

For the 7th time Nepal fails to elect PM

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's parliament failed to elect a new prime minister for the seventh time yesterday, prolonging a stalemate that has held up vital public spending and threatened the fragile peace process.

The country has been without a government since June 30, when former prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal stood down under pressure from the opposition Maoist party to pave the way for a new national unity government.

Since then, the parties have been unable to agree on the shape of the new administration and a series of votes in the 601-member parliament have proved inconclusive, with none of the candidates securing an overall majority.

The Maoists, who fought a decade-long civil war against the state before transforming themselves into a political party and winning 2008 elections, hold the largest number of seats in parliament, but not enough to govern alone.

Maoist leader and former warlord Pushpa Kamal Dahal, better known as Prachanda or "the fierce one", won 252 votes in Tuesday's poll, beating his only opponent but still falling well short of the necessary majority.

Rival candidate Ram Chandra Poudel, chairman of the second-largest party in parliament, the centrist Nepali Congress, took 119 votes.

Parliament has said the next election will be held on September 26, further delaying the annual budget and holding up much-needed public spending in one of the world's poorest countries.

The stalemate has also halted work on the peace process that began when the bloody civil war ended in 2006.

The United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) warned Tuesday that there were "few signs of a consensual way forward in Nepal's peace process with the major parties preoccupied with internal fissures and the question of power sharing."



Internally displaced Pakistani children hold up their Eid Al-Fitr packages at a camp in Sukkur yesterday. Global cash pledges have been slow in coming to bolster rescue and relief efforts ongoing in the flood-damaged nuclear nation, where more than 21 million people have been affected by a month of monsoon-triggered floods.

PHOTO: AFP

India says China wants 'grip' on S Asia

REUTERS, New Delhi

China is seeking to expand its influence in South Asia at India's expense, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh warned in rare public criticism of his country's main rival for regional resources and geopolitical clout.

Singh's comments follow repeated diplomatic sparring between the two Asian powers over the last two years, reflecting growing friction over their disputed borders and roles as emerging global powers despite bilateral trade that has grown 30-fold since 2000.

"China would like to have a foothold in South Asia and we have to reflect on this reality," Singh was quoted as saying by The Times of India yesterday. "We have to be aware of this."

"There is a new assertiveness among the Chinese. It is difficult to tell which way it will go. So it's important to be prepared."

The newspaper also quoted Singh as saying that China could use India's "soft underbelly" of Kashmir, a region disputed with Pakistan, "to keep India in low level equilibrium."

But it also quoted Singh as saying he believed the world was large enough for India and China to "cooperate and compete."

An official at the prime minister's office, on condition of anonymity, said the newspaper

quotes were correct.

Answering reporters' questions about Singh's remarks, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Jiang Yu gave an upbeat view of ties that did not suggest Beijing is spoiling for a fight.

"Development of bilateral relations benefits both countries and region as a whole," Jiang said in Beijing.

Analysts said that despite decades of mistrust, the current spat is unlikely to snowball if past diplomatic sparring is anything to go by. China is India's biggest trade partner.

While trade has grown 30-fold since 2000, the tension highlights how economic ties alone may not be enough to resolve the two countries' growing friction.

"Mutual confidence between the countries is far from sufficient," said Zhao Gancheng, an expert on Sino-Indian relations in Beijing. "That problem is rising in importance."

China defeated India in a 1962 war, but they still spar over their disputed 3,500 km (2,170 mile) border and the presence of exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, in India. China's support for India's arch-enemy Pakistan, which backs separatists in disputed Kashmir and also claims the region in full, has not helped defuse tensions.

China warns against interfering in Myanmar polls

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday hailed Myanmar as a "friendly neighbour" and warned the world not to meddle in its upcoming election, as the head of the country's military junta was due to arrive for a state visit.

Than Shwe, whose regime has drawn international condemnation for its human rights record, arrives Tuesday for a four-day visit that will include a meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao.

While Myanmar is the subject of tough Western sanctions, China -- the junta's main trading partner and an eager investor in the isolated state's sizeable natural resources -- called for even closer ties with its neighbour.

"China and Myanmar are friendly neighbours and this year marks the 60th anniversary of bilateral ties," foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told reporters.

"We are willing to take this opportunity to further consolidate our traditional friendship and make new contributions to regional peace and stability."

Myanmar will hold its first election in 20 years in November but pro-democracy parties allege that restrictions imposed by the iron-fisted military regime will virtually ensure it wins the poll.

Jiang deflected questions about Myanmar's human rights record and whether China's support has helped keep the junta in power.

But she said China hopes "the international community can provide constructive help" for the polls and "refrain from any negative impact on the domestic political process of Myanmar and on regional peace and stability."

Indian trade unions strike against price rises

BBC ONLINE

A 24-hour nationwide strike called by trade unions has caused major disruption in parts of India.

The walkout was felt mostly in Tripura, Kerala and West Bengal states where the ruling Communists backed the action.

Called to protest against price rises and alleged labour law violations, the action caused major disruption to air and road transport in those states.

The coal, power, telecom, banking, insurance, defence, port, petroleum and construction sectors joined the strike.

Industry virtually ground to a halt in much of West Bengal and Kerala.

Communist Party of India (CPI) MP and trade union leader Gurudas Dasgupta told the Press Trust of India news agency that many private sector employees had also participated in the walkout.

Strict curfew after four new deaths in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Thousands of Indian police and paramilitary forces enforced a strict curfew in much of Kashmir yesterday after security forces shot dead four protesters, police and witnesses said.

Government forces have struggled to contain almost three months of violent demonstrations by Kashmiris ignited by the killing of a 17-year-old student by police on June 11.

A total of 69 protesters and bystanders have been killed over the past three months, mostly by security forces who have used live ammunition on rallies after being pelted with stones.

Troops sealed off neighbourhoods in the regional summer capital Srinagar and other towns with barbed wire, iron gates and abandoned carts to prevent residents from leaving their homes to stage protests against the killings.

"We are enforcing a strict curfew to maintain the peace, police officer Pervez Ahmed told AFP.

Four people were killed Monday in the northern village of Palhalan when security forces opened fire on protesters during fresh demonstrations against Indian rule in Kashmir.

Residents told visiting reporters that the protests were peaceful and that no one was throwing stones at the time of the shooting.

Authorities have launched a probe.

"Senior police officers have taken a serious view of the firing. Ammunition of the policemen is being checked to fix the responsibility," an official statement said.

Top court backs president's 3rd-term bid

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court has cleared the way for President Mahinda Rajapakse to run for a third term in office, saying the constitution can be changed by a vote in parliament, officials said yesterday.

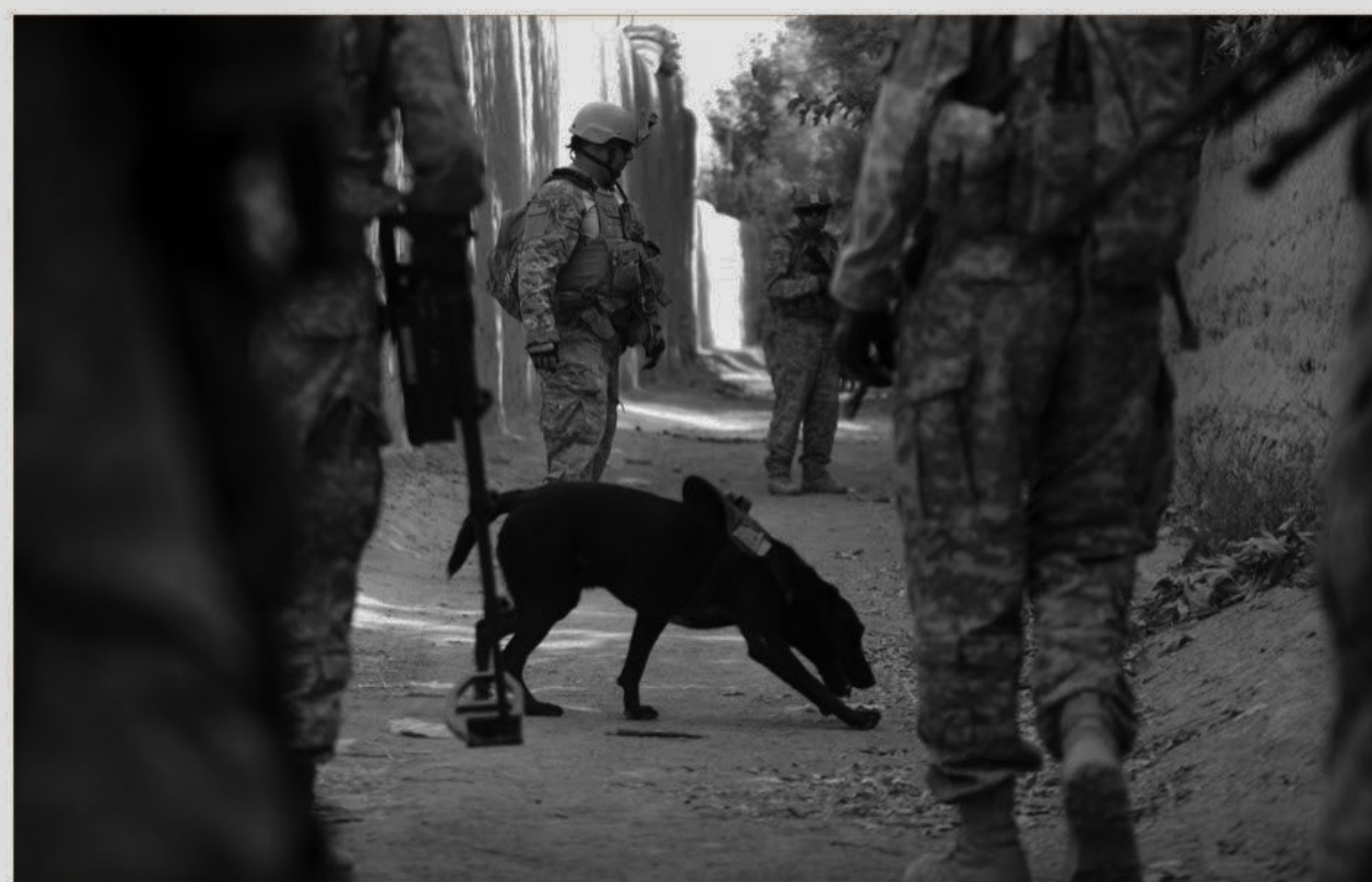
Rajapakse, who oversaw the defeat of the Tamil Tiger rebels last year after decades of civil war, has a firm grip on power in Sri Lanka and has been criticised for crushing dissent and opposition media.

He looks set to gain the two-thirds majority among lawmakers needed to pass the proposed law, which will end the current two-term limit on presidents.

Rajapakse won a second term in January but would have to step down in 2016 under the present constitution.

"The Supreme Court has said the Constitutional Reforms Bill does not require a referendum in order to be passed, instead it only requires a two-thirds majority in parliament," Speaker Chamal Rajapakse, who is the president's elder brother, told lawmakers.

The draft bill will be debated and voted on by the 225-member parliament on Wednesday. Rajapakse's cabinet approved the proposed constitutional amendments last week.



A US army sniffer dog serving with US army soldiers works during a patrol on the outskirts of the village of Jellawar in the Arghandab Valley in Afghanistan on Monday. Western powers must change strategy in Afghanistan, focusing on Al-Qaeda militants and cutting troop numbers instead of pursuing failed attempts at nation-building, a top think-tank yesterday.

Lanka opposition resists more powers to president

IANS, Colombo

The Sri Lankan opposition yesterday launched protests in and outside parliament against proposed constitutional amendments that would boost the powers of the president.

The amendments were formally proposed by the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) party and debated ahead of a vote planned for late Wednesday.

The changes, which were approved by the cabinet last week, would allow among other things President Mahinda Rajapaksa to run for a third term in 2016.

But the government needs 150 votes to pass the amendments in the 225-seat parliament, and the UPFA has 144 seats. The UPFA was said to have canvassed at least 12 opposition members for support.

Members of the opposition United National Party attended parliament dressed in black Tuesday to protest the proposed changes, which they called undemocratic.

The other main opposition party, the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, or People's Liberation Front, was planning to stage a protest on the route to parliament later Tuesday.

Both parties were planning demonstrations across the country for Wednesday.



Angelina Jolie visits Pakistani flood victims

BBC ONLINE

The Hollywood film star Angelina Jolie is in Pakistan to draw attention to the plight of flood victims.

She is travelling as a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations refugee agency, the UNHCR.

Last week the actress released a video appealing for more donations. Across Pakistan, nearly 21 million people have been affected by the disaster.

The 34-year-old visited affected communities where millions of long-term Afghan refugees reside.

"UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie arrived in Pakistan today to meet people affected by the floods and to highlight the continued urgent need for help," the UNHCR said in a statement.

The UNHCR says that it expects to ask for more money in the coming days. It says that pledges of aid have been slow and that it still needs \$120m for tents and other supplies.

In the south of Pakistan, areas are being newly-flooded even as the long process of reconstruction begins in the north.

Well over a million people have been forced to live in schools.

This is the fourth visit by Ms Jolie to Pakistan since she became a UNHCR goodwill ambassador in 2001.

The video message she released last week appealed for greater public support for Pakistan's relief efforts. She has personally donated \$100,000 to the flood appeal.

9/11 ANNIVERSARY

Petraeus warns over Quran burning

AFP, Kabul

The US commander of the Afghan war has warned that his troops' lives will be endangered if a Florida evangelical church goes ahead with a planned burning of the Quran on Saturday's 9/11 anniversary.

General David Petraeus said the planned torching of Islam's holy book would be a propaganda coup for the Taliban in Afghanistan and stoke anti-US sentiment across the Muslim world.

Afghanistan, where Petraeus leads a 150,000-strong US-led Nato force against an extremist Taliban-led insurgency, is a deeply devout Islamic country.

Actions seen by Afghans as against their religion or even allegations that Western troops have insulted the Quran have led to deadly violence in the past.

On Monday about 200 men gathered near a mosque in the capital Kabul to protest against the planned torching, shouting "death to America" and "long live Islam" for about an

hour after their midday prayer, witnesses said.

The Dove World Outreach Center at Gainesville, Florida, says it will burn copies of the Quran on this weekend's ninth anniversary of the September 11 attacks in protest at what it calls "the evil of Islam".

Petraeus said of the plan: "It could endanger troops and it could endanger the overall effort in Afghanistan."

"It is precisely the kind of action the Taliban uses and could cause significant problems. Not just here but everywhere in the world we are engaged with the Islamic community," the general said in an emailed statement.

"I am very concerned by the potential repercussions of the possible Quran burning," Petraeus added.

"Even the rumour that it might take place has sparked demonstrations such as the one that took place in Kabul yesterday," he said, adding that an actual burning would put the safety of US soldiers and civilian workers in jeopardy.

Indian PM wants Pak FM Qureshi to visit

THE INDIAN EXPRESS
ONLINE

Despite the unexpected turn of events during External Affairs Minister S M Krishna's visit to Islamabad, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Monday said he was still optimistic about the engagement process and hoped that Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi would accept the invitation to visit India.

Speaking on his government's approach towards Pakistan, Singh said the mood in the country after 26/11 did not favour continuation of the peace process. In due course, he indicated, the government found this policy was becoming counterproductive and, therefore, necessitated a review.

West needs new Afghan strategy: IISS

AFP, London

Western powers must change strategy to focus on the "containment" of al-Qaeda and Taliban militants in Afghanistan instead of on failed efforts at nation-building, a leading think-tank said yesterday.

The need to restore order to Afghanistan was "hitting its political and military limits" as the war nears the start of its tenth year, the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) said.

The need for a new policy is part of a wider picture left by the aftermath of the global financial crisis and by shifts in the balance of power, it said in its "Strategic Survey 2010" annual review of global security.

"It may become necessary and is probably advisable for outside powers to move to a containment and deterrence policy to deal with the international terrorist threat from the Afghan-Pakistan border regions," the report said.

"The future clearly lay in negotiations with or among the participants in the conflict," it