

International



Nguyen Thi Phuong Mai, 92, is helped to cast her vote at a polling station in Hanoi during Vietnam's national elections Sunday. Voters will elect a new 450-member National Assembly for a five-year term. Out of 663 candidates, only 112 are non-communist party members, and only 11 were self-nominated.

— AP/UNB photo

40m Vietnamese cast votes in National Assembly polls

HANOI, July 20: Vietnam held elections today for an enlarged 450 seat National Assembly, but little was being left to chance as the country's 40 million voters went to the polls, reports Reuter.

Cross Hanoi residents were woken to the sound of stirring music from the city-wide megaphone network and message instructing people on how to fulfil their civil duties.

Outside the city's 1,540 polling stations, middle aged women in traditional silk dress encouraged passers by to participate in the official atmosphere of festivity.

Little was being left to chance in what amounted to elections for a parliament with limited powers and no opposition.

All 663 candidates were officially approved. Most are members of the ruling Communist Party, and 202 are women complying accurately with state directives aimed at ensuring

they occupy around 30 per cent of parliamentary seats.

Nonetheless Vietnam's Communist Party chief, Do Muoi, told reporters at an early morning voting session that democracy was growing in Vietnam every day. He also brushed aside local news paper claims of official cheating.

"We have conducted so far nine assembly elections, and no cheating has been noticed," he said, adding: "And the candidates do not have to spend money to buy votes."

The total budget for Sunday's nationwide elections and campaigning was about 17,000 dollars amounting to a little over 25 dollars per candidate.

Vietnam's National Assembly elections are held every five years, and are touted as a mechanism aimed at allowing ordinary people a say in the selection of grass-roots parliamentary representatives chosen by the state.

The assembly meets twice

each year, for a month, to discuss government legislation and vote on nominees for Cabinet and top state positions.

It has traditionally been seen as compliant, but in an unusually direct editorial today a Ho Chi Minh City News Journal said changing times in Vietnam required a more mature legislature. And one more in touch with popular opinion.

"As it integrates into the global community, Vietnam cannot feel satisfied with where it is now," the Tuoi Tre newspaper said.

The opinions of National Assembly deputies could be more powerful if new ideas are expressed, and if these are a result of refined wisdom and the initiatives of many people."

The new assembly is scheduled to meet for the first time in September when it will vote on the appointment of successors to President Le Due Anh, 76, and Prime Minister Do Muoi, 74 and approve a new Cabinet.

ISLAMABAD, July 20: Pakistan will make a glittering start to its golden jubilee of independence celebrations next month as millions across the country will light oil lamps and candles on houses and buildings, reports AFP.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will lay a wreath at the Karachi mausoleum of the founding father of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, on August 14, when Pakistan celebrates its 50th Independence Day.

He will also hoist the national flag and address the nation from the tomb in a live broadcast on state-run television and radio.

A special joint session of Pakistan's Senate and National Assembly will be held in Islamabad in the afternoon, and Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad will be invited to deliver the keynote address.

The programme of nationwide festivities was being planned, officials said, but they emphasised it would be a modest affair because Pakistan's economy was ailing.

"All our energies have to be concentrated on rebuilding the economy shattered by reckless policies of the previous government," an official attached to a national celebration committee said.

Sharif, who assumed office in February, has made economic revival his top priority after inheriting what he called an economy brought to the verge of collapse by his predecessor.

Former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, sacked in November by President Farooq Ahmed Leghari for alleged misrule, was blamed for ruining the economy, a charge she denied, accusing Leghari of sacking her in a personal vendetta.

NEW DELHI, July 20: Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral said today he was finding it difficult to fight the cancer of corruption in the country, reports AFP.

"Corruption, I say with great regret and pain, has seeped into the veins of this nation," Gujral told a domestic television channel here.

"I am not tolerating corruption, but I have not discovered that magic wand where I can say no corruption and there will be no corruption tomorrow," he said.

"It is not only those who are in ministerial positions who are corrupt. Of course they are (corrupt), and something drastic has to be done about them."

The main problem is people in the street suffer."

Gujral said his weekly meetings with members of the public at his residence helped him understand how much corruption had grown in India.

"I feel very hurt when somebody tells me 'I want an electricity connection but they (officials) want money (bribe).'"

WASHINGTON, July 20:

President Bill Clinton on Saturday hailed the IRA's decision to resume a ceasefire in northern Ireland and said the United States would work to nurture this "moment of great possibility," reports Reuter.

"This declaration, which we expect to be implemented unequivocally and permanently, can open the door to inclusive negotiations to achieve a just and lasting settlement," Clinton said in a statement issued by the White House.

The Irish Republican Army on Saturday announced a new truce in its 28-year war against British rule in northern Ireland. It was to take effect at midday today (Sunday) and allow Sinn Fein spokesmen a seat at peace talks.

Clinton, who has been more directly involved than any other US President in trying to end the violence in northern Ireland, publicly and privately has been pressing the IRA to reinstate a 17-month ceasefire

it ended in February 1996.

"This is a moment of great possibility," Clinton said. "As northern Ireland's political leaders begin to shape their future, I urge them to do so on the basis of the principles of fairness and compromise that underpin all democratic systems."

Declaration of a ceasefire paves the way for Sinn Fein to enter full-scale Northern Ireland negotiations that Britain and Ireland say must get underway by mid-September.

Earlier the IRA ordered its guerrillas to observe a truce in their battle against Britain at noon Sunday, improving prospects for a fresh start in Anglo-Irish efforts to end conflict in British Northern Ireland.

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