

## 'Gulf states to oppose Iran attack'

### US lawmaker backs direct talks with Tehran

AFP, Tehran/Washington

Iran's influential former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said yesterday he was sure the Islamic republic's Gulf neighbours would not support any US assault on his country over its nuclear programme.

"We are certain that Gulf countries will not back the United States in waging an attack on Iran," Rafsanjani said on the second day of a visit to Kuwait aimed at allaying fears in the region over Iran's nuclear activities.

"The talk about a US attack on Iran is nonsense and we are sure the Americans would not want create problems for themselves."

Rafsanjani, who heads Iran's powerful Expediency Council, met with Kuwaiti deputies after holding talks with the emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah.

His visit follows Iran's announcement last week that it had successfully enriched uranium to the level needed to make reactor fuel, trig-

gering global concern about its nuclear ambitions.

Uranium enrichment can be extended to make weapons, and the UN Security Council has given Iran's hardline leadership until April 28 to freeze the sensitive fuel cycle work.

Kuwaiti parliament speaker Jasssem al-Khorafi tried to play down

the worries in the Gulf over Iran's nuclear facilities, including a reactor being built with Russian help in Bushehr across the Gulf, and its standoff with the West.

Meanwhile, the chairman of the powerful US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Sunday urged the United States to take up

direct negotiations with Iran to resolve the continuing crisis over Tehran's nuclear programme.

Speaking on ABC television's "This Week" programme, Republican Senator Richard Lugar said talks with Iran could prove "useful" in breaking the impasse.

"Now, the Iranians are a part of

the energy picture. Clearly their ties with India and with China, quite apart from others, are really critical," he said.

"We need to talk about that," said Lugar, who said the discussions on Iran's nuclear programme could be held alongside future talks about Iraq.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian women voters have their identity cards inspected by an election official as they stand in a queue outside a polling booth at Chotojibanpur, some 240kms south-west of Kolkata yesterday. Voting in state assembly polls has opened under tight security in India's Marxist bastion of West Bengal, where leftist parties are expected to win big and gain strength on the national scene.

## Voting in West Bengal amid tight security

AFP, Kolkata

More than a million people voted under tight security yesterday in India's Marxist bastion of West Bengal, where leftist parties are expected to win big and gain strength on the national scene.

Officials said people turned up in colourful traditional clothes and waited in long queues under a scorching sun, with temperatures up to 47 degrees Celsius (116.6 Fahrenheit).

"(By) late afternoon, voter turnout was more than 47 percent," said the state's chief election official Debashish Sen.

Around 3.2 million people were eligible to vote in Monday's first stage of the five-phase vote, under which 45 constituencies were being contested at 7,700 polling stations in three districts.

Another four rounds of voting are due on April 22, April 27, May 3 and May 8 for a total of 294 state assembly

seats. The results are due on May 11.

Officials said thousands of policemen, backed by helicopters, patrolled three western districts of the populous state where balloting was being held amid a poll boycott by Maoist rebels who control swathes of rural areas.

"All possible steps have been taken to thwart the Maoist threats," said West Bengal police inspector general Raj Kanjia.

"Over 60,000 policemen have been deployed and two helicopters are on aerial patrol," Kanjia said, adding police had been asked to shoot troublemakers.

Witnesses said police in riot gear stood guard outside polling booths while helicopters flew over thick forests where Maoist rebels are believed to have camps.

A pre-poll survey predicted that communists, also known as the Left Front, would win more than 233 seats. The communists are crucial outside allies of the Congress-led

federal government but staunch critics of its economic and foreign policies.

"The Left Front appears set to win the seventh consecutive assembly election and add to the size of its majority," said a survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, a research group based in New Delhi.

A win for the Left Front would allow them to wield more influence on national economic and foreign policies, said political analyst Rasheed Kidwai.

But "a defeat for the party in West Bengal could strain ties between the Left and the Congress as the communists will blame the erosion of their support base on the unpopular policies followed by the federal government," he said.

The communists have been opposing the opening up of the retail sector, privatisation of airports and a landmark nuclear deal between New Delhi and Washington.

## Saddam's handwriting scrutinised in court

REUTERS, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein and seven co-accused returned to court yesterday and proceedings focused on attempts to prove the ousted Iraqi president signed documents implicating him in crimes against humanity.

A criminal expert's report was read out in court which said Saddam's signatures were on documents connecting him with the killing of 148 Shia men and teenagers after an attempt on his life in the town of Dujiail in 1982.

Saddam has said he ordered the trial which led to the execution of the men, saying that any president who escaped an assassination attempt was entitled to crack down.

But Saddam and his half-brother and former intelligence chief Barzan al-Tikriti have refused to give the Iraqi tribunal in Baghdad a sample of their handwriting.

## Ill-equipped S Asia looks resigned to bird flu

REUTERS, Mumbai

Bird flu is spreading across one of the most crowded places on earth and, far from being brought under control, looks almost certain to remain a long-term menace in South Asian poultry, officials say.

Since February, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Myanmar have culled hundreds of thousands of chickens and shut poultry farms, yet the virus has kept spreading to new areas.

Surprisingly, no humans are known to have been infected in South Asia, where hundreds of millions in the countryside live with their livestock.

But fears over the H5N1 flu virus have slashed demand for chicken meat and eggs, ruining the livelihoods of countless workers in India's \$7.8 billion poultry industry and even leading to the suicides of nine Indian farmers, an industry group said.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and some Indian officials

say that once the virus takes hold in any country — developed or not — it is just about impossible to eradicate.

"Has any disease which has come in the last 50 years into India gone away?" said H.K. Pradhan, head of India's only animal diseases laboratory that carries out tests for bird flu.

Worse still is a lack of laboratories, trained veterinary personnel and ignorance about the disease.

Officials admit they face an uphill battle against bird flu, which experts fear could mutate and spread easily from person to person, triggering a pandemic.

In a region where many have little or no access to stretched health services, a mutated strain could spread rapidly among humans, leaving countless numbers of people to fend for themselves.

While officials might feel a sense of crisis, the reaction of many ordinary people is slowly turning from panic to cautious resignation.

## Iraq crisis deepens

### 9 Iraqis, 4 US soldiers killed in violence, 12 bodies recovered

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Iraq was thrown into deep political crisis yesterday after leaders cancelled a much-awaited parliament session following their failure to resolve a bitter dispute over the prime minister.

At least nine people were killed in violence across the country, while police recovered 12 bullet-riddled bodies in a notorious Baghdad district.

Four US soldiers were reported killed in fighting west of Baghdad, bringing the US death toll for this month to 47 compared with 31 for all of March.

Four Marines, three from Regimental Combat Team Five and one from the 2/28 Brigade Combat Team died Saturday in Anbar province, the US command said Sunday.

Despite the continuing political feuding, Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari predicted that the new government could be in place by the

end of the month.

"I hope by the end of April, to be very realistic with you," Zebari told the BBC. "We understand the impatience everybody is feeling, at home and abroad, among supporters of the new Iraq and we fully realise that time is of the essence."

The country is still without a new government four months after landmark elections for the first full-term post-Saddam Hussein parliament, as Iraqi leaders squabble over the premiership and other key posts.

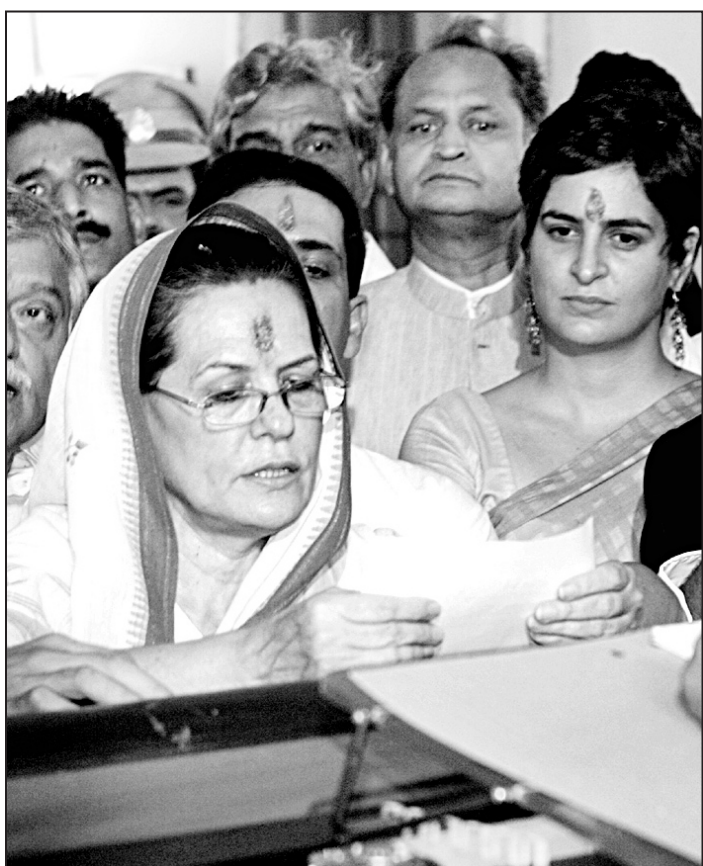


PHOTO: AFP

India's ruling Congress party President and Chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government Sonia Gandhi (C) is watched by her daughter Priyanka (R) as she files her nomination papers in Rae Bareilly yesterday ahead of a by-election scheduled to take place in the Uttar Pradesh constituency on May 8.

## India will not commit to US on atomic testing

REUTERS, New Delhi

India said yesterday it would make no explicit commitment to the United States not to conduct fresh nuclear tests as part of a landmark civilian atomic cooperation agreement.

New Delhi has refused to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), calling it discriminatory, but it did announce a unilateral moratorium on nuclear testing after it conducted atomic tests in 1998.

The civilian nuclear agreement was finalised when President George W. Bush visited India last month.

But a draft of the deal framed since suggested that the pact would be discontinued if India tested a nuclear device, the Indian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

"In preliminary discussions on these elements, India has already conveyed to the US that such a provision has no place in the proposed bilateral agreement," the statement said.