Vajpayee asks Assam CM to

take steps to

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on

Thursday spoke to Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, RJD president

Laloo Prasad Yadav and Railway

Minister Nitish Kumar asking them to

take immediate steps to check violence

Expressing concern over violence

in Assam in the wake of assault on its

passengers in trains in Bihar, Vajpayee

said they must ensure that all out

efforts were made to maintain peace

Laloo Prasad Yadav of full co-

operation and promised to send more

Meanwhile, Vajpayee has assured

stop ethnic

violence

in Assam and Bihar.

THE WORLD

'India's Cong favourites in provincial polls'

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party will be the underdog when it takes on the opposition Congress in provincial elections seen as a barometer for national polls, bookies said

Bookmakers in Delhi's old city, who control much of India's illicit but extremely popular multi-billion-dollar cricket and election betting practice, said the odds favour Congress in four of five states going to the polls.

"The Congress party are the red hot favourites in Delhi and Rajasthan. The odds favour them in Chattisgarh and Mizoram as well. The BJP is only likely to wrest power from the Congress in Madhya Pradesh state," said a New Delhi-based bookmaker

The Congress and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will contest provincial polls on December 1 in New Delhi and the states of Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Elections to be fought on good governance plank: Advani

Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani said yesterday the central issue in forthcoming provincial polls in four major states would be good

"The central point of the campaign for these elections is good governance, Advani said at a news conference in Bhopal, capital of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, one of those going to the polls next month.

"The main issues in these elections are roads, the power situation, jobs and development," he said.

Elections are being held in the four politically important Hindi-heartland states of Madhya Pradesh, Delhi Rajasthan and Chattisgarh on The main opposition Congress party

currently governs all four states but Advani's ruling Hindu-nationalist party BJP is making a strong bid to oust them.

Bali bomber to appeal again as court upholds his death sentence

Convicted Bali bombing mastermind Imam Samudra will appeal to Indonesia's Supreme Court against his death sentence after an earlier appeal was rejected, one of his lawyers said Thursday.

"Samudra said he must fight the decision because it was not based on $Is lamic \ law, "Qadhar \ Faisal \ told \ AFP.$

"After all legal avenues have been

exhausted, he will accept the death Faisal said Samudra would appeal to

the Supreme Court when he had been officially notified that the Bali high court has rejected his original appeal. Imam Samudra is the second key

bomber on death row to have his appeal rejected by the Bali high court. The other man, Amrozi, is also appealing to the Supreme Court. Investigators believe Samudra is a

leading member of the al-Oaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah terror network which staged the attack on two crowded Bali nightclubs to avenge Western oppression of Muslims worldwide.

Lankan PM offers olive branch to president

Legislative row looms

Sri Lanka's government yesterday offered an olive branch to the president in hopes of ending a power struggle that has stalled peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels and hurt the economy, officials

Government spokesman G.L. Peiris said Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was prepared to forget his differences with President Chandrika Kumaratunga so the pair could mend the economy and put the peace process back on track.

"Vituperative politics should be a part of history," Peiris told reporters. "There should be a role for her excellency and her party in the decisionmaking process. There is a clamour for it in the country.

"The country has gone through a period of political convulsions. Now is the time to restore calm, stability and

The country has been gripped by a political crisis since November 4 when Kumaratunga sacked three key ministers and closed parliament for two weeks, effectively blocking any moves against her by the legislature.

In addition to the defence portfolio, Kumaratunga also seized control of the ministries of interior and information.

There was no immediate reaction from the president to Thursday's offer, but since the crisis began Kumaratunga had twice called for a government of national reconciliation to address the main issues facing the country, including its shaky truce with the Liberation Γigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The crisis prompted Norway to suspend its role as peace broker between the government and the rebels because of confusion over who was in charge in Colombo.

The government had earlier said it

should exclusively handle the peace bid with Tiger rebels, although Wickremesinghe backed down from leading the initiative after Kumaratunga took over the defence portfolio.

Asked why there had been a shift on the part of the government, which earlier refused to involve the opposition in the peace bid with the Tigers, Peiris said: "A change of heart is natural."

"The objective at that time was different. We were talking about the establishment of a ceasefire.

"That is now in place and the all the benefits we have today are derived from that ceasefire agreement signed between the prime minister and the He said as the government and the

Tigers discussed core political issues, there would be a role for the opposition whose support was essential to rewrite the constitution to accommodate the demands of the rebels

Peace talks with the Tigers have been suspended since April, but the guerrillas have said they are ready to resume negotiations on the basis of a peace plan unveiled by them on October 31 meant to end three decades of ethnic bloodshed that has killed 60,000 people.

Despite the government's conciliatory moves, a landmark ruling by the Sri Lankan parliament has deepened rifts among political parties while the legislature could be headed for a direct collision with Kumaratunga, politicians and officials said Thursday. Speaker Joseph Michael Perera said

Wednesday the legislature could disregard Kumaratunga if she ordered another suspension that paralysed the work of Wickreme-singhe's govern Parliament met in uproa

Wednesday for the first time since it was suspended by Kumaratunga.



reporting another six people killed by mobs and separatist rebels overnight,

a sense of panic sparked off among the members of the Hindi-speaking

6 killed in Assam

community, many of whom hail from the eastern state of Bihar.

Indian boy Lalua, 9, comforts his injured mother Phulmati at the Medical College Hospital in Guwahati, the capital of the Assam state yesterday following attacks against the state's Hindi speaking minority. With police

central forces to Assam to effectively check the ongoing violence against "PM has assured me of full cooperation by taking steps to restore peace

> by containing incidents of assault on Biharis in Assam." Yaday said after telephonic talks with Vajpayee. Laloo said he had requested the

Prime Minister to send additional central forces to Assam to re-establish peace, harmony and amity in the state.

'US puts pressure on India to hold talks with Pakistan'

ANI. Islamahad

Senior Bush Administration officials have assured Pakistan Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar that sufficient pressure is being put on India to hold talks with Pakistan.

Sources told the Dawn newspaper that US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Deputy National Security Advisor Steve Hadley had told Khokhar during their meetings with him on November 14 in Washington that New Delhi was being asked to hold talks with Islamabad to sort out contentious issues, including Kashmir

Both of them assured Khokhar that they were expecting a "positive reply" from India to engage itself in talks with Pakistan early next year.

"The signals we are receiving from India are that every thing is being made

contingent upon these negotiations (December 1 and 2 air flight resumption talks), and this Indian approach to peace talks has been conveved to our American friends," one source was

He pointed out that over flights were unilaterally suspended by India, and Pakistan at present only wanted certain assurances and guarantees that it would not happen again.

quoted as saying.

"But the Indians seem reluctant to offer any assurance or guarantee and would make it an excuse to scuttle the air talks and thereby delaying substantive peace talks with Pakistan," he

The sources said the US government had been told that India's 12 Confidence Building Measures (CBM) were merely a 'tactical move" and that unless there

was a real pressure from Washington New Delhi would not come to the negotiating table

"The senior US officials say that there should be a lowering of rhetoric and that dialogue between the two nuclear rivals must begin without further delay," another source said. The Pakistan Government has also

expressed its concern over the way Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has bracketed Pakistan with the al-Qaeda in his election speeches.

like the New York Times have reported alleged acts of repression on the Indian side of Kashmir, and suggested that Kashmiris are crossing into Pakistan to join the militant movement there. These propagandist allegations are

ULFA denies involvement in violence in Assam

PTI. Guwahati

The banned ULFA has denied involvement in the ongoing violence against Biharis in Assam, but warned politicians not to protect the interests of the Hindi-speaking people in the

The situation would become serious and politicians should prepare themselves to face the conseguences if they pleaded for the cause of Hindi-speaking people or protected them, ULFA's self-styled commander-in-chief Paresh Baruah told a local language daily here.

Denying that the underground group was involved in the ongoing out of Assam," Madhay Prasad, a 45violence, Baruah, however, warned year-old trader, told AFP in the state that the situation would be "much more dangerous than now" if his outfit did get involved.

capital Guwahati. "There are no tickets available in any

Hundreds of Hindi-speakers in India's

northeastern state of Assam have

started fleeing ethnic violence which

has claimed 29 lives in the past week.

capacity, a railways spokesman said.

'Seats are already full in all the trains,'

Trains leaving Assam are at full

With police reporting another six

people killed by mobs and separatist

rebels overnight, a sense of panic began

to spread through members of the

Hindi-speaking community, many of

whom hail from the eastern state of

waiting for the first possible train to get

"Life is not secure here and so we are

they and officials said yesterday.

of the trains that would take us to Bihar,

Hundreds flee as another

Prasad and his family of four were among hundreds of Biharis either waiting to leave or who had already fled the state by bus or train.

Officials appealed for calm, while the federal government said it could not allow the situation to continue "We urge the Hindi-speaking people

not to panic and leave the state. We are taking all possible security measures to ensure their safety," Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi told AFP. The violence has been led mainly by

militants of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), which is fighting for an independent home In the latest bloodshed, police said

the ULFA killed three Hindi-speaking people late Wednesday in Nalbari town in western Assam, 70 kilometres (44 miles) from the state capital Guwahati.

In another incident in eastern Assam's Tinsukia district, three members of a Bihari family, including a twovear-old child, were hacked to death by an armed mob, they said.

The violence was triggered when Assamese youths prevented Bihari candidates from taking recruitment tests for jobs at the state-run railways on

Groups of Bihari youth retaliated three days later by attacking trains bound for Assam, injuring 50 people.

The ULFA issued a statement Saturday warning all Hindi-speaking people to leave the state immediately or

That night, rebels shot dead a Hindi-

speaking businessman in western Assam -- the first of the killings

A Mizo baby holding her mother's identity card is carried in a voting queue for state assembly elections in Aizwal vesterday. Voting is being held in 208 polling centres in the north-eastern state where some 600,000 people were set to cast their votes. Voter's identity cards and electronic voting machines have been used for the first time in Mizoram.

Mizoram votes to elect new assembly

Polling for assembly elections in India's tiny northeastern state of Mizoram began yesterday following overnight incidents in which three candidates were kidnapped and then freed by police, an official said.

The election official said polling for the 40-member state assembly began at 7:00 am (0130 GMT) with voters in large numbers turning out early to cast their "We expect the voter turnout to be

quite heavy as the mood among the people is very enthusiastic," the official told AFP by telephone from the state capital Aizawl. Police said three candidates con-

testing the polls in the Suangpuilawn constituency in east Mizoram, 70 kilometers (44 miles) from Aizawl, were kidnapped by unidentified gunmen late Wednesday night.

"The three candidates were rescued Thursday morning. Probably political rivalry led to the abductions," a police official said.

Kashmir stand-off enters third day: 3 killed

AFP, Srinagar

An Islamic militant holed up near Indian Kashmir's army headquarters, a soldier and a civilian were killed yesterday in fighting on the third day of a stand-off between rebels and troops, officials

A second militant holed up in a building in Srinagar was providing 'some resistance," an army spokesman As morning prayers ended in nearby

mosques, renewed gunfire from the militants' hideout killed an army major and injured two soldiers, the spokesman said. One of the two militants was killed when the army fired back, he said. "As the troops and police closed in

after killing one of the militants, the second militant opened a barrage of fire on the advancing troops," he said. Indian troops retaliated by firing rockets at the building.

The two militants attacked a camp of the Central Reserve Police Force on Tuesday evening, killing a policeman

and injuring three others. They then fled and hid in a nearby building, which police Wednesday blasted with rockets and mortars.

In the ensuing firefights, another four members of the security forces and a civilian were wounded, police said. Reports suggested the militants had got into a neighbouring building during the Police on Thursday recovered a body

of a civilian from the debris of one of the buildings destroyed in the fighting. He was an employee of state-owned telephone department. Seven people had escaped from the

building, which housed a local telephone exchange, on Wednesday. Residents reported heavy firing and

ground-shaking blasts from early "I have never heard such deafening

blasts," resident Abdul Aziz told AFP. His family have been unable to leave their house since the army sealed off the

US refuses to comment on Taliban, ISI links

A senior US official on Wednesday refused to publicly say whether Pakistan had purged pro-Taliban elements out of its intelligence ser-

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI) is seen in the United States as the chief sponsor of the Taliban regime that emerged as a militia to rule Afghanistan until being deposed by a US-led force in late

Anxiety remains in policymaking circles here that the ISI is still backing what is left of the Taliban and helping the fundamentalist militia shelter in largely lawless regions of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Concern surfaced in a meeting of the House of Representatives International Relations Committee when California Congressman Brad Sherman asked: "Have the supporters of that ideology in that intelligence

service been removed or converted?"

5 slain as Manila fights back against kidnappers

AFP, Manila

Four suspected kidnappers and a policeman were killed and five other people were arrested yesterday as the Philippines government fought back against a rising wave of abductions, officials said.

President Gloria Arroyo said police tailed the mastermind of the abduction and slaying earlier this week of Coca-Cola Export Corp. finance manager Betty Sy to a hideout near the town of Dinalupihan north of Manila.

The gang lobbed a grenade at police raiders, killing an officer and wounding four other lawmen, said local military commander Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Tutaan.

An hour-long firefight followed, killing four gang members including their leader Roberto Yap. Two other suspects were later arrested, including a wounded woman, Tutaan said in a written report.

US willing to grant India | Pakistan steps up 'widest' access to dual-use technology

The United States is willing to grant India the "widest possible access" to dual-use technology in order to expand high technology commerce, US Commerce Under Secretary Kenneth Juster said yesterday.

Juster, in Delhi for the second meet-

ing of the India-US High Technology Cooperation Group, said both countries had agreed to work together to prevent the proliferation of sensitive technolo-"India wants to see strong progress in the area of expanding trade with the US in

strategic goods and technologies, as well

as in the civil space and civilian (nuclear

energy) sphere," Juster told a press confer-

"The US remains committed to enhancing our cooperation in each of these important areas in keeping with our laws and national security concerns We continue to grant India the widest possible access to dual-use technolo

The US recently eased its rules on the export to India of dual-use technology or hi-tech products that could also have military applications

Washington slapped military sanctions on India and Pakistan when the rivals conducted nuclear tests in 1998. The sanctions were lifted after both countries promised support for the USled "war on terrorism" launched following the September 11, 2001 attacks.

US defence firms including Lockheed Martin are hoping to sell equipment to India, whose military had long avoided US supplies. India still relies on its Cold War ally Russia for more than 70 percent of its military equipment. Since the lifting of sanctions only a

small percentage of our trade with India in dual-use goods and technologies are subject to controls," said Juster.

crackdown on militants

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan intensified its latest crackdown against Islamic radicals yesterday, outlawing another three groups including a gang linked to the murder of US reporter Daniel Pearl.

'We have outlawed three more groups in addition to three others which were banned last week," a senior interior ministry official told Outlawed Thursday under

Pakistan's 1997 Anti Terrorism Act were: Jamaat-ul Furqan, whose followers were linked to Pearl's murder and three other deadly terror attacks last year; Jamaat-ul Ansar and Hizbul Tehreer. "All these groups were found to be

targets radical Islamic groups which

involved in activities prejudicial to the interest of the state," the official, who could not be named, added. Jamaat-ul Furqan, meaning

Organisation of the Faithful, is a breakaway splinter group of the outlawed Jaish-e-Mohammad, one of the fiercest anti-India guerrilla groups fighting in Kashmir. Jaish's leader Masood Azhar had

formed a separate new organisation, Khudamul Islam, which was banned last Saturday. The current anti-extremist drive

were banned in January 2002 in a high-profile crackdown by President Pervez Musharraf, but re-emerged

Indo-US air exercise next year PTI, Bangalore

The Indian and US Air Force would hold

joint exercises at Gwalior during February or March 2004, Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal S Krishnaswamy said yesterday. "We are discussing the modalities and planning it for February or March,

Krishnaswamy told reporters here. He said various types of IAF aircraft would participate in the joint exercise in which the USAF plans to bring among other aircraft its F-15 and F-16 fighters.

understand each other...we get an exposure.. and, they get an exposure, professionally it is good," Krishnaswamy said about the first joint Indo-US air exercise being held after 40 years. On the border issue, he said the IAI and the Army were patrolling the borders

of minimal interference from other side' The IAF's thrust was on indigenisation of its machinery, Krishnaswamy said, adding indigenous systems and components were being introduced in the Sukhoi-30MKI aircraft under license production by HAL in India

adding, "we are interested in making sure



Sri Mata Amritanandamayi Devi (C, foreground) of India, a Hindu spiritual leader known as "the hugging saint", hugs one of her followers during a free program Wednesday in Dearborn, Michigan. Mata Amritanandamayi, whose long name translates to, "Mother of Immortal Bliss" claims to have embraced more than an estimated 20 million people around the world in the