

Nepal elections set for June

Nepal's new government has announced that elections will be held in late June for a constituent assembly that will rewrite the country's constitution and decide the future role of the monarchy. The announcement was made on Sunday after Nepal's mainstream political parties reached an agreement with former Maoist rebels.

Amod Prasad Upadhyay, a Nepali Congress leader, said: "The eight party leaders during today's session have agreed to give the senior-most post [after the prime minister] to the Nepali Congress".

The government was formally approved by parliament later on Sunday.

Former communist rebels joined the interim government as part of the landmark peace deal that ended a decade-long insurgency, pledging to ensure development in the Himalayan nation and to hold credible elections.

Five former Maoists were appointed ministers, while a sixth was given a junior minister portfolio in the new government to be headed by Girija Prasad Koirala.

The swearing-in ceremony was broadcast live on national television.

The former insurgents were sworn in along with 20 other ministers and junior ministers by a visibly pleased Koirala, 84, whom parliament re-elected as prime minister earlier Sunday for a sixth time.

Maoist leader Prachanda said their main focus would be to conduct elections for a special assembly that will rewrite the constitution and decide whether Nepal will continue as a constitutional monarchy state.

"This day marks the beginning of a new Nepal. Our priority for now is to hold the elections, which will be free and fair," Prachanda said, whose real name is Pushpa Kamal Dahal.

"Our next goal is to provide some immediate relief to the people and then turn toward long-term development of the country."

The inclusion of the former rebels is part of a peace process that began last year when the Maoists agreed to give up their armed campaign to rid Nepal of its constitutional monarchy and join an interim government.

The landmark agreement on the formation of a joint government was finalised late Friday in a meeting involving Koirala, leaders of the seven ruling coalition parties, and Prachanda, the leader of the former rebels.