

Monarchy may be abolished by 2008

Nepal marks 'democracy' anniversary

AFP, Kathmandu

The movement forced Gyanendra to agree to restore parliament on April 24, 2006, 14 months after he seized power in what he said was a bid to crush a Maoist revolt.

"On this day, Nepali people successfully fought for their rights," Premier Girija Prasad Koirala said, as a helicopter showered flower petals at a flag-draped parade ground ceremony earlier on Tuesday marking "Democracy Day."

"This day has given us the responsibility to build a peaceful, prosperous and a new Nepal by ending all sorts of problems and conflicts," he said as an army band played lively martial music and children paraded past carrying banners.

Last month, the rebels ended their decade-long insurgency and joined the government under a peace deal with mainstream parties.

"It's a long way for a country to come after ten years of bitter armed conflict," said Ian Martin, the head of the UN mission in Nepal.

"The Maoists have come from the countryside into the political process, the Maoist army has placed its weapons under storage and UN monitoring and we now have the interim parliament and government that the Maoists have entered."

The army -- once fiercely loyal to the monarch -- played a central role in the celebrations, in what observers said was a signal aimed at dispelling talk about cracks in the peace process.

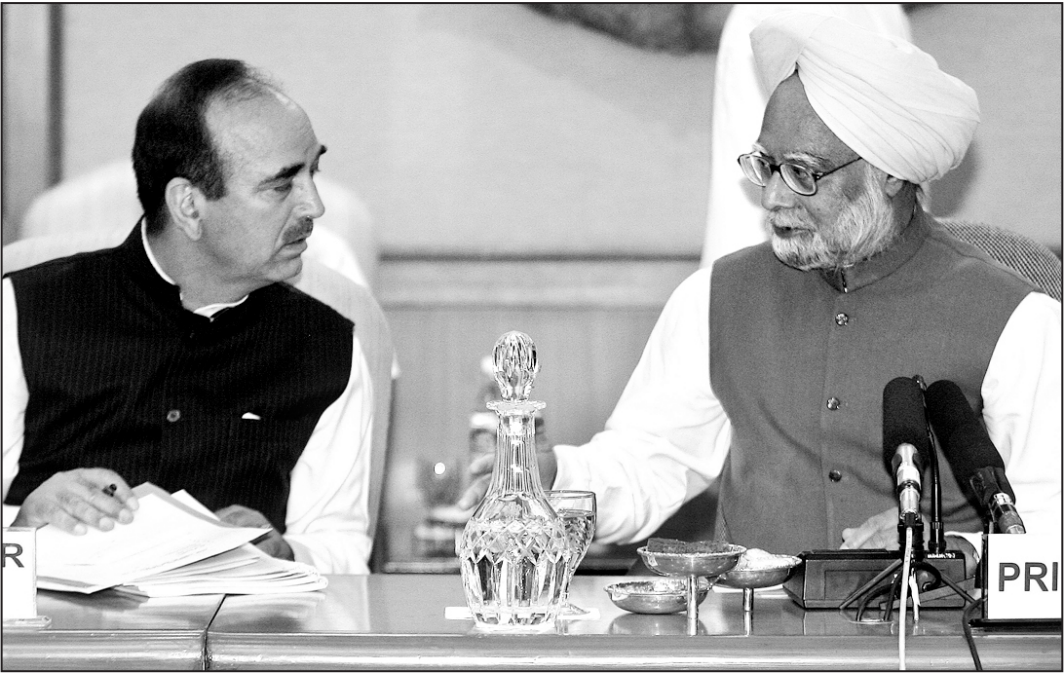
As politicians said the monarchy was headed for the history books, King Gyanendra and his wife visited a temple on the outskirts of Kathmandu to sacrifice animals and offer prayers.

The trip to the temple is an annual ritual for the monarch revered by devout Hindus as a reincarnation of the god Vishnu, local media reported.

King Gyanendra dismissed the government in February 2005 and seized absolute power, claiming that the country was headed for anarchy.



Nepalese artists perform Dev Nach (dance for god) during a parade marking "Democracy Day" in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's new government celebrated the first anniversary of the end of absolute rule by the king as officials and analysts hailed huge progress but warned of a tough road to democracy.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) talks with Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad during the third Round Table Conference (RTC) at Singh's residence in New Delhi yesterday. The conference was scheduled to discuss ways to ease movement across the Line of Control and the contentious issue of providing relief to kin of militants killed in encounters.

'Secret talks in Europe over Palestinian state'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian officials are conducting secret negotiations in Europe on creating an independent Palestinian state by the end of 2008, a Palestinian newspaper reported yesterday.

"Palestinian and Israeli officials are holding secret meetings in a European capital under the aegis of the United States and Europe to try to reach an agreement on final status issues, with a view to establishing a Palestinian state at the end of next year," wrote the leading Al-Quds daily.

Basing its report on "informed" sources, the newspaper said the talks were including the thorniest issues in the decades-old conflict, such as borders, and the fate of Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem and Jewish settlements.

The newspaper said the goal of the talks was to realise US President George W. Bush's two-state vision before his term in office expires in January 2009.

"The United States and European countries have put pressure on the Israeli government to take part in these meetings," the newspaper said.

Government spokeswoman Miri Eisin said the Israeli prime minister's office "categorically denies this report".

Separatists stay away as Kashmir talks begin in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

India's prime minister opened talks with politicians from revolt-hit Kashmir yesterday in a bid to ease tensions there, but the state's separatists boycotted the meeting.

The "Kashmir roundtable" was billed as an internal peace process for the region and the third such meeting for groups in the Indian-administered part of the area, which is divided between nuclear-rivals India and Pakistan.

"There are two dimensions to the problems of Jammu and Kashmir. One is an internal one and the other an external one, involving Indo-Pakistan relations," said Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the start of the conference, according to an official transcript.

"It is our intention and sincere desire to advance on both fronts towards resolving the problems through a process of dialogue."

A peace process with Pakistan, known as the composite dialogue was started by the two nations in January 2004.

Approximately 25 representatives of political parties and other Kashmir groups were present at the one-day talks at the prime minister's sprawling colonial residence in New Delhi, an aide said.

But separatists in Indian-held Kashmir, where an insurgency against Indian rule has raged since 1989, say that the internal dialogue can go nowhere without the presence of the militants and of Pakistan.

"It (the roundtable) is a futile exercise," Yasin Malik, a former militant and now separatist politician who heads the pro-independence Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front, told AFP Tuesday.

Concern mounts over Indo-US nuke deal

AP, New Delhi

Talks over a landmark nuclear agreement between India and the US have been slowed by a series of "complex issues," a top Indian diplomat said in comments broadcast yesterday.

Speaking to a private Indian news channel in New York, India's junior foreign minister, Anand Sharma, acknowledged hurdles in talks over the March 2006 agreement, which gives India access to American know-how in civilian nuclear technology.

"I would not say that there is a stalemate as such ... but these are complex issues," Sharma told CNN-IBN, adding some issues still needed to be resolved.

He gave no details, but Indian newspapers have been quoting unidentified high-ranking officials as saying India has problems with the deal as it currently stands.

One point of concern in New Delhi is a nonbinding clause, inserted by the US Congress, which directs the US president to determine whether New Delhi is cooperating with Washington's efforts to confront Iran about its nuclear programme.



Pakistani lawyers march as they shout anti-Musharraf slogans during a protest rally in Karachi yesterday. Around 3,000 lawyers and opposition supporters massed outside Pakistan's Supreme Court as the country's Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry challenged his dismissal by President Pervez Musharraf.

French candidates eye centrist vote

AP, Paris

The battle between conservative Nicolas Sarkozy and Socialist Segolene Royal heated up Tuesday with both candidates in France's presidential runoff trying to woo voters in the political centre who hold the ticket to victory.

Centrist candidate Francois Bayrou is no longer in the running, but his strong third-place showing in Sunday's first round of balloting could make him a kingmaker if he throws his support behind the low-and-order former interior minister or to the leftist with a chance of being France's first woman president.

Polls show Sarkozy is in the lead, but Royal still has a fighting chance in the May 6 runoff. Both are dynamic figures in their fifties who have rekindled interest in politics after 12 years under Jacques Chirac that left voters with an stagnant economy and a dim view of France's place in the world.

Francois Fillon, a Sarkozy adviser, reached out to middle-ground voters Tuesday by telling Le Figaro newspaper that Sarkozy supporters would form a government with figures from beyond their conservative political party UMP.

Royal, who previously dismissed calls for an alliance with Bayrou, appealed to him Monday, saying she was available for a public dialogue.

"It is my responsibility to make this overture," she told supporters in the southern city of Valence. "I'm awaiting a response."

Sarkozy spokesman Xavier Bertrand on Tuesday accused Royal of bargaining with Bayrou and "bargaining also means renouncing your ideas, your convictions," he told LCI television.

13 Taliban killed in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

Afghan and international forces clashed with Taliban insurgents in two separate gun battles in the south and west, leaving 13 militants dead and four other people wounded, officials said yesterday.

The latest violence came as Afghan officials claimed their forces have trapped up to 200 Taliban in a southern village, possibly including the militia's military commander, Mullah Dadullah, a claim later denied by the Taliban.

After a winter lull in the violence, Afghan, Nato and US-led forces have stepped up operations in recent weeks, hoping to pre-empt a feared spring offensive by militants that threatened the already shaky grip of President Hamid Karzai's government.

Six arrested in anti-terror raids in UK

AFP, London

Six men were arrested in and around London on Tuesday in a series of anti-terror raids, police said.

"Six men have been arrested in connection with inciting others to commit acts of terrorism overseas and terrorist fundraising," a Metropolitan Police spokesman told AFP.

"The men were arrested this morning at five addresses in London and one in Luton," a town north of the capital.

"A number of searches are ongoing."

The men were arrested by the Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command and local police officers.

A police spokesman said: "The arrests form part of a long-term proactive and complex investigation into alleged incitement and radicalisation for the purposes of terrorism, as well as alleged provision of financial support for international terrorism."

Ahmadinejad proposes talks with Bush

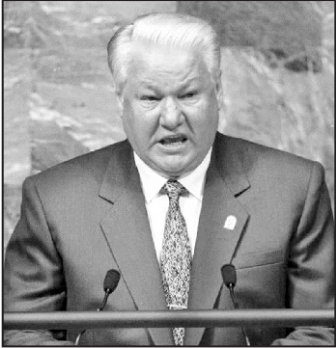
AP, Tehran

Iran's president challenged President Bush to hold public talks on various global issues, though the hard-line leader declined to say if he envisioned such discussions covering nuclear issues.

"Last year, I announced readiness for a televised debate over global issues with his excellency Mr. Bush. And now we announce that I am ready to negotiate with him about bilateral issues as well as regional and international issues," Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was quoted as saying Monday on the Web site of Al-Alam, Iran's state-run Arabic satellite television channel.

The Iranian leader did not elaborate on what specifically he was willing to discuss with the US president, but he said the talks "should be held with media present."

It was not immediately clear if Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say in all state matters, supported Ahmadinejad's proposal.



Transformed Russia bids Yeltsin goodbye

AP, Moscow

Perhaps unavoidably, Russia's farewell to Boris Yeltsin will be filled with symbols and ceremonies that reflect the epochal changes that transformed the nation during his eight years as president.

The body of the first president of post-Soviet Russia will be placed for public viewing on Tuesday afternoon, a day after his death at age 76, in Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral a vast, gleaming church that is the most potent emblem of the Russian Orthodox revival after decades of Communist official atheism.

The cathedral is a replica of the original, which sat on the banks of the Moscow River not far from the Kremlin. It was blown up by the Soviet authorities in 1931, just a few months after Yeltsin's birth.