

### NEPALI PEACE DEAL UNSC backs Ban call

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Thursday backed a call by UN chief Ban Ki-moon to set up a small UN political mission in Nepal to monitor the recent peace accord between the government and Maoist rebels.

The issue was discussed during closed-door consultations by the 15-member council during which members "welcomed the intention of the parties to comply with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement," Russia's UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin told reporters.

Churkin, who chairs the council this month, said council members expressed support "for a speedy deployment of the UN mission in Nepal on the basis of recommendations of the secretary general and within parameters outlined by the peace agreement" signed in November.

He said the 15-member council would consider a draft resolution on the issue at an appropriate time.

In a report on Nepal released this week, Ban said the UN monitoring mission for Nepal would comprise unarmed military inspectors, electoral experts, and police and civil administration teams.

"While Nepal has made remarkable progress towards peace, the magnitude of the tasks ahead and the potential threats to the peace process must not be underestimated," said Ban, who succeeded Kofi Annan on January 1.

The proposed UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) has been requested by both parties in the decade-long conflict that killed over 13,000 people, displaced scores of thousands more, and left between 1,000 and 5,000 "disappeared."

Ban recommended that the mission be established for a period of 12 months.

After waging a bloody "people's war" in Nepal for a decade, the country's Maoists are poised to enter parliament next week in a step analysts say will test their pledge of the ballot over the bullet.

### Bangkok blasts won't delay vote: Thai junta

AFP, Bangkok

Deadly New Year's Eve bombings in Bangkok and the ensuing security clampdown will not delay elections promised for late this year, Thailand's military junta said yesterday.

Concerns mounted about the junta's intentions this week after the generals imposed a gag on broadcasters against reporting on ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra and visibly tightened security around the Thai capital.

Air Chief Marshal Chalit Pukhasauk, a member of the junta, said the process of writing a new constitution was proceeding on time and that elections would still be held before the end of the year.

"We are facilitating the drafting process so the constitution will be complete as soon as possible. Then we can hold elections by the end of the year. That's what everyone wants," he told reporters.

"Everything is proceeding according to plan," he said.

Chalit said the elections would end the political turmoil that has gripped Thailand for the last year.

He also defended the junta's decision this week to strip Thaksin of his diplomatic passport, which was announced along with a ban on broadcasters from reporting on the fallen premier.

"It's not about fairness. Holding a diplomatic passport is a privilege" that Thaksin no longer merits, he said.

The military ousted Thaksin in a bloodless coup on September 19, and quickly scrapped the constitution and imposed martial law.

The generals have promised to draft a new constitution that would prevent the corruption and abuse of power that Thaksin was accused of fomenting.

They also said they would hold elections by October, but raised concerns about their intentions as they have tightened their grip since the bombings that killed three in Bangkok.

## India threatens to use air force against Ulfa

AFP, New Delhi

India on Thursday threatened to use its air force against outlawed guerrillas blamed for a wave of ethnic attacks that have killed 69 people in the northeastern state of Assam.

The warning came as thousands of combat troops scoured dense jungles of two northeastern states for guerrillas of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), blamed for the recent killings in Assam.

"Operations against the militants will continue indefinitely until they are flushed out," India's junior defence minister Pallam Raju said.

"No timeframe has been fixed

for this, and if required, the Indian air force's help will be taken to deal with the rebels," the junior minister told reporters in the eastern Indian city of Bhubaneswar.

In 1999, India deployed French-made Mirage-2000 warjets against cross-border Islamic guerrillas occupying peaks in disputed Kashmir.

The assault cranked up military tensions between South Asian rivals India and Pakistan which left 1,000 combatants on both sides dead.

General JJ Singh, chief of India's million-plus military, promised to crush the Ulfa, a rebel army which has been fighting for a homeland in Assam state for 21 years.



PHOTO: STAR  
People watch footage of repression of political activists by previous four-party alliance government on a television set near the Awami League office at Bangabandhu Avenue in the city yesterday. The front organisations of the AL played CDs of the footage for viewing by people.

## US Guard strained by Iraq, but ready for more

REUTERS, Lexington, Ky

Lt Col Tony Sims is getting ready to go to Iraq with the Kentucky National Guard. He's told his pregnant wife and two daughters, age 4 and 6, and his employer, Microsoft, that he'll be gone by summer.

Sims said it doesn't matter that US President George W Bush wants a surge in troops, or that state governors complain about the war's strain on homeland security, or even that there isn't always enough equipment for training.

"We know we're going, so surge or not, we're going," said Sims, 39.

"Does anyone want to be away from their family longer than they have to be? No. But if we've got to go and stay a year, we stay a year. If we've got to go and stay five years, we stay five years."

Bush's decision to send 21,500 additional troops to Iraq will put further pressure on the National Guard, whose 458,000 citizen-soldiers have a dual mandate to protect the nation both at home and abroad. The plan would call some Guard troops into action again as the Pentagon speeds up active-duty deployments and extends the tours of some units in Iraq.

The Guard has already played a big role in Iraq. Ten percent of the 130,000 US troops there are Guard members. Of the more than 3,000 killed, nearly 400 were in the Guard, according to widely tracked Web site icasualties.org.

While a poll by ABC News and the Washington Post conducted after Bush announced his decision to send more troops found 61 percent of Americans oppose the increase, Sims supports the war. That attitude is shared by most Guard soldiers, according to Kentucky's commanding general.

But Maj Gen Donald Storm, whose Kentucky National Guard has about 1,060 troops in Iraq, said

the regular military is not big enough to protect the country, and more resources are needed to fill the gaps.

"We don't have the troops on active duty that makes it convenient for fighting the global war on terrorism, in my opinion," Storm said in an interview. "I would hope the National Guard gets bigger -- that's the more efficient and cost effective way to increase the size of the US military."

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said on Thursday he would recommend to Bush increasing the Army and Marine Corps by 92,000 troops over the next five years.

**EYES WIDE OPEN**

Defence analysts and commanders alike say the Guard will also need to extend the length of time a part-time soldier can be on active

"The army will put so much pressure on them (Ulfa) that they will come to the negotiating table for unconditional talks," Singh told the private NDTV television network.

The Press Trust of India, meanwhile, said combat formations were moving towards Myanmar's borders in a bid to hem in Ulfa guerrillas on the run.

Troops deployed in troubled Assam were pushing into the nearby Arunachal Pradesh state to cut off Ulfa rebels retreating into forests along the India-Myanmar borders, Major General NC Marwah told reporters.

### Japan, Nato move to deepen ties

AFP, Brussels

Japan and Nato took a new step forward in their relations Friday with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pledging to play a wider role in the military alliance's peacekeeping and stability missions.

In a move that could increase tensions with neighbours like China, Abe offered to send Japanese military personnel abroad on reconstruction and disaster relief operations, as well as involve them more in Afghanistan.

"There is enormous room for Japan and Nato to share their knowledge and experience in areas such as peace-building, reconstruction aid and disaster relief," he told Nato ambassadors.

"I propose to have regular meetings between Japan and Nato," he said, becoming the first Japanese premier to address the alliance's policy-making body, the North Atlantic Council.

Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said Japan and the alliance would have "flexible and pragmatic" relations that could touch on many areas.

### US blamed for raid on Iran embassy in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A night-time swoop by US forces on an Iranian office in northern Iraq triggered strong criticism yesterday, with Kurdish leaders and even Moscow branding the raid unacceptable.

In the early hours of Thursday, US troops dropped from helicopters stormed an Iranian liaison office in Iraqi Kurdistan and detained six Iranian employees.

The operation came on the heels of a warning by US President George W. Bush that he will not tolerate Iranian meddling in Iraq, where US commanders believe Tehran's agents arm militias and incite anti-American attacks.

The US military later said it had freed one of the six people detained in the controversial raid on the Iranian government building in Arbil, the capital of the northern Iraqi Kurdistan region.

Iraq's Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said the office had not yet become a full-fledged consulate, indicating that the raid had not violated any diplomatic protocols as had initially been claimed in Tehran.

"It is a liaison office. There was a request to change it into consulate," Zebari told AFP, adding that the office had been operational for 10 years.

"We had already agreed with the Iranians to open consulates in Arbil and Sulaimaniyah in return for opening (Iraqi) consulates in (Iranian cities) Mashhad and Ahwaz. These procedures have not been finalised," he said.

Asked about the remaining five detainees Zebari said: "They are not with us. They are with the Americans."



PHOTO: STAR  
With admission test over, a joyful girl runs up to her mother on the Vigarunnisa Noon School premises in the city yesterday, the last day of the admission test for class I.

## Ortega a changed man but still a leftist

REUTERS, Managua

One of a few men in history to take power first by force and later by ballot, Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega has matured since he rolled into Managua in a jeep with a rifle in hand leading a 1979 revolution.

Chastened by nearly 17 years in opposition, Ortega returned to office on Wednesday after promising to avoid his past mistakes that helped drive Nicaragua into a civil war with US-backed Contra rebels.

But the pull of the old days is still strong, and Ortega, who easily won a presidential election in November, is making friends with leaders seen in Washington as troublemakers.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, the most vocal US foe in Latin America, and his ally Bolivian President Evo Morales attended Ortega's inauguration. After Ortega took the oath of office, the three men raised their fists in the air in a sign of victory.

Ortega railed against "savage capitalism," saying it had left millions of Nicaraguans trapped in hunger, illiteracy and misery. "We now face the challenge of taking a new path, a path that allows Nicaraguan families to live with dignity," he said.

A far cry from the Cold War, when Nicaragua was a Soviet ally under Ortega's Sandinistas, the Central American nation is now a US partner and sent troops to Iraq briefly in 2003.

Nicaragua is in a regional free trade pact with Washington -- an agreement Ortega supports -- and

its economy would plummet without the money sent home by immigrants in the United States.

Ortega has also changed with the times.

Gone are the austere olive green military fatigues on a skinny frame, the unfashionable thick-rimmed glasses and the fiery rhetoric against "Yankee imperialism."

Instead, the balding Sandinista Party leader drives a Mercedes Benz sport utility vehicle, uses

contact lenses and dresses well. Only his thick mustache remains.

**PEACE AND LOVE?**

The former urban guerrilla who was jailed and tortured for fighting the US-backed dictatorship he later toppled now prefers to talk about God, peace, love and reconciliation.

Church leaders and senior former Contra rebel leaders have been won over, including his vice president, Jaime Morales.



PHOTO: STAR  
Artist Qayyum Chowdhury speaks at the inaugural ceremony of the screening of a documentary on 16 renowned artists at TIC auditorium in Chittagong yesterday. Bengal Foundation produced the documentary.



PHOTO: STAR  
Workers repair underground telephone cables on the busy Chatteshwari Road in Chittagong yesterday without putting up any security fencing around the manhole, thereby putting themselves at risk.