

Thaksin's party banned

Ousted PM apologises for his party fate

AFP, Bangkok

Protesters denouncing Thailand's junta braved a security clampdown here yesterday after a ruling barring the ousted prime minister and his party from elections cast uncertainty on the country's political future.

About 1,000 people wearing yellow headbands and chanting "Junta -- get out!" gathered at a central Bangkok intersection hemmed in by hundreds of police who refused to let the demonstration move.

"We are not allowing them to hold rally," said Colonel Supisarn Bhakdinanach, metropolitan police spokesman.

The turnout was smaller than that expected by the authorities, who earlier said they were expecting thousands of Thai Rak Thai (TRT) members to join a rally by a group supporting ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Army chief Sonthi Boonyaratglin told AFP said an indefinite crackdown had been imposed with extra

checkpoints and other security measures, and with Thaksin's "hardcore" allies under close watch.

"Security measures have been stepped up since last night and will gradually be increased. The measures will be in place for a long time," said the general, who led the coup against Thaksin in September.

Thaksin, now living in London, apologised to his party over the court ruling handed down late Wednesday.

"I, as founder and leader of the party... apologise to all party members, executives and supporters who have met with this unexpected fate," he wrote in a letter handed out to media.

Thaksin's party was found guilty of fraud in April 2006 elections, which were later annulled amid a flurry of allegations of wrongdoing.

The court, which was appointed by the junta, dissolved the party and banned Thaksin and other party leaders from politics for five years.

"The Thai Rak Thai party did not

respect the rule of law," one judge said, adding that it "cannot exist as a political party."

Analysts said the move raised question marks over the credibility of polls and the restoration of democracy promised by the military junta.

"I think it is going to be very rocky, very turbulent, unless they can win over Thai Rak Thai voters," said political analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University.

"They have not made any effort to do that... There is a big gap here, there is a neglected electorate," he added.

Chaturon Chaisang, the current leader of TRT, on Thursday called the verdict an attempt to punish elected leaders.

"It's as if my party members were executed for breaking a glass window while those who made the rules had burned down the house," the former deputy prime minister told media.



Thai Muslim villagers along with students gather in front of the central mosque to protest against the military in Thailand's restive southern Pattani province yesterday. Hundreds of protesters chanted slogans against the military and demanded the withdrawal of all military forces from the Muslim dominated southern provinces of Thailand.

Nepali parties agree to 1st post-war polls in Nov

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's eight political parties announced yesterday a November date for the Himalayan nation's first post-war elections, originally scheduled for June.

The vote for a body to rewrite Nepal's constitution had been set for June 20, but Nepal's top election official has repeatedly said more time was needed to prepare.

"We have agreed to hold the constituent assembly elections by the end of November and the eight party leaders have given the responsibility to the government to fix the (exact) date," minister for peace and reconstruction Ramchandra Poudel told AFP.

"The prime minister has proposed November 26 as election day, but it has not been approved by the leaders of the eight parties," said CP Mainali, leader of the United Left Front party.

Nepal's former rebel Maoists ended their decade-long civil war late last year and have been given five ministerial portfolios in the new government.

The elections will decide the

future of Nepal's embattled monarch King Gyanendra, who has been stripped of most of his powers after being forced to end a much-criticised 14-month period of authoritarian rule last April.

The fiercely anti-monarchy Maoists want the interim government to declare a republic before the polls and while agreeing to a November ballot added a note of dissent.

"Our party thinks that we will not be able to hold the elections without declaring a republic through parliament so we have sent a note of dissent on the election date agreement to the other party leaders," said Dinanath Sharma, a senior Maoist leader.

Nepal's parliament, formed in January, needs to amend the interim constitution in the next two weeks, said peace minister Poudel.

"We have also agreed to amend the interim constitution and formulate the necessary election laws by mid-June," he said.

Nepal's chief election official hailed the announcement of November polls.

"We welcome this agreement and now this political decision

should be backed up swiftly to make sure we can hold the election in November," election commissioner Bhojraj Pokharel told AFP.

The commission has recently finished updating Nepal's electoral register, and around 17.6 million of the 27 million population are now registered to vote, Pokharel said.

However, the eight-party government that includes the Maoists also face law and order problems in Nepal, where at least 65 people have been killed in ethnic unrest in the south since January.

"The government also needs to improve peace and security in order to create a stable environment to hold the polls," the election chief said.

Some 9,700 polling centres would be set up across the country, he added.

At least 13,000 people were killed during the Maoist insurrection launched in western Nepal in 1996.

As part of a landmark peace deal reached late in 2006, the ultra-leftists have placed their weapons and troops in camps under United Nations supervision.

India, US in talks to finalise nuclear deal

AFP, New Delhi

India and the United States began talks yesterday intended to resolve delays in a nuclear energy deal that will give India access to long-denied Western nuclear technology.

Chief US negotiator Nicholas Burns met Indian officials in New Delhi to kick off talks on how civilian nuclear cooperation would work between the two countries.

The deal will reverse three decades of US sanctions on nuclear trade with India, even though New Delhi has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and tested nuclear weapons in 1998.

"Little more work is needed to conclude the pact," which was signed in 2005 during a visit here by US President George W. Bush, Burns said before meeting Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon.

The pact requires India to separate nuclear facilities for civilian and military use and set up a

regime of international inspections for the former in return for technology and nuclear fuel supplies.

"None of the issues that we have highlighted will be brushed aside and they will be examined by both sides in the light of our good bilateral relations," an Indian foreign ministry official said on condition of anonymity.

India was formally non-committal on the talks, which came a week after experts from the two countries met in London to address unspecified "technical issues."

"The visit will be the occasion for further discussions," the foreign ministry said without elaborating.

Burns also met Montek Singh Ahluwalia, deputy head of a national economic policy-making agency and other officials on the first day of the talks, officials said.

US ambassador David Mulford warned on the eve of the talks that tricky issues still needed to be ironed out.



US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns (2-L) talks with media representatives upon his arrival at the Indian Foreign Ministry for a meeting with officials in New Delhi yesterday as US ambassador to India David Mulford (L) looks on.

Police recruiting centre blast kills 25 in Iraq

AP, AFP, Baghdad

A suicide bomber hit a police recruiting centre in Fallujah yesterday, killing at least 25 people and wounding 50 while six more US soldiers were killed in separate incidents, police said.

Ten policemen were among the dead in the attack, which occurred about 11 am, according to a police official in the city who spoke

on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to release the information.

Fallujah, in restive Anbar province, is 65 km west of Baghdad.

Police said the bomber detonated his explosives vest at the third of four checkpoints as he stood among recruits who were lining up to apply for jobs on the force. The centre had only been opened on Saturday in a primary school in eastern Fallujah.

The US military and Iraqi army and police were running the centre along with members of Anbar Salvation Council, a loose grouping of Sunni tribes that have banded

together to fight al-Qaeda.

Police stations and recruiting posts have been a favourite target of Sunni insurgents and al-Qaeda through the course of the Iraq war.

Meanwhile, six more US soldiers have died in attacks across Iraq this week, the US military reported on Thursday, cementing May's position as the deadliest month of the war since 2004.

Two soldiers died in a roadside bomb explosion on Wednesday while patrolling the dangerous neighbourhoods in the southwest corner of the capital, which have seen intense fighting in recent days.

Another two were killed by a roadside bomb during a foot patrol the same day, the military said in a statement without specifying the exact location.

Another soldier was seriously wounded following a roadside bomb explosion northwest of the capital on Monday, and died in a combat support hospital the next day, with the military announcing the death on Thursday.

Musharraf warns against army criticism

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf warned against criticism of the army as the government yesterday urged legal action over "derogatory" remarks by supporters of Pakistan's suspended top judge.

Military ruler Musharraf removed Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry on March 9, citing alleged misconduct. The move sparked the biggest political challenge to the general since he seized power eight years ago.

Musharraf told army officers in the eastern city of Jhelum late Wednesday that a weekend seminar at the Supreme Court featuring fiery speeches by lawyers against his rule was an "assault" on the legal system.

The language used at the meeting -- where the audience chanted "Go Musharraf, go" and other slogans -- was "tantamount to humiliating the armed forces and judiciary," a military state-

ment quoted the president as saying.

Chaudhry, who also spoke at the seminar, did not overtly criticise Musharraf but issued a veiled warning that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Opponents say Musharraf suspended the independent-minded Chaudhry to remove any legal hurdle to retaining his dual position as president and army chief beyond 2007, when he is constitutionally meant to hang up his uniform.

Musharraf last week said his uniform "has become part of my skin" and declined to set up a date to step down as military chief.

The Supreme Court is to begin a hearing on Monday into petitions against "derogatory remarks made at the seminar about the government, judiciary and armed forces," court officials said.

The interior ministry had sent

a letter to the court asking it to take action.

Meanwhile Musharraf said he had "strongly urged the media not to politicise a purely judicial and legal matter," the latest in a series of such pronouncements.

"The president said the media is free to criticise any action of the government but emphasised that their actions must not demoralise the nation," the statement said.

Television stations should not broadcast talk shows that discuss Chaudhry's ongoing legal fight against the charges, it said.

The president's statement comes amid what press and television organisations say is a sudden rise in pressure on the media in Pakistan.

Three Pakistani journalists working for foreign news organisations had envelopes with bulletins inside, left in their cars in Karachi on Tuesday, just over two weeks after violent clashes in the city left 40 people dead.

Taliban attack Pak govt official's home: 13 people killed

AP, Dera Ismail Khan

About 100 suspected pro-Taliban militants attacked the house of a government official in northwestern Pakistan before dawn yesterday, killing 13 people, police said.

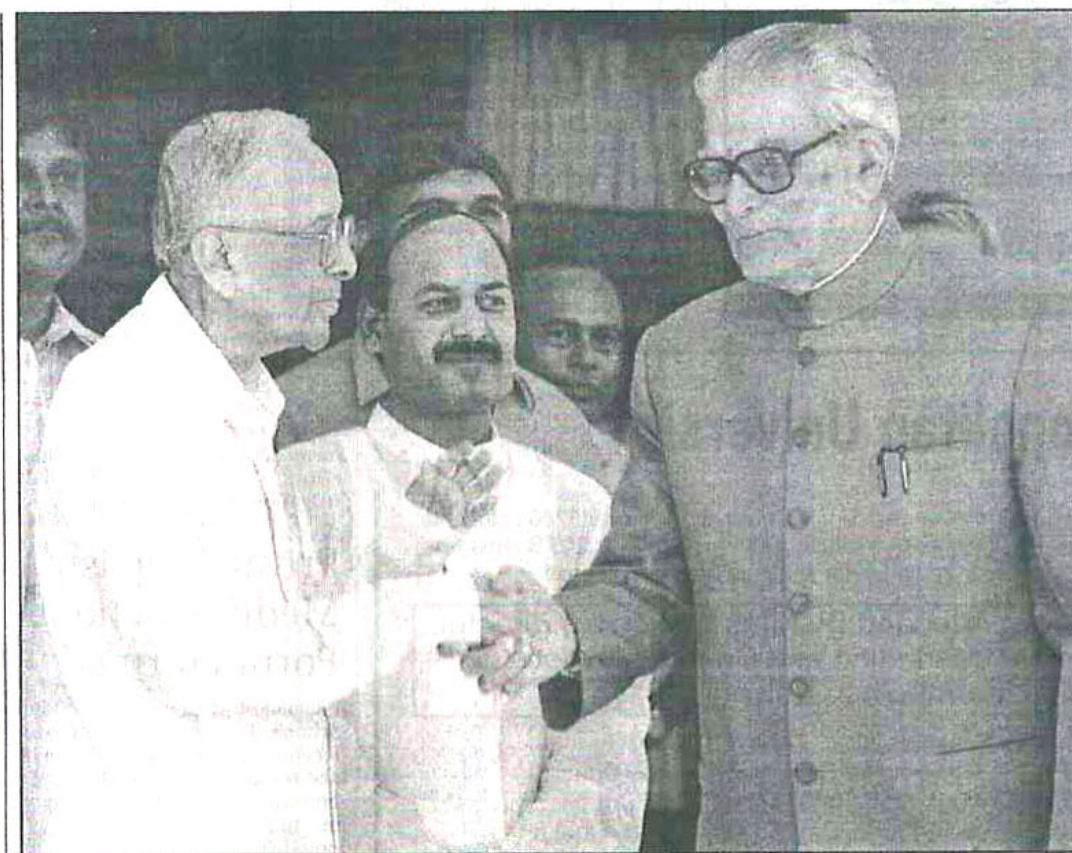
The house belonged to Ameerud Din, the top administrator of the Khyber Tribal region in North West Frontier Province, bordering Afghanistan.

Din was not home at the time, but his brother, who also is a government servant, was among those killed. Authorities said the dead included six members of the same family and seven guests.

"The attackers fired rockets, threw hand grenades and used guns" for about 30 minutes before fleeing, said Sanaulah Khan, an area police chief.

Two others were injured in the attack near the village of Guman, 12 miles from the troubled town of Tank.

Tank lies in a swath of territory near the Afghan border where Islamic militants have challenged the government's authority with increasing success over the past year.



Veteran Indian Marxist leader Jyoti Basu (L) greets Bhairon Singh Shekhawat (R), Vice-President of India, during a visit to Basu's residence in Kolkata yesterday. Shekhawat, who is emerging as a frontrunner for the presidential elections discussed the issue, Basu told media representatives after the meeting.

Astronomers discover giant planet

AFP, Honolulu

Professional and amateur astronomers announced on Wednesday the discovery of a "bizarre" planet outside the solar system that is more than 13 times the mass of Jupiter.

The planet known as XO-3b is "an oddity" compared to the more than 200 extrasolar planets found so far, said Peter McCullough, an astronomer at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, Maryland, in a press release.

"It's the largest and most massive planet yet found in such a close orbit, and given the proximity of the orbit to the star, we were surprised to find that the orbit is not circular but significantly elliptical," McCullough said.

He and other researchers presented their findings on Wednesday at a meeting of the American Astronomical Society in Honolulu in the state of Hawaii.

"This planet is really quite bizarre," said Christopher Johns-Krull, an astronomer from Rice University.



A delegation of 14 family members of Indian Armed Forces personnel missing in action during the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 pose with Indian Defence Minister AK Antony (4R) at the Ministry of Defence in New Delhi yesterday prior to their departure for Pakistan. The delegation will meet with Pakistani officials to determine the whereabouts of their kin.

Lankan troops keep up anti-LTTE offensives

16 killed as ICRC returns to front lines

AFP, Colombo

Government forces kept up two offensives against Tamil Tiger rebels in the island's northern and eastern regions Thursday with casualties reported on both sides, officials said.

Troops backed by artillery combed the jungles of Thoppigala in the district of Batticaloa, where security forces recovered weapons and explosives from a rebel hideout Thursday, the military said.

Officials said several soldiers were wounded in clashes Wednesday in the region.

The defence ministry said two members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed by security forces in the northern peninsula of Jaffna on Wednesday evening.

The International Red Cross resumed work on Sri Lanka's battle-scarred front lines on Wednesday as 16 people died in fresh violence, officials said.

Sri Lankan air force jets Wednesday bombed a base of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at Puthukkudirippu, a town in the northeast of the island, the defence ministry said without providing further details.

The government's military spokesman, Prasad Samarasinghe, said four soldiers were killed Wednesday morning and another wounded in clashes with Tamil rebels in Madhu in the northwest of the country. He said two rebels were killed.

In the northern frontier town of Vavuniya, the defence ministry said another soldier was killed when an army sentry point was shelled by suspected Tamil Tigers late Tuesday.

The defence ministry said nine rebels were killed in clashes with security forces along the northeastern front line of Welio Oya since Tuesday. There were no casualties on the military side, the ministry said.

Turkish MPs clash in final vote on reform

AFP, Ankara

Turkish lawmakers yesterday began a final vote on constitutional changes that would see the president elected by popular vote as the ruling party and the main opposition wrangled over voting rules.

The reforms are pushed by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP). They were introduced after the political turmoil that blocked the election of its presidential candidate by parliament, as the current law requires.

The AKP rushed the bill through the assembly earlier this month but President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who has often clashed with the government, rejected the package last week.

He said there was "no justifiable and acceptable reason" to change the system.

The AKP brought the bill back to parliament, arguing that a popular vote was the only way out of the presidential election deadlock, which forced the sole candidate, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, to withdraw.

Rice warns Iran ahead of key nuclear talks

AFP, Vienna

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told Iran yesterday to change tactics and freeze uranium enrichment, but Tehran remained defiant ahead of talks on its nuclear programme with the European Union.

Speaking to reporters in Vienna, Rice repeated Washington's offer to join multiparty talks on trade, security and technological benefits for Iran if the Islamic state stopped its enrichment activities.

"I think it's time for Iran to change its tactics," Rice said.

"The international community is united on what Iran should do and that is to suspend, to demonstrate that it is in fact not seeking a nuclear weapon under cover of civil nuclear power."

Her comments came hours before Iran's top negotiator Ali Larijani and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana were scheduled to begin a fresh round of talks in Madrid aimed at seeking a way out of the increasingly tense nuclear standoff.

It will be their second meeting in just over a month after a fruitless

head-to-head in Turkey in late April.

It's also their first encounter since a 60-day time limit set by the United Nations for Iran to stop enriching uranium, a process which makes reactor fuel but also atom bomb material, expired last week.

The dispute over Iran's persistent defiance of UN demands has intensified in recent days, with stepped up rhetoric on both sides of the debate.

Foreign ministers from the Group of Eight most industrialised nations said Wednesday that they were prepared to back "appropriate measures" if Iran failed to change its stance.

Oil-rich Iran denies it is seeking nuclear weapons, saying it wants only to produce energy for a growing population whose fossil fuels will eventually run out.

The US is leading calls by Western powers for existing sanctions on Iran to be tightened. The UN Security Council first imposed sanctions on Iran in December for rejecting its demands, and then modestly increased them in March.