

BJP challenges Cong to pitch Sonia against Vajpayee in TV debate

NEW DELHI, Jan 2: India's Hindu nationalists have challenged the Congress Party to pitch Sonia Gandhi against her prime ministerial candidate in a television debate, the Press Trust of India reported today, says AFP.

The Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) made the challenge after the widow of former premier Rajiv Gandhi agreed to campaign for the once-dominant Congress in the February-March polls.

The BJP said its leader, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and Sonia Gandhi should go head-to-head on television or on a public platform to let the voters decide who would be the best prime minister.

The right-wing BJP and the

Congress are expected to emerge from the staggered polls, which begin on February 16 and end of March 7, as the two largest parties.

A senior BJP leader, Pramod Mahajan, told an election rally in Bombay on Thursday that Vajpayee and Sonia Gandhi should be given 10 questions to answer.

"Let both of them speak out on these issues, which will decide who is the national leader best suited to occupy the office of prime minister," Mahajan said.

Analysts said the BJP offer was a disguised taunt.

Sonia Gandhi has no active political experience. Despite offering to campaign for her deceased husband's party, she has not presented herself as an

election candidate.

The BJP challenge came, however, after Congress election posters began appearing emblazoned with a picture of Sonia Gandhi and the slogan "New leader, new direction."

Some Congress hardliners believe the Gandhi name will be able to revitalise the party.

Analysts expect the elections to end in a hung parliament between three major blocs — the BJP, the Congress and the outgoing United Front coalition, a loose alliance of left-wing, centrist and regional parties.

The BJP argues India is "One nation, one people, one culture while the Congress, which ruled the country for almost four decades after independence, says it is the only party which can offer stability."



Party workers place a large garland around LK Advani (second from right), chief of the Bharatiya Janata Party and around Bal Thackeray (full white robe), chief of the Shiv Sena, during their election campaign rally, in Bombay Thursday. Both the right wing Hindu parties have formed an alliance to contest the 12th Parliamentary elections to be held in February 1998.

'Ranariddh may delay his planned return to Cambodia'

PHNOM PENH, Jan 2: Ousted co-prime minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh may delay his planned return to Cambodia several days so it will coincide with a visit by two United Nations envoys, an aide said Friday, reports AP.

Ranariddh, deposed by his rival, Hun Sen, in two days of fighting in the capital in July, has been living in exile and risks being put on trial if he returns.

The prince's personal representative, Lu Layseng, had said his boss would return on January 15 to play a role in elections the Hun Sen-controlled National Assembly has called for July 26.

But Lu Layseng said Friday that the prince would postpone his return to time it with the visit of two top envoys from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights later in January, which could give Ranariddh greater protection.

representative to Cambodia on human rights issues, is to visit January 18 and will be followed January 29 by High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson.

"His plans are unchanged," Lu Layseng said. "But we may suggest he push it back a few days. It is good if the prince can come between those dates."

Lu Layseng said he would seek a guarantee from Hun Sen's government that Ranariddh's life would not be threatened and that threats to arrest him at the airport would "face a lot of problems with the international community."

"You think Prince Ranariddh will come out of the airplane alone?" Lu Layseng said. "He will have a lot of international protectors with him."

Supporters of Ranariddh meanwhile gathered at the headquarters of his royalist FUNCINPEC party to celebrate his 55th birthday. The prince is in France.

BRIEFLY

100 policemen fired in India:

The government of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh has fired 100 policemen for having links with criminals, according to a local news agency, AP reports from New Delhi.

The orders to fire the policemen and suspended another 183 for working with criminals came from the state's top elected official, Chief Minister Kalyan Singh, United News of India reported Thursday.

Indonesia's population rises to 202.5m: Indonesia's population rose a meagre 1.6 per cent in 1997 to reach an estimated 202.5 million helping to curb fears of massive overpopulation, a newspaper said Friday, AP reports from Jakarta.

Family planning officials said the low growth figure in the world's fourth most populous nation debunked dire predictions of massive overcrowding made 30 years ago, the Jakarta Post reported. Indonesia launched a concerted family planning programme in 1969 following forecasts that it would be overburdened with a population of 280 million by the turn of the century.

6 die from choking on rice cakes in Tokyo: "Don't eat in haste," the Tokyo Fire Department cautioned Friday, one day after six people died from choking on the sticky rice cakes that are among Japan's favourite New Year's treats, AP reports from Tokyo.

Of 15 people taken to hospitals in Tokyo with a "mochi" stuck in their throats, another two were in critical condition, said Akihiko Umehara of the Tokyo Fire Department. Most of the victims were aged 65 or older, he said.

Australia sends aid to PNG: Hungry villagers in the Papua New Guinea highlands will soon be replanting their gardens with seed potatoes, dwarf beans, corn, pumpkin and cucumber seeds, AP reports from Canberra.

Almost 700,000 villagers have been facing the spectre of starvation because their country has been in the grip of a severe drought brought on by an El Nino phenomenon. But rain has now fallen in some parts of Papua New Guinea and relief efforts are taking a new turn, AP reports from Port Moresby.

147 die across Colombia: A total of 147 people died in new year's eve celebrations across Colombia, most of them young people who drank too much and became violent, police said in Bogota Thursday, AP reports from Bogota. Fifty people died in road accidents, 64 from gunshot wounds, 22 from stabbing, police said.

17 killed in Philippines: At least 17 people were killed and more than 500 injured as the Philippines welcomed the new year with firecracker explosion, gun shooting and violence, local newspaper Manila Bulletin reported yesterday. Xinhua reports from Manila.

The newspaper quoted an official report as saying that five of the fatalities were hit by stray bullets, three died of firecracker burns while nine others were killed in stabbing and shooting incidents.

UP gov't's order angers Muslims

LUCKNOW Jan 2: A Hindu nationalist government's order that school children in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh start the day by praying to an image of "Mother India" has angered Muslims, a newspaper reported Friday, reports AP.

The Uttar Pradesh government is controlled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, now making a strong bid for national power in upcoming Parliamentary elections. Critics accused the BJP of fanning religious tension in India, with a population of nearly 1 billion that is 84 per cent Hindu and 10 per cent Muslim.

The BJP advocates spreading what it identifies as Hindu value in India. The party is known for its anti-foreigner, anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Ravindra Shukla, minister of primary education in Uttar Pradesh state, was quoted in The Indian Express newspaper as saying the order he issued last month was meant to inculcate patriotism. Following protests from Muslims, whose religion forbids the worship of images, he amended the directive to require prayers to Mother India just a few times a year.

"We don't need a certificate for our patriotism from any political party or person," the Express quoted Zafaryab Jilani, legal adviser to the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, as saying.

The board has advised Muslim youngsters in Uttar Pradesh not to follow the order, and is considering a legal challenge.

Mosquito-borne diseases on rise in Singapore

SINGAPORE, Jan 2: Singapore had a record number of dengue fever and other mosquito-transmitted disease cases in 1997, the Environment Ministry says, reports AP.

Only one fatality from dengue fever was reported last year, down from three in 1996, but the number of infections shot up to 4,300 from 3,128.

The disease, for which there is no vaccine and which is on the upsurge in the region, is transmitted by the Aedes mosquito, which breeds in clean and stagnant water.

The government has an on-going, intensive public awareness and cleanup campaign against dengue that includes fines for people who allow the mosquito to breed on their property.

Malaria cases rose from 364 in 1996 to 421 last year, with 92 per cent reportedly contracted outside the country, either by Singaporeans who travelled abroad or foreigners who came here to work, vacation or seek medical treatment.

The Environment Ministry, in a report carried Friday by the Straits Times, said the biggest source was India, with 76 cases, followed by Indonesia, with 66 cases — up from 24 cases reported just two years ago.

Iraq denies US report on execution of its political detainees

BAGHDAD, Jan 2: Iraq on Thursday denied a US State Department report that it had executed "hundreds, if not thousands" of political detainees in recent weeks, reports AP.

The Information Ministry said the US report was the "peak of a campaign which began Monday in London" where the Iraqi Communist Party said the Baghdad government had executed 12,500 prisoners and detainees during 1997.

In a statement, the ministry said the administration of US President Bill Clinton "and the British government have tried all manner of misleading propaganda against Iraq and they have failed. This new (propaganda) will not have more luck than the previous ones," the ministry said in a statement.

The Iraqi denial was uncommon as the Baghdad government routinely ignores allegations of human rights violations.

State Department spokesman James Foley said Wednesday the United States had received credible reports that Iraq may have ordered the summary execution of "hundreds, if not thousands" of political detainees in past weeks.

The reports said many of those killed were serving sentences of 15 to 20 years for such crimes as insulting the regime or membership in an opposition political party.

Families of the victims had been receiving remains which bear clear signs of torture, Foley said.

Manmohan Singh says

Parties won't be able to bank on wild pledges in upcoming elections

NEW DELHI, Jan 2: Indian political parties will not be able to bank on wild promises over eradicating poverty during upcoming elections, a former finance minister said in an interview today, reports AP.

Manmohan Singh, the architect of India's 1991 market reforms, told the Business Standard Daily that sweeping pre-polls pledges would not automatically translate into votes.

Singh, a prominent leader of the embattled Congress Party voted out of power in 1991, said India's 600 million voters would ultimately see through slogans and promises likely to remain unfulfilled.

"A party which promises to

be honest with the people in the long run has greater credibility," he said. "Competitive populism is not the road to either social equity or to development."

Singh, who began integrating India into the world economy in the early 1990s after decades of protectionist isolation, said subsidies were not the answer.

"If you have a regime which says power will be given free, I think that is a road to disaster," he said.

"We don't need too many anti-poverty programmes but a nationwide programme of an employment guarantee which would put a floor on agricultural incomes."

Communists free policeman after 55 days in Philippines

ROXAS, Philippines, Jan 2: Communist rebels freed an abducted policeman Friday after 55 days of captivity, removing the last stumbling block for the resumption next week of peace talks between the Philippine government and guerrilla leaders in the Netherlands, reports AP.

Police officer Martillano Magtagad was handed to a representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross at a rebel camp on the outskirts of Roxas town on Mindoro Island, where he was seized November 8.

Magtagad walked off free after a medical checkup following his formal release to government representatives waiting at the Roxas town church patio. "I am very happy to rejoin my family," said Magtagad, choking back tears and embracing his wife Irene.

Magtagad had been accused of several crimes, including land-grabbing on Mindoro, about 235 kilometers (146 miles) south of Manila, three summary executions and torture. He has denied the accusations.

Communist rebel spokesman Gregorio Rosa said Magtagad was being tried by a rebel court, but regional committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines recommended his release as a goodwill measure in the talks.

Rosa said Magtagad "expressed remorse for his offenses and promised not to commit the violations again."

The two sides have been working for years toward a peace agreement that would end the world's longest-running Communist insurgency.

Taliban jets bomb opposition military posts

ISLAMABAD, Jan 2: Afghan Taliban government jets bombed military positions of the opposition forces of commander Ahmad Shah Masood north of Kabul Thursday, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported, reports AFP.

The planes targeted the frontlines at Shakardara, about 30 kilometres (20 miles) from the Afghan capital, as well as opposition positions at nearby Guldara, the agency said.

There was no independent confirmation of the report which did not say how many jets were involved or give any details of casualties.

The rival troops also exchanged heavy artillery fire in the area, said the agency which operates from the Pakistani city of Peshawar near the Afghan border.

Clashes also took place between the Taliban and Masood troops at Tagab, around 50 kilometres (30 miles) from Kabul, it said.

Abacha says

Coup plot was to derail Nigeria's transition programme

LAGOS, Jan 2: Nigeria's military head of state, General Sani Abacha, said Thursday that a recent alleged plot to overthrow him was aimed at "derailing" Nigeria's transition programme, reports AP.

Part of the objective of the failed coup plot is to derail the transition programme and extend its period," Abacha said in comments relayed on state television after meeting regional leaders.

Under the transition programme, Abacha's regime has pledged to hand over power to an elected civilian regime on October 1.

Volcano erupts in Mexico

MEXICO CITY, Jan 2: Mexico's majestic Popocatepetl volcano boomed out a loud eruption on Thursday, spewing out a massive gas cloud and setting off a series of tremors reaching up to 3.3 on the Richter Scale, local media reported, says Reuters.

The eruption could be heard in the provincial capital Puebla 20 miles (32 kms) away, where ash rained down on the streets, Television Azteca reported.

The network showed video of a giant cloud extending some four miles (seven kms) above the peak, which is 17,992 feet (5,452 metres) above sea level.

Radio Red said the eruption may have set off a brush fire near the volcano.

A massive explosion of Popocatepetl would be a major disaster for the 500,000 people who live in its shadow, and could pose a threat to the 18 million people living in Mexico City, just 40 miles (64 kms) away.

Off the Record

Balloonists' quest

ST LOUIS: The pursuit of one of aviation's last frontiers — flying a hot-air balloon around the world nonstop — is suddenly a head-to-head race, reports AP.

Two competing balloonists planned to begin the exhausting, exhilarating and dangerous 20,000-mile (32,185-kilometre) journey Wednesday evening.

Architect Kevin Uliassi was to set out from a quarry near Rockford, Illinois, about 90 miles (145 kilometres) northwest of Chicago, in a shoestring attempt at the record books.

At about the same time, millionaire adventurer Steve Fossett planned to lift off a couple of hundred miles (kilometres) to the south, from Busch Stadium in St Louis, in a more sophisticated bid for the honour.

They may have soon have even more competition. Dick Rutan, who helped fly the experimental lightweight plane Voyager around the world nonstop 11 years ago, plans to take off from Albuquerque, New Mexico, as soon as the weather is right.

Anne — the busiest Royal in 1997

LONDON: Princess Anne was the busiest member of the Royal family in 1997, according to a devoted analyst of the Windsor workload, reports AP.

Anne carried out 642 official engagements, 24 ahead of her mother, Queen Elizabeth II.

The count was compiled by Tim O'Donovan, a retired insurance broker from Datchet, Berkshire, who files his reports each New Year in a letter to the editor of The Times.

The letter published Friday included a table of official visits of 13 members of the royal family whose comings and goings are reported in the court circular.

Princess Diana, who died in an August 31 car crash in Paris, was not included because she had been dropped from the royal circular after her divorce from Prince Charles in 1996.

"Those promoting a smaller royal family should bear in mind the important contribution made by the queen's sister and her cousins, with 41 per cent of their engagements in support of charities," O'Donovan wrote.

Seal of Biblical Jewish king found

JERUSALEM: For the first time, a complete and undamaged seal of one of the Biblical Jewish kings has been uncovered, an archaeologist said Thursday, reports AP.

The clay seal was used for sealing a papyrus letter and was stamped with the inscription "Ahaz (son of) Yotam, King of Judaea."

Ahaz reigned from 727-698 B.C. and is mentioned twice in the Bible. The second book of Chronicles, chapter 17, verse 2 reads: "Ahaz was 20 years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem 16 years."

The writing on the seal is of a high calligraphic order, said Robert Deutsch of Tel Aviv University. Deutsch wrote the book "Messages from the Past," which reveals that the seal has been identified.

At the edge of the clay daub is a finger print. "We believe it is the king's and that it was made unintentionally as he imprinted the seal with his signet ring, Deutsch told the Associated Press.

Iranian newspaper rejects any dialogue with US

TEHRAN, Jan 2: A conservative Iranian newspaper rejected any dialogue with Washington on Thursday days before President Mohammad Khatami was due to address Americans in a television interview, reports Reuters.

"There is no sign of a change in the position of the leadership (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) and the Iranian people on relations between Iran and America," the Daily Guds said. "A dialogue with the American nation certainly does not mean opening talks with the American government."

"The respected president has also consistently criticised the domineering behaviour of America's rulers," said the newspaper which is close to conservative Shi'ite Muslim clerics opposed to the relatively moderate Khatami.

No mainstream politician or newspaper has openly advocated talks with Washington since last month.

Kenya polls Opposition urged to accept defeat gracefully

NAIROBI, Jan 2: Unofficial results from Kenya's flawed elections showed President Daniel Arap Moi in the lead with more than half the votes counted and his KANU Party on Thursday urged the opposition to accept the result gracefully, reports Reuters.

"Election defeat looms for the opposition" Kenya African National Union (KANU) Party stalwart Simeon Nyachae told Reuters. They should gracefully accept defeat.

A government statement meanwhile said police would deal "swiftly and firmly" with anyone who tried to disturb the peace.

"The government will not tolerate or condone any acts of intimidation or provocation of its citizens by those who may wish to ignore the wishes of Kenyans and incites them to plunge our peaceful and beloved country into chaos," it said.

The statement was issued a day after opposition leaders

Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga said Kenya was edging towards civil strife and they would not accept a result giving Moi victory.

The 73-year-old president, one of Africa's last "big man" leaders is seeking a final five-year term after 19 years in office, his opponents have charged that corruption and mismanagement are ruining Kenya.

AP adds: Riot police protected ballots and rival party members in Kenya threw metal chairs and punches at each other during a vote count that President Daniel Arap Moi was leading.

Temper were frayed by an unprecedented two-day vote marred by accusations of vote fraud and eight deaths in political violence.

The painstaking process of counting the ballots by hand through three sleepless nights only worsened mood.

Speedy trial of Bosnian war criminals likely

THE HAGUE, Jan 2: After a stop-start tempo in its first few years, the international criminal tribunal for former Yugoslavia is ready to shift into top gear in 1998, reports Reuters.

Progress has been made on two important fronts, with NATO-led peacekeepers in Bosnia showing fresh resolve to help round up war crimes suspects and a second courtroom in The Hague under construction so trials can be held more quickly.

The tribunal is now poised to discharge its mandate fully and expeditiously, chief prosecutor Louise Arbour told a recent gathering of politicians and diplomats in Bonn.

In December Elite Dutch troops swooped to arrest two suspects who are now awaiting trial. British troops had mounted a similar operation in July, arresting one suspect and shooting another dead after he opened fire on them.

NATO Secretary General

Javier Solana has said the SFOR stabilisation force in Bosnia will carry out further arrests if indicted suspects continue to defy the United Nations by refusing to turn themselves in for trial.

This action by SFOR stands as a warning to all those indicted for war crimes who are still at large, that they too will be held accountable," he said during a visit to Bosnia just two days after the Dutch raid.

The Netherlands, the United States and other countries have pledged funds for a second courtroom in The Hague which is expected to be ready by the middle of this year.

"As soon as we have more facilities we can speed up all the proceedings," said tribunal spokesman Christian Chartier.

Meanwhile, two new trials are due to start this month. Bosnian-Croat Zlatko Aleksovski will face charges of mistreating Muslims prisoners

and the former Serb mayor of Vukovar Slavko Dokmanovic will be tried for alleged involvement in a massacre of Croats.

Steps have also been taken to bring the trial of Bosnian Croat general Tihomir Blaskic, one of two currently in progress, to a conclusion in the first half of this year.

The tribunal has set a limit of 100 days for the prosecution and the defence to complete the presentation of their evidence.

Intense US diplomatic pressure on Croatia paid off in October when 10 Bosnian Croat suspects gave themselves up, though three were later released because of lack of evidence.

However, a continuing lack of cooperation from Yugoslavia and the Bosnian Serbs mean some 50 indicted suspects remain at large, including former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and his former military commander General Ratko Mladic.



US Rep. Joseph Kennedy (D-Mass) passes the body of his brother Michael Kennedy off a corporate jet at the Barnstable Municipal Airport in Hyannis, Mass, Thursday. Michael Kennedy was killed on New Year's Eve in a skiing accident in Aspen, Colorado.