

Women MPs to fight for 3rd seat in Indian parliament

NEW DELHI, Nov 19: Women members of parliament in India — where "may you be the mother of a hundred sons" is a traditional blessing — will resume a battle for a third of the seats in parliament when it reopens Wednesday, reports AFP.

Women MPs across the political spectrum say they will resurrect a bill to ensure greater representation in parliament and state assemblies after it failed to reach a vote in September, turning instead into a slanging match between the sexes.

"We have to force the issue. The male mentality and male dominance cannot go on forever," said Sushma Swaraj, spokeswoman of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party).

"Male-style politics, marked by corruption and inefficiency, must end," she said. "Women are more honest and better workers because they are god-fearing."

Swaraj, quoted heavily from the ancient Hindu text, the *Manusmriti*, to show that women in ancient India held the reins of society.

"We held the finance, education and defence portfolios," she said citing Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth.

Saraswati — the goddess of learning and Durga, a militant goddess who saved the world from perdition by slaying a demon.

"Now we are given soft portfolios," said Swaraj, who headed the Information Ministry during India's shortest-lived government, which lasted 13 days in May.

"There will be a sea change in parliament and the country when women gain a voice," she said. "Years of suffering and wrongs will be righted."

Communist MP Geeta Mukherjee, 72, who heads a 30-member all-party parliamentary committee inspecting the proposed bill, said she was hopeful it would be passed without hitches this time round.

"Many men think it is anti-men but it is a neutral proposition which benefits both sexes," she said.

"Can you think of any major national movement, beginning from the independence struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi to recent agrarian uprisings, where women have not played a prominent, if not the leading, role?"

Renuka Choudhry, a member of the Telugu Desam Regional Party, said the earlier attempt by 39 women deputies, outnumbered 14 to one in the 545-seat lower house, to rush through the proposal in one session may have been misguided.

India had one of the world's first female leaders in Indira Gandhi, a contemporary of Israel's Golda Meir and Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka.

Indian court orders Miss World beauty contest to go ahead

BANGALORE, Nov 19: An Indian state court ruled today the final stages of the Miss World beauty contest should go ahead as long as there was no nudity or obscenity, reports AFP.

Two judges of the Karnataka high court made the ruling after a petition was brought against the pageant being held in India for the first time and which culminated at the weekend with judging and crowning ceremonies.

The petition, brought by Hindu feminist K N Shashikala who has threatened to burn herself to death in protest, argued the event was vulgar, a threat to Indian culture and would help transform women into commodities.

The court, however, said the event could not be declared illegal as long as Indian laws were obeyed, there was no nudity or obscenity and no liquor was served.

The two judges also ruled that opponents to the event should not be stopped from "peaceful, democratic protest" and that "minimum force" should be used to police the pageant.

The 50-page judgement was hailed by both the organisers of the beauty contest and its opponents as a victory.

Many feminists and Hindu groups oppose the event on the grounds that it degrades women and is a threat to Indian values.

A spokesman for the Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Ltd. (ABCL) said: "It's a good order. We are happy and relieved, although there will be tension until the thing is over."

"We have to be prepared to all contingencies, we have to protect the participants but also the audience."

Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jasssem al-Thani shakes hands with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat (R) after their meeting in Gaza, on Monday. Al-Thani threatened to freeze his country's normalisation with Israel if progress is not made in talks with the Palestinians, as he made the first trip by a Qatari official to the Gaza Strip.

UN seeks \$260m emergency aid for refugees in E Zaire

GENEVA, Nov 19: The United Nations urgently appealed to donors on Monday to provide 260 million dollars to fund relief for hundreds of thousands of refugees in eastern Zaire, reports Reuters.

The UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), releasing the flash appeal by UN agencies, said it would respond to the most urgent needs of refugees, returnees and the war displaced.

"The international community is faced with one of the largest humanitarian crises and is called upon to respond generously and without delay to this appeal," the DHA said in a statement at the UN's European headquarters in Geneva.

The sudden flood of 500,000 Rwandan Hutus to Africa's most crowded country has caught aid agencies off-guard and will put new pressures on western donors to assist them in home communities.

Until last week, the focus of relief efforts was on securing humanitarian corridors in eastern Zaire. Now agencies are scrambling to cope with an unprecedented number of returnees.

Ahead of the launch of the emergency appeal, UN officials in Geneva worked throughout the weekend revising budgets.

Five could say where the remaining 500,000 refugees scattered in the region would be in a few weeks' time.

A million Hutus fled Rwanda in 1994 after a rebel Tutsi army overran the country following the Hutu-led genocide of Tutsis.

In east Zaire, they set up to cinemas, brothels, shops and hotels in teeming tent cities where birth rates were among the world's highest.

In some camps, repatriation rates were so low that at times, the handful of returnees were being driven to the Rwandan border in air-conditioned, chauffeur-driven UN cars instead of buses.

Japan, the only nation to have been attacked with an atomic bomb, does not possess nuclear weapons and opposes nuclear testing. Several prominent Japanese politicians have travelled to the South Pacific to protest France's tests. France has since promised to suspend future nuclear testing.

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