

Vajpayee says 'no' to early Lok Sabha polls

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Atal Behari Vajpayee indicated today that he was in no hurry to advance the Lok Sabha polls. He directed all his MPs to utilise "about a year left for the polls in 2004 to establish live contact with voters". This had helped in the past, the Prime Minister stressed.

The Prime Minister asked the MPs to be "alert and cautious" about "malicious designs" of the Congress to implicate and malign them at the slightest opportunity. BJP leaders said his remarks were aimed at ending speculation that Lok Sabha polls could be advanced if the Assembly polls verdict was favourable. His remarks also meant there would be two more Parliament sessions, they said.

There is a difference of opinion in the BJP on the wisdom of going in for early general elections. A section in the party feels Vajpayee should complete his term and go down in history as the first non-Congress Prime Minister to complete a full five-year term.



Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Venkaiah Naidu (2nd from L) offers sweets to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (2nd from R) as Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani (R) and Finance Minister Jaswant Singh (L) looks on at Vajpayee's residence in New Delhi yesterday. India's ruling Hindu nationalists appeared set to wrest control from the opposition Congress in at least two of four states that went to polls, according to trends mid-way into the ballot count.

Israel to scale down raids if militants halt attacks

AP, Jerusalem

Israel will scale back its military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip if the Palestinians pledge to halt attacks on Israel, a senior defense official said yesterday as Palestinian militant groups gathered in Egypt for talks.

Deputy Defence Minister Zeev Boim's comments, which came a day after Israel said it had thwarted a suicide bomb attack on a school, were the clearest statement yet that Israel would respond favorably to a ceasefire offer.

Negotiations between various Palestinian factions in Cairo were being mediated by Egypt and were aimed at achieving some sort of truce in exchange for a halt by Israel of targeted killings of militant leaders and raids on Palestinian population centers.

"If the Palestinians agree to a

ceasefire in Cairo, it's certainly not out of the question that Israel will agree to restrain its military activity," Boim told Israel Radio.

In other developments, Israel's Housing Ministry said it had authorised new housing construction in the West Bank settlement of Ariel. Palestinians condemned the announcement and said it endangered the chances of success in Cairo.

Israel announced the arrests of the alleged suicide bombers late Wednesday, hours after declaring a terror alert in parts of northern Israel.

The restrictions were lifted after Israeli troops raided a mosque in the West Bank village of Bardala, arresting two men, said Tadjji Sawafa, a local official.

Israeli media reported that one was wearing an explosives belt of the type used in suicide bombing

attacks. Bardala is on the line between Israel and the West Bank, nine miles south of the Israeli town of Beit Shean.

Dore Gold, an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, said the attackers planned to carry out a suicide bombing in a school in the Israeli town of Yokneam.

He said it "demonstrates the necessity of Israel's ongoing security measures including the completion of its security fence." A barrier Israel is building that has drawn criticism because its route cuts deep into the West Bank to encircle Israeli settlements.

The army also announced Thursday that it had confiscated an envelope full of explosives in a mail truck in the Gaza Strip bound for Israel. No further details were released.

Meanwhile, an advertisement

published in an Israeli newspaper invited contractors to bid for the construction of 13 homes in Ariel, the second-largest West Bank settlement, near the Palestinian city of Nablus.

Palestinian peace negotiator Saeb Erekat said the expansion of Ariel threatened the Cairo ceasefire efforts, which were beginning Thursday.

"We're about to engage in a serious Palestinian-Israeli dialogue," Erekat said.

"I want to call upon the Israeli government to stop thinking unilateral, and to refrain from more settlements, walls and incursions, and to think bilateral," he added.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia hopes to present the truce offer to Israel and resume stalled talks on the US-backed "road map" peace plan.

Koizumi plans surprise New Year's visit to Iraq

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's staff are secretly planning for him to pay a surprise visit to Iraq around New Year's Eve to boost the morale of Japanese troops, a weekly magazine reported yesterday.

The move is designed to turn around his slumping popularity and to counter skepticism about Japan's impending troop dispatch, the Shukan Shincho reported.

"The premier, who excels at political performance, is aiming to perform this feat and get himself out of a pinch," the magazine said, citing a top foreign ministry official.

After former foreign minister Makiko Tanaka charged "If he wants (Japan) to go to Iraq so much... he should go himself", Koizumi appeared to be taking the advice to heart, the magazine said.

India steps up fencing along Kashmir border

AFP, Baras Post

The Indian army said yesterday it was taking advantage of a truce with Pakistan to step up fencing of the divided border in Kashmir to prevent Islamic rebels from crossing.

"We have intensified fencing since the ceasefire. We are now able to work in a more vigorous manner," Brigadier Rajinder Singh told reporters at the snow-patched Baras Post overlooking the Pakistani zone of Kashmir, 170km northwest of Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

"The fencing is going to be very, very effective. Until now the terrorists have not been able to breach it anywhere," said Singh, who is in charge of army opera-

tions in northern Kashmir.

The nine-foot (2.7-meter) barbed-wire fence is stretched out along iron pillars next to anti-personnel mines set to detonate if anyone manages to sneak over.

Singh said Indian forces had fenced 190km of the 460-km Line of Control, the de facto border with Pakistan in the disputed province, and that fencing would be complete by mid-2004.

"At some stretches it can't be laid now because of snowfall and other conditions. We will lay fencing there afterwards," Singh said.

He said that once the fence is complete, the infiltration of rebels "would significantly come down."

India and Pakistan have been observing a historic ceasefire over the LoC and their mutually recog-

nized border in Kashmir since November 26, halting nearly daily artillery skirmishes.

Singh said there have been no violations of the truce.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and training separatist guerrillas, many of them non-Kashmiri, and providing them with artillery covert to cross the frontier.

Pakistan denies the charge, saying it provides only moral and political support to an "indigenous" uprising inside India's sole Muslim-majority state.

The border ceasefire does not apply to the Islamic insurgency inside Indian Kashmir, which has claimed more than 40,000 lives, according to Indian official figures. Separatists and Pakistan put the death toll between 80,000 and 100,000.

Thailand to host forum on Myanmar's 'road map'

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand will host a 10-nation meeting to discuss Myanmar's proposed "road map" towards democratic reform in Bangkok this month, officials and reports said yesterday.

The Nation newspaper said Austria, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore had been invited to send representatives to the talks due to be held on December 15.

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra confirmed Thailand was expecting up to 10 countries to attend the meeting which will be a forum for Myanmar to explain the road map which includes "free and fair" elections and a new constitution.

US forces kill 1, capture 63 during raids in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

US paratroopers killed one "enemy" and captured 63 in a series of patrols over the last 24 hours west of the Iraqi capital, the coalition said in a statement yesterday.

"The 82nd Airborne Division and subordinate units have conducted 161 patrols, including 10 joint patrols with the Iraqi Border Guard and Iraqi Police," said the statement datelined from Ramadi, a hotbed of loyalists to ousted president Saddam Hussein. "During these operations, 63 enemy personnel were captured and one killed while suffering no US casualties," it said.

In one raid "Paratroopers conducted a cordon and search in Nassir Wa Al Salaam to capture six members of a Wahabist cell," it said, referring to Islamic

fundamentalists.

"Thirteen enemy personnel were captured and taken into custody for questioning. Also, several small arms weapons, various munitions, military uniforms, U.S. and Iraqi cash, counterfeit money, and improvised explosive device (IED)-making materials were confiscated during the mission."

The 1st Brigade of the 1st Infantry Division fired three high-explosive shells at a house after it came under attack with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and small arms fire northwest of Khalidiyah, near Ramadi, about 100km from Baghdad.

"The unit returned fire ... and then engaged the house with three 120mm High Explosive Anti-Tank (HEAT) rounds. The unit killed one enemy and captured eight others."

Violence disrupts inauguration of new govt in Mizoram

AFP, Guwahati

Violence broke out in India's northeastern state of Mizoram yesterday, forcing the authorities to postpone the swearing-in ceremony of the newly-elected state government, police said.

A police spokesman said the car of the leader of the Mizo National Front (MNF) and chief minister designate, Zoramthanga, who uses one name, was stoned by protesters and the windscreen was smashed.

"The chief minister designate was not injured although some policemen and protesters were hurt in the clashes," the spokesman told AFP by telephone from Mizoram's capital Aizawl.

"The legislators ... were asked not to go ahead with plans for the scheduled oath-taking function in view of the charged situation," he added.

Koizumi okays dispatch of 1,100 troops to Iraq

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has approved the dispatch of around 1,100 troops to Iraq after hearing a report from his defence chief, a report said yesterday.

The prime minister concluded that a certain level of safety could be ensured around Samawa in southern Iraq, where Japanese ground troops are to be sent, the top-selling Yomiuri Shimbun said, quoting sources close to the government.

An advance unit of Air Self-Defence Forces troops will be sent before the end of the year, followed by transport units early next year, it said.

The Mainichi Shimbun said the government is preparing to send the advance air team to Kuwait and

other countries surrounding Iraq before year-end, with the main unit to start flights into Iraq in January.

The government may still dispatch ground troops before the end of the year, but a final decision has not been taken, the Yomiuri said.

The basic plan on the dispatch of troops to assist with humanitarian needs and logistic support to US and British troops is expected to be approved by the cabinet on Monday at the earliest, the paper said.

Koizumi met with Japan Defence Agency Director-General Shigeru Ishiba and Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi Wednesday afternoon to hear the agency's assessment of a report by an survey team that returned from Iraq last week.

Saudi cops nab car bombing suspect

AP, Riyadh

Saudi police manned sandbagged checkpoints across the capital and guarded western compounds after a suspect in a recent suicide car bombing was arrested amid new warnings of possible attacks on foreigners here.

Armored personnel carriers were parked outside of housing complexes where foreigners live and soldiers armed with semiautomatic rifles stood behind sandbags at checkpoints set up at key intersections throughout the capital.

Tensions are high after attacks on foreign housing compounds in May, the November bombing, and renewed American and British warnings this week of possible new attacks on housing compounds for foreigners.

'UK foiled plot against London-US flight'

AFP, New York

A US television network reported Wednesday that British police foiled a plot to blow up a jet on a Britain-US flight with the arrest last week of a suspected Muslim radical.

Sajid Badat, a 24-year-old British Muslim, was charged in London on Wednesday with conspiring to cause an explosion with "shoe bomber" Richard Reid, who is in jail in the United States for trying to blow up a Paris-Miami flight in 2001.

CBS television quoted unnamed sources as saying that British police had "foiled a plot to blow up an airliner en route from London's Heathrow Airport to the US."

The report gave other details of the plot.

Badat, one of 23 suspects arrested during raids in England over the past week, was charged under British anti-terrorism laws with conspiracy to cause an explosion in Britain "or elsewhere", police said.

British police did not reveal details of the planned explosion or whether it was related to Reid's attempt to blow up a US plane. Badat was also charged with two counts of possessing explosive materials. He is to appear in court on Thursday.

A US court sentenced Reid to life jail last year for an attempt on December 22, 2001 to blow up a Paris-Miami flight using plastic explosives hidden in his shoes.



Supporters of militant Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, shout Allah-hu Akbar (God is Great) with one holding (L) a poster reading "Christian priest is freed but Muslim cleric is jailed" during a protest in Jakarta yesterday. Some 100 supporters of militant Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir held a rally yesterday to protest an appeal court ruling which sentenced him to three years in jail.

Flood-hit areas declared disaster zone in France

AFP, Marseille

Parts of southern France were under disaster regulations yesterday, and a quarter of a million people were told not to drink tap water after floods that took at least five lives and forced widespread evacuations of homes and businesses.

Although there were some signs of water levels abating, the country's second-biggest city, Marseille, was declared a disaster zone on Wednesday, and winds gusting at up to 150km per hour continued to lash the region.

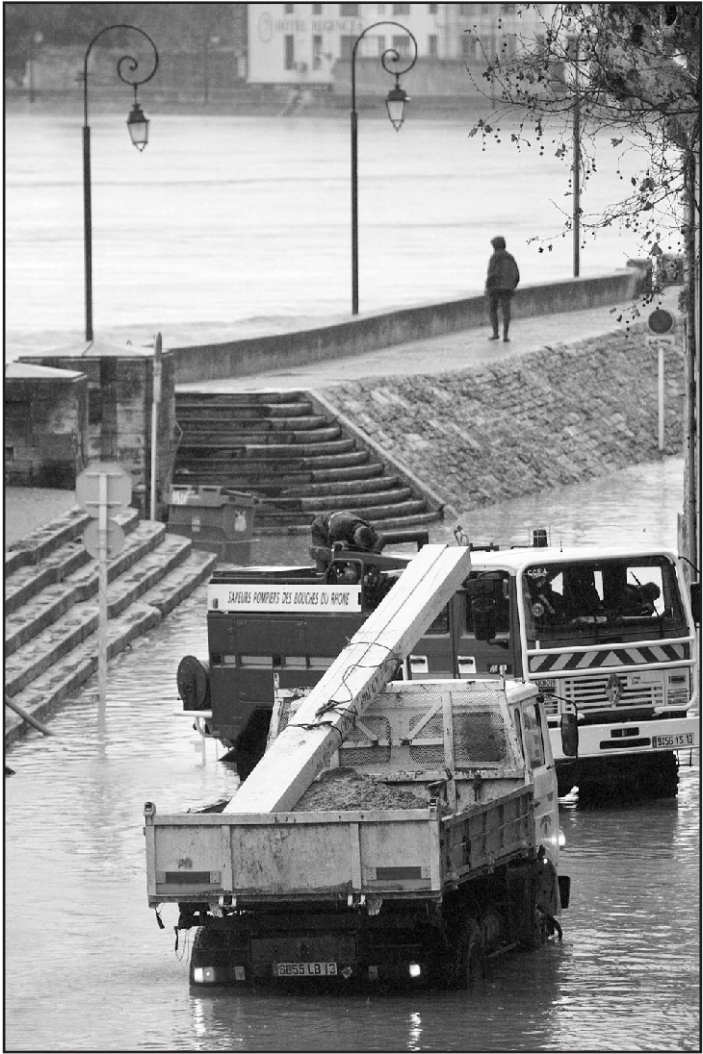
However fears that major rivers, and notably the Rhone, could burst their banks and cause even more widespread flooding receded, as weather officials said levels were beginning to drop.

Around a quarter of a million people in the Gard region, around the city of Nimes, were told not to drink tap water because the flooding may have made it too contaminated to drink.

Local authorities issued new warnings for residents to stay at home, and school was cancelled in most areas.

Firefighters in the Hérault region meanwhile reported rescuing two people from a tree which they climbed to escape floodwaters after venturing out near the town of Valras.

"As the firefighters are charming folks, they even rescued a horse," the local government office added.



A truck carrying earth and beams to reinforce the Rhone banks due to intensive rains Wednesday in Arles, south of France. France's second biggest city Marseille and its surrounding areas were declared a disaster zone as lashing rain caused floods that have claimed at least five lives and forced mass evacuations.

S Korea urges US to ease stance on North Korea

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's key envoy on North Korea urged the United States yesterday to take a softer stance toward the communist country amid signs that a new round of nuclear crisis talks could be delayed.

"North Korea should stop pressing its demands too hard. The United States is also required to ease its stance for the momentum of dialogue," Unification Minister Jeong Se-Hyun said.

His comment comes as top diplomats from South Korea, Japan and the United States gather in Washington to fine-tune preparations for a second round of six-nation talks originally expected to take place this month.

US officials warned Tuesday that North Korea may be stalling over key conditions for resolving the nuclear crisis and talks could be pushed back until early next year.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, however, played down the idea that the talks had hit a roadblock.

There is "no deadlock in the talks. The talks will take place," Powell said Wednesday during a visit to Morocco.

"They haven't been postponed because they haven't been scheduled to begin with."

Jeong also said "progress can be made" at talks this week between Mitoji Yabunaka, director general

of the Japanese Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceania Affairs Bureau, South Korea's Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Soo-Hyuck and James Kelly, US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

"China and South Korea are trying hard to mediate between the United States and North Korea. So you don't have to think that the talks will not take place this month."

"Things could improve," the minister said, referring to Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to Washington next week for talks with US President George W. Bush.

A senior State Department official said Washington was "ready to go" but conceded there were "competing ideas" about how the talks should work.

According to news reports in Seoul and Tokyo, the United States rejected a Chinese-backed draft of a proposed joint statement for the new round of talks.

The draft statement envisaged a security guarantee for Pyongyang in return for its declaration that the Stalinist country would scrap its nuclear program and return to an international nuclear safeguard accord, Yonhap news agency here said.

The United States says no such guarantee would be forthcoming until North Korea verifiably dismantles its nuclear program, Japan's Kyodo news agency said.

Rumsfeld talks disarmament issue with Afghan warlords

REUTERS, Mazar-i-Sharif

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld began a one-day visit to Afghanistan yesterday with the focus on issues ranging from war on the Taliban to efforts to rein in provincial warlords and narcotics traffic.

Rumsfeld arrived in the northern town of Mazar-i-Sharif where he met rival pro-government warlords, including ethnic Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum, who has been accused of dragging his feet on efforts to disarm factional militia.

Such militia are seen as the main obstacle to extending central government rule into the unruly provinces and US officials said Rumsfeld wanted to show support for President Hamid Karzai's efforts to stabilise the region.

"The signal we are trying to send is that this is an important effort that Karzai's trying to do to extend the reach of the central government into the provinces, and particularly into the north," a senior US official with Rumsfeld said.

The defence ministry said Wednesday Dostum had given up just three tanks in a central government disarmament drive while his main rival, Ustad Atta Mohammad, with whom his forces have clashed frequently since helping the United States overthrow the Taliban in 2001,

had handed over more than 50.

Rumsfeld also met Atta in Mazar and later in Kabul was to meet Karzai and commanders of the 11,500-strong US-led force pursuing Taliban, al-Qaeda and allied Islamic militants.

Afghan officials said talks with Karzai would focus on the battle against militants, efforts to rein in provincial warlords, and ways to stem Afghanistan's massive narcotics output.

On a previous visit in May, Rumsfeld said Washington had moved from major combat operations in Afghanistan to stabilization and reconstruction, a statement that has come back to haunt him.

The months that followed have seen a surge in guerrilla activity and the bloodiest period since US-led forces overthrew the Taliban in late 2001.

More than 400 people have been killed since August, including Afghan and foreign aid workers, US and Afghan soldiers, officials and police, and many guerrillas. The violence has severely hampered aid work.

Officials said Thursday suspected Taliban fighters in the southern town of Spin Boldak fired rockets at parked fuel tankers used to supply US forces, destroying one empty tanker.

Wednesday, two US soldiers were wounded, one seriously, when a renegade Afghan police-

man threw a grenade at a US military vehicle in the southern city of Kandahar.

Also Wednesday, the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kabul said it had arrested two suspected members of the Hezb-i-Islami militant group allied with the Taliban.

In Mazar, Rumsfeld met Colonel Dickie Davis, head of a British provincial reconstruction team that has been trying to ease factional tensions and push a disarmament drive.

Washington and its allies see such teams as a means to boost provincial security, but aid groups say that with only a few dozen troops each, they cannot provide sufficient protection for elections next June and vital aid work.

There are six so far and the US official said the United States intended to bring four or five more into the south and east, where the battle against militants is fiercest.

Rumsfeld's visit follows talks with NATO defense ministers to discuss ways to boost security and plug embarrassing equipment gaps limiting the alliance's ability to expand its peacekeeping force from Kabul to provide a meaningful provincial presence.

After the talks in Brussels, he said NATO might at some stage take over operations now being carried out by the US-led force, but such a move was "some distance out."