

AMETHI (India), Apr 26: Pramod, ink bithao, yells Mr Rajiv Gandhi. Mr Pramod Tiwari, chief whip of the Congress(I) legislature party in Uttar Pradesh and former minister makes a valiant effort but trying to quieten the noisy and excited bunch of primary school children who had gathered at Bahadurpur block. Finding Mr Tiwari helpless, Mr Rajiv Gandhi takes over, much in the manner of a veteran school teacher, reports UNI.

Bahadurpur block, near Fursatganj market is the starting point of Mr Gandhi's three-day tour of his constituency, according to the agenda distributed by the Congress(I) president's campaign managers. Mr Gandhi is scheduled to have a "a meeting with party workers of Bahadurpur block" but the faces around bore scant resemblance to party workers. Mediamen who had been tailing Mr Gandhi from the moment he got down from his chartered King Air at Fursatganj airport with wife Sonia are told by trusted lieutenant, Captain Satish Sharma, that though the visit is meant to be a series of block-level meetings with the party cadres, the people's uncontrollable enthusiasm at seeing the man who changed the face of Amethi meant party workers had to vie with the public for the boss' attention. And so it was.

After the initial bout of pleasantries with the school children, Mr Gandhi launches enthusiastically into his pet theme — "shir sarkar". "The real issue in Amethi is development. But how can you have development without stability. All the development projects here have been stalled. We have to get Amethi back on the rails. Today every man is crushed by prices. Even those who had risen above the poverty line have been once again pushed under. Why is it like this? There is no drought. In 1987 there was a terrible drought and yet things were not as bad as today.

At one level, prices are going up, and at another, all the poverty-eradication projects have been stalled. Our country is getting weaker and weaker.



AMETHI — Former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi having a heart-to-heart talk with the voters here. Can he woo them really?

Rajiv in Amethi, but misses VIP status

Look at Iraq. They are being pressurised to stop research on certain fronts. Tomorrow, we could be subject to arm-twisting also. Today we have to answer two questions — how can we get Amethi on the road to progress once again, and second, how can we make our country strong. If the country remains backward, Amethi cannot go forward..... And then, what looks to be the favoured slogan: "Malham lagana hai, ansupochna hai...." (we need the healing touch, we need to wipe the tears). The local block pramukh nods in assent. "Sort out the next meeting" Mr Gandhi says, turning towards Mr Satish Sharma and the "captain" rushes out.

Onto the next stop, with Mr Gandhi at the steering wheel of his white Gypsy (the plastic key chain dangling from the ignition point has the cryptic message "If you don't like the way I drive, then stay off the sidewalk"), Mrs Sonia Gandhi by his side and entourage of security guards, local Congress(I) heavyweights, video crews and other assorted mediamen following. With security a mere shadow of what it used to be when he was Prime Minister, he takes the highway, and then the lanes and by lanes. En route he stops, chats with groups of people waiting to have a 'darshan' by the wayside and talk him personally their woes and travails now that Amethi

no longer enjoys the privileged status of being the prime ministerial constituency. "I have never seen him so relaxed," says Captain Satish Sharma. While the twin, turbulent issues of mandal and masjid form the sum and substance of the discourse of political pundits trailing Mr Gandhi, the people waiting in the scorching heat enduring dust and thirst for a word with Mr Gandhi are concerned more with themes of survival. "Most of the petitions we are getting relate to problems of drinking water, power, roads. A common problem is pensions for widows. We have got many complaints from widows, many from the Muslim community, that they are not getting their

pensions," says Mrs Pramila Kapoor, an aide to Mrs Sonia Gandhi who has been given the task of jotting down all complaints at each place that Mr Gandhi stops. The problems are predictably more acute in the villages but even in Amethi town the mood is sullen. Once much envied as the constituency which does not elect a mere member of Parliament, but a Prime Minister, Amethi has fallen on bad days. "Wherever we went, people looked at us with awe when they learnt we were residents of Amethi. We felt proud. Today the situation is different. All the development work which had been started have been stalled. The central government subsidy to

industries in Amethi have been reduced. The three hide power sub-stations which were installed earlier are yet to become operational," says a shopkeeper in the market place of Amethi town.

"None of the government officials pays any heed to the public now. Earlier, because it was the Prime Minister's interests which were involved, things moved, even if people did them out of fear," says Abdul Rehman, a radio mechanic. Paras Nath, a salesman at a clothstore in Amethi town points out that in the days when Mr Gandhi was in power, outdoor patients at the Sanjay Gandhi Hospital at Munshiganj (part of Amethi parliamentary constituency) enjoyed much more facilities. "Patients were X-rayed. Today all those who need X-rays are referred to other places. Earlier we could get the medicines at OPD. Today we have to buy them from the open market. Corruption is much more prevalent. And all around there is slackness."

At Amethi, whether in the urban pockets or in the villages, there is really only one issue — the people want to get back their privileged status of being residents of a Prime Ministerial constituency. He and Mrs Sonia Gandhi stop and eat khir with the pradhan of Daryya village, toss back the flowers showered by children, pat babies clinging onto the arms of mothers. Certain sections of course get the special treatment.

At Mohna, they stop at the house of the local chowdhury, Anwar Hussain. Much to the delight of video crews in attendance, Mr Gandhi releases pigeons (painted in the Congress tricolour supposedly). On the second day of his visit he attends a roza iftar party.

The local Congress(I) MLA, Haji Wasim makes a valiant bid to bolster Mr Gandhi's image among the public which has gathered. The mood is not very pro-Congress(I), going by stray remarks of the audience and oaf there had been anti Mr Gandhi propaganda, confides a party insider to this correspondent.

Off the Record



LAHORE, Pakistan: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (L) with world famous cricket star Imran Khan attend the inauguration ceremony of the Shaukat Memorial Trust Hospital and cancer research centre 25 April. After Khan's mother died of cancer he is raising money to improve the cancer research in his country. —AFP photo.

Glaspie for a teaching career

WASHINGTON: A. Glaspie, the US ambassador to Iraq when the Gulf crisis erupted last summer, is planning to leave the diplomatic service to pursue a career in teaching, according to informed State Department sources, reports AP. The sources, asking not to be identified, said Glaspie, who turns 49 on Friday, hopes to become a college professor. The circumstances of her decision to leave the foreign service after 25 years were not clear. Some of her colleagues believe she was treated unfairly when the department did not take a strong stand on her behalf after the Iraqi government left the impression that she had acquiesced beforehand in Iraq's Aug. 2 invasion of Kuwait.

An Iraqi transcript of Glaspie's conversation with President Saddam Hussein on July 25 quoted her as saying the United States takes "no position" on Iraq's border dispute with Kuwait. Iraq invaded Kuwait a week later.

The department's refusal to respond energetically to the Iraqi account of her conversation with Saddam was widely portrayed as an attempt to make her a scapegoat for the crisis that ensued.

Monkeys ready for sit-in

BANGKOK: The invitations have gone out, and hundreds of monkeys are eagerly awaiting their second annual sit-down brunch courtesy of a hotel owner, reports AP.

Yongyoot Kitwattanasuan, owner of the Lopburi Inn, said Monday he is spending 32,000 dollars to throw the base — complete with waiters, menus and napkins — for about 600 monkeys on Sunday.

Yongyoot offers the vegetarian meal to thank the monkeys for the success of his hotel in Lopburi, a small provincial capital about 70 miles (110 kilometers) north of Bangkok. The monkeys, who stay at the Buddhist shrine of Wat Pra Karn, are symbols of good fortune and a prime attraction for tourists.

He said he sent 60 invitation cards to the monkeys, who grabbed them and leapt back up the shrine. It will be a sit-down affair, if Yongyoot can keep the furry creatures seated at the 50 tables.

A Gorbys fan in FBI grip

INDIANAPOLIS: The FBI wanted to know why Joe Lee was writing to Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev. Now the US Postal Service wants to know what business the FBI had in asking, reports AP.

Lee, who is a longtime celebrity autograph collector, sent a letter last winter to the Soviet president and asked for a signed photograph. On Tuesday, the FBI showed up at his doorstep. "They showed me their badges and said, 'we're with the FBI. Can we come in, please?'" said Lee, 28, a courier service dispatcher.

"They were very polite, very nice. But they got right to the point," Lee said. They said they had reason to believe Lee had been in contact with someone in China or the Soviet Union. Lee then simply showed him his albums full of signed pictures from such celebrities as Elizabeth Taylor, former pro football star Joe Theismann, Sen. Edward Kennedy and Vice President Dan Quayle. "I must have done a good job of convincing them because they didn't take me in," Lee said. He said the agents told him the inquiry was routine. But a query Wednesday from a reporter for the Indianapolis Star about the FBI visit raised the curiosity of local postal inspectors, who wanted to know why the autograph hound was hounded. "In fact, the inspection service is concerned that something was happening there that shouldn't be, and (inspectors said) that we should advise this customer that we would look into this," said US Postal Service spokesman John Henry.



BRIEFLY

Iraq-Israel peace conference: More than half of the Senate called on Saudi Arabia to join an Iraq-Israel peace conference, reports Reuter from Washington.

A letter to King Fahd released by Senators Bob Packwood, R-Ore, and Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., and signed by them and 51 other Senators said, "It is our strong belief that Saudi Arabia's participation in the negotiations with Israel is indispensable for any real peace process to succeed."

The Senators said they were profoundly concerned at a press report the Saudi government had refused to participate fully in a US-sponsored regional peace conference.

Soviet to fight economic crisis: The Soviet Communist Party Central Committee on Thursday proposed a series of "exceptional" measures over a one or two-month period to fight the severe economic crisis. Interfax News Agency reported, says AFP from Moscow.

The steps include the reestablishment or strengthening of the nation's financing, banking and budget systems and stricter state control of foreign trade relations, Interfax said. The committee also urged opposition to "attempts by anti-socialist forces to restore capitalism and to abolish the system on 'Soviet representation'."

Sudan to be excluded from GSP list: President George Bush notified Congress Thursday of his decision to exclude Sudan from the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) list, reports AP.

The GSP status allows countries to export products to the United States tax-free. Bush said he took the decision because Sudan does not respect internationally accepted labor laws.

The United States bestows the GSP status on those countries that it deems respect labor laws.

Iraq will stop making weapons:

A newspaper run by President Saddam Hussein's eldest son Uday said Iraq would stop making weapons and predicted this would soon be announced officially, reports Reuter.

The political daily Babil (Babylon) said rumours in official circles suggested it had been officially agreed that arms manufacturing departments would stop production.

The newspaper did not elaborate. Uday is Editor in Chief of the newspaper, which began publication last month.

Iraq had the most ambitious arms industry in the Arab world before the Gulf war but the US-led coalition said it wrecked many armament factories in the conflict.

Soviet pilot defects to Turkey:

A Soviet Air Force pilot has apparently defected to Turkey aboard a mi-8 transport helicopter, Tass News Agency reported Thursday, reports AP.

Senior Lieutenant I. Gimatov made an unauthorized take-off from an air base on the outskirts of Yerevan, Armenia, on Wednesday and flew to Turkey, the agency said, quoting the Defence Ministry's press service.

Iraq will end petrol rationing:

Iraq will end petrol rationing on President Saddam Hussein's 54th birthday on Sunday, Iraqi Television reported, says Reuter.

The Television showed Saddam visiting Iraq's biggest oil refinery at Baiji, around 200 km (120 miles) north of Baghdad and said half its petrol refining capacity was back on stream as of Thursday.

The refinery, with a capacity of nine million litres a day, is expected to be fully operational from May 15.

The US and its Gulf war allies destroyed most of Iraq's refining capacity of 500,000 barrels per day.

Saddam will be removed, says John:

Prime Minister John Major said Thursday that Iraq will remain a "pariah" in the world community as long as President Saddam Hussein is in power, reports AP.

In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corp., Major said he hoped the Iraqi leader would not be in power for long.

"We made it very clear frequently that while Saddam Hussein remains the ruler of Iraq, Iraq to many people's eyes in the international community will remain a pariah, someone whom it is difficult to do business with, someone whose word it is difficult to take," Major said.

The prime minister said he hoped the Iraqi people would remove Saddam from office.

"I hope in due course he will not be in power and I hope in due course is not too far away," Major said in the interview to be broadcast Friday.

21 parties field 1,346 candidates Pre-poll violence grips Nepal: 2 CP men killed

KATMANDU, Apr 26: Two people were killed in pre-poll clashes between activists of rival political parties, officials said Thursday, reports AP.

Supporters of the Nepal Communist Party and Nepali Congress Party clashed Wednesday in Sinam village in Taplejung district, 240 kilometers (150 miles) east of Katmandu, according to Home Ministry officials.

The fighting resulted in the death of two members of the radical Communist Party, the officials said.

The party follows the Marxist and Leninist ideology.

Nepal Communist Party officials in Katmandu said rival Nepali Congressmen led by Mani Lama disrupted a rally organized by them and stabbed to death two party members.

Officials said some people were injured in the scuffle and were hospitalized. They did not give details of the clash and the number of injured.

The dead persons have been identified as Indra Bahadur Thebe and Roop Man Thebe, the officials said.

It was the second pre-poll campaign clash that resulted in fatalities.

Last week, one person was shot to death in clashes in Khungali village in Rupandehi district, 200 kilometers (125 miles) southwest of Katmandu.

Elections in Nepal are scheduled May 12. It will be the first multi-party democratic transfer of power in more than three decades after absolute monarchy ended in the Himalayan kingdom last year.

He will contest the elections from the National Democratic Party. The party is led by former Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand, who headed a pro-monarchy government until he was replaced last year by the current Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai.

Bhattarai's Nepali Congress Party and its coalition partner, the United Left Front, launched a democratic movement last April to dislodge what they said was a rubber

stamp government backed by an authoritarian divine right monarchy.

Bohara has charged the government of trying to defame his party by accusing them for the violence.

The three key contenders in the May elections are the Nepali Congress, the Nepali Communist Party and the National Democratic Party.

They are among a total of 21 political parties that will field 1,346 candidates in the polls.

Pindi trying to oust Pak Kashmir PM

ISLAMABAD, Apr 26: The Premier of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir said Thursday he would fight what he said was an attempt by the Pakistan government to force him out of office, reports AP.

"I will resist," said Mumtaz Hussain Rathore, who dissolved the assembly and government of Azad (free) Kashmir after apparently losing his assembly majority in late March.

He said the federal government had blocked state funds ahead of elections set for June 29.

Rathore is a member of Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), while state president Sardar Abdul Qayyum Khan is a close associate of her bitter rival, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Sharif met Tuesday with the leaders of most Kashmiri parties but a meeting with Rathore was cancelled at the last minute.

Rathore said the Sharif government had also "sabotaged" an electoral alliance between the PPP and the state president's All Jammu-Kashmir Muslim Conference.

Qayyum's son, Ardar Khalique, had joined Rathore's caretaker government but was "compelled to quit," Rathore said.

Circulating a copy of what he said was a confidential letter from Islamabad, he said the federal government had also curtailed his powers and imposed a ban on the appointment and transfer of state officials.

These measures proved the government's intention to "get rid of me," he said.



BEIJI (Iraq): Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (L) waves to workers during a visit to the Baiji refinery, the biggest oil processing plant in Middle East. The Baiji refinery currently under repair is located 220 km outside Baghdad. At centre is the Iraqi Defense Minister Hussein Kamel. —AFP photo.

Fined for issuing phony alert on US N-attack

ST. LOUIS, (Missouri), Apr 26: US communications officials fined a radio station 25,000 dollars for issuing a phony alert about a nuclear attack during the Gulf war, reports AP.

"Given the seriousness of the offense and (the station's) two-hour delay in correcting the misinformation conveying the broadcast, a substantial penalty is warranted," said the Federal Communications Commission in a statement Wednesday.

Kshe, a rock and roll station, suspended Disc Jockey John Ulett for a week after he announced on January 29 that the United States was under nuclear attack and played a sound like the emergency broadcast system signal in the background.

Ulett said he used the fake alert to demonstrate the terror of a nuclear attack because listeners had called in to voice their support for such an attack, which they believed would put a quick end to the Gulf war.

The station broadcast an explanation and an apology for the alarm later in the day.

Punjab Governor's PS shot dead

CHANDIGARH, Apr 26: Rattan Lal Sharma, Private Secretary to the Punjab Governor and an official of Punjab Bhawan, New Delhi, were shot dead here today, reports PTI.

Rattan Lal Sharma and his colleague just left their residence in the official car when two car borne militants began firing indiscriminately in Sector 22 killing Sharma on the spot.

Baghdad agrees to pullout from Zakho, says UN envoy

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 26: Iraq's UN Ambassador said on Thursday that Baghdad had agreed to withdraw most of its forces from the northern town of Zakho after Washington warned it would use force if necessary to make the area safe for Kurdish refugees, reports Reuter.

US President George Bush called the Iraqi decision a "very, very good development," and White House spokesman Martin Fitzwater said it appeared Iraq planned to comply with the ultimatum.

"It is a good development. We're glad they are accepting this plan," Fitzwater told reporters.

The statement by Iraq's UN Ambassador, Abdul Amir Al-

Anbari, was in response to a US warning that Washington would use force if Iraqi forces did not leave Zakho, where camps are being set up by the United States, Britain and France for Kurdish refugees after their rebellion was crushed.

Senior US officials had made clear the Iraqis could face military force to leave Zakho if they did not pull out voluntarily by Saturday, in order to "relieve the threat that exists there," in the words of Fitzwater.

Iraqi security forces, numbering several hundred, were told to pull back several miles (kilometers) from Zakho, which is just south of the Turkish border. US Defence

Secretary Dick Cheney said the Allies were determined to protect Kurds in northern Iraq.

"There should be no doubt in their (the Iraqis') minds about what the outcome would be" if they chose to challenge

the allied order with force, Cheney told a news conference.

"We've got sufficient forces in the area, so there is no question. We would prevail," he said.

Pentagon officials said 2,200 US, British, French and Dutch troops were in northern Iraq and several thousand more American troops could be moved in quickly.