

BJP celebrates polls victories

Congress licks wounds

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Hindu nationalist yesterday celebrated sweeping victories in three state assembly polls, while leaders of the defeated Congress party staged an inquiry into what had gone wrong.

Supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were shown on television dancing and setting off fireworks early into the morning in the streets of central Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and western Rajasthan states.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP ousted Sonia Gandhi's Congress in Monday's assembly polls in the three states, doubling the number of provinces in India where it rules.

But Congress easily retained Delhi, albeit with a majority cut by the BJP.

The extent of the victories in the three Hindi heartland states surprised even the BJP, which rules the country in coalition, but its leaders made it clear that they would not be tempted into an early vote for national parliamentary elections.

The general vote is due by October next year, and analysts had predicted that if the Hindu nationalists had managed to win two of the four states, it may have been persuaded to go for a February poll to cash in on the state victories.

But Vajpayee and his deputy, Lal Krishna Advani, both ruled out this option as the results came in on Thursday.

Advani added, however: "This round of elections has certainly strengthened the BJP's position for the coming general elections."

The polls, seen as a barometer of next year's vote, marked the most significant gains since the Hindu nationalists came to power in 1998.

Analysts quoted in the Indian media on Friday blamed Congress' poor showing on typical aversion to an incumbent party, but they also fingered Gandhi's leadership.

The Asian Age, whose main story was headlined "Congress wrecked, Sonia sunk", said Congress leaders had admitted that they should have spent more time addressing development issues, particularly in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, India's two largest states respectively in terms of area.

In Rajasthan, the BJP picked up 87 seats to secure a majority of 120 in the 200-seat assembly. Congress went down 96 seats to win just 57.

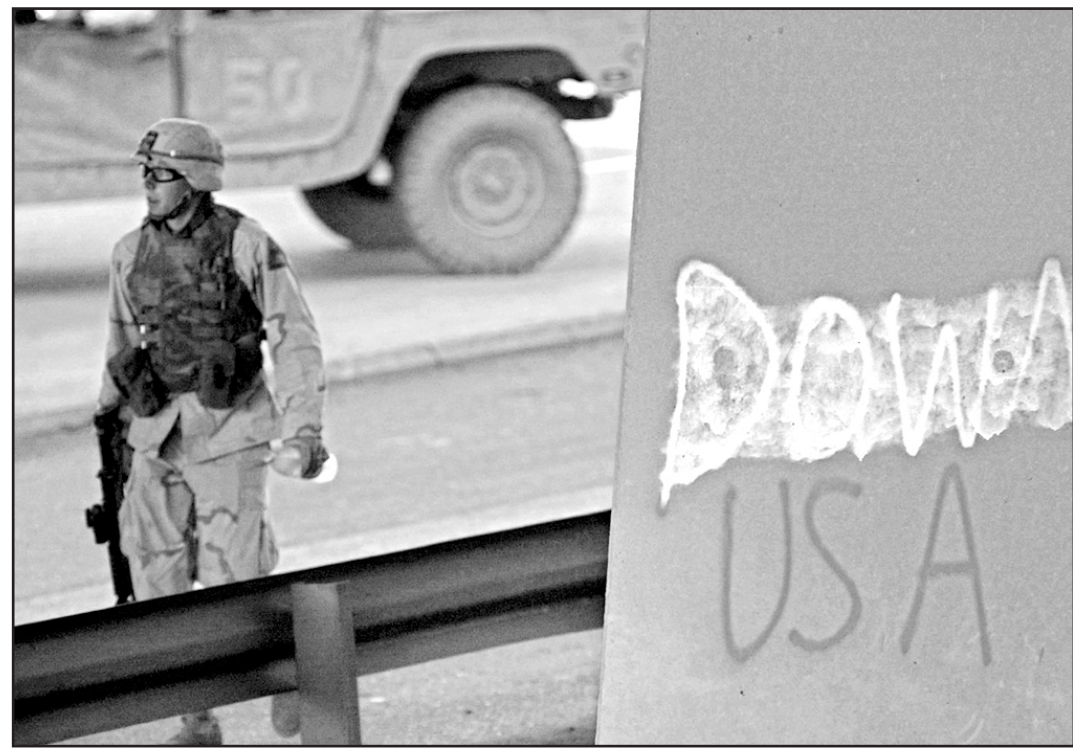
Indian state polls put women 'on top'

THE STATESMAN/ANN, New Delhi

One began her public life as bhajan singer. One as a royal bride. The third as a daughter-in-law of a veteran politico. Different as their beginnings and personalities are, Uma Bharati, Vasundhara Raje and Sheila Dikshit have offered India a new electoral theme - "woman power".

The three join Jayalalitha of Tamil Nadu and Rabri Devi of Bihar to form a formidable quintet of women chief ministers, prompting at least the national parties, the BJP and the Congress, to think whether women politicians should get more visible roles.

Bharati sang to support her family and did so till she joined the VHP. The Ayodhya movement was when she shot into national prominence and her political career began with winning the Khajuraho Lok Sabha seat twice. Then she shifted to Bhopal and defeated the then Congress strongman, Suresh Pachouri.



A US soldier walks under a flyover bridge close to the site where a US military convoy came under attack yesterday in Baghdad. "Two bomb attacks hit US convoys in Baghdad last morning", a US military spokesman said, adding that there was no immediate word on casualties. "We can confirm that at least two improvised explosive devices (IED) of the sort favoured by anti-US insurgents exploded in Baghdad," the spokesman said.

Advani blasts Pakistan for Kashmir infiltration

PTI, New Delhi

India's persistent demand for bringing an end to infiltration and dismantling of terrorist infrastructure has not been responded to by Pakistan, Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani said yesterday.

"On our demand that infiltration be stopped and terrorist infrastructure be dismantled, there has been practically no response from the other side," Advani said while inaugurating the International Security, Safety and Fire Exhibition in New Delhi.

Apparently referring to Pakistan, he said: "Their response is of a nature of tactical moves to ward off pressures from the international community."

"I am sorry to say India's efforts have not been reciprocated by the other side," he said.



Eight West Bank Palestinians speak to reporters at a Palestinian Authority office in Gaza City on Thursday after the Israeli army expelled them to Gaza.

Palestinian factions continue truce talks

Israel expels 12 from West Bank to Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Twelve Palestinian detainees were expelled by the Israeli army from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip as hardline groups such as Hamas continued talks in Cairo yesterday aimed at securing a halt to their campaign of attacks against Israel.

Meanwhile the backers of an unofficial peace plan were due to hold talks in Washington with US Secretary of State Colin Powell despite warnings from Israel that such a meeting would be a "mistake".

A military spokesman said the 12 detainees had been expelled from the West Bank and sent to the Gaza Strip overnight. The Israeli Supreme Court had given the go-ahead for the expulsions on Thursday.

A Palestinian security source confirmed that the 12 had arrived in the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli spokesman said eight were members of the Palestinian radical Islamic group Hamas, three belonged to the smaller Islamic Jihad and the 12th was a member of an armed group

linked to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

Representatives of Hamas and Islamic Jihad have gathered in Cairo for talks aimed at securing a suspension of attacks by armed factions against Israel.

Palestinian premier Ahmed Qorei was expected to join the talks which began Thursday in what one participant called an "extremely positive atmosphere".

Qorei and his new government want to secure a truce by the factions to use as a tool to secure a ceasefire with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government.

He is likely to focus his efforts on securing the adherence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which have carried out the bulk of suicide bombings since the Palestinian intifada, or uprising, erupted more than three years ago.

Meanwhile, Powell was due to meet former Israeli justice minister Yossi Beilin and ex-Palestinian information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo in Washington to discuss the unofficial Geneva Initiative peace plan which was launched on

Monday in Switzerland.

Israel's Trade Minister Ehud Olmert, Sharon's official number two, has said Powell was making an "incorrect decision" by agreeing to meet the pair.

Sharon himself has dismissed the plan as "dangerous", insisting the US-backed "roadmap" is the only framework for peace talks.

Powell however has said it is "a quite appropriate thing for me to do as secretary of state", while US President George W. Bush said Thursday that Geneva could be "productive, so long as they adhere to the principles" of the roadmap.

The Geneva plan addresses some of the thorniest questions of the conflict, providing for a division of Jerusalem and the de facto renunciation of the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

Under the terms of the roadmap, which has made little progress since its launch in June, such issues are to be addressed at a later stage only after violence is halted and both sides have honoured a series of commitments.

Commonwealth may readmit Pakistan

REUTERS, Abuja

The Commonwealth is looking to readmit Pakistan after a suspension over a military coup, but there was no immediate prospect of Zimbabwe's return to the group, Secretary-General Don McKinnon said on Thursday.

The 54-nation body of mostly former British colonies suspended Pakistan and Zimbabwe for violating its democratic guidelines. Both cases came up at the Commonwealth's meeting in the Nigerian capital Abuja yesterday.

The Zimbabwe issue has split the Commonwealth, with black nations pushing for a softer line while white countries including Britain and Australia want to keep the suspension.

McKinnon, a tough-talking New Zealander, denied that Pakistan's role in the US-led "war on terrorism" had helped its cause, saying the government of General Pervez Musharraf was "very busy building a democratic state".

Musharraf seized power in 1999 but won elections last year and has since formed a national assembly.

"What President Musharraf has done is not only to (conclude those elections, he has brought a lot more women into those assemblies and brought a lot more

minorities into those assemblies so it is a very good starting point," McKinnon told reporters.

"The feeling among ministers dealing with this issue is that they are certainly moving in the right direction on all fronts."

A group of Commonwealth ministers will draw up a report on Pakistan later on Thursday and present it to heads of government during the weekend summit.

Musharraf was criticised by opponents for rigging the 2002 parliamentary election by barring key opponents and formalising the military's role in government. But he has also cracked down on Islamic militants and become a key ally in the US-led "war on terrorism".

"Whilst we are fully aware that Pakistan's geo-strategic position gives other countries a different view of how Pakistan should be treated, that is not an issue that Commonwealth ministers use as their benchmark. They use as their benchmark democratic credentials," McKinnon said.

He said Pakistan still had to address a few outstanding issues such as the judicial system before it could be readmitted, but Commonwealth sources said leaders could set out a timetable for its return at this summit.

Asia's anti-corruption fight 'hurt by lack of political will'

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Great efforts are being made by some countries in the Asia-Pacific region to reduce corruption but they are hampered by a lack of political will and inadequate resources, a regional conference declared yesterday.

To counter these problems the Fourth Regional Anti-Corruption Conference for Asia-Pacific, organised by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), called for stronger regional cooperation.

The meeting reviewed progress made by 21 countries which have endorsed the ADB-OECD "Anti-Corruption Action Plan" launched in Manila in 1999, under which they are committed to combating bribery and money laundering and promoting public sector integrity.

A statement issued at the end of the three-day conference, which saw Australia sign up as the 21st endorsing country, said the initiative "is already bearing fruit".

The adherence of a growing number of countries testified to the attractiveness of the plan's core principles, which include a focus on prevention and punishment and put a priority on feasibility and effectiveness, the statement said.

Among recommendations made by the conference were protection of "whistleblowers" to increase the corruption detection rate, reviewing public procurement systems and the swift provision of mutual legal assistance "in light of the growing transnational nature of corruption".

It also called for countries to explore the possibilities of establishing internationally agreed

criteria for the repatriation of the proceeds of corruption.

The conference heard that one-third of public investment in many Asia-Pacific countries is squandered on corruption, with governments paying between 20 to 100 percent over the top for goods and services due to corrupt procurement practices.

ADB vice-president Geert van der Linden said studies had shown that corruption can cost up to 17 percent of a country's gross domestic product, "robbing the population of precious resources that can be used to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development".

The conference was attended by some 200 government officials and representatives of the private sector and the international donor community.

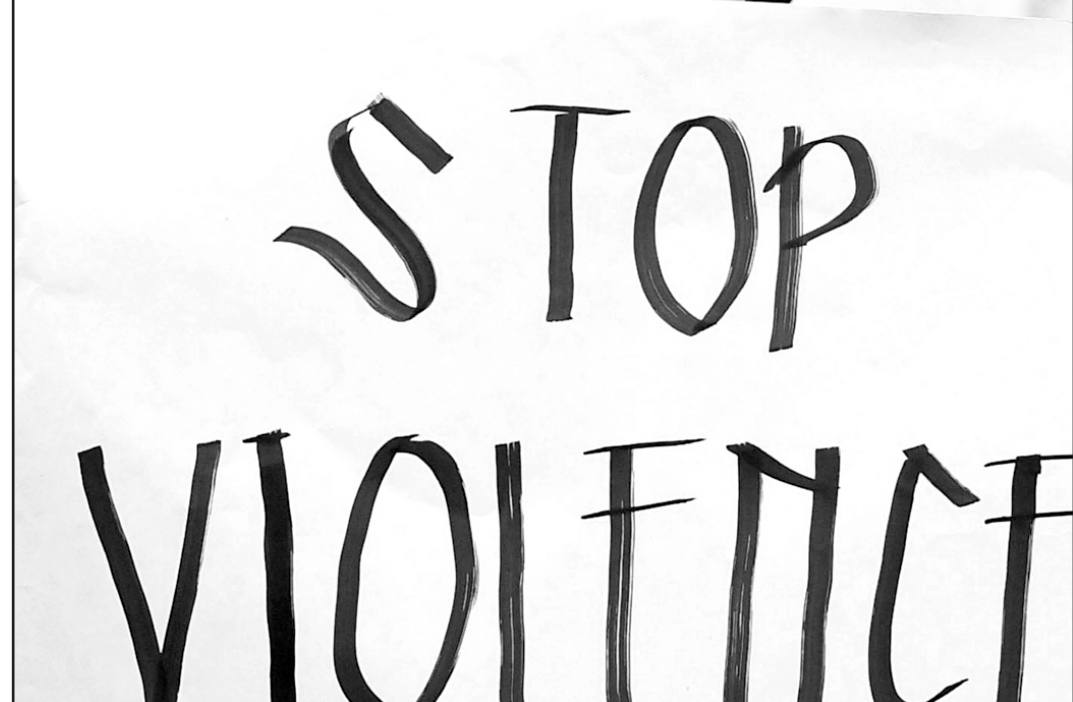
Human rights in spotlight as Euro-African summit opens

AFP, Tunis

Leaving aside, at least temporarily, differing interpretations of the host nation's human rights record, a two-day summit of 10 southern European and north African states will open here amid hopes of cementing multilateral cooperation.

Illegal immigration, responding to the threat from militant Islam and deepening trans-Mediterranean cooperation will top the agenda as leaders from Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania and Morocco of the Arab Maghreb Union join France, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain at the talks yesterday.

Already two sideshows have come close to throwing a spanner in the works, both of them involving France, whose President Jacques Chirac arrived here early for a state visit hosted by Tunisian counterpart Zine al Abidine Ben Ali.



People from conflict ridden Poso district-Central Sulawesi who live in Jakarta hold a protest in the city yesterday. Indonesia will step up its offensive against gangs who have launched attacks on non-Muslims in a religiously divided district in Central Sulawesi, reports and officials said Wednesday. Up to 1,000 people were killed in Muslim-Christian battles, which broke out in 2000 in the district. In October gunmen killed 10 people in attacks on mainly Christian villages. A senior security official, police Inspector General Ansyad Mbai, has blamed the al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah terror group for those killings.

US weighs contentious peacekeeping plans

REUTERS, Washington

With guerrilla attacks overshadowing reconstruction efforts in Iraq, the Pentagon is considering formation of a specialised force to help shepherd war-torn countries from the end of major combat to the start of civilian nation-building, government officials say.

In an about-face for the Bush administration, defense officials are quietly examining proposals including a small joint-services unit of a few thousand troops that could be assembled in as little as a year to perform policing, civil affairs, engineering, medical and other duties in hot spots such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

A study, ordered by the Pentagon's Office of Force Transformation and written by National Defence University, also proposes an ambitious long-term Army reorganization to create up to two active divisions for a combined 30,000 active-duty and

reserve troops dedicated to stabilization and reconstruction duties under new joint command.

An aide to Office of Force Transformation director Arthur Cebrowski told Reuters the office declined to comment on the plan and referred all questions to the study's authors.

The team that produced the study said stabilization duties were fast becoming key to military success due to the increased pace of US intervention abroad and a new battle strategy bent on producing quick, decisive victories with fewer troops.

"I see this force as a bridge between the actual period of high-intensity conflict on the one hand, and nation-building, which is primarily a civilian effort, on the other," said National Defence University professor Hans Binnendijk, a former Clinton administration National Security Council official who led the study.

'Baath party reemerges in new guise in Iraq'

REUTERS, London

Members of the Baath party, the former political base of ousted president Saddam Hussein, have started to regroup, according to Britain's special representative to Iraq, the Financial Times reported yesterday.

The newspaper said former Baathist leaders who had fallen out with Saddam in the past want to set up a party under a new name to participate in the country's new political climate, with Iraq's former leader excluded from joining the organization.

There was "evidence of motivation and the beginning of some activity" among Baathists, Britain's special representative to the war-torn country, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, told the Financial Times. "Iraqis will be watching this very closely."

US officials say die-hard supporters of Saddam and the deposed Baath Party are behind the hit-and-run attacks plaguing

US forces in the Sunni Muslim Arab heartlands north and west of Baghdad.

US administrator Paul Bremer sought to uproot the remnant of Iraq's Baathist past by dissolving the Iraqi armed forces, security services and defence and information ministries in May.

But his abrupt move may have prompted some of the 400,000 people who lost their jobs, many of them Sunnis prominent in Saddam's forces, to turn their guns on the occupiers.

According to the new plans unveiled in November by Washington and the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, regional caucuses will select a national assembly by the end of May, and this will pick a transitional government by the end of June.

The government would take over sovereignty from occupying powers in July, and a constitution would be written and democratic elections held by the end of 2005.