

Indian cabinet okays arms shipment to Nepal

HR bodies urge US not to supply weapons

AFP, New Delhi

India has decided to send to Nepal a shipment of arms it had delayed after King Gyanendra seized power and will keep future requests for military supplies "under constant review," a report said yesterday.

The decision was taken by the federal cabinet on Friday last week, the Hindu newspaper said, quoting unnamed sources.

The Hindu said India would send arms and other supplies "already in the pipeline" for the Royal Nepalese Army after it suspended them following Gyanendra's decision to dismiss the government and assume power on February 1.

The report comes after Indian media said in April that the government had decided to resume military aid to Nepal unconditionally after a meeting between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Gyanendra in Jakarta on the side-

lines of an Asia-Africa meeting last month.

Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh however denied supplies would be sent unconditionally in an interview on May 7 to the Hindu and said India would consider sending new arms supplies if the king moves to restore democracy.

India is Nepal's biggest arms supplier and has close ties to the country's military which has been fighting a Maoist rebellion that has claimed more than 11,000 lives since 1996.

Britain also cut arms supplies to Nepal and joined India, the European Union and the United States to ask Gyanendra to restore democracy.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, Christina Rocca, is currently in Nepal amid speculation the United States could consider sending M-16 rifles and ammunition to Nepal's military at the end of this month.

US ambassador to Nepal James Moriarty told a public forum in Washington recently that the United States would decide by the end of May on further military assistance to Nepal to fight the Maoist insurgency.

The Rocca visit follows a decision by Gyanendra April 30 to lift a state of emergency in the kingdom, but rights groups note that press freedoms and basic civil rights remain restricted and hundreds of people have been arrested by authorities including former prime minister Deuba on corruption charges.

"If such military aid is given, then it will only strengthen the king's actions in suppressing human rights and attempting to silence democratic opposition," said T. Kumar, Amnesty International's Washington-based advocacy director for Asia and the Pacific.

Meanwhile, human rights and other groups warned the United

States Monday against supplying weapons to Nepal's military despite the lifting of a state of emergency in the Himalayan kingdom.

US ambassador to Nepal James Moriarty told a public forum in Washington recently that the United States would decide by the end of May on further military assistance to Nepal, which is fighting a bloody communist insurgency.

Unlike Britain and India, the United States did not suspend military aid to Nepal after King Gyanendra sacked the government on February 1 and assumed emergency power.

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A Nepalese student shouts slogans upon her arrest by riot police during the Nepalese government's seizure of the All Nepal National Free Students Union's (ANNFSU) office in Kathmandu Tuesday. The government had ordered the ANNFSU to immediately vacate its office in the building and at least twelve students were arrested while trying to resist the police.

India-Pakistan hold talks on Amritsar-Lahore bus service

PTI, Islamabad

India and Pakistan yesterday held talks on the launch of Amritsar-Lahore bus service.

Restoration of communication links between the coast guards of the two countries and liberalising procedures for repatriation of fishermen who stray into each others' waters, were other issues which were discussed.

An Indian delegation of transport officials, headed by Secretary Transport Alok Rawat discussed with the Pakistani officials modalities of Amritsar-Lahore bus service linking the two Punjab.

The two countries had agreed in principle to run the bus during President Pervez Musharraf's visit to India last month. The talks would end on Wednesday.

India and Pakistan already run bus services between Lahore and New Delhi and Srinagar to Muzaffarabad and a train service between Lahore and Attari near Wagah border point in Punjab.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) listens to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during their meeting in Moscow Monday. Manmohan Singh and Vladimir Putin met in Moscow as world leaders gathered for commemorations marking the defeat of Nazi Germany 60 years ago.

Cracks widen in Israel over Gaza pullout

AFP, Jerusalem

Cracks widened in the government yesterday over Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's camp snubbed calls to freeze the pullout should Hamas triumph in Palestinian polls.

Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom's comments that the plan be rethought should the Islamist movement win parliamentary elections in July flew in the face of statements from Sharon loyalists and cabinet ministers.

"We should not accept a process if it leads to suicide," Shalom told army radio. "It would be totally illogical to go on with the withdrawal plan as if nothing had happened."

The Palestinian Authority accused the foreign minister of looking for an excuse to scupper the Gaza pullout and Hamas slammed him for meddling.

Likewise, Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz and a Sharon aide said there was no question of reneging on the so-called disengagement project.

"The pullout will not be cancelled. It is a difficult process but essential for our future," said Mofaz, stressing that the army was ready to oversee the removal of all 8,000 Jewish settlers from the occupied territory.

Interior Minister Ophir Pines, from the centre-left Labour party which entered into the coalition government primarily to shore up

the pullout, told public radio that Shalom's remarks were in fact liable to strengthen Hamas.

Instead, he suggested strengthening Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas and coordinating disengagement to better help his Fatah party win the elections.

"Paradoxically, these declarations could strengthen Hamas... We must be very careful. Abu Mazen's Fatah is weakening considerably as Hamas strengthens," he said, referring to Abbas.

"This plan will be carried out whatever the results of the Palestinian elections," an aide to the prime minister told AFP.

Tigers issue warning as strike grips Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Shops were closed and public transport ground to a halt in northern and eastern Sri Lanka yesterday as Tamil Tiger rebels warned that the killing of a Tamil protestor could seriously undermine a three-year truce.

Key towns in the northern and eastern provinces were at a virtual standstill following the strike called by pro-rebel activists the day after the army killed a 65-year-old man during a protest over a new police checkpoint.

"We fear that incidents like this will weaken the confidence people have in the ceasefire agreement and create anger among the people and will lead to increased tension in the prevailing fragile situation," the Tigers said in a statement.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in their first reaction to Monday's crackdown in the district of Batticaloa, said the shooting was a violation of the truce that went into effect from February 23, 2002.

"Blocking peaceful protest by the people using arms and violence is against the rules of the ceasefire and will affect the validity of the ceasefire agreement," the Tigers

said in a statement.

Soldiers opened fire Monday when hundreds of demonstrators hurled stones at a military jeep to protest a new road checkpoint set up by police and soldiers.

The military Tuesday ordered all its units to act with maximum restraint and use minimum force to disperse any new protestors in the troubled eastern region, an army officer said.

"We have also ordered all units to ensure that local police are called for crowd control instead of deploying security forces for such work," the officer said.

The eastern province has been in turmoil since the region's top guerrilla leader, V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, led an unprecedented split in the Tamil Tiger movement in March last year.

Since then there has been a spate of factional killings.

More than 60,000 people have died in three decades of war between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels.

Diplomatic efforts to get both sides back to the negotiating table after talks broke down in April 2003 have remained inconclusive.

South American, Arab nations seek 'alliance of civilisations'

AFP, Brasilia

More than 30 nations from South America and the Arab world began yesterday an unprecedented two-day summit in a bid to form a new alliance that could serve as a counterweight to US dominance and open up new regional markets to world trade.

Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim, in a preparatory meeting Monday, called on participants to forge an "alliance of civilisations" that he said began 150 years ago with a strong wave of migration to South America from Syria and Libya.

Speaking to 21 delegations from the Arab League, the Palestinian Authority and 12 South American nations, Amorim said the summit would attempt to draw the two regions, which are "symbols of the south" together.

Despite its lofty goals, the summit, which will mark Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's debut on the world stage, has been largely ignored by the Arab nations: only five of the 22 members of the Arab League is represented by a head of state.

Arab diplomatic sources in Brasilia told AFP the United States had pressured several countries to stay away after the hosts turned down a US request for observer status at the summit.

Besides Talabani, Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas and the heads of state from Algeria, Djibouti and Qatar will also be present.

Nuclear India moves to outlaw proliferation, missile tech transfer

AFP, PTI, New Delhi

India, which conducted a series of nuclear tests in May 1998, introduced a bill in parliament yesterday to ban proliferation and the transfer of missile technology to non-nuclear states.

Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee introduced the Weapons of Mass Destruction and their Delivery Systems bill on the eve of the seventh anniversary of the tests India carried with a series of weapons, including a 45-megaton thermonuclear device.

The bill, which becomes law if endorsed by parliament's two houses, would "provide an integrated legislative basis to India's commitment to prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destruction," Mukherjee said.

"The provisions of the act apply to export, transfer, re-transfer, transit and transhipment of material, equipment or technology relating to weapons of mass destruction or their means of delivery," Mukherjee added.

India has refused to sign two landmark agreements on proliferation, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and Non-Proliferation Treaty, saying they are discriminatory because they allow the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to keep their nuclear weapons.

After the 1998 tests, which were matched by rival Pakistan the same month, India announced a moratorium on future tests and called for a time-frame for global disarmament.

"In view of India's status as a nuclear weapon state and its international commitments it was felt necessary to introduce this legislation," a statement accompanying the draft legislation said.

In April, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice offered New Delhi greater access to high technology sales, including civilian nuclear power plants and fuel to meet its growing energy needs.

India is currently barred from buying such equipment because it is not a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty that forbids such sales to countries that do not agree to international inspection of nuclear plants and facilities.

In another development, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Monday highlighted the need for further advancing strategic bilateral ties during a meeting with President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin.

"Russia is our time-tested friend and the people of all walks of life in India see Russia as our friend and recognise the strategic importance of ties with it," the Prime Minister, who is on a three-day visit in Moscow, told Putin during their meeting.

Car bomb blast kills 7 in Baghdad

3 US Marines slain during operations

AP, AFP, Baghdad

A car bomb exploded in a business district of central Baghdad yesterday, and a police officer said at least seven people were killed and 16 wounded.

The blast, which occurred near a cinema, sent a huge plume of black smoke into the sky. An Associated Press reporter at the scene saw rescue workers carrying bloodied bodies away on stretchers.

A police officer with the Interior Ministry said on condition of anonymity that at least seven people were killed and 16 wounded by a suicide car bomb that exploded just as a US military convoy of Humvees and armoured vehicles was passing.

The US military confirmed a car bomb attack in the area but provided no other details.

Firefighters and ambulances raced to the scene, where at least five heavily damaged vehicles were burning in al-Nasr Square, a main intersection of shops, offices and apartment buildings, the AP reporter said.

Earlier three US marines were killed in fighting in western Iraq near the Syrian border on Sunday and Monday, the US military said Monday.

"One marine was killed on May 9 by enemy fire by light arms near Al-Qaim", in the restive Sunni province of Al-Anbar, the army said in the statement.

Rare meningitis infections go up in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

The chief minister of India's Delhi state urged health officials to curb the spread of rare bacterial meningitis on Monday as the number of cases rose by 17 to 187.

Since the outbreak was first reported earlier this month, 15 people have died and hospitals have reported new cases almost daily, a New Delhi health ministry official said.

Chief minister Sheila Dixit called a meeting of health officials and municipal officers Monday to devise ways to stop the disease, which has spread from the heart of New Delhi to outlying suburbs.

Health secretary S.P. Aggarwal told reporters after the meeting that "the biggest worry" was that 14 of the cases had come from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar, raising fears that it was spreading across the region.

"We have sent letters to the families of the patients telling them to take precautions," said Aggarwal. "The chief medical officers of these states have been instructed to tell people who have come into contact with the patients to get antibiotics immediately to prevent the infection from spreading," he added.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean activists chant slogans during an anti-US rally near the US embassy in Seoul Tuesday. South Korea has neither detected signs nor received intelligence from the United States that North Korea is preparing a nuclear test, a high-level official said.

