

Alarm in Nepal as Maoists build up new clout

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists are cementing their new found political clout by establishing unions that could cripple the country and undermine a fragile peace deal, industry figures have warned.

The ultra-leftists, who renounced violence when they signed a peace deal last November, have attracted thousands of workers from sectors ranging from tourism to education.

The latest strike by a Maoist-affiliated union was on Tuesday, with 50,000 copies of a popular English language daily newspaper stuck at the printers due to a strike by delivery workers -- their second in a week.

The strike "is a part of the larger picture," said Ram Pradhan, editor of the Himalayan Times, the paper

hit by the stoppage.

"It's more political than industrial. They (the Maoists) want to put pressure on all sectors and show how powerful they are," he said.

He senses that the Maoists are attempting to enlist broad support ahead of crucial elections set for November.

The vote, a key part of the peace process, will lead to formation of a body that will rewrite the constitution.

"These kind of actions," Pradhan warned of the union activity, could "endanger the peaceful transition that's supposed to be going on."

The tourism sector, a key foreign currency earner, has also been hit.

"The Maoists want to establish themselves and get recognised

and that's why they've been building networks in almost every sector," said Prakash Shrestha, president of the Hotel Association of Nepal.

"We don't oppose formation of trade unions but they must be practical and know their rights and limitations. If we fulfilled their every demand, the institutions would collapse," he said.

Since emerging from the jungles after 10 years of brutal civil war, the Maoists have promised to join the mainstream.

Despite being given key government portfolios, allegations of mafia-style beatings and abductions persist.

The education sector has proved fertile ground for the former rebels to build their presence, with thousands of private schools shut down in May by another strike.

Explosion at Syrian ordnance depot kills 15 soldiers

AP, Damascus

An explosion went off at an ordnance depot inside a military complex outside the Syrian city of Aleppo yesterday, killing at least 15 soldiers and wounding 50 others, the state news agency said.

The SANA news agency said the blast was caused when high summer temperatures set off high-explosive materials at the depot, adding that the explosion was "not the result of sabotage."

The explosion resulted from "the combustion of sensitive, highly-explosive material caused by extremely high temperatures," SANA said.

The depot belonged to a military unit in Musalmiya, some 10km from Aleppo, 350km north of Damascus, the agency said.



British Foreign Secretary David Miliband (R) holds official talks with his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Kasuri (L) at the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad yesterday.



Relatives of South Koreans who were kidnapped in Afghanistan grieve as they meet to deliver a message for their loved ones at the office of the Korean Foundation for World Aid in Seoul yesterday.

S Korea seeks to break hostage deadlock

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

With the lives of the 22 remaining South Korean hostages hanging in the balance, the Seoul government yesterday dispatched a presidential envoy to the area to pick up the failed negotiations.

As shock and grief pervaded nationwide, Cheong Wa Dae released a statement live on television in the morning, harshly denouncing the Taliban's killing of Bae Hyung-kyu, 42.

"The Korean government clearly states that the organisation responsible for the abduction will be held accountable for taking the life of a Korean citizen. The killing of an innocent citizen cannot be justified under any circumstance or for any reason, and any such inhumane act can not be tolerated," said the statement read out by Chief Presidential Secretary for Security Policy Bae Jong-chun.

Baek was set to fly as the president's special envoy to Kabul to join the crisis team working with the Afghan government for the release of the hostages.

Cheong Wa Dae spokesperson Chun Ho-seon explained that "the

gravity of the situation called for the decision to send" Baek to Afghanistan.

Baek said: "The Korean government will exert all possible efforts and cooperate with the governments of Afghanistan and other related countries so that the Korean citizens held hostage will be able to return to the arms of their families safely and at the earliest possible time."

Tension remained high as the militants were still reportedly holding all remaining 22 hostages.

"No one has been released, and there has not been any exchange," Marajudin Pathan, the governor of Ghazni province was quoted as telling the Associated Press over the phone.

"They are still in Taliban custody."

Pathan was also quoted as saying that authorities were in contact with kidnappers early Thursday trying to secure the Koreans' freedom. The militants gave a list of eight Taliban prisoners who they want released in exchange for eight Koreans, he said.

Democrats push new Iraq pullout bill

AP, Washington

House Democrats have drafted new Iraq legislation they hope will appeal to Republicans fed up with the war: Start withdrawing troops in two months but leave it up to President Bush to decide when to complete the pullout.

The vote will come next week, as members take up a \$460 billion bill covering military spending for 2008. Another vote could come again in September, after Iraq commander Gen David Petraeus delivers a long-anticipated assessment on the war and Congress considers a \$142 billion measure needed to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"This is big time," Rep John Murtha, D-Pennsylvania, said of the upcoming fall debate. "When you get to September, this is history. This is when we're going to have a real confrontation with the president trying to work things out."

The House has passed similar anti-war measures in the past, but has been unable to push the legislation through the Senate, where Democrats hold a slimmer majority and Republicans have routinely blocked such bills from advancing.

British FM urges support for Pak terror fight

AFP, Islamabad

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband called yesterday for international support for Pakistani President Pervez's efforts to combat al-Qaeda and Taliban militants along the Afghan frontier.

Miliband, on his first major trip since he took office a month ago, struck a markedly different tone from the United States which recently threatened to launch unilateral strikes on rebels in Pakistan's tribal areas.

Pakistan has bristled at warnings from Washington, its key ally, that it cannot continue to allow Osama bin Laden's rejuvenated terror network to use the South Asian nation's frontier regions as a safe haven.

"The right way forward is one based on partnership between the countries," Miliband told a news conference when asked if he had discussed the US threats of military action with Musharraf during their meeting earlier in the day.

"In respect of the shared challenges we face in the tribal areas,

in every aspect we have been talking about what we can do together, not me lecturing the Pakistani government or vice versa," he added.

The British minister said a strong relationship was needed between Pakistan's government and the Nato and US forces in neighbouring Afghanistan to stabilise the volatile border between the two countries.

"This is an issue that requires concerted efforts on both sides of the border. It is also a problem that requires elements of social intervention, as well as security intervention," he said.

His Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Kasuri used their joint press conference to lash out again at the increasingly tough line being taken by the administration of US President George W Bush.

The White House's top counter-terrorism official Frances Townsend on Sunday caused a stir by refusing to rule out a military incursion into remote Pakistani regions close to the border with Afghanistan.

"Such statements are irresponsible and should not be made," Kasuri said.

"It may be election season in the United States but it should not be at our expense."

Pakistan says it has nearly 90,000 troops along the border and points to the fact that it has lost more than 700 soldiers in military operations against Islamic militants who fled the fall of the Taliban in late 2001.

Miliband flew to Islamabad on Wednesday from Kabul, where he met Afghan President Hamid Karzai and other officials for talks on stabilising the volatile region.

Violence has flared in Pakistan since government troops stormed the pro-Taliban Red Mosque in the capital earlier this month, killing scores of militants.

More than 200 people have died in a wave of revenge attacks by militants, including around a dozen suicide bombings in the past three weeks. A soldier was killed in a rocket attack on Thursday in the tribal belt.

Group of US lawmakers threatens to block nuke deal with India

AFP, Washington

A bi-partisan group of lawmakers warned Wednesday that Congress could block a landmark US-India nuclear cooperation deal if it side-steps safeguards to prevent military uses of the technology.

The 23 legislators sent a letter to President George W. Bush saying the so-called "123" operating agreement, which reportedly allows India to reprocess spent nuclear fuel, could end up violating US law.

"The agreement for nuclear cooperation is subject to the approval of Congress, and any inconsistencies between the agreement and the relevant US laws will call congressional approval deeply into doubt," said the letter from the 23 members of the House of Representatives.

Edward Markey, co-chairman of the House Bipartisan Task Force on Nonproliferation, sounded his own warning.

"If the 123 agreement has been intentionally negotiated to side-step or bypass the law and the will of Congress, final approval for this deal will be jeopardized," Markey said.

Details of the agreement have been kept under wraps since it was finalized in Washington last week by senior officials of the two countries.

The nuclear deal was agreed upon by Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh two years ago to highlight strategic ties between the world's two biggest democracies.

The Congress approved the deal in principle last year and a bill to that effect was signed into law by Bush, but there was a delay in finalizing the operating agreement, which has to be approved again by Congress.

India has stood fast against accepting any curbs on its reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel.

US tries to smooth Pak al-Qaeda row

AFP, Washington

The United States Wednesday stressed it was acutely concerned about infringing Pakistani sovereignty, after Islamabad bristled at its threats of strikes against al-Qaeda in restive tribal areas.

But senior State Department troubleshooter Nicholas Burns said Washington would retain the option of targeting Osama bin Laden's terror group in Pakistani-Afghan border areas in some circumstances.

"We want to respect the sovereignty of the Pakistani government ... we want to work with the Pakistanis," Burns, under secretary of state for political affairs, told a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"Are there any scenarios under which the United States might take its own action when we are dealing with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda? We can foresee some

such scenarios," he said.

"But it's always going to be our preference to work with (Pakistan) ... we are partners of them, we don't want to complicate their internal politics needlessly."

Burns was replying to a question from Virginia Senator Jim Webb, who expressed concerns about the political impact of any US action in the tribal areas on President Pervez Musharraf, a key ally in the US "war on terror."

"We would have the potential of causing a ripple effect throughout the country which could truly destabilize the central government," Webb said.

Burns appeared before the committee several days after Pakistan reacted angrily to threats of action against militant targets in tribal territories, where US intelligence says al-Qaeda and the Taliban are regrouping.

Pakistani foreign ministry spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam said

any such action would be "unacceptable," counterproductive and fan public anger.

The White House's top counter-terrorism official Frances Townsend on Sunday caused a stir by refusing to rule out a military incursion into remote Pakistani regions close to the border with Afghanistan.

"There are no tools off the table, and we use all our instruments of national power to be effective," Townsend, assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism, told CNN.

Despite praising Pakistan for its increased military action in the tribal areas in recent weeks, Burns did say however that more needed to be done in the regions of North and South Waziristan.

"We would like to see a more sustained and effective effort by the Pakistani government to defeat terrorist forces on its soil," said Burns.



North Korean (L) and South Korean officers hold military talks on the south side of the border village of Panmunjom yesterday. High-level military talks between South and North Korea broke down due to differences over their disputed sea border.

Bush wants ME deal within this yr: Abbas

AFP, Jerusalem

US President George W Bush is looking to reach a final status Israeli-Palestinian agreement before he leaves office, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas said in an interview published yesterday.

"The Americans are determined to push the parties into reaching an arrangement during President Bush's current term," Abbas was quoted as telling Israel's Maariv daily in published extracts of the interview.

"I heard this in person from the president himself and from Secretary of State (Condoleezza) Rice. They want to reach an arrangement between Israel and the Palestinians in the coming year," he added.

Bush leaves office in January 2009 after two terms in the White House.

"We have to reach the final formula, the end game, and then think about the implementation and set a timetable for the implementation on the ground," said Abbas, when asked about his plan for a final-status arrangement.

"First we have to resolve the problems and arrive at an outline for the final agreement," he added, listing his principles of this agreement.

"A Palestinian state within the 1967 borders with east Jerusalem as its capital and a solution to all the problems on the agenda, including the refugee problem," he said.

"Afterwards we have to think about how to implement the agreement... The timetable may be long, but what is important is for the Palestinians to know the final result, the end game, from the outset."

Speaking about the sensitive Palestinian refugee question, Abbas called for a "just and agreed-upon solution" which he said would need to be "creative" but without going into details.

On whether he intends to run in the next presidential election he was non-committal. "Perhaps three and a half years is enough," he told Maariv.

The paper claimed Abbas voiced support for Marwan Barghouti, the most famous Palestinian prisoner jailed by Israel, if and when he runs for president.

On Wednesday, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared "we have started very seriously" to talk to Abbas "on a peace process and questions which can allow a Palestinian state to be established."



A resident of Osney looks at the flooded street in Oxford, central England yesterday. More rains were forecast yesterday for flood-hit areas as meteorologists said the three months from May to July were the wettest in England and Wales since records began in 1766.

Lankan court allows appeal against eviction of Tamils

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court allowed a challenge yesterday to the eviction of nearly 400 minority ethnic Tamils from Colombo carried out during an anti-rebel drive.

The court allowed the challenge on the grounds that anti-torture provisions of the constitution may have been violated by the police and troops and fixed a formal hearing for November 28.

The three-judge bench granted "leave to proceed" in the case filed against the police and the state security apparatus for forcibly removing nearly 400 men, women and children last month as part of an anti-rebel campaign.

"The case is being taken up on the basis of article 11 and 12 which says that all are equal before the law and that no person shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment," a court official said.

The petition was filed by a lobby group called the Centre for Policy Alternatives.

The lobby group complained that hundreds of Tamils were dragged out in their night clothes by security forces and bused out of Colombo in a violation of basic rights.

Iraq's neighbours grapple with war refugee influx

AFP, Amman

Countries hosting hundreds of thousands of Iraqis uprooted by war met yesterday in Jordan to grapple with the social and economic burdens amid appeals for help from rights groups.

The one-day conference was attended by representatives from Jordan and Syria -- which alone host a total of around two million Iraqi refugees -- as well as Egypt.

Also attending the conference are "observers" from the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), Turkey, Iran, Russia, Japan, the European Union, the United States and Britain.

"We hope that we will find ways, with our neighbours, to help the Iraqis and that our prayers will be heard," Mohammed al-Hajj al-Hmud, secretary general of the Iraqi foreign ministry, told AFP as he headed into the meeting.

"The conference will discuss ways of helping these states cope with burdens caused by Iraqi refugees," Jordan's foreign ministry said.

The United Nations estimates that some four million of Iraq's 26

million people have fled the violence in the country, including those who left before the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

The UNHCR calls this the biggest wave of displacement in the Middle East since 1948, when the creation of Israel caused hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to take flight.

It estimates that Syria hosts some 1.4 million Iraqis and Jordan about 750,000, including people who abandoned the country before 2003.

Officially Jordan shies away from calling Iraqis on its territory "refugees" and has commissioned a Swedish group to survey their numbers and identify their status.

Although many commentators agree the influx of migrants has triggered concerns about inflation, job losses and the expansion of ghettos in Jordan, others blame the economic challenges on other factors.

"It appears that the end of subsidised fuel from Iraq, high international oil prices, exports of the domestic food supply and rising costs of food ... have done far more to spur inflation in Jordan over the

last two years," the University of Jordan Centre for Strategic Studies said in a report published in early July.

The study said Jordan's inflation rate was 6.25 percent in 2006 compared with 1.6 percent in 2003, when Jordan depended on Iraq for all its oil needs, importing 5.5 million tonnes annually by road, half of it free and the rest at a preferential price.

Nevertheless Jordan and Syria need funds to cope with the Iraqis.

The UNHCR has urged the international community to "put its money where its mouth is" and earlier this month it doubled to 123 million dollars its annual appeal for funding to help boost medical care, shelter and other support for the Iraqi refugees.

The agency warned that Syria and Jordan's healthcare, education and housing are under severe strain due to the continued influx of Iraqis and has repeatedly urged the Iraqis to register with its offices in Amman and Damascus.

The UNHCR has already registered more than 150,000 Iraqis in the region, he said.