

Nepal in turmoil as Maoists threaten street protests

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists vowed yesterday to bring thousands of protesters onto the streets of the capital after a bitter stand-off with the army chief forced their leader to resign as prime minister.

The collapse of the ultra-leftists' administration after just eight months in office leaves the impoverished country without an effective government, and threatens a 2006 peace deal that ended a decade of civil war.

Maoist leader Prachanda announced Monday he was quitting as premier after his decision to sack the head of Nepal's army, a long-time rival, was vetoed by President Ram Baran Yadav, a member of the main opposition Nepali Congress party.

Prachanda, who led a bitter insurgency before signing up for peace and pushing through the abolition of Nepal's Hindu monarchy, accused the president of being "undemocratic" and undermining the peace process.

His supporters vowed a campaign of civil disobedience.

"We are planning protests in different parts of the Kathmandu valley on Tuesday afternoon," said Uma Subedi, secretary of

the Maoists' feared youth wing, the Young Communist League.

"We will launch regular protests until the president takes back his decision," she said.

Maoist spokesman Dinanath Sharma also said all left-wing "sister organisations" had been ordered to join the protests, including in the national parliament, "unless the president apologises."

The Maoists tried to sack the army chief, General Rookmangud Katawal, for refusing to integrate 19,000 former Maoist fighters -- currently confined to United Nations-supervised camps -- into the regular army as stipulated by the peace accord.

The army views the guerrillas as politically indoctrinated, and also accuses the Maoists of not fulfilling commitments to dismantle the paramilitary structure of their feared youth wing.

Prachanda, however, has long argued that the dispute is merely part of a wider campaign to undermine his democratically-elected government, which was formed after the ex-rebels scored a surprise win in landmark polls last year.

The resignation of Prachanda -- whose real name is Pushpa Kamal Dahal, but

who goes by a nom-de-guerre meaning "fierce one" -- now leaves the landlocked Himalayan nation in political limbo.

Officials said the president had asked Prachanda to stay on as a caretaker premier until a new government is formed.

In last year's elections, the Maoists won 40 percent of the seats in a new constitutional assembly -- which functions as an interim parliament -- making them the largest single party, but short of an absolute majority to govern alone.

Their main rivals have sided with the president, and have said they will start talks Tuesday on forming a new government.

"We will build national political consensus to form a new government," said Ishwor Pokhrel, head of the centre-left UML party, which holds fewer than half the number of seats the Maoists hold.

But observers say the Nepali Congress and the UML -- the second and third-largest parties -- will have trouble garnering support from a host of smaller ethnic parties and independents to form a government.

Even if they do get the numbers, a coalition without the Maoists would be fragile.



PHOTO: AFP

Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) supporters shout slogans against Nepalese president and wave flags during a protest rally in Kathmandu yesterday.



India urges Nepal to resolve crisis, ups border security

AFP, New Delhi

India on Monday tightened security along its border with Nepal and urged Kathmandu to resolve peacefully a political crisis which has sparked the resignation of its Maoist prime minister.

India put its troops along the 1,751-kilometre (1,086-mile) border on alert after premier Prachanda quit to protest a move by the president of the Himalayan country to stop his elected government from sacking the army chief.

"Orders have been issued to field formations to heighten their vigil," said a spokesman for the Special Security Bureau paramilitary force.

The Indian foreign ministry meanwhile described the developments as "internal to Nepal".

But it said in a statement: "We wish Nepal well in its transition to a fully democratic polity and would hope that the present crisis is resolved in a manner which contributes to the early conclusion of the peace process."

Nepal's Maoists have warned that the landlocked nation's 2006 peace deal, which ended a decade of civil war that left 13,000 dead, is in danger of falling apart.

UN asks Nepali parties to honour peace pacts

INDO ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kathmandu

As the rift between Nepal's Maoists and the other political parties deepened following the resignation of Maoist Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon asked the parties to honour the peace pacts ahead of a UN Security Council meeting.

The UN chief said that he was saddened by developments leading to Prachanda's resignation. However, he was encouraged by the former guerrillas' assurances of their commitment to the peace process, including continued participation in the drafting of the constitution.

Reiterating his call for restraint and political consensus, Ban has asked all the stakeholders to "strictly" adhere to the comprehensive peace agreement signed in 2006 that led to the end of the communist insurgency.

He has also asked for the parties to honour

the arms pact, which "stipulates clear and specific restrictions on the Nepal Army and the Maoist army."

The secretary-general's statement, issued by his office in New York, would be a shot in the arm for the Maoists who were forced to pull out of the government over a row with the army chief.

The ruling party had fired Nepal Army chief Gen Rookmangud Katawal for disobedience after he refused to halt military recruitment.

The UN has said during the row that the recruitment was in violation of the peace pacts.

The statement came ahead of the UN Security Council meeting in New York to discuss a recent report on the developments submitted by Ban.

Though the report was tabled before the fall of the Maoist government, Ban's representative in Nepal, UN Mission in Nepal chief Karin Landgren, would brief the Security Council on the current situation in the country.

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