

Maoists declare war on King's polls

IANAS, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist guerrillas have declared an all-out war against the civic elections called by the government on February 8 and virtually ruled out any further extension of their unilateral ceasefire that ends January 1.

Architect-turned-rebel Baburam Bhattarai, one of the front-ranking leaders of the underground communist insurgents, has said his banned party would "obstruct" all processes adopted by the royalist government headed by King Gyanendra to hold municipal elections.

Bhattarai's statement follows a news conference called by the king's deputy, Tulsī Giri, vice-chairman of the council of ministers, at which he ruled out reciprocating the ceasefire or beginning talks with armed Maoists and asserted the government would go ahead with elections even if there were no peace.

The statements of Bhattarai appeared in the latest issue of a popular weekly, Mulyankan, which

said the interview had been conducted by email.

Asked whether his party would reciprocate if the government called a ceasefire and invited it to talks, he said currently he saw no possibility or rationale in holding talks with the king.

Bhattarai also hinted at a shift in the Indian government's policy towards Nepal.

Though New Delhi says it considers multiparty democracy and constitutional monarchy to be the twin pillars of peace and stability in Nepal, the rebel leader hinted India could be agreeable to the abolition of monarchy and installation of a republic in the Himalayan kingdom.

He also said though the king was trying to get the support of countries like China, Pakistan and Russia (for his power takeover by force in February), his party felt China would not extend its support keeping in mind the wish of the Nepali people (for democracy) and Beijing's desire to maintain its geopolitical balance with India.

BJP against expulsion of accused MPs from House

PTI, New Delhi

The five-member House committee, which went into the cash-for-query scam, has ruled that the continuance of the ten accused members was "untenable" and recommended their expulsion from the House.

The 10 accused members are Narendra Kumar Kushwaha (BSP), Annasaheb MK Patil (BJP), Manoj Kumar (RJD), YG Mahajan (BJP), Pradeep Gandhi (BJP), Suresh Chandel (BJP), Ramsevak Singh (Cong), Lal Chandra Kol (BSP), Rajaram Pal (BSP) and Chandra Pratap Singh (BJP).

One of the Committee members, VK Malhotra of the BJP, has, however, given a note of dissent saying, "no member of the House can be expelled except for the breach of privilege of the House".

"I will not like to become a party to create a precedent by which a member can be expelled from the House without proper procedure being

adopted", Malhotra said in the dissent note, suggesting that the matter must be dealt according to the rules of the Privileges Committee.

Malhotra, in his dissent note, said the matter must be referred to the Privileges Committee on a motion moved in the House, or the Committee adopt the rules of Privileges Committee.

"In the Privileges Committee the tainted members will have a right of cross examination, arguments, defence etc., which is necessary for Natural Justice," he said.

In its recommendation, the panel said, "howsoever harsh it may sound, the continuance of these members as members of Lok Sabha will be untenable".

"The Committee accordingly recommends that the House may consider the expulsion of the ten members from the membership of the 14th Lok Sabha", the 38-page report said.

The Committee said considering

the "totality of the facts and circumstances of the case, it is of the opinion that the allegation of accepting money by the said ten members have been established.

"The Committee further notes that it is difficult to escape the conclusion that accepting money had a direct connection with the work in Parliament.

The Committee felt that such conduct of the said members was "unbecoming" of Members of Parliament and also "unethical".

"The Committee is, therefore, of the view that their conduct caused for strict action," it said adding stern action also needs to be taken against the middle-men, touts and persons masquerading as private secretaries of Members since they are "primary responsible" for inducing members for such activities.

Sri Lanka protests after sea battle with LTTE

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's navy and Tamil Tigers fought a sea battle off the island's northwest coast Thursday and the navy said three sailors were feared killed and seven rebels were captured.

The incident marked a worsening of clashes between rebels and government forces amid diplomatic moves to arrange direct talks between the parties to stop the country sliding back into war.

Government spokesman Nimal Siripala de Silva said they lodged a complaint with the Scandinavian truce monitoring mission and condemned the attack on sailors as a "gross violation" of a ceasefire in place since February 2002.

"We are asking the international community to take note of this gross violation of the ceasefire and apply pressure on the Tigers to halt this cycle of violence," de Silva said.

Tiger rebels fired automatic rifles at two naval patrol boats off the town

of Mannar, sparking an exchange of gunfire, navy spokesman Jayantha Perera said.

"They have taken away three of our sailors and we presume they have been killed," Perera said. "We have captured seven Tigers during the battle."

A fourth sailor escaped with injuries and was in the hospital, Perera said, adding the attackers had taken cover among fishermen to stage the assault.

The guerrillas had initially taken away one naval patrol craft which was later found abandoned, the navy said.

There was no immediate comment from the Tamil Tigers on whether they had killed the three sailors, but Perera said the navy had intelligence information that the three had been killed.

Thirty-nine people have been killed this month alone in violence linked to the ethnic conflict, heightening fears about the future of an already faltering ceasefire.

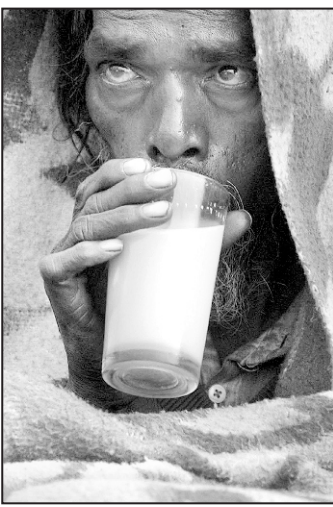


PHOTO: AFP

Indian beggar Subash, 55, drinks a glass of milk tea as he covers himself with a blanket to keep warm, in Amritsar, in India's northwestern state of Punjab yesterday.

Cold wave in India claims 5 more lives, toll reaches 53

PTI, New Delhi

Cold wave continued its onslaught in the plains claiming five more lives in Punjab and UP on Wednesday and taking the death toll to 53 as fresh snow in Himachal Pradesh froze water sources at a low of minus 10-20 degrees.

Eight persons were injured in separate mishaps which occurred due to poor visibility owing to thick fog. The heavy blanket of fog also disrupted train and road traffic in the early hours with several trains passing through Haryana and UP being rescheduled.

Two persons each died of cold in Varanasi and Banda in UP since Tuesday while a migrant labourer identified as Ram Din from Madhya Pradesh's Hajori district died due to cold in Batala town of Punjab which is reeling under a spell of cold wave.

With this, the cold wave has so far claimed nine lives—seven in Punjab and two in Haryana—in the region.

Though cold wave conditions relented a bit in Haryana, most Punjab towns continued to face its onslaught, with Amritsar once again turning out to be the coldest zone at 0.8 degrees Celsius.

At least eight passengers suffered injuries in different road accidents in Sonapat district on Wednesday on account of poor visibility due to thick blanket of fog.

UP continued to face the brunt of the cold with the toll here climbing to 44. Met office sources said though night temperature rose in some divisions of the state it was below normal in Gorakhpur, Faizabad, Kanpur and Agra divisions.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Kashmiri students walk across a devastated school in Garhi Dupatta, some 15 km south of Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-administered Kashmir yesterday. The 7.6-magnitude earthquake killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistan and Pakistani Kashmir and 1,300 in India.

Kashmir settlement hopes freeze despite quake disaster

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Hopes that India and Pakistan can build a solution to the Kashmir dispute from the rubble of the South Asia quake have cooled as the Himalayan winter draws in, analysts and residents say.

Almost immediately after the tremor tore through the disputed territory, there was talk that the awesome scale of the disaster could prompt the nuclear rivals to accelerate their nearly two-year-old peace process.

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf quickly proposed crossings on the Line of Control, the de facto border, in a move that was ostensibly for aid but that would have also reunited Kashmiri families after almost six decades.

Less than a month after the earthquake Indian and Pakistani soldiers were shaking hands and passing supplies over the heavily militarised frontier in unprecedented scenes.

But tellingly the Pakistani forces also teagassed angry locals who were not allowed to pass through themselves despite the earlier plans, and now the flurry of peace-making seems to have stalled.

Instead of drawing comparisons with the peace deal in Indonesia's

Aceh after the 2004 tsunami, commentators are more likely to point to the unchanged situation in Sri Lanka which was affected by the same disaster.

"It was mainly because both the establishments did not feel confident enough to exploit this opportunity," says Mohammad Afzal Niaz, a Pakistani newspaper commentator and political analyst.

"The earthquake did seem to have opened possibility but they could not realise their potential."

The Kashmir problem -- the cause of two of three wars between India and Pakistan since independence from Britain and partition in 1947 -- has resisted almost every attempt to resolve it.

In late 2003 New Delhi and Islamabad agreed on a ceasefire along the Line of Control and in January following year they began a peace process centred on Kashmir but including other issues.

The first tangible result was not until April this year when a historic bus service was launched linking Muzaffarabad, the now devastated capital of the Pakistani side, and Srinagar, the summer capital of India's portion.