

International

Cong campaign material solely focusing on Sonia

NEW DELHI, Jan 10: India's ailing Congress Party has focused solely on Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born wife of assassinated former premier Rajiv Gandhi, in publicity material for upcoming polls, a daily said today, reports AFP.

The Pioneer newspaper said posters, video films and slogans compared the 51-year-old widow to Lakshmi, the Hindu Goddess of wealth, and paid homage to the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty.

Sonia Gandhi, who has no political experience, will start her campaign for the February-March elections on Sunday at the site of her husband's murder, in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu.

She has so far remained silent on whether she will be a candidate.

The Pioneer said one advertising agency hired by the congress had packaged the entire Gandhi family as India's saviours, calling Indira Gandhi a tender mother, Rajiv Gandhi a loving leader and finally Sonia, the "Goddess Lakshmi who will

light a lamp in every home." The traditional lamp symbolises happiness and wealth in India.

Another poster described the hitherto reclusive Sonia Gandhi, who lives amid tight security in the heart of New Delhi, as the new icon of India.

The slogan said: "She will bring a fresh wave of joy, the new Gandhi of a new era."

Sonia Gandhi has shed her reclusive image and opened the gates of her bungalow at 10, Janpath, one of India's best-known addresses, to the public three days ago, the move has sparked an overwhelming response with milling crowds from far away villages.

Witnesses said Sonia Gandhi has been more attentive to villagers and the poor in the public audience and constantly speaking in Hindi, a language in which she is fluent.

The spotlight on the widow has sparked suggestions that there was a "cold war" between Sitaram Kesri, the octogenarian Congress president and Sonia Gandhi for the party's leader-

ship. Kesri on Friday angrily denied any animosity saying Sonia Gandhi was the "undisputed leader" of the Congress and that he was ready to quit his post the moment she wanted to take over.

Sources in the Congress said Kesri had been totally ignored in an election video.

A member of the Congress Election Committee said it was "amazing" how the nine advertising agencies hired by the party had by them selves ignored Kesri.

"Only one agency has come up with a poster of Kesri," he said.

The election material will be formally approved by the party's campaign committee later.

The Congress was voted out of office in 1996 in the worst electoral defeat in its 112-year history. The party was dominated for much of this century by the Gandhi-Nehru family including Indira Gandhi's father Jawaharlal Nehru and her grandfather Motilal Nehru.

Tribesmen clash with troops in Pakistan: 8 killed

ISLAMABAD, Jan 10: Tribesmen battled paramilitary soldiers in a remote corner of northwestern Pakistan, killing as many as eight people and injuring dozens more, news reports said Saturday, says AP.

Official sources, however, put the death toll at one in a clash Friday between tribesmen protesting repeated electrical shortages and officers of Pakistan's paramilitary Frontier Corps.

Tribesmen began as a peaceful demonstration spun out of control when the soldiers opened fire, according to some reports. Tribesmen, who apparently were unarmed at the time, went home to get their weapons and returned to the site and opened fire.

Both sides used heavy weapons including rocket launchers, according to some witnesses. The duel went on for several hours.

Energy-poor Pakistan routinely experiences power outages. In some areas the electricity is cut for hours causing local demonstrations.



President Clinton delivers an address on education reform during an event at Mission High School in Mission, Texas, Friday. A statue of the school mascot, an eagle, can be seen behind. — AP/UNB photo

Caste violence kills 9 in India

NEW DELHI, Jan 10: Nine people were killed in a fresh outbreak of caste violence in India's eastern Bihar state, police said today, reports Reuters.

An armed gang attacked Rampurchaura village in Jehanabad district, about 110 kms (68 miles) north of the state capital, Patna on Friday night.

Police said all nine victims belonged to upper castes.

At least two people were injured.

Last month, upper caste landowners led the state's worst ever massacre, killing 64 people including women and children, in Jehanabad district.

A police official told the agency that Friday's killings appeared to be in retaliation for the December massacre.

Bihar is one of the poorest Indian states wracked by caste conflict.

US urges Taliban, other factions to ensure safety of aid workers

WASHINGTON, Jan 10: The United States called on Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia and other factions to ensure the safety of aid workers Friday following bombings that took place near a relief mission, reports AFP.

In a statement, the State Department also expressed concern that "specific ethnic groups are increasingly being targeted in the conflict" and cited Taliban actions against the country's Hazara and Shia populations.

"We call on the Taliban and all other Afghan factions to guarantee the safety of all humanitarian relief workers and to facilitate the free flow of relief supplies to all Afghan civilians in need," State Department spokesman James Rubin said in the statement.

2 Muslim schools to get state funds in UK for first time

LONDON, Jan 10: Two Muslim schools in Britain are to get state funding for the first time. Education Minister David Blunkett said Friday, reports AFP.

Until now only grant-maintained Anglican, Roman Catholic and Jewish schools received state funds.

Blunkett has approved grant-maintained status for two independent Muslim schools in London and Birmingham.

The decision resolves a long-standing grievance in Britain's 1.5 million Muslim community that its parents are not offered the same choice of religious education as that available to other faiths.

2 US global balloonists land in cactus field

YESO, New Mexico, Jan 10: Two balloonists parachuted into a cactus-studded pasture after a tear-drenched round-the-world quest just an hour after launch. The balloon, laden with explosive fuel, floated off over Texas at 110 mph (176 kmph), reports AP.

The Federal Aviation Administration ordered all aircraft to stay clear of the 170-foot (50 metre) balloon, which was drifting east at 35,000 feet (10,500 metres) during the afternoon. The military ordered chase planes to keep watch on it.

Dick Rutan and Dave Melton, who parachuted in 45 mph (72 kmph) winds, landed a quarter-mile (0.4-kilometre) apart about 13 miles (21 kilometres) southeast of the town of Vaughn. Rutan hit cactus and suffered bloody puncture wounds all over his nose and cheeks; Melton hit the only wire fence in the wide-open area.

"He was curled up on the ground. He was in pain," said Vaughn Police Chief JR Romo, who saw the pair parachute.

Opposition regrouped to unseat Hashimoto

TOKYO, Jan 10: When the granite pyramid that houses Japan's legislature opens its doors Monday, Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto will be facing one of the broadest opposition alliances in years, reports AP.

And for that, he might well consider himself lucky.

Hoping to regain dwindling voter support, Japan's scattered and increasingly marginalised opposition forces have regrouped into a six-party alliance that includes the biggest party outside Hashimoto's current ruling coalition.

While the new opposition bloc — harbouring political elements from across the ideological spectrum — will control a considerable chunk of seats in the parliament, analysts say it may be too disjointed to topple the status quo.

"It's easy to see how the new alliance members could get tripped up over its ambiguous identity," said Susumu Takahashi, a political science professor at Tokyo University.

The coming five-month session of parliament will offer lots of chances for heated debate.

Hashimoto, who celebrates his second anniversary as premier Sunday, has a full agenda planned, including bills aimed at boosting Japan's ailing economy, a controversial revision of Japan's military alliance with the United

States and a sweeping reorganisation of the central bureaucracy.

The nascent alliance is trying to focus attention on tax cuts.

Shortly after taking shape late Tuesday, the group called for 46.2 billion dollars in tax relief, tweaking Hashimoto's famed fiscal prudence.

They also criticised a government-sponsored, 231 billion dollars rescue effort for banks struggling under a huge load of bad loans.

While the alliance has been quick to attack Hashimoto's proposals, its own policies remain sketchy.

Members, who chose to keep their parties intact within an umbrella grouping, even had trouble agreeing on a name. After a noisy and embarrassing debate, they settled on "Min'yuren," an abbreviation of all their party names strung together.

The alliance came together after the collapse of the New Frontier Party, which was once viewed as a vanguard for political reform but fell apart last month amid incessant infighting over the tactics of Ichiro Ozawa, its outspoken leader.

Ozawa's behind-the-scenes overtures to elements within the governing Liberal Democratic Party upset some of his allies and blurred the New Frontier's distinction as an opposition force.

Council of Europe opens to sign accord banning human cloning

STRASBOURG, France, Jan 10: The Council of Europe opens Monday for the signing of the only international accord strictly banning human cloning, amid an outcry over a US researcher's scheme to clone people, reports AFP.

Seventeen European countries have already announced they will sign the legally binding protocol that rules out any exceptions to a strict ban on creating a human being genetically identical to another, living or dead, whatever the technique.

The prohibition on cloning, under the terms of the protocol, cannot be circumvented for any reason, even for public safety, protecting public health or protecting rights and freedoms for all.

The signing ceremony will take place at the French Foreign Ministry in Paris the presence of French Justice Minister Elisabeth Guigou, French European Affairs Minister Pierre Moscovici, and the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe Daniel Tarsy of Sweden.

It will be preceded by a European conference on national ethical committees that will be

inaugurated Monday morning by French President Jacques Chirac.

Countries that have said they will sign the human cloning protocol, which will take effect once five countries have ratified the text, include Denmark, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Turkey.

Several other countries in eastern Europe, including the Baltic states, Romania and Slovakia, are also expected to sign.

Only countries who have already signed the European convention on human rights and biomedicine can sign the protocol on cloning. This is the reason why Germany — though it supports the cloning protocol — will not be able to sign on Monday.

The German Federal Health Ministry however has hailed the European initiative.

This week German Research Minister Jürgen Rüttgers called US physicist Richard Seed, whose announcement has created the latest storm over cloning, "an ethically deranged soul."



Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan and leader of the opposition in the National Assembly has said Friday, in Islamabad that she will file the references against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif who is involved in corruption. Bhutto's accounts in Switzerland and London were frozen as requested by the Sharif government. — AP/UNB photo

Successor govt unlikely to change foreign policy: Gujral

ON BOARD AIR FORCE ONE, Jan. 10: Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral feels a successor government is unlikely to make radical changes in his government's foreign policy, particularly improving ties with neighbours, since the policy has received warm appreciation from world leaders, reports India Abroad News Service.

Asserting that his Gujral Doctrine had resulted in "melting" barriers between India and Pakistan, Gujral said "no party in India can gain from giving relations with Pakistan a setback."

"No government can be myopic in regard to foreign policy," Gujral told India Abroad News Service in an interview Thursday night on board his Indian Air Force special aircraft while returning from Chennai where he had gone to inaugurate the Partnership Summit of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII).

"My policies were developed, enlightened and far-sighted and were in India's interest. They (the Gujral Doctrine of good neighbourly relations) got a lot of mileage abroad and were praised by several world leaders," he said.

Gujral, who spoke at length on ties with Pakistan, said while he foresaw a "difficult period" in ties politically because of domestic compulsions of both countries, he saw prospects of improvement in other areas via the "SAARC route," because economic compulsions would override political and ideological antagonisms.

He said his visit to Dhaka next week to attend the trilateral business summit between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh was to see how best to get the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) operational by 2001.

"If we succeed in SAFTA by 2001 we must start in terms of thinking of a South Asian community on the lines of the European Union," Gujral said.

When pointed out that Bangladesh opposition leader Khaleda Zia had made India-baiting a major plank of her party's policy, Gujral said it should be seen as nothing more than opposition rhetoric. He said Khaleda had sought a meeting with him during his Dhaka visit on January 14 and 15.

He said that presently South Asian leaders enjoyed good personal rapport with one another and he particularly had warm

ties with all of them including Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka and Bhutanese monarch Jigme Singhe Wangchuk. He confirmed he would meet Sharif in Dhaka on January 15, but parried a question on whether discussions between them would centre on India's election and the likely political scenario thereafter.

"We are good friends on a personal level," he said of Sharif. He said it was perhaps a spinoff of this friendship that "artificial barriers between the two countries were crumbling," a large number of non-official and cultural groups had been coming from Pakistan to India in recent times and "My house is a port of call for all those who come from Pakistan."

He said a book of essays written by him had been published in Pakistan last year in Urdu and another was to be published shortly. Two books of poems by his wife Sheila were also published in Pakistan, in both Gurmukhi (Punjabi) and Persian scripts.

Gujral said he was disappointed at not being able to fulfil his domestic and foreign policy agendas and he was particularly unhappy that US President Bill Clinton could not visit India because of the uncertain political situation here caused by the fall of his government.

He said there had been a "new surge" in ties with the U.S. and the number of visits from Washington to New Delhi in the last few months were something unprecedented in the history of bilateral ties. He said these visits would have been "crowned" by Clinton's visit here, but the elections put a brake on the momentum generated in bilateral ties.

However, he said it was heartening to see so many European leaders keeping their date with India at this time because all these countries recognised the economic importance of India. He said foreign and economic policies could not be divorced from each other as "both were sleeping in the same bed."

Thus, he said, the United Front government's economic policies were unlikely to be radically altered by a successor government as "You cannot change the general trend (prevailing the world over) and it is not in India's interest to change them."

Referring to Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Atal Behari Vajpayee's comment in a newspaper interview that if his party

came to power it would review the economic reforms programme, Gujral said Vajpayee may have said it as part of election rhetoric. "I really don't see any change in the economic policies," Gujral said, adding even he had criticised the economic liberalisation programme of prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's government when he was in the opposition.

He said he had no personal frustration at the loss of power but felt a little unhappy at the disruption of his government agendas that were based on a two-year framework. He said he was working to improving the lot of women and the girl child, on removing illiteracy and bringing back probity to public life.

"This election," he regretted, "will once again see the demonstration of money power combined with criminality and communalism."

He dismissed as "not true" charges made in a newspaper interview by Congress president Sitaram Kesri that his party was not consulted on major policy issues by the Gujral government, even though it had been providing critical support to the United Front coalition.

"Can he (Kesri) point out even one policy on which he was not consulted," Gujral asked, saying his fulmination might be attributed to election propaganda.

Gujral said he had offers to contest from Jalandhar (Punjab), Chennai (Tamil Nadu) and Gandhinagar (Gujarat) in the election but he would leave it to his coalition partners to decide on his electoral constituency. He said a realignment of forces was inevitable after the election as none of the three major formations was capable in forming a government on its own "even in the best scenario," unless of course major defections took place.

He said he could have saved his government by bowing to Congress dictates to throw out the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) members from the government, but the cost to the nation would have been high.

"I have saved the unity of India," Gujral declared. He said his government should be remembered for one which stood by India's emotional unity and restored the dignity of the nation's democratic institutions.

Journalism & Internet : A new world of information

ARLINGTON, Virginia, Jan 10: The Internet can make the new more democratic, giving the public a chance to ask questions and seek out facts behind stories and candidates, the head of the largest US online service said Friday, reports AP.

But the greatest potential for public participation is still in the future. Steve Case, chairman of America Online, told a meeting on Journalism and the Internet sponsored by the Freedom Forum, a foundation promoting understanding of the news media.

Already, though, the new technology of computers is changing the face of journalism, giving reporters access to more information and their readers a chance to ask questions and turn to different sources, other speakers said.

"You don't have to buy a newspaper and be confined to the four corners of that paper anymore," Sam Meddis, online technology editor at USA Today, observed about the variety of information available to computer users.

But the speakers noted that easy access to the Internet also means anyone can post information for others to see.

"Anyone can say anything they want, whether it's right or wrong," said Case. Readers have to determine for themselves who to trust.

"In a world of almost infinite voices, respected journalists, respected brand names, will probably become more important, not less," Case said.

The Internet today is about where radio was 80 years ago, or television 50 years ago or cable 25 years ago, he said.

But it is growing rapidly because it provides people fast access to news and a chance to comment on it.

For example, when Princess Diana was killed in a car crash, millions went online for details and to join in mourning, Case said.

He forecast increased political participation online in this year and in 2000 with politicians able to answer directly to the public — an opportunity to increase voter turnout and for politicians to raise funds from the public.

Llewellyn King, head of the newsletter group King Publications, said that while the Internet is a tremendous source of data, he doesn't see it producing a "new journalism."