

Wrangling delays Maoists' entry into Nepal govt

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's parliament delayed yesterday ratifying a landmark pact to bring former Maoist rebels into government and cement an end to a decade of bloody civil war.

The parliament had been due to give its formal approval to the deal reached Friday under which the main political parties agreed to give the Maoists five portfolios in a new cabinet.

But political wrangling over cabinet hierarchy forced a postponement of the parliamentary sitting until Sunday.

Nepal's seven main political parties and the former rebels met in the prime minister's residence on Saturday to sort out the differences.

The row did not jeopardise the decision to admit the Maoists into the new interim government, said Prakash Sharan Mahat, a law-

maker from the Nepali Congress (Democratic) party.

"We will meet tomorrow at 8:00 am (0215 GMT) and sort out these differences and we will go to parliament around 11:00 am (0515 GMT) tomorrow (Sunday) to formalise the cabinet," Mahat said.

The parties were at odds over who should hold the most senior positions in the cabinet. One of its tasks will be steering the Himalayan nation to new elections this year.

"The meeting has been postponed until tomorrow morning because the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) could not reach agreement regarding the ministerial hierarchy in the interim government," said Dev Gurung, a Maoist leader.

"We don't have any major differences over the structure of the interim government," Gurung

said.

Under the new government deal reached Friday, veteran Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala -- the leader of the Nepali Congress Party and architect of the peace process -- retains his position as leader of the government.

Koirala's party will also hold the key defence, home and finance ministries, while the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) -- Nepal's second largest party -- will hold the foreign ministry.

The Maoists, who are still classed by the United States as a "terrorist" organisation, will head the ministries of information, local development, planning and works, forestry, and women and children.

"This is our first step in achieving the goal of establishing a new Nepal," said Maoist second-in-command Baburam Bhattarai.

The deal brings the leftists, who want to remove embattled King Gyanendra as head of state and become a republic, into government for the first time.

"This is a major achievement for our party," said Bhattarai, whose members are still morphing from a life of guerrilla warfare to mainstream politics.

The deal to include the Maoists capped months of discussion over power sharing following last November's historic peace accord, which ended the civil war that claimed at least 13,000 lives.

Prachanda, the Maoist leader, and Bhattarai will not take ministerial portfolios, the Maoists have said.

Under the next step laid out in the peace plan, the new interim government will organise elections for a constituent assembly in June to decide the future of the landlocked country.

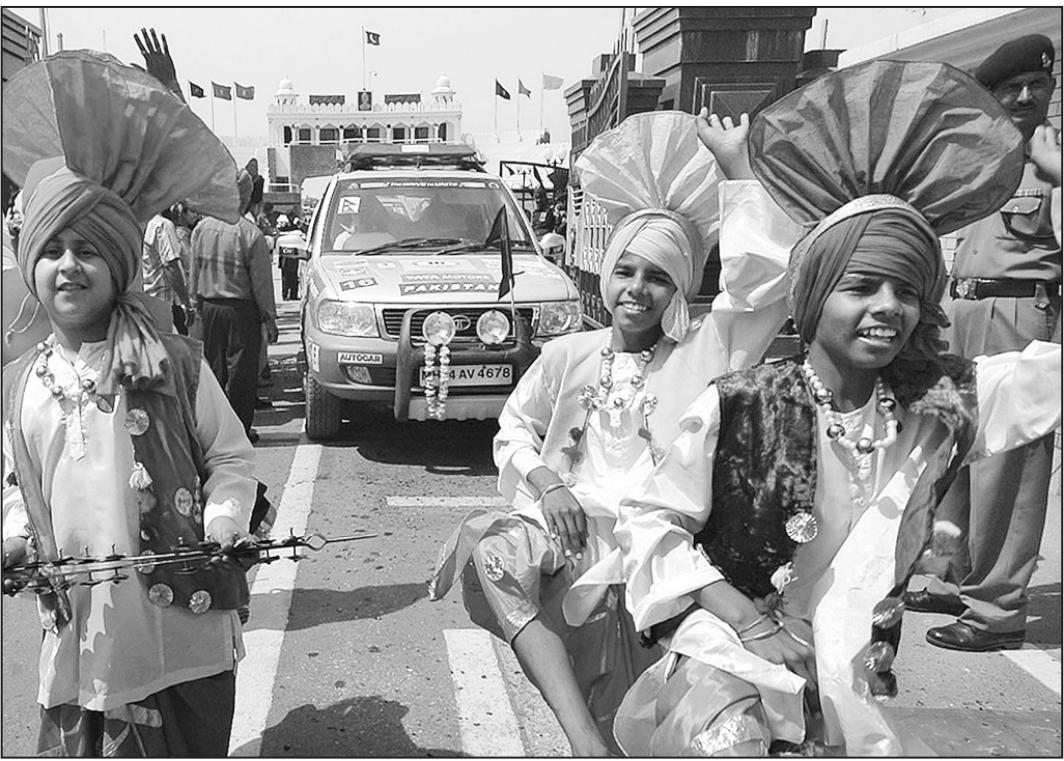


PHOTO: AFP

Indian children in traditional costumes perform a traditional Punjabi dance as vehicles driven by participants in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Car Rally cross the border back into India at Wagah yesterday. Some 120 participants are taking part in the car rally, which will cover a distance of some 8,200km over a 31-day period.

Pak tribal offensive to curb cross-border attacks: Officials

AFP, Wana

Pakistani officials have said an "onslaught" by local tribesmen against foreign al-Qaeda militants in which 56 people died could curb cross-border attacks by the rebels in Afghanistan.

The clashes in the lawless South Waziristan region came as President Pervez Musharraf, a key US ally, faces international pressure to get tough on extremists who have regrouped in Pakistan's tribal-run regions since 2001.

Uzbeks, Chechens and some Arab militants have traded rocket and mortar fire for two days with pro-government tribal forces led by a former Taliban commander after a tense ceasefire broke down Thursday, officials said.

The Pakistani government "is

not intervening," a top security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"We hope this onslaught against foreign militants will help reduce cross-border activity. The foreigners were involved in this cross-border activity," the official said.

"This is a decisive battle for us."

Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao told AFP late Friday that 56 people were killed on Thursday and Friday, 45 of them foreigners, after fighting "intensified after peace talks failed."

"Tribes are insisting on their demand that these people either surrender or quit the area," Sherpao said.

The al-Qaeda militants numbering around 500 were effectively under siege as all roads to the areas where they are dug in are controlled by tribal commander Mullah Nazir, who is said to have

around 1,500 men, residents said.

Last week the government said clashes in South Waziristan left 160 people dead, again mostly Chechens and Uzbeks. Local sources put the toll lower but the figures could not be independently verified.

Officials said the tribesmen's efforts to drive out the rebels vindicated Islamabad's policy of signing peace deals in the tribal belt instead of sending in government troops as it has in the past, with little success.

Pakistan inked pacts with pro-Taliban tribal militants in South Waziristan in 2005 and neighbouring North Waziristan last year, under which it withdrew many soldiers while the tribes agreed to curb attacks in Afghanistan.

UN pact on disabled rights signed

AP, United Nations

In what the UN human rights chief called an unprecedented show of support to empower the physically and mentally impaired, 80 countries signed a UN convention enshrining the rights of the world's 650 million disabled.

The United Nations held a ceremony Friday on the first day the convention opened for signatures and not only did 80 countries and a representative of the European Union sign it but Jamaica announced that it had also ratified the convention. That means only 19 more ratifications are needed before the convention comes into force, and speaker after speaker urged speedy approval.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour announced the huge level of support at a news conference afterward.

"It's certainly unprecedented in terms of support for a human rights instrument, but it's apparently setting records for the signature of any convention in the United Nations," she said.

The convention is a blueprint to end discrimination and exclusion of the physically and mentally disabled in education, jobs, and everyday life. It requires countries to guarantee freedom from exploitation and abuse for the disabled, while protecting rights they already have such as voting rights for the blind and wheelchair-accessible buildings.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi Shatha Hassun holds up her national flag after winning the pan-Arab Star Academy reality talent show and competition, in Adma, north of Beirut late Friday.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami speaks during a joint press conference with Arab League Secretary General Amr Mussa (R), at the Arab League's headquarters in Cairo yesterday.

Iran winning propaganda war with UK: Experts

AFP, London

While Britain battles to rally international pressure in its standoff with Iran over 15 detained sailors, for the moment Tehran seems to be winning the propaganda war, experts admit.

Although criticised by London as crude and unacceptable manipulation, the release of letters and video has certainly dominated media coverage of the standoff over the last few days.

"They have got everyone's attention. They are clearly getting things out, using the girl because they know in the West that's a soft spot," said Paul Beaver, a leading defence expert.

"I don't like it but I think they're doing very well."

The "girl" in question is 26-year-old Faye Turney, the sole

woman among the eight sailors and seven marines seized at gunpoint on March 23 in the northern Gulf.

She has become the human face of the standoff, in particular since she was shown in television footage Wednesday -- complete with dark Islamic veil -- admitting that the 15 had "obviously" strayed into Iranian waters.

Three letters have since been released purporting to have been written by her, reflecting for many the successive hardening of the Iranian position.

In the first, released Wednesday, she asked her family not to worry because she was "strong." In the second she questioned why British forces remain in Iraq.

In the third, released Friday addressed in odd-sounding

English "To British People" (sic), she lamented that she and her colleagues had been "sacrificed" to US and British policy -- and compared their good treatment in Iran to the inmates of Iraq's notorious Abu Ghraib prison.

Britain insists Turney is being coerced.

"I really don't know why the Iranian regime keep doing this. All it does is enhance people's sense of disgust," said Prime Minister Tony Blair on Friday. "Captured personnel being paraded and manipulated in this way doesn't fool anyone."

Turney's body language in Wednesday's video certainly suggests she is under pressure: she answers the interviewer blankly and smokes intensely, in stark contrast to the "chatty" and "outgoing" woman described by those who know her.

Tigers blame Lanka for killing civilians

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday accused government forces of shelling civilian settlements in eastern Sri Lanka and killing at least eight villagers.

Troops killed eight civilians, including four children, when they fired at a suburb of Sittandy in the eastern region late on Thursday, the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said.

"Eight civilians, including four children, were killed," the LTTE said in a statement. "Six shells were fired towards the civilian settlement. Eight houses were damaged."

The rebel statement came after the defence ministry on Friday accused the Tamil Tigers of shelling the villages and killing civilians.

However, the Tigers said they had not opened fire in the disputed area on Thursday.

Pakistan test-fires N-missile

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan successfully tested an indigenous short-range, nuclear-capable missile on Saturday, the military said.

The surface-to-surface Abdali ballistic missile with a range of 125 miles was launched from an undisclosed location inside Pakistan. The missile "can carry all types of warheads," the military said in a statement issued from Rawalpindi, a garrison city near the capital, Islamabad.

The military did not provide any further details, but Pakistan and its nuclear-armed rival, neighbouring India, routinely test missiles.

Pakistan's latest comes about a week after India tested its indigenously developed air-to-air Astra missile, with a range of up to 50 miles.

India sets up panel to cut Kashmir troops

AFP, New Delhi

India has set up a panel to review a possible cut in troop levels in insurgency-racked Kashmir, the prime minister's office announced Friday.

The announcement came after demands by a regional ally of premier Manmohan Singh's ruling Congress party, which also governs Kashmir, to reduce troop numbers in the Himalayan region.

"The panel would be a professional body ... to determine whether there is need to relocate and reconfigure security forces (in Kashmir)," Singh's office said.

"While making its determination, the panel should ensure that cardinal aspects of security are not compromised in any manner," it said in a

statement.

The panel would also review the use of a draconian military law that gives sweeping powers to soldiers battling the Islamic insurgency in Kashmir, which according to official figures has claimed more than 42,000 lives since its launch in 1989, it added.

Mufti Mohammed Sayeed's People's Democratic Party (PDP) has threatened to withdraw its support if Delhi rejects its demands for troop cuts by mid-year.

India has deployed an estimated half a million troops and paramilitary soldiers in Kashmir, the subject of two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since their 1947 independence from the British.

Bombs kill 14 as US envoy vows to end bloodshed

AFP, Baghdad

A string of bomb attacks killed 14 people in Iraq on Saturday as Washington's new ambassador vowed that the United States would do everything to curb the unrelenting bloodshed.

Ryan Crocker, a fluent Arabic speaker with extensive experience in the Middle East, this week became the third US ambassador to Iraq in as many years and presented his credentials to President Jalal Talabani on Saturday.

Capping a week in which hundreds of Iraqis were slaughtered in attacks, the bloodshed continued with another 14 people killed in three car bombs and a roadside bombing targeting Shia areas, security officials said.

The deadliest car bombing killed five and wounded 15 wounded when it exploded outside the Al-Sadr hospital in Baghdad's Shia enclave of Sadr City, named after the ayatollah father of radical anti-US cleric Moqtada Sadr.

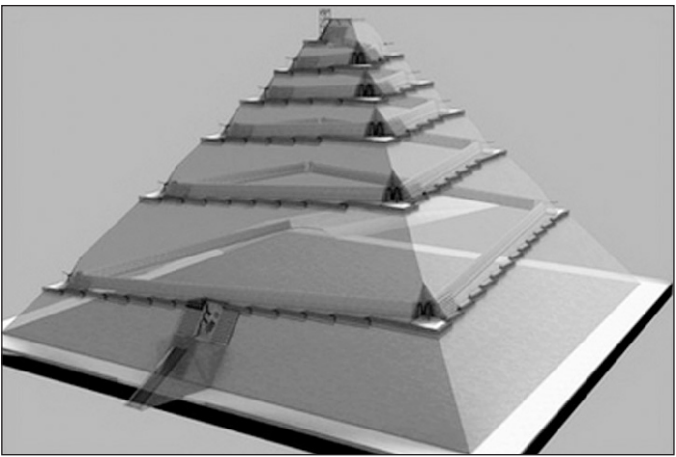


PHOTO: AP

In this 3D computer image released by French company Dassault Systemes on Friday the theory of French architect Jean-Pierre Houdin of an internal ramp built for the construction of the Great Pyramid of Khufu is seen. During a 3D screening followed by a press conference at the Paris Geode cinema on Friday, Houdin exposed his revolutionary theory of the construction of the Great Pyramid of Khufu, arguing it was built from inside.

Architect uncovers pyramid secret

AP, Paris

A French architect claimed Friday to have uncovered the mystery about how Egypt's Great Pyramid of Khufu was built -- with use of a spiral ramp to hoist huge stone blocks into place.

The construction of the Great Pyramid 4,500 years ago by Khufu, a ruler also known as Cheops, has long befuddled scientists as to how its 3 million stone blocks weighing 2.5 tons each were lifted into place.

Ending eight years of study on the subject, architect Jean-Pierre Houdin

released his findings and a computerized 3-D mockup showing how workers would have erected the pyramid at Giza outside Cairo.

The most widespread theory had been that an outer ramp had been used by the Egyptians, who left few traces to help archaeologists and other scientists decode the secret to the construction.

Houdin said he had taken into account the copper and stone tools available at the time, the granite and limestone blocks, the location of the pyramid and the strength and knowledge of the workers.