



Nepalese opposition activists scuffle with riot police during a protest in Kathmandu yesterday. Police arrested 70 lawyers staging a pro-democracy protest as Nepal was gripped by its worst political crisis since King Gyanendra seized power.

Nepali cops open fire on anti-king protests

70 lawyers detained, soldiers urged to join rally

AFP, Kathmandu

Police fired rubber bullets at hundreds of lawyers protesting King Gyanendra's absolute rule yesterday as Nepalese awaited a broadcast by the monarch to see if he would reach out to opponents.

In a sign of an easing of a crackdown by authorities, mobile telephone service in the capital Kathmandu was restored after being cut last week by the government in a bid to thwart anti-royal protests.

Restoration of the service came

as Nepal awaited the king's traditional message on Friday to mark the Nepalese New Year and to see if he would use the occasion to try to pacify opponents of his takeover 14 months ago.

On Wednesday authorities lifted a daytime curfew imposed on the capital, although a night curfew remained in effect.

Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets to break up the protest by hundreds of lawyers urging a return to democracy outside the Supreme Court and arrested 70 of them.

On Wednesday rebel leader

Prachanda, who has been waging a "People's War" since 1996 to oust the king, called on the army and police to join the anti-royal movement.

In the Kathmandu suburb Gongabu, at least 3,000 protesters chanted, "Death to the monarch and long live the democratic republic," and "We will burn the palace and run the country."

But unlike Tuesday when scores were injured in the same spot as police battled with demonstrators, security forces did not intervene.

Coalition forces launch major anti-Taliban drive Six insurgents killed

AFP, Kabul

Thousands of Afghan and coalition troops backed by US and British warplanes continued strikes yesterday on a known insurgent area, in one of the biggest operations in Afghanistan in a year.

About 2,500 troops launched Operation Mountain Lion Wednesday with a series of pre-dawn air and ground assaults in eastern Kunar province, in one of their biggest campaigns since the overthrow of the Taliban government in late 2001.

The US military said late Wednesday six insurgents were killed at the start of the assault, seen as direct retaliation to a new spring offensive launched by the Taliban with a stream of suicide blasts and other attacks.

The operation started in Kunar's Pech River Valley, "an area notorious for terrorist activity," the military said, describing it as "one of the biggest operations over the past one year."

It aimed to "disrupt insurgents' activities, deny them sanctuary and prevent their ability to resupply."

Coalition air forces are providing 24-hour support, a separate air

force statement said. F-15 Eagle fighter jets, A-10 Thunderbolt ground support planes and massive B-52 heavy bombers are providing close-air support for troops on the ground who are rooting out insurgent sanctuaries and support networks," it said.

Royal Air Force GR-7 Harriers were also providing combat support and Global Hawk and Predator unmanned aerial vehicle aircraft were supplying intelligence and surveillance information.

"How long it takes to rid this area of extremist activity, we'll be there," said James Redmore, the command sergeant major of the US-led Task Force Spartan, one of several units involved in the operation.

About 1,200 Afghan army troops were taking part in the operation, defence ministry spokesman General Mohammad Zahir Azimi said, describing it as "one of the biggest operations over the past one year."

"The troops have not faced any major resistance so far," Azimi said.

War in Lanka may not be far away

Tigers postpone Swiss talks on saving truce

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels said government forces ambushed and killed two of their men yesterday, a charge the army denied, as the body count from recent violence soared and diplomats said war might not be far away.

More than 40 people have died in the past week, 16 of them on Wednesday in two suspected rebel blasts in and near the northeastern port of Trincomalee and the ethnic riot that followed in which a majority Sinhalese mob attacked minority Tamils. It was the bloodiest day since a 2002 ceasefire.

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday called for a postponement of ceasefire talks scheduled for next week in Switzerland amid an upsurge in violence that has killed dozens this week.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the three-day talks due to start next Wednesday cannot go ahead and they want a fresh date.

"We requested Norway to postpone to talks until after the 22nd (of April)," LTTE spokesman Daya Master told AFP. "We need some time to discuss the ground situation with our commanders in the east."

With tensions rising fast, aid workers providing relief after the 2004 tsunami said they had suspended operations in parts of northeastern Sri Lanka. Diplomats said return to the island's two-decade civil war looked increasingly likely.

Police said at least two Tamil civilians had been killed by unknown gunmen in the northern army-held Jaffna enclave, hemmed in by rebel lines.

The Tigers blamed army-backed Tamil groups for the killings, and their Web site also accused the army and linked groups of ambushing and killing two rebels behind Tiger lines in the north and east. The military, repeatedly hit by suspected Tiger attacks this week, denied the charge.

"We do not operate in LTTE areas," army spokesman Brigadier

Prasad Samarasinghe said. "They are putting us under a lot of pressure and they want to provoke us but we will not be provoked."

The Tigers also accuse the military of backing the ethnic riots that followed a suspected rebel blast in Trincomalee on Wednesday, in which a crowd mainly from the island's Sinhalese majority attacked Tamil shops and people.

"Seven people were cut and chopped and killed by the Sinhalese thugs while the military and police looked on," Puracethi, head of the Tamil Eelam Students Union -- a Tiger body -- told Reuters. "The police were keen to control and suppress the Tamils."

The army denies helping the rioters, a charge made on the official rebel Web site, and the government blames the Tigers for the bomb in a crowded market that triggered the violence.

Retired US generals rebuke Rumsfeld

THE WASHINGTON POST

The retired commander of key forces in Iraq called Wednesday for Donald H. Rumsfeld to step down, joining several other former top military commanders who have harshly criticised the defence secretary's authoritarian style for making the military's job more difficult.

"I think we need a fresh start" at the top of the Pentagon, retired Army Maj. Gen. John Batiste, who commanded the 1st Infantry Division in Iraq in 2004-2005, said in an interview. "We need leadership up there that respects the military as they expect the military to respect them. And that leadership needs to understand teamwork."

Batiste noted that many of his peers feel the same way. "It speaks volumes that guys like me are speaking out from retirement about the leadership climate in the Department of Defence," he said earlier yesterday on CNN.

Pakistan to maintain nuclear deterrent

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan, worried about a nuclear cooperation deal between India and the United States, said on Wednesday it will maintain a credible nuclear deterrent for its security.

US President George W. Bush during a trip to south Asia last month agreed to give India nuclear fuel and technology for its civilian nuclear programme, but refused to cut a similar deal with Pakistan.

Pakistan's Nuclear Command Authority (NCA), the top body that controls the country's nuclear assets, criticised the US-India deal and said it would help New Delhi expand its nuclear weapons programme.

"... the agreement would enable India to produce significant quantities of fissile material and nuclear

weapons from un-safeguarded nuclear reactors," said a statement issued after a NCA meeting chaired by President Pervez Musharraf.

"The NCA expressed firm resolve that ... credible minimum deterrence requirements will be met."

Under the deal, India has agreed to separate its civilian and military nuclear weapons programme, and open the civil reactors for international inspections. But critics say the deal will help India boost its weapons programme.

Pakistan said it too needed international cooperation to meet its energy needs, including nuclear power.

"Pakistan is determined to pursue this legitimate requirement," the statement said.