

Filipino cops storm prison : 28 killed

AP, Manila

The Philippines braced for retaliatory attacks after some of the country's most hardened terror suspects were killed in a failed prison uprising that left 28 people dead, most of them inmates killed in a barrage of bullets as hundreds of police stormed the maximum security facility.

The dead included three leaders and a fourth member of the al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf, a group notorious for deadly attacks and ransom kidnappings in which hostages have been beheaded.

The crisis began with an Abu Sayyaf suspect snatching a guard's weapon and quickly turned into a prolonged standoff with at least 10 of the group's top suspects leading the rebellious inmates. Three guards and 24 inmates died 22 in Tuesday's assault to take back the prison. A police officer also was killed, his body discovered under debris hours after the operation ended.

Sweat-soaked police marksmen filed out of the building after the assault to the applause of bystanders, escorting prisoners stripped to their underwear and with hands clasped behind their heads.

"The terrorists got what was coming to them," Ignacio Bunye, press secretary for President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, said in a statement. "The crisis team gave them all the chances to peacefully surrender."

The raid began after authorities gave the inmates a 15-minute deadline to surrender, an ultimatum that came after hours of fruitless negotiations. Six officers were wounded in the assault, which saw some detainees scale down walls inside the compound as thick smoke billowed out.



PHOTO: AFP

Relatives of Abu Sayyaf prisoners look over the barbed-wire fence in an effort to find their kin after police commandos stormed the Camp Bagong Diwa prison in Bicutan suburban Manila yesterday to end the militant prison revolt.

Only 30 people to attend Charles's civil wedding ceremony

AFP, London

Only 30 people will attend the civil wedding for Britain's Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles, but 700 will watch the blessing later in Windsor Castle, a source close to the royal family said.

Those attending the April 8 civil ceremony in Windsor Guildhall will include the children that the heir to the throne and Parker Bowles had from their previous marriages, the source told AFP late Monday.

"There will be 30 people present for that (civil ceremony)," in keeping with the couple's desire for a "low-key" affair, the source said on condition of anonymity.

The source denied a report in The Times newspaper that 200 would attend the civil ceremony.

No details have yet emerged for the guest list for the civil wedding, though Queen Elizabeth II and her husband Prince Philip have decided not to attend the civil ceremony to keep the event a low-key affair, the family has announced.

Royal experts said the queen, as head of the Church of England, believed that a civil wedding in an ordinary town hall diminished the monarchy as an institution.

However, the queen will be present for the service of prayer and dedication afterward at Saint George's chapel in Windsor Castle, which the source close to the royal family said will have 700 people attending.

Nepalis threaten more protests amid blockade 500 anti-monarchy protesters detained

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese activists yesterday threatened further demonstrations a day after more than 500 anti-monarchy protesters were rounded up across the country, as security forces braced for a fresh transport blockade called by Maoist rebels.

The All Nepal National Free Students' Union "is going to hold anti-king protests in all the colleges across the country on March 27," a group official, Bal Gopal Upadhyay, told AFP.

"The protest programmes will include demonstrations, slogans and corner meetings," Upadhyay said. "Our main demand, however is a republic form of government in the country."

Witnesses said dozens of people were detained Monday in the capital alone as the main political parties began a programme of demonstrations against King Gyanendra's seizure of power last month.

Police said only 18 people were arrested, of whom three would be

released later Tuesday while 15 would be held for three months under the Public Security Act.

Among those detained are leaders, lawmakers and activists of the five political parties who organised the protest, a police official said Tuesday.

"They will be served notices regarding their detention," he said.

Those arrested were members of an alliance of five political parties that had pledged to risk arrest to protest the king's sacking of his government and assumption of total power on February 1.

Most of the 500 or so political activists rounded up on Monday during protests in the Janakpur zone of the southeastern district of Dhanusha have been released, an official said.

"Excepting 45 top political leaders and activists, all ... 500 arrested on Monday were released later in the evening," an official from the Dhanusha chief district office told AFP by telephone.

New Iraqi parliament convenes today

5 killed in 3 Baghdad car bombings, GI in separate attack

AP, Baghdad

Kurdish and Shia leaders agreed to convene Iraq's new parliament today even if they fail to iron out some wrinkles in their deal to form a coalition government. Three car bombs exploded in Baghdad, killing at least five people, police said.

Shia officials said Monday that they also agreed to reach out to the country's Sunni Arab community to name the parliament speaker for the 275-member National Assembly that is to convene for the first time since Jan. 30 elections.

On Tuesday, a car bomb targeting a US military convoy exploded on the main road to Baghdad's international airport, police Capt. Thamer Talib said. Four civilians were killed and seven were wounded, including two police officers, he said.

In a report unconfirmed by US

officials, witnesses said some US troops were also wounded. When US forces arrived on the scene to evacuate them, another car bomb exploded, wounding more troops. One Humvee was destroyed and two civilian cars were in flames, witnesses said.

A US military spokesman said he was checking into the report.

Another suicide car bomb exploded in northeastern Baghdad, killing one child and wounding at least four people, including a police officer, police Col. Muhanad Sadoun said. The bomber was trying to hit a traffic police patrol but crashed into a tree, Sadoun said.

Separately, a US Marine with the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force died Monday in Anbar, a troubled province that has been a hotbed of guerrilla activity and includes the cities of Fallujah, Ramadi and Qaim, officials said Tuesday.

The Shia clergy-backed United

Munda wins trust vote in Jharkhand

PTI, New Delhi

The Arjun Munda government in Jharkhand yesterday comfortably won a vote of confidence in the 81-member assembly in the absence of three UPA MLAs including the lone NCP member and also got its nominee elected as the Speaker.

Bringing curtains down on the fortnight long political drama enacted after the elections threw a hung assembly, the ruling BJP-led NDA got its nominee Inder Singh Namdahri elected as Speaker in a voice vote amidst uproar by the opposition members.

Later after a 15-minute break, the new Speaker allowed Chief Minister Arjun Munda to move his motion of confidence. But as the opposition UPA members trooped to the well of the House, the put the motion to vote. After asking those in support to raise their hands, he declared the motion of confidence has been carried by 40 votes.

Later outside the House, he told reporters that the opposition count was 37.

Anti-secession law heightens war fear

US, EU worried at Chinese move

AFP, Taipei

China's new anti-secession law heightens fears of war, Taiwan Premier Frank Hsieh said yesterday as the United States and the European Union voiced concern over escalating tensions in the region.

"The peaceful status quo has been altered ... the present situation arouses concerns for war," Hsieh told legislators.

He said Beijing had misjudged Taipei's determination to safeguard its democracy, as angry Taiwanese lawmakers decapitated paper effigies of Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao.

The Taipei government has demanded Beijing "sincerely apologize to the Taiwanese people for their grave mistake."

China's parliament passed the legislation Monday, giving the military the legal basis to attack Taiwan if it moves towards independence.

Undeterred, Beijing lashed out at the island for trying to "mislead," "hoodwink" and "distort" its citizens out of ulterior motives.

"It's a pure attempt to mislead and distort out of ulterior motives," an unnamed spokesman of China's Taiwan Affairs Office was quoted as saying by state-controlled Xinhua news agency.

"The objective is to hoodwink the Taiwan compatriots and the world opinion, again stir up confrontation in the Taiwan Straits, and seek an excuse for the Taiwan independence forces to create trouble," he said.

At the same time Wang Zaixi, vice minister of China's Taiwan Affairs Office, refused to say what specific moves by the island would warrant China to respond with "non-peaceful means" as stipulated in the law.

"For a law, I do not think it's possible or necessary for us to make examples concerning future complicated specific situation," Wang said.

With China bolstering its military capabilities and cross-Strait tensions growing, alarm bells have been ringing in the United States which warned the "unfortunate" law endangered regional peace and stability.

"We view the adoption of the anti-secession law as unfortunate. It does not serve the purpose of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait," White House spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters.

The issue is expected to be high on US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's agenda when she visits China on Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP

Armed Syrian intelligence members stand near a truck loaded with office furniture while preparing to leave a position in Beirut yesterday.

Palestinians ready for Jericho transfer, truce talks in Cairo

AFP, Jericho

Palestinians yesterday prepared to take control of Jericho from Israel in the first of five West Bank security transfers as Palestinian factions were to hold talks on a formal ceasefire.

After weeks of stalemate, Israel agreed to transfer security responsibility to the Palestinian Authority in the town at talks Monday between Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz and Palestinian interior minister Nasr Yussuf.

"We are totally ready to take control in the governorate of Jericho. We are ready to assume our responsibilities fully at both a security and civilian level," said Jericho governor Sami Musallam.

Israeli troops are to pull back from the quiet desert town and its surrounding area from Wednesday in a four-week process, a top Palestinian official said.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP that Israel would leave the town and two checkpoints on Wednesday.

The main DCO checkpoint -- which houses the office for coordinating with the Palestinians -- will be

dismantled and the remaining urban area evacuated within four weeks.

"We hope that this agreement will be implemented accurately," Erakat said.

A similar transfer in the northern West Bank city of Tulkarem is expected to take place on Friday, a Palestinian official has said.

The handover of security in five West Bank towns -- Ramallah, Bethlehem, Qalqilya, Tulkarem and Jericho -- was one of the key issues agreed at a landmark peace summit in Egypt early last month.

Movement on the transfers comes as Palestinian factions were to begin marathon talks in Cairo on Tuesday to decide on whether to agree to a formal ceasefire with Israel.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas, who was to attend the conference following an overnight visit to Saudi Arabia, said last week he expected the armed factions to agree to a ceasefire at the meeting.

But Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has said a ceasefire agreement alone is not enough and called on Abbas to dismantle radical Palestinian groups.