

## International

# UF prepares to fight polls as single entity

NEW DELHI, Dec 8: India's 15 party United Front, whose minority government fell late last month when the Congress Party withdrew its support, prepared today to fight the spring election as a single entity, reports Reuter.

The fractious coalition banding Communists, free-marketeers and regional groups was seen as positioning itself between the Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the third alternative for a sullen electorate.

"We are determined to fight our way back as a United Front and with a majority of our own," said A.B. Bardhan, general secretary of the Communist Party of India's a coalition member.

The United Front was formed after the 1996 national elections failed to give a majority to either the centrist Congress or the rightist BJP in the 545-seat Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament.

"But this time we will camp-

aign as one, after all we have a government, we have to ask the people to give us a chance to govern the country again," Bardhan said.

Front leaders were scheduled to meet at 4:30 pm (1100 GMT) today to finalise campaign plans.

"The United Front is a functioning group for the first time," said Mahesh Rangarajan, a political expert at the Centre for Political Studies.

Congress toppled the United Front on November 28 after it refused to drop a regional party named by an independent probe into the assassination of former premier and popular Congress leader Rajiv Gandhi.

No party was subsequently able to cobble together a new coalition with majority support in parliament forcing the calling of new elections early next year. The dates are to be announced in January.

"But political parties already have begun mapping strategies for the election. Congress and the BJP were looking for allies

over the week-end.

"Political leaders have made a mockery of the people's verdict, even before we have had a chance to deliver the goods to our constituency, another election has been forced," said Bhikta Charan Das a lawmaker who campaigned against early polls.

Analysts have predicted the election still will not give India political stability.

"I do not foresee any party or group of parties getting a clear majority, we are into an era of coalitions and alliances," said Rangarajan.

Some United Front members were keeping the door open to a limited electoral alliance with Congress to keep out the Hindu nationalists.

The BJP is perceived by rivals to be biased against India's Muslim minority.

"We welcome a fight between the BJP on one side and the rest on the other. This presents a clear choice before the country," said BJP general secretary Venkaiah Naidu.



The wife, centre, and mother, bottom left, of Lt Col Nilantha Sirimanne weep Sunday as his remains are cremated according to Buddhist custom. Sirimanne was killed when the Sri Lankan military and Tamil Tiger rebels clashed in northern Sri Lanka Thursday. The Tamil rebels claimed 300 soldiers were killed in the battle, 111 bodies were handed over to the ICRC.

— AP/UNB photo

# India may again become safe haven for Tigers as govt fails to mend ties

COLOMBO, Dec 8: Sri Lanka's main opposition today said the government had failed to improve relations with India which it warned could again become a safe haven for Tamil separatists, reports AFP.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) legislators accused President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government of keeping India's new High Commissioner (ambassador) designate waiting since November 24 to present his credentials.

The former junior foreign minister, John Amarasinga, told Parliament that there was a danger that the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, home to more than 55 million ethnic Tamils, could provide safe haven to Sri Lankan Tamil rebels.

Amarasinga said keeping ambassador designate, Shivasankar Menon, waiting could be seen as a reaction to the welcome given to opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe during his recent Indian visit.

"We do not know whether this important High Commiss-

sioner is treated like this and deliberately delayed just to spite the Indian government for giving red carpet treatment to our leader," Amarasinga said.

Junior Foreign Minister Lakshman Kiriella said that Wickremesinghe, a former prime minister, was also extended all courtesies by the Sri Lankan mission in Delhi because he held the rank of a Cabinet minister.

The opposition urged the government to strengthen the country's diplomatic missions in India to counter the threat from the separatists Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), especially in Tamil Nadu.

The South Indian state is known to have provided material and moral support to the LTTE and several other Tamil militant groups in the mid 1980s.

Sri Lanka's LTTE was at the centre of a political crisis in India in which Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral was resigned after failing to ditch a coalition partner allegedly linked with the murder of former prime minister Rajiv

# Over 20m Africans don't know they have AIDS virus

ABIDJAN, Ivory Coast, Dec 8: Most of the more than 20 million people in sub-Saharan Africa who carry the virus that causes AIDS don't even know they have it, an expert on the disease told an international conference Sunday, reports AP.

"The situation in this region is unprecedented," said Dr. Peter Piot, executive director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, or UNAIDS. Piot was addressing the opening session of the 10th International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Africa, a five-day gathering bringing together hundreds of researchers who will discuss methods for stemming the disease's spread on the continent.

French President Jacques Chirac, also addressing the group, noted the heavy toll that AIDS has taken in Africa.

"The evil struck your land of Africa earlier and more rapidly than the rest of the world, wreaking death and destruction far more devastatingly," he said.

A UNAIDS report released two weeks ago estimated 30.6 million have HIV or AIDS across the world, two-thirds of them in sub-Saharan Africa.

# US sees possibility of a BJP-led govt in India

WASHINGTON, Dec 8: The United States has been preparing to deal with a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in India as it feels that the party could come to power after next year's elections, according to India Abroad News Service.

A senior Clinton administration official told IANS: "We are aware that there's a very real possibility that the BJP could come to power" at the election set for early next year.

"We have disputes among ourselves actually as to what a BJP government would mean," the official said, "not so much in terms of economic policy, which we hope would continue, but real disagreement among ourselves about what it would mean in terms of its attitude toward maintaining a dialogue with Pakistan."

"This is the foreign policy fallout we are most concerned with," the official said.

According to background interviews with senior administration officials in both the State Department and the National Security Council, this preparation had taken on a new urgency in the past few months as the United Front coalition

hobbled from one crisis to another and finally fell to the machinations of the Congress Party.

In the South Asian division of the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research as well as in the Policy Planning Council there has been much brainstorming and discussion as well as circulation of policy briefs about what the advent of a BJP or BJP-led government in New Delhi could envisage.

Another official, concurring with these views, said as far as India-U.S. relations are concerned, "I think we are less concerned. We believe that basic changes have taken place in Indian public opinion, that there is a fairly broad agreement on improved Indo-U.S. relations and on the benefits of liberalisation if it's done correctly."

These discussions have also extended to the White House National Security Council South Asia division headed by Bruce Reidel and apparently what concerns Washington the most is how the BJP will deal with Pakistan - whether it will continue with the Gujral Doctrine of seeking a rapprochement with Islamabad or be hostile to it.

The official said that a BJP government that would have to pull together coalition partners

will be forced to continue movement of the Indo-Pak dialogue and of course that means trying to resolve the Kashmir problem," the official emphasised.

Commission formed to analyse factors causing sectarian unrest in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Dec 8: The government has formed a commission to analyse factors contributing to growth of Muslim sectarianism in Pakistan and initiate remedial steps, a minister was quoted today as saying, reports AFP.

Headed by Religious Affairs Minister Raja Zafarul Haq, the commission will bring together scholars from different schools of religious thought on one platform, Interior Minister Shujaat Hussain told the officials APP news agency.

Red Cross from both Koreas to resume talks on food aid

SEOUL, Dec 8: South Korea's Red Cross proposed to its North Korean counterpart Monday that they meet in Beijing on December 22 to discuss additional food aid to the famine-stricken North, reports AP.

The South Korean Red Cross made the proposal in response to a North Korean suggestion in November that both sides meet in Beijing "as soon as possible" to discuss new aid.

Shattuck declined to comment on the amount of US elec-

# Chirac appeals for global effort to combat AIDS

ABIDJAN, Dec 8: French President Jacques Chirac appealed Sunday for a "Global co-ordinated effort" to combat the course of AIDS at an international conference on the disease in Africa, reports AFP.

Speaking at the opening ceremony of the 10th International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Africa (CISMA), Chirac called for France's partners, notably Europeans, to urgently create a fund of therapeutic solidarity.

He denounced the risk of a "two speed epidemic" whereby the spread of AIDS is slowing in northern countries but fuelled in the south by problems of prevention and the cost of health-care.

"We don't have the right to fight the epidemic on two fronts," he said, arguing that it was unacceptable to concentrate on providing expensive drugs to treat the sick in the rich north but limit action in the south to prevention.

Some 1,300 speeches will be presented between today and tomorrow to the conference held under the theme of AIDS and development and to which around 4,000 people are taking part.

David Chipanka, the Kenyan President of the African net,

work of people living with HIV called for a minute's silence in honour of the victims of the pandemic. He deplored the ostracisation and stigma suffered by carriers of the virus in Africa.

Pierre M. Pele, a Congolese professor and President of the African Society against AIDS called on delegates to "act to prevent and relieve Africa's pain," because, he said AIDS is: "A disease of poverty and exclusion and is eating away at the foundations of our society."

Luc Montagnier, the professor who discovered the HIV virus, speaking on behalf of UNESCO Director Federico Mayor, said AIDS "will be conquered everywhere or not at all."

Several people with the HIV virus in the conference hall displayed placards bearing slogans such as "silence kills" and "Africa: 90 per cent of (all the world's) people with AIDS, zero per cent of the treatment."

AIDS is spreading in Africa faster than anywhere else in the world.

Two-thirds of the world's 30 million people infected with the HIV virus live in Sub-Saharan Africa, where more than seven per cent of the population aged between 15 and 49 are HIV positive.



Vice President Al Gore, centre, chats with Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, right, as Japanese Foreign Minister Keizo Ouchi looks on prior to their talks in Kyoto, western Japan, Monday. The leaders are to deliver a speech at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change later the day.

— AP/UNB photo

# Cambodia had to ensure return of all politicians to get US electoral aid

PHNOM PENH, Dec 8: Senior US human rights official John Shattuck said today Cambodia had to ensure the safe return of all politicians, including ousted co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh, to qualify for US electoral aid next year, reports Reuters.

Shattuck, the Assistant Secretary of State for democracy, human rights and labour, said he has also told the government it must improve the security climate, punish human rights violators and implement a ceasefire to help guarantee free and fair elections.

"Our position ... and we expressed it very clearly to all I met ... is that all political leaders should be able to come back and participate in this election, and that certainly includes Prince Ranariddh," Shattuck told reporters at the end of his three-day trip to Phnom Penh.

He said he had delivered that message to co-premier Hun Sen, who deposed Ranariddh on July 6, as well as King Norodom Sihamoni and other senior government officials.

Shattuck declined to comment on the amount of US elec-

toral aid at stake, but said: "We hope we can get to a point where some additional assistance could be provided to the electoral process."

The US government would not lift its ban on direct assistance to the Cambodian government, he said.

The United States suspended all aid except for humanitarian and democracy-building programmes in Cambodia in the wake of Hun Sen's coup and has been pressuring his government to hold free elections next year.

Khmers must stay out of politics'

AP adds: With Cambodian elections less than six months away, visiting US diplomat said Monday that leaders of the radical Marxist Khmer Rouge must be barred from politics.

"I urged leaders of all parties

not to allow a political role for past or present senior Khmer Rouge leaders," Shattuck said.

During his two-day visit, Shattuck met with Second Prime Minister Hun Sen, Interior Minister Sar Kheng and Chea Sim, president of the National Assembly.

In his public address, how-

ever, he offered no detailed changes in the US proposal.

Gore reminded delegates Kyoto is only a first step in pro-

tecting the atmosphere. "If we

can quickly build momentum

as we learn together how to

meet this challenge," he said.

European governments, environmentalists and others had

been looking for a more ambitious US offer on reducing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. "The United States can do much more," said Ritt Bjerregaard, the European Union environmental commissioner.

Japan's Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, preceding Gore to the podium, said only "high-level political decisiveness" will produce "an agreement which can be handed down to future generations with pride."

Differences between Europe and America over cutback targets stood as a major obstacle to completion of the Kyoto Protocol, an unprecedented global agreement to control energy use in the 21st century.

Gore and the environment ministers of scores of other countries addressed the historic conference Monday and Tuesday as the pace picks up toward a Wednesday conclusion.

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