



Thousands of Maoist activists and supporters march through the streets of Kathmandu yesterday. Security was tight as thousands of Maoist supporters rallied in Nepal's capital to press the government to hold elections this year as agreed under a landmark peace deal.

Nepali Maoists call for end of monarchy

Thousands attend Kathmandu rally

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist leader Prachanda vowed yesterday to push to abolish the monarchy and create a "new Nepal" as he addressed tens of thousands of supporters in his first public speech in the capital in 25 years.

"Unless the monarchy is eliminated, a new Nepal cannot come into existence," Prachanda, or 'the fierce one', said as his flag-waving supporters roared their approval.

The rally, which brought the heart of the city to a standstill, took place on the 11th anniversary of the start of the Maoist revolt that ended

last November when the rebels signed a historic peace deal with the government.

"This is a memorable day for us as our 10 years of people's war has been able to establish new norms and values for the country to head towards the path of a republic," he added, in what organisers said was his first public speech here since the early 1980s.

Security was tight as the demonstrators listened to their formerly reclusive leader, who has emerged from a quarter-century underground vigorously to press his cause.

The Maoist leader spoke for just under an hour in a vast open-air

theatre and was frequently interrupted by cheering supporters waving red flags and holding banners declaring "Long live the Maoist party," and "Long live Prachanda."

The former rebels entered parliament earlier this year, taking 83 out of 330 seats, but have yet to be given positions in the cabinet.

Prachanda is not a member of parliament. But he said late last year he was willing to serve as president of a future Nepal republic "if the masses want to give me the responsibility and if my party chooses me as the best candidate."

Under last year's peace deal, the fate of the embattled King Gyanendra is to be decided in

crucial polls that will elect a body to rewrite Nepal's constitution permanently.

The elections to the constituent assembly are supposed to be held by mid-June.

But on Monday, Ian Martin, the UN envoy to Nepal's peace process, warned the deadline could be missed unless parliamentarians swiftly pass legislation to hold the polls.

"If constituent assembly elections cannot be held by mid-June, we should be ready to declare Nepal a democratic republic by mid-May," Prachanda told the crowd.

Millions vote in India's Punjab state polls

AFP, Chandigarh

Millions braving heavy rains voted Tuesday in the northern state of Punjab in a poll which analysts say will test the popularity of India's ruling Congress party.

Sixty-five percent of 16 million Punjabi voters turned out under a blanket of security to choose from 1,050 contestants vying for 117 seats in the state legislature, national election commission officials said.

"The polling was largely peaceful," India's deputy election commissioner R. Bhattacharya said in New Delhi as the eight-hour voting ended at 5:00 pm (1130 GMT).

Some 50 people were briefly detained by the police for trying to disrupt the balloting, one of a series of tough mid-term tests for the Congress, which also governs Punjab.

Bush trashes talk of Iran attack plan

AFP, Washington

US President George W Bush on Monday warned of the danger posed by a nuclear-armed Iran but dismissed talk of a likely US attack on Iran as "noise" from his critics.

The comments came after the Pentagon said a US military buildup in the Gulf represented a message to "potential adversaries" in the region, and Bush himself has vowed to crush any Iranian net-

works fueling violence that claims the lives of US soldiers in Iraq.

"I guess my reaction to all the noise about, you know, 'he wants to go to war', is -- first of all I don't understand the tactics, and I guess I would say it's political," Bush told CSPAN television in an interview.

"On the other hand, I hope that the members of Congress, particularly in the opposition party, understand the great danger of Iran having a nuclear weapon," the US president said.

Referring to the nuclear dispute, Bush said he had "a comprehensive policy aimed to solve this peacefully" and vowed to "press hard" for Iran to freeze sensitive nuclear work that could be a key step towards an atomic arsenal.

Tehran has rejected charges of smuggling bombs to insurgents who target US troops as "without foundation," and has repeatedly denied Washington's allegations that its nuclear programme hides a quest for an atomic bomb.

Hamas readies unity govt

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya is preparing to resign at the helm of his Hamas government and form a unity cabinet despite continued Western reluctance to lift a crippling aid boycott.

Almost a year after his first cabinet ushered in unprecedented depression and political crisis, Haniya will be tasked on Thursday by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas with forming the first Fatah-Hamas government.

"The prime minister's resignation and appointment by decree to head

the new government should happen during a meeting, probably Thursday, between Ismail Haniya and president Abbas," said Haniya's chief of staff, Mohammed al-Madhu.

Before meeting Haniya, long considered Abbas's nemesis, the president is to give a televised speech at midday (1000 GMT) on Thursday, his office said.

A power-sharing accord, signed in Saudi Arabia on February 8, has been billed as chance to end fierce factional fighting in which 100 people have been killed since December, win back Western aid

and resume peace efforts.

But it remains to be seen whether Israel and the West will lift the debilitating political and economic boycott, or whether the new government will prove able to prevent further inter-Palestinian bloodshed.

Haniya's radical Islamist faction Hamas, which won an election in January 2006 and is branded a terrorist outfit by Israel and the West, will have nine cabinet posts, Abbas's moderate Fatah party six and other factions four.

The key finance ministry will go to the internationally respected Salam Fayad, the foreign ministry to

a moderate and interior to an independent.

As soon as he resigns, the 44-year-old Haniya will have five weeks to put together the new cabinet and get it passed through the Hamas-dominated parliament. In the interim, his current government will handle business.

In a televised address late Monday, Haniya urged the four sponsors of the stalled Middle East peace process to end their boycott of the Palestinian cabinet, charging that the Saudi agreement justified an end to sanctions.

Gates seeking more effort in Afghanistan

22 Taliban fighters killed

AP, Islamabad/ Kabul

Defence Secretary Robert Gates has asked Nato allies and colleagues for more effort in Afghanistan, but it is too early to tell whether his lobbying will pay off.

In marathon meetings over five days with allied defence ministers and other security leaders and a quick sidetrip to Pakistan, Gates used tough talk wrapped in a congenial package to press his agenda.

His trip ended Monday.

Speaking during the journey to an audience that included many sceptics of the war in Iraq, Gates was blunt: "If the United States and our partners in Iraq fail, and there is

chaos in Iraq, every member of this alliance will feel the consequences."

During more than 15 private meetings with his Nato colleagues, he pressed for more economic and reconstruction support in Afghanistan. Failure to step up and take the offensive against the Taliban as spring comes, he warned them, would be shameful.

Gates also used humour and humility throughout the five-day, three-country diplomatic swing that was clearly aimed at mending fences.

He grabbed headlines when he dismissed a scorching speech by Russian President Vladimir Putin assailing US foreign policy. Characterising it as a throwback to

the Cold War, he said the countries must move on and work as partners, adding, "One Cold War was quite enough."

Meanwhile, Nato and Afghan forces killed 22 Taliban fighters in separate clashes in a southern Afghan province where hundreds of militants have gathered, a police official said yesterday.

More than 300 British marines cleared "a stronghold of Taliban extremists" around a hydroelectric dam in the Kajaki district of Helmand province a region that has been the target of Taliban attacks, Nato's International Security Assistance Force said.

KOREAN NUKE TALKS

US has made major concessions

AFP, Seoul

The United States made major concessions to secure a deal yesterday on curbing North Korea's nuclear weapons programme partly to offset foreign policy problems elsewhere, analysts said.

US President George W Bush, facing a hostile US Congress and battling a series of international diplomatic reverses in Iran and Iraq, needed to quieten down the North Korea problem, they said.

Brian Bridges, a political analyst at Hong Kong's Lingnam University, said a pivotal factor in facilitating the nuclear deal was US domestic politics, notably last year's mid-term congressional elections which produced a Democratic majority hostile to Bush.

"Bush's fortunes are at a low ebb at home and with tension mounting in the Middle East and over Iraq and Iran, he was looking for some kind of diplomatic success," he said.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had given more flexibility to US negotiator Christopher Hill to hammer out a deal through compromise at the six-party talks in Beijing, he said.

Bush, who denounced North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" alongside Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2002, even authorised the US side to offer North Korea bilateral talks on forging diplomatic relations.

The launch of direct talks aimed at eventually establishing diplomatic ties was part of the joint agreement announced on Tuesday.



PHOTO: AFP

US Assistant Secretary of State, Christopher Hill (C) attends the closing ceremony of the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear programme in Beijing's Diaoyutai State Guesthouse yesterday. Host China announced that the six nations involved in talks aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear weapons drive had reached a series of agreements.



PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese soldiers secure the site where bomb blasts tore through two buses in the village of Ain Alak, northeast of Beirut yesterday. The explosions killed three people as the deeply divided nation prepared to commemorate the murder of ex-premier Rafiq Hariri two years ago.

3 killed in Lebanon bus bombings

AFP, Beirut

Bomb blasts tore through two buses in Lebanon on Tuesday, killing three people as the deeply divided nation prepared to commemorate the murder of ex-premier Rafiq Hariri two years ago.

The bombings in a mainly Christian area northeast of Beirut were the latest in a spate of attacks that have been blamed on Lebanon's former powerbroker Syria and came at a time of high political tensions in Lebanon.

"This is another terrorist attempt to exert control over Lebanon with blood and repression," charged Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Moawad, a member of the anti-Syrian parliamentary majority.

The state news agency said the first explosion took place at 9:30 am (0730 GMT) in a minibus full of passengers and just seven minutes later another minibus was blown up.

"Three people were killed and 18 others were wounded," said a police spokesman, identifying the dead as an Egyptian national as well as a Lebanese man and a woman.

Many other vehicles were also damaged in the twin blasts in the village of Ain Alak that lies in the shadow of the snow-capped Mount Lebanon, a largely Christian area in multi-confessional Lebanon.

"Initial reports show that explosive charges were placed inside the buses," the police spokesman added.

Earlier reports had said as many as 12 people were killed in what Lebanese President Emile Lahoud described as a "massacre."

"It is a clear attempt to foil all internal, regional and international efforts to achieve Lebanese national unity," the Damascus-backed leader said, calling on all Lebanese to "stand united" in the face of the attack.

The bombings are likely to exacerbate tensions in a country where the Syrian- and Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim Hezbollah movement is working to bring down the Western-backed government.