

Key parties drop support for Nepal's monarchy

King ready for talks

AFP, PTI, Kathmandu

Leaders of two major opposition parties in Nepal abandoned Monday their support of the country's 15-year-old constitutional monarchy in anger at King Gyanendra's seizure of power in February.

A key committee of the country's oldest democratic party, the Nepali Congress, omitted support for the system from the party's statute for the first time in its 60-year-old history, members said.

Their decision will be put to a vote at the party's general convention beginning Tuesday.

"We have removed constitu-

tional monarchy from the party objectives," senior Congress leader Ram Sharan Mahat said.

"The relevance of monarchy will be kept open from now on and the party is not bound to constitutional monarchy now," he said.

"Constitutional monarchy was a sort of compromise between the king and the political forces in the country and since the king has violated the norms, we are not bound by the monarchy any more," he said.

The Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML), a royalist as well as leftwing party, made a similar decision.

A meeting of the party's central committee adopted a resolution to

push for a democratic republic and an end to the "autocratic monarchy," party general secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal said.

King Gyanendra's seizure of power and sacking of the elected government had undermined the "historic people's movement" that led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1990, he said.

Admitting that the gap between him and Nepal's political parties has "widened", King Gyanendra has said he is open for dialogue with the parties provided they make their stand clear on certain issues, including terrorism.

"I have never said that I will never meet them, but there has to

be some basis for it," the King said in an interview to the official media.

"The political parties must possess crystal-clear views on four issues- terrorism, good governance and corruption, politicisation in bureaucracy and financial discipline - for talks," he said, adding "if they make clear views on these issues, then there will be room for dialogue".

Gyanendra's overture was broadcast on state radio and television late Monday, even as the heads of the two leading parties said they were no longer committed to having a monarchy in the Himalayan country.

Paris apartment fire fills 7 African immigrants

AP, Paris

Flames tore through a rundown Paris apartment building where African immigrants lived, killing seven people, including three children, firefighters said yesterday.

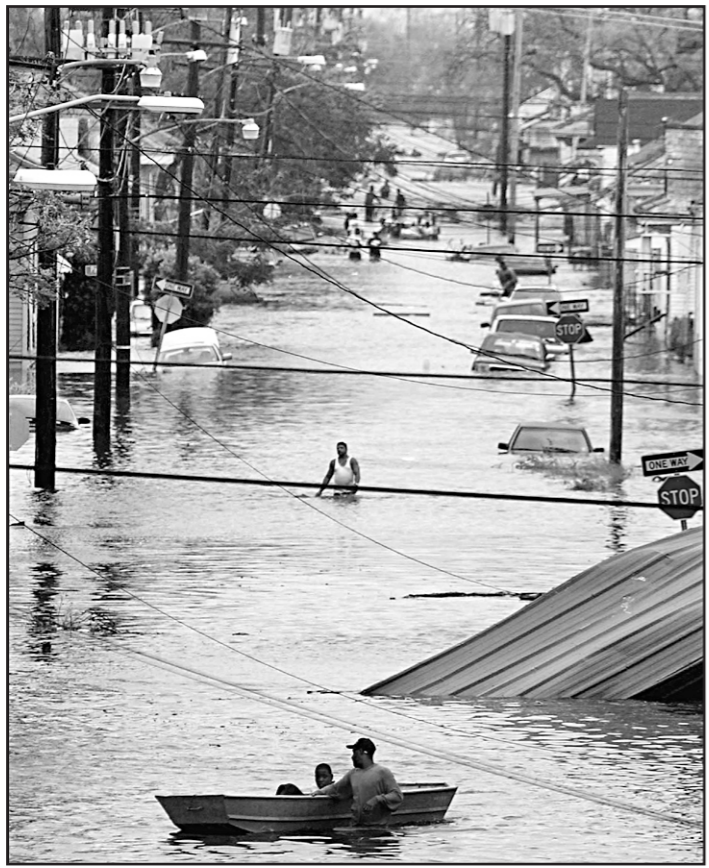
It was the second deadly fire in a week at buildings housing immigrants in France's capital, and the third since April.

Just days ago, a deadly blaze killed 17 Africans in Paris. Four months earlier, 24 people died in a similar fire at a budget hotel that housed African immigrants, focusing new attention on the plight of Paris' poor and their overcrowded lodgings.

Two other people were seriously injured in the latest fire, which started late Monday and ripped through a six-story building in the 3rd arrondissement of central Paris where Ivorian immigrants lived, firefighters said.

Eleven people, including five firefighters, were slightly injured. Two men were injured jumping out of windows to escape the flames, officials said.

French President Jacques Chirac urged investigators to work diligently. He also said the government would take "strong initiatives" soon to help families in inadequate housing.



Residents wade through a flooded street in New Orleans Monday after hurricane Katrina made landfall. Hurricane Katrina made landfall early Monday as a category four storm on the five-level Saffir-Simpson hurricane intensity scale and caused widespread damage and flooding in New Orleans and other cities on the southern Gulf Coast of the United States.

MUSHARRAF WARNS Don't shelter terrorists

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan's president warned Islamic seminaries Monday against sheltering terrorists, and the government threatened to close religious schools unless they register with authorities by the end of the year.

President Gen. Pervez Musharraf praised madrasas, or Islamic schools, for helping about 1 million of the poorest children in Pakistan, and said the government would encourage the schools to teach modern subjects like science and technology.

"However, we will not let any madrasa to harbour terrorists or teach extremism and militancy," the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan news agency quoted Musharraf as saying at a conference on terrorism in the capital of Islamabad.

There are estimated to be more than 10,000 madrasas in Pakistan, long considered a breeding ground for militants.

In recent weeks, Musharraf has renewed his long-standing demand for the schools to register with the government, and has demanded the expulsion of 1,400 foreign students following reports that at least one of the suspects in the deadly July 7 bombings in London may have visited a madrasa in Pakistan.



Pakistani Home Secretary Syed Kamal Shah (L) addresses a press conference as Indian Home Secretary V.K. Duggal (R) looks on after a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. India and Pakistan have agreed to release a number of prisoners held in each other's jails to strengthen their peace process, a joint statement said.

India, Pakistan to free hundreds of prisoners

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan have agreed to release hundreds of fishermen and other prisoners held in each other's jails to strengthen their peace process, a joint statement and an Indian official said yesterday.

"They have ... agreed to release on 12 September 2005 all fishermen and civilian prisoners who have completed their sentences and whose national status has been confirmed," said the statement.

An Indian home ministry official said this would affect "hundreds" of prisoners but did not give an exact number. The statement was issued after two days of talks in New Delhi between the home secretaries (senior interior ministry officials) of the two countries.

India says there are 1,348 Indians in Pakistani prisons while Pakistan says more than 700 of its nationals are in Indian jails.

Many prisoners, despite having completed their sentences and having their nationalities confirmed, remain in prison due to "animosity and lack of mutual trust" between

the two sides, the official said.

"We have made a fairly substantial move forward on various issues, which is an achievement," Indian Home Secretary V.K. Duggal said of the talks in which terrorism and drug trafficking were also tackled.

"The talks were held in a friendly and cordial atmosphere and the deliberations were frank and forthright," said the statement, read out at a press conference by Duggal.

Pakistan's Home Secretary Syed Kamal Shah also described the talks as "positive".

"The good thing is we went beyond the agenda of the talks ... and discussed the prisoners issue as well. This is something that will provide relief to the common people of both countries," Shah said.

Later the Pakistani delegation led by Shah went to the high-security Tihar jail in New Delhi to visit a group of Pakistani prisoners, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency said.

The joint statement said India and Pakistan had "reiterated their commitment to combat terrorism and re-emphasised the need for

effective steps for the complete elimination of this menace."

On narcotics, it said India and Pakistan were satisfied with "the continuing cooperation and exchange of information between the narcotics control agencies of both countries."

An agreement that aims at having "a regular institutional mechanism in place to intensify mutual cooperation and liaison on drug control matters" would be signed shortly, it added.

At the start of the talks on Monday, India handed to Pakistan a list of about 30 "fugitives from law" who had taken refuge in Pakistan including mafia don Dawood Ibrahim, PTI said.

Pakistan also gave India its own list of 37 "wanted" people - mostly involved in drug trafficking offences, it said.

The meeting was part of a peace process launched in January last year by the nuclear-armed arch-rivals, who have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947.

Lankan PM puts focus on ending civil war

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's prime minister, now a high-profile candidate in presidential elections to be held later this year, said Monday his top priority would be to end the civil war with Tamil Tiger rebels.

Mahinda Rajapakse, in an interview with The Associated Press, said he would even be willing to be the first Sri Lankan president to meet the rebels' secretive leader.

"I am willing to walk an extra mile to reach (the) goal of peace," he said.

The presidential elections, which must be held before Nov. 22, are coming at one of the most tense times in Sri Lanka since an 2002 cease-fire brought a halt to fighting between the government and the Tigers.

The peace process is stalled. A split in the Tigers in March 2004 ushered in months of killings between the main rebel group and a breakaway faction. And the Aug. 12 assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar blamed on the rebels led to the imposition of a

state of emergency.

The Tigers have denied any role in the assassination and appealed for the emergency to be lifted, saying it poses a threat to the peace process.

Rajapakse, the candidate of the ruling People's Alliance, said nothing on how long the emergency should last, but stressed that he was committed to the peace process.

"I am not for war, I am totally against war," Rajapakse said during the interview at his fortified residence in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital.

The Tigers began fighting in 1983 for a separate homeland for minority Tamils, who are mainly Hindus and account for about 3.2 million of Sri Lanka's 19 million people, claiming discrimination by the largely Buddhist Sinhalese, who number about 14 million people and dominate the military and police.

The rebels waged a bloody campaign for nearly two decades. They were among the first modern groups to use suicide bombings, killing numerous officials, including late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv

Gandhi in 1991 and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa two years later.

On the government side, human rights groups repeatedly accused the police and military of torturing suspected rebels during the war.

Nearly 65,000 people were killed in the war before a 2002 cease-fire largely stopped the fighting. But subsequent peace talks broke down over the rebels' demand for greater autonomy in the country's north and east, where the Tamils are concentrated.

The president's race will pit Rajapakse against opposition candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe, who signed the 2002 cease-fire with the Tigers and started peace talks during his tenure as prime minister from 2001 to 2004.

Some leaders in Rajapakse's People's Alliance, including President Chandrika Kumaratunga, have taken a harder line against the rebels a policy that has wide support among the Sinhalese majority.

Netanyahu launches bid to oust Sharon

AFP, Tel Aviv

Former Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu announced yesterday he was challenging Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for the leadership of the main governing Likud party.

"I am announcing my candidacy today," Netanyahu told a press conference in the commercial capital Tel Aviv.

"I intend to lead us to victory in the upcoming elections and to establish the next government in the spirit of Likud."

The much-anticipated decision comes after a blistering personal attack by Sharon who called Netanyahu unfit to lead the country.

The 55-year-old Netanyahu, 22 years younger than Sharon, served as prime minister from 1996 to 1999 before a crushing general election defeat at the hands of the centre-left Labour party.

Netanyahu has managed to rebuild his reputation as finance minister under Sharon's cabinet but he quit on August 7 in protest at the plan to pull settlers out of the Gaza Strip and four small West Bank enclaves, which was completed a week ago.

Likud's central committee is due to meet on September 25 where it is expected to set a November 22 date to hold a leadership primary vote.

While Sharon's historic Gaza pullout has enjoyed a majority of support among the Israeli public as a whole, he has been unable to win over the bulk of Likud members who rejected the project in a referendum last year.

And even though he insists he has no more pullouts up his sleeve, Sharon risked further alienating his former allies on the right by acknowledging Monday that Israel would not keep hold of all of its remaining settlements in the West Bank in a final status agreement with the Palestinians.

Opinion polls among Likud members have given mixed results with some showing that Netanyahu should easily defeat Sharon.

The ill-concealed animosity between the two men has bubbled over since Netanyahu's resignation from the cabinet, with Sharon savaging his arch-rival in a television interview late Monday.



Visiting President of Sri Lanka Chandrika Kumaratunga (L) steps up to the podium while walking beside Chinese President Hu Jintao during a welcoming ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. President Kumaratunga is in Beijing on a four-day visit.

Indian diplomats meet convicted spy in Pakistan

REUTERS, Lahore

Indian diplomats were allowed into a jail in eastern Pakistan yesterday to meet one of their nationals sentenced to death for spying and involvement in bomb attacks.

The rare visit came as officials from the two sides, trying to nudge a slow peace process forward, began talks this week to curb terrorism and drug trafficking and work out ways to exchange hundreds of prisoners held in each other's jails.

Manjit Singh was convicted of spying and involvement in bombings in Pakistan that killed 14 people, and the Supreme Court earlier this month upheld the death penalty handed to him in 1991.

But the court decision triggered an outcry in India where Singh's family said it was a case of mistaken identity and that he was a farmer in a border village who wandered into Pakistan while drunk.

VAJPAYEE TELLS BJP Be prepared for early polls

PTI, New Delhi

Claiming that the Congress-led coalition at the Centre was becoming "increasingly unstable", former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Tuesday asked BJP MPs to be prepared for mid-term polls and remain in constant touch with their constituents.

"Whenever the UPA government faces instability, they start talking of early polls which further complicates the situation and they stop talking about it. Whether mid-term elections are held or not, we should remain prepared and remain in constant touch with the people", BJP Deputy Leader in Lok Sabha V.K. Malhotra quoted Vajpayee as saying.

The former Prime Minister was addressing the last Parliamentary party meeting of the Monsoon session this morning.

Expressing happiness over the Opposition's performance in both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, he said they should take the message to the people at large.

Addressing the party MPs, Leader of Opposition and BJP President L.K. Advani termed as "wrong, mischievous and baseless" UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi's charge that the Opposition changed its stand on the Women's Reservation Bill.

'Space for religious talks must remain open'

THE JAKARTA POST/ ANN, JAKARTA

Public space for debate about religion is important and must be maintained, says Zainah Anwar of the Malaysian organisation Sisters in Islam.

In Malaysia, she said, "Space for debate has grown, and there is no turning back."

The battle of ideas to define what is Islam and what is not, she said, "can only be done ... where there is freedom of speech, freedom of expression and press freedom. The fact that Islam is increasingly shaping and redefining our lives means all of us have to engage with the religion if we do not want it to remain hijacked by those who preach hatred, intolerance, bigotry, misogyny."

Anwar, the current executive director of the above non-governmental organisation, was one of the speakers yesterday, the second and last day of the 6th Asian-European Editors Forum held by the Singapore office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and The Jakarta Post.

1.85b in Asia-Pacific live on less than \$2 a day

AFP, Manila

Asia is making giant steps in fighting poverty but 1.85 billion or 57 percent of its people still live on less than two dollars (1.64 euros) a day, mostly in rising economic powerhouses India and China, an Asian Development Bank report said yesterday.

The number of people living in extreme poverty - less than one dollar a day - was estimated at 621 million or 19.3 percent of the population, down from 688 million in 2002, the Manila-based organisation said in a report.

Job generation had lagged behind the region's impressive economic growth, it added.

"Much of the region's overall success in recent years is the result of a dramatic reduction in poverty in (China)," it said in its annual Key Indicators publication.

The data is based on 2003 figures, which the ADB says is the most recent year for which sufficient data is available.

The percentage of the Asia-Pacific population who lived on a dollar a day in 2003 could fall to between 2.9 and 6.7 percent of the population by 2015 if growth remained strong, it said.

The proportion living on two dollars a day in 2003 could fall to between 28.6 and 35.9 percent by 2015 under similar circumstances, ADB projections showed.

"Even under the most favourable scenario... there would still be one billion Asians who would live on less than two dollars a day (by 2015)," the ADB said.

"Although Asian governments are making significant progress in the fight against poverty the latest data clearly shows reducing poverty remains a central challenge facing the region," the ADB's chief economist Ifzal Ali said in a statement.

The report said that despite the impressive region-wide reduction in poverty, large disparities still remain among countries.

All-women rebel squads raid brothels in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

A headline Islamic women's separatist group said yesterday it had begun raiding brothels in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir to stamp out "adultery and the flesh-trade."

Aasiya Andrabi, head of the separatist Dukhtar-e-Milat, or Daughters of Faith, announced over the weekend the formation of all-women squads to raid brothels in the Muslim-majority state.

"We will expose those indulging in immoral activities," Andrabi, a fiery speaker who has in the past voiced admiration for al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, told the Current News Agency.

"We raided several places in Srinagar Monday after getting calls from people," she said, issuing an appeal to people to "arrest moral degradation."

UN HR COMMISSIONER SAYS Nepali army to make public detainee names

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's military has for the first time agreed to make public the names of its prisoners amid concerns about the disappearance of hundreds of people in army custody, a UN rights official says.

The Royal Nepalese Army (RNA), which is not legally allowed to hold prisoners, has also promised to transfer the detainees to civilian authority, said Ian Martin, Nepal representative of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

The prisoners are being held in army barracks in the absence of other detention facilities.

The OHCHR won the concessions as part of its efforts to address human rights concerns that have mounted since King Gyanendra seized power with army backing to stem a Maoist rebellion that has

claimed around 12,000 lives since 1996.

Human rights groups, including Amnesty International, say that many of those killed were victims of extrajudicial executions by Nepal's police and troops.

In 2003 and 2004, the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances said it received more reports of disappearances at the hands of the Nepali government than from any other country.

"There are a very large number of outstanding cases of disappearances. At the moment I cannot put a figure on that, but it is in the hundreds," Martin told AFP in an interview.

"One of the problems is that there has never been a system whereby there is a central register of who is held by the army in the army barracks. The RNA is now working on setting up such a central register."

12 dead as Pak bus hits power cable

AFP, Multan

Twelve passengers were burnt to death when a fire broke out on a crowded bus after it hit a power cable in central Pakistan yesterday, police said.

The bus was heading for the town of Rahim Yar Khan, 400km south of Islamabad, but had to take a diversion as the main road was closed for repairs, local police chief Syed Ahsan Mahboob told AFP.

A bicycle on the roof of the bus then hit the high-tension overhead transmission line, triggering the blaze, he said.

"Twelve people including two women, two children and eight men died on the spot," Mahboob added. "Six others were rushed to hospital where their condition was reported as critical."

Pakistan has the world's third highest death rate from road accidents, the government says. Reckless drivers, overcrowded vehicles and poor roads are usually blamed for the high number of fatalities.

UN envoys launch crisis talks on reform plans

REUTERS, United Nations

Some 32 UN ambassadors began a week of crisis talks on Monday in an effort to rescue a mid-September world summit on extreme poverty, human rights, terrorism, proliferation and UN management reforms.

US Ambassador John Bolton, who had put forward more than 500 amendments or deletions to a 39-page draft text, submitted several letters, including ones on development and terrorism, explaining the US position.

"I'm optimistic that we have all the proposed amendments out on the table and we can engage in negotiations," Bolton told reporters during a break in the talks. "That's what they pay us to do."

But time is short and diplomats said conclusions would have to be reached this week so the document, which has been under discussion for six months, could be translated and submitted to more than 170 world leaders expected to attend the

September 14-16 summit.

The session, called by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, is aimed at revitalising the United Nations and approving new approaches to world issues in the 21st century.

The definition of terrorism, which has been discussed for eight years so it can be included in a binding treaty, is so contentious that Monday's meeting broke up into an evening sub-group to discuss it. The main thrust would be to outlaw attacks against civilians.

Bolton, in a letter to ambassadors, said the text should not "address military activities that are appropriately governed by international humanitarian law," an apparent reference to US soldiers in Iraq or Israeli armed forces.

But Arab nations and others insist the definition exclude the Palestinian struggle against Israel and include action of armed forces against civilians.