

# 80 politicians detained in Nepali crackdown

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese police yesterday arrested more than 80 politicians and demonstrators in a crackdown aimed at thwarting planned pro-democracy protests this week, activists said. Opposition parties ousted when King Gyanendra sacked the government and seized power 14 months ago had called for a four-day general strike starting Thursday and a mass demonstration in the capital Saturday.

About 35 political leaders were arrested in their homes at dawn Wednesday by plain-clothes police officers, activists said, and around 50 people were arrested in the morning at a rally held in defiance of a ban on public meetings.

"At least 35 leaders were arrested this morning. Depending upon the situation they might be held or released by Wednesday evening," a police officer told AFP on customary condition of anonymity.

The United Nations human rights body is monitoring the situation and will be visiting arrested leaders and protesters, a spokesman said Wednesday.

"Monitoring teams will be visiting places of detention throughout the day to determine the number of people held and the conditions and also the reasons given by authorities for the arrests and detention," said Kieran Dwyer, spokesman for the United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

On Monday the Nepal representative of the UN body urged the royal government to allow peaceful

protests.

In January the government launched a similar crackdown that successfully stymied planned anti-royal protests. The crackdown resulted in a wave of international criticism for Gyanendra.

Protesters at the demonstration Wednesday morning were defiant as they were arrested ahead of the mass protests being organised by an alliance of seven sidelined political parties.

"We know that this is banned but

we are supporting the seven-party movement and we will defy the restrictions," said Shambu Thapa, president of the Nepal Bar Association, just before being detained.

Around 150 professionals gathered early Wednesday in defiance of the ban, and 47 were detained before their protest got under way, eyewitnesses said.

"Among those arrested were 13 journalists, five college professors, 13 lawyers and three doctors," said

Balaram Baniya, secretary of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists, who spoke to AFP from police custody.

The strike and Saturday's planned protest will go ahead despite the arrests, said Shovakar Parajuli, a secretary of the Nepali Congress Party.

"Our plan will go ahead as scheduled and we won't be rattled by the government's crackdown," he said.

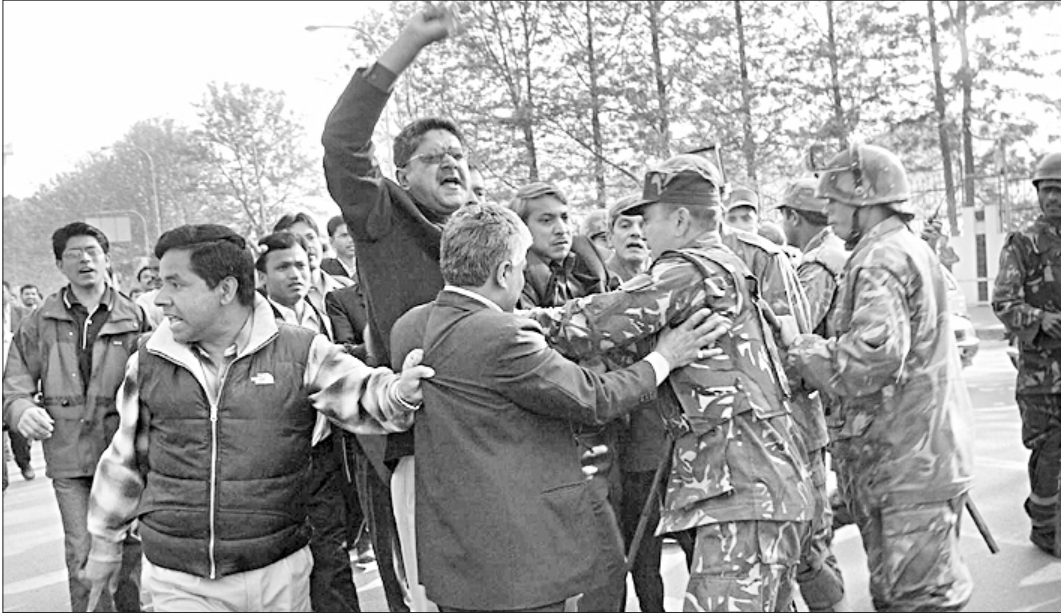


PHOTO: AFP

President of the Nepal Bar Association, Shambhu Thapa (C) scuffles with riot police after arrest at New Baneshwor. He along with others was breaking a protest ban in Kathmandu yesterday.

## Police arrest 6 over Varanasi bombings

AFP, Lucknow

Indian police have arrested six men over triple bombings that killed more than 20 people in the holy Hindu city of Varanasi last month, an official said yesterday.

Police suspect the six belonged to a Bangladesh-based Islamic militant outfit and are holding them on accusations of murder and conspiracy, said S.K. Agarwal, home secretary of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

"In a late-night swoop (Tuesday), police arrested six men who are part of a module that took part in the blasts," he told AFP in the state capital Lucknow.

Police arrested the six in twin raids in Lucknow and on the outskirts, Agarwal said, adding they also found the explosive material RDX, grenades and an assault rifle.

The explosions went off almost simultaneously March 7 at an ancient temple packed with devotees and a crowded railway station, killing 23 people and injuring 68 in Varanasi, India's most important Hindu pilgrimage city.

The arrested men were believed to be members of Harkat-ul Jahadi Islam, a Bangladesh-based offshoot of Jaish-e-Mohammed which is fighting New Delhi's rule in insurgency-racked Indian Kashmir, Agarwal said.

## Iran isolated in its nuclear stance: US

AFP, Washington

Recent military activity inside Iran offers proof of Tehran's willingness to brook international isolation in pursuit of its nuclear ambitions, a White House spokesman said Tuesday.

"Their aggressive military programme and defiant rhetoric are further examples of how the regime is isolating itself and the Iranian people from the rest of the world," spokesman Scott McClellan said at a press briefing.

"It is also a reminder of why the international community is united in its concern about the regime's possible development of nuclear weapons and why the international community is calling on Iran to comply with its international obligations or face further isolation."

Tehran's military activities have aroused international concern. McClellan said the world community speaks with one voice in urging Iran to abandon its nuclear programme - reflected, he said, in last week's unanimous statement from the UN Security Council giving Iran 30 days to abandon the sensitive nuclear work, but without issuing a threat of sanctions.

"Last week the Security Council sent a very clear statement to the regime, and said, 'Comply with your obligations, come clean'," McClellan said.

"You have 30 days to come clean, make a commitment to come clean and comply with your obligations, or we're going to back at the Security Council consulting about next steps to take."

The spokesman called on Tehran "to suspend its uranium enrichment and enrichment-related activity and come back to the negotiations and act in good faith."

# Thaksin goes but much remains to be settled

AFP, Bangkok

Thaksin Shinawatra's stunning announcement that he will quit as prime minister may be an important step towards resolving Thailand's political crisis but much remains to be settled, analysts said.

Weeks of mass rallies against the premier and a controversial weekend general election boycotted by the opposition have left the kingdom with a political mess that will take weeks to clean up, they said.

John Brandon, director of international relations at the Asia Foundation, said the prime minister's decision did little to resolve the immediate hurdles to forming a new parliament, after the election boycott and a strong protest vote left 39 districts with no elected representative.

"I think it's an important step to help resolve the crisis," he said of Thaksin's resignation. "The next big step is how (to resolve) what happened with the results of the current election."

All 500 seats must be filled for parliament to convene. The Election Commission plans by-elections on April 23, and will re-open the nomination process for those seats in hopes of attracting new candidates.

In most of Bangkok, where protest ballots outnumbered votes for Thaksin's party, residents found themselves stuck with representatives that a majority of them opposed.

The Election Commission has said it may not release final results until the end of the week, but a partial count gave Thaksin 54 percent, with more than two thirds of constituencies reporting.

Thaksin's decision to step down despite his apparent win set the stage for a months-long process of constitutional reform, with an interim government running the country until new elections can be organized.

Although he did not mention any plans for the future in his address



PHOTO: AFP

Thailand's outgoing Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra receives roses from his supporters at the party headquarter in Bangkok. His popularity jumped after he stunned both his rivals and his own party by stepping aside yesterday.

Tuesday night, both Thaksin and the political opposition have spoken of creating a special assembly that would amend the constitution - essentially to weaken the powers of the prime minister.

Once the new parliament convenes, Thaksin has said that process could take up to 15 months before new elections, which the opposition says it is ready to join.

Even a lengthy period of political reforms under a caretaker government was preferable to the unpredictable standoff that had gripped Thailand for two months, said Kiatphong Noiiaiboon, a vice chairman of the Federation of Thai Industries.

"After the parliament convenes, political reforms can move forward," Kiatphong said.

"It will be much easier for the opposition parties to run in the new election to make sure Thai democracy works properly."

When new elections are held, nothing stops Thaksin from staging a new bid to lead Thailand, noted Panitan Wattanayagorn, visiting professor of international relations

at Johns Hopkins University.

"That remains to be seen because he is still very much popular. But he has to find ways to increase his legitimacy" after the strong protest vote in Bangkok and southern Thailand, Panitan said.

Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) party is still the most powerful and best-financed political party in Thailand, and is likely to remain so as long as the billionaire former telecoms tycoon remains at the helm.

Thaksin said Tuesday he will continue to lead TRT, and keep his seat in parliament, prompting his critics to question whether his decision to step down will actually lead to any policy changes.

"If he remains the leader of Thai Rak Thai, that means the government policies on free trade agreements and infrastructure projects will not be changed," protest leader Sondhi Limthongkul said.

Sondhi, a wealthy media baron who once supported Thaksin, said he would not disband his protest movement because of Thaksin's continued role in politics.

# Iraqi PM rejects call to step aside

AP, Baghdad

Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari is refusing to abandon his bid for a second term, resisting US and British pressure to step aside to break the deadlock over a new government, the embattled leader told a British newspaper in an interview published yesterday.

Al-Jaafari told The Guardian newspaper that he was rejecting calls to give up the nomination of his Shia bloc "to protect democracy in Iraq."

"There is a decision that was reached by a democratic mechanism and I stand with it," he told the newspaper. "We have to respect our Iraqi people."

Al-Jaafari's comments were his first public response to pressure that escalated after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw flew to Baghdad on Sunday to demand the Iraqis speed up talks on a new government.

Sunni and Kurdish politicians, whom the Shias need as coalition partners, have called for al-Jaafari's replacement, arguing that his government failed to restore order and prevent an escalation in tensions between Shia and Sunni Muslims in recent weeks that threatens civil war.

"People will react if they see the rules of democracy being disobeyed," al-Jaafari told the newspaper. "Every-

one should stick to democratic mechanisms no matter whether they disagree with the person."

Nevertheless, pressure is mounting on al-Jaafari to step aside, even from within his Shia political alliance.

During an interview Tuesday with the British Broadcasting Corp., Vice President Adil Abdul-Mahdi said he met with al-Jaafari the day before and urged him to give up the nomination because he had lost the confidence of the Sunnis and Kurds.

But Abdul-Mahdi said al-Jaafari refused, insisting he wanted to take his case to parliament, which must approve the new prime minister and his Cabinet by a majority vote.

Asked whether al-Jaafari should

withdraw his nomination, Abdul-Mahdi said: "Yes, after such a time of naming him, not getting approval from others now in UIA (the dominant Shia political bloc), there is some rejection so I think he should step aside."

Al-Jaafari beat Abdul-Mahdi for the nomination in February by a single vote at a caucus of the Shia bloc, which won the most seats in parliamentary elections last December. Al-Jaafari squeaked through largely because he had the support of the powerful anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

## Chronic sleep problems afflict 70m Americans

AP, Washington

Chronic sleeping problems afflict as many as 70 million Americans, costing the nation billions in medical expenses, accidents and lost productivity, a new study reports.

"Balm of hurt minds" to Shakespeare, sleep seems to be necessary for the nervous system to work properly, and a lack of sleep can hamper the immune system, cause memory impairment and reduce ability to concentrate.

As many as 30 million Americans, more than one in 10, suffer specifically from chronic insomnia, according to the study released Tuesday by the Institute of Medicine, an arm of the National Academy of Sciences.

And other disorders ranging from sleep apnea breathing interruptions during sleep to sleepwalking and restless leg syndrome affect millions more, the study found.

Yet medical students get little training in sleep problems and research on the subject is limited, prompting the institute to call for more research and training programmes.

"Although sleep research and care for individuals with sleep disorders have expanded over the past several years, we currently don't have the capacity to adequately diagnose and treat all who suffer from these problems," said Harvey Colten, chair of the committee that wrote the report and former vice president and senior associate dean for academic affairs, Columbia University Medical Centre.