

Nepali Maoists join new government

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's main political parties and Maoists struck a deal on Friday that brings the former rebels into government for the first time, officials said.

In a move that gives a major boost to the Himalayan nation's peace process, the Maoists are to take over five portfolios in an interim cabinet tasked with steering the country into new elections this year.

Veteran Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, the leader of the Nepali Congress Party and the architect of the peace process, will also retain his position as leader of the government, officials said.

The cabinet will be formally approved by Nepal's parliament -- which also includes Maoist members -- on Saturday, senior Congress Party official Ram Chandra Poudel told reporters.

The Maoists and the country's seven main parties signed a peace

deal in November 2006, with the one-time insurgents promising to end their decade-long insurgency that left at least 13,000 people dead.

They also pledged to permanently abandon violence and have registered their weapons and fighters under United Nations supervision.

Officials said the five portfolios handed to the Maoists included the Ministry of Information and Communication.

Under the peace plan, the country is due to hold elections for a constituent assembly in June.

This assembly will rewrite the country's constitution and decide on the fate of embattled King Gyanendra and the monarchy as a whole.

Gyanendra was forced to relinquish direct rule last year after months of mass protests organised by an alliance of the political parties and the Maoists. He has since been stripped of most of his powers.

The Maoists are lobbying hard for the country to be declared a republic, although several mainstream parties wish to keep some form of monarch to act as a ceremonial figurehead.

The Maoists joining the government "is a step forward in mainstreaming the Maoists, and bringing them into the constitutional process," he added.

The Maoists and seven-party government signed a peace deal in November 2006. The former rebels, who pledged to end violence and register their army with the United Nations, have already been given seats in a new parliament.

Leaders from the seven parties in government and the Maoists arrived at the prime minister's residence Friday to hammer out the final details of the new cabinet's structure.

Japan deploys new missile defence

AP, Tokyo

Japan began deploying its first advanced Patriot missile defence system yesterday near Tokyo, part of an effort to accelerate missile defence capabilities following North Korea's missile and nuclear tests last year.

The instalment comes about a year earlier than originally scheduled.

Two PAC-3 launchers, brought in on about 10 military trucks, arrived at the Iruma Self-Defence Force base in Saitama, north of Tokyo, just before dawn. Japan plans to deploy about 30 mobile PAC-3 launchers at 10 military bases across the country through 2010.

The Patriots would be used as a last resort if interceptors fired from US or Japanese ships fail to knock out incoming missiles. Japan will begin introducing Standard Missile-3 interceptors on its destroyers over the next few years as part of that effort.



PHOTO: AFP

A video grab taken yesterday from the Iranian Arabic-speaking television station Al-Alam TV shows (L-R) British sailor Nathan Thomas Summers, British servicewoman Faye Turney and an unidentified sailor sitting at an unidentified time and location. Iran said Friday that another British sailor had "confessed" in an interview to illegally entering Iranian waters.

Thousands protest against Thai junta

AFP, Bangkok

Thousands of people protested yesterday against Thailand's military junta, despite the government's announcement that it would hold elections in December to restore democracy.

Police estimated the crowd at 2,000, although organisers said 3,000 protesters were at the rally, outside Bangkok's municipal centre, calling on the junta to step down.

"I am really against any government that resulted from an undemocratic system, because it is not right to take power by force," said one 52-year-old protester, who asked only to be identified as Yod.

"If the junta tries to use their power to prevent people from coming to the protest, people defy them," he said.

Security forces were hardly visible, staying largely on the sidelines of the protest, one of the largest since the military-backed coup that ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in September last year.



PHOTO: AFP

Joint-Secretary level delegates take part in the 29th session of the Programming Committee of the forthcoming South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Summit in New Delhi yesterday. World Powers including the United States, the European Union and China will send representatives for the first time to the 14th Saarc Summit to be held in the Indian capital on April 03-04.

ME peace possible in 5-yr Says Israeli PM

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said in interviews published yesterday that the Jewish state could clinch global peace with its enemies within five years, after Arab leaders revived a peace plan.

"There is a real possibility that Israel can sign a global peace accord with its enemies within five years," Olmert said in an interview with the mass-selling YediotAharonot.

Asked whether he meant "all of

the Arab world," Olmert said "yes."

The interviews with several Israel's leading dailies ahead of the Passover holiday were published after Arab leaders revived a five-year-old peace plan for comprehensive peace in the Middle East at a Riyadh summit.

The blueprint offers Israel full normalisation of relations if it withdraws from all land occupied in the 1967 war and allows the creation of a Palestinian state and the return of Palestinian refugees.

"A bloc of states is emerging that understands that they may have been wrong to think that Israel is the world's greatest problem," he said in an interview with the liberal Haaretz.

"That is a revolutionary change in outlook."

"There are things that are happening, which have not happened in the past, which are developing and ripening," he said, adding that Israel had to "know how to profit from this occasion."

Helicopter shot down in Somalia

AP, Mogadishu

An Ethiopian helicopter attacking insurgent positions in Somalia's capital was shot down Friday as government and allied troops battled hundreds of gunmen in the streets, witnesses said.

Government soldiers and troops from neighbouring Ethiopia, who are in Somalia to protect the fragile government, were under a severe attack for a second day as they tried to quash a growing insurgency by Islamic militants.

"The helicopter looked like a ball of smoke and fire before crashing," said Ruqiya Shafi Muhyadin, who watched as the helicopter rolled over in the sky and went down in a residential area near the airport.

Mohamud Osman Ashir, who lives near the site, said the helicopter was still burning after the crash.

An Associated Press reporter said an anti-aircraft missile hit the helicopter.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai policemen inspect a destroyed vehicle from a bomb explosion in Pattani province yesterday. One policeman was killed and four others injured in a roadside bombing by suspected militants early yesterday.

UNSC adopts Darfur resolution

AP, Geneva

The UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution expressing its concern about the situation in Darfur yesterday, but stopped short of criticising Sudan's government over the atrocities.

The compromise text passed by consensus without a vote after Germany agreed to remove any mention of Khartoum's responsibility for the "armed attacks on civilian population and humanitarian workers, widespread destruction of villages, and continued and widespread violence."

The resolution took note of a report released earlier this month by a group of experts that accused the government of President Omar al-Bashir of orchestrating attacks by Arab Janjaweed militiamen against civilians in Darfur.

Khartoum refused to grant visas to Williams' six-member team to visit Darfur because it said one of the experts was biased.

Fresh violence in Lanka kills 13

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan warplanes bombed suspected Tamil Tiger positions yesterday after the rebels blew up five soldiers and allegedly killed eight civilians in shelling, officials said.

Supersonic jets bombed rebel-held territory after the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) set off a road side bomb and ambushed a military vehicle, killing five soldiers and wounding another, the military said.

"We have hit three LTTE targets today," a spokesman for the Sri Lankan airforce said. He said there were no details on casualties.

The military also reported eight civilians were killed in shelling in the east of the island, where the two sides have been locked in long-range attacks.

The defence ministry said the civilians were killed as a result of firing by Tamil Tiger rebels into populated areas of Batticaloa district. There was no immediate comment from the Tigers.

There has been heavy fighting between the two sides in the coastal

Batticaloa region, where the military captured a Tiger base on Wednesday.

The Tiger rebels are leading a drawn out campaign for independence. More than 4,000 people have been killed in the latest wave of fighting since December 2005 despite a truce arranged by peace broker Norway in 2002.

Meanwhile, a Sri Lanka court blocked access for an internationally supervised team probing grave human rights abuses as the island faced mounting criticism for extrajudicial killings, police said yesterday.

Colombo's chief magistrate refused permission on Thursday for the Special Presidential Commission investigating high-profile assassinations and massacres to have access to court records, a police official said.

"We made an application to court on behalf of the presidential commission, but the chief magistrate ordered that the records should not be made available to them or anyone else," a police official said.