

India's ruling coalition marks five years in office with rally

AFP, New Delhi

India's coalition government, headed by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, held a rally in the capital New Delhi Saturday to celebrate five years in office.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), headed by Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party, is the first non-Congress party government to complete five years in office.

Previous coalitions have collapsed before their full term was up.

India's main opposition Congress party has ruled the country for more than four decades since its independence from British rule in 1947.

The NDA -- an alliance of about two dozen parties -- came to power in April 1998 but collapsed a year later before going on to win elections in October 1999.



Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani (L) and Delhi State Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president Madan Lal Khurana (R) offer a framed India map to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) during a BJP rally in New Delhi on Saturday. The BJP celebrated the five years of National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government on Saturday.

Bhutan asks ULFA rebels to quit camps by June

AFP, Guwahati

Bhutan has issued an ultimatum to Indian separatists to vacate their camps within its borders by the end of June or face military action, a Bhutanese official said Saturday.

"We are giving Indian militants a final chance to leave the kingdom peacefully by the end of June or else we will be forced to use our military forces to remove them from our territory," the Bhutanese foreign ministry official told AFP by telephone from the tiny kingdom's capital Thimphu.

Two groups active in India's northeastern state of Assam -- the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) -- have bases in southern Bhutan.

They are battling for independent homelands in Assam.

The Kamatapur Liberation Organization (KLO) operating in neighbouring West Bengal province also has bases there.

The new deadline for militants to vacate their camps follows a visit to Bhutan by India's National Security Adviser, Brajesh Mishra, on Thursday.

Earlier, they had been asked to wind up their camps by December 31.

The Indian envoy met Bhutan's King Jigme Singhye Wangchuk at a tourist resort near Paro, west of Thimphu.

Indian intelligence officials said Mishra expressed New Delhi's "serious concerns" at the continued presence of anti-Indian militants in Bhutan.

"We can only say the meeting between the Indian official and the Bhutanese king ended on a positive note," the Bhutanese official said.

"Some commitments were made by Bhutan to flush out the militants soon if they don't leave the kingdom on their own."

Bhutan says the ULFA has six camps, including its general headquarters and military training bases, in the thick jungles of the southern Samdrup Joinkar district.

The NDFB have seven camps, while the KLO has two bases inside the tiny Buddhist kingdom.

Indian intelligence officials say there could be more than 4,000 ULFA and NDFB rebels in Bhutan who use the kingdom as a base to carry out their hit-and-run guerrilla strikes on federal soldiers in

Assam.

Bhutan's Home Minister Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho has held six rounds of talks with ULFA's leadership since 1998 on the dismantling of militant camps but Thimphu has so far not taken any action against the separatists for fear of retaliation.

"Bhutan is a landlocked country and many of its nationals have to traverse through parts of Assam to reach some of the kingdoms districts," the Bhutanese official said.

"There is fear that once we launch a military crackdown, the rebels will attack our citizens."

More than 10,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in Assam during the past two decades.

'Asking India to talk to Pakistan is like US talking to Saddam'

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha said Saturday advice from the United States to India to resume dialogue with Pakistan was like asking Washington to talk to Saddam Hussein.

"Advice to India about resuming dialogue with Pakistan in the aftermath of the killings of Hindus in Kashmir this week was just as gratuitous and misplaced as we asking them to open a dialogue with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein," Sinha said in an interview with the BBC.

Earlier this week US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said dialogue was a critical element in the normalization of relations between India and Pakistan.

His remarks came as the US and countries around the world condemned a militant attack on Sunday in which 24 Hindus were massacred in southern Kashmir.

New Delhi has alleged Pakistani involvement in the incident, a claim refuted by Islamabad, which has called for an independent investigation.

India accuses Pakistan of sponsoring militants who have been carrying out a 14-year insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir, while Pakistan says it merely provides moral support.

Kashmir is divided into Indian

and Pakistani controlled zones and is claimed in full by both countries.

India says more than 37,500 people have been killed in the unrest since 1989.

The global war on terrorism will be unsuccessful unless the United States puts pressure on Pakistan to end "cross-border terrorism" in Kashmir, Sinha said.

He welcomed a joint statement by US Secretary of State Colin Powell and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw on Thursday which called on Pakistan to check the infiltration of Islamic rebels into Indian-Kashmir.

"Pakistan should also do its utmost to discourage any acts of violence by militants in Kashmir," it added.

"This statement is more reflective of the situation on the ground and takes into account India's long standing concerns," Sinha said.

"There are times when the international community takes into account India's concerns and puts pressure on Pakistan. For some time it has the desired effect."

"But as soon as the international attention wavers from this region, Pakistan starts again," he said.

On the war in Iraq, Sinha denied media reports that India had refused three times to give help to the US, saying "no help was asked and none was offered."

Israel denies linking Iraq war with ME peace

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel denied Saturday any linkage between the war on Iraq, in which it said it is not participating, and the conflict with the Palestinians, while also offering eventual humanitarian aid to Baghdad.

Foreign Minister Sylvan Shalom said "we do not accept the link being made between the war and the Israel-Palestinian conflict. We are not taking part in this war. When it is over and it is decided to begin (peace) talks, we are ready to do so."

Shalom was speaking to Israeli public radio from New York, where he met Friday with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and said his country was prepared to provide humanitarian assistance to Iraq.

Mumbai cops gun down 3 LeT terrorists

PTI, Mumbai

Three terrorists, suspected to have links with terrorist outfit Lashker-e-Taiba, were gunned down in a police encounter here on Saturday.

Two of them have been identified as Abul Sultan and Anwar Ali while the identity of the third one is yet to be established, police said.

The trio was killed by Crime Intelligence Unit (CIU) of Mumbai Police in an exchange of fire outside Mahananda Dairy on Eastern Express Highway at Goregaon in northwest Mumbai around 12:00 noon.

On a tip-off that the terrorists were to assemble at Goregaon to plan a terrorist attack, police laid a trap and asked them to surrender. However, they fired at the police, who retaliated, killing them.

Terrorists chop off noses of 6 Kashmiris

PTI, Jammu

In a shocking incident, terrorists chopped off the noses of six persons, including a woman and thrashed another person at a village in Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir, official sources said on Saturday.

A group of about seven to eight suspected foreign mercenaries, in combat dress, descended the Panihad village of the district and thrashed one Abdul Khaliq in the intervening night of March 27 and 28, the sources said here.

Pakistan slams US ban on trade with KRL

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan Saturday slammed as "unjustified" a two-year ban imposed by the United States on trade with the Kahuta Research Laboratory (KRL), which deals with the country's nuclear and missile programme.

A foreign ministry spokesman said the decision would have no effect on Pakistan's determination to pursue its indigenous missile programme as KRL was not dependent on foreign assistance.

In a statement he said the decision had "no material impact either on KRL, which had never depended on foreign assistance, nor on our determination to pursue our indigenous missile programme."

Sources here said the US recently imposed the restriction under the missile technology control regime (MTCR) in the wake of tit-for-tat tests conducted by

nuclear rivals India and Pakistan.

The spokesman said Pakistan had told the United States during a Islamabad-Washington dialogue on security issues in Washington last month that "missile proliferation activities were going on in one of our neighbouring countries."

"Given that fact, it was essential to adopt even-handedness, as Pakistan would never accept any partial approaches flowing from selective application of the so-called missile non proliferation norms," the spokesman said.

"The measure against KRL was unjustified," he added.

Pakistan on Wednesday test-fired a short-range missile, coinciding with a missile test by India. The two countries have launched missile development programmes leading to a series of tests of long, medium and short range projectiles after conducting nuclear tests in May 1998.

Turkish plane hijack drama ends without bloodshed

AFP, Athens

The dramatic hijacking of a Turkish airliner to Athens ended peacefully Saturday with the release of all 203 people on board and the arrest of the lone and apparently disturbed hijacker.

The suspected hijacker, a 20-year-old Turkish national, commandeered the plane shortly after it took off from Istanbul late on Friday, forcing the Airbus A-310 to divert to the Greek capital from its intended destination of Ankara.

The Turkish Airlines aircraft was carrying 194 passengers and nine crew, among them several Turkish parliamentarians, a former minister and senior officials, some of whom were instrumental in bringing a bloodless end to the incident.

The state secretary in charge of transportation, Manolis Stratakis,

said hijacker Ozgur Gencaslas, who demanded the plane be flown to Berlin, seemed "to have psychological problems." Running low on fuel, the plane landed in Athens.

Stratakis told a press conference at Eleftherios Venizelos airport that Gencaslas remained on board with the two pilots once he let everyone else go. Special forces then arrested him when a translator arrived to help in negotiating the terms of his surrender with Greek police.

In Ankara, Turkish officials said there were no apparent connections to terrorism in the hijacking, which lasted nearly four hours.

The hijacker decided to release the passengers after speaking on the telephone with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Transportation Minister Binali Yildirim told reporters.

No good news in hunt for deadly virus in Asia

AFP, Hong Kong

Scant news of further cases of a killer pneumonia virus was being viewed cautiously in Asia Saturday as China, the new focus of a search for its origins, remained doggedly silent on the incidence of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) within its borders.

A day after Chinese health authorities vowed to give "full and frank" reports on new and suspected cases of the mystery respiratory disease, official media appeared to have maintained its virtual blackout on news of the illness.

Reports from Singapore and Hong Kong, however, were more encouraging, with no new cases announced as major clean ups and screening and quarantine

programmes to halt SARS' spread got underway.

In Beijing, World Health Authority experts were still awaiting proof of China's promise given Friday to more openly report SARS cases. Only the English-language China Daily newspaper and Xinhua news agency, both aimed at foreign readers, made any mention of the disease in their Saturday reports.

The Chinese government often treats disease epidemics as state secrets and a national security concern and have been extremely cautious about reporting the SARS epidemic to the public.

Although the WHO had been expecting a rise in the numbers of reported cases with the Chinese announcement, they had seen the move as a breakthrough following continued insistence from China

that the disease was "effectively controlled".

On Friday the WHO team announced that the focus of its hunt for the origin of the disease, which has killed more than 50 and infected about 1,400 worldwide, was now in the southern Guangdong province.

It followed a week-long visit by a team of WHO experts who determined that the SARS virus had first appeared in Guangdong's Foshan city on November 16, more than a month before the previously suspected original outbreak was discovered in Hong Kong.

So far 806 SARS cases have been detected in China and 34 people have died, while 11 people died and 425 were infected in Hong Kong, which borders Guangdong.



A unidentified family, passengers on board Turkish Airlines flight TK160, stand outside Ankara's Esenboga Airport Terminal C, on Saturday after their arrival from Athens. Passengers aboard a Turkish Airlines Airbus 310, which was hijacked to Athens overnight, landed in the Turkish capital and the passengers re-united with their families after the incident in Athens ended peacefully.

N Korea defiant over inspections

BBC ONLINE, AFP, Seoul

North Korea has vowed to strengthen its military defences, saying it would fend off what it called the "miserable fate" that had befallen Iraq.

A commentary in the state-run

newspaper of the ruling Korean Workers' Party, Rodong Sinmun, said that what was happening in Iraq was a result of concession and compromise.

It pledged to resist international demands to dismantle its nuclear programme to end the current stand-off over its nuclear ambitions.

North Korea - named by Washington along with Iraq and Iran as part of an axis of evil - has been closely watching developments in the war with Iraq.

It has alleged that its own country could be the next military target of the United States - pointing to the ongoing annual joint military exercises between South Korean and US troops as proof that preparations are under way for a pre-emptive attack.

Those allegations have been firmly rejected by officials in Seoul - but that has done little to convince the North.

Rodong Sinmun's commentary vowed to strengthen the country's military defences and its army-first policy.

Earlier this week, North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament approved an increase in the budget for military spending.

Despite its belligerent rhetoric, Pyongyang has continued to call for direct talks with Washington to resolve the five-month crisis over its nuclear programme.

The US has insisted any talks must be multilateral.