

Nepali parties, Maoists to work for democracy

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's major political parties have agreed to work with Maoist rebels to abolish the monarchy and restore democracy if the insurgents first disarm, a former prime minister said yesterday.

The agreement, announced by Girija Prasad Koirala, is the first between the rebels and an alliance of seven political parties since King Gyanendra sacked a coalition government in February and assumed power. "The country's seven agitating party alliance and the Maoists have agreed to a 12-point agenda to establish full-fledged democracy and launch a movement to end the tyrannical monarchy and hold constituent

assembly elections under UN supervision," Koirala told a press conference.

"However the two sides will not launch the joint movement until the Maoists surrender their arms," said Koirala, who leads the Nepali Congress, the largest party, and has been premier of the Himalayan kingdom four times.

Gyanendra has said he sacked the government for its failure to tackle the rebellion which has claimed more than 12,000 lives since 1996.

In response to pressure from India, Britain and the United State, Gyanendra offered last month to hold local elections in February 2006 and parliamentary elections in 2007.

But the political alliance rejected the gesture because of continued

restrictions on media freedom and civil rights.

Maoist rebel leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, alias Prachanda, also issued a statement Tuesday announcing the agreement but did not mention abandoning arms.

"The seven-party alliance and the Maoists have reached a 12-point agreement during various phases of talks," the emailed statement said.

Last week Koirala had appealed to the rebels to form an alliance with mainstream parties to restore democracy.

The rebels have previously called for a constituent assembly to review the constitutional monarchy founded in 1990, although political parties had earlier rejected the idea.

A report in The Indian Express newspaper last week said the Maoists were willing to disarm under United Nations auspices.

In September the rebels announced a three-month unilateral truce in what analysts saw as an attempt to win public support and work with mainstream political forces.

"The tie-up is a natural course of action because the king has not sought to reconcile with political parties," said senior human rights leader Padma Ratna Tuladhar, who has led government negotiations with the Maoists in the past.

"The political leaders are joining hands with the Maoists because the king has sidelined the parties."



Supporters of the National Democratic Alliance celebrate victory in the Bihar legislative assembly election at Patna yesterday.

Sharon on course to win election

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Ariel Sharon is on course to win Israel's coming election, opinion polls showed yesterday in an initial boost for the prime minister a day after he quit his rebellious right-wing Likud to form a centrist party.

With an early election likely in February or March, the surveys gave Sharon 30-33 seats in the 120-member parliament, enough to make his still unnamed party the biggest faction in a governing coalition and virtually ensure him a third term.

Sharon, in a move that could reshape Israeli politics for years to come, bolted the party he co-founded three decades ago, saying he could not push for peace with the Palestinians

while "wasting time" battling far-right rivals in the Likud.

However, he gave no ground in his bedrock demand, part of a US-backed peace "road map" whose terms both sides have failed to fulfil, that the Palestinian Authority disarm militants before talks on statehood can resume after five years of bloodshed.

"We will work to set the permanent border of the nation while insisting on the dismantling of terrorist groups," Sharon said.

Appearing to be in high spirits, the 77-year-old ex-general popularly known as "the Bulldozer" ruled out further unilateral Israeli withdrawals from occupied land following a Gaza pullout completed in September that split the Likud.

Bush plotted to bomb al-Jazeera

AFP, London

US President George W. Bush planned to bomb pan-Arab television broadcaster al-Jazeera, British newspaper the Daily Mirror said yesterday, citing a Downing Street memo marked "Top Secret".

The five-page transcript of a conversation between Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair reveals that Blair talked Bush out of launching a military strike on the station, unnamed sources told the anti-war-in-Iraq daily.

The transcript of the pair's talks during Blair's April 16, 2004 visit to Washington allegedly shows Bush wanted to attack the satellite channel's headquarters.

EUROPE TELLS US Come clean on secret CIA prisons

AFP, Copenhagen

The European Union wants the United States to clarify reports about the way its CIA spy agency handles suspected Islamic extremists as part of anti-terrorism activities, Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moeller said Monday.

"We say in all friendship to the United States, 'What is this? You can't be satisfied with all these rumours and neither are we,'" Moeller was quoted telling Danish news agency Ritzau after a meeting of European foreign ministers in Brussels.

Washington has refused to confirm or deny press reports about the

Central Intelligence Agency's use of European airports to transfer suspected Islamic extremists around the globe, and so-called "black site" covert prisons in eastern Europe, Afghanistan, Thailand and elsewhere.

"We say (to the Americans): A lot of countries have been named in relation to these overflights, and we can guess at a lot of others in connection with these prisons. So we would like you to tell us something about it," he said.

British Foreign Minister Jack Straw, whose country currently holds the rotating EU presidency, did not mention any formal demand to the United States about the matter, the news agency said.

US, Europe won't push for UN move on Iran

AP, Vienna

Washington and its European allies will forgo pushing for Iran's referral to the UN Security Council later this week, giving Russia more time in persuading Tehran to give up technology that could make nuclear arms, diplomats and officials told The Associated Press on Monday.

For the Americans and the European Union, the plan holds the promise of success even if Iran continues to reject the proposal that would move its uranium enrichment program to Russia.

The acceptance of that plan, in theory, would deprive the Iranians of the chance to enrich uranium to weapons grade, suitable for use in the core of nuclear warheads.

But if the Russians fail to win over the Iranians, Washington and the Europeans hope Moscow and other key board members of the International Atomic Energy Agency now opposed to Security Council referral will moderate their opposition.

The comments by the diplomats and US and European government officials came three days before the IAEA board meets to ponder options on Iran that at least formally still included a decision on Security Council action.

But the diplomats and officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the strategy on Iran is confidential, said referral was now off the table at the meeting.

Instead, they said Washington as well as Britain, France and Germany representing the European Union would probably settle for a statement critical of recent IAEA findings showing the Iranians in possession of what appeared to be drawings of the core of an atomic warhead and of other worrying nuclear activities.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack also suggested the focus had shifted from an all-out push for referral, saying: "We're encouraging Iran to get back to the negotiating table with the EU-3 at this point."

Iraqi leaders call for US pullout timetable

AP, Cairo

Reaching out to the Sunni Arab community, Iraqi leaders called for a timetable for the withdrawal of US-led forces and said Iraq's opposition had a "legitimate right" of resistance.

The communique finalised by Shia, Kurdish and Sunni leaders Monday condemned terrorism but was a clear acknowledgment of the Sunni position that insurgents should not be labelled as terrorists if their operations do not target innocent civilians or institutions designed to provide for the welfare of Iraqi citizens.

The leaders agreed on "calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops

according to a timetable, through putting in place an immediate national program to rebuild the armed forces ... control the borders and the security situation" and end terror attacks.

The preparatory reconciliation conference, held under the auspices of the Arab League, was attended by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Iraqi Shia and Kurdish lawmakers as well as leading Sunni politicians.

Sunni leaders have been pressing the Shia-majority government to agree to a timetable for the withdrawal of all foreign troops. The statement recognized that goal, but did not lay down a specific time reflecting instead the

government's stance that Iraqi security forces must be built up first.

On Monday, Iraqi Interior Minister Bayan Jabr suggested US-led forces should be able to leave Iraq by the end of next year, saying the one-year extension of the mandate for the multinational force in Iraq by the UN Security Council this month could be the last.

"By the middle of next year we will be 75 percent done in building our forces and by the end of next year it will be fully ready," he told the Arab satellite station Al-Jazeera.

New Lanka govt to go on with emergency rule Rajapakse to keep finance, defence portfolios

AFP, REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's new government will maintain a state of emergency and the national parliament will be asked to ratify the tough laws, officials said.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, who was sworn in Saturday after his victory at Thursday's election, was due to prorogue parliament later Monday and summon the assembly on Friday, officials said.

"After parliament holds its ceremonial sitting with an address by the new president, the assembly will meet again that afternoon to ratify the state of emergency," the official said.

The current emergency laws were declared by former president Chandrika Kumaratunga on August 13, a day after foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was assassinated by suspected Tamil Tiger rebels.

Emergency laws give sweeping powers to police and security forces to arrest and detain suspects for lengthy periods without warrants.

The parliament was on Tuesday due to debate the national budget unveiled by former finance minister Sarath Amunugama earlier this month, but Rajapakse said he would unveil a new budget incorporating his election promises.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's new president, Mahinda Rajapakse, will keep the finance and defence portfolios for himself when he unveils his cabinet later on Tuesday, his media secretary told Reuters.

Rajapakse, the island's former prime minister, has previously held the labour, fisheries and highways portfolios in cabinet, but has never held the post of Finance Minister.

"It is only two posts (he is keeping). One is defence, the other one is finance," said media secretary Chandrapala Liyanage. The swearing in ceremony of the cabinet ministers will be this evening."



Outgoing German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (bottom) walks away after congratulating his successor Angela Merkel after she was elected new chancellor during a session of parliament in Berlin yesterday.