

Nepal cracks down on reporting on Maoists

Students hold protest, US envoy prevented from meeting detained leader

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has cracked down on reporting of the long-running Maoist insurgency, ordering editors only to publish information provided by the security forces or face punishment, state-run radio announced yesterday.

"Unless any publication or broadcasting source acquires information (from) sources of security bodies, publishing interviews, articles, news, information, reading materials, opinion or personal views that directly or indirectly instigate or support terrorist and destructive activities and terrorism will be punished," it said, quoting an information and communications ministry statement.

The media has already been restrained from publishing criticism of King Gyanendra's seizure of absolute power and declaration of emergency rule last month, during which a number of journalists were detained without trial.

Information and Communications Minister Tanka Dhakal, meanwhile, Wednesday urged the media to "restrain itself, be restrained, responsible and disseminate objective information", state-run news agency RSS said.

"The government has just tried to make the information and communications sector systematic so that the morale of the terrorists will not get a boost in the course of dissemination of information," RSS quoted Dhakal as saying.

"This measure is not censorship," he said. "Terrorism can be blunted only if the mass media fulfils its duty and responsibility in a responsible manner."

Meanwhile, hundreds of students held a hurried anti-monarchy demonstration Wednesday at Ratna Rajya college in Kathmandu to protest King Gyanendra's seizure of power and declaration of emergency rule a month ago, witnesses said.

During the five-minute protest, the students chanted anti-king slogans and others such as "Long live complete democracy", "Release all the student leaders and activists" and "Restore fundamental human rights."

Moreover, US ambassador to Nepal James Moriarty was prevented from meeting a former prime minister who has been under house arrest since King Gyanendra seized power in the Himalayan country a month ago, the US embassy said Wednesday.

PRISON ABUSE

HR groups file case against Rumsfeld

REUTERS, Washington

Two US human rights groups sued Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Tuesday, saying he first authorized and then failed to stop torture of prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights First filed suit in federal district court in Rumsfeld's home state of Illinois on behalf of eight former detainees who said they were severely tortured. All eight were subsequently released without being charged.

"Secretary Rumsfeld bears direct and ultimate responsibility for this descent into horror by personally authorizing unlawful interrogation techniques and by abdicating his legal duty to stop torture," said Lucas Guttentag, lead counsel in the case.

The Pentagon denied that it ever sanctioned or condoned the abuse of detainees.

"There have been multiple investigations into the various aspects of detainee abuse. None have concluded there was a policy of abuse," the Defence Department said in a statement.

The ACLU filed similar complaints against three other senior officers: Col. Thomas Pappas, Gen. Janis Karpinski and Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez on behalf of prisoners mistreated at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas (R) and EU Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana meet at the EU Headquarters in Brussels yesterday. After an international meeting to support Palestinian reforms the previous day in London, Abbas arrived in Brussels for talks with Solana and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso.

Israel warns Abbas of stormy future

Palestinians win global support for statehood

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel warned Mahmud Abbas yesterday of a bleak future ahead unless he crushes militants, as the Palestinian leader basked in global support for a raft of reforms set to create a viable Palestinian state.

"If the Palestinian Authority will not start acting against the terrorists, the future will be very bleak for Abu Mazen (Abbas)," a top aide to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said.

Five Israelis were killed in a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv last Friday, seriously denting mutual efforts to observe calm since Abbas and Sharon declared an end to hostilities at a Middle East summit in early February.

"If these organisations feel they can get away with things like this now, they will resist him even more in the future," added the official.

Israel delivered its ominous warning as Abbas was set to hold talks with top EU officials in Brussels, with some welcome international credibility tucked under his arm, after unveiling an ambitious reform programme in London.

In the wake of the attack --

claimed by the radical Islamic Jihad faction -- he has vowed to exert a "100-percent effort in the domain of security".

Abbas was set to meet European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana in Brussels. The EU is the biggest single source of aid to the Palestinian Authority.

On the ground, the Palestinian interior ministry confirmed that all heads of security in the West Bank stronghold of Jenin had been ordered to take early retirement after militants opened fire on a ministerial car on Tuesday.

All 11 chiefs of the security services would be dismissed, a spokesman said, but denied reports that the Jenin governor had been similarly sacked.

"Any official who will not act according to his duties and responsibilities, will be punished," spokesman Colonel Adnan Adnani told AFP.

The security overhaul came as Abbas won support from the European Union, the United Nations and the United States for an ambitious package of reforms intended to create a viable Palestinian state living in peace with Israel.

Participants at a London conference hailed his reform blueprint as "a major step in implementing its roadmap commitments" but similarly said they "urged and expect action by Israel" in relation to its own peace pledges.

The Jewish state did not attend the meeting, regarded by the Palestinians as a prelude to a full-dress peace conference, which France offered to host in the second half of this year.

Instead, Israel kept up the heat on arch-foe Syria amid growing Western pressure on Damascus, dismissing comments from President Bashar al-Assad that he will recall troops from Lebanon within months.

"We will believe it when we see it," said the Sharon aide.

In an interview with US magazine Time, Assad said a withdrawal of the 14,000 troops still in Lebanon "should be very soon and maybe in the next few months. Not after that."

Israel, the United States and France have been exerting major pressure on Syria quit Lebanon following the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri.



PHOTO: AFP
Nepalese policemen guard Padama Kanya Girl's College campus in Kathmandu yesterday in order to prevent anti-monarchy student demonstrations. Students held protests on the campuses in the country's capital, most of which are controlled by riot police, a month after King Gyanendra's seizure of absolute power and declaration of emergency rule.

'DAMASCUS TO QUIT LEBANON IN MONTHS'

France, US lead drive for Syrian pullout

AFP, REUTERS, London

France and the United States spearheaded a major effort Tuesday to drive Syrian troops out of embattled Lebanon and pave the way for free elections under the watchful eyes of an international force.

In a rare display of unity, French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called for the immediate withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the holding of free and fair elections there.

"We fully support the Lebanese people in their pursuit of an independent, democratic and sovereign Lebanon, free of outside interference and intimidation," they said in a joint statement on the sidelines of a meeting on Palestinian reforms in London.

They said their presidents -- George W. Bush and Jacques Chirac -- had "instructed us to work urgently together and with the international community to help realise that fundamental goal".

Seen to be seizing the opportunity arising from the dramatic collapse of the pro-Syrian government in Lebanon in the face of mass public protests, the foreign ministers pushed for internationally-observed elections within the first half of this year.

The Lebanese "must have the opportunity to chart their own course through free and fair parliamentary elections this spring, bolstered by an international observer presence prior to and during the elections," the ministers

said. A US State Department official said Washington was considering helping the Lebanese government exert greater control of the country.

"We know how difficult it might be for the Lebanese government to extend its authority throughout Lebanon and we would be looking for a range of things in order to help them," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Asked whether security assistance would be part of the offer, the official said: "Well, there are various kinds of things we might do."

The United States and France sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 1559 passed last year, which calls for an end to foreign interference in Lebanon and a withdrawal of foreign troops although it stops short of mentioning Syria.

Meanwhile, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said Syrian troops might pull out of Lebanon in the next few months, as Lebanese protesters rallied in central Beirut on Tuesday demanding Syria get out of their country.

Syria, which has 14,000 troops in Lebanon, has come under increasing pressure as a result of demonstrations following the assassination last month of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

"It (withdrawal) should be very soon and maybe in the next few months. Not after that," Assad said in an interview conducted on Monday and published by Time magazine on its Web site on Tuesday.



HK leader set to resign

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong leader Tung Chee-hwa yesterday looked set to resign, cutting short a turbulent eight-year tenure overshadowed by economic recession, policy gaffes and unease over China's interference.

Local newspapers splashed Tung's resignation across their front pages, but the governments in both Beijing and Hong Kong refused to confirm or deny whether the territory's first post-colonial leader was stepping aside.

Reports said Tung, handpicked by Beijing to be Hong Kong chief executive in 1997, handed in his resignation last month citing poor health. The Standard newspaper said it had been accepted by the Communist Party's ruling politburo.

Tigers warn of threat to fragile truce

Lanka orders probe into attacks on LTTE

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has ordered an investigation into increased attacks on Tamil Tiger rebels who yesterday warned that the violence will have "far-reaching consequences" for a fragile truce.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the attacks were aimed at provoking them and asked the Scandinavian-led truce monitors to investigate the attacks and make the findings public.

The LTTE said Monday's attacks against three of their women political activists in the island's eastern province could not have been carried out without the backing of security forces.

"We fear that such attacks could result in far-reaching consequences on the three-year long ceasefire agreement," the LTTE said in a statement Wednesday.

"Such attacks are clearly intended to provoke the Tamil people and the LTTE, who maintain severe restraint despite having lost senior officials and cadres to

such traitorous attacks during the period of ceasefire."

Also Monday, a former government soldier was shot dead in the same province and the military accused the Tigers of involvement.

The state-run Daily News reported Wednesday that the president had decided to appoint two high court judges to probe the violence and report within a month.

"The president has further directed that investigations should be made as to whether any group or groups of terrorists or any other forces in the Eastern province are involved in these attacks," the newspaper said.

There was no immediate comment from the president's office.

The violence was seen as a further blow to the already faltering Norwegian-brokered peace process.

Talks between Colombo and the Tigers have been on hold since April 2003 but both sides have pledged to uphold an Oslo-arranged ceasefire in place since February 23, 2002.