

Polls-bound Sonia quits Rajiv Gandhi Foundation post

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

In the aftermath of the office-of-profit storm, the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, has continued to be on resignation overdrive.

Barely a few days after quitting as chairperson of the Jallianwala Bagh Memorial Trust, Gandhi resigned on April 8 as the head of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation (RGF), established several years ago as a non-government body to work for social causes in memory of her late husband.

Gandhi's move is clearly aimed at playing it safe for her re-election bid from Rae Bareilly parliamentary constituency slated for a bypoll on 8 May.

After coming under the office-of-profit cloud for holding the chairperson's post of the National Advisory Council with the rank of a Cabinet minister, Gandhi had resigned on 23 March from the NAC as well as from her membership of the Lok Sabha from Rae Bareilly.

Pakistan brands Baluch rebel group terror outfit

AFP, Quetta

Pakistan has branded an underground militant group operating in the restive southwestern province of Baluchistan a "terrorist" organisation, officials said yesterday.

"The federal government has declared Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) as terrorist organisation over its involvement in sabotage and subversive activities," provincial police chief, Chaudhry Mohammad Yaqub, told AFP.

He said Baluchistan police had arrested an unspecified number of militants who confessed they had been receiving money and weapons from the group for attacks on government installations.

"BLA itself had been claiming responsibility after almost every incident," Yaqub said.

He said now the group was officially a terrorist organisation, its name could not appear in the

Pakistani media.

The police chief said the group was allegedly led by a provincial deputy, Balach Marri, who was facing several criminal charges including landmine blasts and bomb explosions.

"He will now lose his seat in the provincial assembly," he said.

The BLA leader's brother Gazin Marri, who served as provincial home minister from 1993-96, was arrested in Dubai late last month on charges of money laundering, he said.

"This confirms our belief that the group had been receiving funds from abroad," Yaqub said without giving details.

Along with some nationalist tribes the BLA has been waging a sporadic revolt in recent years in sparsely populated Baluchistan to win more political rights and a greater share of profits from the region's rich natural resources.

Canada to slap terror tag on LTTE

AFP, Montreal

Canada has added to its list of terrorist organizations the Tamil Tigers, a group fighting for the autonomy of northeastern Sri Lanka, the National Post reported Saturday, saying an official government announcement was expected Monday.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), or Tamil Tigers, would be the 39th organization deemed a terrorist group by the Canadian government, and the first so named by the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

According to a Human Rights Watch study released last month, the group extorts money from the diaspora in Britain and Canada.

"Many members of the diaspora actively support the Tamil Tigers. But the culture of fear is so strong that even Tamils who don't (support them) feel they have no choice but to give money," the report said.



A female riot police kicks a political activist during the day-time curfew in Kathmandu yesterday. Police arrested dozens of stone-throwing protestors opposed to King Gyanendra in the Nepal capital who defied a curfew and shoot-on-site orders that were matched elsewhere in the Himalayan nation, political parties said.

INDIA SAYS

No compromise on nuke deal with US

AFP, New Delhi

India's top foreign ministry official has denied that the country's nuclear weapons programme has been compromised by last month's nuclear deal with Washington.

"We have preserved all our basic positions. We have preserved our basic interests," Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran said in a transcript of a television interview published by the Press Trust of India on Sunday.

He also dismissed suggestions that New Delhi would come under pressure from Washington to cap its nuclear weapons programme, saying the deal only referred to cooperation in civilian nuclear technology.

"I see no reason why there should be anxieties that we are

always vulnerable to pressure," Saran was quoted as saying in an interview on an Indian TV channel to be broadcast later Sunday.

"Why are we always so worried about screws being tightened on us...as if someone can come and turn the screws on us and we just lie back and be screwed."

The landmark India-US nuclear deal -- concluded on March 2 during a visit by US President George W. Bush -- would lift an embargo on the transfer of nuclear fuel and technology to India for civilian purposes.

New Delhi has promised to separate its military and civil facilities, opening most of the latter to international inspections.

The deal must be ratified by the US Congress and the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group.

US opponents say the deal abandons non-proliferation principles and will complicate efforts to curb the spread of atomic weapons elsewhere, such as in Iran and North Korea.

Several US lawmakers including Republican House leader Dennis Hastert and Republican Senator Charles Hagel are scheduled to travel to India in the coming days to discuss the deal.

On Friday, visiting US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher said he hoped there would be a congressional "vote in a few months from now" but cautioned that the full implementation of the agreement might take "maybe a year at best."

Thai opposition fails to win hearts despite Thaksin ouster

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's top opposition party scored a win by helping to oust Premier Thaksin Shinawatra, but this has done little for the fortunes of a party that lacks a vision for the kingdom's future, analysts say.

The Democrat Party boycotted the April 2 elections, a snap poll called by Thaksin in a bid to end weeks of street rallies demanding his resignation over alleged abuse of power and corruption and to gain a new mandate.

But during the two-month deadlock, the People's Alliance for Democracy, a broad coalition of protest groups who took centre stage in the move against Thaksin, never called on Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva to replace him.

Instead, they asked revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej to appoint a new prime minister.

Analysts say the country's oldest political party, which marked its 60th anniversary last week, has failed to win the confidence of voters during the five years Thaksin has been in office.

"After five years, we still don't have a policy platform from the party. I haven't heard what they are going to do with Thailand," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a political science professor at Chulalongkorn University.

"It's very frustrating because they have no policy. The Democrat Party has failed to present themselves as a credible alternative. So far in this crisis, we have Thaksin or nothing," Thitinan said.

Thaksin said last Tuesday he would not accept the post of prime minister when parliament convenes, even though his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) party won 56 percent of the vote in the troubled elections.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai waves to media representatives upon his arrival at New Delhi's Palam Air Force Airport yesterday. Karzai arrived in India on a three-day visit for talks on economic relations, countering terrorism and regional growth.

Karzai in India to boost ties

Pakistan wary

REUTERS, New Delhi

Afghan President Hamid Karzai arrived in India yesterday to boost ties with New Delhi that have blossomed after the fall of the Taliban regime, in a trip a nervous Pakistan will be closely watching.

Afghanistan has received hundreds of millions of dollars in development aid from India in the past four years, but its ties with Pakistan have strained after Karzai asked Islamabad to do more to stop Taliban militants infiltrating the border.

"Well, we are very happy in Afghanistan with India helping us in a manner that is not expected," Karzai told Doordarshan, in comments aired on Sunday before his arrival.

Karzai starts the official leg of his five-day trip on Monday and will hold talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

India, which did not recognise the radical Taliban regime, lost its foothold in the rugged country where arch rival Pakistan held diplomatic sway for years before the September 2001 attacks on the United States sparked a US-led

invasion.

India is now involved in training Afghanistan's police and diplomats, building roads, hospitals and supporting trade and services as Afghanistan tries to rebuild its war-ravaged economy, despite continuing attacks by Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents.

Singh visited Afghanistan last August.

"India went out of its way to provide us with great economic assistance. India's help is reaching up to \$600 million. It has helped us in all walks of life," Karzai said.

Analysts in Pakistan, which has fought three wars with India, said Islamabad was worried over India's growing influence in Afghanistan, which borders Pakistani territory.

"Pakistan should improve its relations with Afghanistan to check the growing Indian influence," said Hasan Askari Rizvi, Lahore-based foreign policy analyst.

"The visit should not be a cause of concern for Pakistan because it can't stop it. But the growing influence of India in Afghanistan creates problems for Pakistan."