

# Donors hit out at Maoists for storming out of govt

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's key international donors have hit out at the country's former Maoist rebels for jeopardising a 10-month-old peace process by storming out of government and launching a strike campaign.

The ultra-leftists quit the government earlier this week and have threatened mass street protests and work stoppages to push for the immediate abolition of the Himalayan nation's monarchy.

Under the terms of last November's peace deal, that issue was supposed to be decided after a popular vote now scheduled for November 22 -- which the Maoists have also vowed to disrupt.

"Until now, the Maoists have been a full part of the political game," a senior Western diplomat in Kathmandu told AFP.

"If the situation changes and they do not take part in the elections, we

will have to reconsider this conception."

When the Maoists signed up for peace, they were promptly greeted and engaged by most major donors -- with the exception of the United States which continues to list them as a "terrorist" organisation.

And nearly a year down the road, most donors have invested heavily in ensuring the elections will go ahead as planned.

"We've informed our capitals that we need bigger budgets" to help Nepal with the November polls, said another Western diplomat, who also asked not to be named.

"If they don't have elections then that extra budget could be lost and there is also a loss of credibility," the diplomat added.

On Thursday, top US State Department official Richard Boucher hammered the Maoists for attempting to "trash" the effort to close the book on a decade of civil

war and revive democracy in one of the world's poorest countries.

"Trying to trash this election is trying to trash the whole process," he said in Washington. "Declaring yourselves an opponent to the democratic voting process, we can't abide that. So I hope they won't go that far."

Boucher said the US government would continue to treat the Maoists as extremist outcasts until the movement becomes a normal political party.

So far the Maoists have not threatened to renounce the ceasefire that ended their decade-long insurgency, and their soldiers remain confined to UN-monitored camps -- but Boucher said it was not enough.

"They need to give up the gun. They need to give up extortion. They need to give up the militant youth groups that have sort of extended their power and tried to intimidate

people in the countryside," Boucher said.

On Thursday, the European Union also fumed that it would be a "betrayal" of the Nepalese people if the elections cannot go ahead on time, while Japan, another leading donor, also voiced concern for the polls.

Analysts and diplomats have said the Maoists' withdrawal from government is in part designed to appease hardliners within their party who are frustrated with the pace of the peace process, and also to pile pressure on the other parties in government to accede to their demands.

In addition, the Maoists fear they will do badly in any polls because their popularity has plummeted due to continued charges that they use violence and intimidation.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif march as they shout slogans during an anti-Musharraf protest rally in Karachi Thursday. Hundreds of Pakistani opposition supporters called for the downfall of President Pervez Musharraf, in a turbulent start to the countdown to presidential elections in October.

## Iran not an 'immediate threat', says IAEA chief

AFP, Rome

UN atomic chief Mohamed ElBaradei said Thursday that Iran does not currently pose an immediate threat as international tension over Tehran's nuclear programme continued to rise.

"Iran does not constitute a certain and immediate threat for the international community," ElBaradei said in an interview with Italian RAI television.

The IAEA director called for international leaders to "give peace a chance," underlining that no hidden radioactive substances or underground production sites had yet been found.

However, he admitted: "Iran has not yet completely revealed

all the aspects of its nuclear programme."

Once again, ElBaradei called for dialogue, underling that a calendar was in place for inspections concerning the nature of Iran's atomic programme.

"If we do not obtain satisfying results in two or three months, only then will we be able to draw negative consequences," said ElBaradei, in Italy for a general conference of the UN watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency.

Western powers are to meet in Washington on Friday to discuss a new UN Security Council sanctions resolution in the nuclear standoff and the US administration is frustrated at

the lack of progress being made.

The United States and France want tougher sanctions against Iran, which has denied western allegations that it is covertly developing a nuclear weapon.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Wednesday for diplomatic action "with teeth" against Iran's nuclear programme and French President Nicolas Sarkozy on Thursday insisted that Tehran was seeking to build a nuclear bomb.

Sarkozy said France did not want a war with Iran over its nuclear programme, after his Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner recently warned of a possible military action.



PHOTO: AFP

Buddhist monks gather in front of the city hall in Myanmar's largest city Yangon yesterday after marching from the famous Shwedagon Pagoda. About 3,000 people including 1,500 Buddhist monks marched through the flooded streets of Yangon Friday in the latest protest against the ruling junta, witnesses said.

## US backs 'smooth' return to democracy in ally Pakistan

AFP, Washington

The United States wants to see a smooth transition to democracy in Pakistan for the country's long-term stability and to aid the fight against terror, a top State Department official said Thursday.

The comments by Richard Boucher came after Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said he would seek re-election on October 6 while still serving as army chief.

Without commenting specifically on Musharraf's announcement, the State Department's assistant secretary for South and Central Asia said an end to military rule would benefit both Pakistani and US interests.

Addressing postgraduate students at Washington's Johns Hopkins University, Boucher said that "long-term stability in Pakistan requires a return to democracy."

"We want to see that transition, we want to see it to be a fair election so that in the end, it's about the people of Pakistan... and respecting the choices they make," he said.

Boucher stressed that Pakistan was an indispensable US ally in the

"war against terror," and noted that Musharraf now faces a declaration of war from al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden.

"We want to see continuity in terms of Pakistan being better able to continue that fight for the long term, continue not just in the military dimension but in the economic and social dimension," he said.

Opposition parties in Pakistan immediately vowed to quit parliament over Musharraf's plans to win another five-year term in uniform. He announced this week that he would step down as army chief, but only if he wins the poll.

Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup and whose popularity has nosedived, must also hope the Supreme Court does not uphold any of the legal challenges that political rivals have filed against his eligibility.

"This transition in Pakistan, we want it to be smooth, we want it to be successful... but it has to result in a more stable and democratic system," Boucher said.

## N Korea nuke talks to resume next week Says China

AFP, Beijing

The much-anticipated next round of six-party talks on disarming North Korea's nuclear programmes will be held next week in Beijing, China's foreign ministry announced yesterday.

"Following consultations, the six-party talks... will be held from September 27 to 30 in Beijing," the ministry said in a short statement on its website.

The disarmament negotiations, which opened in 2003, group the two Koreas, China, Japan, Russia and the United States.

In a landmark deal brokered in February, North Korea agreed to dismantle all of its nuclear facilities and programmes in exchange for diplomatic concessions and energy and other aid.

In July it shut down its only operating reactor at Yongbyon in return for 50,000 tons of fuel oil.

At next week's meeting, representatives are expected to work on setting a firm deadline for the permanent disabling of the North's nuclear facilities, as called for in the February deal.

US top nuclear negotiator Christopher Hill said earlier this

week that participants in the six-party talks would also seek to devise and adopt a "work plan" for Pyongyang to declare and disable its entire nuclear arsenal.

Negotiators are also expected to set a date for the first meeting of foreign ministers from the six nations involved in the talks to end Pyongyang's nuclear drive, which was given new urgency when it tested a nuclear device last year.

The talks had been expected to start on Wednesday this week, but according to Western diplomats in Beijing, North Korea pulled out for unspecified reasons.

The postponement also came amid reports of North Korean anger over delayed shipments of oil from China and other news reports from the United States suggesting that Pyongyang could be supply Syria with nuclear technology.

China said Tuesday that it had delivered 50,000 tons of oil aid to North Korea, but foreign ministry officials refused to comment on the reported delays.

Also on Tuesday, North Korea denied that it was helping Syria to develop nuclear weapons and insisted it was keeping an earlier pledge not to allow the transfer of nuclear materials.

## Thousands protest racial injustice in US South

AFP, Jena

In a scene reminiscent of the US civil rights movement of the 1950s, thousands marched through this small Louisiana town Thursday protesting what they say is widespread inequality and racism in the US criminal justice system.

"It's amazing," civil rights leader Reverend Al Sharpton told CNN as he marched with the crowd. "You see the beginning of a movement that will deal with the criminal justice system in this country."

Wearing black clothing as a sign of mourning, protesters bused in from across the country chanted "No Justice! No Peace!" and swarmed the grounds of the town's high school, many bending to touch the stump of a tree cut down after it sparked months of racial tensions.

Five decades after US schools were officially desegregated, that tree was known as the "white tree" because only white students at Jena High School sat in its shade.

A few black students tried to cross the schoolyard's invisible color line last September and sit under the "white tree." They arrived the next morning to find three nooses hanging from it, a stark symbol of the lynching, which once terrorized southern blacks.



PHOTO: AFP

An army helicopter arrives at the site of a suicide attack in Kabul Friday. A suicide car bomber blew himself up in the Afghan capital Kabul on Friday, killing a French soldier with Nato's International Security Assistance Force, the French military and police said.

## Israel imposes West Bank lockdown

Hamas leader detained in refugee camp

AFP, Jerusalem/ Nablus

Israel imposed a lockdown on the occupied West Bank overnight as part of security measures brought in for Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement and the holiest in the Hebrew calendar, the army said.

"The total closure came into effect overnight and will last until Sunday morning unless it is extended," an army spokesman said.

Yom Kippur is the holiest and most important holiday in Judaism.

The observant neither eat nor drink from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday as they pray for forgiveness for their sins.

Israel suspends all TV and radio broadcasts, stops all public transport and closes ports and airports during the holiday, along with entertainment venues.

This year is the 34th anniversary of the start of the 1973 Yom Kippur War when Egypt and Syria

launched a surprise assault on the Jewish state which cost the lives of 2,700 Israelis and which continues to haunt the Jewish state.

Meanwhile, Israeli special forces yesterday arrested a local Hamas commander in a West Bank refugee camp where the army concluded a four-day operation, sources on both sides said.

The Islamist movement said Israeli troops arrested Nihad Shkirat, 35, a senior official for the northern Nablus region.

A military official described him as the Hamas military commander in the Ein Beit Elma refugee camp and said he was connected to a local cell that was plotting an imminent suicide attack in Israel.

He was detained at dawn by special forces disguised as Palestinians, the official added.

The army said troops arrested 50 suspects in Ein Beit Elma during four days of operations that wound up on Friday.



PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese mourners carry the coffins of assassinated MP Antoine Ghanem and his bodyguards during their funeral in Beirut yesterday. Lebanon was in mourning for the funeral of Ghanem and his bodyguards whose death has stirred fears of more instability in the tense runup to a presidential vote in parliament.

## North Korea, Syria hold talks amid suspicion

AP, AFP, Seoul

North Korea and Syria held high-level talks Friday in Pyongyang, the North's state media reported, amid suspicions that the two countries might be cooperating on a nuclear weapons programme.

The talks took place between Choe Tae Bok, secretary of the Central Committee of the North's ruling Workers' Party, and Saeed Eleia Dawood, director of the organizational department of Syria's Baath Arab Socialist Party, the official Korean Central News Agency reported.

The two sides discussed ways of improving friendship and cooperation and other issues of bilateral interest, KCNA said without elaborating.

Their meeting drew attention because it came amid suspicions that North Korea may be providing

nuclear assistance to Syria, a charge that both Pyongyang and Damascus deny.

The allegations arose after an alleged Israeli air raid earlier this month on unknown Syrian targets possibly connected to a weapons programme.

Andrew Semmel, acting US deputy assistant secretary of state for nuclear nonproliferation policy, said last week that North Koreans were in Syria, and that Syria may have had contacts with "secret suppliers" to obtain nuclear equipment.

Semmel did not identify the suppliers, but said North Koreans were in Syria and that he could not exclude that the network run by the disgraced Pakistan nuclear scientist AQ Khan may have been involved.

President Bush, when asked at a news conference Thursday

## Pakistan dismisses al-Qaeda threat

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan on Friday dismissed Osama bin Laden as a terrorist whose "ridiculous" call for holy war against its US-allied leader will find little echo, despite growing concern that al-Qaeda is regrouping near the Afghan border.

In a recording released Thursday, bin Laden urged Pakistanis to wage Jihad against President Gen Pervez Musharraf because of his alliance with the US against Islamic militants.

The al-Qaeda chief's message received wide but short-lived media coverage in Pakistan. Attention quickly returned to Musharraf's disputed re-election bid and fast-rising food prices.

But it could feed into a growing debate here about whether Pakistan is sacrificing its own stability by playing such a prominent and prolonged role in a US-led campaign against terrorism.

Officials on Friday played down the possible impact of the al-Qaeda leader's call.

"If Osama bin Laden has spoken to the people and urged them to rise, and the people were really following him, they would have done so much earlier," said army spokesman Maj Gen Waheed Arshad. "He doesn't have much following here."

## 27 Pakistanis die after consuming poisonous alcohol

AP, Karachi

At least 27 people have died after consuming poisonous alcohol in southern Pakistan, police said yesterday.

The deaths were reported late Thursday and early Friday after more than three dozen people were brought to various hospitals in Karachi, the nation's biggest city, after falling unconscious.

Their relatives told doctors that they had consumed "poisonous alcohol," said Javed Bukhari, the city's police chief. About 10 people are still being treated in hospital and are in stable condition.

Police have detained two men accused of preparing the contaminated alcohol, Bukhari said.

It is illegal for Muslims in Pakistan to drink alcohol, and there are only a handful of licensed producers catering to non-Muslims, who make up about 5 percent of the 160 million population.

'Number of Iraqi displaced nears 2m'

AFP, Baghdad

The number of Iraqis displaced in their own country because of rampant insecurity has reached almost two million following a sudden jump in August, Iraq's Red Crescent reported on Friday.

It said more than 280,000 families, or 1.9 million people, were displaced by the end of August, compared to 1.1 million people at the end of the previous month, according to the report, a copy of which was obtained by AFP.

The report gave no explanation for the massive jump in a single month, but said the figure had been on the rise ever since January.

Baghdad accounted for the lion's share of the increase, with 970,000 more people classified as displaced. Most of them, about 823,000 people, were from the mainly Shiite east bank of the Tigris river which runs across the city.