

BJP for confederation of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh

NEW DELHI, Feb 10: Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief L K Advani Monday said India, Pakistan and Bangladesh should learn from the examples of Germany and the European Union to form a confederation, according to India Abroad News Service.

"If Germany can become one, if all of Europe can come together, I see no reason why we cannot do so," Advani said when asked about a proposal for a confederation of the three South Asian neighbours.

"If we can come together in the form of a confederation, nothing like it," he told representatives of the foreign media here at the Foreign Correspondents Club.

Pointing out that he was himself born in what is now the Sindh province of Pakistan, the BJP chief said the Jan Sangh, the predecessor of the BJP, had also advocated an "Akhand Bharat" (united India).

"I would be a happy person if a day comes when both India and Pakistan would realise that they have not served the interest of any section of their population, that India had been divided, and (were to) come together again," he said.

Advani claimed that a BJP government would get along better with Islamabad. He recalled how Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had once praised BJP prime ministerial nominee Atal Behari Vajpayee's stewardship of India's foreign policy in the former Janata Party government in 1977-79.

The BJP chief said his party's decision to induct nuclear weapons, if elected to office, was dictated by its perception of India's security and foreign policy concerns. "We respect world opinion, but we would be feeling in our duty if we disregard the imperative requirement of national security out of fear of attracting world opprobrium," he said.

"A weak security set-up affects not only security, it affects international diplomatic relations," he added.

Insisting that the BJP's stand on the nuclear issue was "very similar" to that of the other big parties, he explained that "in their case the articulation of the issue seems different, but in our case the articulation is more candid."

Advani also accused his party's rivals in the general election of spreading "systematic disinformation" that a BJP government would roll back economic liberalisation and disputed pollster surveys which show that Sonia Gandhi's campaigning for the Congress party had made a dent in the BJP's chances.

While asserting that a BJP government would ensure a level playing field to Indian industry, he reassured foreign investors: "The BJP will not roll back the economic reforms instituted. If at all anything, this process will be further speeded up. Consequently foreign companies seeking to make investments in India will not be hindered just as they will not be favoured as was often the case

so far," he said.

Advani admitted that Sonia Gandhi had made a difference to the Congress party's chances in the general election which would no longer be a "one-horse race" dominated by the BJP.

Comparing her campaign to former Pakistan cricket captain Imran Khan's participation in his country's general election last year, Advani added that assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's widow had helped the BJP cadres overcome "overconfidence and complacency" which could have hurt the party's prospects.

"Till a month ago, before Sonia Gandhi decided to campaign for the Congress, it looked like the general election was a one-horse race with the BJP alone in the fray and signs of the BJP suffering from overconfidence and complacency," he said.

Later speaking at the BJP headquarters, Advani denied that the BJP had made Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin a poll issue. "The BJP has not made her foreign nationality an (election) issue because the Congress has not projected her as a prospective Prime Minister," he said, adding, "I do not criticise Sonia Gandhi, but I criticise the Congress party for its inability to find another leader forcing it to turn to her."

Advani again challenged Sonia Gandhi to come out with the truth on the Bofors scandal to which her husband has been linked. "I am still waiting for her reply to the Swedish Prime Minister's office," he said.

Shevardnadze survives assassination attempt

TBILISI, Georgia, Feb 10: President Eduard Shevardnadze escaped unharmed Monday night when gunmen opened fire on his car, badly damaging the vehicle during a gun battle that left one bodyguard and an attacker dead, officials said, reports AP.

The 70-year-old Shevardnadze was shown later on state television, talking to President Geidar Aliyev of Azerbaijan, who called to express concern about the attack. Shevardnadze appeared to be uninjured.

"I am OK," he was heard telling Aliyev.

Best known as the Soviet foreign minister who helped orchestrate perestroika under former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, Shevardnadze has led his native Georgia since 1992.

Shevardnadze was returning to his official residence in the southern part of the capital Tbilisi when gunmen opened fire on the four-car motorcade, police said. The bodyguard who was killed was in the same car as Shevardnadze, officials said.

The front of Shevardnadze's car was badly damaged when a rocket-propelled grenade hit the front, officials said. Two other cars in the motorcade were badly burned.

Two other bodyguards were injured in the 10-minute gun battle that followed, officials said. The president was taken to his residence in a police car.

Iraq crisis at 'critical stage': Annan

US moving BIDS to Gulf for detecting biological agents

WASHINGTON, Feb 10: The US military is moving its most advanced systems for detecting biological agents to the Gulf to protect its forces, officials said Monday, reports AP.

Although Pentagon officials say the risk of an Iraqi germ warfare attack is rated as low by US military intelligence, the administration has made much of the dangers of Iraq's biological weapons capability.

The deployments, announced over the weekend by US Defence Secretary William Cohen, involve a team to operate portable shield and a platoon for a Biological Integrated Detection System (BIDS).

Portal shield is designed to protect ports or airfields. It consists of a network of as many as 24 sensors that are linked to a central command post by landlines or very high frequency radio.

The sensors are capable of detecting as many as eight high threat biological agents, relaying the data by computer to the command post in less than 15 minutes.

Independent confirmation requires manually transferring samples to a base lab, which adds another 20 minutes to the process.

Only recently out of development, the system was not scheduled to be used in the field until the end of the year in South Korea.

But amid mounting prepara-

tions for war against Iraq, the Pentagon decided to accelerate its deployment and send it to the Gulf instead, officials would not say where the system will be deployed.

"It performed very well in its last testing," a military official said.

BIDS, on the other hand, is a mobile lab mounted on the back of a truck, a platoon would consist of seven four-member teams, each with a truck mounted lab.

Fielded by the army in 1996, they are designed to detect as many as four biological agents released in a stream form an aircraft, as opposed to from the impact of a Scud missile.

But they take longer than portal shield to identify the agents — about 45 minutes — eating up precious time needed to take medical countermeasures.

"Depending on where your force is, the detection time is quick enough to allow for the force to mask," the military official said.

AP adds: Saying efforts to solve the Iraq crisis were at a "critical stage," UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan cancelled a Mideast trip on Monday to concentrate on ever-more urgent negotiations at UN headquarters.

The US ambassador to the United Nations dismissed Iraqi compromise proposals to end the standoff over UN weapons

inspections, calling the suggestions unworkable.

But Ambassador Bill Richardson gave no indication that events were moving closer either to a peaceful resolution or to a US-led military strike.

"This is Saddam Hussein's decision," Richardson said. "If he backs off, the ball is in his court. Full and unconditional access to all sites, all documents, that's the bottom line."

Richardson also announced he was leaving Wednesday night for Tokyo and Beijing to brief Japanese and Chinese leaders on the US demand that Iraq grant unrestricted access to UN inspectors.

Richardson returned Friday from a tour to European, African and Latin American capitals to drum up support for Washington's stand.

The UN Security Council met Monday afternoon to discuss a related proposal by Annan to ease economic sanctions against Iraq, imposed after it invaded Kuwait in 1990, touching off the Persian Gulf War.

But the council did not get to the issue because of a briefing on Bosnia.

Diplomats from the United States and Britain — the nations leading the way for a military strike against Iraq — say they support efforts to relax the embargo to reduce malnutrition and hardship among Iraq's 22 million people.

But the issue has been complicated by Iraq's refusal to grant UN inspectors unimpeded access to suspected weapons sites, including Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's palaces, and Baghdad's rejection of parts of Annan's embargo-easing plan.

Council diplomats were also expected to discuss the latest diplomatic efforts to resolve the standoff.

US sending 3000 troops to Kuwait

Another AP report says: The Pentagon is sending up to 3,000 troops to Kuwait — tripling US ground forces in the country — to discourage any creative thinking by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

At the same time, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright ruled out any massive military invasion of Iraq. "The administration does not agree with those who suggest we should deploy hundreds of thousands of American troops to engage militarily in a ground war in Iraq," Albright said in a speech in Washington.

The latest deployment of US ground forces was disclosed by a senior military official travelling in the region with Defence Secretary William Cohen. He said up to 3,000 troops from Fort Hood, Texas, will be sent to Kuwait over the next 10 days or so to help defend Iraq's southern neighbour.

BRIEFLY



The head of the Sisters of Charity, Sister Nirmala, successor of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, is greeted by an elderly woman during her visit to Quito, Monday. Sister Nirmala is on an official visit to Ecuador. — AP/UNB photo

Yeltsin meets Pope: Russian President Boris Yeltsin meets Polish-born Pope John Paul in a rare encounter between two towering world figures both instrumental in bringing down communism in their native lands, Reuters reports from Rome.

The two men, who have met just once before in the year the Soviet Union collapsed, will meet as heads of state and are likely to skirt sticky questions over a return visit to Russia by the pontiff, Yeltsin's spokesman said.

Thai aid for Indonesia: Thailand said Tuesday it would donate 5,000 tons of rice to help alleviate food shortages caused by drought and an economic crisis in Indonesia, AP says from Jakarta.

Visiting Thai Foreign Minister Surin said his government would also supply 1 million baht (dhs 21,000) worth of medicine to help villagers in drought-stricken Irian Jaya, the Indonesian-governed western half of New Guinea. Pitsuan said he delivered a message from Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai supporting economic reforms enacted recently by Indonesia's President Suharto.

Farrakhan applies for Australian visa: Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan has formally applied for a visa to visit Australia later this week, the federal government said Tuesday, AP reports from Canberra.

The militant leader and his 24-member entourage applied for visas at the Australian consul in the Philippines capital of Manila on Monday, a spokesman for Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said. The visa applications were being reviewed by immigration officials in Canberra. "A decision will be made on the basis of the contents in the visa applications," the spokesman said.

5500 arrested in Vietnam: Police have arrested more than 5,500 people and confiscated more than 20 tons of banned materials over the past two years in a crackdown on social vices in Ho Chi Minh City, the city's police newspaper reported Tuesday, AP reports from Hanoi.

The campaign has focused on battling drug addiction, prostitution, gambling and "poisonous" cultural items. Pornography is illegal, and the government also forbids videos, music and publications that promote Western values. The paper conceded that despite tough measures that include inspections of everything from video sellers to bars and karaoke parlors, social evils remain and piracy is rampant.

US unveils restructuring of flawed citizenship programme

WASHINGTON, Feb 10: The US immigration service unveiled its latest blueprint Monday for using computers, electronic fingerprint checks and other high-tech tools to stop fraud and reduce the backlog of 1.7 million applications in its troubled citizenship programme, reports AP.

The plan, building on the recommendations of a 4 million dollars study by outside consultants, would wean the immigration and Naturalisation Service from its antiquated paper filing system.

The agency has been under fire from the US Congress for testing fraud and allowing thousands of foreigners to become Americans without full criminal background checks. As the agency struggled to cope with a surge of applications in recent years, the wait to become a citizen swelled from a six-month average to more than two years in some cities.

Until recently, INS didn't use computers to process applications in half of its offices. It's now undergoing and overall modernisation. As part of that

push, newer technologies are being added to the citizenship programme computerisation, electronic fingerprint checks, scan bar codes and telephone information lines.

At a news conference Monday, Clinton administration officials said the restructuring is working.

"We are addressing the errors of the past and have improved the process significantly," said Assistant Attorney General Stephen Colgate.

The error-riddled Citizenship USA programme, launched with fanfare in 1995 to address growing backlogs, has drawn criticism from Republican lawmakers who accused the Clinton administration of hijacking it for election-year gain.

A random sampling of some of the 1,049,867 naturalisations performed over a one-year period ending in September 1996 suggests INS erred in granting citizenship to 38,850 people — 11,550 because they lied about past arrests or had disqualifying convictions.

Albright against delay in NATO expansion

WASHINGTON, Feb 10: With the three candidates cheering her on, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright advised the Senate Monday to move quickly to expand the NATO military alliance eastward toward Russia, reports AP.

She flatly rejected calls for delay from two former senators and a one-time White House national security adviser.

In a speech to the American Enterprise Institute, a private research group, Albright said delay would harm US national security interests and diminish the likelihood of Central and Eastern-European countries cooperating with the United States.

"Some critics have said NATO enlargement would draw a destabilizing dividing line in Europe," Albright said. "A larger NATO with an open door will not. One round of enlargement with a mandated pause would."

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is set to take in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary in April 1999, if the Senate approves. A vote is expected in the next month or two.

Albright said the door would be left open to other countries, as well, but she did not say when additional applications would be considered.

In the meantime, a pause has been suggested by former Sens. Howard Baker and Sam Nunn,

Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser in the Ford and Bush administrations, and Alton Frye of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Judge questions Di's car crash witness

PARIS, Feb 10: A man who said he was a witness to the car crash that killed Princess Diana, and who claimed to have placed her in an upright position, was only questioned by the judge investigating the case last week, France Inter radio reported Monday, reports AP.

In an interview with the station, Eric Petel recalled the scene in the early hours of Aug. 31 as he roared his motorcycle near the Pont de l'Alma bridge. A dark car, he said, flashed its headlights — a signal to move aside — whizzed past him, then spun, bounced and crashed inside the traffic tunnel near the bridge.

He saw a woman with her head between the two front passenger seats of the wrecked Mercedes.

"I lifted the woman. I saw a stream of blood by her right ear. I asked if she was OK," he said in the taped interview.

"The eyes were blinking, but no response," Petel said. "At that moment, I understood who the person was. So I was very afraid."

Madhuri, 2 others bag Kalashree Award for '96-97

NEW DELHI, Feb 10: Cine stars Madhuri Dixit, Sunil Shetty and Akshaya Khanna have bagged the Kalashree Awards for 1996-97, reports PTI.

While Dixit won the award for her performance in "Mohabbat", Shetty and Khanna got it for "Border" at a function held here Monday.

Anil Kapoor received the award for Best Actor of the Decade. J P Dutta's "Border" got the Best Film Award and veteran actress Asha Parekh was given the highest honour of Kala Ratan at the 21st annual Kalashree Awards ceremony.

Others who got the award were Pooja Batra, Mahima Choudhury, Prem Chopra, Kumar Sanu, Kavita Krishnamurthy and others.

Probable vaccine against ovarian cancer

WASHINGTON, Feb 10: A team of US cancer researchers said on Monday they had created what they think could potentially be a vaccine against chance of the ovaries using a patient's own cancer cells, reports Reuters.

The vaccine stimulated the immune systems of volunteers although there was no evidence yet it could work against cancer, they told a meeting of the society of gynecologic oncologists in Orlando, Florida.

Dr. Charles Dunton and colleagues at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, tested the vaccine on six patients.

"We looked for an immune reaction. With the idea that such a reaction might mean the vaccine would prove potentially beneficial," Dunton said in a statement.

But he said surgery and chemotherapy would still be the first choice of treatment for ovarian cancer. "I doubt that the vaccine will ever become the primary treatment," Dunton said.

Storm kills 13 in Mexico

TIJUANA, Mexico, Feb 10: Soldiers and rescue workers scraped away mud and debris after El Nino-fed floodwaters roared through a shantytown along the border, killing 13 people and forcing hundreds to flee their homes, reports AP.

Three teen-age girls were killed after fast-flowing mud swallowed their family's car at the foot of the eastern shantytown of Mexico Lindo, or Beautiful Mexico. Swirling floodwaters dragged an 18-year-old girl from her house to her death.

Sonia Gandhi, accompanied occasionally by her daughter Priyanka and son Rahul, has given much-needed hope to the Congress, so much so that it



Iraqi women attend a military training in a poor neighbourhood in the outskirts of Baghdad Monday. Iraqi government has been organising military training for Volunteers to face a possible US military attack. — AP/UNB photo

Cong relies on charisma of Sonia to win polls

NEW DELHI, Feb 10: More than a century after it was formed to fight British colonialism, India's oldest political party today relies on the charisma of an Italian-born widow to win upcoming elections, reports AP.

The 113-year-old Congress, its back to the wall and plagued by desertions, is waging a desperate campaign to overcome a challenge from Hindu nationalists to decide who will rule the world's largest democracy.

That desperation is reflected in the party's decision to turn to a political novice, Sonia Gandhi, the widow of former Congress premier Rajiv Gandhi, in a last-ditch effort to avoid a rout in the February-March vote.

Improbably, the gamble seems to be paying off. In the month since she began campaigning for the once dominant Congress, the 51-year-old mother of two is drawing mammoth crowds.

The Congress, in calling her the messiah for India's problems, has bet on her charisma.

That she is an Italian, that she only took up Indian citizenship in 1986, 18 years after her marriage, does not seem to matter.

Sonia Gandhi, accompanied occasionally by her daughter Priyanka and son Rahul, has given much-needed hope to the Congress, so much so that it

now believes it can bounce back after being voted out of office in 1996.

"Now with Sonia Gandhi, there is a wave in favour of the Congress," asserted Vital Gadgil, its chief spokesman. "The Congress is facing a resurgence."

Not everyone is quite so confident that Sonia Gandhi, clad in a saree and speaking in her heavily-accented Hindi, is the answer.

For, despite grassroots enthusiasm, the party's deep-seated woes remain, once, the Congress was beyond challenge.

Set up in 1885 by a British liberal, it had championed India's freedom from British colonial rule before emerging as a mass party.

Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence, was its undisputed figurehead, working closely with India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, who ruled the country from 1947 until his death in 1964.

His daughter Indira Gandhi, another leader of world stature, was to follow, ruling the country for 16 years in two spells.

It was under her leadership, however, that the Congress lost power in New Delhi for the first time.

Her son and successor Rajiv suffered a similar fate, after four years in power, he was voted out in 1989. Like her, he was assassinated.

All round India, meanwhile, new parties have sprung up, representing regions and the previously disadvantaged.

The Congress' gradual but steady decline was confirmed when, devoid of a larger-than-life figurehead, it was routed in 1996.

Congress officials say India's poor, its minorities and the upper-caste Hindus — the party's traditional supporters — have deserted it.

Whatever the reason, the party is a pale shadow of its former self. Many of its stalwarts are despised as power-hungry.

To top it all, the party, spokesman Gadgil admits, lacked a charismatic leadership, a presentable face — until Sonia Gandhi stepped in.

With Sonia Gandhi taking over the campaign, it seems to have a better chance. For that, Congress stalwarts need to thank a "foreigner" and Indian voters' undying romance with the Nehru-Gandhi family.

Meanwhile, West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu yesterday said that it was disgraceful for Congress that it was fighting the election with the help of Sonia Gandhi who was nothing but a housewife.

It was a shame for the 112-year-old party that it has to seek the support of a housewife to restore its glory" Basu told an election rally in Asansol.

Villagers flee northeast Afghanistan fearing aftershocks

RUSTAQ, Afghanistan, Feb 10: Carrying heavy bundles and leading goat herds, hundreds of villagers fled Monday down the muddy roads from a northeastern Afghan district, fearing aftershocks from an earthquake and tremors that killed thousands, reports AP.

"My three sisters and two brothers and the rest of my family are dead," villager Ghulam Russul said, his voice shaking.

Russul said he was leading his surviving relatives to flatlands south of mountainous Rustaq district, where a magnitude-6.1 earthquake on Wednesday launched devastating landslides that killed between 2,000 and 5,000 people.

A Red Cross plane and a Pakistani air force cargo jet landed in nearby Hajaghah on Monday, bringing much-needed medical and sanitation supplies as well

as blankets and tents to the estimated 15,000 people left homeless.

Four-wheel drive military trucks carrying the supplies lumbered slowly toward the worst-hit areas. The 40-kilometre (25-mile) journey east into Rustaq, the capital of the district, took more than two hours.

There, hundreds of homeless villagers were looking for shelter from the subfreezing temperatures. Many said their mud and brick homes, which had been perched on mountain slopes that ring the district capital, had been destroyed.

Officials with the military alliance who control the area told an Associated Press reporter who travelled with the Pakistani plane that 20 villages were destroyed or damaged in Rustaq district, which sits between the Pamir and Hindu

Kush mountain ranges. "There are at least 4,000 dead so far, but not so many injured," said Qari Amir Allah, who met the Pakistani flight.

Estimates of the death toll from the quake and subsequent jolts have varied. Fog, civil war, a poor-quality airstrip and mountain snows have hindered foreign aid agencies from reaching Rustaq since first reports of the quake reached the Afghan capital, Kabul, on Friday.

New tremors over the weekend killed 500 to 600 more people, the Afghan ambassador told India, Masood Khalili, told the AP on Monday in New Delhi.

Initially, aid workers were skeptical about the high casualty figures Afghan officials gave, noting that the region is sparsely populated and that officials have exaggerated natural

disasters in the past. But some aid workers on Monday began to acknowledge that the toll could be much higher than they first estimated.

Doctors Without Borders, the first foreign aid agency to reach the area, has reported that 1,800 people died and 600 homes were destroyed in one village alone, said Juan Martinez, the Red Cross spokesman in Kabul, 240 kilometers (150 miles) to the south.

He did not name the village, but Allah said the worst-hit village Ragh, had 1,800 dead. Allah named 12 other villages that apparently suffered similar destruction, including Ghunji, where Khalili said 1,600 people died and 600 homes crumbled under landslides.

The Red Cross is sticking

with a preliminary death toll of 2,150 until its first team, which reached the area Sunday, reports back. But a Red Cross official in neighboring Pakistan, who asked not to be named, said the group expects to increase its estimate once it hears from the team.

"The rescue work by local soldiers is going very slowly and we desperately need outside help," Allah said as Pakistani cadets and Afghan soldiers unloaded more than 200 blankets and 200 tents from the Pakistani C130 cargo jet.

"The dead bodies now are frozen, but there will be a problem very shortly," when temperatures rise, he said. "We must dig them up and bury them properly."

Workers with the UN World Food Programme said 320 dead were found in the village of

Khoja-Khaided. The Rome-based agency said its four-truck convoy delivered medicine, blankets, tents, cooking stoves and 19.5 metric tons (21.43 short tons) of food to victims in the Takhar region Monday.

At least two more Pakistani cargo flights were expected to arrive in the next few days. Afghan military helicopters apparently are helping ferry medical and sanitation supplies to the worst-hit villages.

Khalili said volunteers from neighbouring areas were coming to the quake-hit region, bringing whatever food they could spare and even shoes for homeless survivors.

Doctors Without Borders reported a shortage of clean water and has expressed fears that disease and dehydration could cause more deaths, Martinez said.

Riot over price hikes Dusk to dawn curfew imposed on Indonesian town

JAKARTA, Feb 10: A dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed on a provincial town Monday after rioters attacked stores and homes owned by ethnic Chinese for a second day in anger over rising prices, reports AP.

The rioting on the island of Flores came as Indonesia battles its worst economic crisis in three decades. Inflation and unemployment have risen dramatically, and austerity measures enacted under a 40 billion dollars bailout by the International Monetary Fund have added to the discontent.

Although ethnic Chinese make up only about 4 per cent of Indonesia's 202 million people, they dominate commerce and are often targeted when prices rise.

On Sunday, a mob of about 1,000 rioters burned 21 Chinese stores in the town of Ende, 370 miles (595 kilometres) east of Jakarta. After an uneasy night, protesters returned to the streets Monday, throwing rocks at other stores and homes, and smashing windows and damaging buildings.

Sixty to 70 ethnic Chinese sought refuge with police, and later were escorted to relatives' homes, authorities said.

The violence in Ende was the worst so far linked to Indonesia's deepest economic crisis in 30 years.

Ende authorities imposed a 7 pm to 6 am curfew and dispatched hundreds of troops to patrol the streets overnight. Army Sgt Lulu Syaiful said. He said there were no reports of violence or injuries.