

Maoist leader repeats offer of alliance

AFP, Kathmandu

The leader of Nepal's Maoist rebels on Thursday repeated an offer to work with an alliance of political parties to restore democracy, saying the insurgents would work democratically.

Last week the seven parties had cautiously welcomed the Maoist offer of talks to establish an alliance to challenge a royal power grab. But in a statement, they called on the rebels to lay down arms before any negotiations and show a commitment to multi-party democracy.

In a notice published on the Maoist website Thursday, the party's leader Prachanda said he welcomed last week's alliance statement as a positive step to create a united opposition to King Gyanendra, who sacked the government and seized power in February.

"Our party regards the press statement of the seven political parties waging a movement against the monarchy as a positive step

forward in creating an extensive political front," Prachanda said.

"We are confident that the technical and practical problems could be solved by a joint movement," he added.

Gyanendra said he seized power from a four-party coalition government because it had failed to tackle the Maoist rebellion which has claimed around 12,000 lives since 1996.

The United States, India and Britain have condemned the takeover and urged the king to restore democracy and free political prisoners.

On Wednesday the United States said this week's jailing of former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba for alleged corruption in a government contract was another setback to democracy in the kingdom.

Prachanda also said the rebels would work with the parties to establish a framework for democratic cooperation, though he said nothing about halting the rebellion.

At least 10 killed in Indian oil blaze

More than 350 workers rescued

AFP, Mumbai

Rescuers battling towering seas through the night rescued 351 workers from a blazing Indian offshore oil platform but at least 10 people died and a search was under way for several still missing, a minister said Thursday.

Oil Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar told parliament that 384 personnel had to abandon the platform when it caught fire Wednesday afternoon, of whom 351 had been rescued.

"So far, 10 personnel are confirmed dead," Aiyar said.

It was unclear Thursday how many people were still missing, with various officials giving conflicting figures ranging from six to 34.

Some workers jumped into the Arabian Sea and clambered on to lifeboats while others scrambled to

safety via a bridge to another rig, coast guard officials said.

The giant platform belonging to the state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) some 160 kilometres (100 miles) west of Mumbai, produces about 100,000 barrels of crude a day. It collapsed into the ocean soon after erupting in flame.

Authorities launched a massive rescue operation, sending eight naval and coast guard ships, two aircraft and four helicopters from the air force and navy.

"The injured were provided first aid by doctors and paramedics immediately on rescue," Aiyar said.

Vice Admiral Madanjit Singh, commander-in-chief of Western Naval Command, said earlier Thursday that rescue operations were continuing in treacherous conditions.

"It is a difficult scenario due to uncertain rains," he said.

Singh said there was no confirmation yet of how the blaze began. "It might have been caused due to a survey ship hitting the leg of the structure of the platform," he said.

A ship carrying 129 people rescued from the fire reached Mumbai's Victoria Docks on Thursday afternoon. They were greeted with jubilation by loved ones.

"We tried to rescue whoever we could ... there was no light at night, we had to use flashlights to find people," said one rescuer in a television interview, as rescued workers hugged family members and called friends and relatives on mobile phones. Of the 10 dead, six were ONGC employees and two were contract workers, an ONGC official said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian officials escort one of the 351 injured survivors in Mumbai yesterday after he was rescued from a burning giant offshore oil platform. At least 10 people died after the platform belonging to the state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC) some 160 kilometres west of Mumbai, collapsed into the water soon after erupting in flames.

US condemns jailing of ex-PM of Nepal

AFP, Washington

The United States said Wednesday the jailing of former Nepal prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba for alleged corruption was another setback to democracy in the Himalayan kingdom.

Deuba was sacked as prime minister in February when King Gyanendra seized power to combat a Maoist rebellion that has claimed around 12,000 lives since 1996.

He was ordered jailed for two years Tuesday by the Royal Corruption Control Commission after being convicted in connection with the granting of a contract in a road building scheme which formed part of a 464-million dollar project to supply drinking water to the parched capital.



PHOTO: AFP

This undated photo received 30 January, 2002, shows kidnapped Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl at an undisclosed location with his hands bound in chains.

Pearl murder suspect arrested in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani security forces have arrested a fugitive suspect in the murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl during their ongoing raids against extremists, police said Thursday.

Hashim Qadeer, arrested in the eastern city of Gujranwala late Wednesday, is said to have introduced the US journalist to British-born Sheikh Omar, who faces the death penalty for Pearl's 2002 murder.

"Hashim was arrested by chance as police were looking for militants under a crackdown against extremist elements launched by the government," said a local police official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The suspect was caught at a bus terminal while boarding a bus for Rawalpindi, a city near the capital Islamabad, the official said.

The US government had posted a reward of half a million dollars for Qadeer's arrest, while the government of Pakistan's southern Sindh province has offered a reward of one million rupees (16,700 dollars).

Pearl, the Wall Street Journal's Mumbai-based South Asia correspondent, disappeared in Karachi on January 23, 2002, while working on a story into the murky underworld of Pakistani militant groups.

Pearl was abducted, and a graphic video depicting his gruesome decapitation was later delivered to the US consulate in the southern port city of Karachi.

BATTLE TO SURVIVE AFTER TSUNAMI Sri Lanka victims shrug off war fears

AFP, Mankerni

Escalating violence in eastern Sri Lanka has heightened war fears but tsunami-battered families living in this picturesque fishing village near the front line of the conflict have more pressing concerns on their minds.

"We hear that there could be fighting again, but what we are more worried about is shelter," said Nilanthi Coonghe, secretary of the fishermen's welfare association, pointing to a makeshift palm-roofed and tin-sheet shack shared by several families.

"We still don't have the proper temporary shelter that people in other areas have been getting."

Fisherman Emmanuel Raj, 28, said he was more concerned that his tsunami-damaged fishing boat be repaired than about the prospects of fighting breaking out between Tamil Tiger rebels and

government troops.

"Yes, there is talk about war. People are afraid there might be some fighting again, but we don't think we will leave this place," he said.

Sri Lanka's foreign backers have expressed concern that escalating violence across the eastern province could push the country back to civil war and have called on both sides to try to end the bloodletting.

Should hostilities be resumed, the village of Mankerni would be in the direct line of fire -- government troops and Tamil rebels have both moved their big guns within shelling distance of the village.

Sri Lankan troops captured Mankerni from Tamil rebels after heavy fighting 15 years ago and since then it has become a haven of peace, with fishing in its deep and warm waters bringing a lucrative trade.

US helicopter destroyed in "hard landing" in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

A US Chinook troop helicopter was destroyed when fire broke out during a "hard landing" in southeast Afghanistan, said the US military, which stressed hostile fire was not involved.

No-one had been injured in the incident late Thursday in the conflict zone near Spin Boldak, in Kandahar province close to the Pakistan border, said the US military in a statement.

"A Coalition CH-47 helicopter made a 'hard landing' due to brown-out conditions as the crew was attempting to insert forces south-west of the border city of Spin Boldak late on July 27," said the US military.

"The aircraft, one of two operating in the area at the time, was conducting operations in response to reports of enemy activity.