

Nepali journalists fear crackdown

UN urged to act

AFP, Kathmandu

Journalists affiliated with 10 Nepalese media groups appealed to the UN's human rights body to take urgent steps to prevent a fresh crackdown on the media after the Supreme Court upheld an anti-press law.

"We have felt that now the United Nations needs to play a more proactive role to protect the Nepalese media community from all types of offences by an autocratic regime," the groups said.

"Nepalese media and media professionals are in total danger now," it said in a memorandum to Ian Martin, the local representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Nepal's Supreme Court on Friday refused to block a widely-criticised

law banning radio news programmes and introducing heavy fines and jail terms for those who criticise the government and members of the royal family.

Friday's ruling on a petition brought by nine groups including the Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ), cleared the way for the government to impose the controversial law, which has led to strikes and protests.

Kantipur FM, sister organisation of Nepal's largest private media company, said it would respect the law and end its news broadcasts.

"Most other private radio stations have taken a (similar) 'soft approach' after the court's decision but they have not stopped airing news-oriented programmes," said Ghama Raj Luintel, spokesman for the Save Independent Radio Movement

(SIRM).

Minister for Information and Communications Tanka Dhakal told reporters Saturday that the government would take severe action against those who violate the media ordinance.

"They will face dire consequences," Dhakal said.

In their memorandum the journalists said the Nepalese media was at one of the most critical junctures in its history.

"The state will expedite its repressive measures against the media," they said.

"The situation is such that the property of some five dozen independent radio stations and hundreds of newspapers could face attacks from the state (at) any time."

Coordinator of Delhi blasts detained

AFP, New Delhi

The suspected key coordinator of last month's serial bombings in New Delhi that killed 62 people has been arrested, police said yesterday.

"He was arrested (in Kashmir) on November 10," police commissioner K.K. Paul told a press conference in New Delhi, naming the key suspect as "Tariq".

He said the hunt was on for four accomplices identified as members of the hardline rebel group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is among a dozen guerrilla organisations battling Indian rule in Kashmir since 1989.

Besides the Lashkar rebels, a number of foreign militants were also involved in the blasts, Paul said.

The Delhi police chief said Tariq had come to the Indian capital in the first week of October to plot the bombings, but was not present when the attacks were carried out by a team of militants on October 29.

Tariq was a key financier for Lashkar though he worked in Indian Kashmir as a sales representative for a pharmaceutical company, Paul said.

"The three blasts were carried out

by at least four people. The identity of the people has more or less been confirmed and we are trying to track them down," he added.

Paul identified two of them as Lashkar militants Abu Alqama and Abu Hussain Khan.

The blasts in two markets and a bus in New Delhi, which came before the Hindu festival of Diwali, also wounded 210 people.

Paul said investigators learned that Tariq received 500,000 rupees (11,500 dollars) from a person based in the Middle East days before the blast.

"The investigations are at an important juncture and it may not be right to disclose everything right now," he said in response to queries by reporters.

"We are piecing the evidence together and we are sure to come out with more information soon."

Paul said police found that Tariq made a call to a news agency office in Srinagar, summer capital of Indian-administered Kashmir, to claim that Lashkar had not carried out the bombings.

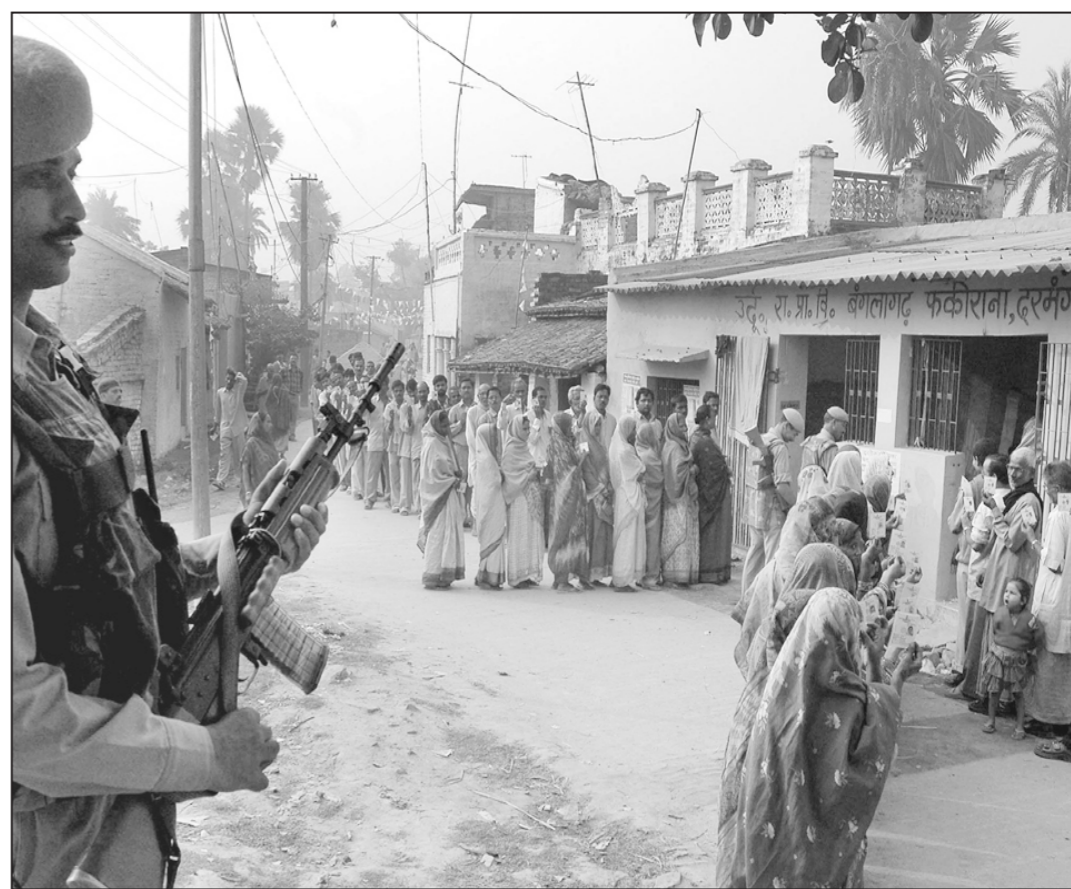


PHOTO: AFP
An Indian paramilitary soldier stands alert outside a polling station as voters stand in queues for casting their votes in the third round of the four-phase state assembly elections yesterday in Darvanga, Bihar.

Polling peaceful in Bihar

AFP, Patna

A provincial poll in India's lawless state of Bihar ended relatively peacefully yesterday, officials said, despite earlier shoot-on-sight orders to police amid fears of attacks by Maoist rebels.

"Polling for the third phase of the assembly elections ended peacefully with not even a single incident of major violence," said K.J. Rao, state election commissioner.

The turnout, however, was a low 40 to 45 percent despite the fact many first-time voters had lined up to cast their ballots.

"Many people I visited said they were voting for the first time," said Rao.

Minor clashes in three districts between rival political groups had left 10 people injured, officials said.

Some 73,000 paramilitary troops backed by police in the eastern state had guarded the balloting in the third round of the four-phase state assembly elections, called after a February vote failed to produce a clear winner.

"Security forces have been armed with orders to shoot booth-grabbers

and criminals on sight," Bihar police chief Ashish Ranjan Sinha said ahead of the vote, referring to the popular practice of taking over voting stations and stuffing ballot boxes. Sinha added that riot police on horseback had patrolled some of the 12,786 polling stations.

Bihar home secretary H.C. Sirohi said India's elite frontier guards have been called in to reinforce security at constituencies on the borders with Nepal.

"Indian Air Force helicopters have been also pressed in for aerial surveillance," Sirohi said in the state capital Patna.

Sirohi said the state had sealed its borders with Nepal to prevent cross-border violence by Maoist rebels, who have strong influence in seven of the 11 districts where the balloting was taking place.

India's Home Ministry has warned that Maoist rebel groups within the country are cooperating with guerrillas in Nepal, where a leftist insurgency has claimed more than 12,000 lives since 1996.

"The Border Security Force are

patrolling the rivers as well," Sirohi said, referring to the borders between Bihar and the troubled Himalayan kingdom.

The porous borders, which also include jungle areas, were guarded by troops from both sides, he said.

India's Maoist-linked People's War Group, which is outlawed, enjoys widespread support among Bihar's marginal farmers and had called for a poll boycott, labelling the election a sham backed by feudal landlords.

The election commission has staggered the poll to assure security.

Polling in the first two rounds was largely peaceful, although two men were killed in election-linked violence.

Some 12 million people had been eligible to vote on Sunday.

With 80 million people, Bihar is India's second most populous state after neighbouring Uttar Pradesh and a make-or-break battleground for political parties.

It is also India's most lawless state, with police recording at least 5,000 murders and 12,000 abductions a year.



PHOTO: AFP
Members of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists shout slogans during an anti-government protest rally by over 2000 people in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's Supreme Court refused to block a widely-criticised law banning radio news programmes and introducing heavy fines and jail terms for those who criticise the government and members of the royal family.

Christians hold mass in open after Pak churches torched

AFP, Sangla Hill

Hundreds of Christians worshipped yesterday in the open air after a Muslim mob in eastern Pakistan burnt down churches over allegations that a Christian had desecrated the Koran, officials and witnesses said.

The crowd, including women wearing black armbands to protest Saturday's attacks, also demanded protection for the minority community in the small town of Sangla Hill.

"They held their Sunday mass and dispersed peacefully," police officer Mohammad Asghar told AFP. A police contingent cordoned off the area near a gutted church in Sangla Hill, 80 kilometres (50 miles) west of Lahore, capital of Punjab province.

The crowd dispersed after Catholic Archbishop Lawrence Saldanaha advised them not to

retaliate.

"The situation is under complete control now," home secretary of the Punjab provincial government, Khuro Pervez, told AFP.

"Police have arrested around 90 people for rioting and violence and vandalising Christian property," he said.

Yousaf Masih, a Christian accused of desecrating the Muslim holy book, has been detained, he added.

Witnesses said at least two churches were destroyed in the attack by more than 1,000 enraged Muslims. The mob then ransacked a Christian school, set its furniture on fire and attacked a hostel where a pastor lives.

Residents said the attack was prompted by allegations from Muslims that Yousaf Masih had burnt copies of the Koran. Christian leaders said Masih's rivals had made a false accusation after losing money to him at gambling.

Lankan polls campaign winds down today

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday banned liquor sales and political rallies ahead of this week's presidential vote as monitors described campaigning so far as the most peaceful in decades.

The government announced that bars would remain shut for four days before and one day after Thursday's election while all campaign rallies must end by midnight Monday.

The ban on political meetings will continue for another week after the election, police said adding that the move was aimed at preventing celebrations that could lead to violence.

"This has been the most peaceful election campaign in the past 20 years," said Kingsley Rodrigo, the head of the main poll monitoring outfit, People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL).

The PAFFREL received 114 com-

plaints of violence but they were all minor, he said, adding that violence was sharply lower compared to previous elections when dozens of people were killed.

Some 13.3 million Sri Lankans over the age of 18 years are eligible to vote on Thursday to elect a president from among 13 candidates, only two of whom are regarded as serious contenders.

The ruling party is fielding Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, who is being challenged by opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The two are poles apart on handling the island's fragile peace process and the equally troubled economy, which polls show are the main issues in the election.

The premier says he wants to change the Norwegian-brokered peace process and re-negotiate a truce with Tamil Tiger rebels, but has not

spelt out details or how he wants to do it.

Wickremesinghe wants to revive talks with Tamil Tigers. Direct negotiations have been on hold since April 2003, and the Tigers for their part have said they are opposed to any unilateral action on the peace process.

The premier seeks an inward looking Marxist-oriented economic system while the opposition leader is promising to attract more foreign investment and move towards more market reforms.

Both have tried to woo the island's minority Tamils who have emerged potential king-makers, but Tiger rebels who wield considerable influence over them have remained neutral.

The majority Sinhalese community is seen as divided between the two main contenders.

Lanka astrologers see better times after vote

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan astrologers have predicted their fortunes will rise after Thursday's presidential election and see the opposition leader as the candidate with the stronger horoscope.

The Association for the Propagation of Vedic Astrology said Sunday that former Premier Ranil Wickremesinghe was the rising star according to his horoscope. His manifesto may have also helped.

The seers had also pored over the election pledges of candidates and found only Wickremesinghe had promised an "Astrological Council" to boost the fortunes of the practitioners.

"Yes, we will have a better time if the opposition leader wins the election," the association's leader Ananda Seneviratne told AFP. "But our calculations show he is winning."

The soothsayers, who had remained unusually quiet during the campaign, made the surprise announcement after a private opinion poll put Wickremesinghe six percentage points ahead in approval ratings.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani Christians sit on the street in front of a burnt church yesterday during a demonstration against attacks on churches in Sangla Hill, some 90km west of Lahore.

6 killed in Kashmir gunbattles

AFP, Srinagar

Six people, including four Muslim rebels, were killed in two gunbattles in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir while police fired tear gas to quell anti-government protests, police and witnesses said yesterday.

Two rebels, a Muslim student and an Indian soldier were killed in a fierce gunbattle Saturday evening in the village of Palhalan, 30km north of the summer capital Srinagar, a police statement said.

Two civilians and an army major were injured during the fighting that erupted when troops raided a suspected rebel hideout, it said.

Palhalan residents late Saturday and again on Sunday held noisy protests on the main highway connecting Srinagar with the northern town of Baramulla, stranding hundreds of vehicles on the road.

Villagers said security forces killed only one militant during the fighting and that the other two who died had been students who had been used as "human shields" by the troops.

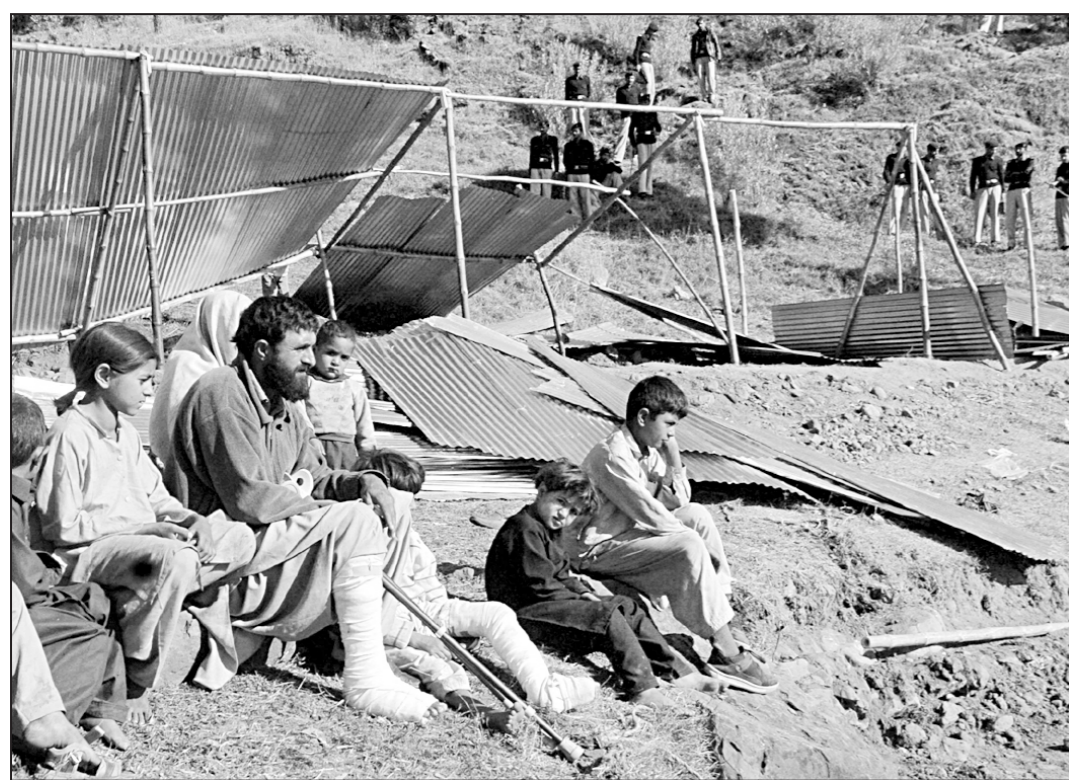


PHOTO: AFP
A Pakistan Kashmiri earthquake survivor and his family sit in front of their demolished makeshift hut as policemen look on in Muzaffarabad yesterday. Local authorities have demolished makeshift huts which were built by a local NGO on official land without permission from authorities.

UN immunises kids in Pak quake zone

AP, Muzaffarabad

Health authorities Saturday launched a two-week campaign to immunize 800,000 children in divided Kashmir to prevent infectious disease from thriving in the crowded and sometimes squalid tent camps for earthquake survivors.

Meanwhile, Pakistan and India opened a third crossing through their disputed Kashmir frontier as part of limited cooperation between the nuclear rivals since the Oct. 8 quake. But it involved only a ceremonial swap of aid as with the previous two openings with no crossings by Kashmiri residents.

Also Saturday, calm returned to a makeshift refugee camp in Muzaffarabad a day after police used bamboo canes and rifle butts to break up a march by survivors protesting eviction from the public park where they had been living.

Pakistani police said they had no immediate plans to move the camp residents.

UN and Pakistani health officials spearheading the immunization drive in Pakistan's portion of Kashmir are racing to protect children before the region's savage winter strikes, starting in the most remote towns hit by the quake and working their way toward larger hubs.

"Now, the mourning period is over, and everybody is ready to move forward to make sure that those who carry the future will be protected," said Dr. Edward Hoekstra, a senior health adviser for Unicef, the UN children's agency. "We are starting in the most inaccessible areas in case the weather turns bad in the next two weeks."

The campaign aims to vaccinate children up to age 15 against diseases including measles, polio, diphtheria and tetanus. Shots will include vitamin A, which can reduce the mortality rate of respiratory illnesses expected to be rife in winter by up to 50 percent, Hoekstra said.

Pak army selling organs of quake victims: JKLF

PTI, New Delhi

JKLF has claimed that some criminals and Pak army men were taking away the vital organs from those killed in the killer quake in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) to make a quick buck.

Besides this, criminals were taking away children and women for selling. JKLF's Diplomatic Committee Chairman Shabir Choudhry said in a statement.

"While the earthquake has brought untold miseries and suffering to the people of Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan, some selfish and criminal minded people have made business from plight of these unfortunate victims," he said.

JKLF is extremely concerned about looting and kidnapping of Kashmiri children and women by organised groups who came from various parts of Pakistan and did not hesitate in taking out body organs of victims and selling them, he said.

"What hurts us that apart from some criminal minded civilians, some army men were also involved in selling items designated for the earthquake victims," the statement added.

FINAL AFGHAN POLLS RESULTS Ex-commanders, Taliban win seats

REUTERS, Kabul

Final results of Afghanistan's legislative elections show several former commanders of military factions, three old Taliban officials, women activists and several ex-communists won seats in the new parliament.

The results of the September 18 vote for the 249-seat lower house, or Wolesi Jirga, and councils in all 34 provinces were finally released on Saturday, after being delayed by a slow count and accusations of vote fraud.

"We have now completed certification of all final results for both the Wolesi Jirga and the provincial council elections," said a statement by Bismillah Bismill, chairman of the UN-Afghan Joint Electoral Management Body.

Parliament is expected to sit for the first time next month in a renovated old assembly building.

One of parliament's key jobs will be to approve or veto the nomination of cabinet members. An election for a

new upper house is expected to be completed by the end of this month.

Bismill described the polls, the first in decades in war-torn Afghanistan, as a milestone in the country's transition to democracy.

The UN-organised elections were held on a non-party basis, with all 5,800 candidates running as independents, raising fears that a fragmented parliament will emerge, with members focused on parochial issues as they compete for government resources.

President Hamid Karzai has no political party and stayed out of the fray, although several supporters, including two relatives, won parliamentary seats.

Yunus Qanuni, leader of an alliance of parties opposed to the US-backed president, also won a seat. The former interior and education minister in Karzai's government came a distant second to Karzai in the October 2004 presidential election.