

70 rebels killed in Nepal clash

FM tells world community to choose king or communism

AFP, Kathmandu

More than 70 Maoists have been killed in a fierce clash with Nepal's army, an official said yesterday as the foreign minister warned the world to accept the king's power grab or watch a communist takeover of the Himalayan country.

Four members of the security forces were also killed in the clash Monday night at Ganeshpur in Bardiya district, 500km southwest of Kathmandu, said army spokesman Brigadier General Dipak Gurung.

"So far the security forces have recovered the bodies of at least 70 Maoists killed in the clash," Gurung said. The rebels had carried away others of their dead, he added.

There was no immediate independent confirmation of the casualty toll.

The reported death toll is the highest of any clash since King Gyanendra a month ago seized absolute power and declared emergency rule.

Soon after his power grab he offered to hold unconditional talks with the Maoists, who have been fighting to overthrow the monarchy since 1996 at a cost of some 11,000 lives.

The Maoists, who branded the king a "national betrayer" for his February takeover, have not responded to his call but instead staged a two-week transport blockade, which ended at the weekend.

The blockade, which the Maoists said was aimed at getting the king to reverse his seizure of power, reduced transport to a trickle and sent food prices soaring.

Gurung told AFP last month that if the rebels rejected the king's offer of talks they faced a series of military offensives.

"We have to force the Maoists to come to the negotiating table, we are looking for them. Wherever they are we are going to launch offensive operations," he said. "We have to make them weak."

One of the king's appointed minis-

ters, meanwhile, warned in television interview late Monday the world had to choose between supporting the monarch and an eventual return to democracy or allowing Nepal to be taken over by communists.

In the interview, state-run news agency RSS reported Tuesday, Foreign Minister Ramesh Nath Pandey staunchly defended Gyanendra's seizure of power, saying it had been done at the express wish of the population because the politicians were squabbling among themselves and were not dealing with the Maoist insurgency.

The international community has reacted sharply to the power grab, with India and Britain suspending military aid vital to Nepal's fight against the rebels, while the United States has warned it will follow suit if Gyanendra does not restore fundamental rights.

'Laden asks Zarqawi to make US a target'

REUTERS, Washington

al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden recently asked his chief ally in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, to consider the territory of the United States as a target for terrorist attacks, a US counterterrorism official said on Monday.

"There has been communication between bin Laden and Zarqawi, with bin Laden suggesting to Zarqawi the US homeland as a target," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The official called the bin Laden communication "a fairly recent development" but declined to provide details for fear of compromising US anti-terrorism efforts.

The Department of Homeland Security said it issued a classified intelligence bulletin over the weekend warning state officials that the federal government had received nonspecific information about al-Qaeda plans to attack the United States.

Department spokesman Brian Roehrkasse said the threat was still being analysed, but was not enough to raise the US terrorism alert level, which is currently set at yellow to signify an elevated threat.

Number of asylum seekers in rich states falls to 16-year low: UN

AFP, Geneva

The number of asylum seekers arriving in industrialised countries has fallen to its lowest level in 16 years, after a third successive year of decline in 2004, the UN refugee agency said yesterday.

About 368,000 people sought asylum in 38 countries in Europe, North America and parts of Asia, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said in its round-up of asylum data for 2004.

The overall number of asylum requests fell by 22 percent last year, adding to a similar decline observed in 2003, the UNHCR added.

In Australia and New Zealand, the number fell by 28 percent last year (3,680) and has dropped by three quarters since 2001.

Palestinians muster world support

Leaders demand immediate moves against terrorism

REUTERS, London

World powers have demanded immediate Palestinian action to catch those behind a Tel Aviv suicide bombing that has broken a fragile ceasefire with Israel.

A statement by the Middle East quartet -- the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States -- urged yesterday "further and sustained" Palestinian moves against terrorism.

The quartet met on the sidelines of a London meeting on Palestinian reform clouded by Friday's suicide bombing of a Tel Aviv night club, in which five people were killed.

"We are very upset at the quartet statement," said a Palestinian official who asked not to be identified.

He said the Palestinians had condemned the bombing, but Israeli travel restrictions were hampering efforts by Palestinian security services to find the perpetrators.

"They (quartet members) are putting security as the first approach as if they want the occupied Palestinians to give security to their Israeli occupiers," the official said.

The bombing had undermined the truce declared by new

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at a summit three weeks ago.

The London meeting, attended by Arab and European foreign ministers as well as quartet members, told Israelis and Palestinians to meet their obligations under a peace "road map" to ensure creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

A final draft statement, obtained by Reuters, offered Palestinians support for security forces trying to stop attacks on Israelis, for parliamentary polls and for efforts to ensure order when Israel pulls settlers from the occupied Gaza Strip.

In return the Palestinians vowed to pursue security reforms, hold elections on schedule in July and fight corruption.

The aim of the meeting, hosted by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, was to back efforts by Abbas to implement reforms, halt violence and resume peacemaking with Israel after the death last year of veteran Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Israel, which had shunned

Arafat, is willing to deal with his successor, but stayed away from the London meeting, anxious to avoid international pressure to resume early peace talks.

The London statement said the path to peace required direct talks leading to "a safe and secure Israel and a sovereign, independent, viable, democratic and territorially contiguous Palestine, living side by side in peace and security".

Rice said her pointman on Palestinian security reform, Lieutenant-General William Ward, would move to the region, where he will coordinate security contacts between the two sides.

A Palestinian official said Ward was welcome. "We need him to be a witness to the actions of both sides," Mejdai al-Khalidi, an aide to Foreign Minister Nasser al-Kidwa, told the news agency.

Abbas told the meeting that reforms must be backed by peace negotiations with Israel, saying security efforts could collapse unless supported by a "serious political track".

He urged new efforts to implement the nearly two-year-old road map, stalled by violence and

upstaged by Sharon's unilateral Gaza withdrawal plan.

Palestinians want governments to press Israel to ensure that any Gaza pullout is part of the road map, not a one-off move to perpetuate Israeli control of West Bank settlements.

Gaza is home to 1.3 million Palestinians and the West Bank to 2.3 million. Nearly 240,000 Jews live in settlements in the territories, which Israel occupied in the 1967 Middle East war.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said it was vital to stop violence by militants, but Israel must also do its part.

"Israel must take no actions that prejudice a final settlement, and must help ensure that a new Palestinian state is truly viable. A state of scattered territories will not work," she said in remarks that echoed the quartet statement.

Representatives of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were also attending.

British officials expect some countries to pledge cash to plug short-term gaps, setting the stage for a donor conference by the end of June.



PHOTO: AFP

Migrant workers are apprehended and led to an open area by civilian security volunteers to have their documents inspected during an immigration raid, shortly after midnight in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Some 450 civilian volunteers and 13 immigration officers carried out the first raid on a construction site in a controversial operation to round up, whip and deport hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants following the end of a four-month amnesty.

Malaysia launches massive crackdown

First raid nets 62 illegal Indonesians

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian officials yesterday launched a controversial operation to round up, whip and deport hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants following the end of a four-month amnesty.

Some 450 civilian volunteers and 13 immigration officers carried out the first raid shortly after midnight on a construction site in Cheras, south of Kuala Lumpur, which netted 62 Indonesians, officials said.

Some of the illegal immigrants fled into surrounding forests under cover of darkness in an attempt to escape the dragnet but later surrendered to the officials, who were armed with batons while six officers also carried side arms.

The 62 Indonesians, including 27 from tsunami-hit Aceh province, were being held at Semenyih detention centre south of here, Mohamad

Amirudin Mohamad Yusof, director of the 300,000-strong civilian security force who led the raid, told reporters.

"It is a successful operation. No one was injured. We will conduct more raids," he said. The volunteers are paid 80 ringgit (21 dollars) for each illegal caught in the nationwide operation, codenamed "Ops Tegas".

The crackdown against illegal immigrants, mainly Indonesians, marks the end of an amnesty, which has twice been extended at Jakarta's request.

Malaysia had estimated there were nearly a million illegal workers in the country, mostly from Indonesia but also from the Philippines, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka.

Some 382,000 took advantage of the amnesty declared at the end of October and had departed before it expired at midnight Monday.

HR GROUP SAYS US rights report suffers from politics

AFP, Washington/ Beijing

A US State Department human rights report treated Latin American countries unequally, the result of US political priorities, a rights group said Monday.

"The credibility of these reports depends upon a coherent and objective analysis," said Kimberly Stanton, deputy director of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), a Washington think-tank and advocacy group.

"This year, the political priorities of the US government affected the evaluation of the data in some cases," she said.

"Flagrant disparities in the treatment of Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia" peppered the report, which was published Monday, she said.

Stanton called on the State Department to release information and "minimize the effects of ideology."

While the United States criticized Venezuela for a "poor" performance

last year, she said, Colombia "benefited from a much more positive treatment, despite extrajudicial executions by government security forces ... and the assassination of at least 19 human rights workers."

In the report on Ecuador, Stanton said the State Department "barely mentioned" a purge of the Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, a "very dissatisfied" China yesterday lashed out at the United States for criticising its human rights record in an annual report, accusing the Americans of double standards.

"We're very dissatisfied with this report and we will protest over this report," foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao told a regular briefing.

"I would like to take this opportunity to make the point that the United States should stop using double standards on human rights issues and stop interfering in the internal politics of China," he said.

Violence escalates as Norway fails to end Lankan deadlock

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday investigated escalating violence as a top Norwegian envoy ended another mission without a breakthrough in restarting peace negotiations between Tiger rebels and the government, officials said.

Police and the military were investigating two shootings Monday in the eastern province that occurred hours after a visit by Britain's Prince Charles, a military official here said.

The military tightened usually strict security in Batticaloa district for Charles to inspect tsunami destruction in the area, but soon after he left gunmen opened fire at a former soldier.

Defence officials said the victim was in hospital and an investigation was underway after he made a statement blaming Tiger rebels for the shooting.

The Batticaloa shooting came shortly after gunmen shot and wounded three women Tiger rebels in adjoining Ampara district, officials said.



PHOTO: AFP

Hundreds of Iraqis shout during protest in the city of Hilla, 100km south of Baghdad yesterday, a day after a massive car bomb. Hundreds of angry Iraqis protested in Hilla to demand improved security a day after a devastating car bomb attack in the central city that killed 125 people.

Saddam kept in total isolation, but in good health: Lawyer

AFP, Tokyo

Saddam Hussein is isolated from the rest of the world but in good health and was overjoyed when he learned that Spanish troops had left Iraq, a spokesman for the former strongman's legal team said yesterday.

Jordan-based lawyer Ziad Khassawneh said the ousted president who was captured by US forces in December 2003 "has good health now" but was "isolated from the whole world."

"He is now in a very small cell. He is not allowed to meet either his attorneys or his family," Khassawneh said on a visit to Japan at the invitation of a civic group.

"He doesn't have any TV, no radio and he is not allowed to read newspapers. He knows nothing about what is going on in Iraq or the world," he said.

Saddam last met his defence counsel in December and conveyed his greetings to all "free people" of the world "and especially to France and Germany," which were staunch opponents of the war that ousted him, Khassawneh said.