

## International

# CPI rejects Congress' appeal to join hands against BJP

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: Indian Communists, who could play a key role as powerbrokers in the country's upcoming elections, today rejected appeals from the once-dominant Congress Party to join forces against the Hindu nationalists, reports AFP.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) said they would battle it out against both the Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), the country's largest two parties, in the February-March polls.

The snub came after a Congress leader Friday said the Communists would have to abandon their "anti-Congressism" if they wanted to defeat the right wing BJP, accused by critics of sectarianism and of championing divisive religious policies.

CPI general secretary AB Bardhan, however, said: "There is nothing like blind anti-Congressism, which we are often accused of. It is with open eyes we are critical of the Congress and their corruption."

"We have always considered the BJP as a rank rightist, communal and reactionary force. We consider them dangerous. We will try to prevent them from taking power. But that does not mean we will spare the Congress."

The BJP, seen as pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim by its critics, overtook the Congress as India's largest parliamentary party last year.

Both are hoping to come to power at the head of coalitions after the polls, which are expected to produce a hung parliament.

India's population of 960 million includes around 125 million Muslims.

India's outgoing United Front minority coalition government, made up of more than a dozen parties including the Communists, is expected to be the third force in the polls.

The front collapsed in November when the Congress, after backing it following 1996 elections to keep the BJP out of power, withdrew its support.

The Congress appeal to the Communists, who are influential in three of India's 25 states, was part of its attempt to form an anti-BJP nationwide coalition.

The CPI and the more influential Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) claimed around 50 of the 545 seats in the last parliament.

"They played a key role in launching the United Front centre-left coalition that took office in June 1996 after those elections produced a hung parliament.

Analysts say the Communists could again play a crucial role if the upcoming polls lead to another split verdict.

## EC urged to shorten duration of polls

Meanwhile, Indian political parties eager to end dragging political uncertainty, have urged the poll panel to shorten the duration of coming elections now staggered over three weeks, newspapers said today.

The autonomous Election Commission has been besieged with requests from political leaders to cut short the voting schedule that is to start February 16 and end on March 7, the Hindu and other dailies said.

He counting of the millions of votes was to begin nationwide on March 8, and all results were expected to be known by March 12.

Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's Janata Dal (People's Party) said the schedule was unusually long.

It could increase the chance of tinkering with ballot boxes and other types of manipulation, it added.

The Janata Dal said its views had the support of its Communist allies.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), said it also wanted the polling duration to be reduced.

The present programme is unduly staggered," said the BJP's Jana Krishnamurti. "It would be good if the Election Commission had condensed it within 10 days or a week."

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The autonomous Election

## Mexico massacre Top official indicted for killing

TUXTLA GUTIERREZ, Mexico, Jan 3: The top official in the Mexican county where 45 people were massacred has been indicted on charges that he organized the killings, reports AP.

Jacinto Arias Cruz, the head of Chenalho country in southern Chiapas state, will not be eligible for bail due to the seriousness of the crimes he is charged with, prosecutors said Friday.

"According to several witnesses, Jacinto Arias Cruz supplied weapons to those accused" in the December 22 massacre, said Roberto Villarreal, spokesman for the Attorney General's Office.

Arias Cruz has denied responsibility for the massacre, but refuses to speak with the press, according to prison officials.

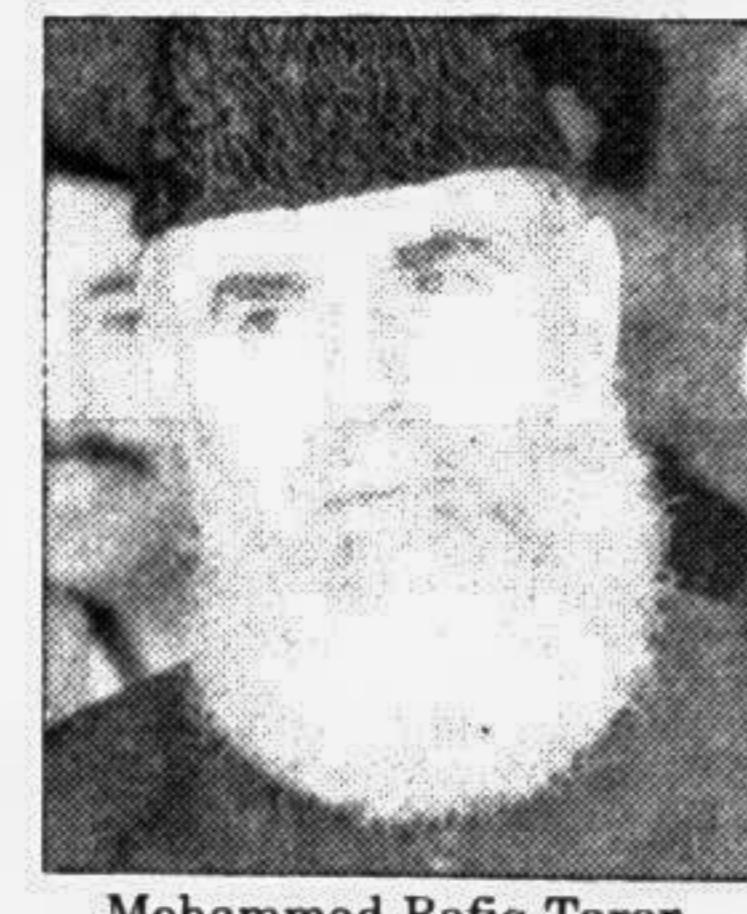
A supporter of Mexico's ruling party, he is charged with causing injuries, criminal association and illegal weapons possession.

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The autonomous Election

# Tarar's election may strengthen hands of Pak fundamentalists



Mohammad Rafiq Tarar

LAHORE, Jan 3: The election of Pakistan's most conservative president in a decade is the latest sign of the strengthening influence of religious fundamentalism in this Muslim country, reports AP.

In a mosque in Lahore, a young boy says his big ambition in life is to kill non-believers. His friend says he wants to fight a "jihad," or holy war.

In the nearby village of Railwind, hundreds of bearded men carrying bed rolls arrive at a religious school to learn more about their Islamic faith before heading off to preach in Pakistan and abroad.

Here, in Punjab province, where 60 per cent of Pakistan's 140 million people live, segregation of the sexes is gaining momentum.

Television advertisements of pretty young women using facial soap have been pulled, not for what they show, but for what they don't. As one government censor put it: "People may imagine that she is not wearing anything."

Now, Rafiq Tarar, who was elected by legislators Wednesday, is taking office as the country's most religiously orthodox president since military dictator Mohammed Zia-ul Haq died in 1988.

Zia resurrected public

hangings, stoning to death and public beatings, all in keeping with Islamic dictates.

Tarar, a retired judge of the Lahore High Court, is a member of Pakistan's orthodox Muslim Tableeqi movement, which is committed to spreading Islam

worldwide. Religious leaders welcomed Tarar's election. Liberals and human-rights activists expressed worries.

Tarar told The Associated Press in a telephone interview that Pakistan's liberals have nothing to fear from him and described himself as a "liberal Muslim."

His critics question that description.

Tarar opposes family law legislation that gives women the right to divorce and to fight for custody of their children. The three-judge court he led upheld amputation of limbs as punishment for theft, although Pakistani physicians have refused to carry out such sentences.

He also has condemned the promotion of members of Pakistan's minority Ahmadi community to senior government jobs and judicial posts.

Many liberals also believe Tarar's election is a devastating setback for campaigns against laws they view as repressive or anti-women.



Former drug czar Lee Brown, right, is sworn as mayor of Houston by US District Judge Venessa Gilmore Friday in Houston. Brown is the first African-American mayor of Houston. — AP/UNB photo

**Turkey detains 20 Pakistanis:** Turkish authorities on Friday detained 20 illegal Pakistani immigrants seeking to flee western Turkey for a Greek island in the Aegean Sea, security officials said. AFP reports from Ankara.

The refugees were detained in the town of Seferihisar near Turkey's main Aegean port of Izmir as they were preparing to sail to Greece, they said. The report came amid an ongoing influx of thousands of mainly Kurdish refugees from Turkey to Italy.

**US balloon launch to be delayed:** An impending storm has forced two men to delay for 24 hours their attempt at an around-the-world balloon flight, AP reports from Albuquerque.

Pilot Dick Rutan of Mojave, California and co-pilot Dave Melton of Espanola, New Mexico, now plan to take off early Tuesday. Forecasters are predicting rain and strong winds up to eight knots Monday in Albuquerque. Balloonists generally wait to launch in winds under five knots, said Patrick Barry, spokesman for the Global Hilton team.

**Gas fumes kill 4 of a Pak family:** Four members of a family were asphyxiated while they slept after leaving a gas heater on, police said Saturday, AP reports from Lahore.

Matiob Hussain, his wife, daughter and elderly uncle died Friday when gas fumes filled their home in Mohra Rajputan, a mountainous area 6 kilometres (10 miles) northeast of the capital of Islamabad in the Punjab province. Neighbours entered the home when no one emerged by midday and discovered the bodies, police said. Hussain's 14-year-old daughter, the sole survivor, is recovering at a nearby hospital, police said.

**Train mishap kills 8 in India:** Eight people were killed when a speeding passenger train rammed into a jeep in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, The Hindustan Times newspaper reported yesterday. AFP says from New Delhi.

Four others were injured in the accident near Champaran town, the daily said. The jeep was crossing a railway line when it was hit by the train that was coming from the Nepal border.

**2 Filipino crew members missing:** Rescuers searched Friday for two missing Filipino crew members of cargo ship that exploded and caught fire north of Argentina's capital, AP reports from Buenos Aires.

The tanker exploded late Thursday night on the Parana River, injuring 31 crew members, the coast guard said. The reason for the explosion was not immediately clear. The tanker, Lancer registered in the Bahamas, was en route from the Buenos Aires province port of Campana to Houston, Texas, via Venezuela. Two of the crew were in serious condition, the coast guard said. The nationalities of all the crew were not immediately available, although the majority were believed to be from the Bahamas, Greece and the Philippines.

**Strong quake hits Tokyo:** A fairly strong earthquake hit the main northern Japanese island of Hokkaido yesterday but caused no damage or injuries, the Meteorological Agency said, Reuter reports from Tokyo.

The quake, strong enough to knock items off shelves measured 5.3 on the Richter Scale and was most intense in the town of Nakashibetsu, about 1,700 km (1,055 miles) northeast of Tokyo, it said.

**4 killed in Venezuela jails:** One inmate died in violence that broke out early Friday in La Planta prison and three others were killed Thursday in fighting in a jail 30 kilometres (19 miles) away, officials said, AFP reports from Caracas.

Rodolfo Marcano was fatally shot in the chest in the La Planta prison in the southwest of the capital, a national guard official said. Police cordoned off the prison and conducted a search of Cellblock Four, the most violent unit of the capital's beleaguered prison system, where inmates were digging a two-metre-wide (two-year-wide) tunnel.

**21 Japanese choked to death so far:** A total of 21 Japanese choked to death on the first two days of the New Year in Tokyo after eating traditional glutinous "mochi" rice cakes in the belief the food brings longevity, a report said yesterday. AFP reports from Tokyo.

Of the 21 victims, 18 were aged 65 years or older, according to police and ambulance squad reports compiled by the mass-circulation daily Yomiuri Shimbun early Saturday. Official nationwide figures were unavailable although the Tokyo fire department said eight people died of suffocation after eating "mochi" or "ozouni" soup containing the traditional food.

**Firefighters watch a fire in New York, Friday.** A burst water main put lower Manhattan streets around the Flatiron Building under more than a foot of water overnight, then as the streets dried, fire erupted from a gas main at the site of the break. — AP/UNB photo

**Grenade attack on UN HQs in Baghdad**

**Rabbani in Iran for talks**

**Castro makes surprise visit to US ship**

**Mir astronauts fix computer component**

**UK minister still opposed to decriminalising cannabis**

**Ranariddh's return from exile denounced**

**ISLAMABAD: Two men allegedly killed their married sister in a Pakistani village because they suspected her of committing adultery, press reports said today.**

**Offensive against LTTE likely to slow down**

**Brutal!**

**Offensive against LTTE likely to slow down**

**COLOMBO: The Sri Lankan military offensive to open a land route to the northern Jaffna peninsula is expected to slow down with the army and political analysts cautioning against haste to meet the government's approaching target date, reports India's Agence France Presse.**

**Senior military officers are of the opinion that any attempt to speed up the operation would result in heavy troop casualties.**

**They point out that the 17 km stretch to link up troop columns with Kilinochchi, the military held township in the North, lies along the most fortified strongholds of the Tamil Tiger rebels.**

**Political analysts too said that it was ill-advised to link the opening of the land route with the golden jubilee of the island nation's independence on February 4.**

**Linking it with the golden jubilee of independence would send wrong signals to the Tamil people, who actually appreciate the government's intention of restoring civil administration in the North," he explained.**

**Local government elections in the government-controlled areas in the North are being held on January 29 with four Tamil parties contesting.**

**Sri Lanka's Deputy Defence Minister, General Anuruddha Ratwatte, had announced last month that the Operation Jayasikuru (Victory Assured), which began on May 13 last year, would be completed before**

**the 50th independence anniversary.**

**Military officers said that unless the troops consolidate their positions after every few kilometres before resuming the forward march, the army would suffer heavy casualties.**

**"If we rush, the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) would hit weaker spots on the military column causing heavy damage as they had done in the past," a senior officer told IANS, requesting not to be identified.**

**More than 110 soldiers have been killed and around 2,000 wounded in the operation so far. The LTTE has also suffered heavy losses. Defence**

**Spokesman Brigadier Sarah Munasinghe said the offensive has killed more than 3,000 Tiger rebels, but independent sources put the LTTE casualty figure to be around 1,500.**