

International

Iraq agrees to UN inspection if embargo lifted



Sonia Gandhi along with Congress president Sitaram Kesri, right, waving to the crowd at an election rally at Brigade Parade Ground, Calcutta, Thursday.

— AP/UNB photo

'Sonia's campaign won't affect polls process'

BJP, UF have 'secret understanding': Kesri

CALCUTTA, Feb 6: Congress president Sitaram Kesri on Thursday alleged that BJP and United Front had "secret understanding" evident from Prime Minister I.K. Gujral's seeking election from Jalandhar with Akali Dal (Badal) support, reports PTI.

"That such understanding exists is now clear when Gujral depends on support from Akali Dal (B), which is BJP's electoral ally in Punjab," Kesri said at the Congress election rally at city's Brigade Parade Ground here.

The AICC chief said he was "amazed" to find Gujral calling for strengthening secular forces "When he himself aligns with BJP's ally to get elected to the Lok Sabha".

"There is hardly any difference between UF and BJP as both are power hungry," he alleged.

The rally was also addressed by party's star campaigner Sonia Gandhi.

Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president L.K. Advani today said Sonia Gandhi's active participation in electioneering was not going to affect the country's polls process by any means.

Advani told a crowded press conference here today before

leaving for electioneering in Uttar Pradesh that Sonia Gandhi's active participation in polls campaign had only stopped disintegration of the Congress Party but had yielded no other prospects.

Advani expressed confidence of mastering a "comfortable majority" by securing over 300 seats to form the government at the centre.

Targeting Congress as their main adversary in the forthcoming elections, Advani said in the last two years both Congress and Communists were working closer and closer and in this election the convergence was more apparent.

While BJP has focused its fight against Congress countrywide, its main focus in West Bengal was to "shatter the Marxists' dream".

Referring to the seat adjustment with Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress in the state, the BJP president said that BJP had to forge this to teach the Marxists a lesson.

He had already directed his party workers and leaders to extend all out support to the Trinamool Congress candidates in the constituencies where the BJP had not put up any candidate, Advani said.

NICOSIA, Feb 6: Iraq agrees in principle to inspection of all its suspected sites, including those it terms "presidential" on condition the UN embargo is lifted one month after the inspections, diplomats in the region said Thursday, reports AFP.

Following Russian mediation, Iraq agreed to inspections of its eight most controversial presidential sites but on condition that the inspections are carried out "only once".

These conditions are unacceptable to the United States, which demands unconditional and unhindered access for UN disarmament experts to all Iraqi sites.

French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine said Thursday that Iraq's offers so far were not enough for Paris.

Iraq referred for the first time to "eight presidential sites" in December during talks with the chairman of the UN Special Commission on Disarming Iraq (UNSCOM), Richard Butler.

The United States has spoken of 78 so-called presidential sites, and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said Thursday that Baghdad agreed to inspections of 45 of the sites.

"The number of sites called

presidential is of little importance because no suspected site will be exempted from inspection," a diplomat said. He explained that there are three categories of Iraqi sites:

— "Normal" sites such as factories, warehouses or public buildings for which UNSCOM has encountered no obstacle in inspecting.

— "Sensitive" sites such as ministries and the headquarters of the elite Republican Guard troops, Iraq and Butler agreed that these sites would be inspected by UNSCOM experts together with diplomats and other experts from UNSCOM's 21 member nation.

— "Presidential" compounds, such as presidential palaces and the buildings that surround them. The latest Iraqi-UN crisis came after Iraq said UNSCOM inspections of these sites would violate its sovereignty.

According to another diplomat, Baghdad agreed to the inspection of the eight controversial presidential sites that it had discussed with Butler, who is expected to return to Baghdad on March 2.

France says the inspections of presidential sites must take Iraq's dignity into consideration.

But Paris distinguishes between the palaces and the sur-

rounding structures such as hangars and other buildings.

According to a French proposal, the palace inspection teams would include more diplomats than UNSCOM experts, while the inspections of the surrounding buildings would include more UNSCOM experts than diplomats.

"The Iraqis should, according to US, agree to let UNSCOM accompanied by independent experts or diplomats who are jointly selected, visit the presidential sites which surround the residences or palaces," French Foreign Ministry spokesman Yves Douthiaux said.

Meanwhile, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein chaired a joint meeting Thursday of the country's two highest authorities to discuss the Iraqi-UN crisis over disarmament, the official INA news agency said.

Saddam and members of the Revolutionary Command Council and ruling Baath Party leadership discussed the "Results of the talks in Iraq with Russian envoy Viktor Posuvalyuk," French emissary Bertrand Dufourcq, Arab League Secretary General Esmat Abdel Meguid and Turkish Foreign Minister Ismail Cem, INA said.



Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, right, meets the Secretary-General of the Arab League Esmat Abdel-Meguid in Baghdad Thursday. Diplomatic efforts are still going on to solve peacefully the standoff between the UN and Iraq and avoid a US military intervention.

— AP/UNB

Parties come out with big promises before Indian polls

NEW DELHI, Feb 6: India's main parties have yet again promised the moon to voters before upcoming elections... while carefully leaving out all detail of how they will achieve it, analysts say, reports AFP.

The manifestos of the three main contenders for power — the Hindu nationalists, the Congress and the outgoing United Front coalition — are little more than a collection of "slogans" and a "grand fudge", they say.

The right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), expected to emerge as the largest party after February-March polls, released its programme earlier this week.

The document reiterated its traditional stance on major policy issues, saying it would put "India first," restrict foreign companies from entering the country, build nuclear weapons and create 100 million jobs over the next decade.

But, as in the case of its rivals, there were few details to the broad brushstrokes.

B.G. Verghese, a former editor of the Indian Express newspaper, doubts many people will read the manifestos.

The parties just say yes to everything — how they organise things, how they raise funds to pay for policies, these are the questions that are not answered.

"Prices, corruption, housing, water supply, education and health — these are the issues that worry the man in the village."

"But it's one thing to say you are concerned, but that does not add up to a policy."

Around half India's 960 million population cannot read or write, while a third live in poverty and do not have access to safe drinking water.

Verghese says "bread and butter" issues would be addressed "ad hoc at the local level," adding: "parties don't tell the country what they plan to do — nor do they have the foggiest notion themselves."

Vague statements abound in the manifestos.

Part of the BJP educational programme is to "restore to teachers self-esteem." No details are given. Its employment policies include "a strong commitment to make labour,

both organised and unorganised, an equal and proud partner in the nation's progress."

It promises to revitalise agriculture. "Our government shall appeal to Indian kisans (farmers) to double food production by the year 2010."

The Congress, meanwhile, the BJP's main rival, "will overhaul the law and order machinery to make it more effective yet more humane. More powerful yet more sensitive." And "all controls that breed corruption will be weeded out." Again, no details.

Zoya Hassan, a New Delhi-based professor of political science, says the manifestos are "basically fudging — it's a grand fudge."

"Unemployment is central but no parties seem to focus on it — it's never faced frontally. It's part of our culture."

There are isolated figures. The United Front, a multi-party coalition, says it will spend six per cent of gross domestic product on education. Its other figures, however, relate to its past record, not its future intentions.

Its prime objectives, it boasts, are "good governance and all-round socio-economic development: Food grain in every home. Every Indian healthy and literate, every child in school."

Pran Chopra, of the Independent Centre of Policy Research, says costing of policies "does not happen yet." Most manifestos are "slogans or labels."

Madhu Kishwar, a feminist and magazine editor, adds: "I don't think this election has any one real agenda. All the parties make the appropriate noises on most issues. They promise you the moon in their manifestos... it's all mantra chanting and blah, blah, blah."

While the United States cannot impose solutions to the region's disputes, its unique military and political position demands that it play an active role in promoting regional stability and advancing the cause of peace," he said.

He said Washington seeks a Middle East and South Asia region at peace, where access to strategic, natural resources at stable prices is unhindered and free markets are expanding.

Washington, Feb 6: The United States has said there cannot be any stability in South Asia till a peaceful resolution of India's disputes with Pakistan but made clear that Washington cannot impose any solutions, reports PTI.

Defence Secretary William S. Cohen, in his annual report to President Bill Clinton and the Congress, said South Asia and Middle East region cannot be stable until there is a just, lasting and comprehensive peace between Arabs and Israelis and a peaceful resolution of Indo-Pak disputes.

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Washington, Feb 6: The Sri Lankan army on Thursday claimed to be closing in on a major LTTE military base in northern Vanni, while its chief Lt Gen Rohan Daluwatte said troops at the northern Paranthan army garrison which came under heavy attack few days ago had recovered over 300 bodies of LTTE guerrillas, reports PTI.

State-run Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, quoted the army chief as saying troops have encircled a large group of rebels who tried to overrun army defences near Paranthan, the scene of heavy fighting over the past few days.

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Original version of Di's funeral song to be auctioned

LOS ANGELES, Feb 6: The original version of "Candle in the Wind 1997," which Elton John last sang during the funeral of Princess Diana, will be auctioned by Christie's off next week for charity, reports AFP.

Proceeds from the sale Wednesday of the lyric will go to Children's hospital, Los Angeles on behalf of the Diana Foundation created to help charitable causes.

In addition to the original draft comprised of three handwritten annotated pages, the auction will also include the typed final version of the lyrics signed by author Bernie Taupin and John.

Christie's spokeswoman Beth Shepherd declined to say what she believed the lyrics would fetch, explaining "it's too sentimental." Lyrics scripted by John Lennon several years ago sold for 200,000 dollars.

Lankan army closes major LTTE base in north

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US storm death toll rises

NEW YORK, Feb 6: Nasty weather battered the United States from coast to coast Thursday, with a powerful storm pelting northern California, strong winds, slamming the East Coast and snow blanketing an area from Ohio to North Carolina, reports AP.

As northern California residents dealt with a Pacific storm that blew in Thursday, two more were hovering offshore.

"We're going to get thumped good," warned US National Weather Service forecaster Dan Keirns. "It's going to get a lot worse before it gets any better."

At least four deaths were blamed on the California storm, and Gov. Pete Wilson declared a state of emergency in ten counties. A levee washed away on the Pajaro River, flooding farms in Santa Cruz County, about an hour south of San Francisco.

In the East, a storm stomped its way north, flooding streets, stranding travelers, forcing people to evacuate their homes and leaving tens of thousands without power. It also has dumped plenty of snow inland.

The heavy snow — more than a foot (30 centimeters) in some spots — shocked Kentucky and Ohio, where forecasters had predicted a light dusting.

Nineteen deaths have been attributed to the East Coast storm since Monday, including five in accidents on snowy roads in Kentucky, and two in Indiana. Two men died when the roof caved in under 11

inches (28 centimeters) of snow at a recycling plant in West Virginia. In the southeastern state of South Carolina, a pregnant woman drowned when her car plunged into a swollen creek.

The storm brought tornadoes to southern Florida on Monday before churning to the north, hammering the coast from Georgia to New Jersey with heavy rain and winds as high as 75 mph (120 kph).

Farrakhan wants to visit Australia

CANBERRA, Feb 6: US black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan wants to visit Australia as part of his current world tour. But the Australian government on Friday said it had not yet decided whether to let the controversial leader visit, reports Reuters.

An immigration spokesman said an official representing the Nation of Islam leader had told the Australian embassy in Washington in recent days that Farrakhan planned to visit.

"In the last couple of days, I believe Farrakhan's entourage contacted the Australian embassy in Washington and just alerted them to the fact that they'd be coming to Australia," a spokesman for Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock told Reuters. "He was told to make a written application."

Clinton firm on denying legal charges of scandal

WASHINGTON, Feb 6: US President Bill Clinton said on Thursday the allegations in the sex scandal engulfing him were false, while independent counsel Kenneth Starr said he was making significant progress in his probe, reports Reuters.

"I have already denied the legal charges and I do so strongly," Clinton said in the Oval Office as he posed with British Prime Minister Tony Blair for the start of a three-day visit.

"The charges are false," Clinton said he has been accused of having a sexual relationship with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky and then trying to get her to lie about it under oath.

Starr, who has been negotiating with the attorney representing Lewinsky about granting immunity in exchange for her testimony, said he was making progress in the investigation that has generated headlines around the world.

In an exchange with reporters in Little Rock, Arkansas, where a Grand Jury has been looking into Clinton's past Whitewater Real Estate dealings, Starr said his probe of the Lewinsky matter was "moving very quickly, and we have made very significant progress."

Starr has been negotiating with William Ginsburg, the lawyer representing Lewinsky about whether the 24-year-old would be allowed to testify before a grand jury under the protection of full immunity.

Lewinsky gave a sworn statement in the sexual harassment case filed by Paula Jones that she did not have sex with Clinton. She could be charged with perjury if she revises her story.

Starr declined to discuss his negotiations. But said "My interest and that of the career prosecutors in my office is very simple it is to talk facts... and yes, we want all of the facts, and we want people to be accurate and truthful with us."

CBS news reported that Starr had notified Ginsburg that he was willing to grant full immunity to Lewinsky in exchange for her testimony. Both Ginsburg and Starr's office declined comment on the report.

In a separate development, a West Palm Beach Television station said Starr had subpoenaed its footage of Clinton's March 1997 visit to Florida, when he tripped and badly injured his knee, to determine whether Lewinsky was on the trip.

The television station CBS-TV affiliate WPEC, said it was reviewing its footage to see if any images of Lewinsky existed, adding that it had not yet decided whether to turnover any footage to the independent counsel.

White House spokesman Mike McCurry said he did not believe the woman was with Clinton on the trip, but said he had not looked into the matter enough to give a definitive answer.

The remarks by Clinton were his first on the issue since his denials last week,

those denied travel permits by Israel.

Rantissi called on the Palestinian Authority of Yasser Arafat to intervene in the matter with Israel, which maintains control over all international transit points into the Palestinian areas.

Yassin has received a diplomatic passport from the Palestinian Authority, allowing him to move more freely through Israeli-controlled border crossings into the occupied territories.

Hamass, which has rejected the PLO's self-rule deals with Israel, had conducted a campaign of violence against Israel which has killed scores of people since 1993.

BRIEFLY

15 killed as truck plunges in Indonesia: Fifteen people were killed and 22 injured when a truck packed with passengers plunged into an Indonesian ravine, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

The truck, travelling between two villages in north Sumatra province Wednesday, should not have been carrying passengers, the Jakarta Post quoted police as saying. The driver fled the scene and was being hunted by police, it said, without giving further details.

Violence claims 2 in Haiti: Two people, including a police chief, were killed and another was wounded in a confrontation between police and a vigilante group on Thursday in the central Haitian city of Mirebalais, radio reports said, Reuters reports from Port-au-Prince.

A group called "put order in disorder" chopped off the head Mirebalais police chief Wislen Dorneus with machetes, burned police cars and forced the police to abandon their post, according to the radio reports. The group was provoked when police killed one of their members, the reports said.

Bob Hope to get honorary Knighthood: Acknowledging that Americans are better at entertaining the troops than the British, Queen Elizabeth II is to give comedian Bob Hope an honorary knighthood, AP reports from Washington.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair broke the news to President Bill Clinton during Thursday's talks in Washington — which included the possibility of military action against Iraq. Hope, 94, a British-born American citizen will not be able to use the title "Sir" which, for Britons, goes with a knighthood. Foreigners can use the initials of the British Empire. British officials said the award both acknowledged American superiority in the field of troop entertainment, and honoured Hope for his contribution to this and to movies.

Palestinians being encircled by ring of Jewish settlements

RAS KARKAR, West Bank, Feb 6: In the barren hills and valleys stretching out from Jerusalem, Palestinians can no longer raise their eyes from the rocky soil without seeing the tell-tale red tile roofs and high fences of a Jewish settlement, reports AFP.

"Our communities are literally encircled by Israeli colonies, and they are continuing to build at a frantic rate," laments Abdel Jawad Saleh, who holds the Agriculture portfolio in Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority.

Ras Karkar is one of these Palestinian villages, a hilltop hamlet whose residents are front-row witnesses to a boom in Jewish building over the past 20 months in the occupied West