

HR groups urge UN forum to act against Nepali violations

AFP, Geneva

Human rights groups yesterday urged the 53 countries in the UN's top human rights body to take firm action on Nepal, as political parties in the Himalayan state planned a protest against King Gyanendra's absolute rule.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists said in a joint statement that the release of some political prisoners in Nepal must not be taken as a sign of durable improvement.

"We see no sign that the rule of law is being restored," said Nicholas Howen, secretary general of the ICJ.

"The appalling violence against civilians carried out by the Maoists and security forces continues and the democratic parties, human rights organisation and the media are still intimidated and controlled under the state of emergency," he added.

Five Nepalese political parties said this week they were planning pro-democracy rallies Friday to protest against King Gyanendra's seizure of power.

Howen told journalists that previous protest rallies had been

suppressed.

King Gyanendra sacked the government and declared emergency rule on February 1, saying it was necessary to tackle a Maoist insurgency that has killed more than 11,000 people since 1996.

Switzerland has lined up a draft resolution at the UN Human Rights Commission, urging the restoration of multi-party democracy and a halt to abuse by all sides.

It would also allow UN monitors to be sent to Nepal and appoint an investigator to keep the country under outside scrutiny.

The proposal has the overt backing of the European Union. But human rights groups fear it could be rejected when it is put to a vote in the 53 member assembly next week.

Nepalese activists attending the UN meeting in Geneva urged more support from the international community.

"The international community should really think hard about the suppression of peaceful demonstrations in Nepal," said Arjun Karki, head of the NGO (non-government-entail organisation) Federation of Nepal.

Several political leaders, including a former prime minister, have been released in the past month after being arrested along with

hundreds more, while disappearances, beatings and cases of torture have been reported.

Human rights groups regard action on Nepal as a test of the much criticised UN forum's credibility.

On Thursday UN Secretary General Kofi Annan reiterated that the Commission's wider failure to confront abuse was undermining the United Nations as a whole.

Peace talks have failed to get off the ground and the king seems determined to use the poorly equipped army to crush the rebels even though defence experts say it faces a protracted guerrilla war because of the country's mountainous terrain.

The king, himself, is facing international pressure to restore democracy.

India - Nepal's giant neighbour - and Britain have suspended arms aid and other nations are stepping up the pressure.

"Democracy cannot be safeguarded by excluding legitimate democratic forces from the decision-making process," said Susan Ulbaek, a Danish foreign ministry official who is on a visit to Kathmandu.

US, China to hold regular talks

AFP, Washington

The United States and China have agreed for the first time ever to hold regular, senior-level talks on a range of political, security and possibly economic issues, The Washington Post said yesterday quoting senior US administration officials.

The meetings, which the US government has chosen to call a "global dialogue," will be headed by Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and will be held periodically, with the timing and frequency yet to be determined.

The place for the first meeting is also undecided with China favoring Beijing and the United States, Washington, the officials said.

A Chinese vice foreign minister will head the Chinese delegation at the regular meetings, which have never been held at such a senior level of officials said.

The talks both signify China's interest in the prestige of such sessions and Washington's efforts to come to terms with China's rising influence in Asia, the senior US officials said.

The US has chosen to call the talks a "global dialogue," the officials told the daily, to differentiate them from the "strategic dialogue" the US holds with its close allies.

US intentions to hold regular sessions with top Chinese officials were confirmed last month by US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, during a visit to Beijing, officials said.



Nuns of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity watches the live telecast of late Pope John Paul II's funerals on a giant screen in Kolkata yesterday. The nuns decorated their house with pictures and posters of the pope and held prayers round-the-clock ahead of the funeral.

Millions across Asia pray for pope during funeral

AFP, Manila

Millions of mourners gathered in churches, parks and around television screens across Asia yesterday to bid farewell to Pope John Paul II while his funeral took place in Rome.

In the Philippines, Asia's largest Catholic nation, an estimated 10,000 people including nuns, priests and families gathered at Manila's Luneta Park ahead of a dusk mass to be celebrated by Manila Archbishop Gaudencio Rosales.

"Pope John Paul II We Love You," read one giant banner. "Farewell Pope John Paul II. Thank You For Your Legacy - The Culture of Life," read another.

The Vatican funeral was carried live on giant television screens in the park, the scene of a giant, open-air mass celebrated by the late pontiff during his last visit to Manila in 1995.

Mourners cheered when a flower-bedecked "popemobile," the bullet-proof vehicle used by the pontiff during the visit, arrived at the head of a procession.

In the eastern Indian city of Calcutta, a giant television screen was set up at Mother House, the mission established by Catholic nun Mother Teresa to take care of the sick and poor.

"We offered our morning prayer for the pope," said Sister Christie of the Missionaries of Charity. "Nuns of the Missionaries of Charity will also organise a special mass after the funeral of the holy father."

Several thousand people attended a one-hour mass in St. Thomas Church in the heart of the city Friday morning, said Calcutta Archbishop Lucas Sircar.

Nationwide, India marked its third and final day of official mourning for the pope, with flags at half-mast at government offices and all official entertainment such as state banquets postponed.

The 300,000 Catholics in Buddhist Taiwan were to gather at night masses to mourn the pontiff, whose funeral was shown live on local television.

China's state television, in contrast, said it would ignore the event.

Despite an official blackout on the ceremony in China, which does not recognise the Vatican, Chinese Catholics marked the day both in official churches and underground congregations.

For most underground Catholic groups, the day would pass in quiet prayer, with no major events organised, according to the US-based Cardinal Kung Foundation, which supports China's unofficial Catholic movement.



French President Jacques Chirac (L) shakes and with United States President George W. Bush (R) before the funeral of Pope John Paul II in St Peter's Square at the Vatican City yesterday. The world looked on Rome as leaders from more than 100 nations and a multitude of mourners gathered for the funeral Friday of Pope John Paul II, one of the most cherished pontiffs in history.

Yemen seizes rebel outposts: 75 killed

AFP, Sanaa

Over 75 followers of a slain rebel preacher were killed and the army sustained dozens of casualties in two days of fierce clashes in northwest Yemen that ended with government forces taking control of rebel outposts, tribal sources said yesterday.

"More than 75 followers of (Sheikh Hussein Badr Eddin al-Huthi) were killed in the fighting which went on throughout Wednesday and until Thursday night" in Saada province, where the two sides have been locked in combat since March 28, one source told AFP, requesting anonymity.

"Their bodies were found in the mountain hideouts from which they had been resisting authorities," he said.

"Dozens of troops were (also) killed or wounded, particularly when counter-terrorism units parachuted onto mountain tops overlooking the rebels' strongholds in Razamat and Wadi Nushur (Nushur Valley) on Thursday," the source said.

The sources said government forces stormed rebel positions in

Razamat, Wadi Nushur and Al-Shafia, wresting control of the outposts Thursday night.

"Troops are combing the area to hunt down the leaders of the rebellion, starting with Badr Eddin al-Huthi," father of the preacher killed by the army last year and who authorities say is the rebels' spiritual leader, according to the tribal source. Government forces are also trying to track down the ground commanders of the rebels from the Faithful Youth movement, chiefly Abdullah Ayedh al-Razami, Yussef al-Madani and the preacher's brother Abdul Malak, they said.

Pro-government tribal sources said dozens of militants have been rounded up, mostly young men aged 18 to 22.

Apart from the undetermined number of government forces which fell in the clashes of the last two days, more than 180 people have now been reported killed in the fighting. Dozens more have been injured on both sides.

Kashmiris hope bus will foster peace

REUTERS, Srinagar

Kashmiris hailed yesterday a historic bus service between Indian and Pakistani Kashmir as a tangible step toward resolving the vexed territorial dispute and said militant separatists should not be allowed to prevent it.

Analysts praised India and Pakistan for what they said was the determination of the nuclear-armed rivals to go ahead with the bus launch on Thursday, the first to connect the two Kashmiris in nearly 60 years, despite threats from militants.

But they said New Delhi and Islamabad - who have fought two wars over Kashmir - still had a long way to go to untie the Kashmir knot, as they had yet to show much inclination to move from entrenched diplomatic positions despite the hype and celebrations over the transport link.

"I was crying with joy when I saw television pictures of the bus crossing over to this side," Pakiza Carrim, 25, a sociology student at a university in Srinagar, the main city of Indian Kashmir, said. "Kashmiris have won

half of the battle."

"Now, it is the sincerity of the two countries that will make a difference to the future of Kashmir. I wish this bus runs daily," she said, a day after the first fortnightly service rolled into Srinagar from across a military cease-fire line.

Nineteen Indian Kashmiris, mostly elderly, on Thursday defied separatist threats and crossed a "Peace Bridge" across a military line that divided them for more than half a century, hours after 31 Pakistanis walked into the Indian side for an emotional reunion with relatives.

Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistani Kashmir, erupted into spontaneous celebrations as the first passengers broke down with joy over seeing their dear ones, many of them for the first time.

"It is a great step toward peace," said Abdul Hamid Bhat, a businessman in Srinagar. "Kashmir is a more than 50-year problem and things will not change overnight. Some elements will oppose it for their vested interests but let's go ahead."

Newspapers in India and Pakistan were also upbeat.

"The determination shown by India and Pakistan to go ahead with the bus service in the face of terrorism is praiseworthy," Pakistani daily The News said in an editorial on Friday.

"It will send an unambiguous message to the shadowy groups that there will be no bowing to terrorism."

A day before the service was launched, militants fighting against Indian rule in the Himalayan region staged a suicide attack on a heavily guarded government complex sheltering the Indian passengers, torching the building.

None of the passengers were injured but five pulled out subsequently.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said the bus had opened a door and it was the beginning of a new phase for Kashmir.

OIC calls for an end to West's 'Islamophobia'

REUTERS, Sydney

The West must end "Islamophobia" and Muslim nations must tackle the causes of religious extremism, such as poverty, to win the fight against terrorism, the head of the world's largest body of Islamic nations said yesterday.

Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, chairman of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), said the war on terrorism could not be won by military might alone.

Abdullah said in a speech in Sydney that the West and the Muslim world must unite to tackle the "root causes of terrorism", such as poverty.

"The increasing gulf and misunderstanding between the West and the Muslim world must be bridged. But it requires both sides to work in tandem to close the chasm," said

Abdullah. The OIC groups 57 Islamic nations.

"The non-Muslim world, especially the West, must be prepared to discard their prejudices against Islam. Muslims too must be prepared to begin a process of reform and renewal in their respective Muslim countries," he said.

Abdullah is in Australia in part to begin negotiations on a free trade agreement but the relationship between Australia and Malaysia remains uneasy.

The two have often differed, including on how to prosecute the war on terrorism. US ally Australia was quick to join Washington's attack on Iraq while Malaysia opposed the invasion.

Abdullah said Malaysia's moderate form of Islam and its peaceful multi-faith society was an example of how to defeat religious extremism and terrorism.



Fatima Butt (R), a passenger of the first trans-Kashmir bus service who arrived Thursday from Indian controlled Kashmir, cries while meeting her son Naseer Ahmed after 15 years, who lives in Pakistani-controlled Kashmiri town of Muzaffarabad yesterday. People of India and Pakistan welcomed the first bus service across the heavily-militarised frontier in disputed Kashmir in almost 60 years and hailed the passengers as heroes for defying Islamic militant threats.

'Tiger attack on navy boat violation of truce' Rebel fighting kills 2 more

AFP, Colombo

Scandinavians monitoring a truce between Sri Lankan troops and Tamil Tigers ruled yesterday that the rebels were in breach of the ceasefire when they attacked a naval patrol boat.

The Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission said the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) violated the ceasefire agreement by attacking the craft three days ago. There were no casualties in the shooting.

However, a member of the team monitoring Sri Lanka's fragile ceasefire was injured after diving for cover when the patrol boat was fired on near the eastern port of Trincomalee.

The cease-fire monitoring group

has no legal clout to enforce their rulings.

A spokeswoman of the monitoring group however said the Tigers had undermined the spirit of the ceasefire and violated part of the agreement that refers to the use of direct or indirect weapons against each other.

Meanwhile, at least two people were killed in Sri Lanka's restive eastern province Friday in what military officials described as escalating rebel factional fighting.

A breakaway faction of the Tamil Tigers clashed with the main rebel outfit in the eastern region of Mahindapura early Friday, leaving at least one dead and several injured, a military official here said.

'China reasserting Third World leadership role'

REUTERS, Beijing

Chinese President Hu Jintao will attend the 50th anniversary commemorations of the Asia-Africa Conference in Indonesia, reasserting China's credentials as a leader of the Third World, diplomatic sources and analysts said.

Following the 1949 Communist takeover, China emerged from its diplomatic isolation in 1955 at the Asia-Africa Conference in Indonesia's West Java town of Bandung that marked a move by the Third World to assert itself.

Hu will attend the April 21-24 golden jubilee of the Bandung conference en route to the Philippines for an April 26-28 state visit, said two Asian diplomatic sources.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has yet to announce Hu's trip, which is also expected to take him to the tiny oil-rich sultanate of Brunei.

China has played down its role as the vanguard of the Third World, but analysts said Hu's presence would cement such a position for the world's most populous nation and an emerging economic power that has been careful in recent decades to be seen to be diplomatically neutral.

"The growth of its domestic economy and increased integration with the world will compel China to exert itself and take a larger role in regional security and economic issues," Drew Thompson, a China watcher at the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, wrote.

The 1955 Bandung conference adopted the five principles of peaceful co-existence that have long been trumpeted by China's communist rulers as the foundation of their foreign policy.

The principles are: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.

"It reflects China's desire to be the carrier of the spirit of Bandung that focuses on decolonisation in all aspects especially now in economic, technology and culture," said Hong Kong-based commentator Josef Purnama Widaymatadja.