

Taliban attack peace talks in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

A Taliban suicide squad armed with rockets yesterday targeted a landmark Afghan peace conference hosted by President Hamid Karzai in a bid to seek a consensus on how to end nearly nine years of war.

At least five explosions, believed to be caused by rockets, and gunfire erupted near the giant air-conditioned tent where 1,600 delegates from across the country and Western diplomats attended the opening of the "peace jirga".

One of the jirga organisers said suicide bombers dressed in women's burqas targeted the event, which was being protected by 12,000 security personnel, but that the attack was unsuccessful.

"Three suicide bombers wearing burqas entered a house which was under construction. They fired one RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) towards the tent," Ghulam Farooq Wardak told delegates.

"Thank God, two of them were killed, paying for their crimes. The third has been captured," he said.

The Taliban claimed it had dispatched four suicide bombers armed with guns and rockets who were threatening the jirga from a nearby rooftop.

Two blasts were heard as Karzai delivered his opening address in which he condemned the Taliban for bringing suffering and oppression, while a third took place later about 200 metres (yards) away from the venue, AFP reporters said.

Karzai left the jirga on schedule after his address, driven away in his customary armoured convoy.

Intensifying gunfire rattled the vicinity of the tent in the southeastern Kabul suburbs, where the interior ministry said that Afghan police had surrounded a "terror" cell holed up in a house nearby.

"There is terrorist activity going on in a house in Afshar. The house has been surrounded by police," said interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary.

Sayed Kabiri, chief doctor at a Kabul hospital, said two people had been admitted with injuries caused by the rocket attacks.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai (L) delivers a speech to the National Consultative Peace Jirga in Kabul yesterday. The Taliban claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on this landmark gathering, where hundreds of delegates are meeting to discuss peace talks.

TALKS WITH MAOISTS

India sets conditions

BBC ONLINE

Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram has set out a "detailed road map" to initiate peace talks with Maoist rebels.

The proposals are in a letter sent by the minister to a special envoy negotiating with the Maoists.

The rebels were blamed for a train crash on Friday, which killed 148 people.

A Maoist spokesman speaking to the BBC, gave a cautious welcome to Chidambaram's initiative.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has described the Maoist insurgency as India's biggest internal security challenge.

Chidambaram's letter - a copy of which has been seen by the BBC - says that in order for the government to initiate a peace process with the Maoists, they must stop violent activities for 72 hours after which time the security forces will "not conduct any operations" against them.

It says that the central government will then consult the "chief ministers of the affected states" to invite the Maoists to hold peace talks.

It says that this process will be initiated once the Maoists announce a date for the ceasefire and "abjure violence".

At a press conference on Monday, Chidambaram expressed hope that the Maoists would respond to his call for a "structured dialogue" and continue to maintain a "non-violent" position until the talks were concluded.

South Korea's president faces polls test over leadership

BBC ONLINE

South Koreans are voting in local polls seen as a crucial test for President Lee Myung-bak over his handling of the sinking of a warship in March.

Lee's party is expected to benefit from his strong stand over the incident, which his government says North Korea is responsible for.

The two countries have cut all ties since the sinking, amid rising tensions on the peninsula.

The Cheonan sank off South Korea in March, with the loss of 46 sailors.

An international investigation said it was torpedoed by North Korea, but Pyongyang denies involvement and has urged voters in the South to punish Lee's government for his stance.

South Koreans are voting for some 4,000 mayors, governors and local government representatives, with results expected early on Thursday.

Nepal at the crossroads

SYED ZAIN AL-MAHMOOD, Kathmandu

From monarchy to republic, Hindu kingdom to secular democracy, unitary state to a federal structure -- Nepal has been facing challenges few nations have encountered in recent times.

Strategically placed between economic superpowers China and India, and in control of the headwaters of rivers used by hundreds of millions of people in the subcontinent, the direction Nepal takes is not only to decide the future of its 30 million people, but also to impact the region as a whole.

May 29, 2010 was meant to be a day of great celebration for Nepal. Not only was it the second anniversary of the abolition of a 240-year-old monarchy and the declaration of the republic, but also this was the day when a newly written constitution -- enshrining equality, justice and freedom of expression -- was supposed to take effect.

Instead, Nepal woke on Republic Day with the fate of its fragile democracy hanging in the balance.

The Constituent Assembly (CA), the interim parliament charged with the task of drawing up the constitution, had failed to meet the May 28 deadline.

But the politicians had averted a constitutional crisis by stitching together a last-gasp compromise to extend the tenure of the CA by a year.

"It's a new lease of life, but for the most part the glass remains half empty," said Vinod Bhattarai, political commentator and secretary of the Centre for Investigative Journalism in Kathmandu.

It took less than a day for cracks to appear in the May 28 'accord' with the government and the opposition Maoists making no secret of their differing visions for the future.

The leading members of the ruling coalition -- Nepali Congress (NC) and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) -- said Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal would only step down when the parties reach agreement on "outstanding issues in the peace process" such as the integration of former Maoist fighters, return of property seized by the Maoist guerrillas, and the disbanding of the radical Maoist youth wing, the Young Communist League (YCL).

The Maoists, who had been demanding the resignation of the prime minister, said they expected Madhav Kumar to be replaced immediately, raising fears of another stalemate.

"They gave us a cheque," Maoist Vice Chairman Baburam Bhattarai told the media. "We will soon go to the bank with that cheque. If the cheque bounces, we know what to do."

Despite the squabbling, the goalposts remain clear. The CA must give the nation a constitution that will institutionalise democracy, restructure the state and conclude a four-year-old peace process that brought Maoist rebels into the political fold. The challenges it faces are enormous.

The 2006 peace agreement under which the Maoist rebels agreed to end a bloody 10-year civil war calls on the parties to act on the basis of consensus.

But following the May 2008 elections, in which the United Communist Party of Nepal Maoist (UCPN-M) won the largest number of CA seats, sharp political and ideological divisions emerged.

The UCPN-M government fell within nine months, while the Maoists have been agitating for power ever since. And the diverse ambitions of Nepal's ethnic mosaic make the task doubly difficult.

Traditionally, politics in Nepal has been controlled from the foothills of the Himalayas by upper caste Pahari Hindus. But today roughly half the population lives in the fertile southern plains known as the Tarai. More than one third belong to over 58 (some estimates say over 100) ethnic largely non-Hindu communities. Some groups, notably the Dalits or untouchables, have been historically excluded from the socio-economic life of Nepal.

"It's not a case of one majority ruling over a minority," said Sarah Levit-Shore, country representative of the Carter Center, which monitors the peace and constitution-drafting process with a focus on the local level. "It's a case of a minority ruling over many other minorities."

For these marginalised groups, the process of writing a new constitution was an opportunity to push for more representation and the end of discrimination. One reason for the success of the Maoists at the polls was that they fielded socially diverse candidates.

A major sticking point in the constitution drafting process is the issue of federalism. Research carried out by the Carter Center shows that many Nepalese support a federal state because they believe it would bring government closer to people and make decision makers more accountable.

The Maoists have supported ethnic-based federalism while other parties are in favour of drawing state lines based on geography. Although federalism is popular, many analysts fear it may open the door to conflict and disintegration.

"The Maoists speak the language of social justice," said Kanak Mani Dixit, a leading Nepali journalist. "But if we go beyond populism, is ethnic federalism really remains a good thing? Nepal enjoys excellent harmony, but this could cause fracturing along ethnic lines."

The Maoists, always keen to show that they are a force of ideas rather than a group used to getting its way by force, took advantage of Republic Day to unveil its own draft of the constitution -- a concept paper that contains a commitment to multi-party democracy but makes no clear mention of pluralism.

Other points of contention between the Maoist and non-Maoist parties include the form of government and the independence of the judiciary.

The Maoists favour a powerful executive president while other parties favour a Westminster-style parliamentary system. Rival parties say the Maoists oppose a true pluralistic democracy and are trying to insert elements of a Communist system into the constitution.

Unveiling the draft constitution, Maoist leader Babu Ram Bhattarai said they wanted to build a socialist order standing on the foundations of capitalism.

Many older political parties, which fought for democracy against an unpopular monarchy, feel that they unwittingly became instrumental in taking back the power from the far right; only to hand it over to the far left.

"But the only way forward is to engage the Maoists, and insist on democratisation," said Kanak Mani Dixit.

However, progress can only be made on constitutional issues when there is political consensus, which means the thorny political problems must be dealt with first.

The most pressing problem is integration and rehabilitation of the Maoist fighters -- the People's Liberation Army -- into the security forces as envisaged by the 2006 peace accord.

The Nepalese army has grown increasingly wary of accepting politically indoctrinated fighters into its ranks. For now, the PLA remains in camps monitored by the UN and paid by the government.

The troubled political evolution has created deep divisions within Nepalese society, a fact that was evident when the government announced the Republic Day awards.

Several of the awards aroused controversy and some prominent personalities declined to accept the state medals. "At a time of deep political polarisation, it is inappropriate for me to accept this recognition," said Kanak Dixit, who refused his award.

Apart from tackling a fragile transition, Nepal also has to contend with an economic crisis. Despite being sandwiched by the world's fastest growing economies, the Himalayan nation has managed growth of less than 3 percent recently.

There are not enough jobs, and although Nepal has relied on a high remittance inflow, that has also been dipping. Business leaders feel the fierce political wrangling is diverting attention from the economy.

Despite the challenges, many observers are keen to see a silver lining. Nowhere in the world, the transformation of an armed insurgent group into a peaceful political movement is quick or easy. Nepal's peace process has been truly indigenous -- it has not been mediated or managed by any external third party.

The country's political actors have shown an extraordinary capacity to maintain dialogue and work through their differences, and if the political problems can be resolved, there is every chance that the constitutional divide will be bridged.

"The heartening thing is that although this transition is a difficult period in Nepal's history, they have shown on multiple occasions the ability to compromise," said Sarah Levit-Shore.

Although it has mountains to climb, the world's newest republic may yet provide a lesson in democracy for its South Asian neighbours.

Poll symbols

FROM PAGE 16

Among the independent candidates Jane Alam got "inkpot-pen", Md Ibrahim "motorcycle", Syed Sajjad Zoha "spectacles" and Professor Mozammel Hossain Bhuiyan "helicopter" as symbols for the CCC polls.

All the candidates, except Manjur, were present on the occasion.

The RO also allocated symbols to 59 women candidates competing for 14 female councillor (reserved) seats and 251 male candidates for 41-ward councillor.

The allocation began with the mayoral candidates in the morning with 20 symbols for them, 18 for women and 30 for ward councillors, said Assistant Returning Officer Farhad Hossain.

After allocation of election symbols all the candidates including two major contenders -- Mohiuddin Chowdhury and Manjur Alam Manju -- landed on the campaign trail.

After acquiring election symbol Mohiuddin went to North Halishahar of the city to offer feteha at the graveyard of former AL leader MA Aziz. He also addressed a street rally in the area urging the party leaders and activists to carry out an organised electioneering by going door to door of the people.

Mohiuddin also went to see the anti-British revolutionary Binod Bihari Chowdhury Tuesday night to seek support.

On the other hand, after the election symbol was fixed, Manjur ran his election campaign seeking votes at Agrabad, Pathantuli, West Madarbar, Halishahar and Choumahoni areas from morning to noon.

Sources said the electioneering for BNP-backed candidate is gearing up as the leaders and activists of Chittagong city BNP have undertaken a genuine election drive.



Activists from India's Leftist Parties shout anti-Israeli slogans during protest march to the Israeli embassy in New Delhi yesterday. Hundreds of protesters condemned an Israeli commando attack on a flotilla of aid ships bound for the Gaza Strip.

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