

# Nepali Maoists ask govt to scrap monarchy

**AFP, Kathmandu**

Nepal's Maoists demanded yesterday that the country immediately scrap the monarchy and declare itself a republic amid probable delays in an election over the issue.

"We have to find a new political basis in order to move forward. That basis is declaring the country a republic immediately," Maoist leader Prachanda told reporters.

The Himalayan kingdom is scheduled in June to elect a body that will rewrite the constitution and decide whether sidelining King Gyanendra and the monarchy as a whole should stay or go.

But last week Nepal's election commissioner, Bhojraj Pokharel, said the peace process that has brought the Maoists into government after 10 years of insurgency was moving so slowly that the elections would have to be postponed.

The eight-party alliance govern-

ment, which contains five Maoists ministers, has not formally announced the delay in the polls.

But Prachanda -- whose nom de guerre means "the fierce one" -- argued that any delay would give room for King Gyanendra and his supporters to destabilise the country and undermine the peace process.

The Maoists accuse the king, who has already been stripped of most of his powers, of provoking ethnic violence in a bid to hang on to his throne.

"The longer the delay the more it will space to feudalistic and reactionary forces for creating a negative environment. Such forces have been conspiring to sabotage and derail the peace process," Prachanda told a news conference.

"If this republic is not declared immediately, we have some other options -- which include a referendum and appealing to the popula-

tion to protest against the feudal set up," he said.

The Maoists signed a peace deal in November 2006 after fighting for 10 years to impose a communist republic on the Hindu-majority country in a war that left at least 13,000 people dead.

The former rebels, who still feature on Washington's list of foreign "terrorist" organisations, have registered their weapons and fighters with the United Nations as part of the accord.

Meanwhile, Nepal's Maoists, who were recently given ministerial roles in a new parliament, need to end violence and intimidation against gay men and women, a rights group said yesterday.

"As Nepal tries to recover from a decade of conflict, its leaders should make it clear that no one's rights are disposable," Jessica Stern, a researcher with the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights

Program at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement.

The New York-based rights group issued the statement after it had received reports that Maoists abducted, tortured and tried to forcibly recruit a woman and a teenage girl in March they accused of having a lesbian relationship.

The Maoists have also faced charges of forcibly recruiting children during a decade-long people's war.

"Abusing women for their sexuality and forcibly recruiting children are simply unacceptable in a new Nepal," said Stern.

After King Gyanendra was forced to end a 14-month period of direct rule last April, the former rebels signed a peace deal with the government late last year to end a civil war that had killed at least 13,000 people.



**Pakistani Islamic students carry bamboo sticks and shout anti-government slogans outside the Lal Mosque (Red Mosque) in Islamabad yesterday. Baton-wielding students from a radical mosque in the Pakistani capital took to the streets after alleging that the government had sprayed them with irritant gases from a helicopter.**

## Indian SC mulls Sonia's right to hold public office

**AP, New Delhi**

India's top court accepted a petition by a non-governmental group Monday seeking to bar Sonia Gandhi, the chief of the ruling Congress party, from holding public office because she was born in Italy, a news report said.

The Supreme Court said an important constitutional issue has been raised in the petition by the Rashtriya Mukti Morcha, or the National Freedom Front, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

The front is a sociopolitical rights organization.

The court would seek the views of the federal government and the independent Election Commission before starting regular hearings in the case, PTI said.

Sonia Gandhi married into India's powerful Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty in the late 1960s. She became a full-fledged Indian citizen in 1984, but her Italian origins have regularly been used against her by her opponents. Under Indian laws, any Indian citizen can hold a public office.

## Sudan inches toward UN deployment in Darfur

**AFP, Khartoum**

Sudan on Monday inched towards a reluctant acceptance of UN peacekeepers in Darfur, as a senior US official warned Khartoum it faces isolation if it blocks an international peacekeeping plan for the war-torn region.

The warning from US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte came as Khartoum finally announced it was accepting the second phase of the UN plan.

"We must move quickly to a larger, hybrid United Nations-African Union peacekeeping force with a single, unified chain of command that conforms to UN standards and practices," Negroponte told reporters as he wrapped up a five-day visit to Sudan.

## No more 'war on terror', says UK minister

**AP, London**

The British government has stopped using the phrase "war on terror" to refer to the struggle against political and religious violence, according to a Cabinet minister's prepared remarks for a Monday speech.

International Development Secretary Hilary Benn, a rising star of the governing Labour Party, says in a speech prepared for delivery in New York that the expression popularised by President Bush after the Sept. 11 attacks strengthens terrorists by making them feel part of a bigger struggle.

Extracts from Benn's speech at New York University's Centre on International Cooperation were released by his office.

## 11 officials killed as Indian train hits minibus

**AP, Chennai**

A passenger train crashed into a minibus carrying local council officials at an unmanned rail crossing in southern India yesterday, killing 11 people and injuring another 12 in the vehicle, police said.

Seven of the injured were hospitalised in serious condition, said I. Raja, an inspector-general of police. The vehicle was carrying a total of 23 people.

The accident occurred near Thirumatpur, a village in Tamil Nadu state. The village is about 55 miles southwest of Chennai, the state capital.



**Thousands of Iraqis protest yesterday in the southern oil city of Basra demanding the resignation of a provincial governor, whom they accuse of corruption. A large crowd of men, women and children gathered in front of the Grand Basra mosque in the heart of Iraq's second largest city under the banner of a new movement called Jamahir al-Basra (People of Basra).**

## Benazir vows return to contest polls

**PTI, London**

Vowing that she would go back to Pakistan and contest polls, former Pakistan premier Benazir Bhutto has said that she wanted to reach a political deal with President Pervez Musharraf, which she claimed, would be in the interest of the country.

Fifty three-year-old Benazir Bhutto, speaking to 'The Sunday Times' from her home in exile in Dubai, said that she wanted a deal with the President but that it would be "premature" to say one was imminent.

She vowed to go back despite the danger of assassination by Islamists whom she accused of bringing "Taliban campaigns" to Islamabad.

The Oxford-educated Benazir Bhutto, the Chief of Pakistan People's Party (PPP), said she was not afraid: "I don't worry about it.

When it's time to go, it's time to go. I'm committed to contesting the elections."

Benazir Bhutto is the PPP's only candidate for Prime Minister and the report quoted aides as saying that Musharraf will be obliged to let her take the post if she triumphs at the polls.

According to the paper, she confirmed that PPP was in negotiations with supporters of Musharraf to secure free elections for National Assembly and to reach an understanding on how the two leaders would work together if she won.

Benazir Bhutto, the paper said, is convinced that 63-year-old Musharraf will secure a second term as President by seeking re-election from the current Parliament, where his supporters have a majority. She claimed it would be in Pakistan's interest for them to reach an accord.

## Key Taliban leaders killed, says Nato

### Suicide bomber kills 9 Afghan cops

**AFP, AP, Kabul**

Nato-led troops said yesterday they had killed several key Taliban leaders in a series of airstrikes and raids targeting militants in southern Afghanistan during the past week.

The raids in the insurgency-hit southern province of Helmand were part of a major Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) offensive launched by some 5,000 Afghan and foreign troops early last month, it said.

"Isaf, in joint operations with Afghan forces, launched a series of attacks and precision strikes against Taliban extremists in Helmand this week resulting in the elimination of several key extremist leaders," it said in a statement.

It did not give any further details on the identities or ranks of the Taliban leaders, nor of the locations or dates of the attacks.

"Striking at the heart of the problem and removing these key leaders has paid off," the statement quoted Isaf Commander for southern Afghanistan Major General Ton van Loon as saying.

"We fully realise the influence these Taliban extremist leaders have on the population of southern Afghanistan, who have clearly told us they felt like they were hostages in their own communities," the

general said.

Meanwhile a Taliban suicide bomber blew himself up among a group of policemen in northern Afghanistan Monday, killing nine officers, the interior ministry and the militant movement said.

Another 25 policemen were wounded when the attacker, who was on foot, struck at about 9:00 am (0430 GMT) in the relatively peaceful northern city of Kunduz, ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary said.

"There was a suicide bombing in front of a police station in Kunduz," Bashary told a news conference in Kabul.

"Unfortunately nine policemen were martyred and 25 others were wounded. The bombing coincided with the exercise time of the policemen," he added.

The bomber had spoken to his victims, who were performing morning exercises in the street outside the police station, before he detonated explosives strapped to his body, said Kunduz province governor Mohammad Omer.

Earlier gunmen shot dead a school headmaster in the south-eastern province of Khost as he returned home late Sunday, police said, blaming "terrorists" for the attack.

## Israel, Palestinians to contest progress

**AP, Jerusalem**

The Israeli and Palestinian leaders on Sunday discussed the outlines of Palestinian statehood for the first time in six years, taking a modest step toward breaking the long paralysis in peacemaking.

In the first in a series of biweekly talks, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas focused mostly on day-to-day issues such as travel and trade restrictions, but also raised broader issues that have not been discussed by the two top officials since the collapse of peace talks in 2001.

Representatives of the two sides said Olmert and Abbas discussed the structure of the government of a future Palestinian state and economic cooperation, among other topics.

"It was a good beginning," Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said of the meeting, which lasted

more than two hours. Olmert and Abbas smiled and looked comfortable as they walked into Olmert's official residence in central Jerusalem.

Israeli government spokeswoman Miri Eisin called the talks "very positive," adding the two leaders broke away from their aides and spoke one-on-one for more than an hour.

Olmert and Abbas plan to next talk in the West Bank town of Jericho, the first meeting of the two leaders in a Palestinian town.

Israeli officials emphasized that the two sides did not go into the key elements of a final peace deal, such as borders of a Palestinian state, the future of Jerusalem or the fate of Palestinian refugees.

"We're not going to be talking about the core issues of the final status at this stage, certainly not with the issue of terrorism not being addressed adequately yet," Eisin said.

## Separatists to snub Kashmir meeting

**AFP, Srinagar**

Muslim separatists in Indian-run Kashmir said yesterday they would boycott a government-organised meeting this month on the revolt-hit province, saying talks would be a "futile exercise."

The so-called "Kashmir roundtable" is due to be held in New Delhi on April 24, the third such meeting aimed at easing tensions in the revolt-hit state which is divided between India and Pakistan.

"It is a futile exercise. We will only take part in trilateral talks involving India, Pakistan and Kashmiris," prominent hardline separatist Masarat Alam told AFP.

The first two meetings last year were attended by pro-Indian parties only with those opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir staying away.

He argued that bilateral talks between New Delhi and Kashmiri parties -- an idea of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh -- will not resolve

the dispute as Pakistan was also an "important party" in the dispute.

Nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan hold Kashmir in parts but claim it in full. They have fought two of their three wars over the scenic region since getting independence from Britain in 1947.

The roundtable process is different from a "composite dialogue" launched by the two nations in January 2004.

Moderate separatists have held talks with India in the past, although sources said they were also likely to boycott the April 24 meeting and were meeting Monday to discuss the issue.

The insurgency in Kashmir was launched in 1989 and has left more than 42,000 people dead by an official count. Human rights groups put the toll at 70,000, including 10,000 people who have disappeared and are presumed dead.



**Sri Lankan army soldiers search bus passengers at an entry point to the city of Colombo yesterday. Sri Lankans are in the midst of celebrating their traditional New Year, which is shared by the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamil community.**