

# Nepal crisis 'averted'

## Maoists abandon efforts to form a new govt

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's main Maoist party that props up the fragile coalition said on Thursday it had abandoned efforts to form a new government, averting an immediate crisis that had threatened to dislodge Prime Minister K P Oli.

The Maoist former rebels, the second biggest group in the coalition, triggered a crisis in the young republic on Wednesday by threatening to pull out of the unwieldy alliance.

They had accused Oli of failing to resolve a political deadlock with ethnic minority groups in the southern Madhes region over the new constitution and step up rebuilding work after last year's earthquakes.

On Thursday, they had been expected to join the opposition Nepali Congress party and move a no confidence motion in parliament against the government.

"We will not pull out of the present government now because the prime minister has promised to work for a national consensus and address our concerns," Maoist leader Dinanath Sharma said.

Janardan Sharma, another Maoist, told state television that the former rebels had

backed down after Oli's communist UML party refused to support their own leader's efforts to form a unity government to resolve the constitutional impasse.

Addressing parliament earlier, Oli vowed to resolve all concerns of the Maoists and expedite rebuilding houses after the massive quakes that left 9,000 people dead and destroyed a million homes.

"I am prepared to work with other parties, address their genuine concerns through talks and correct any past mistakes," Oli told lawmakers.

Nepal has been in turmoil since it adopted the first post-monarchy constitution in September last year.

Ethnic Madhesis, who live mostly along the lowland southern border with India, imposed a four-month blockade in protest at a proposal to carve Nepal up into seven federal states, saying it would divide their homeland and exclude them politically.

More than 50 people died in clashes as protesters blocked trade with India, causing acute fuel shortages. The blockade ended in February but Oli still faces opposition criticism for failing to improve fuel supply and control smuggling.



# Kim hails nuke power status

AFP, Pyongyang

Kim Jong-Un opened North Korea's first ruling party congress for nearly 40 years yesterday, with a defiant defence of the "magnificent" strides made in the country's nuclear weapons programme.

Hailing the historic test of what North Korea claims was a hydrogen bomb in January, the isolated state's young leader said it had shown the world it would not be cowed by sanctions or outside pressure.

Dressed in a western style suit and tie, Kim's speech was delivered to thousands of party delegates who had gathered in Pyongyang for the once-in-a-generation conclave.

In particular, he praised the country's scientists for "creating milestone miracles with the magnificent and exhilarating sound of the first H-bomb of our republic".

The test, which was followed a month later by a successful long-range rocket launch, "clearly demonstrated to the whole world our undefeatable spirit and endless power ... in defiance of malicious pressure and sanctions by enemy forces", he said.

Most experts have questioned the North's H-bomb claim, saying the detected yield from the January test was far too low for a full-fledged thermonuclear device.

There has been widespread speculation about the North preparing another nuclear test to coincide with the con-

gress, as a defiant gesture of strength and future intent.

The 33-year-old Kim, who was not even born when the last Workers' Party Congress was held in 1980, said the party conclave would prove to be a "new milestone" that would lay out the future direction "of our revolutionary march".

While the agenda -- and even the duration -- of the congress remains unknown, its main objective is clearly to confirm Kim Jong-Un's status as absolute ruler and the legitimate inheritor of the Kim family's dynastic rule which spans almost seven decades.

It may also enshrine as formal party doctrine Kim's "byungjin" policy of pursuing nuclear weapons in tandem with economic development.

Analysts will be watching for personnel changes as Kim looks to bring in a younger generation of leaders hand-picked for their loyalty.

Around 130 foreign journalists were invited to cover the event, but were not allowed inside the congress venue, restricted instead to watching from a spot 200 metres away in the light drizzle falling on the capital.

Notably absent was any Chinese representation -- a possible reflection of the increasingly strained ties between the North and its sole major ally.

Since Kim took power after the death of his father in December 2011, he has demonstrated a ruthless streak, purging the party, government and powerful military of those seen as disloyal.



# 'We'll go our way, you can go yours'

Erdogan refuses to change anti-terror law for sake of EU visa deal

AFP, Ankara

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday warned the European Union that Ankara will not change its anti-terrorism law, despite it being a condition laid down by Brussels to ensure visa-free travel for Turks.

"The EU says: you will change the anti-terror law for visas," Erdogan said in a televised speech in Istanbul. "Pardon me but we are going our way and you can go yours."

Erdogan was speaking one day after Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, who had championed the accord with European leaders, announced that he was stepping down.

Turkey must complete five more benchmarks by the end of next month to complete the EU's list of 72 criteria -- which include changes to anti-terror law as well as protection of personal data.

The promise of visa-free travel for Turks is a key pillar of a deal between Brussels and Ankara to reduce the flow of migrants from Turkish territory to the European Union.

A Turkish official said this week talks with the EU were under way to meet the five remaining criteria including changes to the anti-terror law.

Earlier, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she expects Turkey to stick to the migrant deal to limit refugee flows to the EU even after the announced resignation of its prime minister.

## NEWS IN brief

**Mumbai court strikes down beef ban**  
AFP, Mumbai

An Indian court on Friday struck down a tough law that had banned the consumption of beef in the western state of Maharashtra, dealing a blow to right-wing Hindu groups. Last year the government of Maharashtra, home to India's commercial centre Mumbai, made the sale or possession of beef an offence punishable by a five-year jail term or a 10,000-rupee (\$150) fine.

**China to join US-led naval exercise**  
AFP, Shanghai

China will take part in a regular US-led naval exercise starting next month, a top US commander said yesterday, despite tensions over Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea. The United States will host multinational naval drills called the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) -- billed as the world's largest -- off Hawaii in June and July.

**Greece paralysed by anti-austerity strike**  
AFP, Athens

Greece's public transport networks grounded to a halt yesterday after trade unions called for a 48-hour strike to protest controversial government plans to overhaul pensions and increase taxes, as demanded by international creditors. No public transport service in Athens was working Friday morning as metro, tram, bus and rail workers began a strike that is set to run through tomorrow, unions said.

**Six feared killed in MY chopper crash**  
AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Search teams yesterday recovered the body of a Malaysian deputy minister in the Borneo island state of Sarawak near where a helicopter carrying her and five others is believed to have crashed, officials said. The Eurocopter AS350 had been ferrying Plantation Industries and Commodities Deputy Minister Noriah Kasnon and her husband from Sarawak's interior to its capital Kuching when it went missing Thursday.



India's main opposition Congress party president Sonia Gandhi and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (blue turban) and party Vice-president Rahul Gandhi cross a police barricade during what the party calls as a "Save Democracy" march to parliament in New Delhi, India, yesterday. Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi were briefly arrested at a police station yesterday and later released during the march against the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

PHOTO: REUTERS

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# 'What has happened to you, Europe?'

Pope Francis said yesterday he dreamed of a Europe in which "being a migrant is not a crime", as he urged EU leaders to "tear down the walls" and build a fairer society.

Invoking the memory of the EU founding fathers' pursuit of integration in the aftermath of World War II, the pontiff said they inspired because they had "dared to change radically the models" that had led to war.

"Today more than ever, their vision inspires us to build bridges and tear down walls," he told a Vatican audience including German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has been at the centre of the EU's attempts to resolve its biggest refugee crisis since the war ended in 1945.

"I dream of a Europe where being a migrant is not a crime but a summons to greater commitment on behalf of the dignity of every human being," he said.

"What has happened to you, the Europe of humanism, the champion of human rights, democracy and freedom?" he asked. "What has happened to you, Europe, the home of poets, philosophers, artists, musicians, and men and women of letters?"

German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Thursday urged European leaders to protect EU borders or risk a "return to nationalism" as the continent battles its worst migration crisis since World War II.

Meanwhile, Italian vessels have helped rescue nearly 1,800 migrants from boats trying to reach Italy from north Africa in the last 24 hours, the navy said yesterday, indicating that numbers are rising as the weather warms up, reports Reuters.

The navy said 1,759 migrants were rescued in 10 operations involving the Italian navy, coastguard and finance police, the European Union's external borders agency Frontex and the medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres.



**Yet another ministry for Suu Kyi!**  
AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's president has urged the creation of a new ministry for Aung San Suu Kyi's state advisor position, official media reported yesterday, a move that will deepen her influence and likely rile the powerful army.

Suu Kyi is barred from the presidency by the military-drafted constitution despite having led her pro-democracy party to a landslide victory in November.

She has instead hovered up a slew of other senior positions, including foreign minister, president's officer minister, and the specially-devised role of state councillor, which gives her vaguely-defined powers to guide parliamentary affairs.

The broad array of powers across government has helped the veteran activist fulfil a pledge to rule "above" her presidential proxy and close ally Htin Kyaw.

# SNP wins, Corbyn hangs on in UK local polls

Sadiq Khan set to become first Muslim mayor of London

AFP, London

Scottish nationalists won a third term in power but lost their outright majority yesterday in one of a series of local and regional elections seen as a key test for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Britain's main opposition Labour Party came third in the vote for Scotland's devolved parliament but its candidate Sadiq Khan is expected to clinch victory in London to become the city's first Muslim mayor.

Leftwinger Corbyn, under pressure from centrists in his party since taking power last year, insisted his party had "hung on" and surpassed expectations.

"All across England last night we were getting predictions that we were going to lose councils. We didn't," he said. "We hung on and we grew support in a lot of places."

While the results may have done enough to damp down talk of a leadership challenge to Corbyn for now, they will not ease disquiet among some MPs about his leadership.

With results from 87 councils in, Labour had 43, down one, and 846 seats, down 22. Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservatives had control of an unchanged

23 councils and 520 seats, up seven.

North of the border, Nicola Sturgeon, leader of the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) claimed the result as a major victory as her party seeks a mandate to move towards a second independence referendum.

"What is now beyond doubt is that the SNP has won a third consecutive Scottish Parliament election," Sturgeon said.

However, the 63 seats out of 129 won by the SNP fell short of polling ahead of the election which had suggested the party would retain its majority. The SNP, which previously had 69 seats, will now have to seek the support of a smaller party like the Greens to govern.

The result of London's mayoral election was expected later yesterday, with Khan tipped to secure an easy victory over Zac Goldsmith, the Conservative candidate.



# Music washes away IS filth in Palmyra

AFP, Palmyra

Leading Russian musicians on Thursday staged a classical concert in the ancient theatre of Syria's ravaged Palmyra in a show by the Kremlin to herald its successes in the war-torn country.

Famed conductor Valery Gergiev led Saint Petersburg's celebrated Mariinsky orchestra through pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach, Sergei Prokofiev and Rodion Shchedrin in front of a crowd of Russian soldiers, government ministers and journalists.

Cellist Sergei Roldugin -- a personal friend of President Vladimir Putin -- played a solo against the backdrop of the Roman amphitheatre where jihadists from the Islamic State group staged mass executions less than a year ago.

"Thank you for today's amazing humanitarian act -- the concert in a Palmyra liberated from terrorists," Putin said in an address from Russia broadcast at the start of the concert.

"I see it as a sign of gratitude, of remembrance, of hope," Putin said.

Syrian troops backed by Russian air strikes and special forces on the ground recaptured UNESCO world heritage site Palmyra from Islamic State group fighters in March. Russian army sappers said last month they had demined the ancient site -- known as the "Pearl of the Desert" -- where jihadist fighters blew up ancient temples and looted relics.



# Trump backs 'Brexit'

US House Speaker deals major blow to his unity efforts

AGENCIES

Donald Trump has said he thinks Britain would be better off outside the European Union.

The Republican candidate, who is now all but certain to become the party's nominee at the convention in July, told Fox News he supported Brexit because immigration has been "a horrible thing for Europe".

He said: "A lot of that was pushed by the EU. I would say that they're better off without it personally, but I'm not making that as a recommendation - just my feeling."

"I know Great Britain very well. ... I would say that they're better off without it, but I want them to make their own decision."

The billionaire will most likely to face Hillary Clinton in the Presidential election this November after his remaining rivals Ted Cruz and John Kasich dropped out of the race after his success at the Indiana primary.

Meanwhile, Trump said yesterday he was surprised by the US House speaker's refusal to back his bid for the White House and that the two will meet next week.

In a stunning declaration, Paul Ryan said Thursday he was not yet ready to support the billionaire, signaling a deep rift within the Republican party, reports AFP.

The shock announcement by Ryan was expected to reverberate throughout the GOP's establishment and its rank and file.