

'Dharma Army' keeps up vigil against Thai PM

REUTERS, Bangkok

Monks of the "Dharma Army" chanted prayers on Monday to greet what leaders of a campaign against Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra say is the start of round-the-clock protests to force him to quit.

But Thaksin repeated that his resignation would mean bowing to a small group of people, not the great majority who voted him into power, and he would not do it.

"You can't tell me to quit before you call off the rally, otherwise my resignation would mean the people's power in democracy means nothing," Thaksin told reporters in the northeastern province of Khon Kaen.

He was there campaigning for the April 2 snap election he called in a counter-attack against a campaign to oust him which took off after his relatives sold the business empire Thaksin founded for a tax-free \$1.9 billion in January.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators hold banners while protesting against Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra at Saman Luang in Bangkok yesterday. Embattled Thai premier urged his rivals to agree to a compromise to end the nation's political turmoil as protesters called for civil disobedience to oust him.

Nepali Maoists raid jail, free prisoners

8 killed in town attack

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Hundreds of Maoist rebels raided a town in eastern Nepal, bombing government buildings and freeing dozens of prisoners from a local jail, officials said yesterday.

At least eight people -- three Maoists, two civilians, two police officers and a soldier -- were killed in the overnight attack in Ilam, a tea-growing area bordering India, about 600km east of Kathmandu, they said.

The guerrillas, who specialise in hit-and-run attacks, drove into Ilam in buses and trucks, attacking government buildings and shooting at security posts, residents said.

"The Maoists also stormed the local jail and freed more than 100 prisoners including some Maoists," a police officer said.

He said the rebels, who are fighting to overthrow Nepal's constitutional monarchy, bombed or set fire to the district administration office building, the revenue office and the local municipal council office.

"We spent the night in terror," Ilam housewife Kamala Bhattarai told Reuters. "We could hear gun shots and explosions for several hours."

More than a dozen security troops were wounded in the fighting.

The rebels also set ablaze the home of the mayor who was elected in last month's municipal elections opposed by the Maoists, journalist Rohit Chandra Bhattarai said.

He said the fighting continued until dawn when an army helicopter was seen and the rebels sped away in buses. "Many buildings in Ilam are

burned out and riddled with bullet holes," said another resident.

The Maoists, fighting since 1996 for a communist state, have stepped up attacks since they ended their unilateral truce in January after the royalist government failed to reciprocate.

Nepal's seven main political parties on Monday appealed to the Maoists to call off plans for a blockade of Kathmandu next week and a nationwide strike later, saying it would hurt ordinary people.

The political parties, who have struck a loose alliance with the Maoists after King Gyanendra seized power last year, said they would start a new round of protests in April in their campaign for restoration of democracy.

The Maoists have threatened an indefinite blockade of the hill-ringed

capital from March 14 and a general strike next month to increase the pressure on the king.

In November mainstream opposition parties formed a loose alliance with the rebels, which still holds despite the return to violence.

Independent local media reported Monday that two leaders from one of the mainstream parties, the Nepal Communist Party (United Marxist Leninist), had gone to New Delhi to hold talks with Maoist leaders living in exile.

More than 13,000 people have been killed in the revolt that has shattered Nepal's aid dependent economy, one of the world's 10 poorest.

120 militants killed in 3-day Pak battle

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistani forces using helicopter gunships yesterday tackled sporadic resistance by militants after three days of clashes in a remote tribal town left nearly 120 rebels dead, the military said.

The army imposed a curfew in Miranshah, the main town in the semi-autonomous North Waziristan tribal region bordering Afghanistan, after seizing control of the bazaar and key government buildings, provincial authorities said.

Residents said more than 1,000

terrified families clutching belongings had fled the area following the fierce rocket and artillery clashes.

They were the most violent in the tribal belt since the fundamentalist Taliban regime in neighbouring Afghanistan fell in late 2001 and many fighters fled across the border.

"According to latest information, the death toll in March 4 (Saturday) fighting has gone up to 100. This is in addition to the 19 killed this morning in Miranshah," military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan toldAFP.

Sultan had earlier said 19 mili-

itants, including some foreigners, died on Monday when troops tried to take control of a telephone exchange in Miranshah.

Five paramilitary soldiers were also killed on Saturday, he said. "We are establishing the government's writ," he said.

The fighting erupted on Saturday when hundreds of tribal rebels seized government buildings in revenge for an army raid three days earlier targeting an Al-Qaeda training camp. That raid was said to have killed 40 militants, including foreigners.

India seeks uranium from Australia

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Hot on the heels of signing a landmark civilian nuclear deal with the United States, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday sought uranium from Australia ahead of talks with the visiting Aussie counterpart John Howard.

"We want to trade with Australia in all areas. We are short of uranium. We would like Australia to sell uranium to India," Singh told reporters after a ceremonial reception for Howard, who arrived here Sunday evening, at the Presidential Palace here.

Replying to a question, Howard said he would discuss with Singh the issue of uranium sale to India keeping in mind the needs and policies of India and Australia.

"I think I will discuss the issue keeping in mind policies and needs of our two countries," he said.

Australia has an estimated 40 percent of the world's uranium reserves but does not sell uranium to countries, which are not signatories to Nuclear Non-Proliferation

Treaty. The country is reportedly planning to sell uranium to China.

Australia is among the countries, which had reacted sharply to India's testing of nuclear capable missiles in May 1998.

Trade and economic cooperation will be high on the agenda of Howard's talks with Singh. Leading industry body Assocham estimates that bilateral trade would go up from 7.5 billion dollars to 16 billion dollars by 2010.

While India's imports from Australia are worth six billion dollars, its exports account for just 1.5 billion dollars.

India's main imports include gold, coal, diamond, copper ores and wool and its exports comprise mainly of garments, cotton fabric, gems and jewellery and machinery and instruments.

Australian coal worth 1.2 billion dollar is used for production of more than 50 percent of steel in India and Indian power companies are more keen on importing coal from Australia because of its high quality devoid of ash.



PHOTO: AFP

Australian Prime Minister John Howard (R) is greeted by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during an official welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace in New Delhi yesterday. Howard is on a four-day visit to India to boost trade and deepen strategic relationship between the two countries.

Ex-Croatian Serb leader commits suicide in UN custody

AFP, Zagreb

Convicted war criminal Milan Babic has committed a suicide in a cell of the UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague, where he was serving a 13-year sentence, the court's office in Zagreb said yesterday.

Babic, the wartime leader of Croatian Serbs, was jailed in 2004 for crimes against humanity committed during Croatia's 1991-1995 war.

"On Sunday March 5, Milan Babic ... was found dead in his cell at the United Nations detention unit in Scheveningen," the UN tribunal said in a statement obtained by AFP.

"The Dutch authorities were called immediately. After conducting an investigation, they confirmed that the cause of death was suicide," the statement said.

Marxists call for taking tougher line on Tigers

AFP, Colombo

A key ally of Sri Lanka's government urged it yesterday to take a tougher stance against Tamil rebels and to beef up training for the country's security forces to deter the Tigers from going back to war.

"The government of Sri Lanka should speak softly and carry a big stick, which will greatly negate the LTTE threat of a return to hostilities," the Marxist JVP said after a routine meeting of political parties with President Mahinda Rajapakse to discuss the island's peace process.

The JVP, or People's Liberation

Front, whose support is crucial for the survival of Rajapakse's minority government, said in a statement it opposed Colombo making concessions to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) during talks in Switzerland last month.

After a break of nearly three years, the government and the Tigers opened talks at Celigny near Geneva. The next round is scheduled for April 19 at a venue in Switzerland still to be decided.

At the talks, the government initially insisted on rewriting the February 2002 truce arranged by peace broker Norway. After the

Tigers resisted the move, Colombo backed down and agreed to uphold the existing ceasefire.

"We firmly believe that it is better to walk away from the negotiating table without any progress being made, rather than agree to any conditions that would be detrimental to the sovereignty of Sri Lanka," the JVP said.

The government, it added, "should ramp up its strengthening and training of the armed forces so that the LTTE will realise that going back to war is not an option for them."

US-India nuke deal may hurt N Korea talks

AP, Seoul

A US deal offering India help with its civilian nuclear programme could further stymie arms talks with North Korea and push China to step up its own atomic dealmaking in the region, experts say.

President Bush signed an agreement with New Delhi last week to share nuclear know-how and fuel providing India allow international inspections of its nuclear reactors.

The agreement marks a shift in policy for the United States, which imposed temporary sanctions on India in 1998 after it conducted nuclear tests.

However the deal requires US Congress approval, which may be difficult because India hasn't signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

China typically sees India as a strategic rival and is likely to step up its influence to try and block the deal, said Mohan Malik, professor at the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies in Honolulu. Beijing has already offered nuclear technology to Bangladesh, and Myanmar has expressed interest in atomic energy.

"China could step up proliferation of nuclear technologies in India's neighbourhood to counter-vail India-US ties," Malik said.

China's Foreign Ministry criticized the plan last week, saying any international nuclear cooperation "must meet the requirements and provisions of the nuclear nonproliferation regime and the obligations undertaken by all countries concerned."

Iraqi parliament finally to meet on Mar 12

13 people killed in attacks

AFP, Baghdad

President Jalal Talabani yesterday announced Iraq's first permanent post-Saddam Hussein parliament would convene on March 12, ending three months of waiting after general elections.

The announcement came as rebels killed at least 13 people across the strife-torn country and Kurds and Sunnis kept up the pressure on Shia Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari not to stand in the next government.

"I'll be summoning today the leaders of parliamentary factions to

inform them of the inaugural meeting of parliament to be held on March 12," Talabani said after meeting the new premier of the northern Kurdish region Nichirvan Barzani.

The opening of parliament has been delayed by bickering over the formation of the government with Kurdish and Sunni parties demanding that the leading Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) ditch outgoing Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari and nominate another candidate to form the coalition cabinet.

"We want all parliamentary groups to back the next prime

minister because we need a government of national unity," said Talabani, a Kurd.

He made fun of newspapers, which described Jaafari being the chosen candidate of "the man in the street".

"But which street?" he asked. "The streets of Sulaimaniyah (Kurds), of Amara (Shia), Kirkuk (mixed) or Ramadi (Sunni) because there are many streets in Iraq."

"My position is clear -- I repeat there must be consensus agreement on the names of the head of state, prime minister and parliamentary speaker."