

By-election in Sonia's seat on May 8

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's Election Commission has announced the by-elections to northern city of Rae Bareilly parliamentary seat on May 8.

The seat fell vacant as Sonia Gandhi, the chief of ruling Congress party, had quit 12 days ago in the wake of a controversy over lawmakers facing disqualification for allegedly occupying office of profit.

The counting of the by-polls to the Lok Sabha seat, which should see 59-year-old Sonia comfortably winning once again, has been fixed on May 11. The following day, Parliament session would start discussing a special law to prevent lawmakers from being disqualified for occupying offices of profit.

Election Commission spokesman denied it was in a "tearing hurry" to announce the by-polls to Rae Bareilly seat in Uttar Pradesh state to help Sonia.



Riot police kick a student (C) upon arrest during an anti-king rally in Kathmandu yesterday demanding the restoration of democracy in the country. At least 12 students were arrested in clashes with riot police while supporting the seven alliance political parties call for a 4-day anti-royal strike from April 6 to 9.

Nepal bans protests

Parties vow to defy, 4-day strike begins tomorrow

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's royal government yesterday banned all public gatherings in the capital, including a mass democracy protest planned for Saturday, but political parties vowed to defy the order.

"The local administration in Kathmandu and (the suburb of) Lalitpur has announced a ban on public gatherings within the ring road, effective from Wednesday, in order to maintain peace and security," government-owned Radio Nepal said Tuesday announcing the ban.

Seven opposition parties ousted by King Gyanendra when he seized power 13 months ago have called for four-day nationwide general strike from Thursday, and a mass demonstration in the capital Saturday.

Political parties vowed to go ahead with the strike and peaceful protest. "We will defy the ban. What the

government has done is wrong," said Minendra Rijal, spokesman for the Nepali Congress (Democratic) party.

A leader from the Nepal Communist Party (Unified Marxist-Leninist) was equally defiant.

"The ban has violated the basic rights of the people to organize peaceful assembly. We will defy the government ban order," said Khadav Prasad Oli.

Earlier Tuesday riot police fired tear gas, used batons and arrested at least 12 students during clashes on two college campuses in the capital.

Security forces moved in to disperse demonstrations and an AFP reporter saw students throwing rocks at police at one of the protests.

"At least a dozen students were detained and several others injured in clashes with riot police," Mahendra Sharma, president of the Nepal Students Union, told AFP.

Students have begun demonstrating to show their support for the strike and protest programme, said Sharma.

In January the government disrupted a planned anti-royal protest by banning public meetings, detaining hundreds of political and human rights activists, imposing a curfew and cutting mobile phone lines.

The crackdown resulted in a wave of international criticism for Nepal.

Maoist rebels have announced a unilateral ceasefire in the Kathmandu valley ahead of the mass protest.

Opposition politicians, who have a loose agreement with the rebels to oppose the royal takeover and jointly work to restore democracy, welcomed the move but said it should apply nationwide.

Israel fires 2 missiles into PA compound

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli aircraft on Tuesday fired two missiles into the compound of the Palestinian Authority (PA) headquarters in Gaza City, wounding two people, Palestinian security sources said.

Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas, who was in the West Bank at the time of the attack, condemned the strike and called on the international community to intervene to stop what he called Israel's escalation.

A military spokeswoman said Israel launched the attack to "send a message" to the Palestinians that it does not tolerate the continued firing of makeshift rockets into the Jewish state from the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli aircraft fired two missiles into the helicopter pad of the Palestinian Authority headquarters by the seafont in Gaza City, gouging two craters out of the tarmac, an AFP reporter said.

Iran claims success in war games

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said it successfully test-fired a new land-to-sea missile in Gulf war games that have aroused international concern amid rising tensions over its nuclear programme.

"The medium-range Kowsar missile is capable of combatting electronic jamming systems and it cannot be thrown off course by any instruments," state television reported.

It touted the Kowsar, which means "a spring in heaven" in Farsi, as a "super-modern" weapon.

Iran also said it successfully tested a "domestically developed" hydroplane with the television showing a small one-pilot craft flying some 10 metres (30 feet) above the surface of the water.

The one-propeller craft "is invisible to radar" and "can carry weapons and aim at various targets while on the move", said Rear Admiral Mohammed Ebrahim Dehqani, spokesman for the manoeuvres codenamed "Holy Prophet".

On Monday, Iran said it had tested a highly destructive torpedo, prompting the US State Department to voice "concern" at a time of high tensions over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The series of armaments tests "demonstrates a weaponisation programme by Iran that does nothing to reassure Iran's neighbours or the international community", the State Department deputy spokesman said.

Straw forces Rice to sleep on floor

AFP, London

Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was rapped for ungentlemanly conduct Tuesday after reportedly commandeering US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's private quarters on her official jet.

Rice was reported in a number of British newspapers to have graciously offered her British counterpart the use of her bed and cabin on the Boeing 757 plane and Straw ungraciously accepted, leaving her to sleep on the floor.

What one newspaper called "Bedgate" is said to have happened as the political bedfellows flew to Kuwait at the weekend before transferring to a military flight bound for Baghdad.

Hamas minister to visit China, E Asia

REUTERS, Gaza

Palestinian Foreign Minister and senior Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Zahar met yesterday in Gaza with a top Chinese diplomat and announced plans to visit China and other countries in Asia next month.

Israel and the United States have been trying to isolate the Islamic militant group, which won parliamentary elections in January and formally took control of the Palestinian Authority last week.

"We will visit countries of East Asia, and China will be the first country we will visit in that region," Zahar told reporters. "I have spoken to the ambassador and they are ready to receive a Palestinian delegation any time."

At a joint press conference with

Zahar, China's representative in the West Bank and Gaza, Yang Wei Guo, said Beijing respected Hamas's election victory, adding: "We have explained the Chinese position that supports the Palestinian people in their just struggle to regain the national rights and to regain occupied land."

Zahar did not say which other countries in Asia he planned to visit. Hamas officials said on Monday that they held talks two months ago with French officials and more recently with an Indian diplomat, despite US and Israeli pressure on countries to shun the group until it renounces violence and recognizes Israel.



Indian activists from student organisations in the north-eastern state of Manipur hold placards and shout slogans as they take part in a protest rally in New Delhi yesterday condemning violation of basic human rights and dignity by the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) and Kangleipak Communist Party (KCP).

China, US near deal on repatriating 39,000 illegal migrants

REUTERS, Beijing

The United States and China are close to an agreement on repatriating illegal Chinese migrants, the US security chief said on Tuesday at the end of a visit that also focused on aviation and ports security.

US Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said returning illegal immigrants, rather than releasing them on bail, would act as a deterrent.

"If we catch them and release them ... we suggest to people that if they can get across the border they are home free and safe from being returned. We want to send a very different message," Chertoff told reporters.

"We've reached a meeting of the minds and a common approach on the issue of repatriation of illegal migrants with China."

About 39,000 Chinese were illegally in the United States, many of them brought there by people

smugglers, Chertoff said.

Chertoff's Asia trip, which also took him to Singapore, Tokyo and Hong Kong, focused on ports and aviation security, with Washington worried that nuclear bombs or radioactive material could be smuggled into its borders in shipping containers.

China and the United States were also near an agreement on air security, Chertoff said, without giving details.

A container security initiative has already begun at some Chinese ports and the two countries are working to deepen relations between their customs officials.

"It's critical for us to have a relationship with China that elevates the security of the movement of those containers, but in a way that doesn't interfere with the process of rapidly moving cargo to the United States," Chertoff said.