

CABINET OKAYS INTERIM CONSTITUTION

Maoists in Nepal set to enter parliament

AFP, Kathmandu

The transformation of Nepal's Maoists from rebels to mainstream politicians moved closer yesterday after the cabinet approved an interim constitution giving the ultra-leftists seats in a new parliament.

The rebels will hold 25 per cent of the seats in the temporary parliament.

"The cabinet meeting Sunday approved the finalised interim constitution due to be presented before parliament tomorrow," Deputy Prime Minister Amik Sherchan told AFP.

"The Maoists will enter parliament for the first time and the house session will pass the interim constitution on the same day after discussions," he added.

The former rebels fought a

violent "people's war" for a decade in the impoverished Himalayan nation to install a communist republic, but have now agreed to join mainstream politics.

The temporary constitution has provisions which formally remove the king's status as head of state, with his executive powers passing to the prime minister.

The interim constitution grants the former rebels 83 seats in a new 330-seat parliament. Among their delegates are representatives of marginalised groups never present in parliament in Nepal before.

The Maoists are expected to join the cabinet within a couple of weeks, but negotiations are still to take place on which posts they will hold.

Once former foes, the rebels

and government have observed a ceasefire for nearly nine months, and the rebels have agreed to place their weapons and army under UN monitoring.

The Maoists are expected to start placing their weapons in containers under UN supervision Monday, but as part of the peace deal the rebels will retain keys to the locked-up weapons.

The parliament due to be sworn in Monday will oversee elections to a body that will draft a new version of Nepal's constitution, and address the future of the monarchy, a long-held rebel demand.

The Maoists are keen to see Nepal become a republic but some other parties want a ceremonial monarchy.

Buddhist man beheaded in Thai south

AFP, Yala

A Buddhist man was beheaded after he and his wife were gunned down early yesterday in Thailand's Muslim-majority south, police said.

The Buddhist couple, both 38, were shot repeatedly as they were riding a motorcycle home after finishing their work tapping trees on a rubber plantation in Yala, one of three provinces wracked by a three-year insurgency.

The militants apparently dragged the man's body off the motorcycle and then cut off his head, which they dropped on the roadside some 20 meters (yards) away, police added.

The militants, who never claim responsibility for their near-daily attacks, left three notes written in Thai near the bodies, identifying themselves as the "Pattani fighters" and saying: "You arrested our men, so we will kill yours."

Pattani is another of the provinces hit by the separatist insurgency, and was also the name of the autonomous Malay sultanate that controlled this region until it was annexed by Buddhist Thailand more than a century ago.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai teachers and students attend a school function as guns of security officials lie on a table in Thailand's restive southern Narathiwat province.

Asia on high alert for bird flu resurgence

AFP, Hanoi

Four bird flu deaths in Indonesia and a spate of new poultry outbreaks in Vietnam and elsewhere in Asia are signs the virus could make a resurgence this northern winter, health experts warn.

While most Asian countries are better prepared than they were a year ago to prevent or contain the spread of avian influenza, epidemiologists say there is no room for complacency about the virus that remains widespread in the region.

"The concern is still there," said Hans Troedsson, head of the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Vietnam, where after a one-year hiatus bird flu has spread across dozens of farms in six southern provinces in recent weeks.

"What we see an indication of -- not only in Vietnam with the poultry outbreaks, but also with the human cases in China and Indonesia and so on -- is that the virus is still here," he said.

"And it still has the potential capability to change, and to change in the worst scenario into a virus strain that could cause a pandemic through being easily transmitted from human to human."

Asian nations have raised their alert level as four people died of bird flu in Indonesia last week, China and South Korea reported new human infections, and the virus has spread across farms in Vietnam's southern Mekong Delta.

"There is a seasonal pattern of the influenza virus," said Troedsson. "It is more active when it's colder. When the temperature goes down, usually all the respira-

tory infection viruses get more active.

"People's behaviour during winter time also changes. They spend more time inside homes, and homes are more crowded, so they expose each other to the risk of spreading the virus."

For now, experts say, there is no evidence the lethal virus has mutated to spread easily among humans, and no cause for alarm.

China last week reported its first human case of bird flu in six months, but the farmer who fell ill made a full recovery.

"We need to be vigilant all year round, but this case shouldn't be seen as particular cause for alarm," said WHO spokeswoman Joanna Brent.

"One isolated case in six months is certainly not a sign for worry, and the threat level to humans remains unchanged."

But experts also warn that the risk will increase when China, Vietnam and other Asian countries celebrate the Lunar New Year in mid-February, when the movement of both poultry and people sharply increases.

Migratory birds also continue to pose a risk, warned York Chow, the health secretary of Hong Kong, where a dead wild bird has just tested positive for a milder strain of the bird flu virus.

"This is the real risk that the whole world is facing," Chow said Saturday.

Since bird flu swept from Asia to the Middle East, Europe and Africa last winter, UN agencies and governments have improved surveillance and vaccinations, boosted health services and stockpiled anti-

viral drugs.

But gaps remain, both in vaccination drives and in spreading information about the virus to small poultry farmers in many remote Asian regions.

In Indonesia, which last year overtook Vietnam as the worst hit country and has now recorded 61 human deaths, government health official I Nyoman Kandun said education remained the priority in

the fight against bird flu.

"The people need to be involved," he said. "It is (the government's) job to package the information such that it is easily understood by everyone."

"Indonesia is vast and we have a culture of keeping poultry and other animals near the home," said Kandun. "This needs to change, or extra precautions need to be practised."

Officials in the archipelago main-

tain that vaccination drives have proven effective, but they also say they only have enough doses to effectively vaccinate about 10 per cent of backyard poultry this year.

In Thailand, disease control chief Thawat Sunthrajarn said there was cause for neither alarm nor complacency, but added that the kingdom was "on high alert after the reported resurgence in Vietnam and China."



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (L) and Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas address a joint press conference in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Rice arrived in Ramallah for talks with Mahmud Abbas for reviving the stalled Middle East peace process.

US MOVE AT SECURITY COUNCIL

Myanmar continues to dog Asian diplomacy

AFP, Cebu, Philippines

Myanmar has once again dogged the best efforts of Asian diplomacy after Southeast Asian leaders bridled at US attempts to have the UN Security Council condemn the army-ruled state.

Leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) said after their summit that they should take primary responsibility for handling member Myanmar, which the United States wanted to target with international pressure.

But the statement was delayed until Sunday, a day later than had been promised, and a diplomatic source said negotiations over just what to say about the country's troublesome leadership were to blame.

According to an Asean document seen on Sunday, Philippine President Gloria Arroyo -- the summit host and current Asean chair -- took a much stronger stance than the bloc in a meeting with Myanmar Prime Minister Soe Win.

The statement from the 10-nation Asean bloc, which has been at odds over how to handle its most notorious member, said the unresolved issue had put its own credibility at stake.

"We agreed on the need to preserve Asean's credibility as an

effective regional organisation by demonstrating a capacity to manage important issues in the region," Asean said in the official summit statement.

It encouraged Myanmar to "make greater progress towards national reconciliation" and called for the release of detainees as well as dialogue with all parties concerned.

But in her meeting with the Myanmar prime minister, Arroyo expressed hope the extension of Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest last May "would be the last."

She said the fact that Myanmar had allowed a UN envoy to meet the Nobel Peace Prize winner -- detained for most of the last two decades -- was encouraging but called for "more concrete and meaningful results" in future.

Arroyo also said Myanmar should consider the desire expressed by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy, which won elections in 1990 but was never allowed to govern, to be consulted by the government.

The president said there was "tremendous concern" in the international community about the 61-year-old democracy activist, and expressed hope that her request for more regular medical attention would be granted.

China and Russia used a rare double veto in the Security Council on Friday to sink the US resolution, which would have called on the junta to free the estimated 1,000 political prisoners in the impoverished country.

New genetic clue to Alzheimer's found

AFP, New York

Researchers have identified a second gene responsible for the most common form of Alzheimer's disease, a development that may make it easier to screen for, and ultimately treat, this devastating brain condition, a study released yesterday said.

In genetic studies involving some 6,000 volunteers, the researchers discovered that variants of the gene SORL1 were more common in people with late-onset Alzheimer's than in healthy people the same age.

The Alzheimer's victims also had a strikingly low level of the SORL1 protein in the blood compared with healthy people -- less than 50 percent of the level seen in the healthy group.

In healthy people, SORL1, which is a "traffic cop" regulating

the flow of amyloid precursor protein (APP) inside nerve cells in the brain, drives the protein to a part of the cell where it is recycled.

But in people with the gene variants, the gene appears to drive APP to another region of the cell where it accumulates and is degraded into amyloid plaques -- the abnormal sticky proteins that gum up the brain of Alzheimer's victims, the researchers said, citing laboratory experiments.

"The importance of the finding is that it opens new pathways to explore the cause of the disease, as well as potential targets for treatment," said Richard Mayeux, co-director of the Taub Institute for Research on Alzheimer's Disease and the Aging Brain, and one of the authors of the paper.