

NEPAL WAR CRIMES

Work harder for justice: US

AFP, Kathmandu

The United States has urged Nepal to work harder for justice over atrocities committed during the country's 10-year civil war after striking the ruling Maoist party off its terror blacklist.

Nepal's leaders are setting up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate wartime killings, torture and forced disappearances and are considering proposals to grant an amnesty for abuses committed by both sides.

But speaking on a visit to the restive Himalayan nation, US Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake said any such commission had to address the victims' desire for justice.

"A key part of concluding a successful peace process will be for all parties to develop transitional justice mechanisms that are independent, credible, and transparent, and that address the concerns of all Nepalis, particularly the victims and their families," said Blake.



A Syrian man takes pictures with his mobile phone of damage caused by aerial bombardment from government forces in the neighbourhood of Tariq al-Bab in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Syria army, rebels clash in Aleppo

AFP, Damascus

International peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi is to head to Damascus to meet Syria's President Bashar al-Assad today, an Arab diplomat in Cairo said, as fresh bloodshed gripped the north of the country.

In a single incident, rebels killed at least 18 soldiers in a car bomb and ground attack on a military position in Idlib province of northwest Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Separately, four Syrian Armenians were killed and 13 wounded in the war-battered commercial capital Aleppo on the way home from the airport after a trip to Yerevan.

Outside Aleppo, fighting erupted at dawn in the Nayrab area, around five kilometres (three miles) from the airport, which remained fully operational, the Observatory said.

Over the past several weeks, rebels have taken to attacking military airfields in an attempt to prevent them from being used for launching air strikes, while commercial facilities have been left unscathed.

Meanwhile, the army shelled a string of neighbourhoods in central Aleppo, including Suleiman al-Halabi, Sheikh Khodr and Qadi Askar, the Britain-based Observatory said.

Helicopter gunships also strafed the rebel district of Bustan al-Basha, a witness said, and the Observatory reported that rebels used rocket-propelled grenades to attack a security branch in the adjacent Midan neighbourhood.

In Cairo, an Arab League diplomat said UN-Arab League envoy Brahimi would head for Damascus today and meet with Assad the following day, but gave no further details.

The international envoy, replacing former UN chief Kofi Annan who quit in August over UN Security Council divisions on the conflict that has gripped Syria for nearly 18 months, kicked off his peace mission with talks in Cairo.

On Tuesday, UN chief Ban Ki-moon said Brahimi would meet Assad in Damascus and insisted that "the violence must stop by both sides."

He told reporters in Bern that he understood the frustration felt by many in the face of the Security Council's apparent paralysis in dealing with the spiralling crisis.

Overall, at least 44 people -- 22 soldiers, 17 civilians and five rebels -- died in Syria yesterday, the Observatory said.

More than 27,000 people have been killed since the revolt against President Bashar al-Assad broke out in March 2011, according to Observatory figures.

MOCKING GRAFT

Indian cartoonist freed

AFP, Mumbai

An Indian cartoonist jailed on sedition charges was released from a Mumbai prison on bail yesterday, four days after being arrested in a case that has outraged freedom of expression campaigners.

"Although I'm free, the battle will continue. Whenever there is an infringement of legal rights, our fight will continue," Aseem Trivedi told a crowd of reporters outside Arthur Road jail.

Trivedi, whose sketches often mock the government for corruption, accepted bail after the city's High Court said on Tuesday that he could be released on a bond of 5,000 rupees (\$90).

His lawyer Vijay Hiremath told AFP earlier that they were hopeful all the charges would be dropped.

The arrest of Trivedi, a freelance cartoonist and anti-graft campaigner, sparked a backlash against the government, which has been accused of using colonial-era sedition laws to crush dissent.

Human Rights Watch joined the chorus of protest on Wednesday, calling for the "politically motivated" charges to be dismissed immediately.

"Arresting cartoonists for their stinging satire is a hallmark of a dictatorship, not a democracy," Meenakshi Ganguly, the group's South Asia director, said.

Rahul lacks ability to be PM: Mulayam

IANS, Kolkata

Samajwadi Party Chief Mulayam Singh Yadav yesterday launched a scathing attack on the Congress-led UPA government and took on Rahul Gandhi saying that the Congress general secretary lacked the ability to run the country as very little was heard from him on issues of national interest.

Describing the UPA government as scam-tainted, Mulayam said the ruling party's reputation has tarnished as it is riddled with scandals and it was high time his party took charge.

Addressing the inaugural session of the SP's national executive here, Yadav said that while the Congress was demoralised and neck deep in corruption, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in a limbo.

"At the centre, there are so many scams. One minister has given coal blocks to his relatives. The day another man became coal minister, he gave coal to relatives. The reputation of the Congress has suffered," said Mulayam.

Mulayam also said he was determined to ensure that no government takes office in New Delhi next without his party's support.

"In the present scenario, the SP has to bear greater responsibility in national politics. The 2014 election will be decisive. You should all make sincere efforts so that we win a good number of seats so that no government can be formed in Delhi without our support," Yadav said.

"We are already in power in Uttar Pradesh. If we come to power at the centre, then our area of influence will be spread all across north India, from Punjab to (West) Bengal," he said.

The SP supremo said the nation was beset with a large number of problems. Unemployment and poverty were on the rise.

"Our borders are under threat. There are a lot of scams. The Congress is a large party but its confidence is shaken. It is unable to do anything for people. With the scams, its image has taken a beating," he said.



Pak Hindus flee to India alleging persecution

AFP, Jaipur, India

A group of 170 Hindus from Pakistan who travelled to India on pilgrim visas have said they will not return home due to alleged persecution in the Islamic republic.

Officials in the western Indian state of Rajasthan have reported an increase in Hindu refugees, but Pakistani authorities say the numbers are exaggerated and those who leave are economic migrants seeking better jobs.

The latest group from Pakistan's Sindh province arrived in the desert city of Jodhpur at the weekend, and have appealed for help from the Indian government.

"Hindus are suffering social and religious persecution in Pakistan," Chetan Ram, 39, the group's leader, told AFP on Tuesday.

"My wife, mother and family are with me and we will not return to Pakistan whatever the living conditions are in India."

Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot met with some of the group and promised to seek assistance from national authorities.

Rushdie's new book tells of life in hiding

THE HINDU ONLINE

He called himself Joseph Anton, a combination of the first names of two of his favourite writers Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov; masqueraded as a publisher who, for inexplicable reasons, needed to live in a house with bullet-proof doors and windows; and constantly lived in fear of a potential assassin lurking within shooting distance.

That is how Salman Rushdie spent 10 long years on the run in the wake of the Iranian fatwa ordering his death following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988. A full account of those nightmarish years is revealed in his new book, *Joseph Anton*, due out later this month. In a literary conceit, he refers to himself throughout the book in the third person as Anton.

Describing how overnight "Mr Anton's" life changed into a horror story, he writes: "He realised in that foot-stepped silence that he no longer understood his life or what it might become."

In BBC documentary "Imagine," to be telecast ahead of the book launch on September 18, Rushdie reportedly talks of "being 41 and thinking it pretty unlikely I would see my 42nd birthday". He recalls what it felt being suddenly deprived of his freedom and shut out from the outside world.

"You are zooming around in armoured Jaguars and people are jumping to open doors. But it didn't feel grand. It felt like jail. It was also up to me find the houses, places the police would approve of. It was just very cooped up. When I wanted a walk, they would have to take me," he reportedly says in the documentary.

According to snatches from the book published in *The Sunday Times*, Rushdie says the police accompanied him everywhere, even to the lavatory, but he declined to wear a wig as a disguise.

Rushdie, who lived in 20 different "safe houses," spent the first weekend of the fatwa locked inside a bedroom in a hotel.



Myanmar president to make first US trip

AFP, Naypyidaw, Myanmar

Myanmar leader Thein Sein is to visit the United States for the first time as president of the fast-reforming nation, officials yesterday said, after Washington waived visa restrictions.

Thein Sein, who has ushered in a period of sweeping change for Myanmar since nearly half a century of military rule ended last year, will travel to the US to attend a United Nations General Assembly.

"The president will visit the UN and US for three days," a Myanmar official told AFP, adding that the Myanmar leader is set to leave for the US on September 24.

US President Barack Obama last month ordered an exception to a visa ban on Myanmar's leaders to let Thein Sein travel freely during the UN summit.

The Myanmar president, who last attended the General Assembly in 2009 as prime minister under the previous junta regime, would otherwise have been confined to a narrow area around the UN headquarters in New York.

Thein Sein's visit to the US follows soon after opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is set to visit the country for the first time since she began her campaign for democracy.