

India's poorest demand rights to land, water

AFP, New Delhi

Thousands of poor farmers, landless workers and indigenous people reached the Indian capital yesterday after a month-long protest march to highlight the plight of those marginalised by India's economic boom.

Men, women and even some children from India's neglected hinterlands walked in orderly lines waving green and white flags or carrying photographs of freedom icon and revered "untouchable" leader Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.

Their demands -- the right to land and water -- compete with

India's aim to turn rural land into industrial zones and attract foreign investment to maintain its scorching growth of more than nine percent.

For millions like the estimated 25,000 marchers who began their 600-kilometre (370-mile) journey from the central city of Gwalior on Gandhi's birthday on October 2, India's "economic miracle" is meaningless.

"Forty percent of Indians are now landless and 23 percent of them are in abject poverty," march organiser Puthan Vitthal Rajgopal, who heads a group called Ekta Parishad, or Unity Forum, told AFP.

"Such conditions have bred

Maoist insurgency in 172 of India's 600 districts and farmers are killing themselves in 100 other districts. So we want to ask the government, 'Where are the fruits of the reforms in these districts?'

The marchers want India's government to introduce iron-clad legislation on holdings, deeds and tenancy rights -- replacing the current system where ownership can easily be taken by the rich and powerful.

Many have lost land because of the absence of property deeds among people who have long lived on their traditional lands, including indigenous groups in forest areas, or because of cor-

ruption.

One farmer said a local official issued a deed putting part of his land in another's name after being bribed.

"We filed reports, attended courts but nothing happened," said Santok Devi. "And some 39 bighas (around an acre, half a hectare) are stuck in the controversy."

A government plan to set up tax-friendly special economic zones across thousands of acres of farmland in a bid to lure overseas corporations has also led to sometime violent protests over displacement in at least two states.

"For tribals there is no place left to go," said march coordinator Mrityunjay Sanjay. "They are getting displaced for factories. There is no place left for poor people to go in this country."

On Monday, the protesters will march to India's federal parliament to press for the setting up of a single land authority and fast-track courts for land disputes.

"People are still coming," said march coordinator Mrityunjay Sanjay. "Their basic needs are not met -- they don't have land, they don't have food, they don't have water. What are they supposed to do?"

Sanjay said they were waiting to see if the government showed concrete signs Monday of addressing their demands.

In spite of their deep-seated anger, marchers kept their spirits up by singing inspirational songs and dancing as they camped in the old part of the capital for the night.

PHOTO: STAR

Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) Chairman Commodore M Faruque speaks at a view exchange meeting with the media at Chittagong Port Training Academy yesterday. The meeting was organised by CPA. (Story on page 8)

'No evidence Iran making N-arms'

AFP, Washington

Chief UN nuclear watchdog Mohamed ElBaradei said yesterday he had no evidence that Iran is actively building nuclear weapons, despite recent bellicose rhetoric from US leaders.

"I have not received any information that there is a concrete active nuclear weapons programme going on right now," the director of the International Atomic Energy Agency told CNN, warning that US threats added "fuel to the fire."

"Even if Iran were to be working on a nuclear weapon ... they are at least a few years from having such a weapon," he said, citing assessments by US officials themselves.

"At this stage we need to continue to work through creative diplomacy ... as I don't see any other solution than diplomacy and inspections," ElBaradei said.

His comments came as US President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have been sharply ramping up their rhetoric about Iran, leading some critics to draw parallels with the late 2002

months before the 2003 invasion. "We are absolutely committed to a diplomatic process," spokesman Tony Fratto told reporters.

"We would never take options off the table, but the diplomatic process is what we want to move forward with," he said, calling it "unwise" to rule out the use of force.

His comments came as US President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have been sharply ramping up their rhetoric about Iran, leading some critics to draw parallels with the late 2002

verbal escalation against Iraq.

In recent months, Bush has predicted "nuclear holocaust" and "World War III" if Tehran gets atomic weapons, while Cheney has warned of "serious consequences" for Iran if it defies global demands to freeze sensitive nuclear work -- echoing the UN resolution that Washington says should be imposed on Iraq.

ElBaradei said if the United States had more information on Iran's nuclear ambitions than the IAEA, "I would be very happy to receive it and go forward."

He said "we cannot give Iran a pass right now, because there is still a lot of question marks."

"But have we seen Iran having the nuclear material that can readily be used into a weapon? No. Have we seen an active weaponization program? No," he said.

Merely "exchanging rhetoric" would not resolve the Iranian nuclear case, ElBaradei said, pointing to ongoing negotiations with North Korea as an example of dealing with the Islamic republic.

He said it is time "to stop spinning and hyping the Iranian issue," warning that military force could spark a global "conflagration."

Officials said three other militants and two civilians have been killed, along with those beheaded.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent reaction to the deployment one day earlier of more than 2,000 troops to the area to help combat the militants.

Officials said three other milita-

nts and two civilians have been

killed, along with those beheaded.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent

reaction to the deployment one

day earlier of more than 2,000

troops to the area to help combat

the militants.

Militants have seized and

beheaded 13 people in recent days

in the wake of the clashes although

the spokesman for Fazlullah has

denied that his loyalists were

involved in the gruesome killings.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent

reaction to the deployment one

day earlier of more than 2,000

troops to the area to help combat

the militants.

Militants have seized and

beheaded 13 people in recent days

in the wake of the clashes although

the spokesman for Fazlullah has

denied that his loyalists were

involved in the gruesome killings.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent

reaction to the deployment one

day earlier of more than 2,000

troops to the area to help combat

the militants.

Militants have seized and

beheaded 13 people in recent days

in the wake of the clashes although

the spokesman for Fazlullah has

denied that his loyalists were

involved in the gruesome killings.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent

reaction to the deployment one

day earlier of more than 2,000

troops to the area to help combat

the militants.

Militants have seized and

beheaded 13 people in recent days

in the wake of the clashes although

the spokesman for Fazlullah has

denied that his loyalists were

involved in the gruesome killings.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent

reaction to the deployment one

day earlier of more than 2,000

troops to the area to help combat

the militants.

Militants have seized and

beheaded 13 people in recent days

in the wake of the clashes although

the spokesman for Fazlullah has

denied that his loyalists were

involved in the gruesome killings.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent

reaction to the deployment one

day earlier of more than 2,000

troops to the area to help combat

the militants.

Militants have seized and

beheaded 13 people in recent days

in the wake of the clashes although

the spokesman for Fazlullah has

denied that his loyalists were

involved in the gruesome killings.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent

reaction to the deployment one

day earlier of more than 2,000

troops to the area to help combat

the militants.

Militants have seized and

beheaded 13 people in recent days

in the wake of the clashes although

the spokesman for Fazlullah has

denied that his loyalists were

involved in the gruesome killings.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent

reaction to the deployment one

day earlier of more than 2,000

troops to the area to help combat

the militants.

Militants have seized and

beheaded 13 people in recent days

in the wake of the clashes although

the spokesman for Fazlullah has

denied that his loyalists were

involved in the gruesome killings.

An explosion ripped through a

paramilitary vehicle on Thursday

killings up to 30 people in an apparent

reaction to the deployment one

day earlier of more than 2,000

troops to the area to help combat

the militants.

Militants have seized and

beheaded 13 people in recent days