

AMNESTY SAYS IN ITS ANNUAL REPORT

## 'Pockets of repression' mar rights progress in Asia

AFP, London

Amnesty International said Wednesday Asia had recorded some progress on human rights but warned that "pockets of repression" remained, with many abuses committed in the name of the "war on terror".

In its annual report, the London-based human rights watchdog singled out for "grave human rights violations" the long-festering conflicts in Nepal, northeast India and Indonesia's Aceh province.

It also voiced concern about the newly-emerged conflict that has flared in southern Thailand, where at least 78 demonstrators suffocated inside army lorries and 500 people had been killed by the end of last year.

Human rights abuses were also frequent in Asian conflicts where both sides were working on a resolution -- in Kashmir, Sri Lanka and the Philippines -- and in little-watched troublespots, such as the 30-year-old conflict in Laos.

The group also said there were grave concerns for the human rights of vulnerable groups affected by the tsunami that killed more than 250,000 people in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand.

In its annual report, which follows recent reports of prisoner abuse in Afghanistan, the group highlighted violations committed in the US-led "war on terror" in Afghanistan and Pakistan's South Waziristan tribal area.

"In Afghanistan, hundreds of

people suspected of being sympathisers of the Taliban or al-Qaeda were held in long-term arbitrary detention at Bagram airbase and other detention centres run by the US armed forces," it said.

"Without access to judicial authorities, the detainees were effectively beyond the reach or protection of the law."

Islamic minorities were also targeted in China's northwestern Uighur region, where many were arbitrarily arrested as "separatists, terrorists and religious extremists", the report said.

Islamist terrorists, meanwhile, had killed civilians in bomb attacks on the Australian embassy in Jakarta and a ferry in Manila Bay.

Amnesty International noted

some positive developments for human rights and peace in Asia, including the diplomatic thaw between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan.

Human rights had been debated at large meetings in Mumbai, Seoul and Kathmandu and had "shaped many political agendas" in elections in Afghanistan, Australia, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, the Philippines and South Korea.

"Tentative moves towards democratisation and increased human rights" had also been made in Brunei, the Maldives and Bhutan.

The secluded Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan had abolished the death penalty, bucking the trend on the continent with the highest number of executions.



PHOTO: AFP  
Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas (C) heads towards a helicopter outside his headquarters at the West Bank city of Ramallah as he leaves for Washington yesterday. Abbas embarks on US mission for holding talks with US President George W. Bush tomorrow to put pressure on Israel over Gaza pullout.

## India to allow Hurriyat leaders' Pak trip

REUTERS, Islamabad

India will allow leaders of Kashmir's main separatist political alliance to visit Pakistan for talks on the disputed region's future, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf said in an interview published yesterday.

Pakistan has issued an invitation to the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an alliance of about two dozen political groups, to visit on June 2.

India has previously been reluctant to let Hurriyat leaders, some of whom seek independence for Kashmir and others a merger with Pakistan, to travel to Pakistan.

"Now we have a breakthrough. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has allowed them to travel to Pakistan," Musharraf told the Daily Times.

"So once they talk to us and they also talk to the Indian government, which we will try to facilitate, we shall have a trilateral arrangement going."

Hurriyat leaders said on Monday they had yet to receive an official invitation from Pakistan.



PHOTO: AFP  
Bishnu Nishthuri (L), president of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists, leads a protest rally against the government's plan to muzzle the press in Kathmandu yesterday. About 500 Nepalese journalists joined in the action, with their mouths covered with black bands, as a mark of protest against the government's new law.

## 'Syria severs military ties with US'

REUTERS, New York

Syria has severed military and intelligence cooperation with the United States, its ambassador to Washington told The New York Times in an interview published on its Web site on Monday.

The ambassador, Imad Moustapha, told the newspaper in an interview given last Friday at the Syrian Embassy in Washington, that his country had, in the last 10 days, "severed all links" with the US military and Central Intelligence Agency because of what he called unjust American allegations.

Moustapha said he believed the Bush administration had decided "to escalate the situation with Syria" despite steps the Syrians have taken against insurgents in Iraq, and despite the recent withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, in response to international demands.

"We thought, why should we continue to cooperate?" he said.

The comments were in response to Bush administration complaints that Syria was not doing enough to halt the flow of men and money to the insurgency in Iraq.

## MOVE FOR LONG-TERM US MILITARY PRESENCE Bush, Karzzai ink strategic partnership pact

AFP, AP, Washington

US President George W. Bush and Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai signed a "strategic partnership" Monday enabling long-term US involvement in Afghanistan's security as well as reconstruction.

Among the key points of the agreement was allowing US military forces operating in Afghanistan to have continued access to the key Bagram Air Base as well as other military facilities as "may be mutually determined."

American access to these facilities was necessary for US forces to "help organise, train, equip, and sustain Afghan security forces" according to the joint declaration of the "US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership."

"It's a partnership we have been working on for quite a while," Bush told

reporters with Karzai by his side after their meeting at the White House.

"It's a partnership that establishes regular, high-level exchange on political, security and economic issues of mutual interest," Bush said.

Since helping to bring down the Taliban in 2001, Washington has remained Karzai's biggest supporter, both in terms of reconstruction aid and its military presence, with 18,000 troops on the ground fighting remnants of the Taliban and their allies.

Karzai has been a key advocate for a permanent security relationship with the United States but had stopped short of calling for full-time American bases, a sensitive topic in the war-shattered country.

In an apparent bid to assuage any concerns, Bush said Monday that under the new pact, the United

States would "consult with Afghanistan if it perceives its territorial integrity, independence or security is at risk."

"Of course our troops will respond to US commanders, but our US commanders and our diplomatic mission there is in a consultative relationship with the government," he added.

Most of the US troops in Afghanistan are either based at Bagram airbase north of Kabul or at Kandahar airbase, which the United States uses to launch raids against insurgents still active in the south and east of the country.

The US also has an operating base at the old Soviet airport of Shindand in the western province of Herat near the Iranian border, and a forward operating base at Salerno in the southeast of the country, not far from Pakistan.

## Manmohan drums up support to save tigers

AFP, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday promised to save endangered Royal Bengal tigers in India after he sighted one for the first time in his life in a national park under threat from poachers.

Singh, accompanied by his wife Gursharan Kaur, ended a two-day tour of the 390 square-kilometre (150 square-mile) Ranthambore game park by seeing a tiger from a few feet away on a trip planned to drum up support to save the endangered animal.

Singh, 72, sighted the full-grown tigress from a distance of five feet (1.3 metres) 20 minutes into his drive through the park in the northern desert state of Rajasthan.

"I was lucky to spot a tigress called Lady of the Lake," Singh told reporters in a televised press conference.

## Israeli, Palestinians fail to reach accord

Palestinian leadership battles to shore up truce

AFP, Gaza City

A bout of mortar attacks in the Gaza Strip last week has put the biggest strain on the informal truce since it began in January, and prompted calls by senior Israeli army officers to delay the planned pullout of troops and Jewish settlers from the occupied territory.

However, in a speech in New York overnight, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon again stressed his commitment to his disengagement plan which he said would help ensure Jews remain a majority within the state of Israel.

In a sign that both sides were determined to prevent the truce unravelling, Mofaz and Yussuf met late Monday to discuss the recent spike in violence.

Israel's plans to transfer security responsibility for towns in the West Bank, which have been frozen since the beginning of the month, were also set to feature prominently in the talks, said a spokesman for Yussuf.

The handovers were part of a

series of confidence-building measures agreed at a landmark summit in February when Sharon and Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas both declared an end to more than four years of violence.

Agreement was also reached at the summit for Israel to free 900 Palestinian prisoners but an initial batch of 500 releases has yet to be followed up.

Militant groups such as Hamas, which was behind the bulk of last week's mortar attacks, have pointed to the prisoner issue to argue that Israel is not meeting its obligations.

A delegation from Egypt, which hosted talks in March when the factions formally announced the "cool-down", held talks with Abbas' dominant Fatah party in Gaza City ahead of talks with Islamist militant groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad on Tuesday.

ations Minister Taro Aso warned that Wu had caused anti-Chinese sentiment among Japanese people to rise.

"Their manner is totally out of common (diplomatic) practices. It has greatly contributed to fanning anti-Chinese feelings," Aso said.

Education Minister Nariaki Nakayama also joined the Japanese government's unusually strongly-worded criticism of its neighbour.

"I thought China was a country that values manners. I am very sorry to think that they must have forgotten such things," Nakayama said.

His ministry last month caused an uproar in China and South Korea after approving a nationalist history textbook seen as playing down atrocities by Japanese forces during World War II.

The textbooks set off major rallies in China that damaged Japanese diplomatic property and also denounced Tokyo's cherished bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

## Japan-China ties nosedive again

AFP, Tokyo

An outraged Japan said yesterday that China needed to learn better manners after it stood up Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, as relations between the Asian powers worsened over memories of World War II.

Chinese Vice Premier Wu Yi on Monday abruptly cut short a goodwill visit to Japan by one day and cancelled a meeting she had requested with Koizumi, saying only that she had pressing duties at home.

The Chinese foreign ministry later indicated that the reason was Japan's insistence on Koizumi visiting the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo which honors war dead including convicted war criminals.

"They suddenly cancelled the schedule but gave no word of apology. It is understandable if they have urgent matters but they should know society just does not function without saying 'I'm sorry,'" Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura told a news conference.

Internal Affairs and Commun-

Indian President APJ Abdul Kalam (C) introduces the members of the Indian delegation to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin (R) during their meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP  
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