

Koirala calls on king to restore democracy

Maoists bomb 2 bridges, slap blockade on key highway

AFP, Kathmandu

Former Nepal prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala yesterday used his first day of freedom after two months of house arrest to demand King Gyanendra restore democracy immediately if he wants to defeat the Maoist insurgency.

"The parliament must be reinstated by the king which will activate the constitution and, after that, an all-party government can be formed which will tackle the Maoist problem," Koirala said Saturday morning at the first press conference after his release Friday evening.

Koirala, 82, was one of hundreds of political leaders and activists held since February 1 when Gyanendra



sacked the government and declared emergency rule in the Himalayan nation to tackle a Maoist insurgency that has killed more than 11,000

people since 1996.

Koirala, leader of the Nepali Congress party, was among 83 people freed Friday in the Kathmandu Valley. Gyanendra has released other senior politicians held under house arrest including former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba in early March.

Koirala's release came on the eve of the start of an 11-day nationwide general strike called by the Maoists to shut off supplies to the capital.

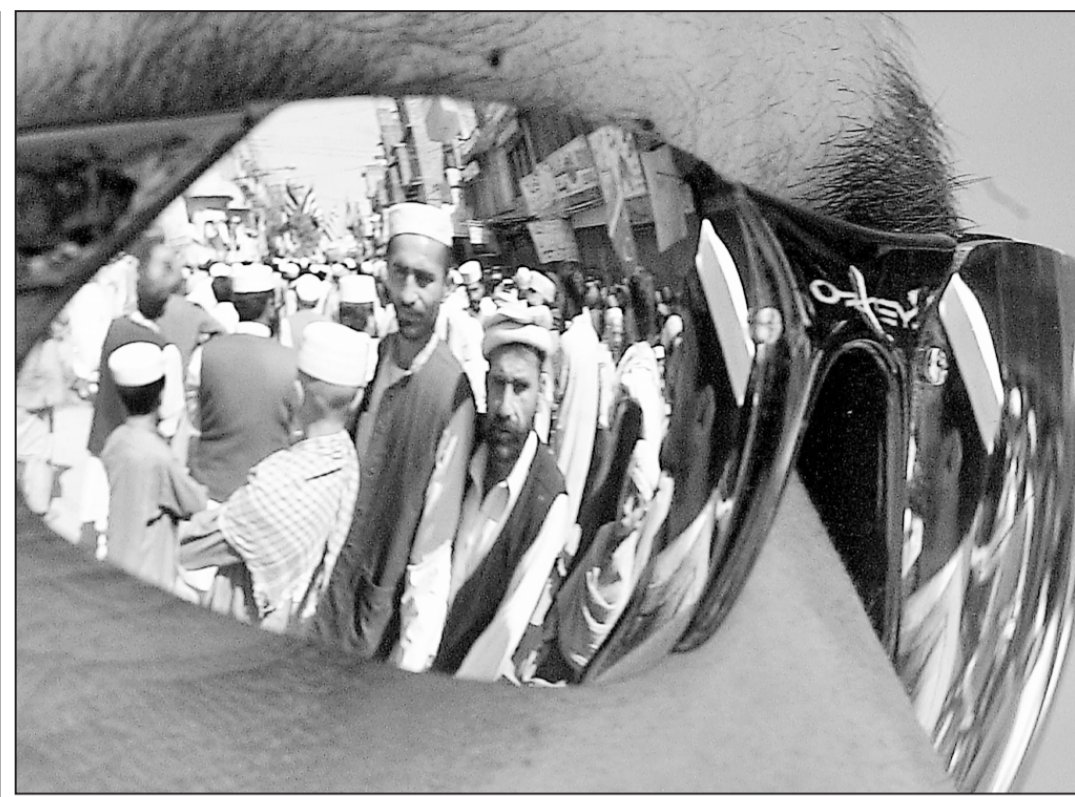
Koirala said the king should reverse his decision to sack the government and accept a role as constitutional monarch as outlined in a constitution passed in 1991. He said the current government is illegal.

"Now what we want is a complete

democracy," Koirala told reporters. "What I mean by complete democracy is that the king should remain as a constitutional head only and nothing else," he said.

Meanwhile, Maoist rebels bombed two bridges and blocked traffic on a major highway in western Nepal yesterday at the start of a nationwide strike to protest King Gyanendra's takeover two months ago.

No one was injured in the explosions, but traffic was blocked along the Mahendra Highway that links the country to its major trading partner India in far western Nepal, said a security source requesting anonymity.



Pakistani activists from the Islamic alliance the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), are reflected in a pair of sunglasses during a protest rally in Peshawar yesterday. The MMA has called for a strike to protest against the military ruler President General Pervez Musharraf's pro-US policies and price hike of essentials across the country.

Quake survivor rescued from rubble after 5-day

AFP, Gunung Sitoli

Rescuers on the Indonesian quake-hit island of Nias yesterday pulled out a survivor buried beneath the rubble of his house for almost five days.

The man was pulled out by Indonesian, Singaporean and Mexican rescuers in the city of Gunung Sitoli at 5:30 pm (1030 GMT), more than 100 hours after the magnitude 8.7 quake struck, according to an AFP reporter at the scene.

As medical workers attended to the survivor, identified as homeowner Hendra Ho Keng, he was heard yelling in pain.

Ho Keng's cousin Junianto, who had been trying to unearth him since early Saturday after hearing voices from under the ruins, immediately began to sob uncontrollably as he hugged and thanked rescuers.

Ernest Ong of the Singaporean team said two of his men had squeezed into the hole occupied by Ho Keng but could not see any sign of three other people believed buried by the collapsed two-storey building.



Tens of thousands of pilgrims gather for prayers under Pope John Paul II's lighted apartment windows late Friday at the Vatican City as his condition worsened and senior prelates signalled he was close to death.

Pope a conservative who revolutionised the papacy

AFP, Vatican City

Pope John Paul II, who was slipping towards death Saturday, has revolutionised the papacy, contributing to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe but alienating many Roman Catholics with his conservative social views.

The 84-year-old head of the Roman Catholic Church, who has struggled to overcome the effects of his advanced age and Parkinson's disease, suffered a devastating heart attack on Thursday, Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said.

The Vatican, which called on the world's Catholics to step up their prayers, was expected to release a new statement about his condition later Friday.

The new setback came as the pope struggled to recover from a February 24 throat operation, which has forced him to miss key Easter celebrations last week.

The first non-Italian pope in four-

and-a-half centuries, and the first from Eastern Europe, John Paul II, born Karol Wojtyla, is the 263rd successor to Saint Peter as Bishop of Rome.

A warm and earthy figure, he has been immensely popular, imposing his own style and agenda on the papacy, eschewing the pomp that surrounded his forebears and seeking contact with ordinary people.

He has given the papacy a higher profile than it had ever had before.

He travelled to 129 countries, taking his message directly to his flock of more than one billion believers and displaying public relations skills unknown to his predecessors.

Born in a small town near Krakow, southern Poland on May 18, 1920, Wojtyla was brought up by his father, an army officer, after the death of his mother when he was eight. His elder brother, a doctor, died in 1932 during an outbreak of scarlet fever.

Pak cops detain 3000 during strike

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani police said they had detained hundreds of headline Muslims after the country's first general strike in more than two years.

An alliance of six parties called the strike to protest spiralling prices, unemployment and the policies of President Pervez Musharraf.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, or United Action Front, said thousands of its workers had been taken into custody in different parts of the country.

"Police have arrested more than 3,000 workers of MMA," the alliance's head, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, told reporters.

The MMA described its protest as successful but witnesses said the strike was partial in most places.

Information Minister Sheikh Rashid insisted the strike had failed and "business remained as usual" in the country.

According to witnesses, several major markets in the country's largest

city of Karachi, where most of the arrests were made, were closed and its busy streets looked deserted.

In the country's largest province of Punjab, police used teargas to disperse demonstrators in the provincial capital city of Lahore.

Thousands of people have attended the alliance's recent protest marches against the pro-US policies of Musharraf, a key ally of Washington in what it calls the war against terrorism. Protesters are also opposed to Musharraf's dual posi-

tion as president and the army chief.

Police arrested 250 workers of MMA including four Islamist MPs in Karachi, city police chief Tariq Jamil told AFP.

"The MPs have been detained for 30-days under Maintenance of Public Order while others were arrested as part of preventive measures," he said.

However, there was no report of any violence from any part of the city, Jamil said.

Hurriyat asks militants not to attack bus

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmiri militant groups yesterday repeated a threat to attack passengers on a bus service to be launched next week across the divided Kashmir region, despite a plea from a hardline separatist group to avoid violence.

The four guerrilla groups repeated a threat made earlier in the week that those planning to take the first bus on April 7 were "traitors" and would have to face the consequences if they travelled despite being warned.

"This service is a sell-out of martyr's blood and will prove to be an end of Jihad in Kashmir," the statement faxed to news agencies

in Srinagar said. "It will also end up handing over Kashmir permanently to India."

The statement said many of the passengers scheduled to take the bus have been called on the phone and told they risk attack at home or elsewhere if they take the journey.

The repeated threat from the militants came after Syed Ali Geelani, the head of the hardline faction of Indian Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, condemned a similar statement released Wednesday.

The threats are not expected to delay the start of the service, which has been suspended for more than 50 years.

Abbas places Ramallah on state of alert

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas placed the security services in Ramallah on a "state of alert" Saturday following an incident in which militants fired into the air inside his compound, officials said.

The move came hours after Abbas dismissed West Bank national security chief, General Haj Ismail Jaber, over the shooting incident late on Wednesday.

Hundreds of members of the various Palestinian security forces were patrolling in Ramallah "to assure order and security" even though Israel has yet to officially transfer control in the city to the Palestinians.

The move came after a group of Palestinian gunmen from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, an offshoot of the dominant Fatah faction, opened fire inside Abbas's Ramallah headquarters.

Abbas also sacked Yunis al-Has, security chief for Ramallah, where the shooting rampage highlighted persistent lawlessness in the occupied territories, officials said.

Earlier it emerged that West Bank intelligence chief Tawfik Tirawi had offered to resign over the shooting, but that it had not yet been accepted.

"He did this because of the corruption and the shooting against the president's office, which the security forces have done nothing about," an official said of the resignation.

Zimbabwe opposition rejects polls result

Mugabe's party wins majority; US, UK term polls neither free nor fair

REUTERS, AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai yesterday rejected the result of a parliamentary election which handed a crushing victory to President Robert Mugabe's ruling party.

"We have rejected the results because we don't believe they reflect the will of the people," said Tsvangirai, who leads the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

The MDC has alleged widespread fraud in Thursday's parliamentary polls, which gave Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF party the two-thirds parliamentary majority it needs to change the constitution at will. Western governments have also described

the vote as unfair.

Addressing a news conference, Tsvangirai did not repeat earlier hints that his supporters might take to the streets to express their outrage, saying party leaders were still conferring on strategy.

"We will consult with the people on a plan to seek redress," he said. "I cannot disclose the plan to the media. We will disclose the plan to the people."

Zimbabwe police Saturday said they were ready to crush any post-election violence.

The MDC has charged ZANU-PF with using fear and intimidation to engineer a victory in the polls, and cited abuses including large numbers of voters turned away from polling

stations and thousands of extra votes cast in battleground constituencies.

But local and international rights groups, the United States and European Union said five years of brutality already had tilted the electoral playing field in favour of Mugabe's party.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Friday that the Zimbabwe's legislative elections, won by the party of President Robert Mugabe, were neither free nor fair.

"Although the campaign and election day itself were generally peaceful, the election process was not free and fair. The electoral playing field was heavily tilted in the government's favor," said Rice in a statement.

Shias, Sunnis battle for Speaker's post

Five killed in car bomb blast

AFP, Baghdad

A car bomb killed five people near Baghdad yesterday, as Sunni and Shia Arab politicians were snatched in a dispute over who will be the speaker of Iraq's parliament, ahead of the body's next session.

The policemen died after approaching an empty car parked on the main highway outside Khan Bani Sad to inspect it when it exploded, Iraqi army and medical sources said.

A civilian driving by also died, while two civilians and a policeman were wounded by the morning blast, 20km north of the capital.

The attack followed the killing Friday of a police chief in nearby Baladruz and the bombing by rebels of the landmark 9th century Malwiya spiraling minaret in Samarra.

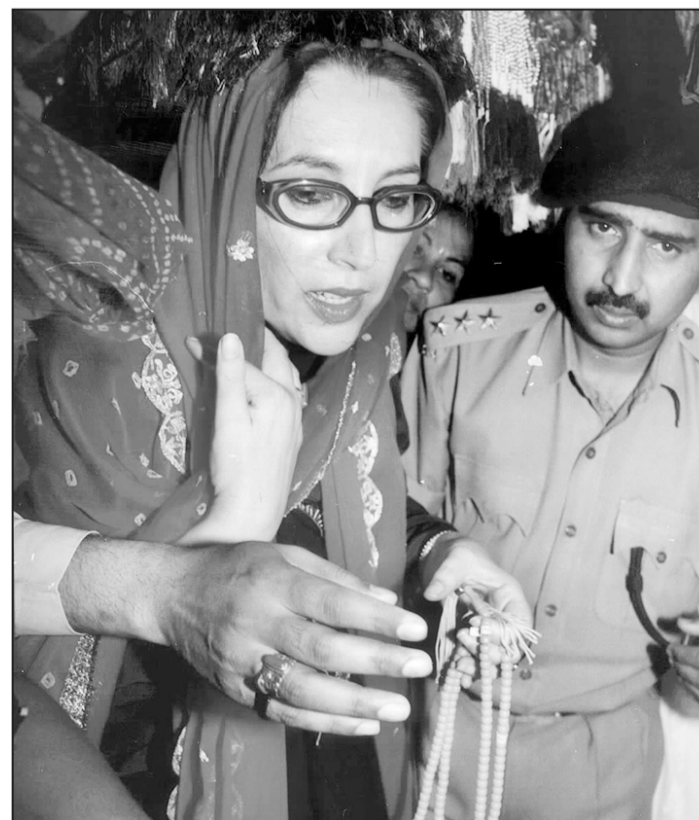
Meanwhile, in a radical policy

shift, Sunni clerics, some of them with back channels to the insurgency, issued a statement calling on their community to join the Iraqi security forces.

But amid the continuing violence, efforts by Iraq's Shia majority to bring the country's Sunni minority into the government had still not born fruit.

The Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which controls 146 seats in parliament, said it would veto Sunni MP Mishaaan al-Juburi from taking becoming speaker and told Sunnis who did not like the final choice to leave the parliament.

"We have agreed on the nominees, and the candidate for the speakership has been endorsed by a majority of Sunnis," Jawad al-Maliki, a senior member of the UIA, told AFP.



Pakistan's self-exiled former prime minister Benazir Bhutto (C) does some shopping Friday at the Ajmer Sharif, in India's western state of Rajasthan, where she came to offer prayers at the shrine of a revered Sufi saint. Benazir said she hoped to return to the country soon "after the return of democracy".