



PHOTO: AFP

A Nepalese student shouts slogans during an anti-monarchy demonstration in Kathmandu yesterday. Three students were arrested after a brief protest in the Nepalese capital against last month's takeover by King Gyanendra, witnesses said. About a dozen people representing seven student unions gathered at Maitidevi, a residential area on the outskirts of the capital and shouted slogans such as "reinstate democracy" for about 15 minutes and fled the scene as two van loads of riot police arrived.

Red Cross team probes Nepali detentions

AFP, Kathmandu

An International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) team is in Nepal to investigate military detentions after the king seized power last month, a statement said yesterday. Asia-Pacific delegate general Reto Meister is heading the team which arrived on Saturday and hopes to meet King Gyanendra and military officials, the Geneva-based rights group said. "During his meetings with government officials, Mr. Meister will in particular review issues relating to ICRCs visits to detainees in army custody," the statement said. After Gyanendra sacked a four-party coalition government last month to tackle a growing Maoist insurgency that has claimed more than 11,000 lives since 1996, the ICRC had urged both the new regime and the Maoists to respect human rights.

Ishwor Koirala, spokesman for the Human Rights Organisation of Nepal, said in March that at least 450 people have been detained since Gyanendra sacked the government on February 1. A report by the New York-based Human Rights Watch, said local human rights groups had recorded more than 1,200 disappearances in the past five years alone. But Foreign Minister Ramesh Nath Pandey said last week that "very few people are in detention."

N KOREA WARNS

US, ROK exercise may result in 'actual war'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea warned on Sunday that annual US-South Korean military exercises due to start this week and designed to deter any military threat from the Stalinist country could turn into "an actual war". The North's cabinet newspaper, Minju Joson, said the week-long military maneuvers beginning on March 19 in South Korea should be called off. "There is no guarantee that the large-scale joint military exercises will not go over to an actual war," Minju Joson said in a commentary carried by the official Korean Central News Agency. "The US and the South Korean authorities should immediately

cancel their plan for the provocative joint military exercises against (North Korea)." The commentary said North Koreans would "wipe out all the aggressors" in the event of war. Officials in Seoul and Washington have said the military drills are "purely defensive" and intended to check on the state of the US-South Korean military alliance. The exercises come amid new diplomatic efforts to bring Pyongyang back into six-nation talks aimed at persuading it give up its nuclear weapons programme. They involve some of the US troops based here, thousands of US soldiers from abroad and South Korean military contingents.

The drills include mock battles aimed at evaluating command capabilities with troops mobilised for anti-commando operations and computer war games. The USS Kitty Hawk, a US aircraft carrier based in Japan, will arrive in South Korea's southern port of Busan Monday for the exercises, the US military newspaper Stars and Stripes said Sunday. Some 32,500 US troops are stationed in South Korea to help deter possible aggression from communist North Korea. About 650,000 South Korean troops have been stationed against North Korea's 1.1-million-strong army on the Korean peninsula since the 1950-1953 Korean War.

ICC to hold first trial on DR Congo crimes

AFP, The Hague

Judges at the world's first permanent war crimes court tomorrow will hold a hearing focusing on the investigation into war crimes committed in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The hearing behind closed doors will be the first time that the judges of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which began operations almost three years ago, will formally focus on a specific war crimes investigation. In June last year ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo announced that he would open his first official investigation into what he called "serious crimes" including mass killings, rapes and torture allegedly committed in the DRC. The investigation into crimes committed particularly in the north-eastern Ituri region is ongoing but last month the judges assigned to oversee the pre-trial procedure announced that they would hold a

hearing on March 15. Ituri has remained a hotbed of ethnic strife and clashes among armed militias since the vast country emerged from its last war of 1998-2003, which claimed around three million lives according to surveys by some human rights organisations. The government in Kinshasa has undertaken to cooperate in preparing the case, which will focus on human rights abuses in Ituri, where relief and rights organisations have recently reported that rape, brutality and extortion by civilians of militia groups are routine. At the procedural hearing the judges plan to discuss issues related to the protection of victims and witnesses and the preservation of evidence, court documents show. The hearing sparked a conflict between Moreno Ocampo and the judges after the prosecutor filed a document earlier this week outlining his position that said the so-called status conference is unauthorised and threatens the impartiality of the court. On Wednesday the judges dismissed his arguments and turned down his request for a hearing on whether the judges have the authority to call a procedural hearing. The hearing will be held in closed session which means no press or public can attend and it is unclear if any information relating to the hearing will be issued Tuesday. The ICC, based in The Hague, became a legal reality in July 2002 despite fierce US opposition to the court. It is the world's first permanent tribunal mandated to try genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The court can only prosecute crimes committed after July 1, 2002 and only if the crimes were committed by nationals of countries that have given their backing to the court or were perpetrated on the territory of signatory states.

8 dead after US hotel shooting in Wisconsin

AFP, Wisconsin

A gunman opened fire at a religious service being held in a hotel in the northern city of Brookfield, Wisconsin, Saturday, killing seven people before turning the weapon fatally on himself, police said. Another four people were wounded in the incident and rushed to the hospital, where most remain in stable condition, Gene Purno, a police department spokeswoman, told AFP in a brief telephone interview. "We don't know his motives at this time," added Sherri Stigler, another local police official. The tragedy started to unfold shortly before 1:00 pm (1900 GMT) when at least two church groups were holding their regular services at a Sheraton Hotel in Brookfield, a western suburb of the city of Milwaukee. The assailant allegedly burst into the conference rooms where members of the Living Church of God were praying and opened fire indiscriminately on people inside, creating pandemonium throughout the hotel. His youngest victim was only 15, the oldest 72, officials said. Brookfield Police Chief Daniel Tushaus told reporters that no accomplice of the 45-year-old man, who had attacked the parishioners with a handgun, was being sought at this time. "We believe that the sole perpetrator is deceased," Tushaus said. A pickup truck reportedly belonging to the gunman was impounded and towed by police from the hotel parking lot. A search was also underway at his house. But no names -- either of the assailant or his victims -- have been made public.

'Pullout won't solve Lebanon's problem'

AFP, REUTERS, Damascus

Syria's official media warned yesterday that the promised withdrawal of all its remaining troops from Lebanon would not solve its neighbour's woes, in particular the sensitive Palestinian refugee problem. "The issue goes much deeper than a Syrian troop pullout from Lebanon, as the coming days will show," the government's mouthpiece daily Tishrin said in an editorial headlined: "Why all the fuss?" "One can already say that one of the aims of this hullabaloo is to harm relations between Syria and Lebanon ... They want to see the two countries estranged from each other... in a 'Greater Middle East' subjected to Israel." The last was an allusion to a US move to push Western-style democratic reforms in the region, that was originally dubbed the Greater Middle East Initiative. "They want to settle the Palestinian problem according to their own wishes and not according to international law, and in particular to deny Palestinian refugees their right of return (to homes in what is now Israel)", Tishrin said.

'Ghosts' scare off Malawi leader

BBC ONLINE

Ghosts - some taking the form of rodents - have forced the president of Malawi to move out of his state mansion, officials have said. Bingu wa Mutharika has been sleeping away from the 300-room building in the capital, Lilongwe, and only comes there to work during the day, an aide said. Christian clergy have been asked to help exorcise the "evil spirits" there. Controversy has raged over the costly palace which housed parliament until Mutharika's election last year. "The president is no longer staying there and we have asked clerics from several Christian churches... to pray for the New State House to exorcise evil spirits," said Malani Mtonga, the presidential aide for religious affairs.

China launches human trials of Aids vaccine

AFP, Beijing

China, grappling with rising numbers of HIV/Aids cases, has begun testing a vaccine on humans, state media said yesterday. A 20-year-old man became the first volunteer to receive the vaccine Saturday, the Xinhua news agency said. He was followed by seven others. Forty-nine volunteers aged 18-50 will undergo trials for the vaccine in the next year and longer, Xinhua said, citing Chen Jie, deputy director of the center for disease control and prevention in the southern province of Guangxi. The trials will be conducted in three phases, Chen said, with the first lasting 14 months. The second phase will test the immune nature and safety of the vaccine.



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese President Hu Jintao (R) shakes hands with Premier Wen Jiabao during a session of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. China's legislature approved President Hu Jintao as the country's official military chief, marking the final step in China's first bloodless leadership transition. Hu, 62, replaces aging former leader Jiang Zemin, 78, as chairman of the state's Central Military Commission (CMC), selected by an overwhelming 2,886 votes at the NPC with six votes against and five undecided.