

Bush renews
Myanmar
sanctions

AFP, yuma, Arizona

US President George W. Bush on Thursday renewed economic sanctions on Myanmar for another year, saying military rulers of the Southeast Asian nation posed a threat to US national security and foreign policy.

Myanmar's military junta has been accused of serious human rights abuses, such as jailing the country's opposition leaders, particularly democracy icon and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Their latest crackdown on ethnic minorities, targeting mainly the Karens, has been condemned by rights groups, who say it is the most serious offensive since 1997.

"Because the actions and policies of the government of Burma (Myanmar) continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States, the national emergency ... and the measures adopted ... with that emergency must continue in effect beyond May 20, 2006," Bush said in a statement.

The US sanctions date to May 1997 and were stiffened by Bush in July 2003.

They prohibit new investments and exports of financial services to and imports from Myanmar. The United States has also frozen Myanmar junta members' assets in the United States and has broadened denial of visas to regime officials.

India promises
more university
seats to quell
anti-quota stir

AFP, New Delhi

Indian officials promised more university places for all yesterday as a medical strike against a new affirmative action plan entered its second week with fresh clashes between police and students.

A week after police beat medical students with batons in the western city of Mumbai, television stations broadcast images of khaki-clad officers whacking crouching students in white coats in the eastern state of Bihar Friday.

Unlike the students in Mumbai, the Bihar students were for more places for disadvantaged students.

As many as 35 were injured in the clashes, including 20 protesters and four journalists, reports said. Violence started when police turned on the students after they vandalized cars and accused local media of failing to cover the rally.

But anti-quota protesters continued to demand the government scrap plans to reserve more places for the disadvantaged in top universities, even as Indian officials said they will hike the total number of university places.

US groups warn against
'dangerous' military
aid to Nepal army

AFP, Washington

The United States said Thursday it was ready to resume military aid to Nepal more than a year after cutting supplies of lethal weaponry to the Himalayan kingdom but rights groups cautioned against what they see as a premature and dangerous move.

Sam Zarifi, research director of the Asia division at US group Human Rights Watch, told the hearing that Washington should not rush into resuming military aid.

"The United States should not resume transfer of lethal military material to the (military) until and unless a legitimate civilian Nepali government requests the aid and until the (military) demonstrates that it is a disciplined, accountable force," he said.

John Norris, the Washington head of the International Crisis Group think tank, warned that any resumption of military aid that did not meet basic criteria "would be seen as dangerous and provocative measures" by Maoist rebels as well as mainstream politicians in Nepal.

Washington suspended lethal military aid after King Gyanendra sacked the government and took direct control of the country in February last year.

numbers of political disappearances, blamed on the military, rights groups say. They also say torture is widespread.

Sam Zarifi, research director of the Asia division at US group Human Rights Watch, told the hearing that Washington should not rush into resuming military aid.

"The United States should not resume transfer of lethal military material to the (military) until and unless a legitimate civilian Nepali government requests the aid and until the (military) demonstrates that it is a disciplined, accountable force," he said.

John Norris, the Washington head of the International Crisis Group think tank, warned that any resumption of military aid that did not meet basic criteria "would be seen as dangerous and provocative measures" by Maoist rebels as well as mainstream politicians in Nepal.

Washington suspended lethal military aid after King Gyanendra sacked the government and took direct control of the country in February last year.

The ruler climbed down and handed back power to the political parties earlier this month after weeks of often violent anti-royal protests organised by seven sidelined political parties in loose alliance with Maoist rebels.

Nepal's parliament voted unanimously Thursday for drastic curbs on the powers of King Gyanendra, including taking away his control of the army.

Curtailing the king's powers is part of the new administration's efforts to persuade Maoist rebels to uphold a ceasefire declared after the king gave up power and to take part in peace talks.

The Maoists' 10-year revolt has left 12,500 dead.

Boucher said Thursday the United States hoped that the Maoists' commitments to peace and multi-party democracy was genuine.

"However, based on their track record, they have not earned the benefit of the doubt," he said.

Nepal has one of the highest



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera (L) listens to his Japanese counterpart Taro Aso (R) at the start of their talks at the foreign ministry's likura guest house in Tokyo yesterday. Samaraweera called earlier on donor countries to raise pressure on the Tamil Tigers to resume talks and curb the rebels' fund-raising overseas.



Ibrahim Gambari (C), the highest-ranking UN official for political affairs, flanked by Myanmar officials visits the historical Shwe Da Gon pagoda in Yangon on Thursday. A top United Nations envoy tasked with pressing military-run Myanmar on reforms was to meet members of detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party amid fresh US pressure on the junta.

Pakistan ridicules UK,
Afghan charges of
sheltering Taliban

AFP, Kandahar/ Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday angrily rejected allegations by Afghan President Hamid Karzai and a top British army officer that it was letting Taliban militants infiltrate Afghanistan to carry out attacks.

Karzai blamed Pakistan on Thursday after two days of bloody clashes in his country left around 100 people dead, including scores of militants, 13 policemen and a female Canadian soldier.

"There is no truth in this," Pakistani foreign office spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam told AFP. "Pakistan is not providing training to insurgents and it is not sending them to Afghanistan."

Ten people were killed in fresh fighting in Afghanistan as security forces carried out clean-up operations after some of the heaviest clashes in months left more than 100 people dead, most of them Taliban.

"Eight Taliban were killed and

two police were also killed in the fighting on Thursday night," Ghazni governor Sher Ali Ibrahim said.

He said one militant was also captured during the battle while nine policemen were wounded.

The fighting was some of the most violent in Afghanistan since the hardline Islamic Taliban regime was toppled in a US-led invasion in 2001 for sheltering al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Karzai also claimed that hardliners in Pakistani Islamic schools known as madrasas were sending students for jihad (holy war) in Afghanistan.

Pakistan's military later rubbished a "ridiculous" claim by Colonel Chris Vernon, chief of staff for British forces in southern Afghanistan, that Taliban militants were launching attacks in Afghanistan from its side of the border.

4 US troops
killed as Iraqis
wrangle on
forming govt

Reuters, Baghdad

A roadside bomb near Baghdad killed four US soldiers on Thursday and Iraq's leaders fought last-minute battles for jobs in a much delayed national unity government before a parliament vote scheduled for Saturday.

An Iraqi interpreter also died in the blast northwest of the capital in the type of violence Washington hopes a grand coalition of Shias, Sunnis and Kurds will start to tackle after five months of stalemate.

Prime Minister-designate Nuri al-Maliki is juggling with a host of names put forward by the various political parties for the posts already broadly allocated to them, negotiators said.

Factional fighting within Maliki's own Shia Alliance bloc and others was complicating the task of appointing ministers to be confirmed in Saturday's expected parliamentary vote.



United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan (L) meets with Chinese President Hu Jintao in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Annan met with Hu on the first day of his China visit with North Korea, Iran and East Asian tensions on the agenda.

PHOTO: AFP

UN body urges US to
shut Guantanamo

Reuters, Geneva

The United Nations committee against torture told the United States on Friday it should close any secret prisons abroad and the Guantanamo Bay facility in Cuba, saying they violated international law.

The 10 independent experts, who examined the US record at home and abroad, urged President George W. Bush's administration to "rescind any interrogation technique" that constituted torture or cruel treatment of foreign terrorism detainees.

Secret detainees are deprived of fundamental legal rights and could face torture, according to the body, which regretted the US "no comment" policy on allegations of secret detention.

The United States is holding hundreds of terrorism suspects, most arrested since al-Qaeda's September 11 attacks in 2001, at its prisons in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay.

existence of any such facilities," said the committee, which has moral authority but no legal power to enforce its recommendations.

"Detaining persons in such conditions constitutes, per se, a violation of the Convention," said the committee, which examines compliance with the 1987 UN Convention against Torture, or other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Secret detainees are deprived of fundamental legal rights and could face torture, according to the body, which regretted the US "no comment" policy on allegations of secret detention.

The United States is holding hundreds of terrorism suspects, most arrested since al-Qaeda's September 11 attacks in 2001, at its prisons in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay.

Clashes erupt as Hamas
deploys gunmen in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Two Palestinian policemen were wounded early yesterday in the first clashes since Hamas deployed gunmen in the Gaza Strip, amid US warnings that rival paramilitaries are creating a dangerous situation.

Thousands of security forces, dominated by the once ruling Fatah, and gunmen loyal to the now governing Hamas deployed in strength for a second day running amid spiralling concerns about Palestinian civil unrest.

A Hamas gunman was also wounded.

The auxiliary force -- created without the consent of Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas, overall commander-in-chief of security -- comes under the direct command of Hamas interior minister Said Siam and is closely linked to the

Islamists' armed branch, the Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades.

Two Fatah loyalist policemen were lightly injured and a member of the new Hamas auxiliary security force more seriously hurt when tensions spilled over into overnight gunbattles in Gaza City overnight that broke up without causing any casualties.

On Friday, traditionally a Muslim day of rest and prayer for Palestinians, hundreds of security officers and Hamas militiamen were out in force -- in parts of Gaza City displaying an even greater show of strength than on Thursday.

Gunmen from the new unit patrolled the major intersections, short distances away from armed preventative security officers in downtown Gaza and outside the Shati refugee camp, an AFP reporter said.

Maoists back clipping
Nepal king's wings

But want more

Reuters, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels yesterday backed sweeping cuts of the king's powers but said the changes should not overshadow planned talks to end their one decade-old insurgency that aims to overthrow the monarchy.

The comments by the rebels came a day after Nepal's parliament, in a historic move, curtailed the powers of the king drastically and took away his control over the army.

The proclamation also declared the royal family had to pay taxes, scrapped the royal advisory council and declared Nepal was no longer a Hindu kingdom but a secular country.

It also said that the king's actions could be challenged in court and took over the power to make laws on the heir to the throne.

"Our party welcomes and supports it," the elusive rebel chief Prachanda said in a statement.

But it was not enough, he added.

The proclamation seemed to have interpreted last month's mass protests against the king and demands for a republic to mean that the monarch should remain a ceremonial head, Prachanda said.

"This is incomplete in itself."

He said the move was silent about "peace talks as a solution to the problem of a decade-old civil war and this has given rise to serious suspicion".

The Maoists have been fighting since 1996 to overthrow the monarchy and establish one-party communist rule. In November, the rebels and seven mainstream parties agreed to a loose pact against the king after he grabbed power in Feb. 2005.

They have agreed to talks aimed at ending a revolt that has killed more than 13,000 people.

They are also preparing for elections to a new assembly to draft a constitution and decide the future of the monarchy, a key rebel demand.

Some analysts have expressed doubts over the effectiveness of the proclamation, and said it could be challenged in court. But the multi-party government asserts that the document overrides the 1990 constitution and has the force of law.

Iran promises cooperation
with UN inspectors

AFP, Vienna/ Tehran

over Iran's nuclear programme, which the United States charges is a cover for secret development of atomic weapons.

IAEA officials have said this severely limits their ability to monitor nuclear activities in Iran.

Larijani's visit came as the European Union is readying a package of trade, technology and security benefits in return for Iran guaranteeing that its nuclear programme is peaceful.

"The discussion was that of course Iran is continuing its cooperation with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) and that inspectors will continue their work in accordance with the NPT (nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) comprehensive safeguards," Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Ali Asghar Soltanpour, told AFP Friday.

Iran is honouring its NPT safeguards obligations, which mandate the IAEA to verify that nuclear material is not being diverted from peaceful uses.

But it has cut off wider inspections, such as visits to sites not directly linked to the presence of nuclear material.

It did this after the IAEA in February referred Tehran to the UN Security Council due to concern

Iran has already rejected what is expected to be yet another call on it to stop uranium enrichment, the process that can produce either fuel for nuclear power reactors or the explosive core of atom bombs.

The Security Council had on March 29 asked Iran to honour IAEA calls for the Islamic Republic to

suspend its enrichment work and also to cooperate fully with an over-three-year-old IAEA investigation which is still unable to determine whether the Iranian nuclear programme is peaceful or weapons-related.

IAEA spokesman Marc Vidricaire said Larijani and ElBaradei had "talks about the usual things, issues that are still unanswered and of course the requirements of the (IAEA) board (of governors) to provide some confidence-building matters."

"The purpose of the meeting was really to discuss the remaining unanswered questions regarding Iran's past (nuclear) programme and the request by the board for confidence-building measures," Vidricaire said.

He did not provide details.

Earlier Iranian state television denied reports that Tehran had used Chinese uranium gas to accelerate enrichment for its controversial nuclear programme, insisting the gas was homemade.

China, which has veto power on the UN Security Council, has been a key player on both issues, and Annan's visit was expected to be closely watched by the international community.

Annan flew in from Tokyo to begin the third leg of his five-nation Asian tour, in which he has already spoken out on the global stand-offs over the Iranian and North Korean nuclear issues.

China, which has veto power on the UN Security Council, has been a key player on both issues, and Annan's visit was expected to be closely watched by the international community.

In Japan on Thursday, Annan said better diplomacy was needed from all sides in helping to resolve the two nuclear disputes, and warned the world was moving mindlessly towards a situation where all nations wanted nuclear weapons.

Israel's officials questioned by AFP refused to make any comment on the front-page Haaretz article.

The United States Thursday submitted the draft treaty to the Geneva disarmament conference on an international ban on producing fissile material such as uranium and plutonium for military purposes.

It was the first occasion that Washington had submitted a disarmament proposal since the end of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1990s.

The US draft does not cover stocks of fissile material and thus does not propose banning use of fissile material produced before the proposed treaty eventually enters into force.

Haaretz also said Washington rejected an Israeli request to purchase previously denied civilian nuclear technology, similar to an agreement with India, which is enriching uranium solely for civilian purposes.

Israel, US at odds on
nuclear treaty draft

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the United States are at odds over a draft