

## 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 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 Pakistani 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.

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.

## 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 Géidar 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.

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 portal 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 said.

"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.

## 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, scan bar codes and telephone information lines.

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

The plan, building on the recommendations of 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 an overall modernisation. As part of that

## 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, who said the person was. So I was very afraid."

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

He did not name the village, but Allam said the worst-hit village, Ragh, had 1,800 dead.

Allam named 12 other villages that apparently suffered similar destruction, including Ghunji, where Khalili said 1,600 people died and 600 homes crumbled under landslides.

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 Allam, 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 to India, Masood Khalil, 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 Allam said the worst-hit village, Ragh, had 1,800 dead.

Allam named 12 other villages that apparently suffered similar destruction, including Ghunji, where Khalili said 1,600 people died and 600 homes crumbled under landslides.

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

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

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

While Dixit won the award for her performance in "Mohabbat," Shetty and Kumar have 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 ovarian cancer 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.

In an interview with the station, Eric Petel recalled the scene in the early hours of Aug. 31 as he road 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 tapped interview.

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

He did not name the village, but Allam said the worst-hit village, Ragh, had 1,800 dead.

Allam 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 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."

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

Workers with the UN World

Food Programme said 320 dead were found in the village of

Kalashree, the Rome-based agency said its four-truck convoy delivered medicine, blankets, tents, cooking stoves and 19.5 metric tons (21.45 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.

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On Sunday, a mob of about

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 Vitthal 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 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.

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