

EASING OF ARMS EMBARGO

India sends non-lethal equipment to Nepal

AFP, New Delhi

India has sent its first shipment of non-lethal army equipment to neighbouring Nepal since freezing military aid after King Gyanendra's power grab five months ago, a report said yesterday.

The shipment crossed the border into Nepal at the weekend after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh gave the okay following assurances by Gyanendra he was moving to restore multi-party democracy in the Hindu kingdom, the Indian Express newspaper said.

India, Nepal's biggest arms supplier, and Britain suspended military aid to Nepal after Gyanendra sacked the government and seized power February 1, saying the move was necessary to

end a bloody Maoist insurgency. Human rights groups and other critics of the king's takeover had urged India not to resume supplies to the Royal Nepal Army, which is facing down a rebellion by Maoists in which about 12,000 people have been killed since 1996.

The Indian Express said the supplies shipped at the weekend included jeeps, bulletproof jackets, concertina security wires, bunker protection devices and mine-proof vehicles.

It added that New Delhi however held back thermal imagers and night vision devices as Nepal does not have a protocol on intellectual property rights.

Former Nepal premier Girija Prasad Koirala last month cautioned India against resuming arms

supplies to the Himalayan kingdom, saying New Delhi had to consider whether the move would encourage "democratic or dictatorial forces."

India's defence ministry declined to comment on the report, but did not immediately deny it.

Meanwhile, a human rights activist, a senior Nepali Congress member and a student leader arrested after King Gyanendra seized power in Nepal in February were released Monday, a Kathmandu District Court official said.

Human rights activist, Krishna Pahadi and Nepali Congress central committee member Narhari Acharya were released after five months of detention.

Nepal Student Union general

secretary Basu Koirala was also released after three months in jail, said the court official, who declined to be named.

Pahadi, a former president of the Human Rights and Peace Society, had threatened to stage a hunger strike from Monday to protest the royal takeover, according to a statement from the group.

In late April, Gyanendra lifted a state of emergency imposed after his power grab and released several detained journalists and political prisoners, including Nepalese communist party leader Ishwor Pokhrel in early June.

But deposed prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba remains under arrest on corruption charges along with several top opposition party leaders and journalists.

Two US soldiers found dead in Afghanistan

REUTERS, Kabul

Two US soldiers who went missing in eastern Afghanistan a week ago have been found dead, the New York Times reported yesterday, but a US military spokesman in Kabul said he was unable to confirm the report.

The newspaper quoted a senior Pentagon official as saying that the two soldiers from a team of four Special Forces troops, missing in Kunar province since last Tuesday, had been found dead. One was missing and one had been rescued, it said.

But the US military spokesman in the Afghan capital, Colonel Jim Yonts, said he had no information to confirm any soldiers had been found dead.

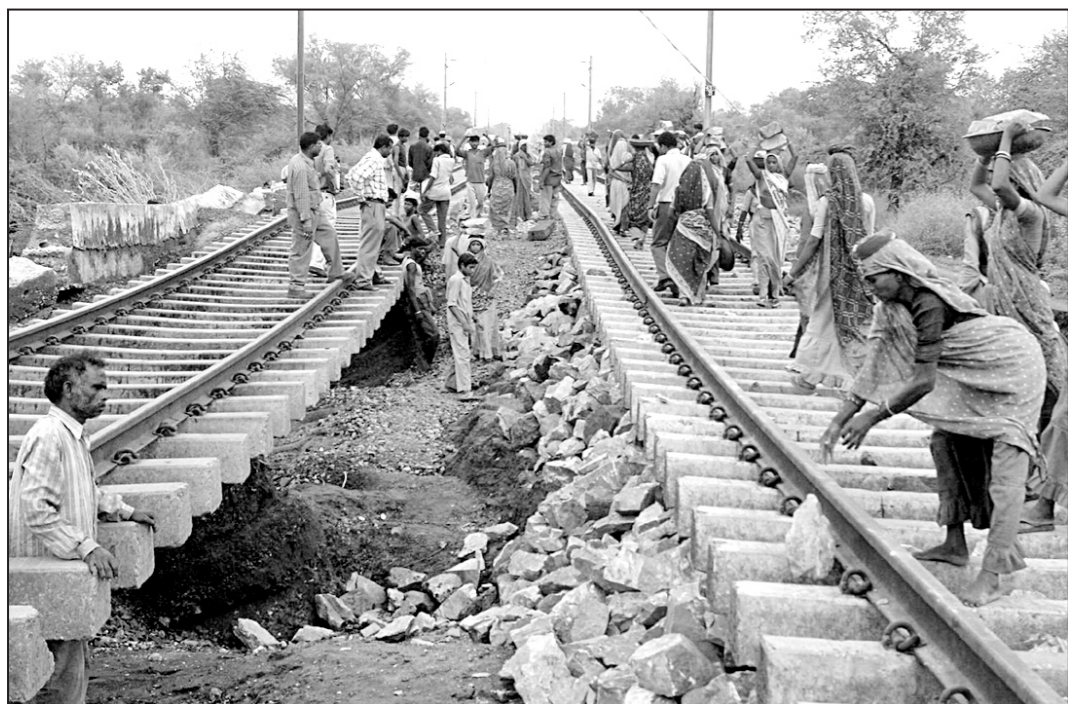
"A search and recovery operation is continuing," he said, referring to a massive effort involving hundreds of US troops that has been underway in Kunar for the past week.

The US military on Monday night confirmed reports that one member of the small US reconnaissance team that went missing in an anti-militant operation had been found and was in stable condition. It said operations were continuing to find the others.



An Indian policeman (L) stands guard at the entrance to the Birla Mandir Hindu Temple in New Delhi yesterday. Security was tightened in the Indian capital after gunmen clashed with police inside the Babri Mosque site in Ayodhya which was demolished by Hindu zealots 12 years ago sparking nationwide riots.

PHOTO: AFP



Indian workers repair rail tracks which were washed away by heavy monsoon floods in Godhaj, in the western state of Gujarat yesterday. More than 135 people have died and about 25 million have been affected by heavy rains and flash floods in Gujarat.

PHOTO: AFP

TRANSPORT LINK

Israel, Palestinians reach agreement

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the Palestinians have reached agreement in principle over method of safe passage between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank immediately after Israel's pullout from Gaza this summer, public radio reported Tuesday, citing Western diplomatic sources.

According to the report, Palestinians will be able to travel between the West Bank and Gaza in convoys escorted by Israeli security forces in the immediate aftermath of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip this summer.

Israeli and Palestinian officials were not immediately available to comment on the report.

The plan has been submitted to officials from the World Bank and diplomats from the Middle East quartet and Israel and the Palest-

inian Authority are now awaiting their feedback, the radio said.

In the longer term, Israel has agreed to build a railway line, which will link the Erez crossing in the northern Gaza Strip and Tarqumiya near the southern West Bank city of Hebron.

The plans, which would facilitate movement of people and goods between the two territories, were approved by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in early June and have been put to the Palestinian Authority.

The railway option is likely to cost more than a previous proposal to build a 42-kilometre long underground road between the Palestinian territories, which would have cost 1.3 million dollars, the radio said, without specifying the cost of the rail proposal.

C Asian alliance calls for date of US pullout

AP, Astana

An alliance of Russia, China and central Asian nations called for the US and coalition members in Afghanistan to set a date for withdrawing from member states, reflecting growing unease over America's regional military presence.

Alliance members Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan both host US bases whose troops are involved in Afghanistan.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, at a summit in the Kazakh capital, said in a declaration that a withdrawal date should be set in light of what it said was a decline of active fighting in Afghanistan.

"We support and will support the international coalition which is carrying out an anti-terror campaign in Afghanistan, and we have taken note of the progress made in the

effort to stabilise the situation," the declaration said.

"As the active military phase in the anti-terror operation in Afghanistan is nearing completion, the SCO would like the coalition's members to decide on the deadline for the use of the temporary infrastructure and for their military contingents' presence in those countries," the declaration continues.

A Kremlin foreign policy adviser, Sergei Prikhodko, said the declaration was not intended as an ultimatum, "but they have to say how much longer they will stay."

Both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are former Soviet republics that Moscow regards historically as part of its sphere of influence. The Kremlin did not object when those states agreed to host US troops following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

However, the statement appears to reflect growing uneasiness with the US presence and increasing concerns that the United States is encouraging the overthrow of Central Asia's authoritarian governments.

Earlier Tuesday, leaders at the summit vowed to step up security cooperation and accused unnamed outside forces of trying to destabilise Central Asia.

Their statements follow the violently suppressed uprising in eastern Uzbekistan in May and the March turmoil in Kyrgyzstan, when demonstrators stormed the presidential offices and sent the president fleeing into exile.

Chinese leader Hu Jintao said at the summit that "we have to make every effort to step up security cooperation or else all our talks about stability will be pointless."

Britain drafts plan for major Iraq pullout

AFP, London

Britain's defence ministry has drafted plans for a significant troop withdrawal from Iraq over the next 18 months and a big deployment to Afghanistan, the Financial Times reported yesterday.

When asked about the article however, a defence ministry spokesman stuck to the official position that British troops would be on the ground in Iraq for as long as necessary to support the Iraqi government.

"In what would represent the biggest operational shake-up involving the armed forces since the Iraq war, the first stage of a run-down in military operations is likely to take place this autumn with a handover of security to Iraqis in at least two southern provinces," the Financial Times said.

Without citing sources, the newspaper reported that the plans depended on the ability of Iraq's home-grown security forces to take over responsibility for peacekeeping operations -- a job they have so far failed to do in violent areas in Baghdad and to the north.

British forces, however, are based in the Shia-dominated south of the country, where there are far fewer rebel attacks compared with the US monitored Sunni areas in and around the Iraqi capital.

"Senior UK officers believe the four south-east provinces under UK command, which are largely Shia and have not seen the same violence as more Sunni-dominated areas north of Baghdad, may be ready for a handover earlier than those under US command," the Financial Times reported.

Global plan to halt bird flu unveiled

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A global strategy to control the deadly bird flu virus within a decade was released yesterday by United Nations and animal health experts who appealed for millions in donor funds to make it a reality.

"It's an international crisis, it has to be an international vision for awareness, surveillance and early response," said Joseph Domenech, chief veterinary officer for the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

"This disease is endemic in Asia... It will not be possible to eradicate the virus from the entire region of Asia in a few months or even in a few years," he told reporters at an international conference on the disease.

FRENCH MINISTER SAYS

EU states to expel illegals on jt flights

AFP, Evian

French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy said yesterday that the five biggest European Union members had agreed to organise joint flights to expel illegal immigrants out of the Union.

He told Europe 1 radio that France, Italy and Spain would also organise joint naval operations in the Mediterranean to stem an increasing tide of illegal immigration from the shores of north Africa, which Italy says is controlled by organised criminal gangs.

Interior Minister Giuseppe Pisanu of Italy, which has been trying to cope with thousands of immigrants arriving from across the Mediterranean in recent weeks, said the price of shipping someone

into Europe has increased from 1,500 dollars (1,200 euros) in 2004 to as much as 2,500 dollars this year.

Speaking from Evian, where Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain were meeting on interior and justice questions, Sarkozy said Spanish Interior Minister Jose Antonio Alonso had called for the setting up of joint flights to repatriate illegal immigrants.

While the three Mediterranean countries were discussing plans for joint naval surveillance and operations against illegal immigration, Sarkozy said France was planning with Spain to conduct similar operations in the Atlantic to curb drug trafficking.

Laden may be in Afghan south, says Pakistan

REUTERS, Islamabad

al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden and his close allies might be hiding in southern Afghanistan, which has seen a sharp rise in militant violence in recent weeks, a Pakistani minister said in remarks published yesterday.

The whereabouts of bin Laden, architect of the Sept. 11 attacks, and top militants such as his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, are not known but they are suspected of hiding along the rugged Afghan-Pakistani border.

Although both close US allies, tension has risen between Afghanistan and Pakistan over Afghan and US military accusations that militants launch attacks into Afghanistan from the safety of Pakistan.

African heads of state unanimous on UNSC seats

AFP, Syrte

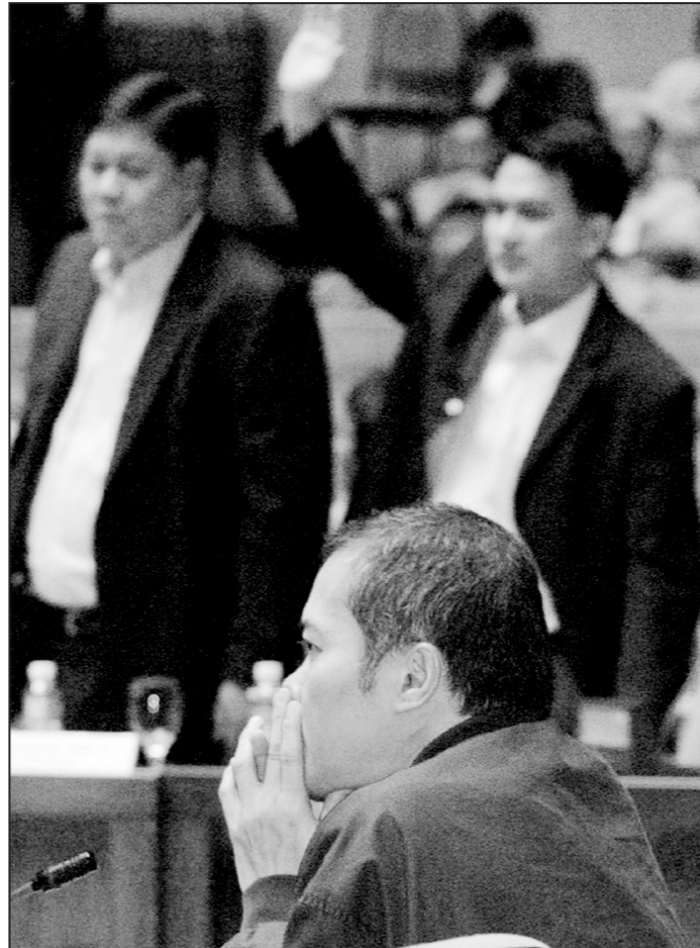
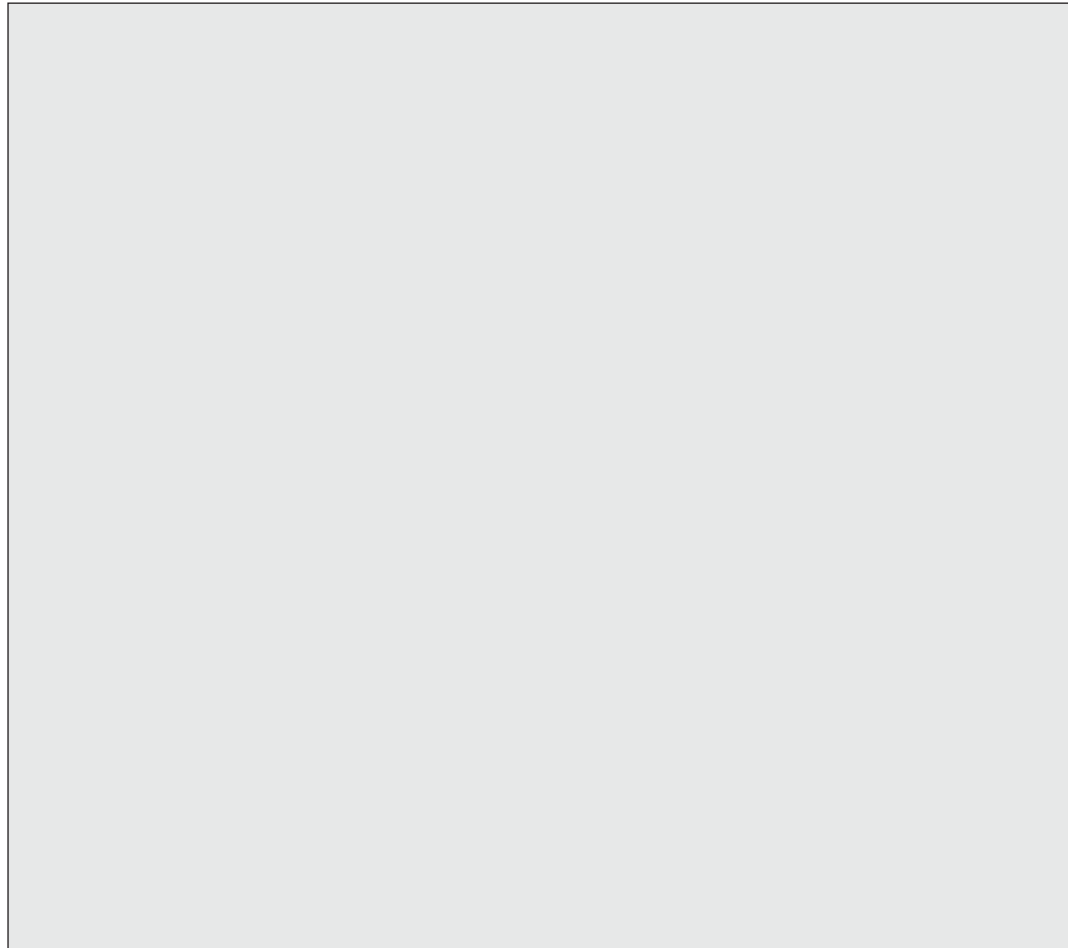
African Union heads of state and government have unanimously adopted a declaration and a resolution they will present to the United Nations with the aim of obtaining two permanent UN Security Council seats with veto rights, summit sources said yesterday.

"The text of the declaration and the resolution that will be submitted to the UN were adopted by the presidents on Monday night. They debated the question at length but they are in agreement on the main point: that Africa should obtain two permanent seats with veto rights on the (UN) Security Council," an AU

official who wished to remain anonymous.

"The texts have been adopted. We intend to ask unanimously for the two UN Security Council seats," Rwandan Foreign Minister Charles Murigande told AFP on the second day of the fifth ordinary summit of the 53-member pan-African organisation, taking place in a Libyan coast town.

The final text of the declaration and the resolution has not yet been made public, but according to a draft resolution obtained by AFP, the African states intended to call for the allocation of "two permanent seats with full privileges including veto rights ... and five non-permanent seats on the Security Council".



Alan Paguia (front), former lawyer to deposed president Joseph Estrada looks on as an unidentified opposition legislator (back) raises his hand during a voting in a Congressional hearing in the Philippine Congress yesterday to play the tape recordings of conversations between President Gloria Arroyo and a senior election official in which they were allegedly conspiring to steal votes in the May 2004 election.

PHOTO: AFP