

# Nepal army kills 65 more Maoists

## Schools obey rebel shutdown order

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 65 Maoist rebels have been killed in the latest fighting in Nepal, the army said on Thursday, taking their unconfirmed death toll to more than 200 in the past week.

Most of the reported deaths were in the western district of Rukum, scene of the heaviest fighting last week since King Gyanendra seized power on February 1.

"Sixty Maoist rebels were killed in a fresh clash with the security forces at Dalphing in Rukum district on Wednesday," the Nepal Royal Army said in a statement, adding the Maoists had suffered "yet another heavy" defeat.

The fighting came less than a week after almost 150 rebels were reported killed and another 300 wounded when they attacked an

army base in the village of Khara in the same district, about 400km west of Kathmandu.

It was the heaviest clash since King Gyanendra dismissed the government and imposed emergency rule in the poverty-stricken Himalayan kingdom, saying the move was necessary to tackle the revolt.

Nepal's private schools outside the capital, Kathmandu, obeyed yesterday a Maoist rebel order to shut after guerrilla bombs, planted as a warning, exploded in three empty schools, officials said.

Two of the blasts occurred Thursday while the other took place last week, Nepal's private schools' association said. All of the bombs exploded in rebel-dominated west Nepal, damaging the buildings but causing no injuries.

Schools outside Kathmandu, where the Maoists hold sway, heeded the rebel closure order that marked the latest challenge to the authority of King Gyanendra who seized power February 1.

The Maoists, who control large swathes of Nepal, are fighting to topple the monarchy and install a communist republic in an insurgency which has claimed 11,000 lives since 1996.

Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Maoist high command confirmed the rebels' heavy losses in the Khara clash without giving the number of casualties, but claimed the Maoists had learned good fighting experience from the incident.

The latest fighting was reported as King Gyanendra, under international pressure over his power-seizure, announced municipal polls

to "reactivate the democratic process".

The king said law and order had improved since he imposed emergency rule and suspended civil liberties.

"In view of the improving law-and-order situation, there should not be any delay in activating the democratic process," Gyanendra said in a speech marking the Nepali New Year.

"We have, therefore, commanded the election commission to conduct municipal elections," he said on state radio.

The king, who has pledged to restore democracy within three years, said he had ordered municipal elections to be held in Nepal's 58 municipalities before mid-April next year. The Nepali calendar year runs from mid-April to mid-April.

## Int'l experts play down threat of terrorists acquiring WMDs

AFP, Helsinki

Terrorist groups and organisations have neither the capacity nor the ambition to produce weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), former UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix and other experts said at a conference in Helsinki on Thursday.

"I'm as concerned about global warming and its long term effects" as about the immediate threat of terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction, said Blix, a former Swedish diplomat who was charged with searching for such weapons ahead of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

"Support and coordination from states would be needed for terrorists to produce WMDs," he insisted, speaking at a conference here entitled "WMD terrorism: how scared should we be?".

Blix acknowledged however that "there is a small but not zero risk" of terrorists laying their hands on weapons of mass destruction, and called for more preventive measures.

"Material and technology are now widespread and an ability to create WMDs is also greater," he said.



US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (R) shakes hands with Indian's Minister of External Affairs Natwar Singh after a joint press conference Thursday at the US State Department in Washington, DC. Singh met earlier with US President George W. Bush at the White House.

# India, US pledge to step up strategic cooperation

AFP, Washington

The United States and India pledged Thursday to boost their strategic ties and launch senior-level talks on energy cooperation, including the use of civilian nuclear power.

But Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh appeared to come away from a day of talks here without specific US support for New Delhi's long-cherished goal of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Singh met with President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice ahead of a planned visit here by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July and a Bush trip to India sometime later.

Rice, who travelled to New Delhi last month, said the discussions Thursday were part of a continuing "strategic dialogue" between the United States and the world's most populous democracy.

"It is very important that the US-

India relationship continues to grow as we recognise the growing importance of India as a global factor," Rice told a news conference. "This is a development we very much welcome."

Washington has been discussing the growing energy needs of the South Asian nuclear arms power, but a proposed pipeline to bring in gas from Iran has been the target of mounting US criticism.

Still, Rice signalled in an interview with the Wall Street Journal that the Americans were not ready to sell nuclear reactor technology to the Indians. "We're not there, that is not the case," she said.

"We have agreed with the Indians that we can talk about a variety of energy sources but obviously there are NPT (nuclear non-proliferation treaty) implications that are quite serious about civilian nuclear power in India," she said.

One unresolved political issue appeared to be India's eagerness for a seat on the UN Security Council if and when it is expanded

from its current 15 members as part of sweeping reforms urged for the world body.

Singh, who was on a three-day US visit, reiterated New Delhi's position: "By any criteria that you apply, India qualifies for a seat in the expanded council as a permanent member."

But Rice, whose country supports Japan's drive for council membership, was non-committal about India, saying only, "We believe UN Security Council reform needs to take place in the context of broader UN reform."

"It is my hope that we can do this in a way that builds consensus in the international community ... because what we do not need is acrimony as we try to move forward," she said.

Singh's visit came less than three weeks after US officials announced their intention to help make India a "major world power" as part of a new strategy to boost ties to New Delhi and its rival Pakistan.



Firefighters work on the facade of the Paris-Opera hotel in central Paris, early yesterday after a fire broke out. At least 20 people were killed in the early morning fire at the hotel occupied mainly by immigrant families.

## EU ministers urged to keep arms ban on China

AP, Luxembourg

The European Parliament urged EU foreign ministers Thursday not to lift their 15-year-old arms embargo against Beijing, saying the human rights situation there did not warrant the change.

In a 431-85 vote, lawmakers at the EU assembly in Strasbourg, France, sent a strong message backing a headline resolution drafted by German Conservative Elmar Brok, who chairs the parliament's foreign affairs committee, calling on EU leaders "not to lift the arms embargo."

## UN rights forum slams systematic abuse in Myanmar

AFP, Geneva

The UN's top human rights body on Thursday sharply criticised "systematic" abuse by Myanmar's military junta, calling on it to restore democracy and free all political prisoners, including opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The 53-member UN Human Rights Commission passed a resolution without a vote expressing "grave concern at the ongoing systematic violation of human rights ... of the people of Myanmar."

## GUJARAT POLICE OFFICIAL SAYS Modi ordered to act against Muslims

AFP, Ahmedabad

A top Indian police official has told a tribunal that Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi ordered him to "eliminate persons" belonging to the Muslim community during riots in 2002.

R.B. Sreekumar served as intelligence chief of western Gujarat state during 2002 riots in which about 2,000 people -- mainly Muslims -- were killed. He said he received directives from Modi and his government colleagues to tap telephones and "eliminate persons belonging to the minority community".

The police officer made the

allegations in a written submission to India's Central Administrative Tribunal which investigates complaints by civil servants.

The tribunal is investigating Sreekumar's complaint that he was passed over for promotion because he ignored Modi's orders.

Modi, who has been accused by opposition and human rights groups of doing little to stop the bloody riots, has until May 9 to file a reply to the tribunal.

Gujarat state home minister Amit Shah has denied the officer's claims as "baseless" and said they were levelled by Sreekumar because he was bitter that he had been passed over for promotion.

## RUMSFELD SAYS US to meet 'legitimate' Pak defence needs

AFP, Islamabad

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told Pakistan that Washington would meet its "legitimate" defence needs, weeks after it announced plans to sell F-16 jets to its key ally, state media said Thursday.

Rumsfeld gave the assurance during his talks with military leader President Pervez Musharraf late Wednesday, according to an official statement carried by the Associated Press of Pakistan.

The US official, who left Pakistan for Kyrgyzstan early Thursday, reiterated the United States' "commitment to broadening and deepening its strategic relationship with Pakistan".

"Secretary Rumsfeld reaffirmed

the US decision to enhance military assistance to Pakistan and strengthen defence cooperation with Pakistan," the statement said.

"Washington would be stepping up support to meet Pakistan's legitimate defence needs," it added.

Musharraf told Rumsfeld the sale of F-16 aircraft to Pakistan would be an "important factor for preserving regional peace and security," the statement said.

Pakistan is a key US ally in its so-called international war on terror and has arrested around 700 al-Qaeda fugitives since 9/11 and the US invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan, most of them handed over to US custody.

## HR activists suffering in war on terror

AFP, Geneva

Nations are using the fight against international terrorism as an excuse to trample on human rights, two advocacy groups charged Thursday, as they reported a doubling of repression against activists.

They said fundamental rights enshrined in UN law were "regularly trampled" around the world, including in many long-standing democracies.

"Such violations have always existed, of course, but the trend today is to justify them in the name of defending other values which are also part of the rule of law, such as freedom and democracy," they said in a statement.

In particular, they said, such

violations were noted "in the framework of the international campaign against terrorism."

The criticism came in the annual report compiled jointly by the Paris-based International Federation of Human Rights and in Geneva, the World Organisation Against Torture.

Last year, 1,154 human rights activists and more than 200 non-governmental organisations were targeted by "acts of repression" in 90 countries, according to the report.

The number brought to the attention of an observatory set up by the groups was a "doubling" of cases from the previous year, revealing "the deteriorating situation of human rights defenders, and thus, the erosion of human rights in the world."



Princess Stephanie of Monaco and her nephew Pierre Casiraghi follow the coffin carrying the body of her father Monaco's Prince Rainier III outside the Prince Palace yesterday in Monaco before the funeral at the 19th-century Cathedral, where Rainier will be laid to rest beside his beloved wife Grace.