

Nepal warns against criticism of king

Kathmandu yet to receive Indian military aid

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's royalist government told political parties yesterday it would not tolerate public criticism of King Gyanendra during pro-democracy protests.

Seven political parties plan street protests on Sunday against the 57-year-old monarch, who fired the government on Feb 1, seized power, jailed politicians and suspended civil liberties under the emergency rule.

"Nobody should resort to activities like shouting objectionable slogans, damaging private and public property in the course of organising demonstrations," the interior ministry said in a statement.

It said the government would take legal action against people who violate the law.

Gyanendra seized power saying the government had failed to quell

an anti-monarchy Maoist revolt in which close to 12,000 people have died since 1996.

After widespread condemnation, the king lifted emergency rule but he continues to hold unlimited power, many political leaders are still in jails and civil liberties remain suspended.

Anti-monarchy rallies have been allowed on the outskirts of Kathmandu since the lifting of emergency rule last month but are banned in the city centre.

Seven centrist and leftist parties who have often bickered in the past have agreed to launch a joint campaign for democracy including the revival of parliament dissolved in 2002.

Earlier this month, Nepal's Maoist rebels said they supported the political parties in their campaign to restore democracy.

The government said the Maoist

rebels might infiltrate the rallies and the political parties would be held responsible for any "untoward incidents" during the protests.

The Maoists want to set up a single party communist republic in Nepal, one of the world's 10 poorest countries.

Meanwhile, Nepalese army officials Friday said Nepal had not yet received any military assistance from India despite New Delhi approving a shipment following the lifting of emergency rule in the Himalayan kingdom.

India earlier this month decided to send to Nepal a shipment of arms it had delayed after King Gyanendra seized power on February 1.

"Despite India's announcement that it has partially resumed the aid suspended after the royal takeover in the kingdom, we have not yet received them yet," said Major General Kiran Shumsher Thapa.

Iraqi Shias stage mass anti-US protests

AP, Najaf

Thousands of Shias stomped on American flags painted on roads outside mosques in a show of anger over the US presence in Iraq, while Sunni leaders called Friday for a closure of places of worship to protest the sectarian violence many fear may erupt into civil war.

An American soldier was killed in a roadside bombing north of Baghdad, the military said. At least 1,628 US military members have died since the Iraq war started in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count.

In an effort to curb the daily violence, Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari said he will travel to Damascus to appeal in person for the government to take stronger steps to block insurgents from entering Iraq via Syria. Al-Jaafari and American officials blame foreign fighters for plotting many of the attacks.

A picture of Saddam Hussein wearing only his underwear appeared on the front pages of the New York Post and Britain's The Sun. The papers said the pictures, taken in the former dictator's

Baghdad prison cell, were provided by an unidentified US military official. The US military condemned the photos and launched an immediate investigation into who took them.

Tensions spiralled throughout Iraq, particularly in its southern Shia heartland, as more than 10,000 protesters heeded a call by anti-US cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to step on and drive over American and Israeli flags painted on roads outside mosques. Many of the worshippers were chanting or waving the Quran, Islam's holy book.

Al-Sadr, a burly, black-bearded cleric, launched two uprisings against US forces in Baghdad and Najaf in April and August last year, then went into hiding before surfacing Monday to demand that US-led forces withdraw from Iraq.

His appeal came after US and Iraqi forces detained 43 al-Sadr supporters during a raid this week on a Shia mosque in Mahmoudiya, south of Baghdad.

Crowds attended angry services in the Shia-dominated cities of Najaf, Kufa, and Nasiriyah, where a gunfight broke out between al-Sadr supporters and guards protecting a local provincial governor's office.



A punter reads the British tabloid paper "The Sun" carrying a picture of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in his underwear at a coffee shop in central London Friday.

Manmohan gov't marks first year in office today

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress Party-led coalition was set to mark one year in office today with low-key celebrations, including the release of a government "report card," a government official said.

The alliance was sworn into office May 22 last year with former finance minister Manmohan Singh as the prime minister.

"There are no great celebrations planned," the government official, who wished to remain unidentified, said yesterday.

"The prime minister will release the government's report card which will let the people know what the government has achieved," he said.

Two opinion polls this week found a vast majority of voters felt Singh was an honest politician who had done a respectable job.

Two out of three respondents in The Times of India newspaper survey rated his performance as good or average while only seven percent called it poor.

A survey by the Week magazine found more than 70 percent felt Singh was India's "most honest" politician in a country where political corruption is considered rife with an equal number saying he had "fared well."

The Earth shook like never before

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

Dramatic new data from the Dec 26, 2004 Sumatran-Andaman earthquake that generated a deadly tsunami show the event created the longest fault rupture and the longest duration of faulting ever observed, according to three reports by an international group of seismologists published on Thursday in the journal Science.

"Normally, a small earthquake might last less than a second; a moderate-sized earthquake might last a few seconds. This earthquake lasted between 500 and 600 seconds," said Charles Ammon, associate professor of geosciences at Penn State University.

The quake released an amount of energy equal to a 100-gigaton bomb, said Roger Bilham, professor of geological sciences at the University of Colorado. And that power lasted longer than any quake ever recorded, according to CNN.



A group of Indian Muslims shout anti-US slogans and burn US flags during a demonstration after the Juma prayers in Kolkata. Hundreds of Muslims took part in the demonstration Friday after Newsweek magazine backed off on a report on Quran desecration by US troops that sparked off bloody protests in the Muslim world.

Protests rock Uzbek border town

Gov't rounding up dissidents

AFP, AP, Karasuv

Protests rocked this town on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border yesterday as Tashkent struggled to quell unrest in the wake of a deadly crackdown that has sparked unprecedented Western criticism of the authoritarian Uzbek regime.

Some 200 demonstrators, mostly women, carried banners demanding freedom for a self-proclaimed Islamist leader as well as a popular local wrestler in the town of Karasuv, which straddles the border between the Central Asian former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Several hundred soldiers and riot police stood by as the protestors blocked the road leading to a bridge to the Kyrgyz side of the town, over the Sharikh Khansai canal.

Defying growing calls Friday for an international inquiry into the bloody suppression of anti-government riots, President Islam Karimov's regime rounded up suspected participants in the unrest, which human rights activists say killed hundreds.

Witnesses and rights activists have reported continuing arrests in Andijan, the eastern city at the centre of the unrest. A senior Uzbek police official said Friday that police in the capital Tashkent had arrested several people on suspicion of involvement in the Andijan riots.

The protestors tried to persuade traders crossing the bridge to join them, one young man throwing a rock at a car and smashing a window, witnesses said.

Hamas agrees to end attacks on Israel

AP, Gaza City

The Hamas militant group has agreed to halt mortar and rocket fire on Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, a deal meant to save a truce threatened by three consecutive days of violence, the Palestinian interior ministry said yesterday.

Hamas agreed to stop the fire at a late-night meeting on Thursday between Interior Minister Nasser Yousef and the Islamic group's leadership, said ministry spokesman Tawfiq Abu Khoussa.

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas said yesterday that the fighting had subsided, and he didn't expect it to overshadow his meeting next week with President Bush.

Israel threatened harsh retaliation after the fighting erupted Wednesday, and warned the Palestinians that a cease-fire

declared in February was in danger of collapse. Since Wednesday, Israeli troops have killed three Palestinian militants. Militants have fired 60 mortar shells and homemade rockets at Gaza settlements.

The violence erupted after a long spell of relative quiet in nearly five years of fighting, threatening Israeli plans to withdraw this summer from all the Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements.

Hamas is challenging Abbas' ruling Fatah party in a parliamentary election scheduled for mid-July, leading Israeli security officials to speculate Hamas violence is meant to strengthen the group and embarrass Abbas ahead of the vote.

"Our brothers in Hamas reaffirmed their commitment to the quiet," Abu Khoussa said. Asked if Hamas had agreed to stop firing at

Jewish settlements, he said: "Yes. They agreed not to do that."

Israel has accused the Palestinian Authority of not doing enough to stop the militants from firing at Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip. But earlier this week Hamas militants used fists, rocks and gunfire to prevent Palestinian police from deploying and preventing the rocket fire.

At Thursday's meeting, the sides discussed the incident. Hamas denied its people fired on troops, but witnesses confirmed there was gunfire.

On Friday, Yousef toured the Khan Younis and Rafah areas of Gaza some of the most violent spots in the coastal strip and ordered his men to preserve the truce, Palestinian security officials said on condition of anonymity.