

Hindu nationalists awaiting president's invitation

BJP nominates Vajpayee as candidate to become PM

NEW DELHI, Mar 7: Confronted they can form a government, newly elected parliamentarians of a Hindu nationalist party unanimously chose a moderate party member their candidate to become India's next prime minister, reports AP.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a former foreign minister who spiced his speeches with Hindi poetry, was elected unopposed in the ceremonial Central Hall of parliament.

"Our final goal is not far from here," Vajpayee said, accepting his party's nomination. In what sounded like a victory speech, he indicated a government led by his Bharatiya Janata Party would refrain from divisive policies that could alienate India's large Muslim minority.

"Everyone's security and happiness has been our aim. Not to create cleavages in the name of religion — that is the great Indian tradition," he said, speaking in Hindi.

The first meeting attended by most of the 178 BJP legislators since the election did not discuss the arduous task of finding enough coalition partners for a majority, which is being left to the leadership.

Vajpayee served as foreign minister in the late 1970s during the first government that was not led by the Congress Party. He is seen as the soft voice in a party perceived as stridently advocating the pre-eminence of Hindu culture and custom.

A final stage of voting was held in two districts in the disputed northern state of Jammu-Kashmir. Shops were closed in response to a call by militants fighting for the secession of the only Muslim-majority state from the Indian federation.

Most polling booths were empty except for about a dozen armed security men. In a rural belt dominated by the minority Shi'ite Muslims, however, voting began heavily — but only by men. Women were due to vote separately later.

The balloting in Kashmir leaves just four seats where voting is yet to be held, and the outcome is not expected to effect the bargaining for a coalition government in New Delhi.

The BJP said Friday it was certain President KR Narayanan will decide in its favor when he rules next week

on which group is the most able to form a government.

By law, the president decides on the party to be given the first chance to put together a government, a task that seems particularly pressing since no party won the right to govern alone.

The BJP, together with its allies, is 16 short of the 273 seats needed for a majority in the 545-seat House.

At least some of BJP's confidence stems from the dithering of its political foes, the Congress Party and the United Front, which together are 11 seats short of a major-

ity but are having problems coming together.

Both Congress and the United Front leaders have vowed to join forces to keep out the BJP, a party they blame for rising Hindu-Muslim tension in India.

But the United Front, a coalition of 14 regional and national parties, is hesitating; in December, the Congress pulled down the Front government, and not all Front members are willing to forgo.

After huddling for two hours on Friday, the United Front decided to meet again Tuesday to decide whether to sit in the opposition or support Congress, which has ruled India for 45 of its 50 years of independence.

According to tallies after national voting held in stages over the last two and a half weeks, the BJP and its allies won 251 seats, the Congress Party and its allies 166, and the United Front, 96.

Two independent lawmakers and four members of a regional party gave the presidential letters supporting the Hindu nationalists, said a BJP spokeswoman, raising the party's seat tally to 257.

AFP adds: India's dominant Hindu nationalists said today they expected to be invited by the country's President to form a new government before March 15.

"We expect the invitation to come between March 11 and 15," said Kirshan Lal Sharma, general secretary of the right-wing nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

"We are ready to form a government," Sharma told AFP. "We are waiting for the invitation from the President."



Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party candidate for Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, left, arrives on Friday, at the BJP headquarters in New Delhi. The BJP won the most seats in countrywide general elections earlier this week, but may not have enough to form a government. — AP/UNB photo

Queen under pressure to halve HRH title

LONDON, Mar 7: Britain's Queen Elizabeth is under pressure to strip half the royal family of their prestigious "HRH" title in a bid to win more public support for the monarchy. The Sun newspaper said on Saturday, reports Reuter.

Under the proposals, two of the queen's grandchildren, Princesses Beatrice and Eugenie, would both lose the "Her Royal Highness" tag.

They are the daughters of the Queen's younger son Prince Andrew and his former wife the duchess of York, better known as Fergie.

The paper said royal advisors, with the backing of Prime Minister Tony Blair, also recommended drastically cutting the 35 billion pounds (\$7.1 billion dollars) bill for police protection for family members.

Buckingham Palace was not immediately available for comment.

Lata Mangeshkar Award goes to Jagjit Singh

BHOPAL, Mar 7: Noted Ghazal singer, Jagjit Singh has been chosen by the Madhya Pradesh government for its National Lata Mangeshkar Award for the year 1997, reports PTI.

The singer's name was selected by a jury of experts, which included noted film critic Firoz Rangunwala, Ghazal singer and actor Talat Aziz and actor Vijayendra Ghatge.

The award, which carries a cash prize of RS one lakh and a plaque of honour, would be presented to Singh at Lata Mangeshkar Samoh in Indore.

Jagjit Singh, a well known name in Ghazal singing in India and abroad, would join the band of Kishore Kumar, Manna De, Asha Bhonsle, Yesudas, Talat Mahamud and Sandhya Mukherji to receive the award.

The National Lata Mangeshkar Award was instituted by the state government in 1984-85.

LTTE kills 9 naval troops

COLOMBO, Mar 7: Tamil separatist rebels blew up a land mine as a tractor-drawn trailer carrying naval troops crossed over it, killing nine sailors in northern Sri Lanka, the Defence Ministry said Saturday, reports AP.

Friday's attack coincided with a daring, but abortive attempt by the guerillas from the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam to free three suspects of Colombo's bomb blast that had killed 36 people and wounded 305 others, police said Saturday.

The three were detained Thursday in the Batticaloa district, 210-km east of Colombo, hours after a bus loaded with explosives went off in front of a railway station in Colombo.

On Friday morning, a group of LTTE fighters raided the Eravur police station where the suspects were held.

The terrorists used light machine guns and tried to advance towards the police station, but we managed to repulse the attack," said a senior police official, who asked not to be identified by name.

In Colombo, police spokesman Henry Perera confirmed the LTTE's attack on Eravur, but said they were still awaiting details.

"The strategy of the terrorists was to first scare us and then try to storm the police station to free the suspects, but this did not happen as our intelligence had tipped us off," said the police officer at Batticaloa, where the district police is headquartered.

One of those arrested was the owner of the bus that was used in the Colombo bombing.

The land mine deaths, that also injured five sailors, occurred near Nainamadu, a town in the Vavuniya district, said Defence Ministry's spokesman Major Kumara Dewage, who blamed the attack on Tamil

rebels. The area is 240-km north of Colombo.

The sailors were among several thousand reinforcements from the navy, air force and police guarding parts of a crucial highway which the army has been trying to wrest from the rebels since last May.

The military says more than 1,000 soldiers and 3,000 guerrillas have been killed in the offensive, the longest and bloodiest of the country's 15-year-old civil war.

The rebels are fighting for a separate homeland for Tamils in the northeast of the Indian Ocean island.

Tamils, who make up 18 per cent of the population of 18 million, claim they are discriminated against by the majority Sinhalese, who dominate the government and military.

More than 51,000 people have been killed since the war began in 1983.

US Army honour 3 soldiers for saving lives of Vietnamese

WASHINGTON, Mar 7: Thirty years after one of the darkest moments in US military history, three soldiers who happened upon the My Lai massacre and risked their lives to save Vietnamese civilians by aiming their weapons at fellow Americans were proclaimed heroes by the Army, reports AP.

"We stand in honour of their heroism, and we have taken too long to recognise them," Chaplain Donald Shea said Friday at an emotional ceremony by the granite walls of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

"Remembering a dark point in time, we are now a richer nation as their personal heroic service is woven into the fabric of our history."

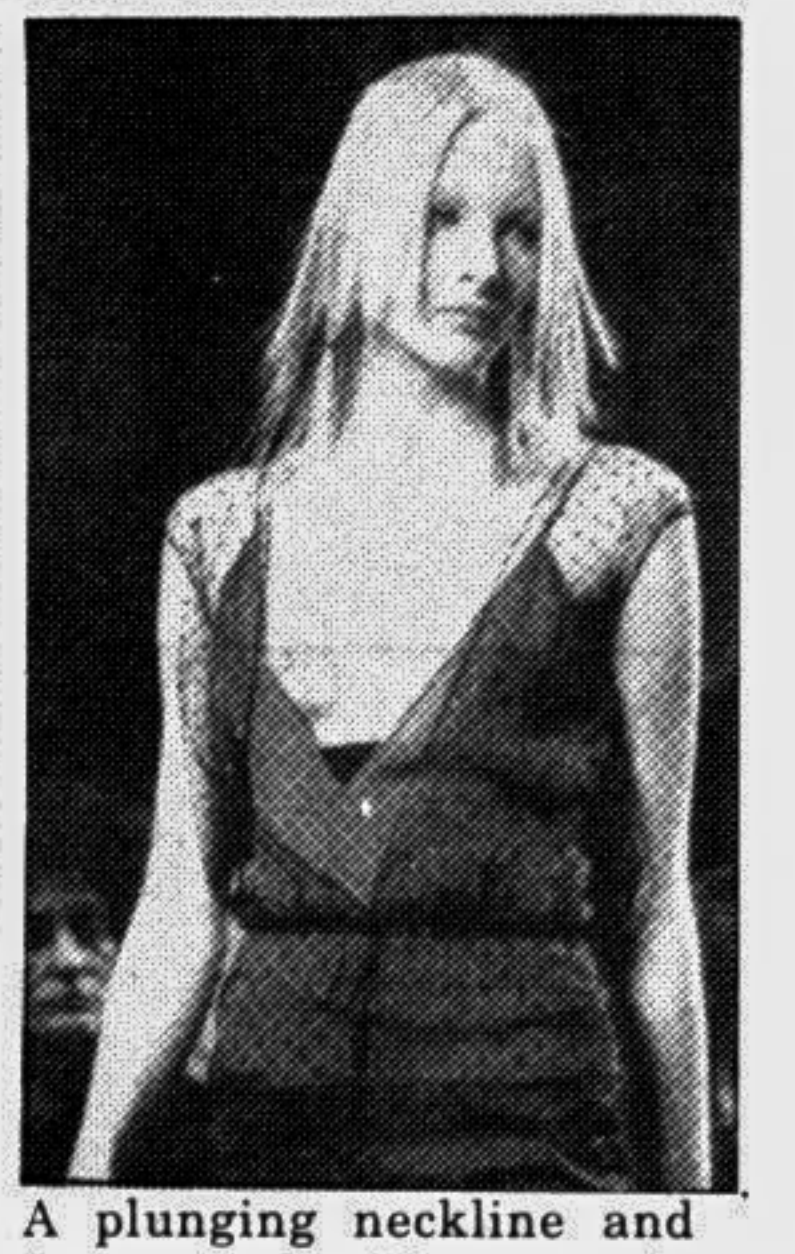
The ceremony was held to award the prestigious Soldier's Medal the highest award for bravery not involving conflict with an enemy to Hugh Thompson, Lawrence Colburn and their comrade, Glenn

Andreotta, who was killed in battle three weeks after My Lai.

"It was the ability to risk the right thing even at the risk of their personal safety that guided these soldiers to do what they did," said Army Maj Gen Michael Ackerman. "This afternoon we will finally recognise these men for their heroic actions that clearly capture the essence of Army values."

Ackerman said the award was "a tribute to these great soldiers, men who became a legend in their own time and whose actions have set the standard for all soldiers to follow."

"I proudly and humbly accept it not only for myself but for the men who served their country with honour on the battlefield in Southeast Asia," said former helicopter pilot Thompson, his voice quivering with emotion.



A plunging neckline and transparent silk concur in making the Byblos sexy look in this model, part of the Italian stylist's collection for the Fall/Winter 98/99 shown in Milan Friday. — AP/UNB photo

Island-wide raid in S'pore to net illegal aliens

SINGAPORE, Mar 7: As concerns mount over unlawful entries due to regional economic problems, police conducted an island-wide raid on illegal immigrants, Singapore media reported Saturday, says AP.

Immigration, police and land department officers arrested 90 illegal immigrants during the 24-hour blitz that ended early Friday, according to Singapore's TV television.

"Although the problem of illegal entry is now under control, the police are taking precautions and have stepped up vigilance in case the situation changes," Police Assistant Commissioner Leo Yip told The Straits Times.

He said there were worries that the number of foreigners entering or staying in Singapore illegally for work may surge due to the region's economic difficulties.

Renegade troops storm Sierra Leonean town: 8 killed

NAGBURAKA, Sierra Leone, Mar 7: Truckloads of renegade rebel troops stormed this sleepy town in central Sierra Leone on Friday, shooting and burning eight people to death and torching 19 homes, villagers said, reports AP.

The hour-long attack came just days after a West African coalition army captured the town from soldiers loyal to the ousted junta and their allied rebels.

The Nigerian-led coalition force had left the town unprotected overnight, said village elder Patrick Kontah. "They came in and went crazy," Kontah said of the rebels.

Last month, the West African troops ousted Lt Col Johnny Paul Koroma's military regime from the capital, Freetown, clearing the way for the return of elected President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah.

BRITFLY

Chopper crash leaves 5 dead in US: A Navy helicopter crashed in the rugged mountains near this resort community, killing all five crewmembers aboard, AP says from Crestline.

The Navy SH-60B was on a routine training mission from the North US Naval Air Station west of San Diego to Las Vegas when air traffic controllers lost contact with it about 2 pm Friday. The wreckage was found five hours later, Navy Lt J G Charlie Brown said. The bodies were found at the 5,000-foot (1,500 metres) level of the San Bernardino Mountains, about 65 miles (100 kms) east of Los Angeles, said Cindy Beavers, spokeswoman for the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department.

Gas blasts kill 11 in China: Eleven people were killed and 20 injured in a fire sparked by exploding gas reserves in the ancient city of Xian, a major tourist centre in northern China and home to the famed terracotta warriors, an official newspaper said Friday, AP reports from Beijing.

The explosions broke out Thursday afternoon at an oil depot of the Xian Gas Corp in the western part of the city, fueling fires that could be seen miles away, the Yangcheng Evening News said in a report sent Saturday in Beijing. City officials had earlier declined to comment on the number of casualties from the fires and explosions. The report said that nine of the injured were in serious or critical condition.

US, Ukraine sign accord: Ukraine and the US signed an accord on satellite technology and initiated an agreement on peaceful nuclear cooperation Friday, Xinhua says from Kiev.

On her one-day working visit to Kiev, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Genady Udovenko and President Leonid Kuchma. In a statement issued after the meeting, Albright commended Ukraine's decision to cancel a deal to provide turbines to an Iranian nuclear power station in Bushehr.

Czech President awarded: Czech President Vaclav Havel has been awarded the International Compostela Prize, worth one million pesetas (6,600 dollars), the head of the government of Galicia, Manuel Fraga, said Friday, AFP says from Santiago De Compostela.

Fraga said that Havel, 61, had merited the prize for his probity, his work for peace and his talent as a writer and philosopher. The award, to be presented in July in the Czech city of Brno, is the second major Spanish distinction for Havel in a few months. Last October he was given the Prince of the Asturias Prize in the human sciences category.

Small plane missing in Indonesia: A small plane with three people on board, including an Australian photographer, was missing over Sumatra island, and aviation official said Saturday, AP reports from Jakarta.

Dwiyono Setiabudi, of Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin airport in Palembang, said the Piper PA-31 Nafajo plane took off at 1:04 pm (0604 GMT) Friday for a photo flight. "We lost contact with the plane just four minutes after it took off," he told the Associated Press by phone from Palembang, a provincial capital in southern Sumatra.

UNITA declares full demobilisation of army

LUANDA, Angola, Mar 7: The former rebel movement UNITA said Friday that its army is no more, but with another deadline missed and 1,900 troops still carrying weapons, diplomats remain worried about the nation's future, reports AP.

UN mediator Behrooz Sandry and members of the Joint Commission, formed to monitor Angola's peace process, started urgent talks in Luanda earlier Friday after UNITA failed to meet the March 5 deadline for declaring it had fully demobilised its 70,000 troops.

The meeting was an effort to salvage the 1994 peace accord that ended nearly two decades of civil war in this southern African nation.

In a statement faxed to The Associated Press in Lisbon, Portugal, UNITA said that 5,980 of the 7,877 troops that were still armed in December have

been demobilised. UNITA, which has now become a legal civilian opposition party, said the demobilisation of the remaining troops will be completed by March 15.

"With this, UNITA declares its complete demobilisation as of today March 6."

There was no immediate response from the United Nations or the Joint Commission. The commission includes representatives from Russia, Portugal, the United States, Angola's government and UNITA.

Thursday's deadline was not the first UNITA has missed and Friday's meeting came amid warnings that the peace process could be crumbling.

Diplomats from the three foreign countries on the commission last week said they believed only a meeting between President Eduardo dos Santos and UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi could restart the stalled process.

UNSC retains ban on Libya despite Arab, African push

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 7: The Security Council left sanctions against Libya in place for another 120 days on Friday despite an appeal by China and others for an early end to the measures imposed in the wake of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am jet over Scotland, reports AP.

The council imposed an international aviation ban on Libya in 1992 to pressure Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi to extradite two suspects in the fatal bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270 people.

In every four months, the council reviews the status of sanctions, which automatically roll over unless the 15 members vote to lift them.

But the Arab League and the Organisation of African Unity have mounted strong international pressure to accept an offer by Gaddafi to try the sus-

pects in a third country or before an international court.

Britain and the United States have rejected this and insist on a trial either in Scotland or the United States.

Arab and African countries have asked for a public debate with the council over the Libyan sanctions. The debate is expected to be held on March 20.

"We hope that all parties concerned can show some flexibility and the council can take a step forward on this issue," China's deputy ambassador, Shen Guofeng, told reporters after the meeting. "China does not favour any kind of sanctions against any country, including sanctions on Libya."

He said China endorsed Arab and African calls for "an early lifting of the sanctions." As permanent council members, either Britain or the United States could veto any move to lift the sanctions.

US-led team inspects Iraq's suspected weapons sites

BAGHDAD, Mar 7: A UN team led by an American, Scott Ritter, went into the field Saturday for a second day of inspections aimed at uncovering Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, reports AP.

Ritter left UN headquarters in Baghdad at 9 am (0600 GMT), according to an official with the UN Special Commission, which oversees the inspections.

He would give no details of Ritter's expected destinations and spoke on customary condition of anonymity.

In January, the Iraqis had accused Ritter of being a spy and of including too many American and British inspectors on his teams. They then prevented him from working by denying him necessary Iraqi escorts, and he left the country without completing his work.

Officials at the Iraqi Press Centre Saturday banned re-

porters, photographers and camera crews from covering Ritter's activities. They said that any journalist who violated the ban would be punished, but did not say how.

It appeared that Iraq didn't want any adverse media coverage that might affect its efforts to fulfill its new agreement on weapons inspections with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The deal, signed February 23 by Annan and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, commits Iraq to cooperate with UN inspections of all suspected weapons sites. It also calls for the creation of a special committee of UN diplomats and inspectors that will look at eight presidential compounds.

Iraq's earlier refusal to open the presidential sites was at the centre of a standoff that prompted the United States to move troops and warships to

the Gulf and to threaten a military strike.

Pentagon officials have said that the 36,000 US troops in the Gulf will remain to ensure that the Baghdad annex complies with the Annan-Aziz agreement.

Ritter is accompanied by 50 inspectors and is expected to spend a week in Baghdad, UN officials in New York said. It is one of the largest teams ever sent to Iraq.

Ritter last was in Iraq in mid-January.

The UN Security Council imposed trade sanctions on Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, which sparked the 1991 Gulf War. The council has said that sanctions will not be lifted until the UN Special Commission certifies that Iraq has eliminated its weapons of mass destruction.



Muslim pilgrims board a plane bound for Makkah, Saudi Arabia, from Halim Perdanakusuma Airport in Jakarta, Friday, Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation, has a 200,000 member group making the pilgrimage to Makkah this year. — AP/UNB photo

Lanka plans to rebuild Jaffna

COLOMBO, Mar 7: Sri Lanka is finalising a huge development plan to start the second phase of rebuilding the insurgency-ravaged Tamil majority northern Jaffna peninsula with the help of foreign funds, reports India Abroad News Service.

The draft scheme is nearing completion and will be placed before the Ministry of National Planning and External Resources for approval. President Chandrika Kumaratunga is expected to give the final nod by the end of this month.

India is among the countries helping Sri Lanka in this. It has agreed to provide cows and help in animal husbandry, dairy planning and farm projects, reports India Abroad News Service.

Some 34 projects had been identified as early as April last year by a panel of local and foreign experts attached to the Settlement and Rehabilitation Authority of the North (RRAN), which coordinates and implements ongoing rebuilding programmes in Jaffna and is backed by the U.N. Develop-

ment Programme (UNDP), RRAN sources said.

Thirteen of these projects will be funded by the UNDP and include animal husbandry, rebuilding the Jaffna Technical College, administrative support to the Jaffna district secretariat and a pilot study on maritime farming.

Other projects to be funded by foreign donors include repair and reconstruction of roads, rural markets and sanitary systems, a well irrigation for paddy farms, supply of coconut seedlings, support to the secondary school system and restoring the Thirunelveli Agricultural Centre.

According to RRAN sources, the present rehabilitation schemes in Jaffna have been hit by a high turnover of consultants despite the keen interest shown by former RRAN Chairman Somapala Gunadheera and his successor, N.A.Obadage.

Donor agencies have also expressed concern over the inertia shown by the administrative section of RRAN and the lack of coordination between RRAN on the one hand, and the Jaffna secretariat and the

North East Provincial Council secretariat in Trincomalee, on the other.

Concerns have also been expressed about the difficulties in moving beyond purely relief and resettlement projects to actual development activities.

The lack of adequate power, transport and telecommunication in Jaffna are cited as the main impediments. Moreover, the fresh infiltration of LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) cadres in Jaffna has raised fears that the next phase of reconstruction and development activities may have to be put on hold.

A major rehabilitation and development plan for Jaffna was begun in 1996 after the return of the Jaffna Tamils who had fled their homes during the successful Operation Riviresa by security forces to recapture Jaffna. But the implementation of the plan got a big jolt when the LTTE bombed the inaugural function to mark the resumption of government control in Jaffna, killing a major general and injuring a government minister.

South Korean newspapers report curfew in Pyongyang after police, army trade gunfire

SEOUL, Mar 7: A night curfew has been slapped on the capital of Socialist North Korea after police and military forces exchanged gunfire, South Korean newspapers said today, quoting diplomatic sources in Beijing, reports Reuter.

The Dong-A Ilbo daily said the gunfire occurred on Tuesday night after police attacked the military. It did not give any details.

The Dong-A Ilbo and the Joong Ang Ilbo daily said a night curfew was immediately slapped on the city and had been in effect ever since.

But officials with government, military and intelligence authorities in Seoul said they did not think the reports were worthy of comment.

There have been a lot of various similar rumours about unrest in North Korea that later turned out to be groundless," said an official at the United Nations command in Seoul.

"We have no official comment on these reports, although I personally think these reports were also such rumours," he told Reuters by telephone.

A State Department spokesman in Washington said it had no information on the reports.

Tokyo-based monitoring service, radio press, said today there had been no breaks in North Korean official media broadcasts as of 11:00 am (0200 GMT) today.

North Korea and the capitalist South are technically still at war nearly half a century after their 1950-53 war ended in a truce but not a peace agreement.

AP adds: South Korea said Saturday it has found no evidence to support reported rumours that North Korea slapped a curfew on its capital after fighting allegedly erupted between police and military forces there.

US launches attack on Taliban

WASHINGTON, Mar 7: In a blistering attack on the Taliban militia which controls most of Afghanistan, the U.S. administration has deplored the group's blatant discrimination against women, reports India Abroad News Service.

Taking aim at what it implied was the Taliban's hypocrisy in forbidding girls from attending school and receiving an education, the administration said. "There are credible reports that some Taliban men, however, have sent their wives and daughters to refugee camps in Pakistan for school."

The Taliban has been recognised by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as the government in power.

In testimony before a Congressional panel convened by Senator Dianne Feinstein to explore the continuing deterioration of the humanitarian situation and the rights of women in Afghanistan, a senior State Department official said, "Women are not merely discriminated against in Afghanistan. They are being brutalised and made invisible

the lives of women - from expanding women's political participation to eliminating violence against women - into the development, formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy."

Theresa Loar, Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues at the U.S. Department of State, said, "At the time women are moving forward in most other countries of the world, the Taliban have cruelly pushed Afghan women backwards."

She said that since the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, "there has been increasing agreement in the international community on the importance of women's human rights."

Loar said, "The situation in Afghanistan presents us with a test of this principle." She asserted that "if the international community is steadfast and united in its resolve, the human rights of women will prevail and the lives of women and girls in Afghanistan will go forward."

Loar, whose position was created by Congress in 1994 to promote the human rights of women within American foreign policy, said, "My mandate is to integrate issues affecting

the lives of women - from expanding women's political participation to eliminating violence against women - into the development, formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy."

She said that "as we look at the egregious human rights violations occurring in places like Afghanistan," it was imperative that the U.S. Senate join 161 other nations in the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Loar said that the situation of women in Afghanistan, "poor to begin with, has worsened drastically under Taliban control."

Dismissing the concern in some quarters that Washington, on the urging of giant American oil companies like Unocal that want to build massive oil pipelines in Afghanistan and Central Asia, may compromise on its professed human rights commitment, she said, "The United States is neutral towards the various Afghan factions fighting in that country."