

Troops deployed to snub Kathmandu cut-off move

Army captain, businessman killed, govt warns politicians to toe the line

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese troops are in place to block a fresh bid by Maoist insurgents to cut off the Kathmandu valley, the army said yesterday, noting an improved security climate.

"We are ready for them," army spokesman Brigadier General Dipak Gurung told AFP.

"They plan to isolate Kathmandu but our troops are already deployed."

The army would provide armed escorts to civilian vehicles, the general said, predicting that the blockade would fail as it did last time.

"So we don't see any problem," he added.

Violence in the valley, where bombings were an almost daily occurrence last year, has virtually halted since King Gyanendra seized total power on February 1.

When the rebels declared a similar strike in mid-March against the power grab, police said it had been largely ignored and transport little affected in the hub of the kingdom's road network.

Troops had deployed in sensitive areas after the rebels called for a blockade from March 14 to April 1.

This time the Maoists have announced an 11-day stoppage from Saturday to April 12.

They issued a statement urging the masses "to create a storm of action in favour of full democracy and against autocracy."

In February a blockade was enforced by the rebels, more through threats than physical action, slowing traffic to a trickle sending fresh food prices soaring.

Maoist rebels shot dead a businessman and an army captain and torched two trucks, while two guerrillas were killed in separate incidents across Nepal in the past few days, a security force source said yesterday.

Two Maoists posing as customers shot Narayan Kumar Shrestha, chairman of the Sindhuli District Chamber of Commerce and Industry, while he was in his shop Thursday evening, the source said.

In another incident, Maoist rebels earlier this week shot dead Arjun Palpali, a captain of the Royal Nepal Army at Kawasoti in Nepal's southern Chitwan district.

"Captain Palpali who was seriously injured in the attack succumbed to his injuries on Wednesday," the security source said, quoting a delayed message from officials in the district.

Meanwhile, two rebels were killed in a clash Thursday night with the security forces at Ghoplu Bhanjyang in Solukhumbi district, an army source said.

On the eve of an 11-day national strike they have called starting Saturday, Maoist rebels set ablaze two trucks carrying goods and construction materials on the Sindhuli-Bardibas road late Thursday, a police official said.

Moreover, Nepal's Communications and Information Minister Tanka Dhakal warned the country's political leaders Thursday to toe the line and to avoid protesting King Gyanendra's power grab on the streets.

"The country is facing a grave crisis and to solve this problem, the king had recently taken the steps and to maintain peace and security," Minister Dhakal told a press conference.

"The political party leaders should cooperate the king's move and maintain peace and security in the country," Dhakal said.



Faithfuls pray in St Peter's Square at the Vatican as they wait for news about Pope John Paul II's health. Pope John Paul II is "sick, very sick", and he has been given last rites as he battles a high fever caused by a urinary infection, according to the Vatican and Italian news reports.

Prayers around the world for pope

AFP, Rome

Faithful from around the world prayed for Pope John Paul II as the one-billion strong Roman Catholic community awoke Friday to alarming news of the 84-year-old pontiff's rapidly deteriorating health.

Several hundred worshippers gathered at St Peter's Square under heavy police presence to await news of the pope, who received the rites administered to the ill when approaching death after his health took a dramatic turn for the worse.

"I'm in anguish going through this. I learned that the pope was very sick during the night, while I was at work, and I came straight here," said a Roman citizen in his 50s.

"I'm not a believer but I felt the need to come here anyway, in the face of so much suffering," said another young man.

Vatican Radio said early Friday that the pope's condition appeared to have stabilised, the first positive news on his health after Italian news reports that he had received the last rites and was even too weak to be hospitalised.



A Singaporean RSAP personnel evacuating an injured earthquake victim yesterday on Nias Island. A United Nation official said the latest estimates from the massive March 28 earthquake which struck northwestern Indonesia puts the death toll as high as 1,300.

Thousands flee amid fresh quake panic

AFP, Gunung Stoli

New panic swept Indonesia's Simeulue island yesterday as most of the population fled to the hills after rumours of a repeat of the earthquake that destroyed entire villages five days ago, a senior official said.

The majority of the 78,000 islanders had left their homes after hearing of an imminent earthquake even bigger than the 8.7-strong one that pounded the area on Monday, Simeulue district chief Darmili told AFP.

Continuing aftershocks intensified the panic on the island, which had only just begun picking itself up after the 9.3-strong December earthquake that unleashed a tsunami that killed around 273,000 people across the Indian Ocean.

Knowledge passed down through the generations about the signs of a looming tsunami had helped tiny Simeulue escape major fatalities in December: when villagers saw the sea recede, they fled to higher ground.

Now most are too afraid to return.

"What is certain is that now a majority of the population of Simeulue are now refugees," said Darmili, who only uses one name.

"The people are now in great fear and are worried because there is a rumour circulating that an even more massive earthquake will soon occur again," he said.

An emergency assessment of remote areas of the island that could only be accessed by motorbike revealed Monday's quake had caused more damage than initially believed, UN aid operations coordinator Michele Lipner told AFP.

"In some areas we have 70-80 percent structural damage and in some villages, up to 100 percent," Lipner said.

The death toll remained at 17, substantially lower than the some 1,000 estimated to have died on neighbouring Nias island, with nearly 180 people injured, she said.

The December quake killed only seven people on Simeulue and damaged around a third of the island's 15,000 homes, along with the hospital and mosques, local officials said at the time.

The UN said it had assessed half of the island by late Thursday, finding that nearly 40 percent of the islanders had left their homes in fear of another disaster.

'Super volcano may dwarf earthquake catastrophes'

AFP, Sydney

As Indonesians struggled to recover from the second deadly earthquake to strike them in three months, an Australian expert warned yesterday that the country faced the prospect of a "super volcano" eruption that would dwarf all previous catastrophes.

Professor Ray Cas of Monash University's School of Geosciences said the world's biggest super volcano was Lake Toba, on Indonesia's island of Sumatra, site of both the recent massive earthquakes.

Cas told Australian media Friday that Toba sits on a faultline running down the middle of Sumatra -- just where some seismologists say a third earthquake might strike following the 9.0 magnitude quake on December 26 and Monday's 8.7 temblor.

Those quakes occurred along faultlines running just off Sumatra's west coast and created seismological stresses which could hasten an eruption.

Cas said Toba last erupted 73,000 years ago in an event so massive that it altered the entire world's climate.

Maps need to be redrawn

Latest Indonesia quake reshapes the landscape

AFP, Jakarta

Three months after the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster saw Indonesia's Sumatra island nudged slightly towards Sri Lanka, the latest quake to hit the region has again altered the landscape.

Anecdotal evidence collected from witnesses in the remote islands of Nias and Simeulue, which were close to the epicentre of Monday's 8.7-magnitude quake, points to substantial change on shorelines around the islands.

In some areas, the land has tilted, exposing large tracts of beach that were once below the water line and thrusting coral reefs up into the air, while dipping other low lying coastal areas into the sea.

Photos shot by Brian Williams, an Australian running a surf camp on Simeulue, show a wide strip of white sand in Simeulue's Gusong Bay, which people familiar with the area say was not there before.

"I was there recently. The beach used to be three metres (yards) wide, now it's 30 metres wide and reefs that were underwater are now above water," Kirk Wilcox of the surfing goods firm Quicksilver, said.

"The same lifting occurred on the top part of Simeulue island after the first earthquake on December 26, 2004, while the lower part of Simeulue dropped."

The December quake, now measured at 9.3 on the Richter scale, caused major upheaval in the region as two continental plates that collide on a fault line close to Nias and Simeulue crunched against each other.

Tsunamis unleashed by the quake also caused enormous damage to the region's coastlines, killing in excess of 270,000 people.

Eyewitnesses say the latest quake also triggered a moderate tsunami, three metres in height, which caused a small amount of damage on Simeulue and the Sumatra coast area of Singkil, where it surged several hundred metres inland.

US to keep up pressure on Iran, N Korea despite damning WMD report

AFP, Washington

The White House said Thursday it had no plans to change its approach to nuclear disputes with North Korea and Iran despite a new report warning that intelligence on their atomic programs may be shaky.

"We've got to continue to work to improve our intelligence capabilities, and we've got to continue to confront the threats posed by the regimes of North Korea and Iran," said spokesman Scott McClellan.

"We're pursuing diplomatic approaches to get them to open up to the international community and fulfil their international obligations. That's what we're working to do," McClellan told reporters.

He spoke after a presidential commission said pre-war US intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was "dead wrong" and warned that US spy agencies lack information about countries like Iran and North Korea.

"The bad news is that we still know disturbingly little about the weapons programs and even less about the intentions of many of our most dangerous adversaries," the panel said in its 600-page report.

Separately, US President George W. Bush indicated that he still believed in using the preemptive military force against rising threats, a doctrine he articulated after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and applied to Iraq.

"My administration will continue to make intelligence reforms that will allow us to identify threats before they fully emerge so we can take effective action to protect the American people," he told reporters.

"We need to prevent terrorists from getting their hands on the weapons of mass murder they would like to use against our citizens," Bush said as he unveiled the presidential commission's report on flawed intelligence.

Bush, who lumped Iraq with North Korea and Iran in an "axis of evil," ordered the war on Iraq on grounds that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction and could give them to terrorists targeting the United States.

The commission said after a year-long enquiry that the flaws that crippled analysis of Iraq "are still all too common" and warned that US intelligence on countries like Iran and North Korea lacks critical information.

World's largest iceberg on the move again

AFP, Christchurch

The threat of sea access being blocked to US and New Zealand bases in Antarctica may have receded after the world's largest iceberg broke free from the McMurdo Sound sea bed last month, New Zealand Antarctic officials said.

Iceberg B-15A -- equivalent in size to Luxembourg -- has started moving again into deeper water after becoming stuck in relatively shallow seas in January.

The previous position of the iceberg had caused a build up of sea ice in McMurdo Sound, threatening access by US ice-breaking ships to New Zealand's Scott Base and the nearby US McMurdo Sound base.

Antarctica New Zealand Chief Executive Lou Sanson said staff were watching the situation with interest but, after past experiences, were making no predictions about the massive iceberg's likely course.

"We know very little about what makes this thing tick. Every time someone has made a prediction about it, they've been proved wrong," Sanson said.

'China supports larger role for India at UN'

Delhi rejects UNSC seat sans veto power

AFP, PTI, New Delhi

China supports a bigger role for India in the United Nations and the UN Security Council, China's ambassador to New Delhi said yesterday ahead of next week's landmark visit by Chinese premier Wen Jiabao.

"We would like to see India play a bigger role at the UN as well as the Security Council," said China's envoy to New Delhi, Sun Yuxi.

But Sun stopped short of expressing any direct support for India's candidature for a permanent UN Security Council seat.

"People in the UN are now discussing it (expansion of the UN Security Council)... there are many different ideas... I don't want to make any specific remark on that... I don't want to influence it in any way," he said.

Japan, India, Germany and Brazil have launched a joint bid to win permanent seats on the Security Council. Veto-wielding power is currently in the hands of five powers -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- in a system rewarding the winners of World War II.

Meanwhile, Sun said the border between India and China, which has been at the heart of a decades-old dispute, should become a "bridge" for friendship between Asia's two most populous countries.

"Our major effort is to keep our border as peaceful and tranquil areas," Sun said.

"We have a common border. We want that the border becomes a bridge for exchanges and friendship," he said.

India and China fought a brief but bitter border war in 1962 and have not established a formal ceasefire line since then.

New Delhi accuses Beijing of occupying 38,000 square kilometres (14,670 square miles) of territory in Kashmir while Beijing claims 90,000 square kilometres -- all of Arunachal Pradesh state.

On Friday, Sun said Arunachal Pradesh was "a disputed area" between India and China.

In recent years, New Delhi and Beijing have played down their territorial dispute to focus on improving commercial and other ties.

Relations improved dramatically after a visit to China by then-prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2003, during which India acknowledged Tibet as a part of China and Beijing gave up its territorial claim over the tiny Indian state of Sikkim.

Earlier India has firmly ruled out accepting membership of the expanded UN Security Council without veto power, saying sans veto, new members would not be able to fulfil the mandate of the General Assembly efficiently.

Responding to suggestions at a meeting attended by diplomats from more than 150 countries in United Nations on Thursday, India's ambassador to UN Nirupam Sen said both in terms of decision-making and in legal constitutional terms, "We cannot accept any discrimination between permanent members."

The meeting was organised by India, Japan, Germany and Brazil, a grouping named G-4 formed to mount pressure on UNSC.

UN sends Darfur suspects to Hague court for trial

REUTERS, United Nations

The UN Security Council decided to send cases of war crimes suspects in Sudan's Darfur region to the new International Criminal Court after agreeing to exemptions for US citizens.

The United States then abstained from the vote late on Thursday in the 15-member council, withdrawing its threat of a veto after insisting for weeks it would reject any move that would give the Hague-based court legitimacy.

The resolution marked the first time the council referred a case to the ICC, which opened its doors a year ago. It is the first permanent global criminal court, set up by treaty individuals accused of genocide, war crimes and mass human rights abuses.

The vote was 11 in favour and four abstentions. In addition to the United States, abstentions came from China and Algeria, which opposed any international trials, and Brazil, a supporter of the court, which objected to exemptions the United States demanded as a contravention of ICC statutes.

The 11 "yes" votes came from France, Britain, Russia, Denmark, Greece, Argentina, Benin, Tanzania, Romania, the Philippines and Japan.

The Bush administration was in the difficult position of either modifying its fierce opposition to the ICC or vetoing a resolution that would try people for the arson, slaughter and rape in Darfur that Washington has itself called genocide.

Pakistan a dilemma for United States

AFP, Washington

When a US State Department report this week denounced Pakistan for a "poor" human rights record, a military-dominated political system and corrupt judiciary, there was little new.

But if the criticisms were familiar, they raised some cynical eyebrows here coming just three days after Washington announced plans to sell Islamabad two dozen F-16 fighter jets, ending a 15-year ban.

Perhaps more than any other country, Pakistan highlights the challenges facing President George W. Bush's administration as it tries to square its drive for global democracy with its strategic needs in the war on terror.

"Pakistan is a really difficult case," Michael Kozak, acting assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labour, acknowledged this week in summing up the US approach to the government of President Pervez Musharraf.

Washington sees Islamabad as a crucial ally in its battle against terrorism, a moderating Muslim influence that cooperated in the war on Afghanistan and is helping to root out Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

The rewards for Pakistan have been plenty: three billion dollars in promised aid over five years, debt relief, negotiations on a bilateral investment treaty, and now the F-16 sale despite bitter objections from subcontinent rival India.

But critics see the administration lavishing money and attention on an autocratic regime that clandestinely developed nuclear weapons, sold the technology worldwide and is only half-heartedly battling al-Qaeda.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) and his wife (R) take a moment to pay their respects Thursday to the Samadhi of Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam at the "Jardin des Pamplemousses" in Port Louis, Mauritius. Singh is flanked by Mauritius minister of agriculture Nando Bodha (L) and by opposition leader Dr Navin Ramgoolam (2nd L).

30 killed in Rio de Janeiro drive-by shooting

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Thirty people, including three children, were killed by eight gunmen in two cars driving around northern Rio de Janeiro suburbs Thursday night, a local official told CBN radio.

The group of shooters first killed 15 people in the Nova Iguaçu neighbourhood at around 8:40 pm (2340 GMT), followed by another 15 an hour later in Queimados, said the Secretary of Security of Rio de Janeiro state Marcelo Itagiba.

He said the group appeared to be "made up of police officers".

Human rights groups have in the past accused police death squads of killing street kids.

"It all happened so quickly," a witness told TV Globo News.

In Nova Iguaçu the gunmen began firing on six people inside a bar and then on another nine people in the vicinity," said another witness whose son was among the victims.