

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 longtime 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.



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

PHOTO: AFP



Nepalese political parties hold discussions to reach a consensus on the formation of a new government in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's Maoists vowed 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.

PHOTO: AFP

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.

Pak nuclear security still cause for concern: US

AFP, Hong Kong

The security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is still cause for concern in Washington despite assurances that the weapons are out of reach of Taliban militants, the US national security adviser has said.

General James Jones said in an interview with the BBC that he had been told by Pakistan's army that the country's nuclear stockpile was safe, but that Washington needed further guarantees.

"We have received many assurances from the military that this is something they have under control but this is very much an ongoing topic," he said.

"The world would like to know that on this question, that there's absolute security and transparency."

Jones' comments came as the Pakistani army continued to battle Taliban militants who have occupied areas of the northwestern

Malakand region, the fringes of which are only 100 kilometres (60 miles) from Islamabad.

Islamabad's western allies expressed serious concerns when the militants began patrolling the streets of Buner district -- around two hours' drive from the capital -- to enforce their strict brand of Islamic Sharia law.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton labelled the Taliban advances an "existential threat" to Pakistan.

The move came after Islamabad signed an agreement effectively ceding control of the Swat valley, part of Malakand and a former tourist spot popular with foreigners, to the Taliban in a bid to end a brutal two-year insurgency.

Speaking in Washington, where Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari is due to meet US President Barack Obama this week, Jones said "things are moving in a more positive direction" in Pakistan, but said more guarantees were needed.

'Indian water terrorism' greater threat than Taliban: Pakistan

ANI, Lahore

Taking the Kishanganga dam issue a step further, Pakistan has termed India's initiative to build a dam on the Indus River as "Indian water terrorism" and said the issue posed a bigger threat to country than the Taliban.

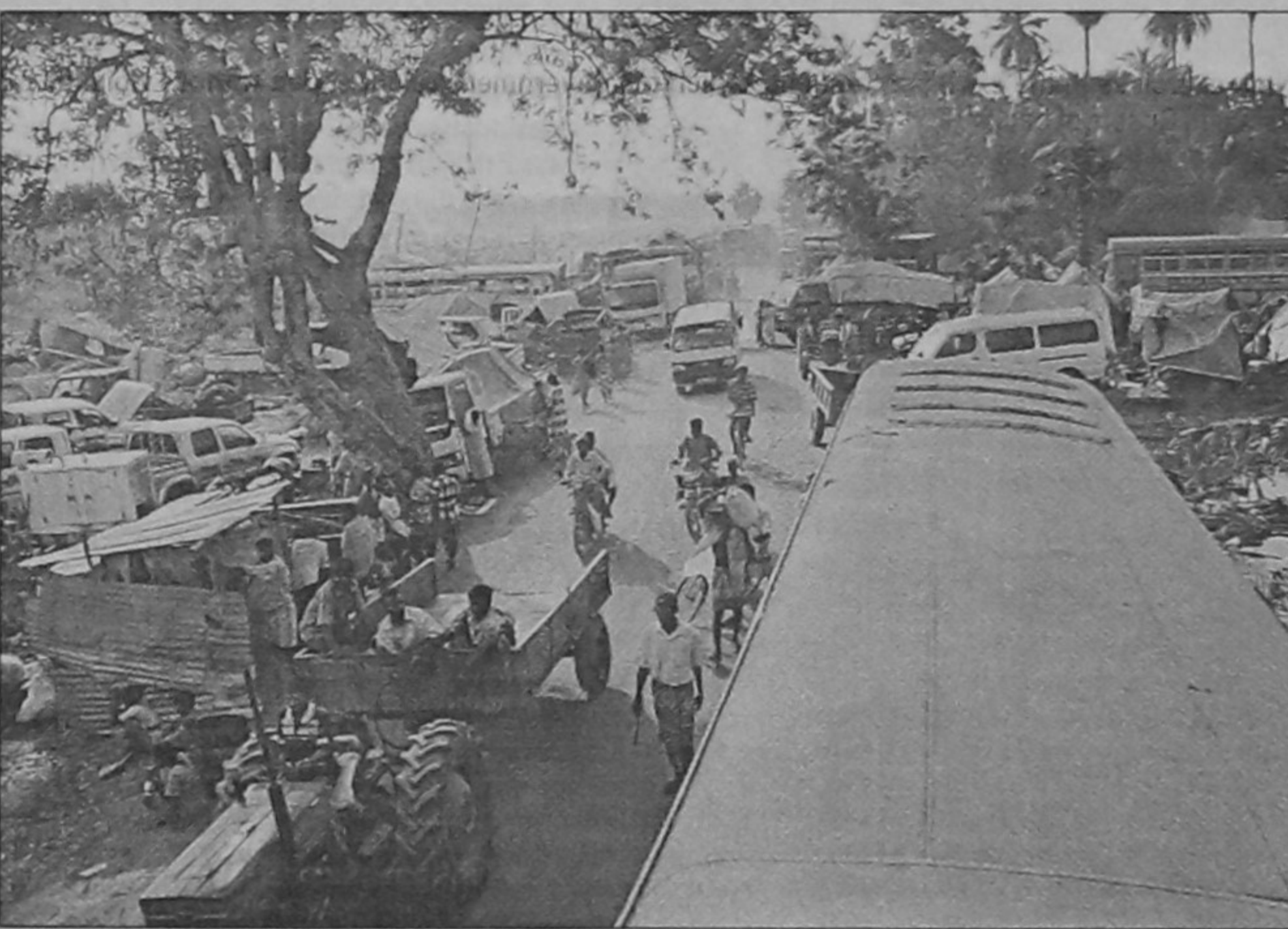
Chairman Indus Water Council Pakistan, Zahoorul Hassan Dahir said India is trying to establish its full control over the Indus River and deprive Pakistan from its share of water.

"After Chenab and Jhelum now India is pursuing a plan to get complete control over Indus River," The Nation quoted Dahir, as saying.

Dahir said the problems of terrorism, insurgency and Talibanisation were created intentionally to divert attention from "Indian water terrorism."

He said urged the government to take immediate step and approach the International Court of Justice to counter the aggressive Indian move and secure the country's water rights.

"Pakistan's efforts for sorting out contentious issues about Baglihar Dam and Kishan Ganga Hydro Power project have failed, therefore government should approach International Court of Justice," he added.



This undated handout picture released yesterday by pro-LTTE Tamilnet.com shows what they claim are Tamil civilians trapped inside the rebel-held territory in the northern Sri Lanka district of Mullaitivu.

PHOTO: AFP

Troops cause heavy damage to Tigers

AP, Colombo

Sri Lankan soldiers broke through rebel defences and advanced further into the Tamil Tigers' last remaining territory, inflicting heavy damage on the beleaguered insurgents, the military said yesterday.

Troops and Tamil Tiger fighters battled throughout the day Monday in the 4.5-kilometre (2.8-mile) -long strip of land along the northeast coast that remains under rebel control, the military said in a statement. One unit, which had earlier pierced an earthen barrier erected by the rebels, pushed 250 yards (meters) forward, the military said.

It made no mention of any casualties among the estimated 50,000 civilians trapped in the war zone.

Reporters and independent observers are barred from the war zone making the government's claims difficult to verify.

In recent months, government forces have

pushed the rebels out of their northern strongholds and vowed to end the nation's quarter-century-old civil war. But international pressure has grown for a cease-fire in the fighting to allow the trapped civilians to flee.

The government has repeatedly refused the appeals, saying it would only give the Tamil Tigers time to regroup.

Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama told a visiting Canadian government minister Monday that the war was almost over, so a truce was not needed.

"(The) armed forces are on the brink of wiping out terrorism, and they are on a rare mission to establish lasting peace on our war-torn motherland," he said, according to a government statement.

The rebels have been fighting since 1983 for a separate state for minority Tamils, after decades of marginalisation at the hands of governments controlled by the Sinhalese majority.



Congress Party General Secretary Rahul Gandhi visits Ajmer Darga Sharif on Monday during campaigning ahead of the fourth of five-phased national elections.

PHOTO: AFP

Top US senators unveil Pakistan aid overhaul

AFP, Washington

Two top US senators unveiled plans Monday to expand and overhaul civilian US aid to Pakistan, calling it an urgent step to help defeat Islamists who threaten the nuclear-armed ally's stability.

Democrat John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Republican Richard Lugar, the panel's ranking member, introduced legislation calling for tripling US civilian aid to Pakistan to 1.5 billion dollars per year over the next five years.

The move came as US President Barack Obama was to host presidents Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan and Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan for

talks Wednesday aimed at defeating Islamist extremists who threaten both governments.

Asked whether there was still time to help Zardari, Kerry replied: "While governments might change at some point in time -- who knows? -- I don't believe the country itself is about to fall apart."

Kerry said about 100 million dollars would go to police reforms, training, and equipment, and left the door open to some funds going to Pakistan's military, if needed.

Lugar, the panel's ranking Republican, underscored that the measure "is not a blank check," pointing to requirements that Pakistan security forces "turn their attention to the extremist dangers within Pakistan's borders."

US to press Pakistan on Taliban, N-security

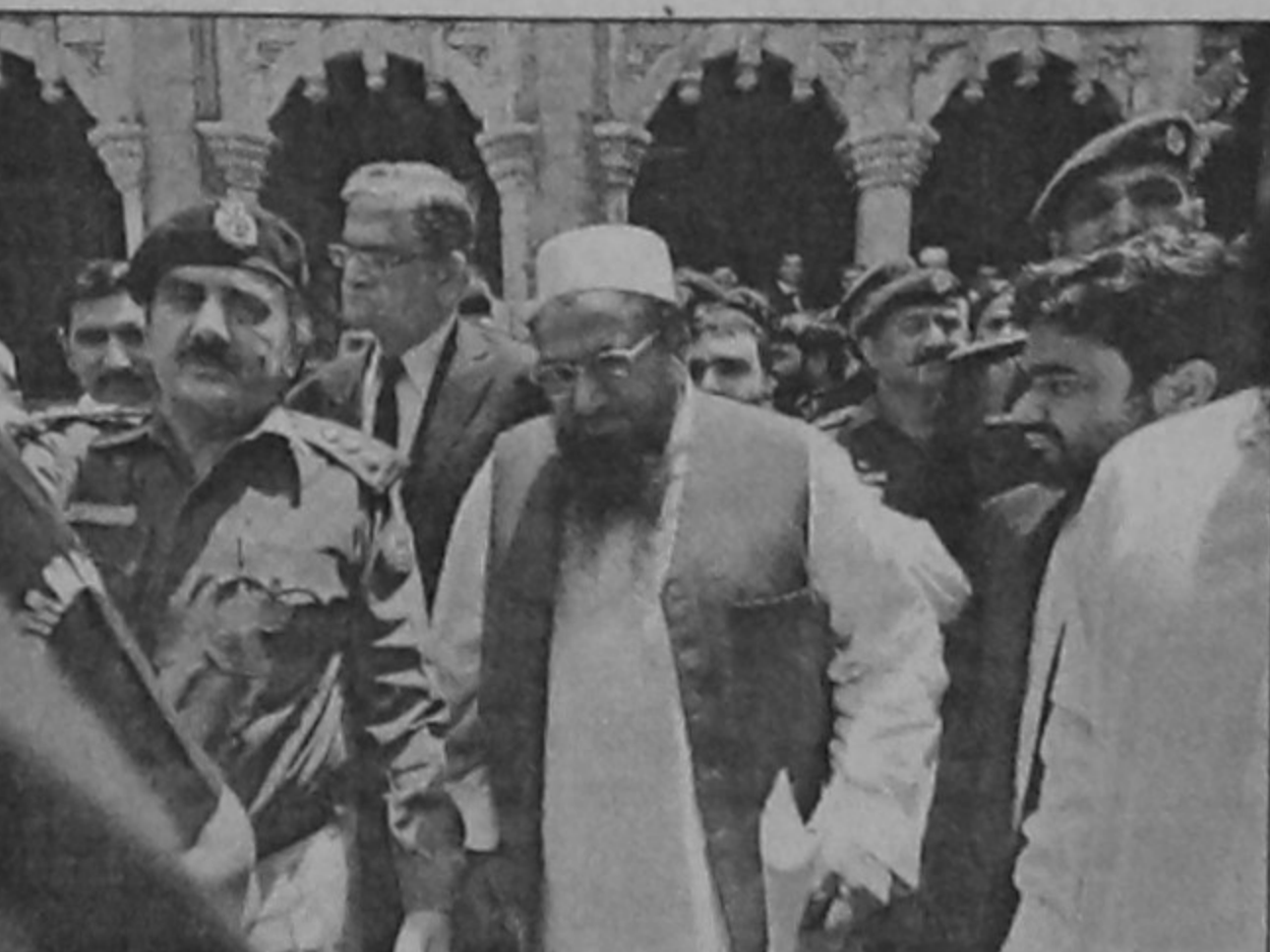
INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

President Barack Obama will press Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari to continue a military drive against Taliban insurgents to prevent a situation that might threaten its stability and nuclear arsenal, US officials say.

Obama is scheduled to meet Zardari and Afghan President Hamed Karzai separately at the White House Wednesday and then hold a three-way summit on regional security.

In comments on the eve of Zardari's arrival in Washington for the crucial meetings, State Department spokesman Robert Wood Monday said he believed Pakistani "Government and military have received the message" about the threat from militants.

"However, that message continues to need to be reinforced because... these violent extremists pose a very serious threat to not only Pakistan, but countries of the region," he said indicating that Zardari will hear that message repeated in Washington.



Pakistani police escort Hafiz Saeed (C-in white cap), the head of the banned Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) and founder of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), outside a court as he leaves after a hearing in Lahore yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar rejects Suu Kyi's detention appeal

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government has rejected an appeal by pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi against her detention, a party spokesman said yesterday.

National League for Democracy (NLD) party spokesman Nyan Win told AFP that Aung San Suu Kyi's lawyer had received a letter confirming the failed bid last Friday, less than a month before her current sentence expires.