

PHOTO: AFP

Bolivian President Carlos Mesa, holding a Bolivian flag, is greeted by supporters as he leaves Monday the government house in La Paz after resignation. Mesa resigned amid angry street protests demanding nationalisation of the country's natural gas sector.

Bolivian president quits

Protesters chase Mesa out of palace

AFP, REUTERS, La Paz

Bolivian President Carlos Mesa resigned after he was forced to flee his office amid angry street protests demanding nationalisation of the country's huge natural gas industry, as Congress prepared to meet Tuesday to decide the future of the government.

"It is my responsibility to say that this is as far as I can go," Mesa said on national television late Monday.

"For that reason my decision is to offer my resignation from my post as president of the republic," which he took over 20 months ago after his predecessor, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, was driven from office, also by demonstrations over control of Bolivia's gas reserves.

Mesa, visibly upset during his 25-minute speech, asked demonstrators to allow Congress to debate his successor.

"The solution to our problems must be based on the interests of all," he said.

Congress President Hormando Vaca Diaz called for a meeting

Tuesday to elect Mesa's successor, according to the constitution. Diaz is next in the line of succession, followed by the president of the House of Deputies, Mario Cossio, and Supreme Court President Eduardo Rodriguez, who has the only legal right to call for new elections.

Hours before his announcement, Mesa was forced to flee his office as protesters threatened to overwhelm police guarding the Quemado presidential palace.

An estimated 80,000 people, including Quechua and Aymara Indians, farmers, miners and unionists surrounded the presidential palace and the nearby Congress on the capital's main square, chanting "Civil war!" and hurling blasting caps, to demand the nationalisation of the natural gas industry.

Opposition leaders, however, were sceptical of Mesa's announcement, recalling that on March 7 he also tended his resignation only to have Congress reject it a few hours later.

Socialist opposition leader Evo Morales, who heads the country's

coca growers' union and was behind the current anti-government protests, said Mesa's resignation was "only half believable since at no time did he mention it was irrevocable."

"To make us believe," Morales added, the presidents of both houses of Congress, Vaca Diaz and Cossio, should also resign "and the Supreme Court president should assume the presidency and call for presidential elections before the end of the year."

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Taiwan's National Assembly okays constitutional reform package

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's National Assembly voted yesterday in favour of a reform package which would allow public referendums on the constitution, a move likely to anger China which sees such polls as a means for the island to push for independence.

The 300-seat assembly, an electoral college nominated by political parties by proportional representation which deals exclusively with constitutional matters, voted by 249 to 48 to endorse the raft of reform measures.

The ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the main opposition Kuomintang (KMT), which together hold 244 seats in the 300-member assembly, both support the constitutional changes.

Changes include reducing the number of seats in the Legislative Yuan, or parliament, from 225 to 113 beginning from 2007.

Other provisions include extending legislators' terms from three to four years and using public referendums to change the constitution, which could lead to the abolition of the assembly itself.

Chandrika under siege

Monks vow to end her career while Tigers warn country may slip back to war

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president came under intense pressure as a key minister quit yesterday and the influential Buddhist clergy vowed to end her career if she approved an aid-sharing deal with Tamil Tiger rebels.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also raised the stakes by warning that a truce arranged by peace broker Norway was under "serious threat," signalling that the country could slip back to war.

The political crisis deepened with the sudden resignation of media minister Mangala Samara-weera, a close confidant of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who helped put together a Marxist-backed coalition after elections in April 2004.

Samaraweera said he resigned for personal reasons. He retained other cabinet posts, but analysts said his role as spokesman was crucial for Kumaratunga's plans to announce a deal to share tsunami aid with the rebels.

The political swirl deepened after the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, leader Lal Kantha said the party would quit the government the moment Kumaratunga signed an aid deal, officially called the North and East Tsunami Relief Board.

Kumaratunga's government has a five-seat majority in the 225-member parliament and depends on the 39 votes of the JVP.

The JVP-affiliated National Monks' Front also said it would launch a campaign to drum up public support against Kumaratunga's plans.

The monks wield considerable influence over the island's Buddhist majority in the country of 19.5 million people.

"We will first start with a protest and then extend it to a death fast from the weekend unless the president withdraws her decision," the front's secretary monk, Kalawelgala Chandraloka, told reporters.

"If the president goes ahead, we will ensure that it will be the end of her political career. We will make

sure that no one accepts her as a political leader in this country."

The remarks were sparked by an advertisement issued in the name of the relief board Tuesday that said an administrative mechanism was needed to fast-track rebuilding in the northeast, one of the areas worst affected by the tsunamis.

Some 31,000 people were killed in the December 26 tsunamis and a million people were initially left homeless. Much of the destruction was in the northeast, parts of which are dominated by the guerrillas.

"Let's stop the debate and decide to move forward," the advertisement urged. "The hope of tens of thousands of children depend on this."

However, Kumaratunga's spokesman Harim Peiris said the advertisement was part of an awareness campaign and not a formal notice of a new relief board or tsunami aid deal.

International donors have called for a joint mechanism to distribute billions of dollars in aid equitably in rebel-held and government areas. Several countries, including Japan

and the United States, have laws prohibiting direct aid to the Tigers.

The aid deal is expected to bring the government and rebels into close cooperation on rebuilding, including areas devastated by decades of a civil war that claimed over 60,000 lives between 1972 and 2002.

The LTTE has said it is willing to agree to the aid deal with the government. However it said a continued delay in reaching a deal has threatened a fragile ceasefire.

The LTTE's political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan told Norway's top envoy in Sri Lanka, Hans Brattskar, Tuesday that the Sri Lankan military was engaged in an "undeclared economic embargo" on rebel-held areas.

"Thamilselvan said that the ceasefire agreement is under serious threat by actions and inaction of the Sri Lankan government," the LTTE's peace secretariat said in a statement after Tuesday's talks in Kilinochchi.

Myanmar beefs up security, raises alarm over terror threats

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government has stepped up security in the capital in a bid to alleviate fears triggered by rumours of impending bomb attacks spread by "destructive elements," state media reported yesterday.

The junta warned that anti-government agents were spreading fabricated rumours of forthcoming bombings at schools and crowded places, causing panic in the wake of last month's bomb blasts in Yangon that killed at least 19 people and wounded more than 150.

"At present, the destructive elements invented rumours to the effect that... bombs will explode at busy spots, supermarkets, markets and schools in downtown Yangon with every intention of jeopardising stability, frightening the people, causing business in a state of disorder and manipulating prices for self-interest," the official New Light of Myanmar newspaper said.

"The government and depart-

mental officials are making arrangements to ensure security for the entire national people," it added.

"Likewise, organisations, companies and entrepreneurs are making arrangements for ensuring security at their offices, departments, workites, crowded supermarkets and cinemas under the supervision of the government."

Security forces on Monday scrambled to various locations around Yangon in reaction to rumours that bombs had been planted at schools and markets.

Classes at several high schools, including a teacher training school near state media offices, were disrupted when panicked parents rushed to collect their children after hearing that bombs had been planted on the premises, one eyewitness told AFP. Similar threats elsewhere also proved false, according to state radio and television announcements.



PHOTO: AFP

A worker (L) smokes a cigarette while waiting for a transport in Yangon yesterday near a parked military vehicle. Myanmar's military government has stepped up security in the capital in a bid to alleviate fears triggered by rumours of impending bomb attacks by "destructive elements."

Nepali army keeps up hunt for Maoist rebels

Himalayan kingdom reels after deadly bus attack

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's security forces were yesterday hunting for Maoist rebels they say blew up a bus and killed 36 people, as the Himalayan kingdom reeled from one of the bloodiest ever attacks on civilians.

More than 70 people were also wounded in Monday's attack at Madi village in the Maoist-controlled district of Chitwan, about 180km southwest of Kathmandu, the army said.

The army and the government has laid the blame squarely at the door of the Maoist rebels who have been waging a bloody insurgency for the past nine years, but no one has claimed responsibility.

"The search to locate the culprits is continuing but they normally blast or attack and run away," army major Sushil Dahal told AFP.

As the bus passed Madi as much as 50kg of explosives buried underneath the road was detonated. The vehicle was crammed with more than 100 passengers, some sitting on the roof.

"The terrorists knew that very few vehicles operated on the route and despite the fact that they could see a lot of people travelling inside and on the rooftop of the bus, they blasted it," an army statement said.

Witnesses said the bus was torn apart by the force of the blast and passengers were hit by shrapnel and shards of metal and glass.

"(The bus) rose into the air... quite high and came down and split into two," an army officer said, quoting witnesses.

Police superintendent Surendra Bahadur Shah said the attack was the work of "terrorists", a word the police and military in Nepal use to describe Maoist rebels.

However there was no claim of responsibility from the Maoists, who have been fighting to install a communist republic in Nepal since 1996. The insurgency has already claimed more than 11,000 lives.

Officials said many of the victims of Monday's attack were women and children, and three military personnel on their way home for vacation were among the dead.

ME truce under fire as 3 Palestinians killed

AFP, Jerusalem

Three Palestinians, including a militant leader, were killed by Israeli soldiers during operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip yesterday, dealing yet another blow to a fragile Middle East truce.

Mraweh Khaled Kamil, a chief of Islamic Jihad's armed wing in the Jenin area of the northern West Bank, died under a hail of gunfire as he hunkered down in a house in the town of Qabatiya with other wanted militants, witnesses said.

Israeli troops surrounded the house before both sides unleashed volleys of bullets and an army bulldozer ground the building to a pulp, witnesses and military sources said.

Nasser Zakarnah, a 23-year-old civilian caught up in the clashes was also killed and nine other Palestinians injured, one of them seriously, Palestinian sources said.

The Israeli military counted one soldier wounded, two armed Palestinian gunmen as "hit" and said four militants surrendered.

Just hours earlier another

Palestinian was shot dead by Israeli soldiers on the border between the occupied Gaza Strip and Egypt, sources on both sides said.

An Israeli patrol opened fire on a "suspect" who jumped over the border fence and ran towards the Palestinian sector of Rafah, a military source said.

Tuesday's deaths raised to 4,765 the number of people killed during the more than four-year Palestinian uprising and flung into further jeopardy an informal truce in place since late January and cemented at a peace summit in February.

"The truce is in peril and this killing will not go unpunished. Our patience is running out," said Khader Adnan, a spokesman for Islamic Jihad after Kamil was pronounced dead in Qabatiya.

Egyptian mediators last month rushed to the occupied territories to bolster the ceasefire after militants launched a string of rocket attacks in the Gaza Strip prompting two retaliatory Israeli air raids in as many weeks.

Israel has repeatedly accused Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas of failing to clamp down on militants, make arrests or prevent anti-Israeli attacks, although Egypt has warned Israel off making "unrealistic and impractical" demands.

In Gaza, the armed wing of Islamist group Hamas on Tuesday claimed another rocket attack on southern Israel, which damaged one house.

It said the strike was to avenge police storming Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque, Islam's third holiest site, on Monday to disperse Palestinians throwing stones at an Israeli guard visiting the complex, also revered by Jews as the Temple Mount.

Palestinians accused Israeli police of provoking the clashes by allowing extremist Jews to visit the compound.

Against the backdrop of unrest, James Wolfensohn, international special envoy for Israel's imminent withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, was to begin a round of talks with top officials in the countdown to the historic pullout.

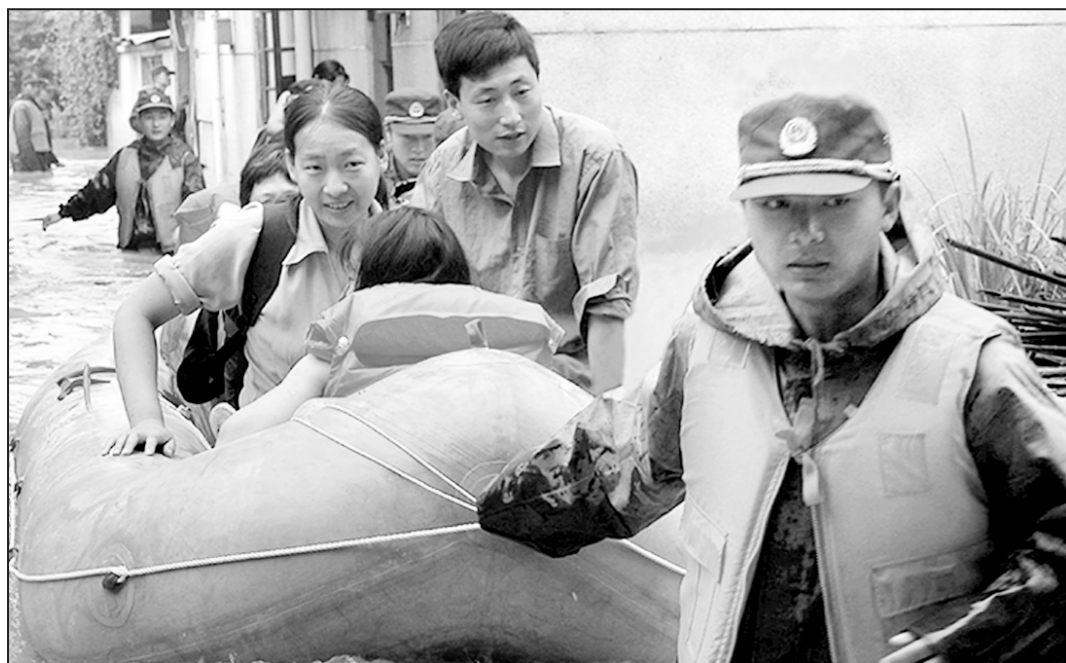


PHOTO: AFP

Rescuers evacuate families from their flooded homes in the suburbs of Guangzhou, southern China's Guangdong province Monday. China was working to control the outbreak of disease in Hunan, Sichuan and Guizhou provinces where torrential downpours have left over 204 people dead or missing.

'Cloned humans a dangerous fantasy'

AFP, Seoul

South Korean cloning pioneer Hwang Woo-Suk said yesterday the cloning of human beings would remain an impossible and dangerous fantasy for decades to come.

"Human cloning is not only ethically outrageous and medically dangerous, but technically impossible as well," said Hwang, who last year created the world's first cloned human embryonic stem cells.

"Cloned human beings are merely a science fiction fantasy. I can assure you that on this globe, you'll never bump into a cloned human being at least within 100 years."

Hwang and his colleagues at Seoul National University made international headlines in February 2004 when they announced the first-ever cloning of human embryos, from which they harvested embryonic stem cells.