

Nepali Maoists to join govt in Feb: PM

UN asks Kathmandu to book rights violators

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's former Maoist rebels will join an interim government in February, the Himalayan nation's prime minister said, capping a fast-moving peace process that is ending a decade-old civil war.

Earlier this week, the Maoists joined an interim parliament, began handing over weapons and dissolved their parallel government and "people's courts" under a November peace pact aimed at ending an insurgency in which over 13,000 people died.

"The interim government including the Maoists will be set up in 15-20 days at the latest," Girija Prasad Koirala said on state television on Friday.

The interim administration aims to organise elections for a special assembly to prepare a new constitution and decide the future of the monarchy, which the Maoists want abolished. The polls are expected to take place in June.



The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour (L) addresses a press conference as Chief of Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal, Lena Sundh (R) looks on in Kathmandu yesterday.

The Maoists began fighting the monarchy in 1996, but declared a ceasefire last year after mass street demonstrations forced King Gyanendra to give up direct rule.

The former rebels hope the constituent assembly will end the centuries-old monarchy and lead to establishment of a republic.

Koirala said the interim administration would be named after the UN-monitored arms handover.

Meanwhile, the United Nations called Friday for human rights violators to be brought to account now that Nepal's decade-long conflict is over.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour told a news conference she would meet Nepal's prime minister and Maoist leader to seek an end to "impunity" and see that a fair legal system is established.

"I don't underestimate the challenges that the country faces," Arbour said in the capital Kathmandu.

Anti-Ulfa sweep to cover more states

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Guwahati

A major counter-insurgency offensive in Assam is to be extended to neighbouring states to crack down on separatists blamed for the killing of scores of Hindi-speaking people.

More than 27,000 army, police, and paramilitary personnel are engaged in a massive operation in Assam against the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa), blamed for a recent wave of violence that killed 76 people.

"The operations are likely to be extended beyond Assam and cover Meghalaya as well. Troops are already combing select jungle areas in Arunachal Pradesh," an army official said.

"The coordinated offensive is required as Ulfa cadres are escaping to Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya from Assam," the official said.

Top army commanders, along with senior police officials from Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya, met on Friday at a military base here.

A meeting of the unified command involving the army, Border Security Force, Central Reserve Police Force and police officials from Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh was held, an army statement said.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan troops and civilians look at the bullet-riddled bodies of three Tamil civilians shot dead in the northern Sri Lankan town of Vavuniya yesterday.

Thousands flee Lanka rebel-held territory

REUTERS, Colombo

fighting overnight. The military said sporadic fighting continued.

"Once the civilians have come out, the security forces will be able to get control over Vakarai. It will be very soon," said military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe. "But we don't know what the LTTE will do – whether they will withdraw or fight."

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were not immediately available for comment.

Vakarai is in the middle of a 20-km long pocket of rebel-held territory, which the military has surrounded after capturing rebel-held territory a few miles away, some carrying white flags.

"Some of the people are making their way down the coast, others are coming through jungle in vehicles," said Selvaraj Jeyaraj, project coordinator for the Italian Red Cross, told Reuters by telephone from the eastern district of Batticaloa.

"More tourists should come back and forth. Pakistan has unilaterally increased visas and I am sure India will do the same. We want more flights to go back and forth so that our people can visit each other's cities."

Aziz denied that any al-Qaeda leader lived in Pakistan but admitted that Taliban fighters may be freely moving back and forth across the porous border with Afghanistan.

"We are trying to regulate the border but with three million refugees living close to the border, the camps are safe haven for many Taliban fighters who are difficult to distinguish," he said.

Aziz rejected media reports that

journalists have been clamouring for weeks to access rebel-held areas, which the government has refused.

The area around Vakarai is one of several pockets of territory the Tigers control in the island's east under the terms of a tattered 2002 ceasefire -- and is their last remaining direct access to the sea in the east, an important supply line.

"This is a very clear indication that the fighting there is going to intensify," said Iqbal Athas, an analyst with Jane's Defence Weekly. "A show down (over Vakarai) is imminent."

The Tigers resumed their fight for an independent state for minority Tamils in the north and east after the majority Sinhalese government rejected their demands for a separate homeland.

Mindful of a rash of suicide bombings, air raids and land and sea battles in recent months, analysts fear this new chapter in a war that has killed more than 67,000 people since 1983 could escalate.

Aid agencies, embassies and

Israel transfers \$100 million to Abbas

Tel Aviv freezes building of new settlement

REUTERS, AFP, Jerusalem

Israel transferred \$100 million in withheld Palestinian tax revenue to President Mahmoud Abbas yesterday, part of a US-led push to bolster the moderate leader in his power struggle with Hamas, Israeli officials said.

The transfer was the first by Israel since Hamas, whose charter calls for the Jewish state's destruction, came to power last year.

"The money has been transferred," a senior official in Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's office said.

The United States has been pressing Israel to strengthen Abbas in his rivalry with the Islamist Hamas movement which took control of the Palestinian Authority in March and has been building up its own "Executive Force."

Israeli officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, have said the money would be earmarked for humanitarian needs and a US-

backed programme to strengthen Abbas's presidential guard.

They said it will not be used by Abbas to make long-overdue salary payments to Palestinian public sector workers, hard hit by a Western and Israeli embargo of the Hamas-led government.

A senior aide to Abbas, Saeb Erekat, said the funds would be channeled to humanitarian projects and the private sector, but declined to say whether any would go toward boosting Abbas's security.

Since Hamas defeated Fatah in parliamentary elections last year, Israel has withheld nearly \$500 million in Palestinian tax revenues, money that would normally be used by the Palestinian Authority to pay government workers.

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum criticised the decision not to allocate the funds for salaries.

"The dangerous thing about what happened was first it bypassed the Palestinian legitimate government and the ministry of finance, and second it has given

the occupation the right to determine where the money should go," he said.

During his first formal meeting with Abbas on December 23, Olmert promised to hand over the \$100 million and to remove roadblocks in the occupied West Bank.

Commenting on External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee's Jan 13-14 visit to Islamabad, Aziz told CNN-IBN that some headway had been made over recent proposals from President Pervez Musharraf aimed at resolving the Kashmir row.

"As we see progress on Kashmir, that will determine the progress on economic relations. We have to reach a point where India, Pakistan and the Kashmiri people are happy, and that will take courage, magnanimity, flexibility and leadership," he said.

Aziz said Islamabad would keep its commitment on implementing the South Asia Free Trade Agreement, an outstanding issue Mukherjee brought up in his discussions with Pakistani leaders.

"As soon as the non-tariff barriers are removed and Pakistan is convinced it has a level playing field, we will open up more economic relations," he said.

Indo-Pak trust deficits down, says Aziz

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

"Trust deficit" between India and Pakistan has come down in the past three years but more progress will hinge on negotiations on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, says Prime Minister Manmohan Singh must visit Pakistan first.

President Musharraf did attend the summit when there was no prime minister in Pakistan ... Prime Minister Singh has the highest respect of the president and myself,"

Aziz said he was satisfied with the progress in the India-Pakistan dialogue process.

"More tourists should come back and forth. Pakistan has unilaterally increased visas and I am sure India will do the same. We want more flights to go back and forth so that our people can visit each other's cities."

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Asian nations express concern over China's anti-sat missile test

AP, Tokyo

China's anti-satellite weapons test raised concerns in Asia and the US yesterday about the rising militarisation of space and prompted governments to demand explanations from Beijing.

The United States said China conducted the test earlier this month in which an old Chinese weather satellite was destroyed by a missile.

Analysts said China's weather satellites would travel at about the same altitude as US spy satellites, so the test represented an indirect threat to US defence systems.

Officials in Japan and Australia immediately demanded China explain its actions.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, who was in New York, said Sydney opposed the test and had called upon Beijing's ambassador to Australia, Madame Fu Ying, for an explanation.

"Our concern about this is that to

Deal reached in US nuke talks: N Korea

AP, Seoul

North Korea said it reached an unspecified agreement with the US this week on its nuclear weapons programme, but America's top nuclear envoy said Friday he was unaware of any such deal.

North Korea's Foreign Ministry said the talks between US envoy Christopher Hill and North Korea's main nuclear negotiator Kim Kyu Gwan had been held "in a positive and sincere atmosphere and a certain agreement was reached there." No further details were given.

But Hill, who arrived Friday in Seoul, said he wasn't sure what agreement the statement was referring to. He called the talks in Berlin "very useful discussions" and added he was pleased that it appeared the North was also positive about them.

Hill and Kim met for three days and were believed to be discussing when to convene the next session of international talks on the North's nuclear programmes, among other issues.

BIG BROTHER ROW Brown throws weight behind Shilpa

REUTERS, Mumbai

Visiting one of Bollywood's top studios, Britain's Finance Minister Gordon Brown threw his weight behind actress Shilpa Shetty who has been shortlisted for eviction by fellow housemates on the show and face off in a public vote on Friday. Goody is hot favourite to be kicked out.

"It is pretty clear how people in this Bollywood studio would vote if they had to vote," Brown added.

Brown received a red carpet welcome from Bollywood despite the "Big Brother" controversy, which has even seen the Indian government ask Britain if race laws have been broken.

Brown, taking time off from meetings with Indian business leaders and politicians, was shown a Bollywood dance sequence involving some of India's biggest stars.

His visit was scheduled before the "Big Brother" row.

Bollywood, the Hindi-language film industry, makes around 1,000 movies a year and has become increasingly popular in Britain.

have a capacity to shoot down satellites in outer space is not consistent with ... the traditional Chinese position of opposition to the militarisation of outer space," he told reporters.

"So we've asked the Chinese for an explanation as to what this may mean," Downer said, adding that so far Chinese officials, including the ambassador in Canberra, said they are not aware of the incident.

The US Department of Defence would not comment on the test, but other American officials said it raised serious concerns in Washington.

"The United States believes China's development and testing of such weapons is inconsistent with the spirit of cooperation that both countries aspire to in the civil space area," National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johnstone said Thursday. "We and other countries have expressed our concern to the Chinese."

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Computer virus uses European storms to spread globally

AFP, Helsinki

A computer virus made use of devastating storms sweeping across Europe to infect email systems and spread rapidly throughout the world, a Finnish IT security company said Friday.

The virus appeared in emails with the subject line "230 dead as storm batters Europe" and attachments bearing names such as "Full Clip.exe", "Full Story.exe", "Read More.exe" and "Video.exe".

The programme infects computers when users click on the message.

"A significant network attack was launched globally in the early hours of Thursday morning using news of a European storm as the hook to lure the unsuspecting," anti-virus programme producer F-Secure said in a statement.

Workers try to remove fallen trees from a main road yesterday near Renneroth, western Germany, after the storm "Kyrill" swept across the country. The storm that lashed northern Europe killed 44 people, halted rail services and forced the closure of Berlin's central train station after a girder collapsed.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers, government officials and professional swimmers prepare to search for bodies following the sinking of a boat on the Krishna River getting at Manchala Katta village, some 200kms from Hyderabad yesterday. Some 66 people were feared drowned when an overcrowded boat sank in a river on Thursday in southern India.



Workers try to remove fallen trees from a main road yesterday near Renneroth, western Germany, after the storm "Kyrill" swept across the country. The storm that lashed northern Europe killed 44 people, halted rail services and forced the closure of Berlin's central train station after a girder collapsed.

PHOTO: AFP