

Nepal Maoist chief wants abolition of monarchy

AFP, Kathmandu

The leader of Nepal's Maoists called yesterday for the immediate abolition of the country's monarchy, accusing King Gyanendra of trying to undermine a peace deal that threatens his throne.

"He has not got enough power to control the country again, but he has the power to create problems," Prachanda, whose nom-de-guerre means "the fierce one", told AFP in an interview.

"We are proposing that we have to take steps to declare a republic right away," said the Maoist leader.

Under a peace deal between the government and former rebels late last year, the future of the 238-year-old monarchy is supposed to be decided by a constitutional body set to be elected this year.

But according to Prachanda, the embattled king has been stirring up ethnic unrest in the southeast in a bid to derail a peace process which has already stripped the king of most of his powers.

"He has influence inside the army, inside the bureaucracy. He has influence inside the police force and he has influence in some sections of people, mainly Hindu fundamentalists," said the 53-year-old rebel leader.

"The king is trying to create problems by stirring the Mahadhesi movement because he knows that



Prachanda making a point

PHOTO: AFP

he has no relevance," said Prachanda, whose real name is Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

At least 19 people have been killed in several weeks of unrest in the impoverished Terai region, which is dominated by the marginalised Mahadhesi community.

The protests flared after a Maoist cadre shot and killed a Mahadhesi protester, an incident described by Prachanda as a "serious mistake."

"We have to address the genu-

ine demands of the masses but we have to isolate those regressive elements and Hindu fundamentalists. We also appeal to the masses to be cautious," said the teacher-turned-revolutionary.

Since King Gyanendra ended a 14-month period of direct control last April, the reinstated parliament has stripped him of most of his powers, including his position as head of the army.

Parliament now swears allegiance to the prime minister, and

the central bank has said that they plan to remove the royal image from all banknotes.

However, despite the sidelining of the monarch, he still has influence in the nation where he is revered by devout Hindus as an incarnation of Vishnu, the god of protection.

The rebels have said that they will abide by the results of the constituent assembly election, due to be held by June, and Prachanda said that civil war will not restart if a majority of people vote to retain any form of monarchy.

"We won't return to war but we will stage peaceful demonstrations appealing to the people that they made a mistake," said Prachanda.

He also pledged to cooperate with any probe into human rights abuses during Nepal's civil war, which left at least 13,000 people dead.

"We will investigate these kinds of cases -- not just ours, but all cases during the 10-year people's war. We have also agreed to take action, but we have not finalised what sort of action that might be," he said.

As part of the peace accord, the Maoists have begun to place their weapons and army under UN monitoring. They have been granted 83 seats in a new 330-seat interim parliament, but a government containing the former rebels has yet to be formed.

French EU diplomat shot dead

AFP, Abidjan

A French diplomat representing the European Union has been shot dead at his home in the Ivory Coast, diplomatic sources said yesterday.

"We confirm that our colleague was killed last night at his home in Abidjan," said EU mission spokesman Lucien Houedanou.

Diplomatic sources said Michel Niauxel, 53, died of bullet wounds in circumstances which were unclear.

They said Niauxel was responsible for security for the EU mission in Abidjan, the economic capital of the west African state.

The diplomat's wife and 13-year-old daughter were said to be at the home in Plateau, Abidjan's commercial district, at the time.

One source said Niauxel was killed with his own gun and there was no sign of forced entry, however suicide had been ruled out.

2 suspects grilled over Pak airport attack

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani investigators yesterday were quizzing two suspects after an Islamic militant was killed by his own hand grenade in a brazen attack on Islamabad international airport, officials said.

The attack late Tuesday was the fifth in less than two weeks in Pakistan, raising fears that Taliban militants near the Afghan border are trying to embarrass President Pervez Musharraf, a key US ally, for a military crackdown on their camps.

The two suspects and the attacker were in a car which drove to the airport carpark, where he exchanged gunfire with security forces, injuring three police, after they stopped him at a checkpoint. He then died in the grenade blast.

"Two people arrested at the scene

are being interrogated by a joint investigation team," said Saud Aziz, the police chief of Rawalpindi, a city adjoining Islamabad, where the airport is located.

"One of them says that he was just a driver and was hired from Golra More (an Islamabad suburb) to go to the airport," he said.

Investigators were trying to match the bomber's face with police records and had fingerprinted him, he said.

The bearded bomber's corpse, with the legs mangled by the blast, was shown to journalists after the attack.

Officials hoped the suspects could provide leads to the group behind the attack amid fears the militants were increasingly "desperate" to send a message to military ruler Musharraf's government.

Pro-Taliban fighters in January

vowed to avenge an airstrike on an alleged Al-Qaeda camp in the South Waziristan tribal region bordering Afghanistan, which broke a nearly two-year truce between the government and militants.

"Links are pointing there, but we are still investigating," Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao said when asked if investigations into the previous attacks had provided leads to militants in the tribal region.

Militants have opposed Musharraf since he ditched Pakistan's support for the Taliban regime after the September 11, 2001 attacks and launched a crackdown on extremism. In 2003, he escaped two assassination attempts blamed on Al-Qaeda.



AFP file photo of Lisa Nowak

US astronaut held for 'bid to kill love rival'

AFP, Houston

A US astronaut was charged with attempted murder Tuesday after driving from Houston to Florida to attack a woman she believed to be a rival for the affections of a colleague, police said.

Lisa Nowak, 43, a US Navy captain and a married mother of three, faces a maximum life prison sentence if convicted of the attempted first degree murder and kidnapping charges lodged against her in Orlando, Florida.

Wearing adult diapers to avoid stopping, Nowak drove over 1,500 kilometers from Houston, Texas to the airport in Orlando.

There, she attacked Colleen Shipman -- an air force captain who herself had just flown in from Houston -- with pepper spray over Shipman's relationship to astronaut Bill Oefelein, according to police reports.

Nowak was arrested early Monday at the Orlando airport after she had accosted Shipman while disguised in a wig and a trench coat.

Police affidavits said the suspect had a bag of weapons including a new steel mallet, a new serrated knife and a loaded pellet gun.

"We believe it was a planned event," Orlando police sergeant Barbara Jones told Fox News.

After being arraigned first on the kidnapping charge and then later on the murder

charge, Nowak was released Tuesday on 25,500 dollars bail under the condition she wear an electronic tracking device and avoid Shipman.

"The facts that Mrs. Nowak drove approximately 900 miles, urinated in diapers so that she did not need to stop, stayed at a hotel where she paid cash and used a false name and address to register, stealthily followed the victim, while in disguise, and possessed multiple deadly weapons at the time she confronted the victim ... give this investigator probable cause to believe that Mrs. Nowak intended to murder Ms. Shipman," investigating officer William Becton, said in an affidavit.

The bizarre case put the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), which runs the space shuttle program, in the spotlight.

In a statement, Michael Coats, director of NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, where Nowak and her husband both work, said, "We are deeply saddened by this tragic event.

"The charges against Lisa Nowak are serious ones that must be decided by the judicial system. She is officially on 30-day leave and has been removed from flight status and all mission-related activities."

Frankie Laine passes away

AFP, Los Angeles

Legendary singer Frankie Laine, who sold over 100 million records and sang the theme tune to 1960s television show "Rawhide", has died, his producers said Tuesday. He was 93.

Laine, a huge international star during the 1940s and 50s before his popularity dipped with the advent of rock 'n roll, died in hospital in San Diego, southern California, producer Jimmy Marino said.

"He passed away at 9:15 this morning at Mercy Hospital of cardiovascular disease," Marino told AFP.

Reports said Laine had entered the hospital over the weekend for hip replacement surgery but suffered complications from the operation.

Laine's popularity peaked in the 1940s and 1950s when he hit it big with a string of hits including "That Lucky Old Sun," "Mule Train," "Cool Water," "I Believe," and "Granada."

For years he sang the theme tune to Rawhide, the 1959-66 television show about cowboys which featured a youthful Clint Eastwood.

Two of 9 held in British anti-terror raids freed

AFP, London

Two of nine men arrested during anti-terrorism raids last week amid claims of an "Iraq-style" plot to kidnap and behead a British Muslim soldier were released without charge yesterday, police said.

But the men's release in the early hours from a high-security police station in Coventry, west central England, immediately prompted criticism from their lawyer and a leading Muslim group about why they were held in the first place.

"They have left the police station without any better understanding of why they were there than when they first arrived seven days ago," lawyer Gareth Peirce said.

"Not a word was ever mentioned to either of them about a plot to kidnap or the grisly suggestion of a beheading or even of a soldier at all.

"Both have been met with a consistent refusal over seven days for any explanation for their arrest."

Nine men -- all said to be British Pakistanis -- were arrested last Wednesday in the city of Birmingham in raids that sparked anger among some sections of the local Muslim community that they were being unfairly targeted.

Police have not officially given details about the alleged offences while British human rights group Liberty has criticised unattributed briefings given to reporters in London on what the men were said to have been planning.

Liberty said it suspected political motives in the leaks to divert attention away from criticisms of the Home Office and Home Secretary John Reid in a row over prison overcrowding.

With memories of previous fruitless police raids still fresh,

'HOUSE OF HORRORS'

Serial killing victims were strangled

AFP, Nithari

Indian investigators working on the "House of Horrors" serial murder case believe the victims were strangled before being cut up and disposed of in drains, officials said yesterday.

The sources close to the grisly probe also said they have ruled out initial suspicions that the 21 victims, most of them children, were killed so that their organs could be sold to illicit medical traders.

"Each victim was first strangled and then chopped roughly into three parts and discarded in separate drains to avoid suspicion and detection," a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) official said on condition of anonymity.

He said forensic experts at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi had concluded that "the heads were thrown into one gutter alongside the house, limbs went into another and the viscera (large organs) were packed into large polythene bags and disposed of separately."

Federal detectives added that they had found no link to the organ trade.

Noida businessman Moninder Singh Pandher and his servant Surender Koli were arrested in late December and face 21 counts of abduction, rape and murder.

Villagers say that as many as 40 children have disappeared since 2004. Among those missing are two boys and a sex worker identified only as Payal.

Police say Koli confessed to having abducted children from Nithari and then killing them in his boss's two-storied home -- dubbed the "House of Horrors" by the media.

He has also admitted to rape, cannibalism and necrophilia, according to the CBI.

The CBI has recovered 42 bags packed with human parts from the drains around Pandher's stylish bungalow, which adjoins Nithari, a village of 20,000 poor migrant workers.