

## BRIEFLY

# Will Sonia Gandhi finally be the saviour of Congress?

NEW DELHI, Dec 30: India's upcoming national elections will seem just like old times. After a break of a few years, a Gandhi will again be in the limelight, reports AFP.

Sonia Gandhi's decision to campaign for the 112-year-old Congress (I) — the party of her assassinated husband Rajiv, his mother Indira and her father Jawaharlal Nehru — is seen by some observers here as a key piece in the electoral jigsaw.

No one, however, is predicting what effect the Gandhi name — as powerful a label in India as that of the Kennedys in the US — will have on the outcome as the ailing Congress and the resurgent Hindu nationalists vie for power.

Nobody, in truth, knows much about the Sphinx-like Sonia herself.

For some, she is a key back-room powerbroker. For others, an apolitical 51-year-old widow, in love with her family, her past and her privacy.

Whatever the truth — and

whatever her own wishes — Italian-born Sonia, as heir to the country's greatest political legacy, holds a singular place in Indian politics.

Her role took on greater importance following the collapse of India's coalition government in November after one of its partners was linked to Sri Lankan Tamil separatists blamed for killing her husband in 1991.

Ever since, hardliners within the Congress have been appealing to her to abandon her enigmatic seclusion and lead the party in the February elections.

Until Monday, however, Sonia Gandhi, clad in her trademark sari, had remained silent behind the high walls of her number 10, Janpath House.

The less she spoke, the more ubiquitous she became in the national media.

Some believe she carefully cultivated her position on the fringes of power, enjoying in-

fluence without responsibility as a stream of Congress leaders headed to Janpath to make obligatory shows of respect.

Others argue the woman who bitterly opposed her husband's fateful entry into politics at his mother's behest has been forced to make a limited gesture — she will campaign but not stand as a candidate — to save the Congress, fallen on hard times after ruling India for almost four decades.

Congress hardliners believe the Gandhi name will be enough to revitalise a party which always relied on larger-than-life figures.

Pran Chopra, a political analyst at the centre for policy research, says the Congress decline since the early 1980s, leading to its route in the 1996 elections when it won 140 of 545 seats, may be terminal.

Any morale boost for Congress afforded by Sonia Gandhi, Chopra argues, "may be offset by the fact that, outside the party, the general public

will not accept Sonia as leader as she is not a daughter of Indian soil."

He adds that corruption scandals linked to her ex-husband could also come back to haunt her while some Congress members might not accept her.

The disadvantages will offset the advantages. Her campaigning will not make a difference," Chopra said.

Keer in November unwittingly forced India's second elections within two years. Only belatedly did he realise that his party could be the biggest loser at the ballot box.

Vinod Mehta, writing for Outlook magazine, argued earlier this year that Sonia Gandhi possessed "only a few passions her family, five-star shopping and privacy."

Her dipping into politics, he said, has been made "from a safe and agreed distance."

A recent opinion poll in the India Today news magazine, however, said she remained the second most popular choice as India's next prime minister.

## China clamps sweeping controls on Internet

BEIJING, Dec 30: China clamped sweeping new controls on the Internet today, warning that the network was being used to leak state secrets and to spread "harmful information," reports Reuters.

Regulations unveiled by Zhu Rongji, Assistant Minister for Public Security, cover a wide range of crimes, including leaking state secrets, political subversion and spreading pornography and violence.

The rules are also designed to protect against computer hacking, viruses and other computer-related crime.

They call for unspecified "criminal punishments" and fines of up to 15,000 yuan (1,800 dollars) for internet providers and users who violate the rules — both individuals and business organisations.

One article says the internet must not be used to "split the country," a clear reference to separatist movements in Tibet and the Muslim region of Xinjiang.

Another on "defaming government agencies" appears designed to combat use of the internet by dissidents a number of Chinese political exiles have home pages which they use to attack the Beijing government.

The regulations, explicitly cover information circulating from Hong Kong Macau and Taiwan.

Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule this year and Portuguese-run Macau will be handed back in 1999, China re-

gards nationalist ruled Taiwan as a rebel province.

The official Xinhua news agency quoted Zhu as telling a news conference on Monday that internet links since 1994 had boosted China's cultural and scientific exchanges with the world.

"But the connection has also brought about some security problems including manufacturing and publishing harmful information, as well as leaking state secrets through the internet," he said.

The regulations contained in 25 articles were approved by the state council or cabinet on December 11 and took effect today.

They go beyond earlier provisional regulations first promulgated in February 1996 revised in May 1997, which also ban pornography and warn against leaking state secrets.

Chinese authorities have made attempts to censor pornography politics and western news organisations on the internet, but with scores of providers Chinese suffers have been able to find a almost anything they want.

It was not immediately clear whether Beijing would devote more resources to policing the internet that new regulations were in place.

US slams Iraq for cutting food rations

WASHINGTON, Dec 30: The United States on Monday blasted Iraq for cutting food rations in its people and accused Baghdad of holding up UN approval of 120 million dollars in food contracts, reports Reuters.

Iraq announced on Sunday it was reducing rations of baby milk, cooking oil and other essentials, saying it had not received sufficient supplies under its oil deal with the United Nations and blaming Washington for the shortfall.

State Department deputy spokesman James Foley called the cutbacks "really appalling and indeed tragic."

He accused Baghdad of "claiming on the one hand to be concerned about the humanitarian plight of their own people, and yet, on the other hand to consistently thwart the efforts of the international community to meet those humanitarian needs."

As an example, he said the United States signaled its "readiness to consider and recommend for approval contracts for food worth nearly 120 million dollars" that are now with the UN sanctions committee secretariat.



A government worker collects plastic bags containing dead chickens inside a Hong Kong chicken farm yesterday. The Hong Kong government ordered the slaughter of all chickens in a move to stamp out a mysterious bird virus that has killed four people.

— AFP/UNB photo

## Palestinians want most of West Bank before final peace talks

JERUSALEM, Dec 30: The Palestinian expect Israel to withdraw from at least 60 per cent more of the West Bank even before talks on a final peace settlement — leaving only about a tenth of the land to be negotiated, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said Monday, reports AP.

That puts the Palestinians on a collision course with the Israeli government, which is talking about a single withdrawal of only about 10 per cent.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu go to the White House next month for separate talks with US President Bill Clinton. The talks are supposed to be followed by an Israeli troop pullback from part of the West Bank.

Erekat said a meeting in Washington between Arafat and Netanyahu in the presence of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was also

possible, but had not yet been scheduled.

Under the Israel-PLO agreements, Israel must carry out three troop pullbacks in the West Bank by mid-1998. Netanyahu, however, wants to carry out just one redeployment and then proceed to talks on a final peace settlement.

He also says that before settling the scope of the pullback Israel must decide which parts of the West Bank it cannot ever give up, the subject of a series of heated Cabinet debates.

"The Israelis are negotiating with the Israelis," said Ahmed Qureia, speaker of the Palestinian council and a top negotiator. "This is an attempt to swallow land."

Arafat, for his part, has proposed stationing international troops in parts of the West Bank that Israel says it needs to retain. Arafat will make that proposal to Clinton as part of a comprehensive plan to revive the peace process, Erekat said.

Netanyahu adviser David Bar-Ilan said Israel would not accept the deployment of foreign troops in the West Bank. Erekat said the proposal was a response to Israel's debate over "security zones" in the West Bank.

"We see the presence of the international forces as a provider of security," he said. Arafat will take maps with him to Washington outlining the more than 60 per cent of the land Israel must return to the Palestinians by mid-1998, Erekat said. The withdrawals must leave the Palestinians with "a single territorial unit," he said.

Combined with almost 30 per cent of the West Bank the Palestinians already control, that will leave, Erekat said, just 9 per cent to be discussed in final status talks.

Erekat said that small remaining area includes Israeli settlements and military bases.

## 5 Congress (I) party activists hacked to death

NEW DELHI, Dec 30: Five Congress (I) Party activists were hacked to death in southern India after a bus was ambushed, the Press Trust of India reported today, reports AFP.

The five were killed with axes after the bus they were travelling in was stopped in the district of Kurnool in the state of Andhra Pradesh on Monday evening.

A group of men blocked the road with boulders and then threw bombs at the vehicle before killing the Congress workers.

The Congress is India's second largest parliamentary party. The country is due to go to the polls in February-March following the collapse of the ruling minority coalition in November.

## Inmates hold over 600 hostages at Brazil prison

SAO PAULO, Brazil, Dec 30: Inmates were holding more than 600 hostages Tuesday following an aborted prison escape that left two people dead in southeastern Brazil, reports AP.

The standoff began Sunday afternoon when 15 inmates reportedly dressed in smuggled women's clothing tried to escape. When guards found out who they were, a brief shootout erupted, killing one prisoner and a woman visiting her jailed husband.

The inmates originally captured 716 hostages, including 699 relatives of inmates and 17 guards, at the Sorocaba Prison, 56 miles (90 kilometres) west of Sao Paulo, said Rosana Tenreiro of the Sao Paulo State Prison Administration Department.

The prisoners later released 78 of the relatives. The standoff continued Tuesday morning, and the two sides were not negotiating, according to local news reports.

## US welcomes new Norwegian effort to spur ME peace

WASHINGTON, Dec 30: The United States on Monday welcomed a new Norwegian initiative to spur Middle East peace and said it did not view that move as competition with Washington's role, reports Reuters.

Norway's Foreign Minister said on Saturday he was planning a trip to the Middle East to serve as a broker in the deadlocked peace effort between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"The Norwegians have long played an extremely helpful role in the Middle East peace process, and so we would certainly welcome their continued efforts," State Department deputy spokesman James Foley told reporters.

He noted that the European Union at its recent summit noted the "importance of the central role of the United States in the Middle East peace process and pledged to continue to work with US cooperatively."

## Queen's friendly chat with Fergie

LONDON, Dec 30: Sarah Ferguson, who has been sidelined by Britain's royal family since her divorce from Prince Andrew, met the queen for a friendly 45-minute chat on Christmas Day, the Mirror tabloid reported today, says AFP.

The Duchess of York, 38, had not been invited to the traditional royal gathering at Sandringham in Norfolk, but was secluded in a cottage on the royal estate.

Shortly after Christmas lunch, the queen strolled to the cottage and had a talk with her former daughter-in-law over cups of tea.

An unnamed friend of the duchess was quoted as saying: "They spent about 45 minutes, chatting together. The whole meeting was very casual and friendly."

Fergie was "surprised and delighted" by the visit last Thursday, which could mark a breakthrough in her attempts to settle her long-standing differences with the royal family.

## Off the Record



Britain's Princess Diana leaves a central London hotel escorted by Lawrence Ingrassia, London Bureau Chief of the Wall Street Journal January 29, 1996. In the first responses to rumors that Princess Diana was pregnant when she died, a hospital said Monday, that no blood tests were taken to determine pregnancy and a letter referring to such tests was branded a fake. — AP/UNB photo

## Charles ready to go

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka: Prince Charles plans to go ahead with an appearance at ceremonies marking Sri Lanka 50 years of independence, despite complaints from a group of nationalists, reports AP.

The National Joint Committee, an organization of 46 Buddhist or nationalist groups, criticised Britain for "the brutal manner in which the British forces crushed" Sri Lanka attempts to become independent.

Sri Lanka, located off the southern tip of India, became independent in 1948, when it was known as Ceylon. Anniversary ceremonies are scheduled for Feb. 4.

## To dance or die...

LAYTON, UTAH: When Karen Hartley found herself stranded in freezing temperatures and mountain snow as night fell, she knew it was either dance or die, reports AP.

So by herself, the American woman danced in the dark, playing remembered tunes in her head, until morning, when rescuers spotted her from a search helicopter. She was unhurt, and spent Christmas Day in a hot tub.

Hartley, a 33-year-old US computer software developer, had wandered out of bounds at the Powder Mountain ski area Christmas Eve and spent more than 18 hours cold and alone on the mountain. The temperatures were in the single digits.

## Netanyahu's 98 budget faces political storm

TEL AVIV, Dec 30: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 1998 budget has run into a political storm that could badly undermine his efforts to revive the troubled peace process, reports AP.

If the budget fails to pass by December 31, the government in effect goes on probation and becomes hostage to coalition hardliners who oppose Netanyahu's plan to carry out the West Bank troop pullout long promised the Palestinians.

With his disparate coalition of interest groups seemingly falling apart, several preliminary budget-related bills were defeated in the Knesset on Monday, sparking calls for new elections.

Among those calling for a new vote were coalition whip Meir Shalev of Netanyahu's Likud Party and the leaders of two key allied parties, Police Minister Avigdor Kahalani and Agriculture Minister Rafael Eitan.

"This government cannot function," Eitan said. "We need to go to the people."

Others, however, are predicting that when the dust settles, Netanyahu, who has overcome many crises since taking office

in June 1996, will survive again.

State budgets have always been the focus of fevered horse-trading in Israel. But this year's spectacle is particularly embarrassing, a result of a weak economy and the fact that Netanyahu's coalition is unusually heavy with special interest groups.

The problem is compounded by the fact that Netanyahu's coalition, which controls 66 of the 120 Knesset seats, is riven between supporters and opponents of the peace process.

Centrists like Kahalani and Foreign Minister David Levy have been threatening for months to bolt because they feel Netanyahu, who once opposed the Israel-PLO accords altogether, is evading Israel's commitment to hand more West Bank land to the Palestinians.

On the other hand, some hawks like former Cabinet minister Benny Begin openly admit they will vote against the budget because they oppose Netanyahu's halfhearted peace moves.

But failure to pass the budget by the regular deadline could generate extremely negative political momentum.

## Lankan opposition blasts govt

## 'Local polls to expose civilians to violence'

COLOMBO, Dec 30: Sri Lanka's main opposition today lambasted the government for staging the first local polls in 15 years in a former bastion of Tamil Tiger rebels saying the move would expose civilians to violence, reports AFP.

The United National Party (UNP) said in a statement that the elections on January 29 had been called by the government to show the international community that the Tamil separatist war had ended.

"The only party that will gain by this sham election will be the government," the UNP said. "It is a deception of the Tamil people and a regrettable exposure of the civilian population of Jaffna to quite unwarranted danger and violence."

The UNP is not contesting the 17 municipal, urban and village councils in the northern peninsula of Jaffna which security forces wrested from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) control in December 1995.

"Not a day passes without a major confrontation between

our security forces and the terrorist who apparently have succeeded in infiltration into the peninsula for hit and run raids," the statement said.

The ruling People's Alliance (PA) of president Chandrika Kumaratunga is also not contesting the Jaffna local elections but of different reasons.

Political sources said that the governing PA could not be seen as running against the minority Tamil political parties contesting the elections because they support the government in parliament.

The UNP said hundreds of thousands of people from Jaffna had not yet returned to the region since fleeing fighting between government forces and Tamil Tigers.

The UNP criticism of the elections came as Tamil parties began a door-to-door campaign.

Tamil candidates from four political parties, all former guerrilla groups, have begun a poster campaign and are going from house-to-house canvassing support.

Benazir Bhutto former Prime Minister of Pakistan along with her children, Bilawal, son (front) and Asifa coming out Islamabad airport to attend the Senate session where her husband Asif Zardari took the oath of office as a Senator in the parliament house on Monday. Zardari has been in Karachi jail since his wife's government was sacked on corruption charges last year. — AP/UNB photo

## 6 killed in Colombia violence:

Six people were killed and seven injured in two attacks on Monday believed to have carried out by right-wing paramilitary groups in Colombia, according to military authorities, AFP reports from Bogota.

Paramilitaries are suspected in the murders of five people in an attack near the border of the departments of Valle and Cauca. The victims allegedly had a past history of involvement in the small leftist guerrilla group Jaime Bateman Cayon which has been active in the region.

## 2 executed in China:

Two men were executed for stealing the heads of precious Tang dynasty figurines after the Supreme Court rejected their appeals, state media reported Tuesday, AP says from Beijing.

Han Huamin and Sun Guobin smashed five stone figurines in front of a Tang dynasty emperor's tomb in northern Shaanxi province on May 3, stealing their heads, the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported. The men lost one head, but sold the other four for some 40,000 yuan (dollars 5,000) in the southern city of Guangzhou. It added: The death sentences were executed Monday after the Supreme Court rejected Han and Guo's appeal, it said.

## 455 kg cocaine seized in Canada:

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police said Monday that 455 kilos of cocaine had been seized at the port of Vancouver over the weekend, AFP says from Vancouver.

Canada customs said the haul had been disguised as coffee imports from Colombia. Officials refused to say whether any arrests were imminent.

## Lien Chan to visit S'pore:

Taiwanese Vice President Lien Chan will fly to Singapore on new year's day in an effort to improve ties in the absence of diplomatic relations, the Foreign Ministry said Tuesday, AP reports from Taipei.

Lien and his wife, Lien Fang Yu, will spend four days vacationing and visiting unidentified persons in the city state, the ministry said. Newspaper reports said Lien will meet with Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's former prime minister who retain considerable influence as a cabinet Senior Minister without portfolio. Lee is a frequent commentator on Taiwan's relations with rival China and has criticised the island's policies as slowing the growth of ties between the sides.

## Blast leaves 2 dead in Thailand:

One day after the Thai military vowed to step up its fight against Muslim separatists in southern Thailand, two people were killed and 13 wounded when a bomb exploded at a school fair in Yala province, local media reported Tuesday, AP says from Bangkok.

The blast was the latest in a string of shootings and fire bombings in Muslim-dominated southern Thailand during the past week. One boy and a girl, both 15, died in the bombing, while the 13 wounded ranged in age from seven to 46. The National newspaper reported. Although no group has claimed responsibility for placing the homemade bomb in a trash container during a fund-raising fair at the Ratprasam School in Yala province, 1,080 kilometres south of Bangkok, police suspect Muslim separatists.

## New Libyan PM named:

Libya named a new prime minister Monday in a limited cabinet reshuffle, Egypt's Middle East News Agency reported, AP reports from Cairo.

Mohamed Al-Mangoush replaces Abdel-Majeed Qa'ad, who had served as prime minister since January 1994. The agency did not say why the change was made. Al-Mangoush who was trained as an engineer, has been involved in Libyan politics since the early 1970s. He has held Cabinet positions in the past, including the housing portfolio. Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi has been the main power in the country since he took control in a 1969 coup.

## Yeltsin to take vacation in Jan:

President Boris Yeltsin, who returned to the Kremlin just last week after being hospitalised with a bad cold, will take a two-week vacation beginning Jan. 5, officials announced Monday, AP reports from Moscow.

The president's aides had said previously that Yeltsin was likely to take a vacation in January. While Yeltsin is still regaining strength from his recent illness, there was no indication that he is again ailing.

## 4 miners die in Philippines:

Heavy rains caused a gold mining pit to collapse in the southern Philippines, killing at least four prospectors, police said Monday, AP reports from Manila.

Rescuers were still searching for other miners who may have been trapped in the pit, which caved in at dawn Friday in the mining town of Moncayo in Davao del Norte province, about 920 kilometers (575 miles) southeast of Manila.

## China, Russia sign contract:

China and Russia yesterday signed a contract for the joint construction of a nuclear power station in eastern China's Jiangsu province, the official Xinhua news agency reported, AFP reports from Beijing.

Premier Li Peng, vice-premier Li Langling, visiting Russian first deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov and visiting atomic energy minister Viktor Mikhailov attended the signing at Beijing's Great Hall of the People.

## Hazing kills 1 more in Lanka:

A freshman college student whose hazing by senior students caused a national political storm, has died in hospital, a news report said Tuesday, AP reports from Colombo.

The state-run Daily News said Thushara Wijetunga, 19, died Monday of kidney failure in Kandy General Hospital three weeks after he was forced to drink several bottles of liquor and to strenuously exercise in the sun. He was the second student to die in the last month from school abuse.