



A Nepalese girl (L) offers a floral garland to King Gyanendra (R), wishing him a long and happy life on the occasion of his 59th birthday at Narayanhity Royal Palace in Kathmandu yesterday.

King parties as Nepalis struggle for peace

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra, who seized power in a coup five months ago, celebrated his 59th birthday yesterday with his impoverished country frozen in political crisis and revolt.

In a carefully stage-managed show of loyalty, thousands of children, cripples and other Nepalis queued in the scorching sun for hours for their brief moment to give the king a present at his Kritinarayan Palace, normally off limits to commoners.

Some came on crutches, some in wheelchairs and some in traditional costumes or holy Hindu robes. One woman carried 59 fried fish to wish Gyanendra luck; others, eggs, flowers, rose petals or trophies for a man revered as an incarnation of the Hindu god of protection, Vishnu.

As summer temperatures soared, school children vomited and

fainted and were carted off to hospital by ambulance.

"All this would be good if it were spontaneous. But there was a written order from the government to bring the children," said teacher Bhanu Dhungana.

The mood was sombre and quiet. There was no sense of cheer or celebration among the queues in the palace grounds.

Gyanendra has suspended democracy, taken control of the Himalayan nation and censored the media, moves he said he was forced to take to fight a Maoist rebellion that has killed at least 12,500 since 1996.

Five months after his Feb. 1 royal coup, heavily guarded Kathmandu is safer, but Gyanendra is no closer to talks with the guerrillas or a deal with the seven shamolic political parties, themselves in disarray.

"The parties are not fully united," Nara Hari Acharya, a senior mem-

ber of the leading Nepali Congress party and one of the last political prisoners freed on Tuesday, told Reuters.

"The parties are not yet clear about what the people want. We are definitely concerned about the restoration of democracy, but we are suffering from a serious lack of self-confidence to restore it."

What Nepalis want more than anything right now, including democracy, is peace.

The war has shattered a national economy dependent on tourism and aid and driven hundreds of thousands from their homes.

"I will give him good wishes so that there is peace in the country," said housewife Indira Acharya, clutching a bouquet of marigolds.

"The Maoists, the king and the political parties must compromise for the sake of peace."

"And this is my prayer on the king's birthday."

'Laden, Mullah Omar not in Pakistan'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Pakistan has denied allegations that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Taliban supremo Mullah Omar are hiding in its tribal areas or militants from its territory are infiltrating into Afghanistan, reports Online news agency.

Foreign office spokesman Jaill Abbas Jillani on Wednesday emphatically rejected claims by Afghan interior ministry spokesman Lutfullah Masal that Bin Laden and Omar were in Pakistan.

He said the two terrorists were "nowhere on Pakistani soil" and claimed that "some vested interests are plotting to assassinate US Ambassador to Kabul Zalmay Khalilzad. It also alleged that Islamabad was abetting terrorism and militants were crossing over into Afghanistan ahead of the general election in September. Pakistan denied the claims.

Pakistan to seal Afghan border

4000 troops to be deployed, 6 militants captured, one soldier killed in clash

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistan will deploy another 4,000 troops to seal its western border ahead of elections in Afghanistan, the military said, as a soldier died and six militants were seized in a major clash.

The extra forces are on top of the 70,000 Pakistani soldiers already stationed in the rugged tribal zone along the frontier, where the army regularly fights pitched battles with rebels linked to al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Pakistan has also intensified patrols amid a spike in Taliban violence in Afghanistan ahead of September's parliamentary polls, regional commander Lieutenant General Safdar Hussain told a press conference late Wednesday.

"We are well aware of our duties

and will ensure that peace and tranquillity prevail at the time of the upcoming local and parliamentary elections in Afghanistan," Hussain said.

He said Pakistan had taken similar measures to ensure security ahead of Afghanistan's October 2004 presidential elections, won by US-backed leader Hamid Karzai.

In the first serious clash in the region for months, Pakistani troops arrested six militants, including a suspected foreign al-Qaeda fighter, in the Shawal valley of troubled North Waziristan region Wednesday, Hussain said.

The troops tried to stop a vehicle at a checkpoint but the occupants opened fire and fled towards Afghanistan, after which Pakistani forces gave chase and arrested four militants while another four or five

escaped, he said.

The escaped men were tracked down and in the ensuing clash one soldier was killed and four more wounded, while two more militants were captured, the general said.

One of the captured men was a foreigner who appeared to be an Arab or Uzbek, Hussain said. The identities of the detainees were being established.

The troops also recovered eight Russian-made machineguns, three hand grenades, four improvised explosive devices and a large quantity of medicines from the militants' vehicle, the military said.

"The arrests establish Pakistan's earnest desire to help Afghanistan to return to complete normalcy," Hussain said.

Intelligence officer shot dead in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels shot dead an intelligence officer conducting security checks in eastern Sri Lanka ahead of a visit by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, officials said yesterday.

The officer from the police intelligence unit was shot Wednesday in the town of Kalmunai in Ampara district, which the premier is due to visit on Saturday, officials said. Another officer was also shot and wounded.

"The two were deployed to gather information about the local security situation ahead of the VVIP visit," the official said. "We believe it is the work of the Tamil Tiger pistol group."

The latest attack came despite security being stepped up in the restive region after suspected Tiger rebels killed three soldiers from a military intelligence unit last month.

Gunmen from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) attacked the three men, two intelligence officers and their driver, travelling in a three-wheel scooter in the eastern district of Batticaloa, just north of Ampara.

Myanmar releases 400 prisoners

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government said yesterday it had released about 400 prisoners across the country but would not identify the freed inmates, many of whom were believed to be political detainees.

"About 400 prisoners were released yesterday," a director from the home affairs ministry told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

He could not confirm who the inmates were or whether prominent political prisoners were among them.

The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) said Wednesday it knew of 249 people, mostly political prisoners, who had been freed. Party officials said they knew of no new releases Thursday.

Early Thursday some of the freed prisoners visited the Yangon headquarters of the NLD, the party

headed by detained Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Rights watchdog Amnesty International said more than 200 political prisoners had been freed but called for the release of the estimated 1,100 others, including pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

"We are happy to hear of the release of prisoners of conscience, many of whom have been imprisoned for more than a decade," said Catherine Baber, deputy director of Amnesty's Asia program.

"We urge the authorities to use the momentum of this decision and release unconditionally -- regardless of their political or religious allegiance -- all prisoners of conscience, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi," Baber said in a statement.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who has spent most of the last 15 years under some form of detention, is under house arrest in Yangon.

MANMOHAN SAYS

Ayodhya attacks may affect peace process

REUTERS, AFP, New Delhi/ Islamabad

India's prime minister has said public support for peace with Pakistan could wither if there were more attacks like this week's raid on a disputed religious site which Hindu groups have blamed on Muslim militants.

Hindu activists blocked roads and closed shops in dozens of Indian cities on Wednesday, a day after unidentified gunmen stormed the Babri Mosque site in the northern town of Ayodhya, claimed by both Hindus and minority Muslims.

All six attackers were killed.

"I have always maintained that we need to carry public opinion to make a success of the peace process," The Hindu newspaper

quoted Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as saying in remarks published on Thursday.

"Anything that comes in the way of public opinion, and certainly these incidents, if they get repeated, have the potential to disrupt the peace process," Singh was quoted as telling reporters travelling with him on his way to the G-8 summit in Scotland.

Islamabad said it had already condemned the Ayodhya attack and reiterated its commitment to the peace process.

"We are a frontline state against terrorism and are fully committed to the peace process," Pakistani foreign ministry spokesman Naeem Khan said responding to Singh's comments.

"The peace process is irrevers-

ible. Such incidents should not be allowed to disrupt the peace process," he said.

No group has claimed responsibility for the Ayodhya raid but security officials and Hindu hard-liners say that it was the work of Muslim militant groups based in Pakistan, going by the nature of the attack in which the gunmen stormed the holy complex with an explosives-laden vehicle.

The raid on the shrine sparked fears of a fresh communal strife between India's Hindus and Muslims who have been rowing over its ownership.

The nuclear rivals, who launched peace talks last year, have blamed each other in the past for militancy and attacks in their own countries.

al-Qaeda returns to Afghanistan: Experts

AFP, Paris

Members of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network may have returned to Afghanistan en masse to bolster Taliban militants fighting US and Afghan forces in the east and south of the country, officials and analysts say.

Although no one has come forward with any hard proof, evidence seems to indicate that headline al-Qaeda fighters have gone back to the country that was

their home base for years until US-led forces toppled the Taliban in late 2001.

The governor of the southern Afghan province of Kandahar, Gul Agha Shirzai, said after a deadly suicide attack at a mosque last month that police "found documents on the (bomber's) body that showed he was an Arab".

He told reporters that this proved that "Arab al-Qaeda teams had entered Afghanistan and had planned terrorist attacks".



Activists of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) shout slogans as they listen to a speaker during a protest rally in Bangalore yesterday against attack on a disputed holy site in Ayodhya by militants.