

Nepal grinds to a halt as Maoist blockade bites

Pro-democracy leaders, rebels meet in Delhi

REUTERS, AFP, Khatri Pouwa

Soldiers carrying automatic rifles patrolled key highways in Nepal yesterday but normally busy roads were all but deserted as an indefinite blockade of the capital by Maoist rebels began.

Piling pressure on King Gyanendra, who seized power last year, the rebels are attempting to cut hill-ringed Kathmandu off from the rest of the country, a move criticised by political parties who have said it will only hurt ordinary Nepalis.

"We patrol the roads and escort the trickle of vehicles that are running," said a soldier in battle dress in the roadside village of Khatri Pouwa 30 km west of Kathmandu.

"There would be a stream of vehicles on other days," he said. "As you can see the road is almost

empty now."

As he spoke three girls played on the highway that snakes through rolling hills towards Kathmandu.

The Maoists, fighting to overthrow the Hindu monarchy and set up a single party communist republic, have ordered the closure of all roads to the capital, disrupting the movement of people and goods to the city of more than 1.5 million.

In the past, rebels have largely relied on fear and intimidation to enforce their blockades but have also set up roadblocks and attacked vehicles.

"I have to go to Narayanghat but don't know whether I will get any bus at all," said 55-year-old Sesh Nath Bhattarai sitting desolately next to a backpack at an empty roadside bus stop. Narayanghat is a town in the southern plains.

Police said there were no reports of violence.

Analysts said the blockade was part of a Maoist strategy to take their fight to

the country's cities, which the rebels had vowed after ending a unilateral truce in January. The conflict has, so far, raged mostly in the countryside.

Meanwhile, leaders of Nepal's Maoist rebels and the opposition alliance were meeting in the Indian capital on Tuesday to work out a programme to end King Gyanendra's seizure of power, a report said.

The talks came as the rebels launched a week-long blockade of the kingdom's cities, leaving roads deserted nationwide and businesses closed in the capital.

The Maoists' second-in-command Baburam Bhattarai was holding talks with heads of the seven-party political alliance on how to restore democracy, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said.



PHOTO: AFP
Village boys walk on the highway at the Nagdhunga check post about 15 kilometres west of Kathmandu yesterday. Maoist rebels trying to overthrow the Nepalese monarchy have launched a week-long blockade of Kathmandu and other cities leaving roads deserted and businesses closed.

Bush extends Iran sanctions

REUTERS, Washington

President George W. Bush issued an executive order on Monday that continued US oil and other economic sanctions against Iran in effect since 1995, saying Tehran's policies posed a threat.

Bush, in a notice to Congress about his executive order, said "the crisis" between the United States and Iran that led to the initial declaration on March 15, 1995, "has not been resolved."

The United States is pushing for the UN Security Council to take a tough approach toward Iran to rein in its nuclear ambitions.

The Bush administration suspects Iran of using its nuclear programme to develop a bomb, but Iran denies that accusation and says its programme is for civilian purposes.

In his message to Congress on the continuation of bilateral sanctions, Bush said, "The actions and policies of the government of Iran are contrary to the interests of the United States in the region and pose a continuing unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States."



PHOTO: AFP
Israeli soldiers guard Palestinian prisoners as the Palestinian jail compound is stormed by Israeli troops in the West Bank town of Jericho yesterday, where the PFLP leader and his comrades are being held. Protests broke out across the West Bank and Gaza Strip following the Israeli raid killing a Palestinian prison guard.

Lankan talks in danger

Tigers, Colombo both lock in blame game

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers have said a second round of talks to avert a slide back to civil war are in grave danger unless the government makes good on a pledge to disarm groups they say the army is helping attack them.

Chief rebel negotiator Anton Balasingham, who is due to spearhead the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) delegation at talks in Geneva from April 19-21, said the group would review its decision to attend unless it sees disarmament.

In particular, the Tigers want the military to rein in a breakaway former top rebel commander named Karuna, who split with the Tigers in 2004 and has admitted responsibility for attacks on the mainstream group in the island's east.

"The Geneva talks will face grave danger if the Sri Lanka government refuses to disarm Tamil paramilitary organisations and continues allowing them to launch offensive military operations," Balasingham told pro-rebel Web site Tamilnet in comments posted on Monday.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's envoys agreed at a first round of talks in Geneva in February to ensure no groups other than the

state security forces carry arms in government territory. But military officials say they have had no new orders to actively hunt the groups down.

"The Rajapakse administration is turning a blind eye when Tamil paramilitaries -- the Karuna group -- launch attacks on our sentry posts with the active involvement of the Sri Lankan armed forces," Balasingham added.

Karuna, who lives in hiding and whose forces are estimated to number a few hundred men at most, refuses to disarm unless the Tigers do too and has threatened to attack the mainstream group if provoked.

Diplomats and analysts say the latest rounds of high-level talks, the first since 2003, are vital to prevent a repeat of attacks in December and January.

The violence threatened to up-end a 2002 ceasefire and plunge the island back into a two-decade war that has already killed more than 64,000 people.

"It is very important that both parties stick to what they said in Geneva," said one European diplomat. "It is important they both now... do as much as possible to create a favourable ambience."

Any good will mustered between

the foes at the February talks, when both sides pledged to uphold the truce, lasted just a few days before each side started accusing the other of killings and abductions.

However, violence has fallen sharply since late January, enabling minority Tamil residents in the rebel-dominated north to return to their daily lives.

On the other hand, Sri Lanka yesterday accused Tamil Tiger rebels of conscripting more child soldiers, heightening uncertainty over peace talks scheduled for next month.

The defence ministry accused the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of abducting two schoolboys in the restive eastern district of Batticaloa on Monday despite pledges to end the internationally condemned practice.

"Despite all assurances given by the LTTE, their abduction and conscription spree continues," a ministry statement said, adding that Scandinavian truce monitors had been informed about the latest abductions.

Milosevic had been on trial before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in the conflicts in

and the internationally condemned practice.

"The final hearing in case at the war crimes tribunal in The Hague lasted just a few minutes.

Presiding judge Patrick Robinson said the court regretted Milosevic's "untimely passing" (which) deprived not only him but

indeed all the interested parties of a judgement upon the allegations in the indictment."

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"The rebels have melted into the jungles and we are now helping the terrified passengers, including, women and children vacate the area," police superintendent Subodh Kumar said.

"The situation is under control and the passengers are all safe. Around 7.00 a.m. (0130 GMT) today, the rebels ordered all the passengers out of the train. They later tried to set the engine on fire.

"Many women and children were crying, they must have been terrified

Iraqi cops find 85 bodies in 24 hrs

AP, Baghdad

Police in the past 24 hours have found the bodies of at least 85 people killed by execution-style shootings, a gruesome wave of apparent sectarian reprisal slayings, officials said yesterday.

The dead included at least 27 bodies stacked in a mass grave in an eastern Shia neighborhood of Baghdad.

The bloodshed the second wave of mass killings in Iraq since bombers destroyed an important Shia shrine last month followed weekend attacks in a teeming Shia slum in which 58 people died and more than 200 were wounded.

Iraq's Interior Ministry announced a ban on driving in the capital to coincide with the first meeting of the new parliament Thursday. The ban takes effect at 8 p.m. Wednesday and lasts until 4 p.m. Thursday.

Quibbling over the composition of a new government has delayed the inaugural session since the results of Dec. 15 elections were confirmed more than a month ago.

Leaders of Iraq's main ethnic and religious blocs, meanwhile, began a series of marathon meetings Tuesday to try to break the deadlock.

US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, who has been shuttling between the main factions, joined the session hosted by Shia leader Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim.

The stakes are high for Washington, which hopes a strong and inclusive central government can stabilize Iraq so US forces can start drawing down in the summer.

Most of the corpses were found in Baghdad, while three were found in the northern city of Mosul, police said.

Acting on an anonymous tip, police found a 6-by-8-yard hole in an empty field. It contained at least 27 dead men most of them in their underwear in Kamaliyah, a mostly Shia east Baghdad suburb, said Interior Ministry Lt. Col. Falah al-Mohammedawi. He estimated they had been dead for three days.

Under the pact, India will receive US nuclear technology in return for separating its military and civil facilities and opening the civilian plants to international inspections.

Hyde, a member of President

Congress may set terms on Indo-US nuclear deal

REUTERS, Washington

Congress may seek to put unspecified conditions on a landmark US-India nuclear-energy agreement despite Bush administration warnings that such moves could scuttle the deal, a key lawmaker said on Monday.

The disclosure by Rep. Henry Hyde (news, bio, voting record), chairman of the House of Representatives International Relations Committee, could pose more trouble for the controversial accord, which has come under sharp attack from lawmakers and others concerned about the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Under the pact, India will receive US nuclear technology in return for separating its military and civil facilities and opening the civilian plants to international inspections.

Hyde gave no further details. A committee spokesman said Hyde was protecting congressional prerogatives by raising the possibility of conditions but was not yet prepared to be more specific.

Thousands blockade Thai PM's office

AFP, Bangkok

Tens of thousands of protesters blocked Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's office yesterday to demand his step down, as military leaders sought to ease fears that they might intervene.

Some 70,000 students, union workers, teachers and activists marched from the royal palace to the gates of the Government House compound about two km south, as the cabinet held its weekly meeting.

"We will be here until Thaksin quits. If police want roads to return to normal, tell the prime minister to resign," said one of the protest leaders, Thaksin's former political mentor Chamlong Srimuang.

Thaksin was not at Government House during the demonstration, but held the cabinet meeting by video conference from the northeastern town of Ubon Ratchathani where he was campaigning ahead of April 2 snap elections.

Thaksin had threatened to declare a state of emergency in Bangkok if the protest turned violent, but later in the day military leaders said they would not support such a move.

"That would only hurt the country's image, and the army does not agree with the idea of emergency rule," army commander General Sonthi Boonyaratglin told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP
Thousands of protesters march towards Government House in Bangkok Monday. Tens of thousands of protesters surrounded Thaksin's office demanding his resignation as the premier threatened a state of emergency if the demo turned violent.

REBEL ATTACK ON INDIAN TRAIN Maoists set free 200 captive passengers

REUTERS, Ranchi

After holding 200 train passengers captive for more than 12 hours, Maoist rebels fled into the jungles of eastern India early yesterday.

About 70 guerrillas seized the train on Monday evening after a rebel on board pulled the emergency cord to stop the train in a remote and hilly area in Jharkhand, a mineral rich but largely lawless state, police said.

"The rebels have melted into the jungles and we are now helping the terrified passengers, including, women and children vacate the area," police superintendent Subodh Kumar said.

"The situation is under control and the passengers are all safe. Around 7.00 a.m. (0130 GMT) today, the rebels ordered all the passengers out of the train. They later tried to set the engine on fire.

"Many women and children were crying, they must have been terrified

after being held captive all night, but thankfully the ordeal is over."

He said the rebel leader had told passengers: "We don't have anything against you and therefore you are free to go. This battle is against the government."

The Maoists, who say they are fighting on behalf of the peasants, have become increasingly active in what is known as the "Red Corridor" stretching from Nepal in the north -- with its own Maoist revolt -- to the southern state of Andhra Pradesh.

Police estimate there are as many as 20,000 Maoists, known as Naxalites, named after the town of Naxalbari in West Bengal where the movement began in 1967. They have close links with the Nepali Maoists.

The rebels operate in 15 of India's 29 states and 1,000 people died in the conflict last year. In November, Maoists briefly took over a town in Bihar.

"Many women and children were crying, they must have been terrified

World unsafe without Pak help: Karzai

10 killed in new Afghan violence

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai yesterday demanded Pakistan's full cooperation in the fight against terrorism, saying that without the neighbouring country's help the world would never be safe.

Karzai's comments were the latest in a tit-for-tat exchange between the allies in the US-led "war on terror", in which Islamabad has rebuffed Kabul's intelligence about Taliban and al-Qaeda militants on Pakistani soil.

The Afghan leader said at a media conference with visiting Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper that the world must unite against militancy because "terrorism can affect any one, anytime and anywhere."

"Pakistan and Afghanistan are the central pieces in this war against terror and unless there is sincere, intense, systematic cooperation

from all sides, the world would not be safe," Karzai said.

"Therefore it is extremely important that our brothers in Pakistan join us in the most intense manner -- that is the need of the hour in the fight against terrorism," he said.

Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have worsened since Afghan officials handed the intelligence to Pakistan during a visit by Karzai last month.

Afghanistan, which says a deadly insurgency plaguing the country is being directed from across the border, has said the information included sightings in Pakistan of fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Omar.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf slammed Karzai in an interview with CNN this month, saying he was "oblivious" to events in his own country and blasting the intelligence as "nonsense".

WEN SAYS China, India will usher in 'new Asian century'

AFP, Beijing

China and India will usher in a "new Asian century," Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said yesterday, as he expressed hopes the world's two most populous countries would build on their improving relations.

"I have a belief, that is when China and India are truly strong enough to fully bring out their own spirit and style, then that will truly usher in a new Asian century," Wen said.

Wen played down concerns that China and India would become competitors when they became much stronger as they vied for foreign investment, energy and other scarce natural resources, as well as regional influence.

"I hope by then our two countries' fraternal and friendly relations will still be vibrant, and remain dear to