

New Bihar CM promises to make state crime-free

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Patna

New Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Thursday promised to usher in a crime-free Bihar.

Soon after taking oath of office and secrecy, the Janata Dal-United leader said his priorities would be to restore the rule of law, provide good governance and put the state on the path of development at the earliest.

The soft-spoken Nitish Kumar was all smiles as he spoke to reporters after the oath taking ceremony at the Gandhi Maidan ground.

He said the most important thing for him was to restore the rule of law, which he said was missing, and provide infrastructure, which he said were in shambles.

"We will restore the law and order and bring back people's confidence in governance," he said, wearing his usual kurta pyjama and a bandgala.

"Our priorities are not impossible. Let's wait for some time, things will show improvement. It is only good governance and a crime-free state that will bring development."

Nitish Kumar said it was unfortunate that Bihar's image was so poor because of lawlessness, kidnappings, poor roads and lack of development over the last decade.



PHOTO: AFP

Nitish Kumar, (R) waves at his swearing-in ceremony in Patna as new chief minister of Bihar yesterday. Kumar led an alliance of the right-leaning regional Janata Dal-United party and Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to end regional strongman Laloo Prasad Yadav's 15-year rule over Bihar.

Lanka floods hit thousands

REUTERS, Colombo

Floods triggered by heavy rains in Sri Lanka have affected some 40,000 people, the government said on Wednesday, including many living in makeshift shelters since last year's tsunami.

Water levels had begun to fall in most parts of the country after the rains eased, but officials were still assessing the damage in the north and east.

"At this moment we are still collecting data," assistant director of the National Disaster Management Centre G.M. Gunawardena said. "It looks as though the worst affected areas are the north and east."

Officials said there was no figure yet on deaths caused by the floods but newspapers said that at least two people were killed in central Colombo when a wall, weakened by the rain, collapsed.

NEPALI POLITICIANS SAY

King in 'panic' over pact with Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu/United Nations

Nepal's opposition party alliance said yesterday King Gyanendra has been thrown into panic by his pact with Maoist rebels aimed at restoring democracy in the Himalayan kingdom.

The government named by the king late Wednesday denounced the alliance struck this week between the seven-party coalition and the Maoists as "unholy."

King Gyanendra dismissed Nepal's coalition government and seized executive power nine months

ago in what he said was a bid to end an increasingly deadly revolt by the Maoists aimed at toppling the monarchy.

"The unholy 12-point alliance-Maoist compact frames an agreement to abolish the monarchy through elections to a constituent assembly," said the government statement carried by the official RSS news agency.

The state-run newspaper Rising Nepal carried the government's statement in its Thursday edition while the independent Himalayan Times called the pact a "historic

development" in an editorial.

"The government has started to panic now," said Krishna Prasad Sitaula, spokesman for the Nepali Congress, the largest political party.

"The government wants to prolong its undemocratic regime. It's not serious about ending the conflict," added Minendra Rijal, a leader of the Nepali Congress-Democratic, part of the four-party coalition sacked by Gyanendra.

On Tuesday the opposition alliance and rebels announced plans for a joint campaign to end the king's direct rule. But the parties said they would

wait for the Maoists to follow through with a pledge to lay down arms before launching the movement.

Under the agreement the Maoists, who have been fighting to turn Nepal into a one-party communist state, would lay down their arms under UN or other international supervision while a new constitution was drafted.

Various details of the deal still must be worked out.

Gyanendra's power grab in February drew international condemnation and sparked widespread protests across the nation, one of the world's poorest.

India, Indonesia agree to boost defence ties

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India and Indonesia, Asia's largest democracies, agreed on Wednesday to forge closer defence and trade ties and cooperate in combating terrorism.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and visiting Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said, "we agreed on a new strategic partnership which calls for closer diplomatic consultations, stronger defence relations and enhanced economic ties, especially in trade and investment."

A joint declaration issued after the talks between the two leaders said Yudhoyono welcomed India's offer of

defence cooperation, specially, in areas of technologies, supplies, joint production and joint projects.

Calling for increased visits by defence officials of the two countries, the two leaders agreed to hold an annual "strategic dialogue" at the level of senior officials with the first meeting to be held in the first half of next year.

Condemning terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, whose threat is faced by both India and Indonesia, Singh and Yudhoyono deplored any attempt to link it with any particular religion or ethnic group.

Tigers to set the course for new Lankan govt

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's new hawkish president is to make a policy statement today pledging prosperity, but analysts and diplomats say they are focusing on a speech by the Tamil rebel leader this weekend that could fan fears of a slide back to civil war.

Left-leaning President Mahinda Rajapakse is slated to open a new session of parliament Friday with a policy declaration that government officials say is likely to be a reiteration of his election manifesto that was packed with promises of subsidies to

boost the island's economy.

However, analysts and diplomats say they are more keenly awaiting the annual policy declaration of Tamil Tiger rebels in view of the new hard-line administration and renewed fears of the country slipping back to war.

"We're anxiously waiting for (Tiger leader Velupillai) Prabhakaran to make his speech," a diplomatic source said. "That will give us an inkling about the direction of the peace process."

Tiger chief Prabhakaran, who turns 51 Saturday, is to deliver his

"state of the nation" speech a day later at the end of "heroes' week" which commemorates rebels who perished in three decades of fighting.

More than 60,000 people have died in the Tamil separatist conflict and four previous peace attempts have ended in failure, leading to more bloodshed.

"Prabhakaran's speech will be more important than anything else at this time," said former air force chief Harry Gunatillake. "We can expect a hardening of his stance and I fear he may signal a drift towards hostilities."

OIL-FOR-FOOD SCANDAL Chaos in Indian parliament

AFP, New Delhi

India's parliament erupted in chaos yesterday as the opposition attacked the ruling coalition over alleged links between a federal minister and Iraq's oil-for-food scandal.

Members of the opposition and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Congress-led coalition traded charges over the naming of former foreign minister Natwar Singh and Congress as beneficiaries in a UN report on the oil-

for-food scam.

Natwar Singh quit as foreign minister earlier this month over allegations in the report that he profited from oil allocations by the government of Saddam Hussein. He remains a minister without portfolio.

"The house can function only if (Congress party president) Sonia Gandhi and Natwar Singh resign. It cannot run until then," said Vijay Kumar Malhotra, a leader of the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka's new Media Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa (L) addresses a press conference with Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva in Colombo yesterday. Yapa announced that the government was inviting all political parties for talks on salvaging a peace process with Tamil Tiger rebels.