

Nepal's Maoists urge US to remove them from 'terrorist' list

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's former rebel Maoists called Friday on the United States to remove them from its list of foreign terrorist groups, accusing Washington of ignoring the country's peace deal.

After signing the landmark deal last November, renouncing violence after a decade of war and taking up seats in parliament, the Maoists say they are now an integral part of the new political landscape.

"We are not terrorists anymore in the eyes of government," Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara told AFP.

"The US is ignoring the new political developments that have occurred in our country. We request the US to change its old policy."

The former rebel movement is now registering fighters and weapons with the United Nations.

But the US ambassador to Nepal, James Moriarty, told journalists last week that the Maoists were likely to "cheat" in the registration process and urged them to disarm completely before being allowed into government.

"I think everybody here believes that the Maoists will try to cheat. They are trying to buy primitive hand-made weapons from Bihar so that they can put crummy weapons into the containers instead of their modern weapons," he said.

He also said the Maoists would "retain their private army" until later this year when the country is supposed to vote for a body that will

redraw Nepal's constitution.

"They will use that to create the condition for an election that is not free and fair," Moriarty said.

But another senior Maoist described the US position as "contradictory."

"On one hand they have welcomed the interim constitution and formation of (an) interim legislature but on the other hand they have hinted they would not cooperate with the ministries led by our party. This is contradictory," said Suresh Ale Magar, a new Maoist member of

the recently sworn-in parliament.

As part of the peace deal signed last November, a new interim constitution has been passed and the former rebels have been given 83 of the 303 seats in a temporary parliament.

Their transition from jungle guerillas to lawmakers came after a decade of bloody civil war that killed at least 13,000 people, during which the United States provided millions of dollars worth of military aid to the government in Kathmandu.

Strike shuts Kashmir on India's Republic Day

AFP, Srinagar

Revolt-hit Indian Kashmir was crippled by a one-day strike Friday called by Islamic militants and separatists as the rest of the country celebrated Republic Day.

The shutdown left many streets deserted in the summer capital Srinagar, the urban hub of Muslim rebels who have been waging an insurgency against Indian rule since 1989.

All shops and businesses were closed as police and paramilitary forces equipped with bomb detectors patrolled sensitive areas.

The strike, called by both moderate and hardline factions of the

region's main separatist alliance, was also in force in other Muslim-dominated towns, police and residents said.

Republic Day marks the date in 1950 when India's new republican constitution came into effect. India gained independence from Britain in 1947, but went through a transitional phase when it was still classed as a dominion.

Kashmiris have spurned the celebrations since the insurgency began, and the run-up to the nationwide celebration also routinely sees an increase in attacks on Indian troops in the divided Himalayan region.

Abbas loyalist killed by rival Hamas forces

AFP, Gaza City

A loyalist of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party was killed overnight in northern Gaza by troops of the rival ruling Hamas movement, medics said Friday.

Nabil Al-Jarjir, a member of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades militant group loosely affiliated with Fatah, was killed in the northern town of Jabaliya by the "executive force" loyal to Hamas, they said.

The death came hours after an attack on a jeep wounded five Hamas troops and seven civilians in Jabaliya late Thursday. One of the Hamas wounded, 35-year-old Khalil Al-Anqa, died in hospital Friday, medics said.

Following the incidents, the rival factions traded accusations that threatened to reignite tensions after several weeks of relative calm in the Gaza Strip.

A Fatah spokesman, Maher Miqdad, accused Hamas of having "executed" Jarjir after surrounding his house.

Hamas said in a statement that Jarjir was killed "in a shootout" with its troops who had come to arrest him.

Calling Jarjir "one of the lackeys of the putschists," a reference to Fatah leaders, the statement said he was the principal suspect in the attack on the jeep.

Following his death, nine members of Hamas and five members of Fatah were kidnapped in tit-for-tat abductions in the coastal strip, security sources said.

Clashes between Hamas and Fatah -- who have failed to agree on a unity government in months of talks -- have killed more than 30 people in Gaza since mid-December.

The clashes erupted on December 16, after Abbas called for early elections to resolve the stand-off with the ruling Islamists.

Karzai becomes father for the first time

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's wife has had the couple's first baby, a son, after nine years of marriage, a presidential spokesman said Friday.

Karzai's wife Zinat, an obstetrician, gave birth to the baby named Mirwais at Rabaha-e-Balkhi hospital in Kabul at 11:30 pm (local time) on Thursday, Mohammad Karim Rahimi told AFP.

"Mirwais is in good health and is of normal weight. The president is very happy," said Rahimi.

Karzai became Afghanistan's first democratically elected president after 2004 elections in the conflict-ravaged country but has come under increasing pressure to tackle a Taliban insurgency.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) talks to Indian president APJ Abdul Kalam during the presidential reception in New Delhi yesterday. Putin was guest of honour at India's Republic Day parade, showing warm ties still exist between the former cold war allies despite New Delhi's growing US tilt.

Police arrest 38 as Lanka vows to fight terrorism

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka arrested 38 people Friday during a crackdown against Tamil rebels in the president's home constituency, a day after he vowed to crush "terrorism", police said.

Hundreds of police in President Mahinda Rajapakse's hometown of Hambantota rounded up the 38 members of the minority Tamil community after they were unable to establish why they were in the area, a senior police officer said.

"We are getting the help of intelligence services and the regular police to check the bona fides of these people and we will release them accordingly," police superintendent Upali Hewage said.

Police were also stepping up checks on all vehicles entering the coastal district in the deep south of the island following fears Tamil Tiger rebels could smuggle explosives into the area to stage attacks, he said.

The stepped-up security came after the president on Thursday vowed to crush "terrorism" as his troops dismantled a de facto separate state run by Tamil Tiger rebels in the island's restive east.

Rajapakse said the military had the strength to cope with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which has been waging a decades-old campaign for independence.

"Terrorism that many once swore cannot be defeated is now crouching in fear because we faced up to that challenge," Rajapakse said while launching a 350-million-dollar irrigation project in north-central Sri Lanka.

Peres favourite to replace Katsav

AFP, Jerusalem

The battle to succeed Israel's disgraced president got under way Friday, with veteran politician Shimon Peres favoured to gain the prestigious post that slipped from his grasp seven years ago.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has proposed an amendment that would change the way parliament votes for the head of state from a secret to an open ballot -- a move thought to boost the chances of the election of the deputy prime minister to the seven-year post, a senior official told AFP.

"Olmert wants to advance the candidacy of Shimon Peres" for the largely ceremonial post, the official said on condition of anonymity.

Olmert was due to propose his change at the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday, the official added.

In a shock defeat in July 2000, Nobel peace laureate Peres lost the contest for the presidency to Moshe Katsav of the right-wing Likud party, after the defection of one of the members of the then governing coalition.

Observers here say an open ballot boosts Peres's chances because it gives Olmert more power to impose vote discipline among deputies of his centrist Kadima party and its coalition members, who currently control 78 votes in the 120-seat Knesset.

Katsav, who became Israel's first president from a right-wing party following his win over Peres in 2000, has been temporarily sus-

pended from his post after the attorney general announced he would indict him on a slew of charges including rape, sexual harassment and abuse of power.

But although a fresh presidential election cannot take place until Katsav resigns or his mandate runs out in July, speculation has already started here on who could replace the disgraced leader.

In addition to Olmert's support, Peres thus far is the public's favourite, with between 40 and 45 percent of Israelis supporting the veteran politician for the post as the head of state, according to two polls released on Thursday.

The 83-year-old is Israel's most veteran statesman, having served twice as premier, three times as foreign minister and three times as defence minister.

The Polish-born married father of three was one of the architects of the 1993 Oslo accords with the Palestinians, for which he shared the Nobel peace prize a year later with then premier Yitzak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

But whether he will get the top job is far from certain, with opposition Likud and some members of Olmert's coalition against the change in voting procedure proposed by the premier.

Abe vows a 'new national identity'

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe vowed Friday to shake off the legacy of World War II defeat to create a "new national identity" as he tried to revive sagging public support.

Abe renewed promises to rewrite the US-imposed pacifist constitution and bring patriotism into the schools, a taboo since World War II, although he also said he would work to repair ties with neighboring China and South Korea.

The conservative premier outlined his policy proposals in an address to a new session of parliament as he faces growing questions over his leadership.

"It's time to embark on a bold review of the postwar regime," said Abe, Japan's first premier born after the war.

"It is my mission to draw up a new national identity that can survive severe storms over the next 50 or 100 years," he said.

He pledged to pass a bill on a national referendum -- the first step in revising the constitution -- during the parliament session, which will end in June.

He also said that reforming the education system was the cabinet's top priority.

"Haven't we ignored such values as self-reliance, public responsibility, morality and love of the country? For the future of Japan, it is extremely important to teach children about these values."

Wen to visit Japan in April

AFP, Beijing

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao will visit Japan in April as the Asian rivals step up efforts to improve relations, Beijing said although it also voiced concerns over lingering "sensitive" issues.

Wen's trip follows Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Beijing in October last year soon after he took office, a key event that helped lead to the cautious thawing of ties between the region's two biggest economies.

Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing told visiting Japanese vice minister for foreign affairs Shotaro Yachi on Thursday that Wen would travel to Japan in April, in the first visit by a Chinese premier for seven years.

"Chinese-Japanese relations are facing very important opportunities to develop," Li said, according to a statement posted on the foreign ministry's website late on Thursday.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi policemen and soldiers secure the area near the shrines of Shiite Imam al-Hussein and al-Abbas as Shiite pilgrims head to the holy city of Karbala to mark the annual ten-day mourning period "Ashura".