

## Nepali Maoists clash with troops: 29 die

AP, Kathmandu

The bodies of 11 Nepalese security forces and 18 suspected rebels were found Wednesday at the site of a fierce firefight in western Nepal, the Defence Ministry said, while five insurgents were reported killed in a bomb explosion.

Security forces found the bodies a day after a gunbattle in Panena village in the Palpa district, which broke out when soldiers patrolling the area came under attack from Maoist rebels who surrounded them on a gorge.

Army helicopters reached the site two hours after the gunbattle began Tuesday and started bombing the rebel positions, forcing them to flee into the jungles.

The army was searching the jungles but the mountainous terrain was making it difficult to find the rebels.

Palpa, about 155 miles west of the capital, Kathmandu, and nearby Nawalparasi districts have been

centre of rebel attacks since they pulled out of a cease-fire in January. Among those killed were 18 rebels, 10 army soldiers and a policeman.

Five suspected communist rebels were killed earlier Tuesday, apparently when they accidentally triggered a homemade bomb in Mangalsen, about 375 miles west of the capital.

Police official Bhopendra Timilsina said Wednesday the cause of the blast was being investigated in Mangalsen, where a dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed a few weeks ago because of increased rebel violence.

The guerrillas have a strong presence in the area and control much of the remote portions of western Nepal.

Elsewhere, the Defence Ministry said two local rebel commanders identified as Bibash Kumar Bajhang and Surya Bahadur Saun were killed in gunbattle Wednesday at Darchula, about 435 miles north-east of Katmandu.

BUSH SAYS

## Nepal's king should restore democracy

Myanmar asked to free Suu Kyi

AFP, New Delhi

The king of Nepal should restore democracy to the kingdom where he took absolute power in a royal coup just over a year ago, US President George W. Bush said yesterday.

Speaking at a joint press conference with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Bush declared: "On Nepal we agreed that the Maoists should abandon violence and that the king should reach out to the political parties to restore democratic institutions."

Some 12,500 people have died since the Maoists launched an

uprising just over a decade ago.

Nepal's King Gyanendra sacked his government and took direct control of the impoverished Himalayan nation in February 2005 saying the politicians had failed to tackle the Maoists and was corrupt.

The United States and India yesterday strongly criticised human rights violations in military-ruled Myanmar and called for the release of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

"On Burma we agreed on the deplorable state of human rights in Burma and all nations should seek the release of Aung San Suu Kyi,"

US President George W. Bush told a joint press conference with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Aung San Suu Kyi has either been in jail or under house arrest for more than 10 of the past 16 years in Myanmar, which was formerly known as Burma.

She has had virtually no contact with the outside world since her last detention period began in May 2003. Her house arrest was last extended by six months in December.

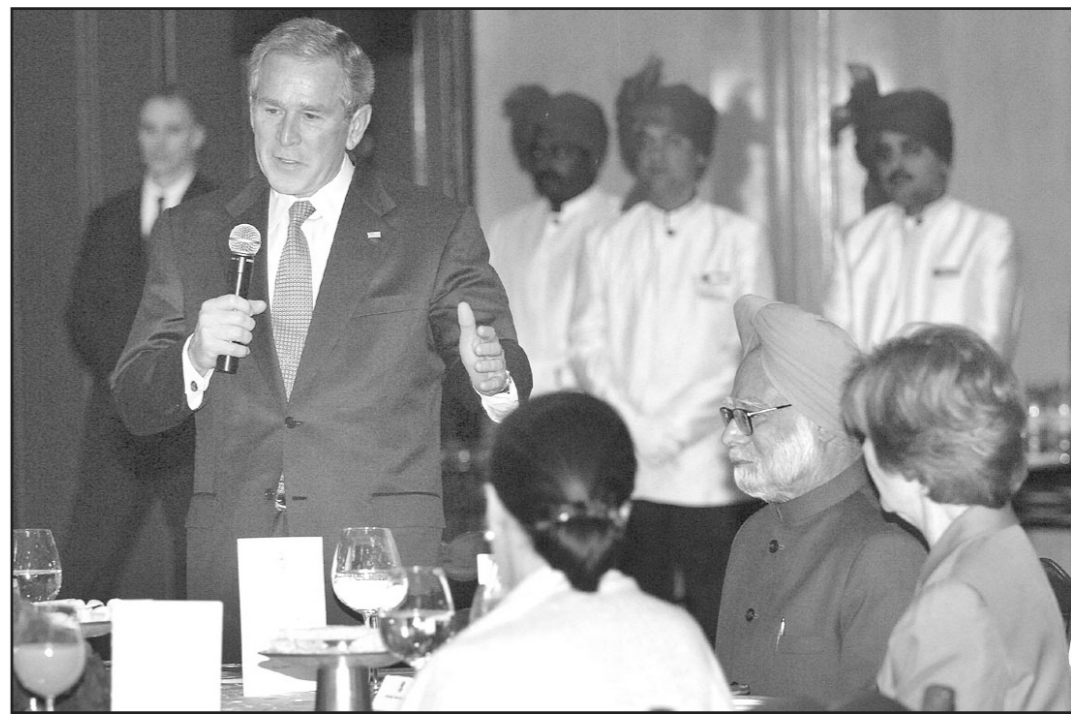


PHOTO: AFP  
US President George W. Bush (L) speaks as Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2R), US First Lady Laura Bush (R) and chairperson of India's ruling United Progressive Alliance Sonia Gandhi (back to camera) listen yesterday during a lunch at the Taj Palace Hotel in New Delhi. Bush and Singh sealed a nuclear deal seen as the bedrock of a new strategic partnership, with both hailing the pact as historic.

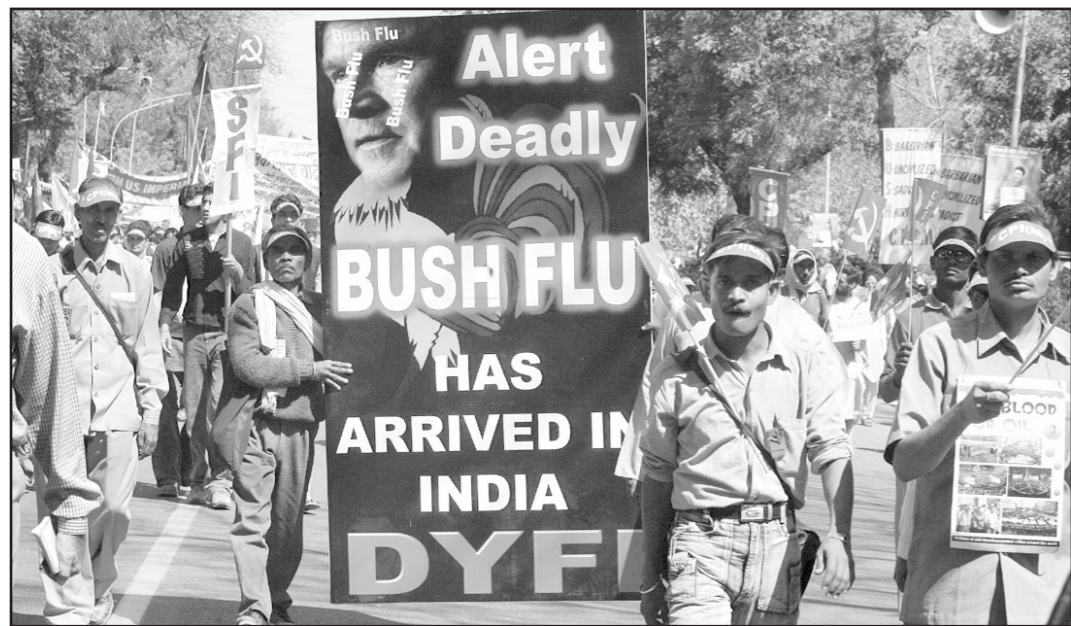


PHOTO: AFP  
Indian Communist Party of India (CPI) activists hold placards and banners during an anti-Bush protest in New Delhi yesterday. Bush is on a three-day visit to India as the United States and India sealed a civilian nuclear deal.

## Thousands protest Bush's visit to India

AFP, New Delhi

Tens of thousands of angry protesters took to the streets in major centres across India yesterday to demand that visiting US President George W. Bush go home, witnesses said.

Most of the demonstrations and protest marches passed off peacefully but in Indian Kashmir nine people were injured when police waded with batons into protesters on the outskirts of the summer capital Srinagar, police said.

The baton charge came after some of around 4,000 protesters, mostly Shiite Muslims, hurled stones and bricks at police and security vehicles, a police officer said.

Demonstrators were trying to reach a small United Nations office to present a memorandum denouncing Bush's visit to India.

In the Indian capital, some 15,000 communist supporters and unionists aligned with India's ruling Congress shouted "Killer Bush, go back!" as the US leader was signing an historic nuclear deal with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh a few kilometres away.

Over a thousand policemen including paramilitary troops and armed commandos, kept a watchful eye as protesters marched from the city centre towards parliament. They blocked them from reaching the building.

## Iran, EU plan last-minute talks on nuclear crisis

REUTERS, Moscow

Iran and the European Union announced yesterday last-minute talks in the crisis over Tehran's nuclear program but neither side appeared to have new proposals to put forward to find a way out of the impasse.

First word of the talks came from Iran's nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani in Moscow who said Tehran would meet the European Union troika of Britain, Germany and France before a crunch UN nuclear watchdog meeting on March 6.

The talks were subsequently confirmed by Britain which said the EU3 planned ministerial-level talks with Iran's Larijani in Vienna on

Friday.

But a source in Britain said the EU troika had no new proposals to put forward and Larijani in Moscow failed to make any mention of the crucial point - whether Tehran would bow to Western calls for it to stop uranium enrichment at home.

The West, led by the United States, suspects the Islamic Republic is covertly seeking to build an atomic weapon. Iran denies this, saying it is pursuing nuclear programs purely for civilian use.

"Iran requested the meeting, we will listen to what Iran has to say but we have no new proposals," a spokesman for Britain's Foreign Office said.

"Our talks with the EU3 are being

held for us to say we are in favour of holding constructive negotiations," Larijani said.

Iran's refusal to re-suspend uranium enrichment activity has raised the prospect of action by the UN Security Council, to which the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency reported Iran on Feb 4.

An IAEA board meeting in Vienna on March 6 will weigh a report by the IAEA chief saying Iran is accelerating a nuclear fuel-enrichment drive despite concern abroad it is secretly seeking atom bombs.

## 'Signs of al-Qaeda in Gaza, West Bank'

Russia can rectify US 'errors' in ME: Hamas

REUTERS, AFP, Cairo

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said in remarks published yesterday there were signs of an al-Qaeda presence in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

"We have indications about a presence of al-Qaeda in Gaza and the (West) Bank. This is intelligence information. We have not yet reached the point of arrests," Abbas said.

"The last security report I received was three days ago," he told the London-based al-Hayat newspaper. "This is the first time that I've spoken about this subject. This is a very serious matter."

Israeli officials said they were worried that foreign militants and al-Qaeda agents entered Gaza from Egypt during a brief period of chaos on the border following the Israeli

withdrawal from Gaza last year.

The Palestinian Authority said that was untrue.

Islamic militant group Hamas swept Palestinian elections in January. But unlike militant groups such as al-Qaeda, Hamas emphasizes that its fight is only with Israel.

Meanwhile, Russia is in a position to rectify "errors" of US policy in the Middle East and advance a more balanced approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a senior member of the radical Palestinian group Hamas said yesterday.

The Palestinian ambassador to Moscow meanwhile evoked the possibility that Hamas could modify its stance against Israel, ITAR-TASS news agency reported.

Russia "can fill the void created because of errors in the policy of the United States in the Middle East," Mousa Abu Marzook, Hamas's

deputy chief, said in an interview with the RIANovosti news agency.

"Russia can present to the world a more fair and transparent vision of the Palestinian problem, as opposed to those whose positions are based only on the interests of Israel," Marzook said.

A Hamas delegation led by the organization's leader, Khaled Meshaal, was scheduled to travel to Moscow on Friday for a two-day visit that was to include talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Hamas is classified as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union, but not by Russia. All three however, along with the United Nations, are members of the Middle East "quartet" trying to mediate a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## EX-UN HR CHIEF SAYS HR abuses, killings widespread in Iraq

AP, Sydney

Human rights abuses in Iraq are as bad now as they were under Saddam Hussein, as lawlessness and sectarian violence sweep the country, the former UN human rights chief in Iraq said yesterday.

John Pace, who last month left his post as director of the human rights office at the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, said the level of extra-judicial executions and torture is soaring, and morgue workers are being threatened by both government-backed militia and insurgents not to properly investigate deaths.

"Under Saddam, if you agreed to forgo your basic right to freedom of expression and thought, you were physically more or less OK," Pace said in an interview with The Associated Press. "But now, no. Here, you have a primitive, chaotic situation where anybody can do anything they want to anyone."

Pace, who was born in Malta but now resides in Australia, said that

while the scale of atrocity under Saddam was "daunting," now nobody is safe from abuse.

"It is certainly as bad," he said. "It extends over a much wider section of the population than it did under Saddam."

Pace, currently a visiting fellow at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, spoke as sectarian tensions in Iraq push the country to the brink of civil war.

There has been a surge in religious violence in Iraq since the Feb. 22 bombing of a Shia shrine in the mainly Sunni city of Samarra, 60 miles north of Baghdad, and a spate of reprisal attacks against Sunnis.

The situation has been made worse by extremist Shia militia operating within the ranks of the Interior Ministry, said Pace, who singled out the Badr Brigade, which makes up a large chunk of the Iraqi security services and military.



PHOTO: AFP  
A Pakistani paramilitary soldier rushes to a bomb blast site after a car exploded outside a five star hotel near the American consulate in Karachi yesterday. A suicide car bomber rammed into a diplomatic vehicle outside the US consulate in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi, killing an American diplomat and four other people.