

No political party can ignore 95.2m Indian Muslims

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: It is always around election time that Indian Muslims become an important factor in the country's politics. No sooner are elections announced that political parties start computing the Muslim factor, reports India Abroad News Service.

Which way will the Muslims turn; what caste combination will suit them; will Muslims be divided in a state like Uttar Pradesh? These are some of the usual queries which every Indian political party likes to analyse before taking a plunge into the hurly burly of an electoral battle.

The coming elections will be no different as once again speculation on the much talked about Muslim "vote bank" has started. But do the Indian Muslims play a crucial role in elections? Is the Muslim electorate such a crucial factor that its voting pattern could make or unmake a federal government in India? The answer is yes. The Muslims' sheer number and their almost countrywide presence makes it impossible for political parties to ignore them at election time. No political party can afford to dismiss 95.2 million Indian Muslims who constitute 12.12 per cent of the total population.

In some of the politically crucial states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Kerala and Assam, the concentration of Muslim population varies from 15 to over 20 per

cent. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, Muslims constitute 16.5 per cent of the total population. But in 25 parliamentary segments in Uttar Pradesh, the Muslim concentration is over 20 per cent. Similarly, 16 parliamentary constituencies in Bihar depend on the Muslim voting pattern because their presence in these constituencies is over 20 per cent.

In states like Kerala, West Bengal and Assam, the Muslim population is over 20 per cent. There are states like Maharashtra (9.7 per cent) and Andhra Pradesh (8.8 per cent) where the Muslim population ratio is below 10 per cent. But as the Muslims usually live in pockets, they influence election results even in the latter states.

Muslim voting behaviour is largely universal in the sense that the community generally votes en bloc in favour or against a political party. That is the reason why it is called a "vote bank", which every political party likes to encash during elections.

Its significance is evident as even a fiercely pro-Hindu party like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with its "Hindutva" plank is trying to woo the Muslim electorate for the coming elections. Just a day after Parliament was dissolved, BJP president L K Advani and former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee addressed a gathering of Muslim youths. Advani even of-

fered to mediate between the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Muslims on the Kashi and Mathura temple disputes.

It was a part of the BJP's election strategy to signal to the Muslims that the saffron family — as Hindu nationalist groups are referred to — was willing to do business with minorities. The new BJP Muslim strategy is an admission that the saffron flag can never be unfurled in New Delhi unless it has at least a part of the 95.2 million Muslims in India on its side. It must have been quite a painful decision for a provocative anti-Muslim BJP to woo the community it loves to hate.

It is indeed a reality that the en bloc Muslim voting pattern has often led to the rise and fall of governments in New Delhi. The Congress Party, for instance, has been both beneficiary as well as victim of the Muslim vote bank. The Muslim electorate had been largely enamoured with Congress' secular rhetoric in the past. Right from the days of the first parliamentary election of independent India in 1952 down to 1977 the Muslims voted en bloc for the Congress throughout the country.

It was for the first time in 1977 that in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra, the Muslims turned against the Congress. The 1977 election was a watershed in Indian politics because it was for

the first time that the Congress party was voted out of power. Both Muslims and Hindus had universally voted out the then Indira Gandhi government for suspending democratic rights under the pretext of an internal emergency.

Again in 1989 Muslim voters, along with the Hindus, had defeated the Congress Party, leading to the rise of the 11-month Janata Dal government led by V P Singh. Finally, Muslims all over the country gave such a drubbing to the Congress Party in the 1996 parliamentary polls that the Congress was reduced to its lowest ever tally of 140 members in the lower house of parliament. Since then the Congress has lost its premier position in Indian politics — thanks largely to the Muslim electorate which has avenged its humiliation following the 1992 demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya during the term of the Narasimha Rao government.

Once again the key question is which political formation will the Muslims opt for in 1998 polls? Like any minority in any part of the world, the security factor basically determines Muslims' voting pattern. Indian Muslims abhor communal riots. Communal violence not only leads to loss of lives and property, but hampers their economic and social growth as well. Curfew, communal killings and a persisting sense

of insecurity can be a highly debilitating factor for the well being of any community. Muslims, therefore, prefer a political party which can buy them communal peace along with protecting their religious and cultural identity.

The Indian Muslim voter turned his back on the Congress party because it failed to check communal violence in the 80s. Under Congress rule, cities and towns with a high concentration of Muslims like Moradabad, Meerut, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Ahmedabad witnessed massive communal riots. In all these cities, the role of the police was suspect. So by the late 80s the Muslims had started feeling let down by the Congress as far as providing security was concerned.

Besides, the right-wing pro-Hindu BJP, with its plank to build the Ram Mandir on the site of the Babri mosque, had started assuming a significant role in Indian politics by the late 80s. Annoyed with the Congress and upset with the rise of the BJP, the Muslims began to look for new political alliances in the 1991 elections. Consequently, in northern India, the Muslim voter tied up with new emerging political players like current Defence Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh and former Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar.

In 1996, Muslims opted for

regional parties in the southern and the eastern parts of India as well. Regional outfits like the Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu and Assam Gana Parishad in Assam were the beneficiaries of the Muslim vote bank.

Fourteen of such small parties formed an umbrella outfit called the United Front soon after the 1996 parliamentary polls. The United Front was formed to keep the BJP out of power, which it succeeded in doing for almost 18 months. Besides, during its rule there were no major communal riots in any part of India. The Front constituents, therefore, should be the natural choice of the Muslim electorate in the next elections. Regional outfits like the Telugu Desam, the DMK, the Assam Gana Parishad and northern players like Mulayam Singh Yadav will be major beneficiaries of the Muslim vote in the 1998 elections.

But the Muslim electorate, which hopes to keep both the BJP and the Congress out of power, does have a problem in states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana where the BJP and the Congress are the only two major political outfits. If they refuse to vote for the Congress in these states, the BJP would be the indirect beneficiary.



A burning barricade of vehicles in Londonderry Saturday night when rioting broke after a Protestant parade through the mainly Catholic city. Nationalist Roman Catholic demonstrators angered by the parade hurled bricks, bottles and gasoline bombs at police, and barricaded streets with burning, hijacked vehicles. — AP/UNB photo

Baghdad refuses to allow inspectors into 60 sites

World pressure on Iraq to continue: Annan

KUWAIT, Dec 14: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Saturday that Iraq's government will continue to face international pressure until President Saddam Hussein complies with all Security Council resolutions, reports AP.

"I think we've been quite persistent in our determination to get the Iraqi government and President Saddam to comply," Annan told reporters. "Recent weeks have demonstrated the determination of the international community and the pressure will be maintained."

Iraq expelled UN weapons inspectors of US citizenship last month, but was widely condemned and finally allowed them to return under a Russian-brokered deal. The inspectors are charged with supervising the elimination of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

The secretary-general was speaking after a ceremony at

Kuwait University that awarded him an honorary Ph.D. for his work for world peace.

Annan said he hoped Richard Butler, the chief UN weapons inspector who is visiting Iraq, would succeed in persuading Baghdad to give monitors full access to all suspected arms sites.

"I would hope Mr. Butler will not fail," Annan said. "Our objective is to get the job done, to keep inspectors on the ground and to continue our disarmament of Iraq."

Baghdad has refused to allow UN inspectors into some 60 sites, saying they are privileged for reasons of national security. Annan announced that the UN Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission was going to start patrolling the naval border between Kuwait and Iraq in the first half of next year.

Meanwhile, Iraq has declared too many sites off-limits

to UN arms inspectors and the sites cover too large an area, the deputy chief inspector said.

American inspector Charles Dueller told The Associated Press on Saturday the Iraqis have abused a 1996 agreement on the disarmament inspections signed by Rolf Ekeus, then chief inspector, and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz.

Meanwhile, Iraqi newspapers called Dueller's boss, chief UN inspector Richard Butler, a "mad dog" on Saturday, warning him to stay away from presidential palaces, which are among the off-limits sites. Butler arrived Friday to press for access for his investigators.

The inspectors are charged with monitoring Iraq's compliance with Security Council orders that Iraq get rid of all long-range missiles and its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

Jain Commission report

Indian judge receives death threats

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: An Indian judge whose report on former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi felled the country's coalition government has received death threats, newspapers reported today, says APP.

Milap Chand Jain has informed the Home Ministry that he and his family had been threatened by anonymous letters and phone calls. The Statesman said quoting official sources.

The government has stepped up security for Jain.

Jain, who lives in New Delhi, could not be reached for comment. The Delhi police refused to give further details.

Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's coalition government collapsed last month in the wake of a row sparked by a report from Jain linking an alliance member with Sri Lankan Tamil guerrillas blamed for Rajiv Gandhi's 1991 killing.

Jain had said in his report submitted to the government after a six-year investigation that

the DMK Party tacitly encouraged the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has been blamed for the assassination.

The DMK, a member of Gujral's multi-party coalition, denied the charge. The Congress Party took back its crucial legislative support to the minority government after Gujral refused to dump the DMK.

Jain has been widely flayed for alleged his "anti-Tamil" remarks in the report. Most newspapers and Indian experts have also dismissed his report as a mere compilation of published reports and unsubstantiated charges.

The report has also embarrassed New Delhi for revealing alleged Indian military training to Sri Lankan Tamil guerrillas for several years beginning 1983.

The Statesman said one of the anonymous letters received by Jain threatened "he would have to face the consequences for his 'anti-Tamil' report."



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, left, with US envoy Martin Indyk, right, during a press conference after their meeting at Arafat's office in Gaza City Saturday. The talks came in advance of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's separate meetings next week with Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. — AP/UNB photo

Khatami hopes to hold dialogue with Americans

TEHRAN, Dec 14: Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said he hoped to hold dialogue with the "great" American people but US politicians were holding up the process, reports Reuters.

"I hope in future I could have a dialogue and talk with the people of America and I hope that will not take long," he told a news conference. "The first step for a dialogue is to have US politicians to understand their own time. They are behind their time. This is the major problem."

"I hope the US politicians would understand their time better, understand the realities and move forward," Khatami told a news conference today, during which he repeatedly referred to "the great people of America."

Sihanouk under stinging attack for Khmer Rouge brutality in '75-79

PHNOM PENH, Dec 14: A Cambodian newspaper today launched a stinging attack on King Norodom Sihanouk, suggesting he was responsible for the brutality of the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge government, reports Reuters.

The Cambodian-language Songkruos Cheat (National Salvation) also said the king wanted to re-enter politics and lead the Royalist Political Party, something he has publicly vowed not to do.

The newspaper carried on its front page several old photographs including one from the early 1970s of Sihanouk in a meeting with Khmer Rouge guerrilla leaders.

Communist rebels declare X'mas ceasefire in Philippines

MANILA, Dec 14: Communist rebels on Sunday declared a ceasefire for the Christmas season, promising to halt offensives that have stalled their peace talks with the government, reports AP.

The Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army, said in a statement the ceasefire from December 22 to January 7 would foster good will and allow combatants on both sides to observe the holidays.

Earlier this month, President Fidel Ramos declared a 30-day ceasefire with the Communist rebels from December 6 to January 4.

BRIEFLY

Snow-storms claim 12 in Mexico:

Freak snow-storms and bitter cold have struck most of northern Mexico, leaving at least 12 dead and paralyzing highways and ports, media reports said on Saturday, Reuters reports from Mexico.

A cold spell that some experts linked to the El Nino weather phenomenon brought historic snowfalls to cities as far south as Guadalajara. It snowed in the city for the first time since 1881, radio reports there said.

5 killed in Philippines truck mishap:

Five people were killed and at least 10 others injured early yesterday when a truck crashed into a small bus on a toll road near the Philippine capital Manila, a radio station said in Manila. AFP reports from Manila.

The truck flew over a gully and into oncoming traffic at the south Luzon Expressway near the town of Binan. Dzh station reported from the scene.

US agents nab 6 Chinese:

Border Patrol agents who stopped a van found 26 undocumented aliens aboard, including six Chinese, AP reports from Tucson, Arizona.

Those six were held pending legal proceedings, spokesman Rob Daniels said Friday. He said the 20 others agreed to voluntary deportation.

Explosion kills 1 cop in Thailand:

An explosion at a police station in the central Thai province of Suphan Buri early yesterday killed one policeman and injured three others, media reports said, AFP reports from Bangkok.

The explosion in the reception room of the station in Bang Pramaa district of the province occurred around 8:00 am (0100 GMT), the radio reported.

Fighting leaves 9 dead in Lanka

COLOMBO, Dec 14: Tamil Tiger guerrillas ambushed a group of government soldiers travelling in northern Sri Lanka, killing six of them, the rebels said today, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said in a statement from their London office that they also captured weapons from the victims who were travelling in a tractor-trailer near Nedunkerni on Friday.

The Tiger claim came as the Defence Ministry said security forces too shot dead at least three rebels during a brief fire fight in the same area on Friday.

The attacks came as a major military offensive to capture a key highway from Tiger guerrillas entered its eighth month on Saturday.

Deputy Defence Minister Anurudha Ratwatte said that they hoped to complete the operation, code-named "Sure Victory," before the country's 50th anniversary of independence on February 4.

The minister said about 1,000 soldiers were killed and another 3,000 wounded in the fighting since May 13 and said more than two thirds of the 76-

kilometers (45 mile) highway had been captured.

Rebel losses have been estimated by the government as more than 2,500 killed and many more wounded but the Tigers have discounted military claims.

AP adds: Police are investigating charges that guards did nothing to prevent the killing of three minority prisoners by Sinhalese inmates, an official said Sunday.

A Tamil lawmaker and a rebel group have accused prison officials of connivance in the killing of two Tamils and a Muslim who were clubbed and hacked to death Thursday inside a prison in Kalutara in southern Sri Lanka.

The three prisoners were killed during a riot inside the prison after some Tamil prisoners had asked for more food from a Sinhalese prisoner who was serving them, said Malingam Seewaratnam, a police official investigating the killings.

"We have moved about 4000 Tamil prisoners to another jail," Seewaratnam told The Associated Press in a telephone interview Sunday.

Suspected 16 Bangladeshi children Delhi Court orders to move 10 from jail to a home

NEW DELHI, Dec 14: An Indian court has ordered that ten suspected Bangladeshi children, who were detained while allegedly being taken to the camel races in the Gulf, be moved from prison to a home run by an international child development agency, reports IANS.

Ruling on a public interest petition by a human rights body here, the Delhi Court Thursday directed the city police to shift the children to the city branch of the SOS Children's Village in India till Court completed hearing the case.

Ten children are among the 16 who are lodged in the capital's Thar jail. However, no order was passed on the remaining six as these children said they did not want to leave their parents who are also jailed with them, newspapers reported yesterday.

According to police, the children, who were held along with adults, were from Bangladesh. The families were promised employment in the

Middle East, but the children would have been forced to take part in the hazardous camel races popular in the Gulf nations, police had claimed.

However, the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi has denied that the children

Security beefed up in Algeria ahead of Ramadan

ALGIERS, Dec 14: Soldiers set up barricades and checkpoints around Algiers Saturday, two weeks ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and amid rumours that Islamic militants have infiltrated the capital, reports AP.

Witnesses, meanwhile, said five family members were killed by assailants carrying axes and knives Thursday night south of Algiers, and newspapers reported several other attacks.

and the adults in jail are from that country. "Unless Bangladesh is satisfied with their nationality, they cannot be taken back," said an official of the Bangladesh High Commission here.

Aurobindo Ghosh, counsel for the petitioner, the People's Right Group (PRG), had argued in court that many of the children were younger than what was stated by the police and putting the children in jail was a serious violation of constitutional guaranteed liberty and equality of treatment to all people in India.

He had also asked for directions to the External Affairs Ministry to work along with the Bangladesh Foreign Ministry to trace the legal guardians of these children in Bangladesh.

However, the External Affairs Ministry told the Court that there was no evidence to prove the children were from Bangladesh. This, the Ministry counsel said, might create problems in shifting them to Bangladesh.



UN Secretary General Kofi Annan addresses the deans and students of Kuwait University in Khaldiya, Kuwait on Saturday, after receiving an honorary degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Annan arrived in Kuwait early Friday and stopped first at a camp of UN observers and peace keepers on the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border. — AP/UNB photo

ROK presidential polls to be held on Thursday

SOUL, Dec 14: South Koreans go to polls Thursday to choose a new president in a three-cornered, first past the post race overshadowed by the country's financial turmoil, reports AFP.

Most see it as a close race between the two top contenders, steel former Supreme Court judge and prime minister, Lee Ho-Chang, 62, and tough opposition veteran Kim Dae-Jung, 73.

The third and youngest candidate, Rhee In-Je, 49, is seen as a spoiler who, if he bowed out of the race, would hand the election to Lee.

But the feisty Rhee, who broke away from the then-ruling party in a huff when Lee was nominated as the party candidate, has doggedly refused to quit, despite charges of being Kim's stooge.

Kim Dae-Jung himself has shed the "pinkish" dissident image he acquired through long years of opposition to the country's military rulers that more than once almost cost him his life and left him with a limp.

Now, in the television debates that have taken the place of traditional mass rallies, Kim projects the image of the conservative elder statesman. He warns of the dangers

posed by North Korea's military, argues for the retention of an albeit modified version of the Draconian National Security Law under which he spent years in prison, and speaks of pardoning two jailed former military leaders.

And in a marriage of political convenience he is allied with veteran arch conservative opposition leader Kim Jong-Pil.

Lee's biggest problem is distancing himself from the tarnished legacy of incumbent President Kim Young-Sam, whose son landed in jail for influence peddling and who is blamed for the humiliation of the country crawling hit-in-hand to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Ironically it is Rhee In-Je, the ruling party breakaway who is harshest in his criticism of Lee's past links with Kim Young-Sam, in an apparent effort to shake off an old rumour that he himself was covertly backed by the president's disgraced son. And equally ironically it is the elderly Kim Dae Jung, on his fourth and final bid for the presidency, who is benefiting from the attacks more than three, who some see as simply making a dry run for the 2002 presidential race.