

UN warns Nepal over political peace mission

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations on Tuesday threatened to end its political mission in Nepal unless the warring parties make a greater effort to end the country's deadlock.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said a withdrawal would be considered if Nepal did not quickly form a government and hold talks on the UN mission.

"I will propose alternative measures to the (Security) Council, including the possible termination of UNMIN's mandate," Ban said in a report to the Security Council.

"I call on the parties to invest greater effort in serious and sustained political dialogue," the UN secretary general added.

The Security Council met hours after Nepal's parliament failed for the seventh time to elect a new prime minister, prolonging a stalemate that has threatened the country's fragile peace process.

There has been no government since June 30, when Madhav Kumar Nepal stood down as prime minister, under pressure from the opposition Maoist party. Since then the rival sides have failed to agree the shape of a new administration.

The UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) was set up after a civil war ended in 2006, with a temporary mandate to monitor the Maoist and national armies and assist with the peace process. It has repeatedly expressed frustration at the slow pace of progress.

The UN chief said again that there has been "no substantive progress" on the future of the national and Maoist armies and drafting a constitution.

"The major parties are preoccupied by profound internal fissures and the question of power-sharing," he said, also complaining about attacks on the UN mission by Nepal's rival parties.



Chinese President Hu Jintao (R) shows the way to Myanmar's military junta leader, General Than Shwe (L) during a welcoming ceremony at the Great Hall of the People yesterday. Than Shwe met with Hu Jintao, the regime's main trading partner and diplomatic ally, two months ahead of polls decried in the West as a sham.

Myanmar's pre-polls censorship criticised

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar's ruling regime has increased its censorship of the country's already highly restricted press in the run up to the first election in 20 years, an international media watchdog said yesterday.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF), which describes the military-ruled country as a "censors' paradise", said there was nothing to suggest local or foreign media would be able to freely report on or ahead of the November 7 vote.

It said media restrictions were tightening as the polls approach, citing as one example the week-long suspension of the weekly Modern Times for changing the headline of its weather forecast without permission.

An article about the possibility of heavy rain in September was given the headline "Will it come in September?" which the censors suspected was an allusion to the anti-government Saffron Revolution in September 2007.

China calls in Japan envoy over boat collision

AP, Tokyo

Diplomatic tensions between China and Japan escalated yesterday when Beijing called in Japan's ambassador for a second time after a Chinese fishing boat collided with two Japanese patrol vessels near a chain of disputed islands.

Tokyo has arrested the boat's captain. A Chinese Foreign Ministry statement said Japanese Ambassador Uichiro Niwa was summoned Wednesday to see Assistant Foreign Minister Hu Zhengyue, who demanded that the Chinese vessel be released immediately. The crew, who do not have passports, are waiting on the boat. Niwa also was summoned Tuesday evening.

But Japanese officials repeated their territorial claims over the islands, adding that they had no immediate plans to release the captain or the boat. Japan has also lodged a protest over the incident to the Chinese side.

Pakistan releases 141 Indian fishermen

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan on Tuesday released 141 Indian fishermen imprisoned for fishing and violating its territorial waters, an official said.

"Since last week we have released and have handed over 442 fishermen to India, today's 141 was the last batch," Mohammad Munir, a Pakistani interior ministry official, told AFP.

"All this is a gesture of goodwill," he said.

A three-member Pakistani delegation is in India to find out about 180 Pakistani fishermen detained by India, Munir said.

The South Asian nuclear-armed rivals have fought three wars since the subcontinent's 1947 partition.

US drone strikes kill 14 Pak militants

AFP, Miranshah

Two US missile strikes in Afghanistan's tribal district on the Afghan border killed at least 14 rebels yesterday, local security officials said.

The first attack took place in Dandey Darpakhel village, five kilometres (three miles) northwest of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan tribal district, a renowned hub for Taliban and al-Qaeda linked militants.

"At least 10 militants were killed in the US drone attack which targeted the compound of a local militant, Abdul Aziz," a senior security official in the area told AFP, adding that the death toll may rise.

The official said the nationalities of the dead militants was not yet known.

China's Hu calls for stable ties with US

AP, Beijing

Trying to smooth over recently rocky relations before a visit to Washington, Chinese President Hu Jintao told American officials yesterday that he wants to see healthy and stable ties between the two countries.

The meeting between Hu and a White House economic policy official and deputy national security adviser was unusual because the Chinese president rarely meets with visitors ranked lower in diplomatic protocol. It underscored Hu's desire to move ahead in relations after months of discord over trade imbalances, Chinese currency policies and US arms sales and military maneuvers.

"China looks positively on the fresh progress made in China-US relations, and we are willing to work together with the United States in promoting the advance of healthy and stable China-US relations," Hu told director of the US National Economic Council, Lawrence Summers, and Deputy National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon.

Addressing the security and economic spats that have dragged down relations was at the heart of Summers' and Donilon's three days of meetings in Beijing. With an anemic economy and his Democratic Party under pressure in upcoming congressional elections, President Barack Obama is hoping for concessions from Beijing on exchange rate policies that critics say keep the Chinese currency too low, thereby subsidizing Chinese exports and contributing

to high US unemployment.

Hu, in the meantime, is trying to strengthen his political hand ahead of a delicate Communist Party leadership transition and maintain the popularity of his government with people grown used to high rates of economic growth in part buoyed by trade with the United States.

The Hong Kong newspaper South China Morning Post reported Wednesday, citing unnamed Chinese diplomats, that the governments had agreed to resume military talks that Beijing suspended earlier this year in pique at US weapons sales to Chinese rival Taiwan.

US National Security Council spokesman Mike Hammer said Donilon and Summers had "productive, detailed, and wide-ranging discussions with Chinese officials" and that the visit, which concluded Wednesday, "advanced the goal of strengthening the US-China relationship."

Hammer said in a statement that the advisers discussed North Korea and Iran, both of which have been sanctioned by the international community for their nuclear programs.

As permanent members of the UN Security Council, China and the US have frequently locked horns over how to persuade Iran and North Korea to give up those programs, with Washington tending to favour sanctions and Beijing advocating dialogue and diplomatic means.

Other economic and security issues also were raised, Hammer said, but gave no specifics.

More Afghan voting stations to remain closed

AP, Kabul

Afghan election officials said yesterday that scores of additional polling stations will have to remain closed during the Sept. 18 parliamentary vote because of the deteriorating security situation in the country.

The state electoral commission said 81 of the 458 polling stations planned in Nangarhar province will remain shut during the Sept. 18 parliamentary elections "due to deteriorating security conditions."

The tense eastern province bordering Pakistan is a centre of the Taliban insurgency, with many militants entering the country from safe havens across the border.

Election officials had earlier announced that more than 900 other polling stations would remain shut nationwide because of security concerns and that 5,897 voting sites would be opened throughout Afghanistan.

During last year's fraud-marred presidential vote, 6,167 voting centres nominally operated.

Japanese hostage tricked Afghan captors with Twitter

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese freelance journalist freed after a five-month ordeal in Afghanistan says he used Twitter to announce he was still alive under the noses of his captors, who did not understand English.

Kosuke Tsuneoka, 41, who had been missing in northern Afghanistan since April, was speaking in Tokyo following his hand-over Saturday to the Japanese embassy in Kabul.

Addressing the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan on Tuesday, he said he was held hostage by a military faction called Hizb-i-Islami (Islamic Party), which is allied with the government of President Hamid Karzai.

Tsuneoka said that one of his captors "came to me with a Nokia N-70 model which was the latest among their mobile phones and asked me how to use it. I thought it was a chance."

He called telephone operators to activate the Internet access then in basic Farsi showed his captors how to go online, accessing Al Jazeera's website, he said.

"Then I told them there is a thing called 'Twitter'. They asked me to show them what it was, so I sent Twitter messages with the phone in front of them. Because nobody understood English, it was no problem."

The September 3 posts on the micro-blogging website -- a short message that said "I am still alive, but in jail", followed by a second tweet giving his location -- were Tsuneoka's first signs of life in months.

Tsuneoka said he was still unsure why he was

released the following day. "I don't think there is any correlation," he said.

He supported a statement by his government that no ransom money was paid.

On Saturday, he said, he was told he would be freed that day. "They told me to shampoo my hair, so I washed my hair, half in doubt," he said.

"Tsuneoka, who is a convert to Islam, added: 'They said I would be released because I am a Muslim, but I doubt it, because they don't even pray. I've never seen mujahedeen (holy warriors) who don't pray to God.'"

He was taken by car to a nearby village, from where he said officials from the presidential office drove him to a nearby highway and on to Kabul.

Speaking about his time in captivity, Tsuneoka said his guards were friendly and gave him three meals a day but were "dreadfully uneducated" and that "even their knowledge of Islamic teaching was very poor."

"When I told one of them that my marriage broke up five months after the wedding, he asked me 'did you kill your ex-wife?', the journalist recounted. "I said 'no way', but he said he would have killed her in my position."

Tsuneoka added: "They seemed to have a very simple interpretation of the world, which is that Muslims are good and non-Muslims are bad, that non-Islam believers are people who attack them."

Even though the area of his captivity in the Kunduz and Takhar provinces is meant to be controlled by government-allied forces, his captors and local residents "hated the commander and hated President Karzai," he said.



Khagendra Thapa Magar, the world's smallest teen, is held next to a life-sized figure of Robert Wadlow, the world's tallest man ever, to mark his introduction into "Ripley's Believe It or Not" latest book during a photo shoot on Times Square in New York on Tuesday. The Nepalese 17-year old made his entry into the record book as the world's smallest male teen standing just 55.9 centimetres (22 inches) tall.

'Islamists' free hundreds of inmates in Nigerian jail attack

AFP, Bauchi

Suspected members of an Islamist sect have freed hundreds of inmates in an attack on a prison in northern Nigeria that led to a fierce gun battle with authorities, officials said yesterday.

Authorities said more than 700 inmates escaped in the Tuesday night attack, including all 150 alleged sect members being held there. The sect blamed for the attack, Boko Haram, had launched an uprising in Nigeria's north last year.

Several sides to blame for Gulf of Mexico spill: BP

AFP, London

Failures by several parties led to the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster, British energy group BP concluded in the results of an internal inquiry published yesterday, accepting some of the blame.

"No single factor caused the Macondo well tragedy. Rather, a sequence of failures involving a number of different parties led to the explosion and fire which killed 11 people and caused widespread pollution in the Gulf of Mexico earlier this year," BP said in a summary of the report.

BP said decisions made by "multiple companies and work teams", including itself, contributed to the accident which arose from "a complex and interlinked series of mechanical failures, human judgments, engineering design" and communication breakdowns.

S Korea imposes sanctions on Iran

AP, Seoul

South Korea said yesterday it will ban unauthorized financial dealings with Iran and impose other penalties as part of a US-led campaign to enforce sanctions against the country over its disputed nuclear enrichment program.

Seoul targeted 102 entities, including the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, and 24 individuals for the sanctions, Foreign Ministry spokesman Kim Young-sun said.

The measures prohibit unauthorized foreign exchange transactions with the targets of the measures, halt existing banking relations, and prohibit the opening of new branches or representative offices in South Korea, Kim said. The individuals are also banned from entering South Korea, Kim said.

South Korea will also heavily penalize the Seoul branch of Bank Mellat, one of the 15 targeted Iranian banks, for violating laws on foreign exchange transactions, a government statement said, without elaborating.

The Seoul branch of Bank Mellat has "facilitated hundreds of millions of dollars in transactions for Iranian nuclear, missile and defense entities," the statement said.

Kim said the sanctions further reinforce United Nations resolution 1929 against Iran, the latest in a series of measures taken by the international community in an effort to halt Iran's nuclear program.

"South Korea expects Iran to join international efforts for nuclear non-proliferation and take steps to faithfully implement its obligations under the relevant UN Security Council resolutions," he said.

'Non-lethal' force can be lethal in Kashmir

AP, Srinagar

Protesters have a new name for the troops: Robots.

In Kashmir, troops now dress in high-tech black riot gear, covered head to foot in plastic armour that can make them look decidedly inhuman. They carry stun grenades, tear gas grenades and shotguns loaded with they say non-lethal pellets.

They are the vanguard trying to fulfil Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's order last month to staunch the bloodshed in Kashmir by using non-lethal measures to control the violent demonstrations that have shaken the Himalayan region for the past three months.

"We're now using a range of non-lethal weapons to control crowds," Shiv Murari Sahai, Kashmir's new police chief, told The Associated Press in an interview in his office in Indian Kashmir's main city Srinagar.

Outside his fortified office, a fleet of armoured vehicles and two brand new vehicle-mounted water cannons were lined up, ready to be deployed.

Despite the new orders, protesters were still being killed by security forces using lethal force. Four more were killed Monday when security forces fired live ammunition into crowds of rock-throwing protesters in Palhalan, a village north of Srinagar, police said.

And the non-lethal weapons themselves have also proven lethal.

A separatist insurgency fighting for Kashmir's independence from Hindu-majority India or its merger with Muslim-majority Pakistan has been active since 1989, and tens of thousands of people have been killed in the conflict over the decades.

Resistance has shifted in recent years from militant attacks to street demonstrations.

At least 69 people have been killed and hundreds wounded since a new round of demonstrations broke out in June. Most of the killings occurred when troops fired directly into the demonstrations. After widespread criticism from security experts and human rights groups, the Indian government changed its tactics.