

PM should quit, says Nepali Maoists

19 killed in fresh unrest

AFP, Kathmandu

A crisis in Nepal's peace process deepened yesterday with former rebel Maoists describing the Himalayan nation's veteran prime minister as a failure who should step down.

The Maoists stormed out of government this week demanding the monarchy be immediately abolished and have embarked on a campaign of strikes and street protests aimed at ousting King Gyanendra and closing the palace.

The move is a major blow to a peace deal signed late last year, under which the ultra-leftists agreed for the issue to be decided after democratic elections set for November. The Maoists have now vowed to disrupt the polls.

"Prime Minister (Girija Prasad)

Koirala had three responsibilities. To keep the alliance of eight parties intact, to run the government and to conduct free and fair elections," Maoist central committee member CP Gajurel told AFP.

"He has failed in all three and morally he should resign," he said, adding that the ex-rebels' "protest programmes will continue."

Koirala, an elderly and respected figure, is widely viewed as the architect of the November 2006 peace accord that ended a decade of civil war.

The Maoists insist King Gyanendra needs to be de-throned before the polls, arguing the embattled monarch and his supporters may find a way of clinging to their positions.

The ex-rebels have said they have no intention of returning to war

and that their People's Liberation Army will remain in camps monitored by the United Nations.

Meanwhile, at least 19 people including a police officer have died in violence in south western Nepal sparked by the killing of a local Muslim leader, police said Wednesday.

Hundreds of houses and vehicles were destroyed when angry mobs rampaged through the area in protests that followed the shooting of politician Mohid Khan on Sunday, police said.

"Five more bodies were discovered Wednesday and local people have told us that another nine people were burned to death, but we need to test the charred remains to verify that they are human," said Kuber Kadayat, the district deputy superintendent of police.

Lankan planes bomb Tiger territory

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan war planes Thursday carried out bombing raids deep inside territory held by Tamil Tiger rebels, causing heavy damages, the defence ministry said.

"The Sri Lanka air force launched an air strike on a major LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) underground weapons depot," the ministry said in a statement.

"It is believed that many LTTE vehicles in the vicinity were also destroyed in the air strike," it said.

The LTTE however claimed that the planes had hit a civilian settlement, wounding at least six people.

"Two Sri Lankan air force bombers dropped several bombs on a civilian settlement just one kilometre from Puthukudirippu" in the district of Mullaitivu on the northeast coast, the LTTE said.

More than 5,400 people have been killed in fighting in the past 21 months following the breakdown of a Norwegian-brokered truce.

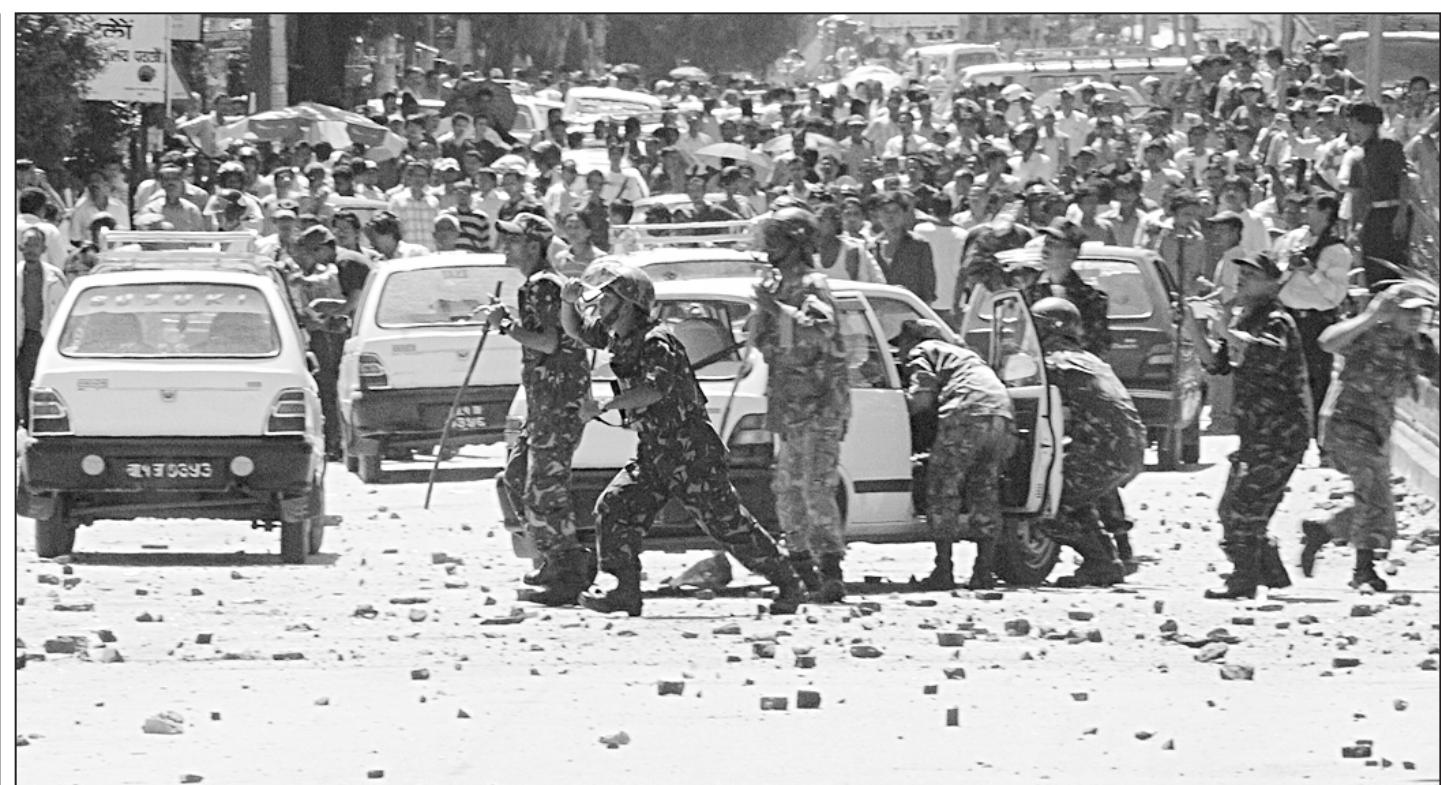


PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese policemen provide security to taxis after scuffles between students and taxi drivers turned violent in Kathmandu yesterday. The scuffle broke out after arguments between students and taxi drivers who were trying to block the road demanding smooth supply of petrol.



PHOTO: AFP

Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon (R) shakes hands with Ahsan Iqbal (2L), an opposition leader of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of former premier Nawaz Sharif as other party leaders Nisar Chaudhry (2R) and Zafar Iqbal Jhagra (L) look on prior to their meeting in Islamabad yesterday. McKinnon, who arrived in Islamabad on Wednesday on three day visit and held meetings with Pakistani leaders and opposition parties, has urged President Pervez Musharraf to keep his promise to quit as army chief during a meeting with him.

C'wealth hails Pakistan vote announcement

AFP, Islamabad

Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon said Thursday that the announcement of a date for President Pervez Musharraf to seek re-election showed democratic progress in Pakistan.

But McKinnon added that the 53-nation club of mainly former British colonies expected the Pakistani military ruler to quit as army chief by the end of the year.

Pakistan's election commission Thursday named October 6 as the date for a presidential poll in which Musharraf will go for a second five-year term. He has said that he will shed his uniform within a month if he wins.

"We do know now that there will be elections for the President on October 6, we also acknowledge ... there are currently actions in the courts pertaining to the election of the President with or without uniform, but this to us is a state of progress," McKinnon told a press conference.

The Commonwealth expelled Pakistan for five years after Musharraf seized power in a 1999 coup.

ME peace meet in mid-Nov: Abbas

AFP, AP, Ramallah

The US-sponsored Middle East peace conference should take place in November, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said yesterday after meeting US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

"I discussed numerous questions with Madame Rice, notably the peace process and the good preparation that is needed to assure the success of the international meeting that should take place in mid-November," Abbas said at a press conference with Rice.

The United States has not yet said when or where the conference would take place, or which countries would be invited to participate.

The conference must "give a push to serious negotiations with the aim of ending the Israeli occupation of our land and Arab lands that began in 1967, in conforming with international law, the roadmap, the vision of (US president George W.) Bush, the Arab initiative and signed accords."

"We told Madame Rice that we were serious in our quest to reach a framework agreement on final status questions, in other words borders, Jerusalem, refugees, settlements and water," he said.

"We will be meeting with the US President George Bush in New York during the UN meetings (next week) to continue our intense discussion with the aim of reaching final settlement."

Meanwhile, Palestinian leaders sought details Thursday from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about the goals of what they hope will be a breakthrough Mideast peace conference, but the talks were overshadowed by Israel's declaration of Hamas-run Gaza as "hostile territory."

The Palestinians want the conference, tentatively set for November, to yield an outline for a peace deal, complete with timetable, while Israel wants a vaguer declaration of intent. Key Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, have said they would only attend if concrete results are achieved.

Iran vows retaliation for any Israeli attack

AP, Tehran

Iran has drawn up plans to bomb Israel if the Jewish state should attack, the deputy air force commander said Wednesday, adding to tensions already heated up by an Israeli airstrike on Syria and Western calls for more UN sanctions against Tehran.

Other Iranian officials also underlined their country's readiness to fight if the US or Israel attacks, a reflection of concerns in Tehran that demands by the US and its allies for Iran to curtail its nuclear programme could escalate into military action.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said Sunday that the international community should prepare for the possibility of war in the event Iran obtains atomic weapons, although he later stressed the focus is still on diplomatic pressures.

The comments come as the top US military commander in the Middle East, Adm. William Fallon, is touring Persian Gulf countries seeking to form a united front of Arab allies against Iran's growing

influence in the region.

Iran has periodically raised alarms over the possibility of war, particularly when the West brings up talk of sanctions over Tehran's rejection of a UN Security Council demand that it halt uranium enrichment.

"We have drawn up a plan to strike back at Israel with our bombers if this regime (Israel) makes a silly mistake," Iran's deputy air force commander, Gen Mohammad Alavi, said in an interview with the semi-official Fars news agency.

Alavi warned that Israel is within range of Iran's medium-range missiles and fighter-bombers.

The Iranian air force had no immediate comment on the Fars report. But Defence Minister Mostafa Mohammed Najjar told the official IRNA news agency that "we keep various options open to respond to threats ... We will make use of them if required."

Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards also weighed in, saying Iran "has prepared its people for a possible confrontation against any aggression."

UN to host key meeting on rescue plan for Iraq

AFP, United Nations

Iraq and its neighbours are to meet with major powers and donors here Saturday to review a UN-backed blueprint to rebuild the war-ravaged country riven by sectarian violence and divisions.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki will co-chair the ministerial session which will consider how to bolster the UN presence in Iraq and weigh a five-year plan to stabilize the country on the political, economic and security fronts.

Organisers said the meeting aims to build on the momentum generated at the international conference on Iraq in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh last May.

Some 20 countries, including the five permanent members of the UN Security Council -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- and eight neighbours of Iraq -- Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey, are to attend.

Participants are to examine

"challenges and opportunities" in implementing UN Security Council resolution 1770 adopted last month, as well as support for the Baghdad government's efforts to curb sectarian strife through an inclusive political dialogue and national reconciliation.

Resolution 1770 extended the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) by one year and urged it to "advise, support and assist" the Iraqi government on a wide range of issues.

The UN was specifically tasked with assisting Baghdad in pursuing national reconciliation and facilitating dialogue with its neighbours on issues of border security, humanitarian aid and the return of the estimated 4.5 million Iraqi refugees.

Ban told a press conference Tuesday that he planned to discuss with Maliki "how to strengthen the UN role" in Iraq and review the "International Compact," the five-year rescue plan adopted last May at the Sharm el-Sheikh conference.

The International Compact with Iraq (ICI) is a joint initiative by the

United Nations, the World Bank and Baghdad.

"The United Nations wants to do what it can to help in Iraq, subject to what the security situation permits and what the Iraqis themselves want us to do," UN Under Secretary General for Political Affairs Lynn Pascoe told AFP Wednesday.

"This meeting should be an important opportunity to exchange views with them in order to chart out the way forward," Pascoe said.

The UN allowed a maximum of 65 staffers to reside in Iraq after its Baghdad office was hit on August 19, 2003 by a truck bomb that killed 22 people, most notably its special envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello.

Currently there are 95 UN international staffers in the country -- 65 in Baghdad and 30 in the Iraqi Kurdish city of Arbil -- in addition to several hundred international security personnel.

Some 235 UN-affiliated staffers also work out of Jordan and Kuwait.

Senate blocks bill on Iraq combat tours

AP, Washington

Democrats' efforts to challenge President Bush's Iraq policies were dealt a demoralising blow Wednesday in the Senate after they failed to scrape together enough support to guarantee troops more time at home.

The 56-44 vote four short of reaching the 60 needed to advance all but assured that Democrats would be unable to muster the support needed to pass tough anti-war legislation by year's end. The legislation, sponsored by Sen Jim Webb, D-Virginia, was seen as the Democrats' best shot because of its pro-military premise.

"The idea of winning the war in Iraq beginning to get a second look," said Sen Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, who led opposition to the bill alongside Sen John McCain.

Webb's legislation would have required that troops spend as much time at home training with their units as they spend deployed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Members of the National Guard or Reserve would be guaranteed three years at home before being sent back. Most Army soldiers now

spend about 15 months in combat with 12 months home.

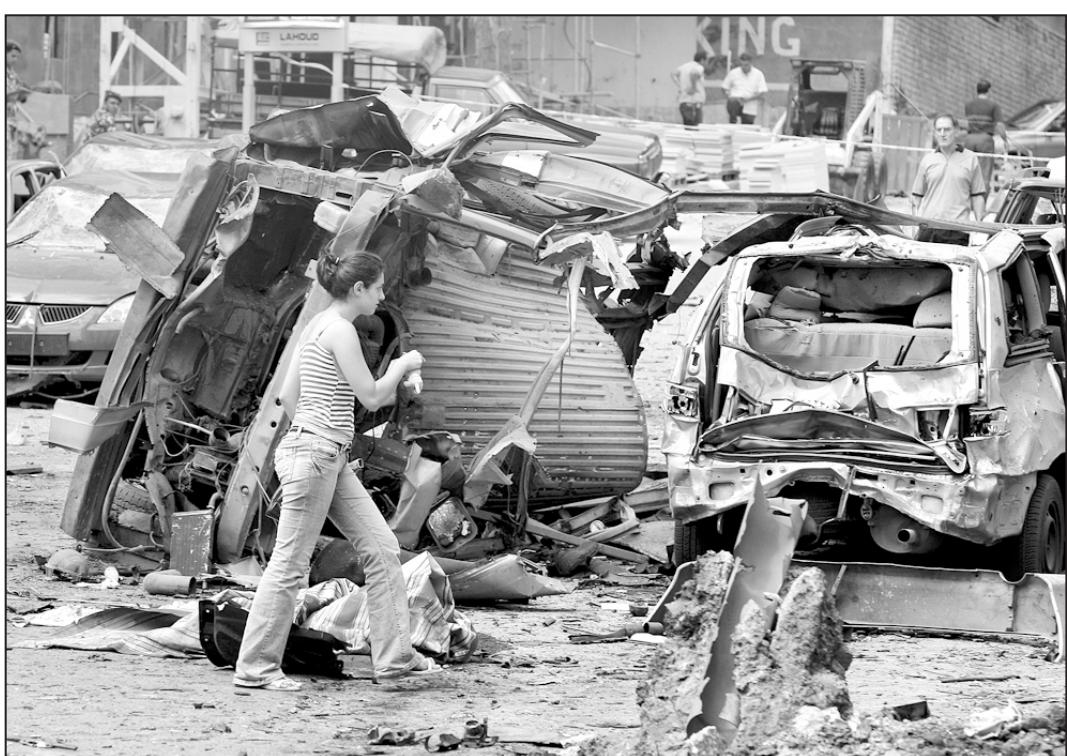
"In blocking this bipartisan bill, Republicans have once again demonstrated that they are more committed to protecting the president than protecting our troops," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

Wednesday's vote was the second time in as many months that Webb's bill was sidetracked. In July, a similar measure also fell four votes short of advancing.

Democrats said they were hopeful additional Republicans, wary of the politically unpopular war, would agree this time around to break party ranks.

It had already attracted three dozen co-sponsors including Republicans Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, Olympia Snowe of Maine and Gordon Smith of Oregon.

But momentum behind the bill stalled Wednesday after Sen John Warner, R-Virginia, announced he decided the consequences would be disastrous. Warner, a former longtime chairman of the Armed Services Committee, had voted in favour of the measure in July but said he changed his mind after talking to senior military officials.



A Lebanese woman walks in front of destroyed cars yesterday at the site of a car bombing in a Christian suburb of Beirut, which killed anti-Syrian deputy Antoine Ghannam on Wednesday. The latest slaying of an anti-Syrian MP in Lebanon is clearly aimed at torpedoing a highly contentious presidential election and further destabilising the deeply divided country.

Lebanon in turmoil after MP's slaying

Damascus blamed as world condemns killing

AFP, Beirut

prevent the terrorists from succeeding.

Security was boosted in Beirut as police sifted through wreckage of the powerful blast, which left a number of blackened and mangled cars, and interviewed people in the Christian neighbourhood where the blast took place.

A police spokesman said five people were killed, including the MP, and 71 others injured. Two of the deputy's bodyguards were among the dead, Ghannam's daughter Mounia told AFP.

"The bomb consisted of more than 20 kilograms (44 pounds) of TNT packed in a Mercedes car parked nearby with fake licence plates," he said. "It was detonated via remote control."

Ghannam, 64, a lawyer, had been an MP since 2000. He belonged to the Christian Phalange party of former president Amin Gemayel, whose own son, industry minister Pierre, was killed last November.

The party said Ghannam's

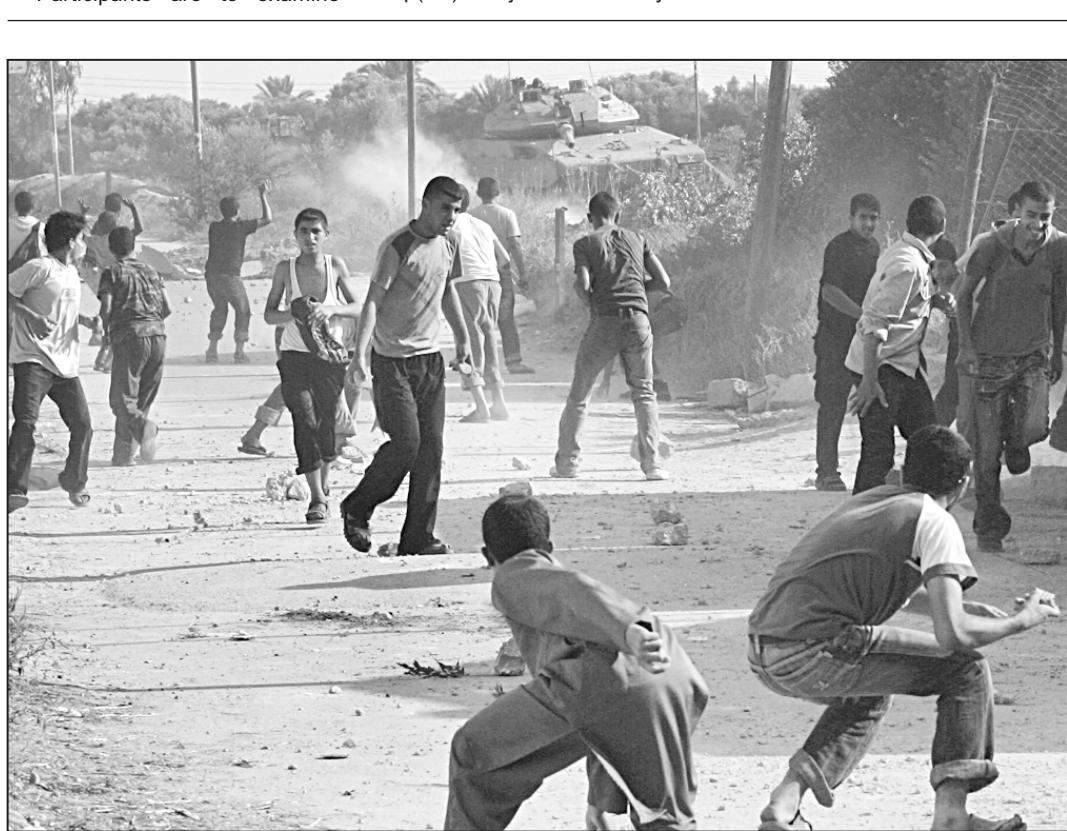


PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians throw stones at an Israeli tank (background) yesterday during an Israeli military incursion into the central Gaza Strip Al-Bureij refugee camp. A 16-year-old Palestinian boy was killed after being run over by an Israeli army bulldozer during the incursion.

Frustration grows in Nepal Maoist army camps

AFP, Nawalparasi

Eighteen months ago Bishnu Pariyar was a Maoist soldier in Nepal, but now he is one of thousands of unhappy ex-rebels who are in UN-supervised camps as part of landmark peace deal.

The former fighters' disgruntlement over camp conditions and Tuesday's decision by the Maoists to quit the government to push for Nepal to be declared a republic immediately have cast a major cloud over the peace process.

"The camp conditions are really bad," said the 26-year-old former guerrilla in the Maoist cantonment of Jhyalting Danda, a camp of 1,200 people, 130km southwest of Kathmandu.

The Maoists complain they are not receiving promised allowances like food, water, toilet and medical facilities," said Magar. The Maoists are demanding accommodation of the same quality as that enjoyed by the Nepal Army.

"At times I feel very frustrated," said Pariyar, who fought with the Maoists for seven years and whose camp is one of 28 around the Himalayan nation.

The ex-rebels have stopped short of threatening to pull their fighters and weapons out of the UN-supervised camps following their exit from the government, but their frustration is mounting.

"We're facing constant pressure from our soldiers to leave the camps and protest," Maoist Deputy Division Commander Ramil Roka Magar told AFP.

"The government's attitude is forcing us to leave the camps," he said.

"We're merely asking the government to fulfil our basic needs like food, water, toilet and medical facilities," said Magar. The Maoists are demanding accommodation of the same quality as that enjoyed by the Nepal Army.

"We do not fear terrorism and this will not break our will," Information Minister Ghazi Aridi told a press conference. "It will only reinforce our determination to