

Nepali Maoists offer roadmap for peace

Arrests, suspensions go on to sweep out king appointees

AP, Katmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebel chief put forth a peace plan yesterday that seeks the release of political prisoners, the dissolution of parliament and the constitution and the restructuring of the national army.

The new government, meanwhile arrested several ministers from King Gyanendra's ousted regime, and suspended police and intelligence chiefs.

Rebel chief Prachanda said in a statement that he would participate in direct talks with the government once his team of three negotiators had carried out a preliminary dia-

logue with officials.

An associate of Prachanda had announced his participation Friday, hours after Deputy Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli told The Associated Press that negotiations would be ineffective without him.

The insurgents played a major role in last month's protests against Gyanendra's authoritarian rule. Now they appear headed for the political mainstream after a decade-long insurgency that has killed 13,000 people.

The rebels and the new government have already agreed to a ceasefire and named peace negotiators, points reiterated in

Prachanda's plan. The two sides also agree on several other points in the plan, including the need to dissolve parliament and the constitution and create an interim constitution and government.

The plans also calls for determining voting areas, holding constituent assembly elections under international supervision, and "restructuring of the state" to include both the rebels and the royal army.

The arrests of five ministers who served under Gyanendra were announced on state radio Friday, and came as the government raised the spectre of royalist elements trying to thwart its rule.

"We are keeping a close watch on the people who are conspiring against (the) democracy system and the recent changes," said Home Minister Krishna Sitaula. "We will go after these people and not spare them."

He did not give further details on what steps would be taken.

Gyanendra seized power in February 2005 after firing the prime minister. Last month's unrest forced him to relinquish direct rule and reinstate parliament. He also appointed a prime minister selected by the political parties behind the protests.

US hindering drive against terror

Says China

AP, Beijing

A top Chinese official accused the United States Friday of hindering the global anti-terror campaign by refusing to hand over five Chinese Muslims released from the Guantanamo Bay detention centre.

Parliament Vice Chairman Ismail Amat, the highest-ranking member of the Muslim Uighur minority in the Chinese Communist Party, said his nation suspects the five men, who were captured during the US assault on Afghanistan in 2001-2002, are members of a terror group.

"I think America is implementing a double standard in fighting terrorism. This is unacceptable to us," said Amat, who is also a member of the party's Central Committee, the heart of Chinese power.

The US military flew the men to Albania last week after Washington concluded they posed no terrorist threat to the United States but might face persecution if they returned to China.



FIFTH SUMMIT OF DEVELOPING EIGHT (D-8) BALI, INDONESIA, 13 MAY 2006



Leaders of eight Muslim nations pose for a photo session shortly before the opening ceremony of the Developing Eight (D-8) Summit in Nusa Dua, Bali island, Indonesia yesterday. (L-R) Egypt's Minister of International Cooperation Fayza Aboulnaga, Pakistanian Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Prime Minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Nigerian President Olesegun Obasanjo and Foreign Minister of Bangladesh Morshed Khan.

PHOTO: AFP

EU slams Tigers for sea battle

Annan urges warring sides to resume talks

AFP, Colombo

The European Union criticised Sri Lankan rebels Saturday for staging a deadly sea attack this week and warned that the escalation in violence could wreck any chance of returning to peace talks.

The statement came two days after a Tamil Tiger suicide attack on a navy gunboat that killed its 18-man crew, dealing a blow to efforts to preserve a four-year ceasefire agreement now in tatters.

The European bloc, which has already warned it may impose a ban on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), said the escalation of

violence undermined the prospects for opening Sri Lankan peace talks.

"The reckless behaviour of the LTTE in the last days can only contribute to a dangerous escalation that results in growing hostilities and jeopardises any possibility for future peace talks," the EU said in a statement.

It also urged the Sri Lankan government to show "as much restraint as possible" following Thursday's sinking of a navy gun boat that was escorting a ship transporting more than 700 soldiers.

The EU statement came hours after UN Secretary General Kofi Annan made a fresh appeal to Sri

Lanka's government and Tamil rebels to end violence and resume Norwegian-brokered peace talks.

"The secretary general appeals to both the government and the LTTE to change course and bring the country back on a path to peace," UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

Dujarric said the UN chief took note of a statement by Scandinavian monitors demanding that the LTTE "immediately cease all operations at sea."

The LTTE earlier rejected a ceasefire ruling against them by Scandinavian ceasefire monitors.

Hamas willing to talk with Israel to avert humanitarian crisis

AFP, Cairo

Hamas said yesterday it was willing to talk to Israel in order to solve a humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian territories after a Western aid freeze left the government in severe financial crisis.

"We as an occupied people are ready to talk to all sides in order to receive aid," said Palestinian health minister Bassem Naim.

"This is not to say that we recognize the occupier but our dealings with the other side would be as an occupied people," he said after meetings with Arab League Secretary General Amr Mousa in Cairo.

The Palestinian Authority is in severe financial crisis after the

European Union and United States halted direct aid to its Hamas-led government on the grounds that the Islamist movement does not recognise Israel, refuses to renounce violence or abide by previous peace agreements.

Israel has also suspended the payment of customs duties levied on goods that pass through its borders en route to the Gaza Strip or West Bank since the Islamist group won a massive victory in a Palestinian election last January.

Naim warned of a "humanitarian and health disaster" if crossings are not opened to allow humanitarian and medical assistance into the Palestinian territories.

23 killed as storm lashes Philippines

REUTERS, Manila

A typhoon whipped through the northwestern Philippines on Saturday, killing at least 23 people in stormy seas and leaving more than 10,000 people stranded as air and ferry services were suspended.

Most of those killed were from a boat that capsized off Masbate island in the south of Luzon region, the Coast Guard said.

At least 21 people on the vessel, named the Mae Ann, were killed and 18 were rescued, Coast Guard spokesman Joseph Coyne told reporters in Manila, citing details from the Coast Guard's district commander in Bicol region.

A fisherman also drowned while his four companions were rescued when their boat sank in rough seas

Don't get nervous

Ahmadinejad's advice to West

AFP, Nusa Dua

Iran's hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad advised Western nations yesterday that they should not be nervous of Tehran's controversial nuclear program and instead have fun.

Ahmadinejad was asked at the conclusion of a summit of Muslim nations here whether Iran would stop enriching uranium because of concerns from Western countries.

"Those who are nervous, there is no need for them to be nervous. They are nervous because of their arrogance, selfish and exclusivist tendencies," he told a press briefing.

"All of them know 100 percent that the nuclear program of Iran is totally peaceful ... We advise them not to become nervous. They can

use this beautiful air. They can have fun," he said.

Western nations have been seeking to halt Iran's nuclear enrichment program, fearful it is using it as a cover to develop an atomic bomb, but Iran insists it is only pursuing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

Ahmadinejad did not refer to his foreign minister's warning earlier Saturday that Iran would only consider new European incentives aimed at finding a deal over its program if it recognised the Islamic republic's right to enrich uranium.

Europe is currently preparing a new package of trade, security and technological incentives to try to entice Tehran away from uranium enrichment and resolve the nuclear crisis peacefully.



Bangladesh Ambassador to Ireland Sabihuddin Ahmed presents his credentials to Irish President Mary McAleese at the presidential house in Dublin on May 11.

UN driver, Afghan doctor killed in rocket attack

AFP, Kabul

A local driver and a doctor with a German-based group were killed in Afghanistan when suspected Taliban attacked their Unicef vehicle with rockets, officials said Saturday.

A project manager for the UN children's agency was also seriously wounded in the attack Friday just 40km outside Herat, the main city in western Afghanistan, Unicef said.

"We can confirm that the two bodies that were recovered last night were of our driver and a doctor with Malteser, a medical NGO in Afghanistan," Unicef spokesman Edward Carwardine told AFP.

Indian coalition gets polls boost

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The result of Thursday's assembly elections in five Indian states has set off new political equations that were expected to cement relations between Congress party and its crucial backer - the Left parties which have serious reservations against the coalition government's economic and foreign policies, analysts said.

The Left parties' landslide victory in their traditional bastions of West Bengal and Kerala states signalled that they would mount pressure on the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh over its economic reforms and burgeoning ties with the United States.

Immediately after the election results, Left leaders, including CPI(M) General Secretary Prakash Karat and CPI leader Gurudas Dasgupta said the elections have

given the Left a greater role in national politics and there should be more intervention in policy matters of the government.

"We have been fighting for the implementation of the Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and will continue to do so," Karat told the media soon after the results were announced.

The Left, analysts said, is certain to step up pressure on the government on issues like Foreign Direct Investment in insurance and retail sectors, strategic partnership between India and the US, India's stand on Iran's nuclear issue, proposed hike in prices of kerosene, petrol, diesel and cooking gas, airport modernisation and pension reforms.

But divergences on these issues would not lead to rocking of the boat of the UPA, agree analysts as well as

sources in Left parties and Congress.

In fact, a hint of this was given by Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram, a senior Congress leader, when he said Thursday that there was no reason to assume that the Left parties would be unreasonable in its electoral victory and Congress will be unnecessarily timid.

Analysts said the basic chemistry between the Left parties and Congress would be strengthened following the election results.

Ever since Left parties extended support from outside to a Congress-led government after the 2004 general elections, a view often aired in certain circles is that the Left would withdraw support to Congress at the time of assembly elections in West Bengal and Kerala as it would be difficult to convince the voters in the two states about the apparently conflicting stands of backing the Congress at the national level and fighting that party in

the states.

But the Left's victory in West Bengal and Kerala has conclusively proved that the existing equation at the national and state levels brought no damage at least to the Left parties, analysts pointed out. In view of this, the Left would not do anything to threaten the stability of the Congress-led government, they added.

Although Congress had lost to the Left Front in Kerala and West Bengal, the Left could not be unmindful of the fact that Congress has not fared badly in Kerala, retained power in Assam and Pondicherry overcoming anti-incumbency factors. Congress has done reasonably well in Tamil Nadu by securing 30-odd assembly seats which has made the party's support critical to a minority government of DMK, a constituent of UPA, in that southern state, according to analysts.