

'Life or death struggle' over Tibet, says China

AFP, Beijing

China said yesterday it was engaged in a "life or death struggle" over Tibet as it announced 105 people had surrendered over an uprising and exiled groups warned hundreds had been detained.

"We are currently in an intensely bloody and fiery struggle with the Dalai Lama clique, a life or death struggle with the enemy," Tibet's Communist Party leader Zhang Qingli said in an editorial in the Tibet Daily yesterday.

While China has insisted it has used no deadly force to quell the unrest, Tibet and other parts of the country that have seen Tibetan protests in recent days remained sealed off to the foreign press to prevent independent

reporting.

Meanwhile the Dalai Lama wants talks between his government-in-exile and China to resume and is committed to a non-violent settlement of the Tibet issue, one of his aides told AFP yesterday.

"Both sides have to realise that we have to live side-by-side. We have to talk to each other," Tenzin Takhlasaid.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said Tuesday that Beijing was willing to hold talks, but only after the Dalai Lama gave up what is viewed in China as a campaign for the remote region to be granted independence.

"We are not asking for independence," Takhla reiterated, stressing that the Dalai Lama was

"still committed to the Middle Way approach" -- a policy of non-violence and autonomy for Tibet within China.

Chinese police have threatened or blocked foreign journalists from reporting on unrest in Tibet at least 30 times since deadly riots erupted there last week.

In one of the latest incidents, an AFP reporter was ordered off a bus in southwest China.

The Foreign Correspondents Club of China said journalists had experienced interference in the cities of Beijing, Chengdu and Xining, as well as in Lhasa.

In several other locations, police barred reporters from carrying out their work and escorted them out of areas where forces were reportedly quelling unrest.

Pak NA elects first female speaker

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's parliament yesterday elected the first female speaker in the country's 60-year history, a loyalist from the party of assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Fahmida Mirza, 52, could play a crucial role in a looming showdown between a coalition government led by Benazir's party and President Pervez Musharraf, whose political allies lost heavily in elections a month ago.

Mps in the National Assembly pounded their desks in approval as the purple-veiled former medical doctor was announced the winner with 249 votes from the 342-seat lower house of parliament, or national assembly.

"Fahmida Mirza is declared to have been elected as the speaker of the national assembly," outgoing speaker Amir Hussain announced after a day-long vote before handing over the speaker's chair.

Mirza, a veteran politician from Benazir's home province of Sindh, then took the oath as the first woman to hold the position in this deeply conservative Islamic nation of 160 million people.

"This is my third tenure in the national assembly and I believe it is time that we all work together to address the challenges facing the country," Mirza told reporters before the session.

"I am sure that we will be able to face these challenges with the support of parliamentarians, our

people and Pakistani media."

Benazir, the first female premier of an Islamic nation, was slain at an election rally on December 27. Her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won the most seats in elections last month and is set to lead a coalition government.

"The election of Fahmida Mirza as speaker will be a big step towards the empowerment of women in Pakistan," Shah Mahmood Qureshi, a central PPP leader, told reporters.

A rival party supporting key US ally President Pervez Musharraf, which suffered a crushing defeat in the elections last month, put forth a candidate who won 70 votes.

The speaker conducts the business of the house, deciding which debates or motions are allowed, and will play a key role in a parliament that looks set for a bruising confrontation with Musharraf.

"This is a big test and I hope that with the honour that Allah has bestowed upon you, you will be able to live up to expectations," said Chaudhry Perwaiz Elahi, parliamentary leader of the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League-Q party.

Musharraf, whose popularity has slumped amid rising Islamic militancy and economic problems, is desperate to find a political ally after his backers were trounced in the February 18 elections.

Election candidate shot dead in Nepal

AP, Kathmandu

Masked gunmen in southern Nepal shot and killed a candidate from a small communist party contesting upcoming elections, police said yesterday.

Kamal Prasad Adhikari, a National People's Front candidate, is the first candidate killed in the run-up to April's election. The election will pick members of a special Constituent Assembly, which is to rewrite Nepal's constitution and decide the nation's future political system.

Adhikari was shot several times by five masked gunmen at his house just after midnight Wednesday, police official Govinda Ram Pariyar said.

Adhikari was taken to a nearby hospital for treatment, but died a few hours later, Pariyar said.

Adhikari was contesting the election from his village of Betini, about 310 miles southeast of Kathmandu.



PHOTO: AFP

Fahmida Mirza at the Parliament House in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan's parliament later elected Fahmida, a veteran politician from Benazir's home province of Sindh, as its first female speaker. She won the top post with 249 votes from the 342-seat of parliament.

Western envoys slam UN's failed Myanmar mission

AFP, United Nations

Western ambassadors on Tuesday voiced disappointment with the outcome of UN troubleshooter Ibrahim Gambari's latest mission in Myanmar but vowed to keep the crisis in the Security Council's spotlight.

"We are disappointed by the lack of any concrete achievement" during Gambari's last visit to Myanmar from March 6 to 9, US Ambassador to the UN Zalmay Khalilzad told reporters after council consultations on the issue.

"The (military) regime has not responded appropriately to Gambari's initiative," he added, describing as "flawed" plans by Myanmar authorities to hold a referendum on a new constitution in May and multi-party elections in 2010.

His British counterpart, John Sawers, said Gambari gave a "not very encouraging briefing" on his latest mission to promote national reconciliation between Myanmar's government and the opposition led by democracy icon and Nobel peace prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

He said the world community's best tool to sway the ruling junta was "the power of persuasion" and keeping the issue "in the spotlight."

France's UN Ambassador Jean-Maurice Ripert expressed alarm that the draft constitution unveiled by Myanmar authorities contained provisions aimed at preventing Aung San Suu Kyi from running in the elections.

"That is not acceptable," he added.

But Chinese Ambassador Wang Guangya, whose country is a major trade partner and arms supplier of Myanmar, insisted that Gambari's mission had achieved some progress.

"One can argue whether the glass is full or the glass is half full," he told reporters.

"The United Nations is the only outsider to maintain access to both the government and Aung San Suu Kyi and to act as go-between between two," he earlier told the council.

On his third visit to Myanmar earlier this month, Gambari was rebuffed twice by the junta.



PHOTO: AFP

Taiwan's presidential candidate Frank Hsieh of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party with his wife Yu Fang-chih (R) greet supporters under heavy security presence during a motorcade rally in Taipei yesterday. Taiwan's next president will have to work hard to carve out a meaningful role for the island on the international stage, and relations with China hold the key to success, analysts say.

Anwar working to form new govt in Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim said yesterday he is moving towards forming a new government after landmark elections, with the help of defectors from the ruling coalition.

"I don't know how soon we can form the new government but we are moving in that direction," the former deputy premier.

Anwar said that coalition members from Malaysia's eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak on Borneo island had contacted him to discuss switching sides. The power bloc there could unseat the government if it changed hands.

"The MPs from there have come here to see me," Anwar said, adding that he was in no hurry to become the next prime minister, but that the opposition would already be in power if the polls had been clean and fair.

"I am maintaining that if there was no fraud in the election, we would have won. If we had two percent more votes we would have formed the new government," he said.

The three-party opposition alliance made unprecedented gains in March 8 polls.

Barisan Nasional will have 140 lawmakers in the new 222-seat parliament, against 199 in the out-

going 219-seat parliament. The opposition alliance won 80 seats from just 19 previously.

Anwar's Keadilan party, which is formally headed by his wife, will be the biggest opposition party in parliament, but Anwar is barred from standing for public office until April because of a corruption conviction.

Anwar said that Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's future was in jeopardy.

Anwar has said he will return to parliament through a by-election in a seat held by Keadilan, but that the plan is on hold until he consolidates Keadilan's unexpected electoral gains.

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