

## Ethnic protesters in Nepal withdraw border blockade, strike

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The Associated Press

**K**ATHMANDU, Nepal — The main ethnic group that's been protesting for months over Nepal's new constitution is ending its border blockade and general strike, bringing relief to the Himalayan nation severely short of fuel, medicine, and other supplies.

The United Democratic Madhesi Front said in a statement it would continue its protests, but would no longer block the border points where crucial supplies come on cargo trucks from India.

The strike shut down schools, markets, and transportation in the south, and the group's announcement came days after frustrated traders and residents forcefully removed the barriers at the main border crossing.

Ethnic Madhesis oppose the new constitution because they say its seven federal states have borders that cut through their ancestral homeland in the south. They want a larger state, more government representation, and more local autonomy. Talks with the government have continued, but no agreement has been reached.

The Constituent Assembly adopted a constitution in September after years of delay and despite protests of unfairness.

More than 50 people have been killed since August in clashes between the protesters and security forces.

In early February, vehicles passed through the Birgunj border point, about 100 miles south of Kathmandu. Hundreds of trucks rolled into Nepal bringing in supplies.



**BACK TO BUSINESS.** Local residents of Nepal and India living near the border cross a bridge at Birgunj, Nepal. Vehicles passed through the main border point between the two nations after local residents forcibly removed barriers set up by ethnic protesters who for months have demanded changes in the new constitution. (AP Photo/Jiyalal Sah)

Fuel trucks also obtained oil from the main storage at Raxaul in India.

Nepal Oil Corp., which imports and distributes fuel in Nepal, said it took days for normal supply to resume in the country.

The statement also indicated problems among the Madhesi groups. The United Democratic Madhesi Front is made up of four main Madhesi groups, and the statement blamed Sadhbhawana Party leader Rajendra Mahato for weakening the front's protests.

**NEW YEAR TRADITIONS.** Ethnic Chinese draw bamboo sticks for divination during the celebration of the Lunar New Year at a temple in Hong Kong. The celebration marked the beginning of the Year of the Monkey. (AP Photo/Kin Cheung)

### Chinese visit temples, fairs to ring in the Year of the Monkey

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese and others around Asia flocked to temples and fairs to pray for good health and fortune on the first day of the Lunar New Year.

In Beijing, hundreds of thousands of people visited traditional fairs held in parks, as well as Buddhist and Taoist temples offering singing and dance performances and open-air markets selling handicrafts. Ethnic Chinese people in other countries celebrated the holiday as well.

February 8 marked the first day of the Year of the Monkey — the ninth animal on the lunar zodiac calendar.

The weeklong holiday, known as the Spring Festival in China, is focused on family reunion and is a time when students and migrant workers return to their hometowns. It is the country's most important holiday.

Dancers dressed in lion costumes entertained the crowds in Manila's Chinatown, Indonesia's ethnic Chinese prayed in Jakarta, and the Sydney Opera House was lit red.

Travel agent Meng Su lined up to burn incense at the Tibetan Buddhist Lama Temple in central Beijing, which is regarded as a popular tradition that brings good luck to those praying.

"Chinese people revere the power of nature and believe in gods, so we hope to express our blessings and that the gods can hear us," said Meng, 39. "It's also a way for us to find some comfort."

Another Beijing resident, Yan Xiaying, 29, said her mother had a clear target as the pair visited the temple.

"I guess my mother hopes that I get married soon," Yan said, with her mother agreeing.

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