

Nepal elects new PM after seven months

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's lawmakers yesterday elected Jhala Nath Khanal as the country's new prime minister, ending a damaging seven-month leadership vacuum in the troubled country.

The 60-year-old chairman of the leftist UML (Unified Marxist Leninist) party won the vote after securing the support of the Maoists -- the largest force in the 601-member parliament with 236 seats.

His election ends a long deadlock that has seen the country without a government since June, with political leaders unable to reach agreement on the formation of a new administration.

"Jhala Nath Khanal secured 368 votes, giving him a majority," speaker Subash Chandra Nemwang told parliament. "I therefore declare him the winner of the election and the new prime minister."



PHOTO : AFP

Egyptian soldiers try to stop pro-government supporters from approaching their opponents in Cairo's Tahrir square yesterday on the 10th day of protests calling for the ouster of embattled President Hosni Mubarak.

World leaders slate attacks on journalists in Egypt

AFP, Washington

The United States yesterday condemned a "concerted campaign" of intimidation against international journalists covering the unrest in Egypt, as news media reported a string of assaults and arrests.

Other foreign leaders and rights activists also denounced the attacks and harassment and one French media executive accused Egyptian state television of inciting "lynching."

"There is a concerted campaign to intimidate international journalists in Cairo and interfere with their reporting," said State Department spokesman Philip Crowley on the microblogging website Twitter.

"We condemn such actions," he added.

Correspondents, photographers and cameramen reporting on the fierce clashes that took place in Cairo's central Tahrir Square said supporters of embattled President Hosni Mubarak had turned on them.

Some described being arrested by police and having their equipment confiscated or destroyed.

"Egyptian state television has referred to foreign journalists as being responsible for what is happening," said Thierry Thuillier, head of news at France Televisions.

"It's a kind of undisguised incitement to lynching," he said.

BBC correspondent Rupert Wingfield Hayes reported that Egyptian secret police had handcuffed, blindfolded and interrogated him for three hours before releasing him.

Al-Jazeera, which has been targeted by Egyptian authorities for its coverage of the events said that pro-Mubarak demonstrators chased away one of its correspondents calling him "a Jew" and "a dog".

On Wednesday, the Qatar-based station said police had detained six of its foreign journalists working for the English service, holding them for several hours and confiscating their camera.

CNN star correspondent Anderson Cooper reported how he and his camera crew were attacked by Mubarak supporters just outside Cairo's central Tahrir Square.

Tens of thousands rally in Yemen

Police foil protests in Aden

AFP, Sanaa

Tens of thousands of protesters massed yesterday at Sanaa University for a "day of rage" calling for the fall of Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime, while a similar number of government loyalists flooded a central square.

"We are here to bring down a corrupt and tyrannical regime," Najib Ghanem, a deputy from the Islamist Al-Islah party that is part of the Common Forum alliance of opposition parties, told anti-Saleh protesters.

"The revolt for justice began in Tunisia. It continues today in Egypt, and Yemen tomorrow will be free from injustice," he said, referring to a popular revolt that led to the Tunisian president's fall, and protests in Egypt seeking the departure of its president.

"We will continue our peaceful struggle until the fall of this unjust regime," various speakers from the Common Forum repeated to the massive crowd of anti-Saleh demonstrators.

Meanwhile, Police fired tear gas and live ammunition yesterday to break up an anti-government protest in the southern Yemeni

port city of Aden, leaving two people injured, witnesses said.

The police, who deployed in large numbers earlier in the morning, were seen by an AFP correspondent dispersing the protesters as they began to march in the Crater district of the city.

Hundreds of protesters gathered, some of them with banners with slogans such as "the corrupt and the tyrants must go" and "the time for change has come."

In another part of Aden, police arrested 30 people as they tried to stage a protest held every Thursday to demand the release of prisoners, officials of the pro-independence Southern Movement said.

Thousands of people also demonstrated in various southern towns, some responding to a call from the Southern Movement and others to an appeal from the Common Forum, witnesses said.

The protest, the biggest staged against Saleh in past weeks, came despite the president announcing Wednesday that he would not seek another term and that he had postponed controversial April elections -- two key opposition demands.

Indian ex-minister remanded

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court granted police the right to detain arrested ex-telecom minister A Raja for five days yesterday as they probe one of the country's biggest ever corruption cases.

A judge at a New Delhi special court agreed to the request from the Central Bureau of Investigation, which said Raja was being "evasive" during questioning about the tainted sale of second-generation (2G) mobile phone licences in 2008.

The former minister is suspected of rigging the rules to favour certain companies, causing a total loss to the national treasury of up to 40 billion dollars according to the national auditor.

Raja, who maintains his innocence, was formally arrested on Wednesday.

UN flying staff out of Egypt to Cyprus

Americans should leave Egypt 'immediately': US

AFP, Larnaca, Cyprus

Around 600 United Nations staff and their families are to be airlifted to Cyprus yesterday as the security situation in Egypt worsens, a UN spokesman said.

"The UN is making preparations for up to 600 UN staff and their dependants to be temporarily relocated to Cyprus on four UN charter flights," UN spokesman Rolando Gomez told AFP.

Some essential staff will remain in Egypt, he said. Gomez said the decision was taken by UN headquarters in New York because the security situation in Cairo was deemed "volatile and unstable" despite no attacks on UN staff.

The evacuation is to take place throughout yesterday with the first arrivals at Larnaca airport expected in the early afternoon.

Cyprus has been chosen as a staging post to get foreign nationals out of Egypt with more than 150 US citizens arriving earlier in the week on specially arranged American flights.

The State Department issued a stark travel warning Wednesday for US citizens in Egypt, urging those who want to leave to "immediately" head for the airport, adding that any delay was "not advisable."

"Do not wait for a call from the US embassy. Further delay is not advisable," the State Department warned.

About 1,900 US citizens and their family members have been evacuated from Egypt since Monday, officials said.

Withdrawal of hartal

FROM PAGE 1 sharemarket scandal and price hike of essentials," he said when asked about the possibility of calling off the hartal since the government backtracked on its plan to build an airport in Aerial Beel of Munshiganj.

The BNP leader was talking to reporters at the party's Naya Paltan office after a meeting with party leaders to make the dawn-to-dusk hartal a success.

"We did not call the hartal only to stop the government from constructing an airport in Aerial Beel," he said.

He hoped the government would not use the law enforcement agencies to thwart the hartal.

Delwar said the government must take all responsibilities for any unpleasant event stemmed from obstruction by the authorities.

The party called the countrywide hartal at a rally at Muktagong on Wednesday in protest at the filing of a case against party chief Khaleda Zia on charge of instigating violence in Aerial Beel.

Ruling party leader Abdul Matin, also public prosecutor in Munshiganj, filed the lawsuit against the BNP chairperson on Tuesday.

The BNP secretary general with newly elected Habiganj-1 lawmaker Sheikh Sujat Miah placed floral wreaths and offered fateha at the grave of party's founder Ziaur Rahman in the morning.

He told reporters that the locals in Munshiganj "forged a movement against the government plan to build an airport in Aerial Beel."

"No feasibility study was done before choosing the site for an airport," he said.

The BNP leader questioned how a public prosecutor could file a lawsuit against the leader of the opposition.

A wise step back

FROM PAGE 1 revealed that she has the self confidence and the maturity to see where wrong was done, and could quickly overturn an anti-people move. Leadership is not just being able to take bold decisions, but also being even bolder to correct it if serious wrong is discovered in it. We commend the PM for seeing her sycophants for what they are -- mere timeservers.

In her press conference yesterday, the PM made a robust defence of her wish to build a modern airport, which will be now on the other side of the Padma River, the exact site to be selected after proper study.

We concur with the prime minister that we need an airport of global standard, if Bangladesh is to emerge as a regional air hub. The air traffic globally, in Asia, and in Bangladesh will definitely grow. Already the growth is impressive. We must have a vision to be a part of that growth. But the timing of the decision to build such an airport cannot be based on either whims or considerations of prestige, political party dynamics or local economic benefit. It has been reported that the proposed airport will cost something to the tune of Tk 50,000 crore. This cost will escalate and reach gigantic proportion in the future. This will be far from a mean sum, and we must weigh its alternative use before we venture in the direction of an airport whose construction cannot be an immediate priority.

We are sorry that acceptance of public opinion had to come in such an expensive manner, both in terms of a loss of life and property. As a further example of her wisdom and sagacity, the PM should now instruct that police action in that area should be strictly restricted only to those responsible for wanton vandalism, violence, and attack on police, and should be dealt with in a case by case basis. There should

be total rejection of whole-sale harassment of the general public.

As we have written yesterday, accusing the leader of the opposition of incitement, and lodging an FIR against her were totally misconceived steps which only helped to reinforce the impression that the ruling party was out to suppress the opposition at any cost. The case should be withdrawn immediately.

Now that the airport decision has been changed, the PM must do a serious in-house investigation as to how such an improper decision was taken that led to a public outrage, and resistance of a scale rarely seen, causing huge embarrassment to the government and the PM. The Aerial Beel incident has caused considerable loss of public goodwill for the government, and the PM owes herself, her government, and her party an explanation that will get to the bottom of this mess, and hopefully prevent similar decisions in the future.

We think the PM should ask the following questions:

- How was the site selected, and who were the people involved?

- Was the civil aviation ministry, the line ministry whose responsibility it should be to select sites of airports, consulted at all? If not, then how could decisions about a new airport be taken and by whose authority? What does it say about the decision making process of this government?

- On the technical side, had any prefeasibility or feasibility study (or study of any sort) been done before the site was chosen? If none, then how could a decision be taken on a subject which naturally entails a range of highly sophisticated studies, given the fact that a modern airport is a highly complex infrastructure whose technical facilities are among the most intertwined and advanced in the world. Was

any such study done?

Though the PM tried to give some answers to the above questions in her press conference yesterday, our impression is that most of it was for public consumption. For her own sake, she needs to dig far deeper to get to the truth which will reveal the weaknesses of decision making process within her government. In investigating the above, the PM will also discover, for whose benefit due process was set aside and the government and PM were forced into a situation that caused so much public anger, and the consequent loss of face for the party in power.

Taher's fate fixed before trial

FROM PAGE 1 under which the military tribunal was formed and Taher was sentenced to death.

On January 20, the HC bench requested Lifschultz to turn in a statement on the trial and execution of Taher.

Lifschultz, a former journalist of the Far Eastern Economic Review, termed Taher's execution a "miscarriage of justice."

"Taher's execution ought to be called not only a miscarriage of justice but a crime committed by the state. Such a crime ought to be remedied by an institution of the state that has the power and capability to look back historically on crimes of the past," he said.

Taher was tried and executed in violation of the existing law, principle and fundamental rights, the US journalist said.

"In my view the critical issue which faces the Supreme Court is whether Abu Taher's constitutional and human rights were violated, in the most fundamental manner, by a military regime that had no democratic or constitutional legitimacy," he said.

Lifschultz said he wanted to interview Ziaur Rahman to discuss the trial but did not get Zia's permission.

"I was not granted an interview by Zia. This was not surprising. The General had other plans and they did not include being asked troubling questions," he said.

The journalist called the military tribunal a "Kangaroo Court" that tried and punished 17 military personnel, including Col Taher on July 17, 1976. Taher was executed at 4:30am on July 21 the same year.

"Would it be accurate to describe the Tribunal headed by Colonel Yusuf Haider as simply a Kangaroo Court which implemented

We also want to point out how the name of Bangabandhu is sometimes used by vested quarters to advance their pet projects for very narrow commercial ends. Things are purportedly done to honour the Father of the Nation, but in reality insults his memory, as people find his name associated with unworthy institutions and projects. We think the prime minister should direct that the name of Bangabandhu can only be used with special clearance after due diligence.

Let us all be wiser from the Aerial Beel incident. Mega projects like airports, deep-sea ports, river dredging, etc should not be undertaken

light heartedly. Decisions that affect livelihoods of people, especially those that involve confiscation of land, must involve in-depth studies and should be undertaken only after people of the area have been given a detailed explanation of why their lands are being taken. We saw in the army housing project how people reacted when their lands were being forcibly "purchased".

As we have praised the PM for her wisdom of bowing to public will, so also we caution her about the decision making processes in many projects that involve big money.

a sentence pre-determined?

"The press was shackled so that public anger at the injustice being carried out in camera would be contained. Journalists were threatened and deported. Imagine the public response, if Taher's closing speech before the Tribunal had been published the day after he spoke?" he said.

Lifschultz was expelled from Bangladesh at the time.

"I was arrested and deported in the midst of Taher's trial," he said.

"In my view a tragic crime was committed in Dhaka during June and July 1976. I was one of the few witnesses to what happened in this case. On June 28, 1976 I stood in front of Dhaka Central Jail. It was the day the 'so-called trial' of Abu Taher and his colleagues began in secret, hidden behind the walls of a prison.

"When I arrived that morning, the security around the prison appeared as if the army was preparing for a war. Machine gun nests were set up all along the prison walls with their guns pointing outwards. What were these guns defending? Secrecy? Who were they prepared to shoot? Why was a trial taking place in a prison instead of in Court?" he said.

"I arrived in Dhaka in early June 1976, I contacted General Mhd Manzur when he was the Chief of General Staff. During the evening General Manzur focused most of all on speaking to me about Taher who by then had been in prison for more than six months. He told me Taher had been kept mostly in solitary confinement.

"In reality, it was an illegal entity established to commit murder and to imprison men and women who were denied their constitutional rights," the US journalist said.

NEWS IN brief

Egypt govt forced Telco's to send pro-regime SMS

AFP, London

Egyptian authorities have forced mobile phone operators to broadcast pro-government messages amid protests engulfing the country, British-based operator Vodafone said yesterday.

Vodafone condemned the "unacceptable" situation, which comes after the government cut mobile communications in a bid to prevent demonstrators from coordinating their protests earlier in the crisis.

"Under the emergency powers provisions of the Telecoms Act, the Egyptian authorities can instruct the mobile networks of Mobinil, Etisalat and Vodafone to send messages to the people of Egypt,"

Court convicts attacker of Danish cartoonist

AFP, Aarhus, Denmark

A court yesterday convicted a 29-year-old Somali man of attempted terrorism and attempted murder for attacking a Danish cartoonist who caricatured the Prophet Mohammed.

"The court deems that the attempted murder of Kurt Westergaard in his own home, (of the man who) personifies the Mohammed cartoon affair, must be considered as an attempt to instil a heightened level of fear in the population and to destabilise the structures of society," which falls under the Danish anti-terrorism law, judge Ingrid Thorsboe told the court

Execution rate in Iran alarms UN human rights chief

CNN ONLINE

The head of human rights for the United Nations has expressed alarm at the number of executions carried out by Iran in the new year.

"We have urged Iran, time and again, to halt executions," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said. "I am very dismayed that instead of heeding our calls, the Iranian authorities appear to have stepped up the use of the death penalty."

At least 66 people were executed during January, according to Iranian media reports. Most of the executions were reportedly carried out for drug offences, although at least three involved political

Russia cautions against 'foreign ultimatums' for Egypt

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday cautioned against foreign interference in Egypt's affairs, saying its politicians should themselves find a way to end violent unrest and the world should not make ultimatums.

"We are interested in Egypt being a stable, prospering, democratic state, in today's social, economic and political problems being settled peacefully as soon as possible," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in a statement.

"How precisely to do this it is up to the Egyptian politicians, the Egyptian people to decide. We do not consider it useful to impose some recipes from the

Blast kills Afghan father and son

AFP, Kunduz, Afghanistan

A father and his young son were killed yesterday when a bomb blew up their car in Afghanistan, police said.

The incident near the northern city of Kunduz was the latest attack of the deadly Taliban insurgency that has gripped the country for the last nine years.

"A father and his 10 or 12-year-old son who were driving to the city were killed," deputy provincial