

India plans to allow expats to vote: PM

REUTERS, Hyderabad

India plans to allow millions of its nationals working in West Asia to vote for elections back home as they have a vital stake in the governance of the country, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said yesterday.

There are more than three million Indian workers and professionals in West Asia and they make up more than 60 percent of all Indian expatriates across the globe.

Singh, speaking in the infotech hub of Hyderabad, said Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) in West Asia -- also home to millions of Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers -- were "unique".

"They are NRIs who will never become naturalised citizens of those countries," Singh told a large gathering of overseas Indians, including many workers from Arab states.

"Most of them have immediate families back in India and have thus a vital stake in local governance, including the issue of who would represent them in the state assembly or the national parliament."

Singh said their long-pending demand for voting in Indian elections while working in West Asia was justified and assured them he would push the move through.

"This proposal is at an advanced stage of consideration

by our government."

There are more than 20 million Indian nationals or people of Indian origin across the world including hundreds of thousands in the United States, Europe and Africa.

Remittances from overseas Indian workers jumped to \$20 billion in 2005 from over \$13 billion in 2001 and New Delhi is keen to tap their growing financial clout and professional talent to boost India's robust economy, one of the world's fastest growing.

Singh said the expatriates had enhanced India's reputation as a global "knowledge economy" with its prowess in biotechnology, software and

pharmaceuticals.

"Overseas Indians have played an extremely important role in global brand building in this respect."

Singh's comments came less than a fortnight after Indian officials offered overseas citizenship to millions of people of Indian origin, giving them opportunities to own land and property and invest in financial markets in India.

Though the Indian constitution does not allow dual nationality, the government has introduced an "overseas citizenship of India" scheme. But the scheme does not include voting rights or the opportunity to stand in elections.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) lights a traditional oil lamp as Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy (R) and Union Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs Oscar Fernandes (L) look on during the inauguration of the "Pravasi Bharatiya Divas" (conference of Indian expatriates) in Hyderabad yesterday.

HAZARDOUS WASTES

France blamed for violating int'l treaty

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A committee appointed by the Indian Supreme Court on Friday accused France of violating an international treaty on movement of hazardous wastes by sending an asbestos-laden ship to be scrapped at an Indian shipyard.

"The country which has sent the ship to India is not observing the Basel Convention on movement of hazardous wastes," G Thyraian, Chairman of the Supreme Court Commission on Hazardous Wastes, told reporters in Mumbai.

If India allows the French warship "Clemenceau" to enter its territorial waters, it would be in violation of the Basel Convention, which bars transfer of dangerous materials and substances from one country to another, he said.

"The ship should not be allowed to enter Indian territorial waters until a final view is taken," Thyraian said adding the committee would submit its recommendation to the apex court in two weeks.



Pakistani survivors of last year's huge earthquake hold a placard during a walk in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani NGOs and survivors of the October 8, 2005 earthquake held a walk encouraging donors to keep up relief efforts.

UN suspends Pak quake aid flights

BBC ONLINE

The UN has stopped aid flights to some earthquake survivors in Pakistan administered Kashmir after dozens of people stormed two of its helicopters.

The people had been demanding evacuation to nearby cities.

Deputy humanitarian coordinator Larry Hollingworth told the BBC that flights into the Lipa Valley area would be suspended to ensure the crews' safety.

He said it was unfortunate that the actions of a minority would deprive the majority of food.

The UN said the survivors had been stranded in mountains and called the incidents extremely disturbing.

There were two incidents, involving more than 50 people. The survivors fled on arriving at Muzaffarabad and Abbottabad. No-one was arrested.

The 8 October quake killed more than 73,000 people and

displaced millions.

Since then the UN and dozens of other organisations have remained involved in the emergency relief work.

However, heavy rain and snowfall early this week created new landslides, leaving thousands of people stranded in mountainous regions.

The UN refugee agency says winter has come late to Pakistan but with a vengeance, with temperatures falling to -13 Celsius in the highest villages.

Hollingworth said the two helicopter incidents were regrettable, adding that in both cases the people were transported to safer places and no-one was detained.

The BBC's Zaffar Abbas in Islamabad says these are thought to be the first such incidents since the earthquake.

A senior UN official told the BBC that in one case about 20 people forced their way onto a UN helicopter as it was about to leave the town of Banamula, after dropping food supplies.

Musharraf offers to join fight against terror in Kashmir

PTI, Islamabad

Claiming complete support of the army to his peace initiatives with India, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has offered to join the fight against terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir if New Delhi agrees to pull out troops from Srinagar, Kupwara and Baramulla, considered to be the hotbed of militancy.

In a candid interview to CNN-IBN TV, Musharraf also said that he was disappointed at the lack of progress in the peace process and complained that there was "not much" response from India to the ideas thrown by him for resolution of the Kashmir issue.

Refuting perception that some of his top commanders do not back his peace initiatives with India, the General said that he

would "throw out" any person if he declined to obey his orders or opposed them.

"Let me tell you, this is not a banana republic army. It is an army that fought wars. It is an extremely disciplined army. It is totally loyal and committed to me. I know that," he said in the interview.

Asserting that the Pakistan army backed his policies 1000 per cent, he termed reports in the Pakistani media stating that a "powerful clique of religious parties within the military establishment" worked against him, as nonsense.

"If they are really against me then they would be out of the army tomorrow. I would not be worth my salt, if I am Army Chief and these people are doing that," he said.

Five shot dead in Thailand's south

AFP, Yala

Five people were shot dead yesterday in separate attacks by suspected Islamic militants in Thailand's restive south while a former Thai prime minister called for peace in the troubled region.

Four suspected militants on two motorcycles opened fire at crowds in Yala, one of the three Muslim-majority southern provinces, killing a 23-year-old Muslim villager and a 24-year-old Buddhist and injuring three.

In a separate attack in the same province, one man and a woman were also shot and injured in a drive-by shooting late Saturday, police said.

Earlier in the day, two police officers were gunned down in a food market in the Raman district of Yala, and a 47-year-old pig farmer was killed by suspected Islamic militants in a drive-by shooting in Pattani province.

US officials in talks with Iraqi insurgents: NYT

US journalist kidnapped

REUTERS, AFP, New York

US officials have been talking with local Iraqi insurgent leaders to exploit a rift between homegrown insurgents and radical groups such as al-Qaeda. The New York Times reported yesterday.

Citing a Western diplomat, an Iraqi political leader and an Iraqi insurgent leader, the Times said that the talks were also aimed at drawing the local leaders into the political process.

According to interviews with insurgents and both US and Iraqi officials, clashes between Iraqi groups and al-Qaeda have broken out in several cities across the Sunni Triangle and they appear to have intensified in recent months, the Times said.

A Western diplomat who supports the talks told the Times that the Americans had opened face-to-face discussions with insurgents in

the field, and were also communicating with senior insurgent leaders through intermediaries.

The diplomat said the goal was to take advantage of rifts in the insurgency, in particular those between local groups, whose main goal is to expel US forces, and more radical groups like al-Qaeda, which have alienated many Iraqis with violent campaigns that have resulted in mass killings of Iraqi civilians.

The diplomat said the talks were taking place "inside and outside Iraq" and began in the fall around the time of the referendum on the new Iraqi constitution on October 15, the Times said. While US officials have made contact with insurgent groups in the past, the diplomat said the more recent contacts were far more significant.

In particular, the diplomat said the talks, of which few details were available, aimed to take advantage

of a perceived willingness among Sunni Arabs to take part in politics after large numbers went to the polls for the first time.

Meanwhile, a US woman journalist was kidnapped by gunmen in the Iraqi capital yesterday and her translator killed, the latest Westerner seized by insurgents in the war-torn country.

"An American journalist is missing. We are investigating," said US embassy spokeswoman Elizabeth Colton, who declined to name the missing reporter.

Iraqi security officials said a US woman journalist was abducted by armed men in the Adl district of western Baghdad and her translator found dead.

An Iraqi defence ministry official said the interpreter was told soldiers that a US journalist was kidnapped before he died.

Violence in Pakistan's tribal belt kills 16

REUTERS, Miranshah

Sixteen people, including eight paramilitary soldiers, were killed in Pakistan yesterday in separate incidents in its restive tribal belt on the Afghan border, officials and witnesses said.

Eight troops of the paramilitary Frontier Constabulary were killed in an exchange of fire with militants in the early hours of Saturday, officials said.

The clash took place in Mir Ali, about 24km east of Miranshah, the main town in the North Waziristan tribal area, they said.

In another incident, eight people, including a woman, were killed and nine wounded in a helicopter gunship attack on a house of a militant in Dandi Sadhy, 8km north of Miranshah.

"The house belonged to Maulana Noor Mohammad," said one witness, referring to a religious scholar who supported Afghanistan's former Taliban rulers.

All those killed in the attack were members of Mohammad's family but it was not known if the scholar was among them, he said.

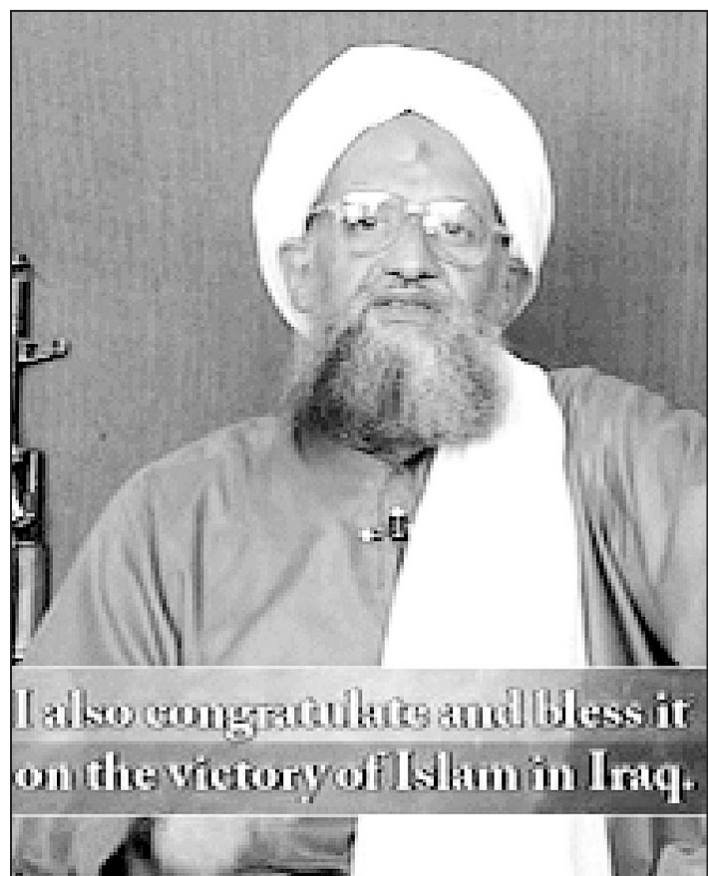
Military spokesmen were not immediately available for comment.

Waziristan is part of Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal belt that stretches through rugged mountains and deserts along the border with Afghanistan.

Many al-Qaeda members fled to the region from Afghanistan after US-led forces ousted the Taliban in late 2001, and were given shelter by militant sympathisers from conservative Pashtun tribes that inhabit both sides of the border.

Pakistan's government has had about 70,000 troops in the region for the past two years after vowing to clear the region of foreign militants and suppress their Pakistani accomplices.

Hundreds of people -- both militants and government troops -- have been killed.



A video grab taken on January 6 from a footage broadcast by Qatari news channel al-Jazeera television shows al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri giving a speech at a secret location.

ZAWAHRI SAYS US defeated in Iraq

REUTERS, Dubai

al-Qaeda's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri said in a video aired on Friday that President George W. Bush's plans to withdraw troops from Iraq meant Washington had been defeated by the Muslims.

He also criticised militant groups, including Egypt's banned Muslim Brotherhood, for believing in Western-style democracy and taking part in elections.

"Bush, you must confess that you have been defeated in Iraq and in Afghanistan and you will be in Palestine soon," he said in the video broadcast by Al Jazeera television.

Jazeera said the video by Osama bin Laden's second-in-command, which had English subtitles, carried the date of the Muslim lunar month which ended in December.

"I congratulate the Muslims on Islam's victory in Iraq. I said more than a year ago that the Americans' departure from Iraq is only a matter of time," said the bespectacled Zawahiri, who wore a white turban and sat next to an assault rifle.

"But they are justifying their withdrawal by saying that the Iraqi forces have reached a satisfactory level."

Bomber strikes court in China: 5 killed

AP, Beijing

A farmer angry over a court ruling set off a bomb in a Chinese courthouse, killing himself and four other people, a news report said yesterday.

The explosion Friday in Minle County in the northwestern province of Gansu killed the president of the county court and a local Communist Party official, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

The bomber was identified as Qian Wenzhao, 62, a farmer who Xinhua said was angry over a ruling in a property dispute involving the house of his late son and daughter-in-law.

Qian forced his way into a meeting room on the courthouse's fourth floor and ignited explosives, Xinhua said.

"Police believe it was Qian's resentment against the court verdict that had led to the blast," the report said.

The slain court president, Chen Xingrong, and the party official, Wang Qiang, were attending the meeting, Xinhua said. It didn't say whether they were the targets of the attack or identify the other victims.

Arab govts largely silent on Sharon

AFP, Cairo

The fight for life of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon may have sparked intense concern in Western capitals but Arab governments have kept largely silent about the plight of a man still widely reviled by their peoples.

Non-Arab Iran was swift to hail the fading health of the leader of its Israeli archfoe. Hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wished the "butcher" dead.

But nearly two days after a new stroke saw Sharon rushed to hospital, plunging Israeli politics into turmoil, most Arab regimes have kept quiet.

Even pro-Western Jordan and Egypt, the two Arab states that have signed peace treaties with Israel, have been slow to comment publicly on his leader's demise.

The Jordanian government said late Friday that it was concerned about the impact on the peace process.

"The Jordanian government continues to follow with interest the impact of the developments in the Israeli prime minister's state of health, particularly its effects on

the Israeli and Palestinian scenes and the peace process," said government spokesman Nasser Jawdeh.

"The government hopes that the peace process will not be affected."

Egypt, whose President Hosni Mubarak has publicly praised Sharon as a man of peace, has yet to make any comment through government officials.

Israel's privately owned Channel 10 television reported that Mubarak had telephoned acting prime minister Ehud Olmert to express his concern for Sharon's recovery.

It was left to the government-owned media to voice Egyptian concerns about the post-Sharon future, and the possibility that it could see hawkish former premier Benjamin Netanyahu, returned to power.

"Should Sharon pass away, Netanyahu will almost certainly reclaim the premiership and we all know that he represents the most extremist wing in Likud," the state-owned Al-Akhabar daily said in an editorial.

The newspaper charged that

Netanyahu, who was elected as leader of Sharon's old Likud party last month, was "hostile to peace and the pursuit of the peace process."

Mubarak had tense relations with Netanyahu when he served as premier between 1996 and 1999, accusing him of repeatedly failing to stand by his commitments.

"How can we trust a man who does not even respect his own signature?" Mubarak asked in 1997.

But independent newspapers in Cairo, like most of their counterparts around the Arab world, took a more critical line.

"The demise of the Sabra and Shatila butcher" was the headline of the opposition daily Al-Wafd, referring to massacres in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982 for which Sharon was found "indirectly responsible".

The Palestinian leadership, which, like Egypt, worked with Sharon's government on last year's pullout from Gaza, voiced concern about the "big vacuum" in Israeli politics following his demise.