA) to fight British colonial forces.

He led a failed attack on colonial India from the tiny northeastern state of Nagaland and later reportedly died in a plane crash at Taihoku airport in Taiwan.

But former Supreme Court judge, Manoj Mukherjee, who was appointed by the government to conduct an inquiry into Bose's disappearance, said "there is no record" that Bose was killed in the plane crash on August 18, 1945.

At least two earlier commissions have held that the freedom fighter died in the accident. The new commission was appointed a couple of years ago after Bose supporters demanded the case be reopened.

"The Taiwanese government has shown me documents that there was no record of (a) plane crash in Taiwan between August 14 and September 20, 1945," Mukherjee, who recently visited Taiwan, told AFP.

# Abbas talks peace with Fatah ahead of summit

AFP, Gaza City

Mahmud Abbas held talks with the revolutionary council of his mainstream Fatah faction yesterday, three days before the Palestinian leader meets Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for a potentially breakthrough summit.

The summit, to be held in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh on Tuesday, has fuelled hopes that the Middle East peace process is moving back on track and coincides with a crucial visit to the region by new US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

It will be the first time top Israeli and Palestinian leaders have met since 2000, with Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert saying Israel was "strong enough to take risks" in its negotiations with the Palestinians.

Israeli public radio said top Sharon adviser Dov Weisglass was to travel to Cairo Sunday to establish the common ground between Israel and the Palestinians ahead of the summit.

Meanwhile, Abbas was holding talks with more than 100 members of his own Fatah party who sit on the revolutionary council, while a top aide said the aim of the summit was to declare a mutual ceasefire between the two sides.

"The revolutionary council of Fatah is holding an important meet-

ing in the presence of Abu Mazen (Abbas) to discuss the summit, political and security questions and the results of contacts with Israel," said Palestinian Authority spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina.

"We intend to work so that a mutual ceasefire can be declared between the Palestinians and Israelis at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit," he said.

"We are also demanding the liberation of 8,000 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel and hope to be able to sort out the differences in this respect in 48 hours," he added.

A group of senior Israeli ministers has approved the release of 900 Palestinian prisoners, with the first 500 to be freed soon after the summit. It has also okayed an army pullback from five West Bank cities and the transfer of security control to the Palestinians.

But the Palestinians have expressed disappointment at the prisoner offer, both in terms of numbers and criteria. In particular, they are pushing for the release of those jailed before the 1993 Oslo accords.

Abbas has publicly called for an end to the armed struggle against Israel while seeking to seal a ceasefire by militant groups, earning praise for his security clamp-down from leading Israeli officials.



Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas is seen during a meeting with Fatah's revolutionary council in Gaza City yesterday. The revolutionary council of the mainstream Fatah faction is holding talks with Abbas just days before a potentially breakthrough encounter between the Palestinian leader and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

# Blair's party slammed for bad English

AFP, London

Britain's governing Labour Party stood accused Thursday of improper English usage after it rolled out a new slogan aimed at wooing voters ahead of an expected general election.

"Britain forward not back" goes the slogan, which according to Labour's election supremo Alan Milburn neatly sums up the mood and desire of the nation as Prime Minister Tony Blair shoots for re-election.

But the Plain English Campaign, a lobby group that wages war on linguistic gobbledegook, said the slogan misses a verb, and ought to read: "Britain forwards not backwards".

"The verb seems to have been abolished by New Labour," said John Lister, a spokesman for the group.

"It sounds like a grammatical nicety, but it means you can put across a message with no specific action in it so you can't be tied down to anything," he said.

"It should say 'forwards not backwards' just for the sake of linguistic consistency."



Comrades of the four Iraqi soldiers killed by a booby-trapped motorcycle earlier in the day drive away their coffin yesterday from Basra hospital. The attack took place behind the general hospital in the Hay al-Rissala neighbourhood, in the centre of Basra, which is the country's second largest city.

# POLICE CHIEF SAYS al-Qaeda plot against London 'inevitable'

AFP, London

It is "inevitable" that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network will try to stage an attack in London, the British capital's new police chief said in an interview published yesterday.

Sir Ian Blair's warning in the Daily Telegraph newspaper echoed similar concerns expressed a year ago by Sir John Stevens, his predecessor as Metropolitan Police commissioner.

"It is inevitable that terrorists connected with al-Qaeda will attempt to carry out an atrocity in London," said Blair, 51, who took over as Britain's most senior police officer on Tuesday.

"I know that because they have. It is difficult to calculate whether it is inevitable that they will get through."

# CONSTITUTION DRAFTING Sunni clerics want troops withdrawal timetable

AFP, Reuters, Baghdad

Iraq's leading Sunni religious authority on Saturday made its participation in the upcoming constitution-drafting process conditional on the announcement of a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops.

The Committee of Muslim Scholars' spokesman, Omar Ragheb, was speaking to the press after its chairman Hareth al-Dari met US Secretary General Kofi Annan's special envoy in Iraq, Ashraf Qazi.

"Qazi asked the Committee to take part in drafting the constitution. We told him that we had conditions and that we would discuss them with the parties that boycotted the polls and would put forward a common

stance," he said.

"These demands focus on reaching a consensus with all political parties on a withdrawal of foreign forces," Ragheb said.

The spokesman of the organisation, which is also known as the Ulema Committee and was one of the leading forces that opposed last Sunday's general elections, hinted that the influential grouping of clerics could then weigh on the insurgency to end the bloodshed which has marred Iraq's reconstruction.

"Then, the country's elders will tell the resistance: 'No need to spill more blood'," Ragheb said.

Meanwhile, the United Iraqi Alliance, endorsed by Iraq's top

Shia clerics, captured more than two-thirds of the 3.3 million votes counted so far, the election commission said. The ticket headed by Allawi, a secular Shia, had about 18 percent or more than 579,700 votes.

Those latest partial figures from Sunday's contest for 275 National Assembly seats came from 10 of Iraq's 18 provinces, said Hamdiyah al-Husseini, an election commission official. All 10 provinces have heavy Shia populations, and the Alliance had been expected to do well there.

So far, 45 percent of the vote has been counted in Baghdad, with varying percentages tallied in the other nine provinces.

# Kashmiris get ready for 3rd phase of civic elections

AFP, Srinagar

Two people were killed and a Muslim candidate in ongoing municipal elections wounded in a surge of separatist violence in Indian Kashmir, police said yesterday.

A police official said a top-ranking rebel commander of the dominant militant group Hizbul Mujahedin was shot dead by Indian troops overnight in the southern Kashmir district of Rajouri.

In the same district, police said suspected militants abducted three Hindus late Friday.

"One of them was shot dead, while two others managed to give slip to their captors," a police spokesman said.

In the state summer capital Srinagar, suspected militants overnight shot and wounded Sheikh Mohammed Amin, police said. Amin had contested the second stage of the municipal elections held on Tuesday in Srinagar.

The latest violence comes on the eve of Sunday's third phase of the vote, which will be held in the southern districts of Anantnag and Pulwama.