

Nepali parties demand limit on king's power

Common platform launched for democracy, dy speaker barred from leaving country

AP, AFP, Kathmandu

More than three months after Nepal's king declared himself the absolute ruler of this Himalayan nation, the country's seven political parties announced a common platform that demands a return to democracy and a constitutional limit on the monarchy's power.

King Gyanendra seized power, declared a state of emergency and suspended most civil liberties on Feb. 1, saying that successive governments had failed to quell a Maoist insurgency. The emergency was lifted last week, apparently under international pressure, but the king still rules the country through a royal council of appointed ministers.

starting point in our common agenda," Mahesh Acharya, a senior official of the Nepali Congress party, said on behalf of the seven parties.

The common agenda would also include constitutional reform to restrict Gyanendra's powers and demand that the monarch release all political detainees, restore press freedom and scrap a royal anti-corruption body that many say targets the king's political opponents, said Madhav Nepal, chief of the Communist Party of Nepal.

Girija Prasad Koirala, chief of the Congress party, which was in power during most of the past 14 years of democratic rule, said the full agenda would be announced later Sunday.

Some 3,000 politicians, student leaders, journalists and rights

activists were arrested after the royal takeover in an effort to block dissent. Though the emergency has been lifted and many detainees have been released, more than 200 protesters still remain in detention.

Party spokesman Acharya said national elections were unlikely anytime soon, but that restoring the parliament would at least bring back multiparty government.

After Gyanendra seized power, the insurgents stepped up their campaign of road blocks and ambushes targeting government troops. The rebels, who claim to be inspired by Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong, have been fighting since 1996 to topple Nepal's monarchy and establish a socialist republic. The revolt has claimed more

than 11,500 lives.

Meanwhile, the deputy Speaker of Nepal's dissolved parliament was prevented from leaving the country on Saturday for a third time since the king sacked the government on February 1, a party source said.

Chitra Lekha Yadav was stopped as she tried to board a flight to New Delhi, the Nepali Congress (Democratic) party source said.

"It was the third time Yadav had been stopped at the airport since February 1," the source said.

Politicians, human rights activists and journalists have been prevented from leaving the country since King Gyanendra seized power to deal with a paralysing insurgency by Maoists fighting to install a communist republic.



Myanmar scraps mass rally amid bomb fears

AFP, Yangon

Authorities in military-ruled Myanmar yesterday scrapped a mass rally against an outlawed ethnic minority group for fear of a repeat of deadly bomb blasts that killed at least 11 people in Yangon, an official said.

Several thousand people were converging on the ancient city of Bagan for a rally led by the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a prominent government social organisation, to denounce a recent declaration of independence by a group of exiled Shan ethnic leaders.

"The mass rally was aborted after yesterday's bombings in Yangon," a source close to the military government told AFP.

USDA officials who had already reached Bagan were hastily brought back to the capital, while the crowds convening on the historic site were being told to disperse, the source added.

Tensions also remained high in Yangon one day after the worst attack of its kind since the military junta assumed power in a coup more than 40 years ago.

PHOTO: AFP

A woman injured in a blast (R) is comforted by relatives at a hospital of Myanmar's capital city Yangon Sunday. Military-ruled Myanmar draped a tight security blanket over the sites of three bombings in the capital, with the junta blaming the unprecedented attacks on ethnic guerrillas and pro-democracy activists.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) greets Chairperson of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government Sonia Gandhi (L) prior to his departure to Russia from New Delhi Sunday. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh left for Russia yesterday where he will represent India at anniversary celebrations marking the end of World War II in Moscow early next week.

Myanmar UN worker among 3 killed in Afghan bombing

AFP, Kabul

A Myanmar engineer working for the United Nations was among three people killed in a suspected suicide bombing at an Internet cafe in Kabul, the interior ministry and UN said yesterday.

The explosion Saturday evening destroyed the cafe and injured six other people.

The dead engineer was identified by his passport and a UN card found in his pocket, interior ministry spokesman Lutfullah Mashal told AFP, correcting an earlier statement that the dead man was from the Philippines.

"He was from Burma not from the Philippines. He was identified from his passport and UN card," Mashal said.

United Nations spokeswoman Ariane Quentier confirmed the man was a UN employee.

"We confirm that one of our employees, a man, a Burmese engineer working for UNOPS, was killed by the explosion on Saturday," Ariane Quentier told AFP.

PALESTINIANS IN FURY Sharon freezes more prisoner release

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon delivered a new blow to the troubled Middle East peace process yesterday by deciding to place an agreement for the release of 400 Palestinian prisoners on hold.

Palestinians reacted furiously to the move, saying it would only serve to undermine an ongoing truce.

The 400 prisoners were due to have been released by Israel as part of an agreement reached with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas at a summit in the Egyptian resort town of

Sharm el-Sheikh three months ago.

However a spokesman in Sharon's office said that the prisoners would remain behind bars until the Palestinians showed a willingness to crack down on militant groups such as the Islamist movement Hamas.

"The prime minister has decided not to release the detainees for the moment as Abu Mazen (Abbas) has not taken any action to decapitate the terrorism which is continuing," the spokesman told AFP.

Indo-Pak officials talk dam dispute

REUTERS, Lahore

India said yesterday it would change the design of a dam it is building in disputed Kashmir if it is unable to address Pakistan's objections to it under a decades-old watersharing treaty.

The water project is among a range of issues the nuclear-armed rivals are discussing, including negotiations on the Himalayan region of Kashmir, as part of a slow-moving peace process.

India's assurance came on the first day of talks in the Pakistani city of Lahore on the 330-megawatt hydro-power project, which Pakistan says violates the 1960 Indus Water treaty.

"It is our responsibility to remove the objections Pakistan has on the Kishanganga project," India's Water Commissioner D.K. Mehta told reporters.

"If we are unable to remove the objections of Pakistan under the Indus Water Treaty, we will have to change the design of Kishanganga," he said.

Pakistan depends to a great extent on rivers that flow from Indian Kashmir for its hydro-power and irrigation needs, and some political analysts say water might in future be a much more contentious issue than Kashmir, over which the neighbours have fought two of their three wars since 1947.

Iran moves to ratify nuclear protocol

But Tehran vows to resume uranium enrichment

AFP, Tehran

Iran said yesterday it was preparing a bill to ratify a key nuclear protocol but also stood firm on its intention to resume sensitive nuclear fuel work despite intense international pressure.

The government is planning to submit a bill to parliament to ratify an additional protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that allows tougher international control of Iran's nuclear activities.

Foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters that the bill would be approved by the government and then submitted to parliament but he gave no timetable.

Iran, accused by the United States of trying to develop weapons under the cover of a nuclear energy programme, signed the additional protocol in December 2003 to allow tougher international inspections of its activities.

The UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, has however insisted that Iran's parliament also ratify the protocol.

But defying international demands, Asefi reiterated that Iran would resume sensitive work on the nuclear fuel process.

"The decision has been taken to start some of our activities" at Iran's uranium conversion facility in Isfahan, he said, but added: "We have not decided what we will start or when."

Iran agreed in November last year to suspend its fuel cycle work -- the focus of international fears the country may be seeking the bomb -- and open talks with Britain, France and Germany.

But the clerical regime has since voiced frustration over the negotiations, in which the EU-3 are offering a package of incentives in return for "objective guarantees" from Iran that it will not develop weapons.

Iraq parliament okays 'national unity' govt

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's parliament yesterday finally approved a "national unity" cabinet, ending months of bitter haggling that created a political vacuum filled by a dramatic escalation in bloody insurgent attacks.

Shia Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari said the country's first democratically-elected government in half century -- which includes members of the disaffected Sunni minority -- "preserves the unity of Iraq."

And he vowed it would "resort to all legal means, including emergency laws if necessary, to combat violence".

Sunday's approval of the final six cabinet posts came a day after a massive explosion in Baghdad killed at least 18 people, including two American security guards, bringing the death toll since the start of May to at least 250.

But the US military announced the arrest of more than 100 suspected insurgents, including 54 allegedly linked to al-Qaeda frontman Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's network, in a series of weekend raids.

More than three months after the landmark January elections, Iraq's 275-member national assembly finally approved the nominees for six government posts which had remained empty since a partial cabinet was sworn in on May 3.

Saadun al-Dulaimi, a Sunni Arab, was appointed defence minister.

The oil ministry went to Ibrahim Bahr al-Ulum, son of a prominent Shia cleric, who previously held the post in the interim administration appointed by US-led forces in September 2003.

The three other ministers and one deputy premier appointed Sunday included three Sunnis and one Shia.

When he was officially appointed prime minister on April 7, Jaafari had said he would form a government within a week or two. But negotiations ran into trouble as Shias, Kurds and Sunnis competed for key jobs.

"We were careful to involve all political protagonists and this explains the delay in forming the government," Jaafari said Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (L) and his wife Rukhsana (2nd L) share light moment with Thai Deputy Prime Minister Surakiat Sathirathai and his wife Suthawan Sathirathai (R) upon arrival at Royal Military Airport in Bangkok Sunday. Aziz arrived in Thailand on an official visit during which he will hold talks with Thai high officials on bilateral and international issues.

Bush pays tribute to slain WWII soldiers

REUTERS, Maastricht

President Bush seeks to promote democracy around the globe, he paused yesterday to pay homage to the "terrible price" paid by World War II soldiers who never came home but helped win the fight against tyranny.

"On this peaceful May morning, we commemorate a great victory for liberty," Bush said at Europe's third-largest cemetery for America war dead near here in Margraten. "The thousands of white marble crosses and stars of David underscore the terrible price we paid for that victory."

On the 60th anniversary of the May 1945 signing of the Berlin armistice that ended the war in Europe, a light, chilly rain greeted Bush at Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial where 8,301 US veterans are buried. Members of White House delegation donned orange plastic raincoats as Bush and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands laid wreaths of tribute, a bugler played taps and military aircraft streaked above the sweeping arcs of gravestones.