

Kesri, Sonia locked in behind-the-scenes tussle to lead Congress Party

NEW DELHI, Jan 8: A politician who aims high but has never fought an election and an enigmatic Italian-born woman without political experience are locked in a behind-the-scenes tussle to lead India's once-dominant Congress Party, reports AFP.

For the moment, Sonia Gandhi, 51, widow of slain former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi, appears to be winning an escalating war that could affect the Congress' prospects in coming elections.

The party's highly unpopular president Sitaram Kesri, who is around 80 years of age but is not sure when he was born, has more than once implicitly admitted he is on a losing wicket. But he is not giving up.

At stake is the leadership of the 12-year-old party. The Congress may be steadily losing influence but could still play a crucial role in the event of a widely-expected hung parliament.

There is nothing in common between the suave, aristocratic Sonia Gandhi, who married

into the well-known Nehru-Gandhi Dynasty in 1968, and Kesri, who calls himself "an ordinary Congress activist."

Kesri, taunted by critics for his poor English and rustic manners, who for decades the backroom Congress treasurer. Never having contested an election, he lacks the legitimacy of a leader.

He became the Congress president after the 1996 elections, by accident, succeeding former premier PV Narasimha Rao who got embroiled in corruption scandals.

Since then, Kesri has been in the news for the all wrong reasons — accused of ousting two minority governments in seven months and for causing India's latest elections, the second within two years, in February-March.

Sonia Gandhi's shadow had been hovering over the Congress since her husband Rajiv Gandhi, who was Indian prime minister in 1984-89, was blown up by a suicide bomber during the 1991 poll campaign.

The mother-of-two has repeatedly rejected demands for

her to take over the party leadership. She only became a Congress Party member last year.

But she is one of the most powerful individuals in India, courted even by foreign leaders.

On December 29, by which time the Congress was beginning to be seen as an also ran in the elections, she announced that she would actively campaign for the party's candidates, electrifying the political scenario.

The announcement — although publicly hailed by Kesri — escalated the Cold War between him and Sonia Gandhi. Only Sonia, her admirers claim, can save the besieged Congress and help it win the polls.

On Tuesday, hundreds of her admirers shouted down Kesri when he tried to address a Congress meeting in New Delhi. Humiliated Kesri and his aides had to leave.

The insult came a day after an opposition leader close to Kesri urged Sonia not to fight the polls or offer herself as a prime ministerial candidate —

something which Kesri would love to say but dare not.

Newspapers say Sonia is under pressure within the Congress to play an active role in party affairs and to personally pick candidates for the polls so as to sideline Kesri.

Sonia has not said if she would do that, many now believe she will.

Already, the rush of Congress politicians has begun moving from Kesri's house to Sonia's heavily-guarded bungalow — known popularly by its address of 10 Janpath. She has emerged as a parallel power centre.

But not all the news is music to Sonia's ears.

Hindu nationalists have threatened that if Sonia were to take over the Congress, they could use continuing allegations of corruption aimed at her husband against her.

They have also said if Sonia Gandhi — who took Indian citizenship in 1986, wears saris and speaks good Hindi but is seen by many as a "foreigner" — were to head the Indian National Congress, they would

renege it the "Italian National Congress."

Rly minister urged to resign

Meanwhile, Indian Railway Minister Ramvilas Paswan was today called upon to resign by a leading newspaper over a railway accident in which 50 people died.

An editorial in the mass-circulation Hindustan Times said Paswan should "assume moral responsibility... for the nineteenth train disaster of his tenure and offer to resign."

The Times said Paswan had proved to be "one of the most accident-prone ministers in history," and said he had contributed to the growing demoralisation among railway staff by meddling in day-to-day affairs.

Fifty people were killed and 60 others injured when two passenger trains collided in dense fog late Monday near the northern town of Hardoi.



Priyanka to campaign for Cong

NEW DELHI, Jan 8: Priyanka Gandhi, the daughter of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, will join her mother in campaigning for the Congress Party in upcoming elections, an aide said here today, reports AFP.

A campaign official for the Gandhis said the 25-year-old had agreed to follow her mother Sonia Gandhi's example and take part in electioneering in the February-March polls.

The once-dominant Congress is gambling on the aura surrounding the Gandhi dynasty to revive the party's fortunes.

"Priyanka has agreed to campaign for the Congress but her programme has not yet been finalised," the official said.

"We still don't know whether she would campaign beside her mother or separately."

Neither Priyanka, who bears a striking resemblance to her grandmother Indira Gandhi, nor her older brother Rahul have previously shown any inclination to enter politics.

Priyanka gave up her job as a school teacher after marrying businessman Robert Vadra in February, 1997. Rahul works in Britain.

Botha to be summoned to appear before court

JOHANNESBURG, Jan 8: South Africa's former state president PW Botha would have to appear in a court since he refused to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), reports Xinhua.

Botha would be summoned to the George regional court in the western Cape province on January 23, South African press association quoted western Cape Attorney-General Frank Kahn as saying today.

Botha will face a two-year imprisonment or a fine of 20,000 rand (4,080 US dollars) if convicted on the main charge of failing to appear before the TRC.

The alternative charge against Botha is hindering the commission in the execution of its duties.

Kahn told a news conference that the decision was hard to make considering Botha's age and health.

"He is almost 82 years of age and no attorney-general in any civilised country lightly decides to prosecute a person of his age, especially given Botha's medical history."

Kahn said he had considered all the circumstances and decided that a prosecution was warranted in law and in the

public interest.

He added that the TRC had decided not to press charges in relation to media references to its standing, and there would be no further charges.

Botha has called the truth commission "a circus" and a "witch hunt" against apartheid leaders, and said repeatedly that he would not testify before it.

Red Cross ready to extend help to newly poor in E Asia

GENEVA, Jan 8: The Red Cross said it is ready to extend help to the newly poor in East Asia, clogged by financial crisis, and in Western Europe as it launched its annual appeal for funds today, reports AFP.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is seeking 240 million Swiss francs (167 million dollars) to help 10 million vulnerable people in 56 countries next year.

Some 33 million Swiss francs are earmarked for the Asia/Pacific region, mainly for traditionally poor countries such as Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar and Indonesia.

BRIFFLY

- 2 F-16s collided in US:** Two US Air Force F-16s collided in midair while practicing intercepts at a training range in Utah Wednesday, and one of the high performance fighters crashed, the air force said, AFP reports from Washington.
- The pilot of the downed plane ejected safely and was located by search teams and taken to a hospital, the air force said. The second aircraft landed safely at an army airfield at dugway proving grounds, it said.
- Assault on gunmen in Yemen:** Yemeni security forces on Wednesday launched an assault against tribal gunmen who kidnapped three South Koreans earlier this week south-east of the capital Sanaa, a security official told AFP in Sanaa.
- Forces from the security services and the Republican Guards launched an attack against the Al-Haddada tribe, around 160 kilometres (100 miles) south-east of Sanaa, said the source. "These forces, supported by tanks, launched this attack during the evening in a bid to free the hostages," said the official.
- Michigan missionary returns home:** A Michigan missionary missing for several days in Romania returned to his home in the European country Wednesday, and church officials in the United States said he had been abducted and drugged, AP reports from Holt, Michigan.
- Bible Baptist Fellowship missionary Jeremy Gaudett, 27, disappeared Sunday in Ploesti, about 30 miles (48 kms) north of the Romanian capital of Bucharest. Tamera Franzel, a secretary at Capitol City Baptist, Gaudett's home church in Holt, said the church received word at around 4 pm Wednesday that Gaudett had returned home.
- Korean-American newsman freed:** A Korean-American journalist, jailed three weeks ago on libel charges, was released early Thursday pending trial, court officials said, AP reports from Seoul.
- Richard Choi, 49, a newsman for Los Angeles-based KBLA-AM, or Radio Korea, was set free shortly after midnight on his stay of his arrest by a Seoul criminal court, they said. The Hankook Ilbo-Korea Times newspaper group, whose lawsuit sent Choi to prison on December 19, welcomed the release but said it had no plan to drop the criminal charges it has filed against him.



President and Mrs Clinton, escorted by Washington-area children who attend day care centres, walk to the East Room of the White House Wednesday, where the president announced his proposed \$21.7 billion package in grants and tax breaks to help working families find affordable care. — AP/UNB photo

Algeria denies independent probe into recent massacre

PARIS, Jan 8: While the massacres blamed on Islamic insurgents are quickening their deadly pace, Algerian authorities have publicly refused outside aid or an independent investigation into the slaughter, reports AP.

And despite a US State Department report Wednesday that Algeria said it would accept a human rights investigator, there was no indication in the North African country that the government had changed its position.

Algerian authorities, meanwhile, have also refused to explain why the army — since independence, considered the embodiment of the nation — is unable to protect the citizenry.

"Where is the president? Where are our elected officials? What are they waiting for to come and see us?" said Farida, a 24-year-old woman who lost her husband and three children Sunday in a mountain village massacre in western Algeria.

Farida, who spoke with The Associated Press in Algeria, was among about 100 survivors who took refuge in the mosque at Chekela, the closest town, 150 miles (240 kms) from Algiers. And she is one of the rare survivors who dares utter the questions so many others keep

to themselves.

The grisly bloodshed has killed tens of thousands, terrified the nation and horrified the world. But it meets a wall of official silence at the seat of power, six years after the Muslim insurgency began.

On Tuesday, Algeria "categorically rejected" a call by the United States for an independent inquiry, in an apparent contradiction, the US State Department said Wednesday that a human rights investigator was still a possibility.

"They told us that they would accept a visit," spokesman James P Rubin said after a telephone report from US Ambassador Cameron Hume.

The European Union was to begin talks Thursday on aid to the victims, but late Wednesday night Algerian government spokesman Hamzaoui Habib Chavki said his government had not asked for any outside help and would "pursue without respite" the fight against what it called "terrorists."

More than 1,000 people are estimated to have been killed since the start of Ramadan on December 30. In the worst single episode of carnage in six years, more than 400 people were killed around Relizane, near Chekela, as dusk settled

Phoolan Devi renominated

NEW DELHI, Jan 8: Indian bandit leader-turned-MP Phoolan Devi has been renominated by the Socialist Party to fight the upcoming parliamentary elections, a spokesman said today, reports AFP.

Devi, accused of murdering 20 men in 1981, was elected to parliament in 1996 after serving 11 years in jail without trial.

She will again contest from her northern constituency of Mirzapur.

Nicknamed the "Bandit Queen," she is one of four members of the Socialist Party of Defence Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav whose candidatures were decided late Wednesday, a party spokesman said.

Devi, aged 35, the subject of several books and a film, is one of India's most colourful politicians.

She was accused by police of leading a gang of bandits into a village in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh in February 1981 and shooting 20 men.

The incident was reportedly a revenge attack after Devi had accused two high-caste men of raping her.

Devi, who surrendered to the authorities in 1983 after two years on the run, was pardoned in 1994, she has always denied carrying out the killings.

US space shuttle will blast off to Mir Jan 22

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla, Jan 8: The US space shuttle Endeavour will blast off to Russia's space station Mir on January 22, for an exchange of US crew members, NASA officials said on Wednesday, reports Reuters.

Space agency managers, meeting at Florida's Kennedy Space Centre, picked the launch date at a day-long meeting to review preflight preparations, NASA spokesman Bruce Buckingham said.

Endeavour, with a crew of six Americans and one Russian, is scheduled to liftoff from the Florida spaceport at 9:84 am EST on January 22 (0248 GMT on January 23) and dock with the orbiting Russian outpost two days later.

The shuttle will pick up US crew member David Wolf and drop off his replacement, Australian-born NASA astronaut Andrew Thomas, it will also deliver food, water and other supplies.

A total of 7,000 pounds (3,175 kg) of cargo will be transferred between the two craft.

Thomas four-month stay on Mir will be the seventh and last by a US astronaut, NASA and the Russian space agency hope to start in-orbit construction of the long-planned international space station in June.

Off the Record

He is not a fan of Spice Girls

SYDNEY: Prime Minister John Howard — unlike South African President Nelson Mandela, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Charles — finds the Spice Girls utterly resistible and will not interrupt his vacation to meet them, reports AP.

It's not clear whether the snub says more about Howard's bland, 1950s style or the purportedly declining popularity of the British girl pop group — or both — but he has turned down repeated invitations to meet the Spice Girls, the Herald Sun reported Thursday.

Howard reportedly told Spice Girls management that it would be "inappropriate" and he "would not be available," the paper reported.

The Spice Girls are in Australia to promote their feature film "Spiceworld: The Movie," while Howard is spending a break from Parliament at Hawks Nest, a sleepy fishing town of about 1,100 on the New South Wales coast.

Clues to origin of Chinese civilisation

JINAN: Chinese archaeologists have recently excavated ten ancient sites dating back to 8,000 years, which are expected to provide clues to the origin of Chinese civilisation, reports Xinhua.

These sites, including hundreds of tombs and houses, are the oldest ones of the Neo-Stone Age found on the lower reaches of the Yellow River, scattered in a 150-kilometre-wide area in Shandong.

Archaeologists said that this is the first time for them to find Neo-Stone Age sites which are so densely located.

One of the largest houses occupies a floor space of 50 square metres, and is distinctly divided into a kitchen, bedrooms and parlour. Pottery articles of different types as well as animal bones have been unearthed.

In another site, archaeologists found that in two tombs 14 and 19 people were buried together, respectively, hinting that there existed a strange custom at that time, when patriarchy was quite popular.

China warns US against chopper sales to Taiwan

BEIJING, Jan 8: China today warned the United States against any sales of helicopters to Taiwan, amid reports of a possible billion dollar deal.

"The US sale of arms to Taiwan will only lead to tension across the Taiwan Straits and is not conducive to the stability of the region," a foreign ministry spokesman told AFP.

The Taiwanese paper The China Times reported Wednesday that the island's army was to purchase around 100 helicopters to replace its ageing UH-1H transportation fleet.

The package worth up to 1.47 billion US including spare parts and post sale maintenance service, has sparked stiff competition among potential supplier US Bell Helicopter Textron Inc and Sikorsky Aircraft Co and a European helicopter maker, the paper said.

The American side in the August 17th (1982) joint communiqué clearly undertook to reduce its sales of arms to Taiwan. Leading over a period of time to a final resolution of the foreign ministry spokesman said.

"The American side should earnestly honour its commitment."

The comment came ahead of a three-day visit by US Defence Secretary William Cohen, due to arrive in Beijing on January 17 as part of a tour of Asia.

On Wednesday a former US defence under secretary said the United States should clarify its position on Taiwan.

If you leave this ambiguity in place, you are courting disaster, Joseph Nye said at a luncheon given by the Asia society in Hong Kong.

French FM arrives in Ankara for talks

ANKARA, Jan 8: French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine arrived overnight in Ankara for talks expected to focus on Europe, illegal immigration by Kurds and bilateral relations, reports AFP.

Vedrine will try to convince Turkish leaders to take part in the European Union conference on enlargement due to be held in London at the end of March even though if Turkey was left out of the group of countries currently being considered for membership.

Turkey announced that it was severing political dialogue with the EU after the EU summit in Luxembourg in December decided against including Turkey among countries considered suitable for EU membership.

His pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and its support for violent opposition to the Middle East peace process, and Iran could present its own concerns, Rubin said.

Real improvement in ties "will depend not upon what the government in Iran says but what it does," he said.

The interview was the latest step by Khatami, 55, a moderate cleric elected with a grassroots of popular support in May, toward rapprochement with the West.

He is under pressure to improve Iran's economy and ease its isolation from the West. Many of the voters who gave Khatami his electoral victory, including the younger generation and women, also want an easing of restrictions on their dress and social activities.

Khatami said he regretted the incident's effect on American feelings, and said it stemmed from "revolutionary real" as well as American provocations.

Israeli PM plans to reduce scope of planned troops withdrawal from WB

JERUSALEM, Jan 8: Concerned about threats by hard-liners to topple his government, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu plans to reduce the scope of Israel's planned troop pullback in the West Bank, Israeli media said Wednesday, reports AP.

Netanyahu has become more vulnerable since moderate Foreign Minister David Levy resigned this week, reducing the coalition's majority in the 120-member parliament from 66 to a minimal 61 seats.

Coalition rightists opposed to the peace process say they may bring down the government if Netanyahu concedes too much land.

At the same time, Netanyahu is also under threat by coalition centrists demanding a pullback that will satisfy both the Palestinians and the United States. Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai told Channel 3 TV he would resign if there was no troop pullout.

Ross is in the region to lay

the groundwork for meetings by US President Bill Clinton with Netanyahu on January 20 and with Arafat on January 22, at which the United States hopes to nail down an Israeli troop pullback, one of three Israel has promised by mid-1998.

The first, offered last March, was rejected by the Palestinians as insufficient, and the second is two months overdue.

Pressed by the United States, Netanyahu had reportedly been ready to offer a troop pullback from more than 10 per cent of the West Bank. The Palestinian already have full or partial control over 27 per cent of the land.

But Israel's Yediot Ahronot newspaper reported Wednesday that Netanyahu has now decided to reduce the pullout to eight per cent unless the Palestinians agreed to forgo the next withdrawal.

Israel's Channel 2 TV Israel had proposed a six-per cent pullout.

The Haaretz daily also said Netanyahu wanted to reduce the



File — Gunther von Hagens explains to journalists specimens at the exhibition Human Body World at the Museum for Technics and Work in Mannheim, Germany, on this filer taken Oct 29, 1997. Some 200 real human specimens, including whole bodies, single organs and transparent body slices, give an unique insight into the world of the healthy as well as the diseased body. — AP/UNB photo

Iran neither fomenting terrorism nor building N-arms: Khatami

TEHRAN, Jan 8: Iran's president appealed for "a crisis in the wall of mistrust" between his country and the United States, and proposed exchanges of scholars, artists and other groups to break down two decades of hostility and suspicion, reports AP.

He also denied that Iran is fomenting terrorism or building nuclear weapons, and made the first expression of regret by an Iranian leader over the holding of hostages at the US Embassy in Tehran during the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Mohammad Khatami made his remarks during a rare interview with Cable News Network in the Iranian capital, broadcast in the United States on Wednesday evening. The interview was to be broadcast by Iranian TV at 6 am local time, Thursday.

Khatami, who faces opposition from anti-American hard-liners in his own government, made clear he was proposing only unofficial contacts, not

formal talks to restore ties between the US and Iranian governments.

"We feel no need for ties with the US, especially as the modern world is so diverse and plural that we can reach our objectives without its assistance," he said. Iran is more inclined to form bonds with European nations because their foreign policies are "more advanced," he said.

But he added, "Nothing should prevent dialogue and understanding between the two nations, especially between their scholars and thinkers. Right now, I recommend the exchange of professors, writers, scholars, artists, journalists and tourists."

Responding to Khatami's remarks, US State Department spokesman James P. Rubin said government talks are the best way for Washington and Tehran to rebuild their relationship.

The United States would raise "Iran's support for terror-