



PHOTO: AFP  
Nepalese students shout anti-king slogans and wave flags while standing near a burning tyre during a protest rally in Kathmandu yesterday. They demanded immediate restoration of democracy in the Himalayan Kingdom. The students are supporting an alliance of seven political parties who have called a four-day strike starting April 6, for the restoration of democracy.

## Maoist rebels announce truce in Kathmandu

### Cops fire tear gas shell to break up students' anti-king rally

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels announced an indefinite ceasefire in the capital and surrounding valley yesterday in response to a call by political parties, days before their nationwide strike, local media reported.

The ceasefire in the hill-ringed Kathmandu valley was aimed at "creating an easy atmosphere for the people to participate in the peaceful protest movement" against the king, Himalkhabar.com, an online news service, quoted Maoist chief Prachanda as saying. Nepal's seven main political parties have called a four-day nationwide gen-

eral strike from Thursday, to be followed by a series of protests and a big rally in Kathmandu on April 8, in a bid to pressure King Gyanendra to restore democracy.

The government has vowed to halt the protests, saying Maoist rebels could infiltrate rallies and create unrest.

The political parties feared that the government could use this as a reason to crack down on their demonstrations and had appealed to the guerrillas to announce a truce.

Prachanda's announcement came hours after Nepali police fired tear gas shells to break up protests by students in the capital against the

king, who seized power last year.

About three dozen students burned tyres on Kathmandu's roads and threw rocks at police in front of a college campus near the royal palace as they demonstrated against the king's rule, witnesses said.

"This is for the restoration of democracy," said activist Kamal Basnet, carrying a mobile phone in one hand and a brick in the other. "We don't want an autocratic monarchy."

Demonstrations have become an almost daily affair in Nepal's temple-studded capital, with hundreds and sometimes thousands of

people chanting slogans against the king.

King Gyanendra says he was forced to take power in February 2005 after political parties failed to quell a Maoist revolt in which more than 13,000 people have been killed since 1996.

The Maoists want to topple the monarchy and set up a single party communist republic in one of the world's 10 poorest countries, which is tucked between giants China and India.

## Norway's new envoy launches Lanka peace mission

AFP, Colombo

Norway's new peace envoy to Sri Lanka began work yesterday, discussing how to shore up a fragile ceasefire ahead of meetings with Tamil rebels and the government.

Jon Hanssen-Bauer, on his first visit to the island, went straight into meetings with experts from think-tanks and development organisations after his arrival. Norwegian embassy spokesman Tom Knappskog said.

During a four-day initial visit the envoy is scheduled to travel to the northern rebel-held town of Kilinochchi to discuss the outline of negotiations later this month between the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Switzerland.

## 23 die as storms batter 8 states in US Midwest

AP, Newbern

Thunderstorms battered eight states across the Midwest with tornadoes and hail as big as softballs, killing at least 23 people, injuring scores and destroying hundreds of homes.

Tennessee was hardest hit, with tornadoes striking five counties and killing 19 people along one 25-mile path Sunday, the National Weather Service said. The Highway Patrol sent teams to the area Monday with search dogs.

Betty Sisk said she and her 13-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son took cover in a closet until the twister blew their house apart and threw them into the yard.

"By the time the (tornado) sirens started going off, it was at our back door," Sisk said Monday. "I didn't hear a train sound, I heard a roaring."

Nothing remained of Sisk's wood-frame home Monday but the concrete steps. A nearby house was destroyed, and Sisk said she had been told the elderly couple

who lived there were dead. Another neighbour's home was blown about 30 feet off its foundation.

Severe thunderstorms, many producing tornadoes, also struck parts of Iowa, Kentucky, Arkansas, Missouri, Ohio, Illinois and Indiana. Strong wind was blamed or at least three deaths in Missouri. A clothing store collapsed in southern Illinois, killing one man.

The weather service's Storm Prediction Centre in Norman, Oklahoma, said it had preliminary reports of 63 tornadoes.

Most of the Tennessee deaths were reported around the Gibson County towns of Bradford and Dyer, said James Brown, assistant emergency management director for the county. Among the dead were a family of four from Bradford, officials said.

Tennessee officials estimated 1,200 buildings were damaged in Gibson County alone.

## 5 killed in Pak bus blast

AFP, Miranshah

Five people including a woman and child died when a roadside bomb hit a minibus in a Pakistani tribal area, while troops killed two tribesmen carrying illegal weapons, officials said yesterday.

The incidents happened in the troubled North Waziristan region bordering Afghanistan, where violence continues weeks after major battles between Pakistani soldiers and suspected pro-Taliban militants.

The remote-controlled explosive device ripped through the bus in Data Khel village near Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, early on Monday, a local official said.

"Four people including a child and a woman were killed on the spot and another died later in Miranshah hospital," the official said on condition of anonymity. The vehicle was badly damaged, he added.

Separately a truck coming from Afghanistan was hit by another roadside bomb blast in the Data Khel area but there were no casualties, the official said.

## Assam votes in test for ruling coalition

REUTERS, Guwahati

Voters trudged through rain to heavily guarded polling booths in India's rebel-infested Assam, the first of five states holding elections that will be the biggest test for the federal coalition since coming to power.

Assam, in the isolated northeast, is kicking off a month-long election process in states in the south and east.

Voters in tea-and-oil-rich Assam braved bad weather to reach polling booths and by early Monday afternoon about 30 percent of electors had cast their ballots.

Golak Thakuria, who says he is over 90 years old, has been voting in every election since 1947.

"I have been voting since India's independence and I have never missed an election," Thakuria said at Bengnabari, 60km west of Guwahati, the state's main city.

Police reported no violence in the state where thousands have died in

three decades of separatist and ethnic violence.

The Congress party, which rules three of the five states facing polls and heads the New Delhi government, and its allies are fighting stiff battles against the national coalition's own communist allies as well as regional opposition parties.

In Assam, soldiers with automatic rifles guarded around 515 candidates, their political workers and voters from attacks by separatist insurgents in 65 of the 126 constituencies across the state where polling was being held on Monday.

Helicopters flew over remote areas looking for rebels.

Voting for the remaining seats will take place on April 10.

Though the rebels said they have nothing to do with the polls, authorities were not taking chances as voting in past years had been marred by violence in the state of 26 million.



PHOTO: AFP  
Local residents, guarded by security personnel, stand in a queue as they wait to vote in the Assam state assembly elections in Guwahati yesterday. Voting began in insurgency hit state amid tight security with the ruling Congress party facing a tough test.

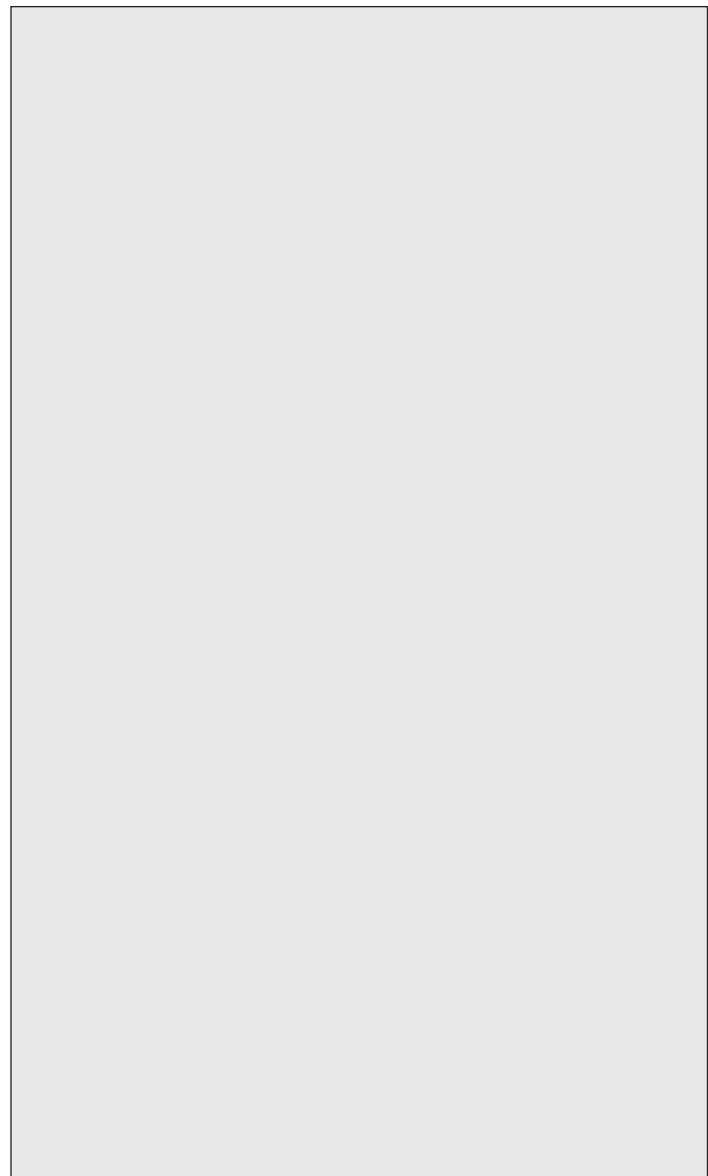


PHOTO: AFP  
Thai University students burn paper flowers next to the wreath during protest against Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra at Thai Rak Thai party headquarter in Bangkok yesterday. Voters in the Thai capital sent a strong rebuke to Thaksin as half of Bangkok voters cast blank ballots rather than picking candidates of the embattled premier.

## Thai PM calls for reconciliation

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra called for national reconciliation yesterday after weekend elections, which he looked set to win but which seemed unlikely to end months of political turmoil.

Partial returns from Sunday's polls showed a high number of "no-vote" abstention ballots in Bangkok and southern Thailand that could

thwart his hopes of staying in office and of halting mass protests calling for his resignation.

Thaksin said he was confident his party would win half the vote, which was still being counted on Monday, but stopped short of declaring victory and said he was open to proposals to bring the nation back together.

"There is no need for me to become prime minister but we need

national reconciliation," he said.

"Today we will win more than half the vote. We only suffered losses in particular constituencies. We accept this," Thaksin told reporters before a meeting at his party headquarters.

Thaksin had vowed not to take office if he wins less than half the vote, stying the election, which main opposition parties boycotted as a referendum on his leadership.

Across much of northern and central Thailand, his support base appeared to have turned out in strong enough numbers to guarantee his victory, according to partial counts cited by Thai television.

But the boycott, combined with a mass disqualification of candidates, left Thaksin's party unopposed in nearly 70 percent of districts.

## Saddam's likely to face genocide trial in May

REUTERS, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein is expected to face trial as early as next month on charges of ordering genocide against Iraq's Kurdish population in the late 1980s, a prosecutor and a court official said.

They said an investigative judge was expected to hand the central case against the former leader over for prosecution this week. Saddam's lawyers will be notified that he could face trial for what is known as the Anfal campaign as early as next month.

"Within days the case will be moved to us," chief prosecutor Jaafar al-Moussawi told Reuters.

Saddam is currently on trial in connection with the killings of 148 Shias in the town of Dujail after an assassination attempt on the former Iraqi president there in 1982.