

Nepal towns under fresh curfew after clashes

Ethnic clashes leave 29 dead

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Hundreds of riot police patrolled two border towns in southeast Nepal yesterday to enforce curfews after bloody clashes between Maoists and an ethnic group left at least 29 people dead, police said.

The clashes on Wednesday between former Maoist rebels and the Madhesi People's Rights Forum in the border town of Gaur, 80km south of Kathmandu, were the deadliest this year.

Both sides attacked each other with guns and bamboo sticks after a row over the selection of the same venue for public meetings, officials said.

"We have imposed a fresh day curfew to avoid more hazards

and violence," Kuber Kadayat, a police official, said by telephone from Gaur.

"People are terrified and afraid about the possibilities of fresh trouble," he said.

Another official said a curfew was imposed on the neighbouring Kalaiya town as well as a precautionary measure.

At least 60 people have now been killed in protests organised by Madhesi activists since January as they protest for more government jobs and seats in parliament for their people, who live along the narrow strip of the Terai region bordering India.

The protests have overshadowed a peace process between the Maoists and the government to end a decade-long insurgency

in which more than 13,000 people have died.

Bipin Gautam, a human rights activist, said bloodstains, shoes and belongings left behind by the people had littered the dusty town after the clashes.

"It was like a battlefield," Gautam said of Wednesday's clashes. "People from both sides were chasing each other with batons and suddenly there was an exchange of gunfire," he said.

Maoists blamed supporters of Nepal's sidelined King Gyanendra for instigating trouble to derail the peace process. Most of those killed were Maoist supporters, Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara said.

The Madhesi group said the

Maoists started the trouble by scheduling a meeting at the same venue where it had planned a public rally.

Some analysts warned of the danger of communal riots.

"If the situation is not carefully handled it can further deteriorate (and turn) into a communal flare-up," commentator CK Lal said.

In the meantime, several business groups called off a crippling strike that had shut shops and industries for three days after the government guaranteed them security.

The strike was called against the kidnapping and beating of a hotel owner by the Maoists after he refused to pay them and offer free rooms.



People walk during a rally on Wednesday, which saw Maoists, Mahadhesi activists and supporters of the Mahadhesi Janadhikar Forum (Mahadhesi People's Rights Forum) clash killing 29 people and injuring dozens of others in Gaur, southeast Nepal.

Lanka troops in clearing operations after fighting

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops were engaged in clearing operations yesterday, the day after simultaneous Tamil Tiger guerrilla attacks left at least 20 people dead and dozens more wounded, officials said.

Fighting on Wednesday in the eastern district of Batticaloa and Muhamalai in the north of the war-torn island claimed the lives of 15 Tamil Tiger rebels, four government troops and a civilian, officials said.

Some 40 civilians were also injured in the fighting in Batticaloa, prompted by an attack by some 300 Tiger rebels.

There was no immediate word on the fighting from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who have been waging a separatist war since 1972.

According to the defence ministry, the clearing operations have led to the recovery of a large haul of weapons, ammunition and mines left behind by the Tigers after they pulled back to their jungle stronghold of Thoppigala.



Pakistani people look for bodies in the rubble of a huge landslide triggered by a heavy down pour at Doba Syedan village in Kashmir's Jhelum Valley, some 77km east of Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan administrated Kashmir yesterday. Thirteen more people have died in landslides taking the toll to 80.

UNSC debates Iran sanctions draft

Ahmadinejad wants to address council

AFP, United Nations

Sponsors of a UN Security Council draft resolution to tighten sanctions on Iran were set to meet yesterday to debate amendments after Tehran warned it would defend its right to nuclear power.

It was unclear when the draft would be put to a vote. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has said he wants to address the council on the issue before the votes are cast.

The draft bans Tehran from exporting arms, calls for voluntary trade sanctions and expands a list of officials and companies targeted for financial and travel restrictions, toughening sanctions already imposed in December.

The 15-member Council held

closed-door consultations Wednesday on the text, which the council's five veto-wielding members (P5) -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany agreed last week.

Council members are to meet Thursday to consider an amended draft, which the sponsors promised to produce based on changes offered by South Africa, Qatar and Indonesia.

Western powers fear Iran aims to produce nuclear weapons with the enriched uranium, though Tehran insists the fuel is for peaceful purposes.

In Iran, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei remained defiant.

Iran "will use all its capabilities to respond to threats and to the use of force and violence," he warned in a

televised speech broadcast Wednesday from the holy city of Mashhad.

"If they want to use threats, to resort to force and violence, then without a doubt the people and the authorities will use all their capabilities to strike the enemies," Khamenei said.

Khamenei also denounced what he called "exploitation of the Security Council" by world powers over Iran's uranium enrichment programme.

Earlier Wednesday Ahmadinejad attacked "Zionists who dominate the world" in a message marking the Iranian new year, or Nowruz, and said Iran was determined to defend its position in the nuclear standoff.

N Korean nuke talks break up in disarray

AFP, Beijing

Six-nation talks aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear weapons programme broke up yesterday following four days of deadlock, throwing efforts to implement a disarmament accord into disarray.

After North Korea's chief envoy Kim Kye-Gwan abruptly abandoned the talks and flew home on Thursday afternoon, China announced that the latest round of negotiations had been suspended with no date set for their resumption.

It followed an increasingly frustrating wait for the return of 25 million dollars of North Korean assets that had been frozen in a Macau bank since 2005, with Pyongyang's envoy refusing to talk until the money was safely transferred.

Nevertheless, host China and the chief US envoy insisted the tortuous process remained on track and they expected the Stalinist regime to abide by an agreement to shut down its key Yongbyon nuclear reactor by mid-April.

"The parties agreed to recess

and will resume the talks at the earliest opportunity to continue to discuss and formulate an action plan," a statement released by host nation China said.

The statement said the six nations remained committed to implementing the February 13 accord under which North Korea would shut its Yongbyon reactor within 60 days of that agreement in return for 50,000 tonnes of fuel aid.

Chief US envoy Christopher Hill also told reporters that he expected North Korea to close Yongbyon within the 60-day timeframe.

"The six-party process continues to be on track," Hill said. "It is our strong view that we are on schedule to meet the 60-day requirement."

However, after the talks began on Monday amid expectations that the envoys would flesh out the accord and discuss a longer-term roadmap for disarmament, there was little else to report.

Iraq nearing anti-Qaeda deal with insurgents

REUTERS, Baghdad

A senior Iraqi official said yesterday the government was holding talks with some major insurgent groups that might be nearing a point where a number would join a fight to drive al-Qaeda out of Iraq.

Saad Yousif al-Muttalibi, international affairs director at the National Dialogue and Reconciliation Ministry, said the talks were designed to persuade the groups to halt guerrilla warfare against the government and help defeat al-Qaeda.

"We've already established links and contacts with major insurgent groups," Muttalibi told the BBC in an interview.

"One of the aims is to join with them into the fight against al-Qaeda. We are almost getting there and to join forces to attack al-Qaeda to get them out of Iraq," he said.

No Iraqi officials were immediately available to elaborate on

Muttalibi's comments.

Insurgents draw support from Iraq's Sunni Arab minority, once dominant under Saddam Hussein.

The western Anbar province has been a hotbed for the insurgency but since last September there has been a mounting power struggle in the area between al-Qaeda, which has non-Iraqi Arabs as its leaders, and fellow Sunnis who oppose the group.

Increasing sectarian violence between Sunnis and Iraq's majority Shia Muslim community has become an additional security concern in the country.

Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who heads a coalition government of Shias, Sunnis and Kurds, has ordered a major crackdown against insurgents and sectarian violence in Baghdad.

President Bush is sending about 26,000 more US troops to Iraq, mainly to back the crackdown in Baghdad.

Pak Taliban commanders talk truce with tribesmen

Fighting toll rises to 135

AFP, AP, Wana

Taliban commanders tried yesterday to negotiate an end to four days of battles between Pakistani tribesmen and foreign al-Qaeda militants that have left at least 135 dead, officials said.

Army helicopter gunships hovered over the rugged South Waziristan tribal area bordering Afghanistan but did not intervene, as the tribes and their Uzbek opponents exchanged sporadic heavy weapons fire, witnesses said.

Four Uzbeks and two local supporters were killed Thursday when tribesmen fired at their pickup truck in a village near the regional capital Wana, tribal sources told AFP. They were buried together in a grave.

The Pakistani government, which is under pressure from the United States to clamp down on militancy, says the clashes show its efforts to get Taliban-sympathising tribesmen to expel foreign extremists are working.

However intelligence officials said that the "jirga" or tribal council overseeing the negotiations includes figures wanted by the government, notably Baitullah Mahsud, a Pakistani Taliban chief blamed for a string of suicide bombings in Pakistan.

Another member of the council is Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of Jalaluddin Haqqani, a former minister in Afghanistan's 1996-2001 Taliban regime, they said.

Officials said they were unable to confirm local media reports that Mullah Dadullah, a top Afghan Taliban commander behind the recent kidnapping of an Italian journalist, was also involved.

"Top Taliban commanders have assembled in Wana to negotiate a ceasefire between Uzbeks and local Taliban backed by the government," a local security source told AFP, adding that the tribesmen wanted the foreigners to surrender first.

"There is still a tense stand-off

between the rival factions with occasional firing."

Both sides agreed to a brief ceasefire late Wednesday to bury their dead.

The fighting started Monday after ex-Taliban commander Mullah Nazir, whom the government says has defected to its side, ordered followers of Uzbek militant Tahir Yuldashev to disarm.

An intelligence official said Nazir had "refused to meet the jirga."

Officials said Yuldashev, who leads a group called the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, was formerly a close confidant of Osama bin Laden.

Yuldashev and his men were among thousands of militants who fled the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 and sought shelter with ethnic Pashtun tribesmen in Pakistan's lawless tribal belt along the border.



This handout picture supplied by babylon-freefly.com and taken on March 12 shows Swiss professional pilot and inventor Yves Rossy above the Spanish resort of Empuriabrava during a test flight with jet-fuel powered wings strapped to his back. Rossy and his "Fusion Man" project will take part in the upcoming Geneva's International Exhibition of Inventions in April.

US does not see judicial crisis toppling Musharraf

REUTERS, Washington

Despite huge protests in Pakistan over the suspension of its top judge, Washington does not think its ally President Pervez Musharraf will be toppled because of the case, a senior US official said on Wednesday.

The State Department official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the United States had made clear to Pakistan's government it must take the utmost care in the judge's case, otherwise it could be viewed as politically motivated.

"We are concerned, we are watching it carefully. We want them to proceed very carefully and we will follow this turn by turn," said the official.

"Allegations against the chief justice are serious and can be easily misconstrued as political," he added.

The suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry on March 9 outraged Pakistan's legal community and triggered Musharraf's biggest political crisis, raising concern about

stability before elections due around the end of the year.

The move to sack Chaudhry led to suspicion Musharraf feared the independent-minded judge would block any attempt by the president to keep the post of army chief, which he is due to give up this year.

The government has released no details of the accusations against Chaudhry but a state news agency cited "misconduct and misuse of authority."

"I don't think it's too much of a question of being toppled or serious unrest in the country," said the US official when asked whether the United States was worried Musharraf could be ousted because of the case.

Asked whether he feared the protests would increase as the election drew closer, he replied: "I don't see any signs of that. Again part of it will depend on how it is handled."

He also said it was too early to say whether Musharraf's motives in the case were political.

"It is hard to render a judgment

on the whole process until one sees charges and information presented."

Musharraf is a close US ally in fighting terrorism and the United States has pushed hard for him to work toward a democratic transition.

The official said US policy was to continue supporting Pakistan's efforts to be a moderate, democratic nation.

"As long as he is heading in that direction, we will work with him," he added of Musharraf.

The State Department's own human rights report released this month pointed to Pakistan's "poor" human rights record.

The report noted the disappearance of activists and political opponents and extrajudicial killing by security forces. In addition, it said corruption was pervasive throughout the government and security forces.