

Fresh polls likely to throw up another hung parliament

India's 3 main power blocs look for new allies & alliances

NEW DELHI, Dec 7: With elections barely three months away, India's myriad political parties are exploring marriages of convenience in a bid to strike it rich at the polls, reports AFP.

The country's three main power blocs are looking for new allies and alliances amid widespread fears that the fresh elections, due in February or March, will throw up another hung parliament.

Hindu nationalists, waiting in the wings to rule India, are scouting for regional partners who could give them strength in areas where they have been unable to expand their influence.

The Congress (I), which looks bruised after toppling the coalition government of Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral, has virtually conceded that it needs crutches to fight the electoral battle.

Gujral's centre-left United Front coalition also faces fissures.

The new polls for the Indian parliament were announced last

week after Gujral resigned on November 28 when Congress took back support to his minority coalition it had propped up in April.

The BJP (Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian People's Party) will need new allies in a bid to grab a majority in parliament," said GVL Narasimha Rao, an election analyst.

The BJP now has four regional friends. But they had only 193 seats in the outgoing 545-member parliament.

A party or an alliance needs to control just over half the House for a stable government.

"In all probability there will be another hung parliament," election analyst Deepak Kumar told AFP. "All the parties know this. And they are preparing for the eventuality."

On Saturday, the 112-year-old Congress, India's oldest party, said it favoured a broad secular front to take on the BJP, which is tipped to be the front-

runner in the polls.

"If the secular forces are ready to co-ordinate with us, we would welcome it," Congress president Sitaran Keshri said.

Indian Defence Minister Mulyayam Singh Yadav, a key member of Gujral's United Front, has already indicated he would join hands with the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state.

Yadav was once a bitter Congress enemy. A similar tiff between the Congress and a former foe, Laloo Prasad Yadav, is likely in the neighbouring state of Bihar.

In West Bengal, a populous Communist citadel bordering Bangladesh, one Congress stalwart has warned of an unlikely alliance with Hindu nationalists to fight the Marxists.

The BJP is otherwise considered an "untouchable" by both the Congress and United Front for pursuing an aggressive pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim agenda.

A section of Gujral's Janata Dal (People's Party), however,

may sail with the BJP in the eastern state of Orissa to jointly take on the Congress.

In the country's deep south, two Tamil parties — both members of the United Front — may part ways following differences over the links of one with Sri Lankan Tamil guerrillas.

The conservative All India Muslim Conference could dump the Congress, its traditional partner in the southern state of Kerala, and opt for a coalition led by Communists.

The Hindu militant Shiv Sena, which rules Bombay, will stick to its alliance with the BJP in western India, but battle it out against the latter elsewhere in the country.

"These shifting alliances are the outcome of a desperate desire by people to retain their seats in parliament," said a Gujral supporter here.

"At times, it looks as if people are motivated only by self-interest, not ideology."



US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, right, and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat address the press after their meeting at the US mission in Geneva, Switzerland, on Saturday.

— AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Imran trying to free 2 Britons: Pakistani former cricket star, Imran Khan is working on behalf of Britain to try to secure the release of two British hostages detained in Chechnya, the Sunday Times reported. AFP says from London.

After being contacted by the British Embassy in Islamabad, Imran Khan went to Chechnya secretly in October but failed to make contact with the two hostages, Camilla Carr and Joh James who disappeared five months ago.

350 kg opium seized in Myanmar: The Myanmar authorities seized over 350 kilograms of opium in the Kalaw area of the country's Shan state Wednesday, the official new light of Myanmar Newspaper reported yesterday. Xinhua says from Yangon.

The opium was seized by the military intelligence unit, the local anti-drug squad and police when they intercepted a car at a check-point.

Izetbegovic meets King Fahd: Bosnia's Muslim President Alija Izetbegovic and Saudi Arabia's King Fahd met in Riyadh Saturday to discuss bilateral relations, the official Saudi news agency SPA reported. AFP says from Riyadh.

The agency provided no further details of the visit by Izetbegovic, who heads Bosnia's collegiate presidency. Saudi Arabia supported Bosnia's Muslims during the Bosnian war. Izetbegovic is due to go to Tehran on December 11 to attend the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit in Tehran, his office announced Friday.

Kidnapping on rise in Colombia: Kidnapping in Colombia rose nine per cent this year as a total of 1,546 people were abducted, the private foundation Free Country said Saturday. AFP reports from Bogota.

Left-wing guerrillas kidnapped 801 of those people, most of them political candidates running in the October 26 elections, the foundation said in a report. The ultranationalist National Liberation Army (ELN) claimed responsibility for 391 kidnappings; the Communist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) for 364 and the much smaller pro-Cuban Popular Liberation Army (EPL) for 31.

Saudi minister in Yemen: Saudi minister without portfolio Muhsin Ibn Mohammad al-Ayabani arrived in Aden on Saturday to meet with Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Saleh on border issues, according to Yemeni officials. AFP reports from Sanaa.

The officials said the meeting in the largest city in the south of Yemen was to focus on ways "to resolve the question of the border" between the two countries. A Western diplomat in Sanaa said the visit was intended to ease tensions over their border which the two countries have been trying to delineate since 1995.

Albright meets Netanyahu in Paris

Israeli jets pound Hezbollah posts in South Lebanon

SIDON, Lebanon, Dec 7: Israeli warplanes on Saturday afternoon launched a raid on an area of South Lebanon known as a stronghold of the Hezbollah guerrillas, Lebanese police said, reports AFP.

They fired two air-to-ground missiles only minutes apart on the hills of Iqlim at Touffah at around 3:00 pm (1200 GMT), the police said, without saying if there were any casualties.

An Israeli army spokesman in Tel Aviv confirmed the air raid.

"Our planes attacked positions held by terrorists. Their

shots were extremely precise and they then returned unharmed to their bases," the spokesman said.

The raid is the 86th this year according to Israeli air force figures.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Paris Saturday after making "headway" with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Geneva amid efforts to revive the moribund Middle East peace process.

More than 8,500 combatants on both sides have been killed or wounded in the military drive for the 76 kilometre (45-mile) road to the northern peninsula of Jaffna, the former rebel citadel, according to conflicting claims.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) staged their fourth major counter offensive against the security forces last week, inflicting heavy losses on the military as well as taking big casualties themselves.

The Defence Ministry said the operation code-named "sure victory" launched on May 13 had covered two thirds of the way and had only another 20 kilometres (12 miles) to go. The last kilometres are proving to be the toughest.

Justice Minister GL Peiris said the military campaign had reached a "critical stage" and the government did not expect any escalation of war-related expenditure.

He told reporters two weeks ago that the security forces hoped to corner the Tigers with the current offensive which is increasingly proving to be the bloodiest for the security forces.

Two army divisions, or 20,000 soldiers, are fighting to open the land route to Jaffna which is currently supplied through expensive and dangerous air and sea transport.

"Once this MSR (Main Supply Route) is open it will make a drastic impact on the fortunes of war," said Peiris who is also the architect of the constitu-

tionary reforms aimed at ending the conflict.

His reform plan suffered a deadly blow last month when Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran rejected the peace bid which seeks to turn the country into a de facto federal state in exchange for ethnic peace.

Prabhakaran, 43, said on November 27 that the power-sharing proposed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who once held peace talks with him, was merely a political tactic.

In an address commemorating his dead cadres, Prabhakaran said he would keep up his decades-old guerrilla cam-

Road to tame Tigers becomes deadliest for Lankan forces

COLOMBO, Dec 7: When Sri Lanka launched a big battle for a strategic highway, the government banked on it to tame Tamil Tigers and push political reforms. Seven months later, it is becoming the deadliest "toll" road, reports AFP.

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paign until the Tigers won a

Tamil homeland, Tamil nationhood and the Tamil right to self-determination."

Diplomats here saw Prabhakaran taking the govern-

ment's two-pronged war-and-

peace strategy head on with a

rejection of the political pack-

age on the one hand and escala-

ting attacks against the mili-

tary.

Prabhakaran, Sri Lanka's

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The meeting was attended by

senior Arafat aides, including

top negotiator Mahmud Abbas

and Palestinian minister of in-

ternational cooperation Nabil

Shaath, and Mubarak's politi-

cal advisor Ossama al-Baz.

Arafat arrived in Cairo late

Saturday after talks in Geneva

with US Secretary of State

Madeleine Albright.

At a joint news conference

Albright said "we are making

some headway" on some of the

interim issues in the

Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.

"We should be able to come to

a closure soon," Albright said

before flying to Paris for her

second meeting in two days

with Israeli Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu.

Palestinian minister of ci-

vilian affairs Jamil al-

Torai who preceded Arafat to

Cairo told reporters that Ne-

anyahu was "trying to gain

time and losing credibility."

Cohen tells NATO

Iraq's chemical weapons exceed UN estimation

BONN, Dec 7: US Defence Secretary William Cohen has told NATO that Iraq has a larger arsenal of chemical and biological weapons than the United Nations has estimated until now, a German newspaper reported.

The Sunday newspaper Welt Am Sonntag said Cohen provided the information to NATO during his visit last week to Brussels.

President Saddam Hussein's Iraq has tried several times to deceive the west, it said.

For example, Baghdad had disputed allegations that it possessed VX nerve gas although UN inspectors ended up discovering nearly four tonnes of the deadly poison.

According to Cohen, Iraq has between 20 and 200 tonnes of VX, of which one gram can kill up to 500 people, while it also possesses 23,000 litres of anthrax bacteria although the United Nations has found only 8,500 litres.

One kilogram (2.2 pounds) of anthrax can kill a million people.