

UK resumes non-lethal military aid to Nepal

Nepal orders closure of radio centre

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, AFP, Kathmandu

Britain has decided to resume non-lethal military assistance to Nepal on humanitarian grounds, following in the footsteps of India.

Prior to the February 1 royal takeover, the British government had planned in January to "gift" a package of military equipment to Nepal under its "Global Conflict Prevention Pool" to help the Royal Nepalese Army combat the escalating Maoist insurgency.

The equipment, worth 1.34 million pounds, comprised non-lethal aid like surveillance helicopters with night flying capability and communications enhancements, 40 general purpose Land Rovers and

Explosive Ordnance Disposal equipment and vehicles.

This week there was a British parliamentary notice to the effect that some of the equipment would be released.

After the royal coup, following the Indian Government's decision to freeze military aid to Nepal, the US and Britain too had put military assistance on hold.

Last month, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw had issued a statement saying his government had decided to suspend the planned package in the light of the "disturbing situation" in Nepal.

"The UK would be reviewing the impact of the king's action on the security assistance we provide to Nepal," the statement added.

"We are now considering with key international partners what our longer term policy for providing assistance to Nepal should be, including on assistance with a humanitarian purpose."

The notice on resuming military assistance came nearly a week after a Ministerial Troika meeting between the European Union, India and Luxembourg, which currently holds the six-month rotating presidency of the European Union. Britain is a member of the EU.

Attended by Indian External Affairs Minister K Natwar Singh on May 19, the meeting in Luxembourg discussed EU-India ties as well as regional and international developments, where Nepal reportedly

featured on the agenda.

Meanwhile, Nepal's government has ordered the closure of a radio programme production centre in the latest crackdown on the media since the king assumed absolute power almost four months ago, the centre said yesterday.

"The Ministry of Information and Communications sent a letter to us Friday (telling us to shut down our centre," said Gopal Guragain, managing director of the Communication Corner which operates with a team of 12 journalists.

The ministry said the centre, which provides programming to 14 of the 50 private FM radio stations across the country, was operating illegally, Guragain said.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani security personnel guard the area outside a Muslim shrine, where a bomb exploded Friday. Sandals of victims are kept as evidences of the blast at the shrine on the outskirts of Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani security forces were on alert for reprisal attacks a day after a suicide bomber blew himself up in a crowd of Shia Muslims at the shrine, killing at least 19 people.

Uncertainty over Saudi king's health

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's King Fahd remained in hospital yesterday one day after he was admitted suffering from pneumonia and fever, raising concerns over his health in the oil giant that has been fighting al-Qaeda.

Fears about the king's condition had heightened on Friday after a royal statement urged Saudis to pray for his recovery.

But the state Saudi news agency SPA quoted an official on Friday night as saying: "King Fahd is well, thank God, and the medical tests he is undergoing are proceeding in a normal way."

"We ask God to keep and care for the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and grant him health and well-being," the royal statement said.

It gave no details on the condition of Fahd, in his early 80s and incapacitated since 1995 by a stroke. There was no further update about his health on Saturday morning.

Nuclear treaty failure sets tone for summit

US, Israel are real nuke threats: Iran

AP, REUTERS, United Nations

The failure of a global nuclear conference leaves it to President Bush and other world leaders to "think outside the box" at a September summit and find new ways to stem the spread of nuclear arms, UN officials say.

After a month of sharp debate, the conference ended Friday with a whimper: no consensus recommendations for strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the pact that has helped keep the lid on doomsday arms since 1970.

The failure comes at a time of mounting nuclear tensions around the world.

North Korea has pulled out of the treaty and says it is building atom

bombs. Iran's nuclear fuel program raises questions about possible weapons plans. Arab states view Israel's nuclear arsenal as increasingly provocative. The conference had futilely debated proposals to address all these issues.

Many delegates also were disturbed over Bush administration talk of modernising the US nuclear force, and sought US reaffirmation of commitments made to disarmament steps at the non-proliferation conferences of 1995 and 2000.

Reuters adds: The United States and Israel represent the real nuclear threat to the world, not Iran, Tehran's chief envoy to the United Nations said on Friday after an abortive conference

on controlling nuclear weapons.

Javad Zarif, Iran's ambassador to the UN, said the United States never intended to scrap its nuclear arsenal, despite promising to eventually disarm when it signed the 1970 nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the landmark arms control pact.

Zarif, in an interview with Reuters, said Israel, which is widely believed to have nuclear weapons, was the threat to the Middle East region. "There is unanimity on the threat that is posed not only by Israeli nuclear weapons but by its aggressive policy (in general)," he said.

Musharraf insisted that Pakistan, which already has nuclear weapons, was against proliferation.

MUSHARRAF SAYS Iran anxious to obtain nukes

AFP, Berlin

Iran is very anxious to obtain a nuclear bomb, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf said in an interview published yesterday, while stating his opposition to any preventive attack on the fellow-Muslim nation.

Asked by Germany's Der Spiegel weekly how to prevent Iran from developing a military nuclear program, Musharraf said: "I do not know. They are very anxious to have the bomb."

But a preventive war against Tehran would lead to "a disaster considering the current state of the world," the Pakistani leader said.

"It would provoke a rebellion in the Muslim world. Why open up new fronts?" he was quoted by the weekly as saying.

Musharraf insisted that Pakistan, which already has nuclear weapons, was against proliferation.

Delhi formally invites Ulfa for talks

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Guwahati

The Indian government has invited the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) for talks in a bid to make peace with the last major militancy group still active in the country's northeast.

A Home Ministry official in New Delhi said a formal letter was sent from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on Friday to the Ulfa.

"The letter signed by National Security Adviser MK Narayanan was addressed to Ulfa chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa," the official said.

The letter from PMO was handed over to Assamese

writer Indira Goswami, who has been requested by Ulfa to mediate in the peace talks with New Delhi.

"I do not want to disclose the contents of the letter but I can say it is very encouraging and is a positive move forward," Goswami said.

"I have e-mailed the letter to the Ulfa chairman and I hope they respond positively."

The PMO's letter is in response to a letter from the Ulfa chairman to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh two months ago in which the group offered to hold talks if New Delhi discussed its main demand for "sovereignty" or independence.

"We are hopeful of a breakthrough. From our side we are ready to extend whatever is required to facilitate negotiations with Ulfa," Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi said.

On Wednesday, Home Ministry and Assam government officials signed a ceasefire pact with the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) in New Delhi, another powerful tribal rebel group in Assam.

"If Ulfa too joins the peace process like NDFB, we hope to bring the curtains down on one of the most violent insurgencies in the northeast," Gogoi said.

In the past two days, Ulfa triggered a series of explosions targeting power transformers and road bridges, besides attacking an army convoy and injuring at least four soldiers.

The Ulfa has been fighting for an independent homeland in Assam since 1979 and is considered one of the most organised rebel outfits in the northeast.



Sonia reelected Cong president unanimously

PTI, New Delhi

Sonia Gandhi was unanimously re-elected Congress President with the party's Central Election Authority announcing her unopposed election yesterday.

The announcement was made by CEA Chairperson Oscar Fernandes in the presence of Sonia and several senior leaders, Union Ministers and party workers amid jubilant scenes at the AICC headquarters.

Fernandes later presented a certificate to Sonia about her election.

"I declare Sonia Gandhi duly elected unopposed President of the Indian National Congress," he said.

Out of 100 nominations received proposing Sonia's name for the top party post, 97 were found valid.



PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiris carry injured children to the hospital following a grenade attack in a busy market place in Srinagar yesterday. The officials blamed Kashmiri militants for the attack and also a mine blast outside the southern town of Anantnag earlier in the day, in which 12 civilians and seven policemen were wounded.

Pakistan, India begin talks on demarcation of Sir Creek border

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani and Indian defence officials started a two-day meeting yesterday in a bid to settle a row over maritime boundaries in the Sir Creek marshlands that lie between the countries, officials said.

The talks focussed on a survey of the area, which falls between Pakistan's southern Sindh province and the Indian state of Gujarat, conducted by Pakistani and Indian teams early this year, a defence ministry official said.

The delegations would discuss proposals from both sides on the boundary, which is undetermined and has been a source of border tension.

Aceh rebels seek truce at talks

AFP, Helsinki

Separatists from the war-torn Indonesian province of Aceh said they will push for a ceasefire in their almost 30-year-old conflict with the Indonesian authorities, at peace talks yesterday in Finland.

Bakhtiar Abdullah, a spokesman for the exiled leadership of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) who are taking part in the talks in Helsinki, told AFP that a ceasefire should be part of a security agreement which was to be discussed with the government delegation.

"We have had only negative answers so far, but we will pursue (the issue)," he said. "It will be part of a security package."

Zarqawi in good health after injury

AFP, Dubai

al-Qaeda's frontman in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, is in good health after his reported wounding, his organisation said, as seven people were killed in a car bombing in Saddam Hussein's hometown.

Meanwhile, Tokyo was seeking yesterday to confirm a report that a Japanese security worker believed captured in an ambush three weeks ago had died.

The Army of Ansar al-Sunna militant group posted on its website the image of a bloodied body claimed to be that of Akihiko Saito, who has been missing since an ambush by Islamic militants in western Iraq, according to press reports.

France votes today on EU constitution

AFP, Paris

France goes to the polls today for a historic referendum on the EU constitution, one that could send shockwaves through the country and the European Union if voters reject the treaty as predicted.

On the eve of the referendum, final opinion polls gave an edge to the "no" camp, with the IFOP institute suggesting that up to 56 percent of voters could oppose the text, which aims to simplify the operating rules in the expanded EU.

But after a campaign that has mesmerised and polarised France, about one in five voters remains undecided, meaning that a last-minute surge in support for the "yes" camp led by President Jacques Chirac could turn the tables.

Should France -- one of the EU's six founding members -- reject the constitution, it would deal a harsh blow to the 72-year-old Chirac, who just celebrated 10 years in office, and compromise his political legacy.

It could also leave the treaty dead in its tracks and plunge the EU into a period of uncertainty, as all 25 member states must approve the constitution for it to take effect.

"Europe at stake," read the front-page headline of the left-leaning daily Liberation on Saturday, with two dice spelling out the words "oui" and "non".

Chirac's ruling centre-right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) is campaigning alongside its junior partner in government, the Union for French Democracy (UDF), as well as the opposition Socialist party (PS) and the Greens.

They are battling a disparate "no" camp made up of the far-right National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the Communist and Trotskyist parties, nationalist Euroskeptics and a smattering of UMP and PS dissidents.

Voting began Saturday in France's overseas territories, with residents of the tiny archipelago of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, located off the coast of Canada, the first to cast their ballots from 1000 GMT.

As was the case for last year's regional elections, officials decided to organise voting in the territories on the eve of the referendum in France proper, so that residents would not be influenced by results from the mainland.