

Nepal faces full-scale conflict threat: UN

Leftists gear up for anti-king protests as govt bans rally

AFP, Geneva/Kathmandu

UN human rights chief Louise Arbour warned that Nepal faced the threat of a full-scale armed conflict, and called on authorities to join a ceasefire with Maoist rebels and allow free assembly.

"A mutual ceasefire between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government of King Gyanendra, and steps towards lasting peace, are crucial to bring to an end a period of grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by both the Maoists and the State", Arbour said in a statement.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights joined calls for Maoist rebels to extend a unilateral ceasefire, which is due to end this week and urged the Nepalese

government to join it.

"I am seriously concerned about the very real possibility that full-scale armed conflict could resume," she added.

Last week, the Maoists and the opposition parties agreed on an alliance to attempt to restore democracy to the Himalayan kingdom.

Local officials in the Nepalese capital have banned protests by the communist party planned for December 2, state-run media reported on Wednesday.

The Kathmandu district administration office has barred public meetings, processions, sit-ins and strikes in four areas of the city in an effort to head off the planned protests, the Gorkhapatra newspaper reported.

On Tuesday, the Nepal

Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-ML) and six other opposition parties announced they would begin a month-long series of protests starting Friday when King Gyanendra returns from an overseas tour.

The NCP-ML Wednesday rejected the ban and said it would proceed with the demonstrations.

"The programme will be held at the same venue and the party appeals to the public to participate in the programme that day," it said in a statement.

Nepal's Communist party was hopeful yesterday that tens of thousands would take to the streets to protest King Gyanendra's power grab as the monarch returns home and a rebel Maoist ceasefire ends.

King Gyanendra returns Friday

after three weeks in Bangladesh and Africa, his first foreign foray since sacking the government and assuming absolute power in the Himalayan kingdom on February 1.

"The state is trying to arrest those fighting for democracy," NCP-ML spokesman Pradip Nepal told AFP Thursday. "This is state terrorism against those trying to hold peaceful demonstrations."

"We expect more than 60,000 people to participate in the demonstration on Friday," he said.

Human rights activist Subodh Pyakural warned of grave dangers as the three-month Maoist guerrilla ceasefire comes to an end also on Friday.

"Now the king has to compromise or be ready for a civil war in the country," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators carry a mascot to high-light Aids prevention, namely 'Bula di' during an Aids awareness rally on World Aids Day in Kolkata yesterday. According to UN figures, India has the second highest number of HIV/Aids-infections of any country in the world after South Africa.

EU adds Hizbul to terror list

PTI, London

The European Union (EU) has added Hizbul Mujahideen, the Pakistan-based outfit carrying out terrorist activities in Jammu and Kashmir for over a decade, to its list of terrorist organisations.

The EU's decision strikes a major blow to the group as restrictive anti-terror measures will be applied to it, including a freeze on its funds, assets and economic resources.

The Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) is among the groups active in Jammu and Kashmir and reportedly has strong ties to the Muslim fundamentalist group Jamaat-e-Islami.

Founded in late 1980s, the group's primary focus is Indian security forces and politicians in Jammu and Kashmir. It also occasionally strikes at civilian targets. It reportedly operated in Afghanistan and is led by Syed Salahuddin.

The outfit claimed responsibility for a car bomb late last month that killed a border guard and injured 21 people on the outskirts of Srinagar.

New Delhi calls the Hizbul Mujahideen "terrorists" for their frequent guerrilla raids to attack Indian Army targets across the Line of Control.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka's newly-appointed Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera (L) shakes hands with Indian Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed before an official meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Samaraweera is in India on a two-day official visit.

US prods other states to threaten Iran with sanctions

AFP, Washington

The United States, seeking to step up pressure on Iran, suggested Wednesday that other countries threaten their own economic sanctions if negotiations over Tehran's nuclear programme collapse.

"It might be time to consider a different approach toward the new, more radical, more intolerant Iranian regime," Nicholas Burns, number three in the State Department, said in a speech here.

"Through its diplomatic contacts and its trade and investment, the world does have leverage -- and that leverage should be used constructively now -- to convince the hard-liners in Tehran that there is a price for their misguided policies," Burns said.

The United States has long sought UN action to head off Iran's suspected bid to develop a nuclear bomb. Lacking sufficient support, Washington has backed a European attempt to rein Tehran in

with economic and security incentives.

But as the talks floundered, Burns said there was "a widening circle of countries... that are willing to use their diplomatic and economic leverage to convince the Iranians" to scrap their nuclear aspirations.

Speaking to reporters after his speech, Burns said Russia, the European Union, China, Japan, India and Australia were all concerned by Iran's activities, and pressure on Tehran next year would be a "positive development."

Asked if he was proposing the EU impose sanctions if diplomatic talks with Iran fail, the undersecretary of state for political affairs said, "That is up to the EU to decide. It is not up to the US."

But he added, "All of us around the world have to think about how we can influence that government. And it is certainly one way that many countries around the world can do that."

Peres quits Labour Party to back Sharon

Israeli political upheaval like a coup: Abbas

AP, AFP, Jerusalem/Ramallah

Longtime Labour leader Shimon Peres quit his party after six decades, saying he wanted to support former rival Ariel Sharon's bid for re-election to help him pursue their common goal of making peace with the Palestinians.

Peres cemented the alliance when he announced Wednesday he would back Sharon's new centrist Kadima party in the campaign for March elections. It was the culmination of a dramatic political realignment in the country after Sharon pulled Israel out of the Gaza Strip this summer and then left his hardline Likud to form a more moderate party.

The 82-year-old Peres, who led Labour to five electoral defeats and lost a race earlier this month to lead the party into a sixth election, said he believed Sharon was best suited to pursue a peace deal.

"I am convinced that he is

determined, as I am, to continue with the peace process and restart it immediately after the elections," Peres said in a voice shaking with emotion. "I decided, therefore, to support his election and cooperate with him to realize these goals."

Under a reported deal worked out with Sharon, Peres would support Kadima but would not officially join the party and he would not run for a seat in parliament, where he has served since 1959.

In return, Sharon, if re-elected will give Peres a senior post in his next government, possibly putting him in charge of peace talks with the Palestinians and neighbouring Arab states.

Though Peres cited "peace efforts," he is also piqued at Labour members who rejected his bid to become the party's candidate for prime minister again.

Peres' defection was an impor-

tant coup for Sharon. Now both men have left parties they guided for decades, joining forces in a new political lineup. They could emerge from March 28 elections at the head of the first solid parliamentary bloc in favour of compromises for peace with Palestinians.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas said Wednesday the recent upheaval in Israeli politics amounted to a virtual coup in the Jewish state.

"The transformations of the political parties in Israel represents a near political and social coup d'etat," Abbas told journalists at his West Bank headquarters.

"We must wait to see what other changes will take place in Israel. We are interested in knowing who is going to represent the Israeli people and who is going to negotiate with us," he added.

Israel has experienced seismic political changes in the past few weeks.

Kyoto climate accord becomes operational

AFP, Montreal

The controversial Kyoto protocol, aiming to cut greenhouse gas emissions, became fully operational on Wednesday after a UN climate conference here adopted the final rules.

The 34 signatory countries -- which do not include the United States or Australia -- passed the final regulatory measures by consensus at the Montreal conference.

"The Kyoto protocol is now fully operational. This is an historic step," said conference chairman Stephane Dion, Canada's environment minister.

Under the protocol, the 34 agree to limit emissions of gases that cause global warming until 2012.

The Montreal conference is trying to set out preliminary plans to further cut emissions when the accord ends.

Kyoto was negotiated in 1997

and formally entered into force on February 16, 2005. However, it could not come into operation until after the formal adoption of the rulebook, which was drawn up over the past four years.

The signatories hammered out a mechanism for trading pollution rights. The final rules also eased pollution standards by allowing countries to take into account carbon dioxide produced by growing trees.

A separate system setting out sanctions for those who breach the protocol should be adopted before the 12-day conference ends on December 9.

"I am absolutely confident that the compliance system will be adopted next week," said Richard Kinley, acting head of the UN climate change secretariat.

Despite the troubles hounding efforts to restrict pollution, the UN climate secretariat hailed the new

step taken at the conference and the launch of emissions trading. "Carbon now has a market value. Under the clean development mechanism, investing in projects that provide sustainable development and reduce emissions makes sound business sense," Kinley said.

Under the mechanism, developed countries can invest in other developed countries, particularly in central and eastern Europe, to earn carbon allowances which they can use to meet their emission reduction commitments at home.

Industrialised nations can also invest in "sustainable development projects" in developing countries to earn extra pollution allowances.

On Wednesday, the conference debated a new proposal by Papua New Guinea to allocate carbon allowances to developing countries which combat deforestation.

Lanka rejects Tiger deadline for deal

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka dismissed yesterday a Tamil rebel ultimatum for a political settlement and said no deadline could be imposed to resolve the ethnic conflict that has dragged on for over 50 years.

Constitutional affairs minister D. E. W. Gunasekara said: "We don't get excited by these deadlines," set by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the government to come up with a reasonable settlement.

"You can't do these things in a hurry. You can't do it in one night," he told reporters.

The LTTE on Sunday told the new government to come up with a "reasonable" political settlement by year end or risk a war that could break up the island.

Tamil Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran in his annual policy statement said headline President Mahinda Rajapakse should put forward a "reasonable political framework" before next year.

"This is our urgent and final appeal," Prabhakaran said. "If the new government rejects our urgent appeal, we will next year... establish self-government in our homeland."

The Tiger leader also noted that the new president was a "pragmatic leader" but with no understanding of the problems of minority Tamils. The LTTE spearheads a struggle for independence for the 12.5 percent Tamil minority.

Gunasekara said the Tiger leader's statement was "positive" but that the government did not take the deadline seriously.

He said the new government was initiating talks with all political parties represented in parliament before opening direct negotiations with the Tigers.

The top Norwegian truce monitor travelled to the island's north Thursday for talks with the LTTE on the ceasefire, which came under renewed pressure following the slaying of foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in mid-August.

Benazir acquitted of illegal appointments charges in PLA

REUTERS, Karachi

A Pakistani court on Wednesday acquitted self-exiled former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, of charges of making illegal appointments in the state-run Pakistan International Airlines (PIA).

But Benazir still faces a raft of charges of corruption and misuse after her government was sacked in 1996.

Judge Parkash Lal Ambawani of the special accountability court in the southern city of Karachi also acquitted four other accused in the case of appointments in PIA.

"The prosecution has failed to prove its case against any of the accused," Judge Ambawani said while announcing the verdict.

Benazir, who has been living in exile since early 1999, was granted exemption from being present in the court.

Though now living in Dubai, she still leads the Pakistan Peoples'

Party, opposed to President Pervez Musharraf.

Benazir and her husband Asif Zardari are facing several charges in Pakistan and abroad, including one in Geneva relating to accusations dating back to the 1990s that the two accepted commissions for awarding contracts to two Swiss companies to do business in Pakistan.

Zardari was released from prison in Pakistan in December after eight years in detention and now lives with his wife and children.

Benazir, who governed Pakistan twice -- between 1988 and 1990, and again from 1993 to 1996 -- has vowed to return to Pakistan and contest the 2007 general elections.

President Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup in 1999, has vowed to block any move by Benazir and another exiled former prime minister Nawaz Sharif to return to power.

Blast kills 5 militants in Pakistan

REUTERS, Miranshah

Five militants, three of them Uzbeks, were killed in Pakistan's tribal belt on the Afghan border yesterday when a blast destroyed the house they were staying in, a government official said.

The blast happened when explosives the men were storing went off, the official said, but residents of the troubled North Waziristan region, on the Afghan border, said a helicopter fired rockets into the house.

"The explosives materials were dumped at the house to make improvised explosive devices," said Syed Zaheer-ul-Islam, top administrator in North Waziristan where the Pakistani army is hunting al-Qaeda militants and their Pakistani supporters.

Three of the dead militants were Uzbeks and two were Pakistani, he said. Two men were wounded, one of them a foreigner, he said.

Residents of the area also said five people, including three foreigners, had been killed, but they said a helicopter fired rockets at the house in Haisori village, about 30km from the Afghan border.

Bush fails to allay Democrats' doubts about Iraq policy

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush's Iraq speech Wednesday failed to allay opposition concerns, as the top Democrat in the US House of Representatives added her name to a short list of lawmakers calling for a quick withdrawal of US troops.

Bush gave a speech on his strategy in Iraq at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, making the case for staying the course there.

But the top House Democrat, Nancy Pelosi, not only remained unconvinced, but she endorsed Wednesday a controversial proposal by a senior member of her party, calling for an quick pullout of US troops from Iraq.

Pelosi backed the withdrawal resolution proposed by Representative John Murtha, a staunchly pro-military former

marine who shocked the Washington political establishment with his troop pullout resolution nearly two weeks ago.

"I'm endorsing what Mr. Murtha is saying, which is that the status quo is not working and that we need to have a plan that makes us safer and our military stronger and makes Iraq more stable," Pelosi said at a press conference.

"I believe that what he has said has great wisdom. While the president is digging a hole, Mr. Murtha is speaking from the light of day about the realities in Iraq," she said.

In his speech, Bush defiantly refused to set a date for a US pull-out and warning that victory requires "time and patience." But leading Democrats hammered the address speech as reshaped remains of a failed administration policy.

Flight logs reveal 300 CIA flights to Europe

Rights groups list 'ghost detainees'

AFP, London/New York

More than 300 CIA flights have landed at European airports, a British newspaper said yesterday, adding a new element to claims that Washington has been transporting terrorist suspects to secret prisons in Europe.

The Guardian daily said it had seen flight logs documenting the flights by 26 planes operated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The information showed an "unprecedented" amount of travel by the agency but did not reveal which planes took part in alleged prison transfers, it said.

The CIA has been accused in reports of using European countries for the transport, illegal detention and torture of suspected Islamist terrorists in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

The United States on Wednesday promised a timely and forthright reply to an EU letter demanding answers to the claims.

The Guardian said the flight logs revealed that the CIA visited Germany 96 times and Britain 80 times, though when charter flights were added this figure rose to more than 200.

France was only visited twice and Austria not at all, the newspaper said.

The logs also showed regular trips to eastern Europe, including 15 stops in Prague.

"Only one visit is recorded to the Szymany airbase in north-east Poland, which has been identified as the alleged site of a secret CIA jail," The Guardian reported.

Poland and Romania have denied hosting CIA prisons, it added.

The Guardian said the flight logs were obtained from Federal

Aviation Administration data and sources in the aviation industry.

In New York a leading human rights monitor published Wednesday the names of 26 "ghost detainees" that it accused the United States of holding and possibly torturing in secret overseas locations.

The prisoners, suspected of involvement in such acts as the September 11, 2001, attacks, the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, and the 2002 nightclub bombings in Bali, Indonesia, are being held indefinitely and incommunicado, with no access to counsel, Human Rights Watch alleged.

According to the New York-based monitor, US government officials, speaking anonymously to journalists, have suggested that some of the detainees have been tortured or otherwise seriously mistreated in CIA custody.