

## Clashes in Nepal as Maoists step up protest

At least a dozen people were injured in clashes with security forces in eastern Nepal and curfew was clamped in another area in the region as the former Maoist guerrillas Wednesday stepped up their protests against the coalition government, amidst fears by the western governments that it would lead to violence and escalated tension.

The renewed protests called by the former insurgents since Sunday night turned violent in Sunsari district in the Terai plains as demonstrators fought with riot police, who were deployed in large numbers throughout the country to prevent violence.

According to initial reports, eight Maoist protesters and four policemen were hurt in the Sunsari clash while Dhankuta, a hilly district in the east, remained under indefinite curfew for the second day.

Dhankuta was the scene of a violent confrontation between the Maoists and the ruling Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (UML) Tuesday with the youth wing of the rebels setting UML supporters' vehicles on fire and the latter retaliating by attacking Maoist offices.

With an indefinite curfew enforced by the district administration on one hand and the UML calling an indefinite shutdown, tension continued to simmer in the district.

However, the government indicated it was optimistic about containing the protests that are scheduled to continue till Nov 13.

Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal called an emergency meeting of the cabinet Wednesday following which the council of ministers expressed hope that the protests would remain non-violent.

The new confidence came after a surprise meeting between the top Maoist leaders and representatives of the ruling parties at former UML deputy prime minister K.P. Oli's residence Tuesday night.

Information and Communications Minister Shankar Pokhrel, who is also the spokesman of the current government, told the media after the cabinet meeting that informal talks had resumed with the ex-insurgents.

The reconciliatory attitude of the Maoists was also partly due to the meeting their chief and former prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda had with the envoys of 12 western governments Tuesday, whose expression of concern and warning that the protests would tarnish Nepal's image made the former rebels call off their proposed blockade of the country's only international airport Nov 10.

However, as a precautionary measure, the security agencies, including the army, were ordered to be on high alert while hundreds of armed policemen were deployed around government offices Wednesday, when the Maoists began a picket of district administration centres.

But barring the two eastern districts, a carnival mood prevailed among the protesters, who carried musical instruments and occasionally broke out into traditional dance steps.

The Maoists are asking for an apology from President Ram Baran Yadav, who caused the collapse of their brief government this year by reinstating the army chief they had sacked.

Or, as an option, they are asking for a debate on the president's 'unconstitutional role' in parliament, a demand the government has rejected so far.

*Sudeshna Sarkar* ( © IANS / India eNews)