

FM defends king's power-grab

Ex-Nepali minister detained as Gyanendra readies to woo Asia-Africa summit

UN's rights body calls for restoring democracy

AFP, Geneva

The UN's top human rights body on Wednesday called on the Nepalese government to restore multi-party democracy and to cease all arrests under the state of emergency declared by King Gyanendra.

The UN Human Rights Commission also strongly condemned repeated killings, rape, forced displacements, and mass abductions by Maoist rebels, warning in a resolution that they "may constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity".

The motion on Nepal put forward by Switzerland and other European countries was approved without a vote, indicating consent from the 53 countries in the forum.

It replaced a planned tougher resolution which was dropped when the Nepalese government earlier this week agreed to allow UN monitors into the country to help prevent human rights abuses in the kingdom, where security forces are battling Maoist rebels.

Nepalese King Gyanendra's agreement with the UN's human rights office came amid mounting international concern following his seizure of power in February, in what he said was a bid to tackle the Maoist revolt.

AFP, Jakarta

Nepal's foreign minister defended yesterday King Gyanendra's decision to seize power on the eve of an international summit in Jakarta where the monarch aims to drum up support for his rule.

"We have been fighting terrorism for a long time and we have not been able to curb it, so we had to take a position that was a hard decision, taken by the leader of the country and that was to re-establish peace and security," Ramesh Nath Pandey said.

"In the last two months there has been a tremendous improvement in the situation," he said, referring to a bloody Maoist rebellion which has claimed over 11,000 lives since 1996.

"We have declared a local election, so I'm sure in the coming days the situation will improve further and we'll be able to re-establish the democratic process," he added.

Gyanendra fired the Nepalese government and imposed emergency rule on February 1, a step he said was needed to tackle the Maoist revolt.

His announcement a week ago of municipal elections in the Himalayan kingdom has been ridiculed by leading politicians who say they are meaningless without parliamentary elections first.

World powers, apart from China and Pakistan which have called the upheaval in Nepal an internal matter, have largely cold-shouldered

Gyanendra since his takeover of power.

Human right groups say more than 200 people remain in detention since the takeover, although several political leaders, including two ex-premiers, have been released in the past month.

Britain and Nepal's long-standing ally and major trading partner India have suspended military aid to the kingdom, and the United States has threatened to follow suit.

In his first foray onto the world stage since assuming power, the king will address delegates on Friday hoping to convince them he acted to counter the Maoist threat.

In addition to representatives from over 100 countries, the summit will be attended by Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the United Nations, which called Wednesday on Kathmandu to restore multi-party democracy and to cease all arrests under the state of emergency.

Gyanendra was invited to the summit by Indonesia and South Africa, which are co-hosting the event.

Meanwhile, Nepalese police arrested an ex-minister Thursday after he refused to appear before a royal commission set up by King Gyanendra to answer wrongdoing charges over a nearly half billion dollar water contract. Prakash Man Singh, who was works minister in the government sacked by Gyanendra February 1 when he seized power,

was arrested at his home in the capital and taken to the office housing the commission's offices, police said.

Singh, the most senior politician to be arrested by the commission, told AFP minutes before his arrest, "I will not give my statement to the commission as it was formed unconstitutionally."

"Mr Singh has been arrested and taken to the royal commission," a senior police official said.

"There was some pushing and shoving between supporters and police when they arrested him," an AFP photographer at the scene said.

Singh's arrest came after former premier Sher Bahadur Deuba rejected Wednesday a summons from the panel over the drinking water project, accusing the commission of waging a vendetta against opponents of the royal takeover.

So far, Deuba, who spent weeks under house detention after Gyanendra dismissed him as premier along with his four-party coalition, has not been arrested by the panel which has sweeping powers of detention and punishment.

Gyanendra said he assumed absolute power and suspended civil liberties to tackle a bloody Maoist revolt aimed at setting up a communist republic that has claimed over 11,000 lives since 1996.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Nepalese works minister Prakash Man Singh (C) is arrested by plain cloth policemen in Kathmandu Thursday. Nepalese police arrested ex-minister Singh after he refused to appear before a royal commission set up by King Gyanendra to answer wrongdoing charges over a nearly half billion dollar water contract.

Kashmir passengers cross de facto border defying rebel threats

AFP, Srinagar

Bus passengers from the Indian and Pakistani-zones of Kashmir yesterday defied Islamic militant threats and crossed the heavily-militarised ceasefire line for the second time in almost 60 years.

The first batch of passengers crossed on April 7 after India and Pakistan agreed to resume the bus service between the two divided zones.

Eleven Pakistanis and 14 returning residents of Indian Kashmir, who came to Muzaffarabad on the first bus two weeks ago, were the first to walk across the 220-foot (67-metre) bridge which straddles the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border splitting the Himalayan region, police and witnesses said Thursday.

The green gate on the Pakistani side was flung open as the bus stopped at the bridge, amid the raising of white flags by Indian and Pakistani soldiers.

After customs clearance they boarded two buses for their onward journey to Srinagar, Indian Kashmir's summer capital.

Three hours later about 30 passengers from the Indian side

crossed the bridge to buses waiting to take them to the Pakistan-controlled capital of Kashmir, Muzaffarabad.

Some of them were returning home after they crossed on the first bus to Indian Kashmir.

The buses rolled from Srinagar and Muzaffarabad under tight security Thursday morning.

Ten minutes before the two buses rolled out of the high-security Cheshma Shahi area of Srinagar, two dummy buses accompanied by an ambulance and security vehicles headed off to mislead militants who have threatened to target those on board, police said.

"All the passengers were housed (overnight) in state-owned guest houses for security reasons," a police officer said in Srinagar.

Pakistani Kashmir's senior minister Mumtaz Gilani flagged off the bus from Muzaffarabad. Security forces took up positions along the route.

"The security arrangements are watertight all along the route of the bus in our zone," a Pakistan security official, requesting anonymity, told AFP.

Despite tight security and potential militant violence, passengers crossing the divide were excited.

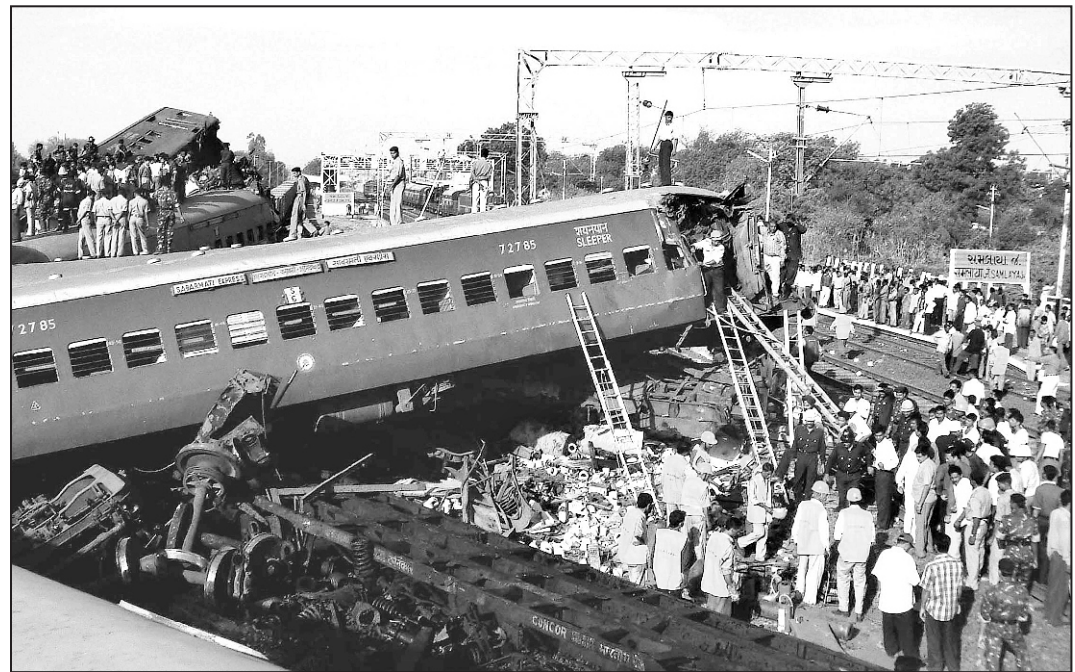


PHOTO: AFP

Indian rescue workers gather at the site of a train accident, at Samaliya junction, some 120km from Ahmedabad, capital of India's western Gujarat state Thursday. At least 24 people were killed and around 150 injured when a passenger train collided head-on with a freight train in western India, police and officials said.

Two Taliban leaders surrender to govt

US forces raid militant base, 12 killed

REUTERS, Kabul

Two senior members of Afghanistan's former Taliban regime surrendered to the government on Thursday under an amnesty offer, a provincial governor said.

The officials -- Mullah Mohammad Naseem, the former Taliban governor of Zabul province, and Haji Mohammad Akhtar, former police chief of Farah province -- surrendered following month-long talks, the governor of Helmand province said.

"They've joined the government's national reconciliation program," the governor, Mullah Sher Mohammad, told Reuters.

The government is seeking to coax rank-and-file Taliban to give up their fight but the amnesty offer does not include 150 of the movement's senior leaders, accused of militant violence or of having links with al-Qaeda.

Fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar and his die-hard

supporters have shunned the talks and vowed to keep on fighting Karzai's government and foreign troops in Afghanistan.

Guerrilla activity has picked up after a winter lull but activity is down on past years, fuelling speculation the Taliban may be struggling to find recruits and resources.

In another sign of problems for Afghanistan's insurgents, US forces blasted rebel positions with bombs, rockets and artillery, killing at least 12 insurgents, after rockets were fired at a US base in southeastern Afghanistan.

Helicopters, aircraft and artillery were used to respond to the four rockets fired without effect at the Salerno base in Khost province on Tuesday night, the US military said in a statement.

"We were able to see the launching point of the rockets and we brought everything we had to bear on it," US army Major J.R. Mendoza said in the statement.

Asia-African FMs endorse strategic partnership

Summit begins today

AFP, Jakarta

Foreign ministers from more than 80 Asian and African nations have endorsed a draft declaration aimed at reviving a partnership between the two continents that began 50 years ago.

The New Asian African Strategic Partnership aims to usher in closer political, economic and social ties between the two continents through tackling terrorism and global crime, resolving conflict, particularly in the Middle East, and promoting billion dollar trade.

The document was agreed to at a

meeting of ministers in Jakarta ahead of a summit of government leaders and heads of state held to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first Asia-Africa conference in 1955.

While many Asian and African nations enjoy greater political freedoms and more peace 50 years after the first Asia-Africa summit, poverty has risen dramatically in the two continents and this weekend leaders will seek ways to profit from closer, strategic ties.

The 47 Asian and African leaders descending on Jakarta for today's opening of the Asia-Africa summit will,

officials said, be looking hard at improving economic cooperation and gaining a greater share of global trade.

The two-day summit, marking the 50th anniversary of a first such conference in the Indonesian city of Bandung, is expected to gather leaders and ministers from 94 countries, most of which are developing nations.

Asia and Africa, home to 4.6 billion people or 73 percent of the world's population, are desperate to increase trade with developed countries and to end unfair trade practices such as protectionism, analysts and officials said.