

Nepal conflict displaces tens of thousands: UN

King seeks Indian backing, Delhi pushes for restoring democracy

AFP, United Nations/Jakarta

Tens of thousands of people in Nepal have been displaced by a Maoist insurgency wracking the Himalayan nation, a UN expert who just returned from the country said Friday.

"There's no systematic assistance or protection given to these displaced populations either by authorities in Nepal or by international organisations," said Dennis McNamara, special advisor on internal displacement to the UN emergency relief coordinator.

"Any assistance that gets in is ad hoc and it's quite inadequate," he said, citing an estimate of between 100,000 and 200,000 people displaced.

Other outside groups estimate that as many as two million Nepalese may have crossed the border into neighbouring India, said McNamara, while

declining to endorse those larger numbers.

"These are major displacements – conflict-related, either directly or indirectly – but very much intertwined with the populations of one of the most impoverished countries in the world," he said.

Conflict has been raging since 1996, mainly in the kingdom's countryside, where army forces are trying to crush a Maoist revolt aimed at installing a communist republic. More than 11,000 have died in the fighting.

McNamara said young men are fleeing conscription in their villages and that civilians are often caught between the two sides.

"In some areas, 60 to 80 percent of the villages have lost their populations recently," he said.

Speaking in Kathmandu earlier, a

UN rights expert blamed the displacements on violence and forced recruitment by the Maoists, fear of reprisals by the army for allegedly aiding the rebels and a "generalised climate of insecurity."

McNamara's trip followed last week's signing of an accord between the Geneva-based UN human rights office and Nepal to set up a monitoring operation to prevent human rights abuses in the conflict.

International concern over abuses has been mounting since King Gyanendra dismissed the government and imposed emergency rule on February 1, saying the move was necessary to tackle the revolt.

Meanwhile, Nepal's King Gyanendra yesterday sought backing for his controversial power grab in his first formal talks with India's Prime

Minister Manmohan Singh since the monarch declared emergency rule in February.

Gyanendra met with Singh on the sidelines of an Asia-Africa summit in Jakarta, officials confirmed, with the two neighbours reportedly focusing on the recent political upheaval in the Himalayan kingdom.

The meeting came a day after Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh pushed for a restoration of democracy in Nepal in a meeting with Gyanendra.

During their "cordial" 45-minute meeting, Gyanendra "explained the circumstances" that led him to dismiss the four-party coalition government, while the Indian foreign minister expressed hopes of renewed ties with Nepal.



King Gyanendra (L) of Nepal meets with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of the Asia-Africa Summit in Jakarta Saturday. 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 on February 1, demanding a restoration of democracy.

SEPT 11 ATTACK

Moussaoui pleads guilty

AP, Alexandria

With the first US conviction from a Sept. 11 case in hand, federal prosecutors face a new battle over whether Zacarias Moussaoui should receive the death penalty for plotting with al-Qaeda against Americans.

Although he pleaded guilty as expected Friday, Moussaoui told US District Judge Leonie Brinkema, "I will fight every inch against the death penalty." Just last week, he had told her he would plead for execution.

That was among several surprises as the defendant voluntarily admitted his guilt on six counts of conspiring with al-Qaeda leaders and the Sept. 11 hijackers to wreak havoc on Americans. Four counts carry a possible death penalty.

Moussaoui also declared for the first time in public that Osama bin Laden personally instructed him to fly an airliner into the White House. The target date was not clear.

The defendant, who had been so volatile and vituperative in three years of legal wrangling, was polite, calm and even able to joke during the proceedings.



Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (R) poses with local students Saturday during his visit to Banda Aceh city which was hit by last December's tsunami. Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi is in Indonesia to attend the Asia-Africa Summit 2005 in Jakarta.

Hu, Koizumi holds talks to salvage ties

Japan apologises for its wartime aggression

AFP, Jakarta

Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and Chinese President Hu Jintao met yesterday for hastily arranged talks in Jakarta to salvage ties between the two Asian powers amid a bitter row.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi on Friday issued Japan's most public apology in a decade for its wartime aggression.

The two leaders met at a hotel in the centre of the Indonesian capital after an Asia-Africa summit and shook hands before ushering journalists out of the room to begin a closed-door meeting, expected to last 40 minutes.

In the exchange of pleasantries Koizumi smiled and mentioned his morning trip to the Indonesia province of Aceh, devastated by the December 26 tsunami.

"This morning we were at the scene of the tsunami, we saw a miserable state," Koizumi said.

Responding, without smiling, Hu said he felt sorry for the Indonesian people who had lost their relatives in the disaster.

"I'm confident that Indonesian people will overcome this difficulty," the Chinese leader said, adding: "China will make the greatest effort to provide assistance to them."

China and Japan have been locked for weeks in a bitter row sparked by Tokyo's approval of a history textbook which Beijing says glosses over past atrocities committed by the Japanese military.

Tensions have boiled over onto the streets of several Chinese cities with thousands turning out at weekend rallies shouting anti-Japanese slogans and angrily denouncing Japan's war record.

Protestors have also expressed violent opposition to Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and anger at Koizumi's visits to a controversial

shrine for the war dead.

China has refused Japan's demands to apologise for the protests, instead saying that Tokyo's refusal to admit its dark past has placed Sino-Japanese relations at their lowest ebb for 30 years.

Koizumi on Friday made Japan's most public apology in a decade for the wartime suffering it had caused Asian nations.

"In the past, Japan, through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations," Koizumi told the Asia-Africa summit with Chinese President Hu Jintao looking on.

"Japan squarely faces these facts of history in a spirit of humility. And with feelings of deep remorse and heartfelt apology always engraved in mind, Japan has resolutely maintained, consistently since the end of World War II, never turning into a military power but an economic power," he said.

Hizbul Mujahedin to consider any truce offer by Delhi

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's main rebel group said yesterday it would "seriously consider" any ceasefire offer by New Delhi to end bloodshed in the insurgency-racked region.

The statement by a top Hizbul Mujahedin leader to a local news agency followed a pledge this week by India and Pakistan to reach a "final settlement" on Kashmir, the spark of two of three wars between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

"If they (the Indians) are serious about it (a ceasefire), Hizbul would seriously consider it," Gazi Misbahudin, chief operational commander of Hizbul Mujahedin, told the Kashmir News Service.

So far, India has made no ceasefire proposal.

But some Indian commentators have suggested it should make such a gesture in the wake of recent talks between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan

President Pervez Musharraf in New Delhi where they said the peace drive between the two nations was "irreversible".

Hizbul Mujahedin, based in Pakistan-held Kashmir, wants the divided territory reunited and joined with Pakistan, and is the key Islamic rebel group battling New Delhi's rule since a revolt erupted in the Indian zone in 1989.

Over 40,000 people have died in insurgency-related violence in Kashmir, according to official figures. Separatists say the toll is at least double that.

India announced a unilateral ceasefire in 2000 but abandoned it after six months in the absence of similar overtures by rebel groups, including Hizbul.

"Any ceasefire announcement should be followed in spirit on the ground," said Misbahudin, without elaborating.

GAZA PULLOUT

Sharon, Abbas to meet early next month

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon plan to meet next month in what would be their first encounter in almost three months, officials said yesterday.

The meeting, likely to be in early May, is set to focus on planning Israel's withdrawal from the occupied Gaza Strip later this year, sources on both sides said.

The prospect of settler resistance, the possible use of force by Israeli security forces and the likelihood of militant groups wanting to portray the withdrawal as a retreat under fire have created a delicate situation for Israelis and Palestinians.

Right-wing settler leaders and rabbis have called for resistance in

one form or another, with some calling on security forces to disobey orders to evict all 8,000 Gaza settlers and four isolated West Bank outposts.

Sharon is also expected to announce a delay to the four-week withdrawal – originally planned for late July – until the middle of August.

Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz and Palestinian civil affairs minister Mohammed Dahlan said on Friday that they had set up joint committees to coordinate Israeli and Palestinian sides of the withdrawal.

Abbas and Sharon first met at a peace summit in Egypt in February but the honeymoon period has faded in recent weeks after the Israeli leader accused his Palestinian counterpart of failing to

crack down on militant groups such as Hamas.

Abbas has denounced an Israeli plan to keep its large settlement blocs in the occupied West Bank, a move that has also drawn US criticism.

The meeting is likely to be held before Abbas heads to Washington in mid-May for talks with US President George W. Bush, their first summit since Abbas succeeded the late Yasser Arafat at the head of the Palestinian Authority.

During their previous encounter in February in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, the two leaders agreed on a truce aimed at ending more than four years of deadly violence, which has since proved less than watertight.

Berlusconi forms new govt

AP, AFP, Rome

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi announced a new government yesterday, leaving key ministries untouched while bringing in his longtime ally and former economy minister Giulio Tremonti as deputy premier.

Seeking to end Italy's worst political crisis in four years, Berlusconi retained National Alliance (AN) leader Gianfranco Fini as his other deputy prime minister and foreign minister in a government dubbed "Berlusconi II" that he hopes will carry him through to general elections next year.

The prime minister faces a vote of confidence in parliament next week when he is to present his new government program.

Berlusconi apparently overcame Fini's objections to the appointment of Tremonti, sacked last year after the AN leader accused him of allowing Italy's budget deficit to spin out of

control.

The coalition's Northern League reportedly backed the return of Tremonti, a northern Italian credited with renewing ties between Berlusconi and the League after it brought down his first government in 1994.

Berlusconi announced the new cabinet list – which also retains Domenico Siniscalco as economy minister and brings in Francesco Storace of Fini's AN as health minister – after meeting with President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi.

Asked on Friday by Ciampi to stay on and form another government, the 68-year-old media magnate had insisted that his new team would not be a "photocopy" of the previous one.

Berlusconi had resigned Wednesday in the wake of a major electoral rout early this month, after the Christian Democrat UDC party withdrew its ministers from his cabinet and asked for a new government with a revamped program.



Italy's Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (R) gives a press conference after a meeting with Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi yesterday in Rome. Berlusconi announced his new cabinet line-up, keeping much of the same team but adding his long-time ally and former economy minister Giulio Tremonti as a new deputy premier.

Bomb blasts kill 21 in Iraq

AP, REUTERS, Baghdad

A string of explosions rocked the Iraqi capital and other parts of the country yesterday and Friday, including a roadside bomb that exploded near an Iraqi army convoy on the outskirts of Baghdad, killing nine soldiers and 12 Iraqis and wounding 20, police said.

When the surviving soldiers responded by opening fire, they shot and killed the driver of a civilian car, said police Lt. Ahmed Abud.

The attack occurred near the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, which was at the centre of a prison abuse scandal last year after photographs were publicised showing US soldiers humiliating Iraqi inmates.

It was one of at least three explosions in Baghdad. Another bomb detonated on a busy road that connects with the perilous highway to the airport, police Capt. Tamir Talib said. One Iraqi was killed and seven wounded, hospital officials said.

On Friday, a car bomb ripped through a crowded Baghdad mosque during midday prayers, killing 12 people and wounding 22,

police and hospital officials said.

After the mosque attack, which targeted Iraq's Shia majority, frantic worshippers searched through rubble for loved ones, and women wailed and beat their chests in grief. Body parts were strewn at the scene among piles of bricks, shattered glass and pools of blood. One man clutched a child's foot, shaking and weeping.

The car bomb exploded at Al-Subeith mosque in the capital's Shia-dominated New Baghdad neighbourhood, said police Col. Ahmed Abud. Witnesses said the vehicle used in the attack had been parked outside the building since the morning.

Shia mosques and funerals have become a frequent target of Sunni-led insurgents.

In eastern Baghdad, two policemen were wounded when a roadside bomb hit their car, said police Capt. Mahir Abdelsatar.

The US military said troops identified a roadside bomb on the highway itself and conducted a controlled detonation that caused no damage or injuries.

In other attacks Saturday: