



A Nepalese driver steers an agricultural vehicle being used as a makeshift form of public transport along a street in Kathmandu yesterday on the second day of a transportation strike.

Unrest threatens to derail Nepali peace

PM holds emergency meet as protester dies in police firing

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's prime minister convened an emergency meeting of the ruling alliance and former Maoist rebels yesterday as violent unrest threatened to derail a fast-moving peace process aimed at ending a decade-old civil war.

Dozens of government offices and buses were torched over the weekend by ethnic Madhesi peoples of the southern plains after a Maoist activist shot dead a 16-year-old boy during a Madhesi demonstration against a recently passed interim constitution.

The violence in the southeastern town of Lahan sparked a trans-

port strike that paralysed much of the Himalayan kingdom on Monday as Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala met with leading politicians.

The strike was called by transport companies to protest against the attacks on their vehicles.

The Madhesi People's Rights Forum, which organised the demonstration, opposes the new constitution, which incorporates Maoists into the political mainstream after an insurgency against the monarchy in which over 13,000 people were killed.

They say it offers little for people living in the southern plains, which is impoverished Nepal's breadbasket. They want more jobs and funds

from the central government.

"The concerns of the people living in the Terai should be adequately addressed in the interim constitution," defence analyst Bishnu Raj Upreti said.

"Otherwise there is a risk of a serious conflict between the people from the hills and the plains," he said.

"This could develop as a separatist movement if not properly addressed in time," Upreti added.

The government says forces opposed to the peace deal were conspiring to create the unrest.

The Madhesh region, also known as Terai, is a narrow, fertile strip of southern Nepal. It holds

about half the country's population and many people have closer cultural links to nearby India than Nepal's highlands.

Meanwhile, one protester was killed by police in southeastern Nepal Monday as violence in the impoverished southeast of the Himalayan nation went into its third day, official media said.

In the capital Kathmandu, the government and former Maoist insurgents met to discuss the violence sparked by last week's shooting of 16-year-old boy during a scuffle between Maoists and activists opposed to their entering the political mainstream.

Russia reaffirms defence partnership with India

AFP, New Delhi

Russia will maintain its military links with old ally India despite New Delhi's warming ties with other countries, including the United States, Russia's defence minister was quoted as saying yesterday.

Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov -- who starts a five-day visit to India Monday -- said in an interview that Moscow was not "afraid of competition".

"India and Russia have been successfully developing strategic cooperation for more than a decade now," Ivanov told the Times of India.

"It's based on similarity, and sometimes coincidence of approaches to resolution of the key problems of our times."

Cold War allies India and Russia have increasingly been developing joint defence projects, with some production already carried out in India under licence, including of Su-30 MKI fighter jets and T-90 tanks.

US envoy sees basis for N Korea talks progress

REUTERS, Beijing

A US envoy said on Monday China could announce a date soon for a resumption of six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear programme and he saw a basis for progress.

China hosts the talks, grouping the two Koreas, the United States, Japan and Russia, which began in 2003 with the aim of persuading Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear arms ambitions. The last session in December broke up inconclusively.

"We hope that the Chinese government will be able to announce soon the start-up of the talks," US Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill told reporters before returning to Washington, adding that Beijing would have to consult other participating countries before setting a date.

The urgency of making headway in the talks has grown since reclusive, communist North Korea defied international warnings last October and conducted its first nuclear test, triggering UN sanctions.

Talk peace or face more war

Lanka to rebels

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government vowed yesterday to stamp out Tamil Tigers from swathes of jungle in the island's east after capturing a key stronghold, but said the rebels could avoid more fighting if they agree to peace talks.

Sri Lanka's government drove out the Tigers from their last coastal enclave in the east on Friday -- territory which belonged to the rebels under the terms of a now tattered 2002 ceasefire -- after weeks of fierce artillery duels.

The government's ultimatum came hours after the military and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) clashed at sea off the island's northern tip and as troops scoured for routed Tigers trying to withdraw to camps in the jungles of Toppigala in the east.

"Toppigala is a bit of a volatile

area, which runs the risk of forces being attacked from time to time, so we will have to eliminate that risk as well," defence spokesman and government minister Kehelika Rambukwella said in a telephone interview.

"If tomorrow the LTTE says 'we are ready to stop hostilities and get back to the negotiating table', we will stop immediately," he added. "If they do not, then we'll have to liberate the Tamil civilians in the east and then call (the Tigers) for negotiations."

He said the government was not threatening to banish the Tigers from their main northern base, which analysts say would trigger an all-out return to a conflict that has killed more than 67,000 civilians, troops and rebels since 1983.

Nordic truce monitors say both sides have repeatedly violated the ceasefire agreement, which now

holds only on paper. Evicting the Tigers from the east is one such violation.

"In the context of what they have done with the ceasefire agreement, the Sri Lankan government has a big way to go to prove their commitment to any kind of negotiated settlement," Tiger military spokesman Rasiiah Ilanathirayan said by telephone from the rebels' northern base of Kilinochchi.

Meanwhile, Tamil Tiger rebels shot dead two soldiers and two policemen in Sri Lanka's embattled northeast as security forces dug in at a town seized from the guerrillas, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The two soldiers were shot on Sunday night in the eastern district of Batticaloa, where troops captured the main rebel bastion of Vakkarai town on Friday, the ministry said, adding a Tiger rebel was also killed.



Sri Lankan policemen remove the body of a civilian shot dead yesterday by unidentified gunmen in the northern town of Vavuniya. The killings came amid an upsurge in violence across the island's northern and eastern regions where troops and Tamil Tiger rebels were locked in fighting.

Anti-missile shield not aimed at Russia: US

REUTERS, Warsaw

The placing of a US anti-missile system on Polish and Czech soil would strengthen Europe's defence against a rogue nuclear attack, a senior US official was quoted on Monday as saying.

Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried told the Polish daily Rzeczpospolita that Russia, which had been critical of the project in the past, had nothing to fear.

"We believe that building infrastructure of the anti-missile shield in Poland and the Czech (Republic) will significantly boost the defences of a united Europe," Fried said. "I want to stress that the anti-missile system is not aimed at Russia."

Fried confirmed reports that Washington had made a specific offer to Warsaw and Prague last week to start detailed negotiations, which he said could last for months.

Indian police patrol riot-hit Bangalore

REUTERS, Bangalore

Federal police were deployed and schools were shut in India's technology hub of Bangalore on Monday after communal rioting between Hindus and Muslims left one 12-year-old boy dead and dozens of people hurt.

Protests by thousands of Muslims against last month's execution of Saddam Hussein in Iraq sparked a chain of violence over the weekend between the minority Muslims and nationalist Hindus, police and witnesses said.

Riot police patrolled empty streets of downtown Bangalore on Monday but operations in the city's numerous software firms and call centre, mostly outside the city centre, were unaffected.

"We are working. There is no change in our schedule," said a spokeswoman for Infosys Technologies Ltd. India's second-largest software exporter.

Muslims protesting against the execution of Iraq's toppled president clashed with police on Friday, ransacking shops owned by Hindus and burning at least 15 cars.



Hamas exiled political supremo Khaled Meshaal (L) and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas hold a press conference in Damascus Sunday. Abbas and Meshaal said that during long-awaited talks in Damascus Sunday they had made progress on key differences but had not yet reached accord on a government of national unity.

Palestinian factions set to resume unity govt talks

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinians were preparing yesterday to press on with efforts to form a national unity government after inconclusive talks between Khaled Meshaal, leader of the ruling Hamas movement, and president Mahmud Abbas, head of the rival Fatah party.

A statement from the umbrella group of Palestinian factions said a meeting would take place in Gaza City on Tuesday between representatives of Fatah and Hamas, but gave no further details.

"We hope to achieve an inter-Palestinian understanding through this dialogue, because the Palestinian people and the factions have no alternative," said Hamas spokesman Ismail Radwan.

Speaking for Fatah, Tawfiq Abu Khusa called for "serious and responsible" talks.

"We need a government capable of lifting the blockade, reducing the suffering of our people and getting the Palestinian cause back on the international agenda," he added.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat, speaking from Damascus, echoed Abu Khusa, while stressing that the new government's political

programme would have to be "acceptable to the Palestinians, the Arabs and the international community."

He said the talks would last for two weeks.

Abbas and Meshaal said after their meeting in Damascus on Sunday that their respective factions were committed to further dialogue "within two weeks" to try to resolve remaining differences.

The talks had been touted as key to resolving the long-running feud between Fatah and Hamas, where intermittent violence that boiled over in December left more than 30 people dead.

Fatah and Hamas have tried for months to agree on a unity government in the hope of ending a boycott and aid freeze by the United States and the European Union that crippled the already staggering Palestinian economy.

Washington and the EU consider Hamas to be a terrorist group and suspended direct financial aid to the Palestinians after it took power in March because the Islamists refuse to renounce violence or recognise Israel's right to exist.

Musharraf seeks to unify Muslim ranks on Middle East tour

AFP, Sharm el-Sheikh

The leaders of Pakistan and Egypt said yesterday that Muslim countries should unite to buck the trend in a region plagued by violence and extremism and push for lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace.

"There is a need for consensus among Muslim states, Arabs and non-Arabs," Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri told reporters after a meeting between President Pervez Musharraf and his Egyptian counterpart Hosni Mubarak.

"Both of them feel there is a need for a new initiative on Palestine as well as one combatting the forces of extremism all over the Muslim world," Kasuri said.

Musharraf already held talks with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah on Sunday before arriving in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh for talks with Egyptian officials.

"What is expected today is for a group of Muslim and Arab countries to mobilise the Muslim world and lead it, both towards an internal agreement and in its dealings with the outside world," Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said.

India urges Myanmar to evict rebels

AFP, New Delhi

New Delhi has urged neighbour Myanmar to evict anti-India insurgent groups operating out of bases there, a foreign ministry statement here said Sunday.

"While welcoming Myanmar's commitment not to allow its territory to be used for activities inimical to India, (India's foreign) minister sought their continued and sustained cooperation in this regard," the statement said.

The issue was discussed at meetings between India's visiting foreign minister Pranab Mukherjee and Myanmar leaders in Yangon, said the statement, issued at the end of Mukherjee's three-day visit.

Indian intelligence officials say at least half a dozen separatist rebel groups, including the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) and a faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, operate out of bases in Myanmar's northern Sagaing division.

The Ulfa, which is battling Indian troops in the northeastern state of Assam, has been blamed for the recent deaths of 61 Hindi-speaking migrant workers and a

string of bombings in the province.

India and Myanmar share a 1,600-kilometre (1,000-mile) unfenced border that New Delhi says helps the rebels to make quick getaways after mounting attacks in India's tea, timber and oil-rich northeast.

Yangon has repeatedly assured New Delhi that it will not let Indian rebels operate from its soil.

Last month, Myanmar launched a military crackdown against the Naga rebels with heavy fighting reported between Myanmar troops and the guerrillas.

More than 50,000 people have been killed in violence in India's northeast since 1947.

During his visit that began Friday, Mukherjee also sought to deepen economic links with what he called a "close and friendly neighbour."

The Indian minister sought the "early conclusion of a bilateral investment promotion treaty and an agreement on avoidance of double taxation," besides ways to strengthen energy cooperation, the statement added.

Troops open fire on Mogadishu protest: 4 die

REUTERS, Mogadishu

Ethiopian troops and Somali police opened fire on Mogadishu demonstrators yesterday, killing at least four in the latest violence in parts of the capital where support for ousted Islamists ran high, a witness said.

Protesters hurled stones and some fired back with assault rifles at the joint security forces, said a local journalist who asked not to be named. At least five people were wounded.

The witness said Ethiopian troops returned to a livestock market in the north of the coastal city where an attack on an Ethiopian military convoy triggered a heavy battle on Saturday.

"The Ethiopians used something like a bazooka to break down the gate of a house in the area, then they arrested two men inside," the reporter said. "Locals began throwing stones at them, some shot rifles, and then the Ethiopians returned fire."

Senators seek support for Iraq resolution

Bush rejects timetables for Iraq pullout

AP, AFP, Washington

Two leading Senate Democrats are seeking to dispel concerns that a resolution on Iraq doesn't go far enough, saying it would make a strong statement to President Bush that a troop increase is wrong.

"It will be a very powerful message if a bipartisan majority of the Congress say that they disagree with the increased military involvement in Iraq," said Sen Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

Division over whether Democrats should push a stronger measure could spell defeat for the resolution, he cautioned.

"The worst thing we can do is to vote on something which is critical of the current policy and lose it," said Levin, D-Michigan. "If we lose that vote, the president will use the defeat of a resolution as support for his

public policy."

Bush, meanwhile, says in a new interview that the best way to convince sceptics "that this makes sense is to implement it and show them that it works."

He also told USA Today in Monday's editions he will argue in his State of the Union speech next week that "what happens in Iraq matters to your security here at home."

Asked in the interview, conducted Friday, whether Iraq would be a problem after he leaves office in January 2009, Bush said: "The war on terror will be a problem for the next president. Presidents after me will be confronting ... an enemy that would like to strike the United States again."

The new Democratic-led Congress heads this week toward its first vote on the war, with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee planning to begin debate Wednesday on

the nonbinding resolution condemning Bush's plan to send 21,500 more troops.

Meanwhile, US President George W Bush yesterday distanced himself from predictions US troops could begin leaving Iraq by late summer, stating bluntly he would accept no timetable for such a pullout.

"We don't set timetables in this administration because an enemy will adjust their tactics based upon perceived action by the United States," Bush told the USA Today newspaper.

The comment signalled a stiffening of his position ahead of a brewing confrontation with Democratic-controlled Congress, which is juggling proposals to begin "redeploying" 132,000 US troops from Iraq in four to six months.



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (R) speaks with his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf (L) during a meeting in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh yesterday. The leaders of Pakistan and Egypt said Monday that Muslim countries should unite to buck the trend in a region plagued by violence and extremism, and push for lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace.

'Castro is dead' spam email infects computers

AFP, Madrid

A spam e-mail with messages including "Fidel Castro dead" and "Saddam Hussein safe and sound" contains a virus which has infected thousands of computers, Spain's Association of Internauts said yesterday.

With speculation rife about the Cuban leader's health, the association said that a computer would be infected by the virus if the recipient opened the message.

"The virus is affecting thousands of computers," the association said.

Other messages sent with the virus include Venezuelan President "Hugo Chavez dead", "President of Russia Putin dead", and "US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has kicked German Chancellor Angela Merkel."

Another read: "The (US) Supreme Court has been attacked by terrorists."