

# 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 Sitaram Kesri said.

Indian Defence Minister Mulayam 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 tie-up 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.

## 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, reports AFP.

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.

## Arafat briefs Mubarak on Geneva meet

CAIRO, Dec 7: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat briefed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak here today on the latest efforts by the United States to push forward stalled peace talks with Israel, reports AFP.

The meeting was attended by senior Arafat aides, including top negotiator Mahmoud Abbas and Palestinian minister of international cooperation Nabil Shaath, and Mubarak's political advisor Osama al-Azhar.

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.

A Palestinian minister of civilian affairs, Jamil al-Toraji, who preceded Arafat to Cairo told reporters that Netanyahu was "trying to gain time and losing credibility."

## Popularity polls Howard suffers setback

CANBERRA, Dec 7: Prime Minister John Howard, threatening an early election, suffered a setback today with polls showing his government's popularity plunging and Australians fearing a national split over race, reports Reuters.

Howard has threatened an early election to resolve a parliamentary deadlock over aboriginal and rights and his planned solution for a land dispute between farmers and aborigines.

But 52 per cent of Australians fear the issue could divide the nation over race, just as the prominence of race row politician Pauline Hanson had begun to fade, a poll in the Sun-Herald newspaper found.

Howard's Liberal — national coalition swept to power by a landslide vote just 20 months ago, now face a humiliating defeat, with the Herald poll and a Sunday Telegraph poll showing the Labour opposition boosting its lead to as much as 15 points.

## 39 Mobutu backers face trial in Kinshasa

KINSHASA, Congo, Dec 7: Court proceedings opened Saturday against the first of 39 former government ministers and business leaders accused of corruption and abuse of power during ex-dictator Mobutu Sese Seko's rule, reports AP.

A five-hour hearing in a Kinshasa court involved the reading of charges against Gen. Kikunda Ombala, who was director-general of state-run Air Zaire. He will be the first to stand trial.

In addition to charges of diverting state funds and state vehicles for personal use, Ombala is accused of ordering the murder of a labour union official. Witness testimony was scheduled to begin on December 12.

## He was wounded last month in fighting between the small but stubborn armed resistance loyal to Ranariddh and Hun Sen's government.

The troops, outnumbered and outmaneuvered by government forces, have stubbornly managed to cling to their small enclave at Osmach on the Thai border with fighting expected to spread east and southwest with the coming dry season.

While some self-exiled politicians have returned, a true reconciliation between staunch Ranariddh loyalists and Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party appears unlikely.

Elections have been scheduled for next year and analysts say Hun Sen's prime concern is that the CPP dominates the polls.

## 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 Toufah 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.

Albright declined to make any comments.

## HR Watch slams military police in Brazil

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil, Dec 7: Brazil's military police are encouraged to kill, rather than arrest, suspects and are rarely punished for their crimes, a prominent human rights group charged, reports AP.

In its "World Report 1998," Human Rights Watch/Americas was especially critical of Brazil and its military police, which it accused of practicing widespread beatings, torture and summary executions.

In one case, an amateur cameraman caught police beating and torturing people randomly stopped at a roadblock in a Sao Paulo slum. In one shocking scene broadcast on national television, an officer shot and killed a car passenger without provocation.

The human rights group also criticised Gen Milton Cerqueira, Rio de Janeiro state secretary of public safety, whose "aberrant policies created incentives for police

throughout 1997 to kill rather than arrest criminal suspects," said James Cavallaro, the Brazil director for Human Rights Watch/Americas, who was responsible for the Brazil chapter.

Two years ago, Cerqueira offered "battlefield" promotions and raises for state military troopers who showed bravery in combating suspected criminals. Since then, the number of people killed by Rio police has doubled, from 16 a month to 32 a month, according to a study by the Superior Institute for Religious Studies. "Rio cops kill more people in one month, than New York cops kill in a year," said Cavallaro.

Human Rights Watch/Americas also criticised inhumane prison conditions, a congressional failure to pass "much needed human rights legislation," and a justice system that has not effectively prosecuted rural violence.

## 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.

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-

tional 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 campaign until the Tigers won a "Tamil homeland, Tamil nationhood and the Tamil right to self-determination."

Diplomats here saw Prabhakaran taking the governments two-pronged war-and-peace strategy head on with a rejection of the political package on the one hand and escalating attacks against the military on the other.

Prabhakaran, Sri Lanka's most-wanted man whose movement was listed as a "foreign terrorist organisation" by the US government in October, has vowed to evict troops from areas captured from the rebels.

For Prabhakaran, the loss of the highway could be a bigger setback than losing Jaffna.

The military taking the road could effectively cut the northern region of the island in the middle, seriously affecting rebel movement and confining them largely to their jungle bases in the north-east.

"This is a battle for survival for both sides: that is why it is so intensely fought out in the battle field," an Asian diplomat here said.

Official figures show nearly 1,000 soldiers have been killed, or about 17 government soldiers killed for every kilometre covered so far since the sure victory offensive was launched on May 13.

The government says about 1,500 soldiers have been wounded.

The military claims more than 2,500 rebels have been killed and 3,500 wounded in the same period. The rebels have discounted government claims.

However, Asian diplomats said both sides are badly bruised by the fighting.

"We know how difficult it is for the army to treat its wounded."

## Moderate Tamil parties for postponement of local polls

COLOMBO, Dec 7: Sri Lanka's moderate Tamil parties called today for the postponement of local elections in battle-scarred northern regions, saying conditions were not suitable for free and fair voting, reports AFP.

Polls will be held in February for 17 municipal, urban and village councils in the Jaffna peninsula.

The Democratic People's Liberation Front (DPLF) said it wanted the government to delay the elections at least by one month to give it more time to campaign in an area where there had been no local elections for 14 years.

"The parliament is now debating the budget and there is no time for us to campaign in the north," DPLF leader Dharmalingam said. "The attitude of the government is very bad."

## 67 pc Americans believe world will come to an end or be destroyed!

WASHINGTON, Dec 7: Sixty-seven per cent of Americans believe the world will come to an end or be destroyed, according to a new survey released Saturday, reports AFP.

The figure is eight percentage points higher than a similar survey in December 1994, the weekly US News and World Report said.

Two-thirds of Americans believe also that Jesus will return to earth sometime in the future, according to the poll, which was to appear in the edition of the magazine to be published today.

The magazine notes that belief in a second coming has risen five per cent since the last such poll taken three years ago.

The poll, showing that 56 per cent of Americans believe humans do not have any control over the end of the world, was conducted to support an article on millennial trends as the year 2000 approaches.

"Envisioning the apocalypse is a longstanding tradition," the magazine notes. "Millions of Americans hold fast to the belief that the Bible contains the key to history's end."

But belief in apocalyptic prophecies is not just a phenomenon of the religious fringe," the magazine says, noting that 58 per cent of senior citizens and 60 per cent of the most educated are likely to believe the world will come to an end.

However, the poll found that a majority — 59.1 per cent — do not believe in prophecy, defined as "accurate predictions of the future by persons who are under the influence of some kind of divine guidance."

For those who do believe in prophecy, evangelist preacher Billy Graham was at the top of the list, garnering 12.2 per cent, as an "authentic prophet alive on earth today."

The poll also found that most people who believe in the apocalypse put its time frame well beyond their lifetime, with 33.8 per cent saying it will happen in more than "a few hundred years."

The telephone poll of 1,000 adults, conducted November 14-16, has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 per cent.



Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammed Said Al-Sahhaf talks to journalists after the Foreign Ministers preparatory session of the 8th Islamic Conference in Tehran Saturday. More than 50 Islamic countries are attending the summit.

## US, China to begin talks on Korean peace next week

GENEVA, Dec 7: The historic talks to implement permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula between South and North Korea, China and the United States will begin here next week, a little is expected to be achieved, reports AFP.

It is expected that the peace talks have started is what is important. But we don't expect anything to be achieved this time," a South Korean government source in Seoul told AFP.

He said the negotiations, aimed at replacing the 1950-53 Korean war armistice which ended the 1950-53 Korean war, were expected to last for a very long time.

"We wish the talks could end this round, but everyone knows that won't happen. It will likely go on for some time," he said.

The source, who asked not to

be named, also said the North Koreans were expected to stall any serious discussions until South Korea gets a new leader.

"The North Koreans don't want to hold any serious talks with this government. They want to wait until a new government takes office," he said.

South Korea will elect a new president on December 18.

The two-day peace talks are scheduled to start Tuesday, but South Korea is expected to hold bilateral contacts today, a South Korean government official here said.

"We want to hold unofficial bilateral talks with the United States and China before the four-party peace talks begin on Tuesday," he said.

"Perhaps other countries may do the same," he said.

## Clinton for annual 'report card' on school violence

WASHINGTON, Dec 7: President Bill Clinton called Saturday for an annual "report card" on school violence, saying more needs to be known to prevent tragic deaths such as the recent shooting spree that killed three girls in Kentucky, reports AFP.

"We know more about the overall patterns of car theft in America than we do about the harm that comes to our children at school," Clinton said in his weekly radio address.

The president said he would ask Attorney General Janet Reno and Education Secretary Richard Riley to launch a major initiative to produce for the first time an annual report card on school violence.

He appealed to all politicians to "compromise and to resolve

## Thousands march for peace in Cambodia

PHNOM PENH, Dec 7: Calling for an end to political violence, prominent opposition leader Sam Rainsy led thousands of demonstrators Sunday in the country's largest rally since the 1993 elections, reports AP.

Disabled soldiers, garment factory workers and saffron-clad monks joined in the procession which nearly tripled in size as it wound through the capital's southwestern suburbs.

At the climax, some 3,000 Cambodians clapped and chanted "peace, peace, peace."

Sam Rainsy, who returned to Cambodia last week for the first time since a violent coup this summer — called for a ceasefire between opposing factions.

He appealed to all politicians to "compromise and to resolve

all national issues by peaceful means."

In July, Second Premier Hun Sen ousted First Premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh, ending for years of relative peace in a country wracked by violence since 1970.

Ranariddh and many of his followers remain in exile or in remote border areas where they battle Hun Sen's forces.

Sam Rainsy gathered considerable popular support as an independent critic of the Hun Sen-Ranariddh coalition government, accusing it of widespread corruption and human rights abuses.

A Sam Rainsy-led demonstration on March 30 ended with a grenade attack that killed 16 people and injured more than 100.

The attack was widely seen as an assassination attempt against the opposition leader, who also suffered minor injuries. Many blamed the bloodshed on Hun Sen.

"It's a great day," said an ebullient Sam Rainsy, who was at times carried on the shoulders of his supporters during the nine-kilometre-long (six-mile) march which ended at Samrong Andet Pagoda. "It gives me hope for peace."

On Friday, Sam Rainsy acceded to government demands that the march be kept out of the capital's central area, thus avoiding a possible showdown with authorities.

The chief of the municipal police, Mok Chito, said that about 500 police had been deployed along the march's route as a security precaution. Human rights workers and United Nations monitors were also present.

Children stood on rooftops and hundreds of bystanders lined the traffic-blocked roads or watched from their balconies as the marchers, carrying banners and cardboard placards which said, "Peace Now," passed by.

Though marchers occasionally joined in cheers of "Long live Sam Rainsy," many distanced themselves from politics, saying that they were participating to help banish Cambodia's violent legacy.

"I just want to see an end to fighting between Cambodians and Cambodians," said Hem Sarong, a 26-year-old soldier from Battambang province who was brought to the military hospital in Phnom Penh after he was injured in battle.