

Nepal king's men arrested over Terai turmoil

Two former ministers of King Gyanendra were arrested and a hunt began for other royalists as Nepal's government began a crackdown to control spiralling violence in the Terai plains.

Police swooped down on Kamal Thapa, the hawkish home minister during the royal regime's last days who advocated force against both Maoist guerrillas and unarmed civilian protesters, late Monday at his residence here.

Former deputy prime minister Badri Prasad Mandal, who held two different ministries during the king's 15-month absolute rule and was named in a fertiliser scam involving millions of rupees, was also arrested from his residence in Biratnagar in southeastern Morang district Monday night.

Both former ministers had split their respective parties to head splinter groups that supported the royal regime. Both were thrown out of their parties after the king was ousted from power by a mass revolt in April.

The arrests occurred after Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala called an emergency meeting of the seven ruling parties and the Maoists to discuss how to contain the violence that has been spreading in the southern plains since mid-January.

Some of the ruling parties as well as the Maoists have been alleging that the spate of arson, vandalism and clashes in the plains are being instigated by the king's followers to create anarchy and to sabotage the upcoming elections.

The former ministers were arrested after the meeting on charges of fomenting violence in the Terai region, an accusation denied by both.

A private daily said the police have been given a list containing the names of over 80 royalists, including former royalist ministers and top government officers during the royal regime.

Former communications minister Tanka Dhakal, who was appointed and then sacked unceremoniously by the king, former vice-chairman of the council of ministers Tulsi Giri, a junior minister and relative of the king Nikshe Shumsher Rana and former chief secretary Lok Man Karki are on the wanted list, the Himalayan Times reported Tuesday. There was no official confirmation.

With the Terai violence claiming eight lives and life in the plains across the Indian border grinding to a halt, a concerned Indian ambassador, Shiv Shankar Mukherjee, met Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula to discuss the situation. The envoy had earlier met Koirala.

The Terai unrest has been triggered by a protest movement first called by the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, a socio-political group of Madhesis, people of Indian origin living in the Terai plains.

Upendra Yadav, the Forum chief, says the protest is to wrest rights for the diaspora that comprise almost half of Nepal's population but remains excluded from all government offices, from the judiciary to the army. Almost half the diaspora also have no documents to prove they are citizens of Nepal and have no voting rights.

The protests started Jan 16 have begun snowballing, with other Madhesi groups joining in.

On Monday, a powerful Madhesi minister, Hridayesh Tripathi, quit the cabinet to show solidarity with some of the demands and his party threatened to quit the ruling alliance.

The protesters want an autonomous Madhes state and proportional representation in the upcoming constituent assembly election.

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