

ETHNIC UNREST IN SOUTHEAST

Nepal govt, Maoists agree to protesters' demands

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government and former rebel Maoists have agreed to demands by protesters in the south-east of the country for greater political representation in an effort to halt ethnic unrest in which nine people have died, officials said late Tuesday.

Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula told reporters new electoral constituencies would be added for key elections due to be held before June, and the demand for increased federalisation of the Terai region would be addressed.

"In principle we have agreed to establish a federal state of government but the new constitution to be

formed by the constituent assembly will decide on the structure," Sitaula told reporters after three hours of talks between leaders of the seven parties in government and the Maoists.

"The new constituencies will be formed based upon population and geography. This is the demand of the Nepali people," the home minister said.

"We think we have addressed the key issues of the Mahadhesi people and we are hopeful that the protests will cease," Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara told AFP.

The agreement comes after nearly two weeks of rioting in Nepal's impoverished southern Terai region by members of the

Mahadhesi community, who have long complained of being discriminated against and underrepresented in government.

The Terai area, known as Nepal's "bread basket", is a low-lying region bordering India and is dominated by the Mahadhesi community.

Mahadhesi leaders say their group accounts for at least a third of impoverished Nepal's 27 million people yet is under-represented in Kathmandu's corridors of power – even after the recent sidelining of the king.

The group wants to see the region made into a federal state within Nepal and wants more representation in government.

Nepal's government has

arrested two royally appointed former ministers, and placed other royalists under surveillance after accusing pro-royal elements of stirring up the unrest.

Nepal's king was forced to end his absolute control over the country in April last year, after massive protests organised by sidelined political parties and the Maoists. The king has since been stripped of most of his powers, but is still revered by many as a Hindu deity.

Late last year, the Maoists and government signed a peace deal that put an end to a decade of civil war. As part of the peace deal, the country will get a new constitution that could abolish the 238-year-old Shah dynasty.



PHOTO: AFP

The United Nations' first all-female peacekeeping force of more than 100 Indian policewomen arriving at Roberts international airport in Monrovia, Liberia yesterday. The women -- who have served in India's worst flashpoints, from insurgency-hit Kashmir to the restive northeast -- will spend at least six months in Liberia emerging from years of a brutal civil war.

Jakarta backs Musharraf's ME peace plan

AFP, Jakarta

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf yesterday won Indonesian support for his new initiative of an Islamic solution to bring peace to the Middle East.

Musharraf said his trip to Indonesia was to discuss "the turmoil within the Muslim world" with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

"We both felt that the time has come for action and that there is not room for complacency because things are moving so fast, things are deteriorating so fast, that we need to arrest this deteriorating trend," he told reporters at a joint press conference with Yudhoyono.

He said they had "reviewed the turmoil in Palestine, in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Afghanistan" and had come to an agreement about the need for a new initiative to contribute to resolving disputes in the Muslim world.

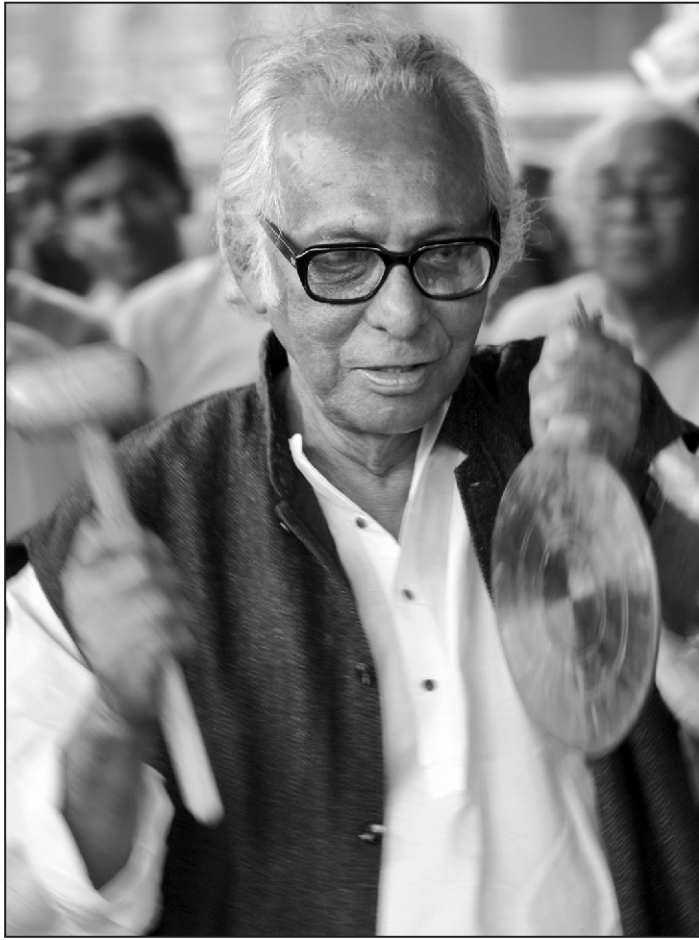


PHOTO: AFP

Indian film maker Mrinal Sen prepares to sound the bell to declare opening of 'symbolic' book fair by writers and intellectuals of Kolkata city on Maidan ground, where the 32nd Kolkata Book Fair, the second largest one after Frankfurt Book Fair, was scheduled to start yesterday. The Calcutta High Court recently banned the holding of the Kolkata Book Fair at the Maidan on environmental grounds.

Blair faces new grilling over funding scam

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair faced growing pressure yesterday to answer more questions about a "cash-for-honours" probe threatening his government, after a key ally was re-arrested over the row.

Blair's Downing Street office remained tight-lipped after the arrest Tuesday of Lord Michael Levy, Blair's Middle East envoy and chief fundraiser for his ruling Labour Party.

But the British premier was expected to face a grilling over the party funding corruption probe at his weekly question-and-answer session with lawmakers in the House of Commons, scheduled for 1200 GMT.

Blair is battling to prevent the affair overshadowing his final months in office -- he is expected to stand down before September after 10 years in power.

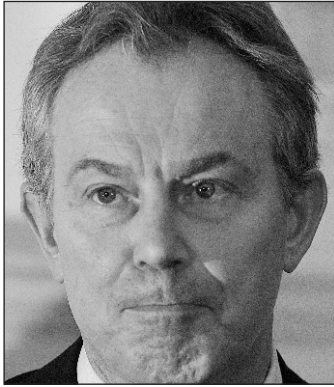
His woes were further exacerbated by a new slump in support for his Labour Party, with a fresh poll giving it 29 percent -- down eight percent from last month -- while opposition conservatives stood at 34 percent.

Lord Levy's re-arrest -- he was first detained over the affair last July -- came less than two weeks after the arrest of another key Blair aide, his director of government relations at Downing Street Ruth Turner.

Like her, Levy was arrested on suspicion of breaching the 1925 Act and perverting the course of justice and then released on bail, sparking talk of a Watergate-style coverup of alleged illicit party funding.

The so-called "cash-for-honours" probe was launched last March and has seen Blair and his entire cabinet interviewed by detectives.

It is seeking to establish if Blair's Labour party and other opposition



parties illegally offered seats in Britain's unelected upper chamber of parliament, the House of Lords, in return for financial contributions.

The practice is outlawed under the Honours (Prevention of

British police thwart terrorism kidnap plot

8 held in major security raid

REUTERS, Birmingham

Police in central England arrested eight people in a major security swoop yesterday which a defence source said involved a plot to kidnap and possibly kill a Muslim British soldier.

Detectives said the suspected conspirators were arrested in dawn raids across the city of Birmingham on "suspicion of the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism".

Uniformed officers searched and sealed off twelve addresses in Birmingham, one of the most ethnically diverse cities with a large Muslim population.

The country has been on its second highest alert level since four Britons killed 52 people in London in July 2005 in Western Europe's first Islamist suicide bombings.

Security experts said the suspected plot was a departure from the mass-fatality attacks on transport networks and showed Britain was on the frontline of al Qaeda-style attacks.

"It certainly seems to confirm Britain is particularly vulnerable to al Qaeda-style attacks because of the historic links to Pakistan and the Pakistani community here," said Shane Brighton, a terrorism expert at London think-tank Chatham House.

"The suggestion is that there is a

higher level of risk in the UK from those Pakistani-linked groups that there is elsewhere in Europe. We may well be on the forefront of this."

Media reports, citing unnamed sources, said police and domestic spy service MI5 had stopped a major terrorist plot in the latter stages of planning, or near fruition.

Sky TV quoted sources as saying the intent was to mimic the abductions and beheadings of Westerners carried out by militants in Iraq and post a video of the killing on the Internet.

Such a murder would be similar to the fate of Briton Ken Bigley, who was kidnapped and later beheaded by al Qaeda's then leader in Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004.

A defence source confirmed to Reuters the suspected target was a Muslim serving in the British military. A police source said the suspected plot would not have caused mass casualties, but would have involved a new terrorism tactic.

Neither the police nor the government would confirm the reports.

"It is unhelpful of the media and potentially damaging to the investigation or any future court cases to speculate on the details of this investigation," West Midlands police said in a statement, adding there was no "specific threat" to the area.

Militants torch school in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Insurgents burned down a primary school in southeastern Afghanistan, police said yesterday, in the second such attack this year targeting the country's struggling education system.

The primary school was set ablaze overnight in the Kharwar district of Logar province, the Afghan interior ministry, which controls the police, said in a statement.

"The ministry condemns this unforgivable action of foreign mercenaries," it said, without referring to any particular country or group.

Similar attacks in the past have always been blamed on the remnants of the Taliban regime. The Afghan government says the militants are supported by circles in neighbouring Pakistan.

INDIAN 'HOUSE OF HORRORS'

Policewoman being quizzed over bribes

AFP, Noida

Indian detectives yesterday were grilling a policewoman who reportedly accepted bribes from a businessman charged with raping and butchering 21 people, mostly children, in his "House of Horrors."

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) detectives raided the home of sub-inspector

Simranjit Kaur in northern Meerut city overnight and seized 300,000 rupees (6,666 dollars).

"Besides this huge sum of money we also found incriminating documents that links Kaur to accused Moninder Singh Pandher," a CBI official said, adding the raid was conducted after she underwent a series of lie-detector tests.

Kaur was among six police

officers sacked in the New Delhi satellite town of Noida following the recovery of 40 polythene bags packed with human parts from the drainage at Pandher's bungalow, labelled a "House of Horrors" by the media.

Three other Noida policemen were suspended for neglect and the probe into the country's most macabre serial killing in decades was

transferred to the CBI earlier this month.

Detectives speaking on conditions of anonymity said Pandher handed out the hefty bribe to Kaur to hush up an investigation into the November disappearance of a 20-year-old sex worker.

The recovery of Payal's cellular telephone led police to Pandher's home on December 29 and the subsequent discovery of her blood-spattered footwear and clothes.

"Kaur went through polygraph (lie-detector) tests on Monday and again on Tuesday which conclusively proved her close association with Pandher," the officer said.

"Also on a monthly salary of 2,200 rupees, Kaur completely failed to explain the large amount of cash found at her home which makes us believe the money originated from the accused," he added.

Pandher's servant Surinder Koli has also been charged with the crimes, and has reportedly confessed to murder, necrophilia and cannibalism.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Ex-Israeli minister Ramon found guilty

AFP, Tel Aviv

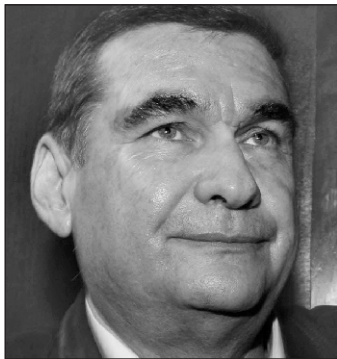
An Israeli court found ex-justice minister Haim Ramon guilty of sexual harassment yesterday in a key verdict to affect a major cabinet reshuffle planned by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

"We find the accused guilty of the charge of an indecent act," said Hayuta Kohan, chief justice of the three-member panel.

The verdict in the case -- one of a spate of scandals involving senior Israeli officials -- has been eagerly awaited in Israeli political circles as it will have direct implications on Olmert's teetering coalition.

Ramon, a close political ally of Olmert and one of the founders of Kadima, was accused of forcefully kissing a female soldier at a party last July 12, the day Israel launched a war against Lebanon's Hezbollah.

He resigned in August following the accusations and the justice portfolio is being temporarily handled by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, the most popular minister in the government and Olmert's official number two.



"After examining and studying the evidence, we find the complainant's version to be true," the ruling said. "The defendant did not stick to the truth and thought to distance himself from his actions. In view of this, we rule that the complainant did not flirt with the accused."

The 56-year-old Ramon faces a maximum sentence of three years in prison. He has 45 days to appeal.

"In the event that Ramon is found guilty there will be a significant reshuffle in the government aimed at strengthening the coalition," a senior official in Olmert's centrist Kadima party told AFP prior to the ruling.