

# Uncertainty grips Nepal

Crisis deepens as deadline looms; deputy PM quits

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's efforts to write a new constitution and avoid a fresh political crisis were in disarray yesterday after the deputy premier announced his resignation amid deep divisions in government.

Krishna Sitaula said he was stepping down from the troubled Himalayan nation's unity government, which has until Sunday to draw up a first peacetime statute, or risk the legislature being disbanded.

"I am no longer in the cabinet from today. It is up to the party to decide whether to stay in the government but there is no relevance in me staying in the government," he told reporters.

Sitaula said the move was in protest over controversial government plans to ask lawmakers to give the repeatedly extended Constituent Assembly another three months to finish writing the constitution.

The proposal goes against a Supreme Court ruling prohibiting any more extensions of the assembly, which was



Krishna Sitaula

elected in 2008 with a two-year tenure that has been renewed four times.

The new constitution is seen as crucial to helping end instability that has plagued Nepal since the end of the 10-year Maoist insurgency in 2006 that left 16,000 dead and led to the overthrow of the monarchy.

But the major parties have been unable to agree on crucial issues such as the names, number and boundaries of states under a new federal structure.

Sitaula's Nepali Congress and the Unified Marxist Leninist party, the second and third biggest groups in the

Maoist-led coalition, have rejected the extension and demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai.

"We can't accept their demand because the constitution drafting is stuck and now they have zeroed in on his resignation," Barsha Man Pun, a Maoist minister, told reporters.

"We are concentrating our efforts to promulgate the constitution by May 27. And, as an option, we have proposed a three-month extension," Pun said.

If there is no new constitution and no agreement on an extension by Sunday, parliament will be disbanded ahead of fresh elections, creating a destabilising power vacuum.

Ethnic factions across the troubled nation have been pressuring the government to recognise their rights in the long-awaited constitution, with protests often spilling into violence.

On Wednesday, thousands gathered in central Kathmandu to press for peace and the new statute, while a shutdown by protesters that crippled life for weeks in the far west resumed on Thursday.

# Egypt polls enters final day

AFP, Cairo

Egyptians swarmed polling stations on the second day Thursday of a gripping presidential election in which candidates are pitting stability against the ideals of the uprising that ended Hosni Mubarak's rule.

Long queues formed outside the voting centres after they opened at 8:00am, with authorities declaring a public holiday yesterday to allow public sector employees to cast their ballots.

Around 50 million eligible voters are choosing among 12 candidates, with the front runners divided between Islamists who say they will champion the uprising's goals and Mubarak-era ministers.

Two of the candidates are expected to go into June run-offs after the May 23 and 24 vote.

Results are expected on Sunday.

# UN blames Syria army for most abuses

Assad optimistic while violence continues

AFP, Damascus

A UN panel yesterday said that government forces are to blame for most rights abuses in the latest unrest sweeping Syria as a watchdog reported an 11th straight day of shelling of a rebel bastion.

President Bashar al-Assad insisted his government was capable of finding a way out of the crisis gripping his country, even as parliament overwhelmingly voted for a member of his Baath party as speaker following a May 7 election boycotted by the opposition and dismissed by the West as a farce.

In Geneva, the UN-appointed Commission of Inquiry on Syria said the army and security forces were behind the majority of serious abuses committed since March this year as they hunt down defectors and opponents.

"Most of the serious human rights violations documented by the Commission in this update were committed by the Syrian army and security services as part of military or search operations conducted in locations known for hosting defectors and/or armed persons, or perceived as supportive of anti-government armed groups," said the panel.

The report comes hot on the heels of accusations by Amnesty International that "the pattern and scale of state abuses may have constituted crimes against humanity."

The London-based rights watchdog denounced the UN Security Council for failing to refer Assad to the International Criminal Court as it had done with Libya's Muammar Gaddafi.

The allegations came as government forces pounded the rebel stronghold of Rastan, in central Syria, for an 11th consecutive day, killing at least three civilians, according to a Britain-based watchdog.

Violence elsewhere killed 10 people, human rights groups said.

But speaking during talks with a visiting minister from Syria's key Middle East ally Iran, Assad insisted his government could find a way to resolve conflict.

"Syria has been able to overcome the pressures and threats it has faced for years and is able to get out of this crisis thanks to the strength of its people and commitment to unity and independence," state media quoted him.

# CONTEMPT OF COURT Pak speaker decides to spare Gilani

DAWN ONLINE

National Assembly Speaker Dr Fehmida Mirza decided against forwarding a disqualification reference against Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Gilani to the Election Commission of Pakistan after his conviction by the Supreme Court in the contempt of court case.

In a five pages ruling released yesterday, the NA speaker says that no question of PM Gilani's disqualification arises according to Article 63 of the Constitution and in light of the apex court's verdict.

She further says in her ruling that there is no need to forward the disqualification reference against Gilani to the ECP as the SC had not raised the issue of his disqualification in the verdict.

Moreover, she argues in her ruling that "no specific charge" has been framed against the prime minister regarding "the propagation of any opinion or acting in any manner against the independence of the judiciary or defaming or ridiculing the judiciary" in the apex court's verdict.

According to Article 63(2) of the Constitution, the speaker has to decide on the prime minister's disqualification.

Gilani was convicted for contempt of court on April 26 for not writing a letter to the Swiss authorities for reopening money-laundering cases against President Asif Ali Zardari. The prime minister was expected to file an appeal against the apex court's decision on also yesterday.



An Indian policeman attempts to put out flames of burning effigies representing Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Petroleum Minister S Jaipal Reddy during a protest by the All Assam Students Union against the petrol price hike in Guwahati yesterday. Opposition parties in India yesterday called a national one-day strike for next week to protest against a hike in petrol prices, with rising costs posing a challenge to the Congress-led government.

# US bin Laden raid 'unlawful': Amnesty

AFP, Washington

Amnesty International criticised the United States on Wednesday for its use of lethal force, particularly for the "unlawful" killing of Osama bin Laden in a clandestine US commando raid in Pakistan last May.

"The US administration made clear that the operation had been conducted under the USA's theory of a global armed conflict between the USA and al-Qaeda in which the USA does not recognise the applicability of international human rights law," it said in its annual report.

"In the absence of further clarification from the US authorities, the killing of Osama bin Laden would appear to have been unlawful," it said.

Amnesty said a request for clarification over an apparent US drone strike in Yemen last September that killed US-born radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaqi, his al-Qaeda co-conspirator Samir Khan and at least two others had also gone unanswered. "These killings appeared to have amounted to extrajudicial executions," the rights watchdog said.

Amnesty also hit out at human rights violations committed by former president George W Bush's administration and condemned the "impunity" with which his officials operated.

The global rights monitor also criticised Canada for failing to arrest Bush when he visited in October, "despite clear evidence that he was responsible for crimes under international law, including torture."

# NEWS IN brief

## Death penalty sought for Ben Ali

AFP, Tunis

A Tunisian military prosecutor demanded the death penalty Wednesday for ex-president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who is being tried in absentia over killings during last year's popular uprising.

Defence lawyers and the victims' relatives alike were surprised by the decision, as Ben Ali is charged only with "complicity in voluntary homicide" while others are accused of direct involvement.

It is the first time the death penalty has been sought against the ousted longtime dictator, although he has already been sentenced to more than 66 years in prison on a range of other charges including drug trafficking and embezzlement.

Ben Ali was absent for those court cases, having fled Tunisia on January 14 to seek exile in Saudi Arabia after protests that swept other strongmen from power across the Arab world.

## 700 students held in Canada

AFP, Montreal

Canada police arrested some 700 people in Montreal early yesterday after demonstrators threw rocks at officers in the latest student protest to shake the city, a police spokesman said.

Several thousand demonstrators poured into Montreal's central square late Wednesday in an unsanctioned rally, defying a law passed last week requiring organizers to notify authorities eight hours ahead of public demonstrations.

Police moved in after several hours when some of the demonstrators threw rocks at them, police spokesman Daniel Lacoursiere said.

Protests have raged in Montreal since mid-February over a plan by provincial Premier Jean Charest to raise tuition fees at Quebec universities by 82 percent to rein in a budget deficit.

## Rabid bats kill 7 children in Peru

AFP, Lima

Seven children have died from rabies in Peru over the past two months after being bitten by bats, an official said Wednesday.

The children, aged 11 months to 14, hailed from a remote region about 1,160 kilometers southeast of the capital Lima, Health Ministry official Ana Maria Navarro told AFP.

To prevent further fatalities, vaccination teams have been rushed to the affected Camana community of 720 people that can only be reached by river.

In February 2011, at least six children in another region of the Amazon, in Peru's northeast, died of rabies carried by bats.

# Last-ditch salvage effort at tough Iran talks

AFP, Baghdad

Iran and six world powers yesterday sought desperately to salvage something tangible from two days of talks that have revealed huge differences over how to resolve the crisis over Tehran's nuclear programme.

With signs that Iran has found little common ground with the P5+1 -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States plus Germany -- diplomats said they were striving at least to agree a venue and date to meet again.

The talks have already been extended by a day and a planned news conference by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton yesterday was abruptly called off, in order, officials said, to have more talks from 6:00pm.

The meeting in Baghdad saw the P5+1 offer a new package of proposals that included Iran suspending enrichment of uranium to 20-percent purities, for the P5+1 the most worrying part of Tehran's activity and the crunch issue.

The capability to enrich to 20 percent takes Iran significantly closer to being able to produce weapons-grade 90 percent, if it took the decision to build a nuclear bomb, by shortening the so-called "breakout" time.

But the P5+1 offer, made on the group's behalf by Ashton, alarmed Tehran since in return it does not offer the relief from crippling sanctions it is seeking.

However, one diplomat said that new talks had been agreed but that it was "not yet" possible to say where and when it would be.

The P5+1 reportedly proposed a pledge not to impose any new sanctions, as well as easing Iranian access to aircraft parts and a possible suspension of an EU insurance ban on ships carrying Iranian oil.

The cost of the talks failing could barely be higher. Iran is threatened with an EU oil embargo due to take full effect from July 1 that will also bar EU firms from insuring crude tankers heading to India, South Korea and Japan.

# US drone kills 8 in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

A US drone strike yesterday killed eight militants in a Taliban stronghold of Pakistan's tribal belt, bringing the death toll from such strikes to 12 in two days, Pakistani officials said.

"The drone fired two missiles on a house in Hassokhel town," 25 kilometres east of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, a security official said.

Washington considers Pakistan's semi-autonomous northwestern tribal belt on the Afghan border the main hub of Taliban and al-Qaeda militants plotting attacks on the West and in Afghanistan.

# DISPUTED RULINGS Taiwan to allow public to join judges' bench

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's cabinet yesterday passed a bill to let members of the public join trial judges on the bench as the island seeks to reform its judicial system following a string of disputed rulings.

The plan, pending parliament's final approval, aims to promote transparency as well as public understanding and trust in the judiciary, the cabinet said in a statement.

Under the bill, five people will be allowed to accompany a panel of three judges in court proceedings involving murder cases or serious offences carrying a minimum seven-year jail term.

The members of the public will be able to voice their opinion as to whether a defendant is guilty and as to the sentence, but judges will still be responsible for the final verdict.

Pressure for judicial reforms has intensified in Taiwan after a spate of controversial rulings, including several cases involving the sexual assault of children.

Last year, President Ma Ying-jeou apologised and dropped the nomination to the constitutional court of a judge who was criticised for acquitting a child molester.

That ruling and two other similar cases triggered mass street protests and prompted parliament to tighten laws on child sex abuse.

# Army kills 35 Qaeda men in Yemen

AFP, Aden

Yemeni troops killed 35 al-Qaeda militants in overnight battles in the restive southern Abyan province, a military official said yesterday as the army pressed ahead with a 13-day offensive to retake extremist strongholds.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the official said "al-Qaeda fighters launched an attack" on the army in the region of Wadi Bani that has been under militant control since last year.

The assault sparked fierce clashes that left "more than 35 militants" dead, the official said. Two soldiers were also killed in the battle.

Yemeni forces launched an offensive on May 12 to capture al-Qaeda controlled areas in Abyan.

Since the offensive began, 299 people have been killed, according to a tally compiled by AFP.

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