

BJP hopes turmoil will catapult them to power

Cong (I) confident of forming alternative govt

NEW DELHI, Nov 30: The Congress (I) Party, which forced Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's resignation two days ago, said today it was confident of forming an alternative government, reports AFP.

"We are still engaged in our efforts," Congress spokesman Vithal Gadgil said. "Yes, we are confident. This can happen either tomorrow or the day after."

Gadgil's comments came a day after a colleague hinted the party could again prop up Gujral's United Front coalition if it agreed to drop a partner, the DMK, linked to Sri Lanka Tamil guerrillas blamed for the 1991 assassination of former Congress prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

The Congress on Friday withdrew support to Gujral's seven-month multi-party government after failing to pressurise the prime minister to axe the DMK from the coalition.

The Congress then staked claim to form a coalition of its

own, counting on support from sections of the United Front. But Front partners announced they planned to stick together.

On Saturday a Congress leader, J B Patnaik, said in an apparent climb down: "My party has an open mind on a better alternative offered by the United Front, but without the DMK."

Another party leader, Pranab Mukherjee, admitted the Congress game plan was not proceeding smoothly.

"We are still trying," said Mukherjee, a confidant of party president Sitaram, Kesri. "However, if the United Front don't cooperate, the arithmetic will not work out."

The Congress has only 138 seats in the 545-member parliament and would require around 140 more members to form a viable government. Hindu nationalists, the largest bloc in parliament, have 162 seats.

Former prime minister H D

Deve Gowda, whose previous coalition government was toppled by the Congress in April, on Sunday said the country was heading for fresh elections.

"A (new) poll is inevitable," Deve Gowda said.

Meanwhile, Hindu nationalists — feared by some, admired by others — are hoping India's political turmoil will catapult them to power in the world's largest democracy.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian people's party), the largest party in last year's hung parliament, is hoping to bag even more seats if the country is forced back to the polls for the second time in less than two years.

Even the BJP's fiercest critics, the communists admit that voters' disenchantment with the other parties may give the nationalists a decisive edge.

The present scenario is certainly advantageous to the BJP," said Doraiswamy Raja, a Communist leader.

The BJP is unlikely to win a majority on its own in any fresh elections although it may again be the largest single party, analysts say.

The jockeying for parliamentary position follows the collapse on Friday of the country's centre-left coalition. Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral and his cabinet resigned after the influential Congress Party withdrew support from Gujral's fragile minority government.

The BJP is one of India's best-organised parties, with an estimated membership of 20 million.

The party has grown tremendously since elections in 1989, when it boosted its tally in parliament from a mere two members to 89 and propped up India's first, short-lived coalition government.

Its presence in parliament swelled to 199 MPs two years later when it fought the polls on its own, and to 162 last year.

China for use of landmines for self-defence

BEIJING, Nov 30: China said it needed to use landmines for self-defence, reaffirming its objection to a treaty banning the weapons, reports Reuter.

Although China supported reasonable restrictions over the use of landmines, it reserved the right to use them on its own soil to defend its border. Xinhua news agency quoted Foreign Ministry spokesman Tang Guoguang as saying.

The general principle of solving the landmine problem should be one that takes balanced account of both humanitarian concerns and the legitimate military needs of sovereign states for self-defence," Tang was quoted as saying.

China and the United States have objected to a deal reached by around 80 nations in September to ban the use, stockpiling and production of Anti-Personnel Landmines (APLs), which are blamed for killing more than 25,000 people around the world each year.

An anti-landmine treaty is due to be signed at a conference beginning in Ottawa on Tuesday, but Tang said: "China does not intend to sign this convention."



Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, right, meets with the Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, centre, in Baghdad Saturday. President Saddam Hussein praised Russia on Saturday for its role in ending the three-week standoff with the United Nations over weapons inspections. Others unidentified. — AP/UNB photo



Jordan's King Hussein (L) kisses his American-born wife, Queen Noor, after the monarch addressed the opening session of the newly elected Parliament with a speech outlining his policy on Saturday. Hussein said the Israeli people wanted peace with the Arabs and that their resolve will win. — AP/UNB photo

Gunmen massacre 15 in Colombia: Fifteen people died in two massacres reported on Saturday, bringing to three the number of mass killings reported in Colombia in the past 24 hours, AFP reports from Bogota.

Gunmen broke into two homes in shantytowns in the Andean city of Medellin late Friday, firing indiscriminately, survivors said. A Medellin police colonel blamed the slaughter on a territorial dispute between street gangs selling hallucinogenic drugs. Five people were killed in one home, including a five-year-old girl and six people were injured. Three died in the second home.

Jiang arrives in Mexico: Chinese President Jiang Zemin arrived in Cancun resort city Saturday after flying from Vancouver, Canada, the official news agency Notimex reported, AFP says from Cancun.

He will spend a day resting before an official visit to Mexico begins on Monday when he travels to the capital. Jiang's wife and delegation of 180 people were met by Quintana Roo state Governor Mario Villanueva Madrid, Mexico's Ambassador to China, Luis Wibe Alfaro and China's representative in Mexico, Shen Yunan.

Radio station closed down in Bosnia: Police loyal to Bosnian Serb President Biljana Plavsic closed down Saturday a radio station run by supporters of her political rivals the Beta news agency reported, AFP says from Banja Luka.

Local journalists confirmed the crackdown on the Sveti Georgije (Saint George) radio station, a private concern based in Plavsic's stronghold of Banja Luka, which began broadcasting Monday.

Policeman killed in Moscow: A tax police officer shot and killed a city policeman Saturday after the two were involved in a minor traffic accident in central Moscow Interfax reported, citing a police official, AFP reports from Moscow.

After the accident, the two, who had identified themselves to one another, began to quarrel. The dispute escalated until the tax police officer drew his service revolver and shot the city policeman. The city policeman died at the scene.

India buys 1 sat from Arabsat: Arab satellite operator Arabsat said on Saturday it had sold the Indian government a satellite in a deal worth 40 million US dollars, Reuter reports from Dubai.

An Arabsat statement said the deal for one of Arabsat's first generation of satellites was signed in New Delhi on November 26. The final handover of the satellite would take place at the beginning of January 1998, it said.

Former mayor of Detroit dies: Coleman Young, the first black man to serve as Mayor of Detroit, died Saturday of respiratory failure after a long battle with lung disease, a relative said, AFP reports from Detroit.

Young died at about 1:55 PM (1955 GMT) Saturday at Sinai Hospital, where he had been hospitalised since July 24. "He was hanging on to life," said his cousin and longtime friend Claud Young in a news conference Saturday. "He loved life and he was not willing to give in until he had lived it."

9 feared dead in Chinese coal mine: Up to nine miners are missing and feared dead after a gas explosion ripped through a coal mine in China's Shaanxi province, local officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

There was an explosion in the Jiaoping coal mine on November 27 at 7:35 in the morning," said an official from the Tongchuan Coal Bureau contacted by telephone. "Twenty miners were rescued, but eight or nine people are still missing," he added.

Gerry Adams to meet Blair
Dec 11

LONDON, Nov 30: Gerry Adams, the Northern Irish nationalist leader once so reviled by London that his voice was banned from British airwaves is to meet Prime Minister Tony Blair at his Downing Street office next month, officials said on Saturday, reports Reuters.

The December 11 meeting will be the first in London between an Irish Republican leader and a British Prime Minister since 1921.

It represents a sea-change in relations between the British government and Adams's party Sinn Fein, which wants a united Ireland.

Narayanan no longer ceremonial after fall of UF govt

NEW DELHI, Nov 30: For years, India's president did little more than greet visiting foreign dignitaries. But Sunday, he held the country's political future in his hands, and the men who would be prime minister lined up to make their cases to him, reports AP.

After the fall on Friday of the third Indian prime minister in less than two years, it is up to President K R Narayanan to decide whether any party or coalition has the strength to form a new government. Or he could call new parliamentary elections, leaving it to voters instead of backroom politics to decide who should rule the world's largest — and seemingly

most fractious — democracy.

Narayanan was to meet Sunday with leaders of Parliament's largest party, the Bharatiya Janata with 162 of the assembly's 545 seats.

Monday, he's scheduled separate talks with Congress, the second largest party with 138 seats; and the ousted United Front, whose 14 members hold 178 seats. It was not clear when he would make his decision.

No one has the 273 seats needed to govern alone following 1996 elections in which voters registered their disgust after a series of political corruption scandals by giving no party a parliamentary majority. Ideological differences and rival

ambitions have kept politicians from forming a stable coalition ever since.

The United Front government was supported by Congress even though it was not a member of the coalition. Congress is looking for partners after withdrawing support from the Front on Friday, accusing one of its members, the Dravida Progressive Party, of supporting rebels linked to the 1992 assassination of Congress leader and former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

To take power, one of India's party bosses must find favour the president, once seen as their rubber stamp. Unlike members

of parliament, India's constitutional head of state is not elected by the public, but instead chosen by about 5,000 state and federal legislators — meaning he owes his position to the bosses.

When no single party commands a parliamentary majority, the constitution gives the president discretion in deciding who should lead the government. The president, an otherwise ceremonial figure, also has the power to dismiss a government deemed unstable.

When President Shanker Dayal Sharma's term expired in July, politicians embraced Narayanan, then vice president and a member of Parliament's

upper house, as one of the few leaders untainted by scandal.

He took office in July, the first Indian president from the nation's lowest class, once known as untouchable.

Narayanan said then his election marked the dawn of a time in which the concerns of the common man would be addressed by politicians.

He has shown he's an independent thinker with little patience for leaders who put party politics over the rule of law.

Last month, Narayanan asked the United Front to reconsider a decision to dismiss a state government headed by political rivals.



A masked Hamas member is carried away after being injured by the rubber bullet fired by the Israeli troops in the West Bank city of Bethlehem, Saturday. The clash broke out as about 2000 Palestinians marched near the Jewish shrine of Rachel's Tomb. — AP/UNB photo

PA asks for full UN membership

JERUSALEM, Nov 30: The Palestinian Authority (PA) asked for full membership in the United Nations on Saturday as Israel celebrated the 50th anniversary of the 1947 UN resolution calling for Palestine to be divided into a Jewish and an Arab state, reports AP.

"Our delegation submitted the request to Secretary General Kofi Annan," Marwan Kanafani, a spokesman for Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, said Saturday.

The 1947 resolution was a prelude to the establishment of the State of Israel, which the Palestinians view as a historic injustice.

Arafat, in a message to Annan, said the anniversary would be an appropriate occasion for the UN to grant full membership to the Palestinians also, Israeli army radio reported.

The Arab countries voted against the 1947 resolution.

Czech PM decides to resign

PRAGUE, Nov 30: Czech Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus said today he was going to resign along with the entire government and that he would not seek to be part of any new cabinet, reports Reuter.

"I decided to resign and it means the whole government will resign, the government as a whole formally, I will hand in my resignation to the president of the republic, Klaus told a news conference after an 11-hour meeting of the leadership of his Civic Democratic Party (ODS).

"I announce that I will not be a member of the next government, which will undoubtedly be created in some period of time," he added that he would remain as chairman of the ODS until an extraordinary party congress is called within 14 days.

China firmly backs just cause of Palestinians

BEIJING, Nov 30: Chinese Premier Li Peng said yesterday that the Chinese government will firmly support the just cause of the Palestinians and the Middle East peace process, reports Xinhua.

Li made the remarks in a telegram sent to a conference marking the international day of solidarity with the Palestinian people, which opened in New York yesterday.

Li said: "Firmly and consistently supporting the Palestinian people in their just cause, the Chinese government and people will, as always support the Middle East peace process" and continue to render assistance to the economic reconstruction in the Palestinian autonomous area.

The Chinese premier said, "Thanks to the powerful backing of the international community and the concerted efforts of all parties concerned, the peace talks have made important progress and the Palestinian people have finally realised self-rule in their own territory."

The Hebron agreement signed early this year, he added, is another step forward towards fully restoring the legitimate national rights of the Palestinians.

Cambodian govt warns US against aiding Khmer

PHNOM PENH, Nov 30: The Cambodian regime warned the United States Sunday against aligning with Khmer Rouge terrorists by sympathising with loyalists to ousted co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh, reports AP.

In a five-page letter to US President Bill Clinton, Cambodia's strongman Hun Sen and his recently appointed co-premier Ung Huot said Ranariddh and his supporters have long received financial, political and military support from the outlawed guerrilla group.

The United States government cannot ignore the above well-known facts and continue to support, against US laws, a group of expatriate Cambodians who are known to have had a long association with the Khmer Rouge," the two leaders wrote.

The Nov 27 letter seen Sunday called Ranariddh and his allies the "more human face" of the Khmer Rouge. It accused them of encouraging the tensions that led to a bloody July 5-6 coup and Ranariddh's subsequent ousting.

Ranariddh was illegally smuggling weapons into Phnom Penh in the weeks preceding the fighting and was plotting his own takeover before his plans were unearthed by Hun Sen, they wrote, adding that the former premier had long been negotiating with rebel hard-liners.

The Khmer Rouge — recently designated by the US as one of 30 foreign terrorist organisations — were responsible for the deaths of up to 2 million Cambodians during their 1975-79 genocide reign.

They continued to wage guerrilla warfare against the government after their overthrow in 1979 from the country's northern and northwestern provinces.

Off the Record Exclusive party for primates

LOPBURI, Thailand: An annual monkeys food party thrown in the Thai province of Lopburi on Sunday proved a big draw, even though most of the primates stood up their human hosts and eager tourists, reports Reuter.

Ignoring table manners, only a handful of primates dived for the platters containing nine kinds of food including bananas, nuts and cakes served up by the provincial organisers of the food festival.

Most others chose to hang around buildings, on telephone poles, pagodas or just stroll the streets instead of rushing for the exotic food prepared in their honour.

Despite the virtual no-show, the hundreds of tourists who had turned up to watch the event were so moved by the bond between man and animal that they dug deep into their pockets and donated money to charity in boxes set up at strategic spots by the organisers.

Lopburi province, about 150 kms (94 miles) north of Bangkok, is the only one in Thailand where monkeys have cohabited freely with man for decades.

"Last year the province gained more than 1.6 billion baht (40 million dollars) from the tourist industry and monkeys played a major role in that. This is because the first thing tourists come here for is to see the monkeys," Eumporn Jiragawisul, director of the local tourism authority of Thailand office, told the news agency.

More than 600 monkeys live in close proximity to people in Lopburi province in the central, ancient Hindu-Buddhist Brahmanic shrine, ageing Khmer-style pagodas and at the local market.

Function relating to politics, HR illegal!

HONG KONG: A top Hong Kong hotel has sent out booking guidelines which brand the discussion of politics and human rights an "illegal" activity, a newspaper said Sunday, reports Reuter.

Furama Hotel Enterprises Ltd's Furama Hotel, which provides rooms for seminars and meetings, classifies functions relating to politics and human rights as illegal activities, the South China Morning Post reported.

"The hotel management declines to accept any bookings for functions which relate to politics, human rights or any other such sensitive issues," the newspaper quoted a paragraph under the heading "illegal activities" as saying.

Drama in real life

BRISBANE, Australia: A 35-year-old man told Sunday how he punched a crocodile to free himself from its jaws during an attack in far north Queensland, reports AFP.

Police said Ron Bakes suffered cuts to his head, arm, back and right shoulder after being bitten by the two-metre (seven foot) crocodile off a beach at Yorkeys Knob, near Cairns on Friday evening.

He was at a beach party when he decided to take a swim to cool off and was attacked in waist-deep water.

"I dived in and it attacked me," Bakes told the Sunday Telegraph.

"I didn't think I'd be here today. It tried to drag me under in a death roll. He was really going for it. It had half my head and shoulder. I was freaking out."

UN casts doubt on Cambodian election

PHNOM PENH, Nov 30: A United Nations envoy said Sunday the Cambodian government's failure to punish acts of political violence did not bode well for next year's elections, reports AP.

UN observers arrived in Phnom Penh Sunday to monitor the return of politicians who fled Cambodia following a July coup by Second Prime Minister Hun Sen, and who now want to participate in elections scheduled for May 1998.

Thomas Hammarberg said he would meet with government officials during his weeklong visit.