

Nepali parties rule out talks with king

Courts free 17 more leaders

REUTERS, AFP, Kathamndu

Nepal's key opposition parties yesterday ruled out talks with King Gyanendra and vowed to intensify protests to press him to restore democracy in the troubled Himalayan nation.

The reaction came a day after Gyanendra made his first formal offer to the estranged parties to join talks on reinstating the democratic institutions the king suspended on Feb. 1, 2005, when he seized power and jailed leading politicians.

"He is on his own road map and has not changed his position since (last) February 1," said Arjun Narsingh K.C., a senior leader of the biggest political party, Nepali Congress.

"There is no possibility of any talks with the king now," he said.

Gyanendra also urged anti-monarchy Maoist rebels to shun violence but did not offer talks with them.

"He has not addressed the current political challenge or other burning issues including the Maoist problem," K.C. said.

In November, the Maoists, who

want to set up a communist state, and the seven main political parties sidelined by Gyanendra, formed a loose alliance to restore democracy and end the king's absolute powers.

Communist Party of Nepal-UML, the second biggest political group, said the king only hoped to minimise international and popular pressure to restore democracy by offering talks.

"We don't think he is sincere," senior party leader Amrit Kumar Bohara said.

"Therefore, we feel stronger popular protests are needed and we will organise more of them," he said.

The Maoists have called for a blockade of Kathmandu and other towns next month, and an indefinite general strike from April 3 to intensify their campaign against the king.

Bohara asked the king to return to the pre-October 2002 position when he first used emergency powers to sack a democratically elected government. In February 2005, Gyanendra assumed full powers as chairman of a council of ministers.

He has justified his action as

necessary to quell the Maoist revolt in which more than 13,000 people have died. But there has been no let up to violence.

Diplomats worry the revolt could slip out of control and that desperately poor Nepal, tucked between India and China, could become a haven for international terrorist groups or drugs trafficking.

The United States and Europe want to avoid a Maoist takeover.

Meanwhile, Nepal's courts Monday ordered the release of 17 political leaders rounded up in a recent royal crackdown in the troubled Himalayan nation.

Ten were released by Kathmandu's District Court and seven were freed by the Supreme Court. They were brought to the courts after writs questioning the legality of the detentions were filed on their behalf.

Beginning on January 20, Nepal's royal government rounded up hundreds of political activists and leaders ahead of local elections earlier this month, saying the move was necessary to prevent protests that could turn violent.

Laden vows never to be captured alive

AP, Cairo

Osama bin Laden vowed never to be captured alive and said the US military had become as "barbaric" as Saddam Hussein in an audiotape reposted on a militant Islamic Web site after first being broadcast last month.

In the tape posted to the Web site Monday, bin Laden offered the United States a long-term truce but also said his al-Qaeda terror network would soon launch a fresh attack on American soil. The tape was initially broadcast Jan. 19 on Al-Jazeera, the pan-Arab satellite channel.

Islamic militant Web forums often repost messages from al-Qaeda leaders to ensure sympathizers can see them. US intelligence officials confirmed that last month's tape was of bin Laden making it his first message in more than a year.

"I have sworn to only live free. Even if I find bitter the taste of death, I don't want to die humiliated or deceived," bin Laden said, in the 11-minute, 26-second tape.

In drawing the comparison to American military behaviour in Iraq to that of Saddam, he said:

"The jihad (holy war) is ongoing, thank God, despite all the oppressive measures adopted by the US Army and its agents (which has reached) a point where there is no difference between this criminality and Saddam's criminality."



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese President Hu Jintao (L) and his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf (R) inspect an honour guard in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Musharraf told China's leaders here that terrorists in his country were trying to hurt bilateral relations following last week's murders of three Chinese engineers.

MUSHARRAF SAYS Pakistan committed to strong ties with China

REUTERS, Beijing

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf yesterday expressed his nation's regret over the murder of three Chinese engineers in Pakistan and said his country was committed to strong relations with Beijing.

The Feb. 15 attack west of Karachi was by a handful of terrorists who "do not want Pakistan to develop and also do not want Pakistan and China relations to develop", Musharraf said.

He told Wu Bangguo, the chairman of China's National People's Congress, of his "nation's regret and condolences over this very sad incident".

The killings have cast a pall over the five-day state visit, which began on Sunday. But Musharraf is eager to extend economic and strategic links with Beijing when India's growing ties with China have created uncertainty, analysts said.

China has repeatedly stressed its swiftly developing trade and political links with India, with which China fought a brief border war in 1962, do not come at the expense of Pakistan, its traditional partner in the region.

But the growing rapport between Beijing and New Delhi had stirred Islamabad to seek more assurance from Beijing, said Zhang Li, an expert on China-South Asian relations at Sichuan University in Western China.

"We shouldn't avoid the fact that Pakistan has some misgivings about China's strategy in South Asia, and we need to strengthen mutual confidence," he said.

Chinese officials will present Musharraf those assurances through a series of agreements covering telecommunications, health, education and energy.

Pakistan and China aim to lift trade between them to \$8 billion by 2008, and are also discussing a free trade agreement. Trade between the two countries rose to \$4.25 billion in 2005 from \$3.06 billion a year earlier.

"China's broad strategic objective is to develop friendly, multi-dimensional ties with all countries in South Asia," said John Garver, an expert on China's role in the region at the US-based Georgia Institute of Technology.

"Beijing doesn't want to have to choose sides."

Hurriyat rejects talks

REUTERS, AFP, Jammu/ Srinagar

Kashmir's main separatist alliance yesterday rejected an invitation by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to attend a conference to boost a peace process in the restive Himalayan region.

The conference, scheduled for Saturday, has been called by New Delhi to widen the dialogue in Jammu and Kashmir where a revolt against Indian rule by Islamist militants has killed more than 45,000 people since 1989.

Singh has called minority Hindu groups in the region, pro-India political parties as well as separatist groups for the peace conference but has not invited nuclear rival Pakistan with which New Delhi has a separate peace process.

The All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), a conglomerate of separatist political groups, said it will not attend as New Delhi had not taken measures in Kashmir to ease the ground situation for Kashmiris that would have built trust ahead of dialogue.

"The Hurriyat has decided not to participate in the conference as it opines that it would harm the peace process rather than benefit it," Hurriyat chief Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said in a statement from Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir.

The alliance also said Singh had not invited Pakistan to the conference. It said it wanted Islamabad to be part of three-way talks between New Delhi, Islamabad and the alliance over the region, which is the cause of two of three India-Pakistan wars.

Blast rocks Philippine palace grounds

AFP, Manila

A loud explosion rocked the grounds of the Philippine presidential palace yesterday, causing no casualties or damage, as a group of self-proclaimed military rebels vowed an "explosive protest" against President Gloria Arroyo.

The cause of the palace blast was not immediately known, but Arroyo's chief of staff Michael Defensor blamed unidentified anti-government elements waging "scare tactics" against the state.

A second explosive device went off on a street in Manila's financial district of Makati, wounding a boy.

GOVT FORMATION Hamas opens talks with militants

REUTERS, Gaza

The Islamist group Hamas opened formal talks in Gaza yesterday with other militant factions in a bid to form a new Palestinian government by early next month.

Election winner Hamas said its goal was to establish as broad a coalition as possible as it faced a cut off in vital tax funds from Israel and a threatened boycott by major powers if it refused to renounce violence and recognise the Jewish state.

With an Israeli helicopter gunship circling overhead, a Hamas

delegation huddled with leaders of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a group involved in a more than 5-year-old Palestinian uprising.

Talks were also scheduled with the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and Islamic Jihad, a group responsible for several recent suicide bombings in Israel.

Hamas planned to meet later on Monday with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whose long-dominant Fatah faction was trounced by Hamas in the January 25 parliamentary election.

Hope of survivor miracle dashed

REUTERS, Guinsaungon

Hopes were raised and then dashed yesterday that 50 survivors had been pulled from a Philippine school three days after they had been buried in a landslide that has obliterated their village.

"We have yet to recover any survivor," Captain Burrell Parmer, a spokesman for US Marines taking part in the desperate rescue operation, told the ABS-CBN television channel.

Parmer contradicted an earlier report from a Philippine government official who told ABS-CBN that US forces had unearthed about 50 people from the rubble at a school in Guinsaungon, a remote farming community about 675km southeast of Manila with a population of about 1,800.

Friday's devastating landslide, triggered by two weeks of heavy rain, obliterated the village.

But rescuers, including US Marines dispatched from annual Philippine military exercises, focused efforts on the packed elementary school after unconfirmed reports that some of the 253 people trapped inside had sent desperate text messages on Friday.

So far, 84 bodies have been recovered from the village. Relatives have reported 1,371 villagers still missing.

Rescue workers, including teams from Taiwan and Malaysia, are battling deep, shifting mud and driving rain and have been told to tread softly for fear of drowning in the soupy earth.

MOSCOW MEET ON NUKE ROW Iranian officials talk compromise plan

AFP, Moscow/ Brussels

Iranian officials arrived in Moscow yesterday for talks on a Russian-authored plan for resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis, but the chief Iranian delegate rejected any link with Western demands for Tehran to halt enrichment work.

Under the Russian proposal, the two countries would set up a joint enterprise that would carry out uranium enrichment work on Iran's behalf on Russian soil.

Russia hopes that by providing fuel for Iran's nuclear energy programme, the proposal would remove the need for Tehran to enrich uranium on its own territory and allay Western concerns that Iran is really trying to develop nuclear weapons.

"We intend to insistently call on our Iranian colleagues to return to a moratorium in the nuclear sphere," the ITAR-TASS news agency quoted a senior Russian foreign ministry official as saying ahead of Monday's close-door talks. "This will reduce tensions concerning the Iranian nuclear issue."

But upon his arrival here, the chief Iranian delegate, national security official Ali Hosseini-Tash, rejected any link "between a moratorium on uranium enrichment and talks on the Russian proposal," ITAR-TASS said.

The Russian proposal has been seen as a last chance for Tehran to avoid being hauled before the UN Security Council for possible punitive action such as the imposition of sanctions.

Last month Tehran removed seals at three nuclear facilities, including a uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, and signalled its intention to resume nuclear work.

Iran has already been reported to the Security Council for its nuclear activities, and the head of the UN nuclear watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency is due to file a report by March 6 that will be crucial in determining whether the world body takes action.

On Monday, Russian newspapers echoed doubts as to the chances of a breakthrough at the Moscow talks and voiced growing fears here that the United States might resort to force against Iran.

The crisis "risks becoming a global one, in the event that the United States and its allies make massive air strikes on secret Iranian nuclear installations," the Gazeta opposition newspaper wrote.



PHOTO: AFP

French President Jacques Chirac (R) addresses the press yesterday as his wife Bernadette (C) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) look on during an official welcoming ceremony in New Delhi.

India, France ink nuke coop declaration

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Giving a new dimension to bilateral ties, India and France yesterday inked a landmark document on civilian nuclear cooperation and a defence pact.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared New Delhi would place its nuclear facilities acquired in "future" through international cooperation under IAEA safeguards.

After extensive talks here, Singh and French President Jacques Chirac described the inking of the Declaration on Development of Nuclear Energy for Peaceful Purposes as an "important step forward" towards realisation of the objective of the two countries to conclude a bilateral agreement in this area.

France relies on nuclear power for 75 percent of its energy needs while India, having one of the

fastest growing economies, is looking to newer sources of energy.

The two countries "agreed to continue to work together towards the fulfilment of that objective," a joint statement issued after the talks said, while recalling the statement of September 12 last year in this regard.

Addressing a joint press conference with Chirac, Singh said India was committed to honouring in "letter and spirit" the Indo-US joint statement issued after his talks with President George W Bush in Washington on July 18 last year when the two sides signed the landmark civilian nuclear deal.

India and France signed an agreement on defence cooperation in various areas including procurement, production and research and development of defence materials.

Seven other pacts in the field of space, commerce, education, tourism, environment, culture and civil aviation were also signed.

US warns against sectarian Iraq govt

GI, 23 Iraqis killed in violence

AP, Baghdad

The US ambassador to Iraq warned Iraqi politicians Monday they risk a loss of American support if they do not establish a genuine national unity government, saying the United States will not invest its resources in institutions run by sectarians.

Meanwhile, at least 24 people, including an American soldier, were killed by bombings in Baghdad and elsewhere. Two Macedonian contractors were freed by kidnappers four days after they were abducted in Basra, a British official said without giving further details.

US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad delivered his blunt warning during a rare press conference after signs that talks on a new government following the December elections were not going well because of sharp differences among the country's Shia, Sunni Arab and Kurdish political parties.

Failure to establish a unity government that includes a strong role for Sunni Arabs would fail to undermine the Sunni-dominated insurgency and throw into question US plans for a phased withdrawal of the 138,000 American troops here.

Khalilzad said that overcoming the sectarian and ethnic divide

requires a government of national unity, which is "the difference between what exists now and the next government." The outgoing government is dominated by Shias and Kurds.

Khalilzad told the Shias that the key security Defense and Interior ministries must be in the hands of people "who are nonsectarian, broadly acceptable and who are not tied to militias."

The ambassador reminded the Iraqis that the United States has spent billions to build up Iraq's police and army and "we are not going to invest the resources of the American people and build forces that are run by people who are sectarian."

Sunni Arabs accuse the Shia-led Interior Ministry of human rights abuses and using Shia militias against Sunni civilians under the cover of fighting the insurgency. Shias deny the charge and say they must control security forces to protect Shias against attacks by Sunni religious extremists.

Khalilzad cited the need for compromise, especially in the Defense and Interior ministries. He said ministers in those posts must be those "who are nonsectarian, broadly accepted and who are not tied to militias."