

US, South Asian experts feel

BJP will have a moderate govt

WASHINGTON, Mar 9: As the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and allies edged closer to forming a new government in India, the feeling among Clinton administration officials and South Asian experts was this would be a "moderate and responsible" government, reports India Abroad News Service.

The consensus among these officials and pundits was that the new BJP-led coalition would be a far cry from the Hindu nationalist party reflected in its election manifesto and pre-election rhetoric.

Publicly the Clinton administration, which has scrupulously eschewed indicating any bias towards one party or another, said it stood ready to work with any new government in New Delhi.

"We are waiting till there is a government. We will see what the government does and we will be having a dialogue with whatever government there is" in India, a State Department official said.

An official source, while acknowledging that the administration had been concerned if the BJP would emerge with a thumping majority, said the US was indeed heaving a sigh of relief that the brittleness of an Atal Behari Vajpayee government would hardly augur for pursuing a Hindu nationalist agenda.

The source said, "Because a

coalition is necessary, if the BJP-led coalition did come to power, it would be more likely that there would be moderation in the Indian government, because it would have to encompass a wide spectrum of views."

Michael Krepon, president of the Henry Stimson Centre, a think tank here, said, "If the BJP forms the government, the top priority has to be economic growth and domestic tranquillity."

He said, "If the BJP takes steps that damage economic growth and domestic tranquillity, not only will they be shooting themselves in the foot, they will be harming India's national security."

Krepon, obviously referring to possible tampering with the economic reforms set in motion in 1991 and adoption of a chauvinistic Hindu posture at the expense of the minorities, reiterated, "If they do things that harm one or both, then India loses."

Robert Hardgrave, professor of government studies at the University of Texas in Austin, said even though the BJP's "Chauvinistic and communal track record is not an anxiety that has by any means been eliminated," a coalition sansan extreme Hindu wing would necessarily manifest a "moderate face."

He recalled that this "moderate face" was reflected in the

"very character of the government that Vajpayee formed for those 13 days" in 1996 when the BJP was in power.

Hardgrave said he has always had tremendous respect for Vajpayee albeit his concerns regarding the BJP's policies. He expressed confidence that the "responsibilities of power," coupled with the "moral force" of a man like Vajpayee, would by themselves "be a moderating force."

James Clad, a professor of Asian Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, said even if a BJP-led government declared India a nuclear power, Washington should not overreact.

He predicted that the BJP for all its bluster would not test a nuclear weapon. "What would India gain from that? Nothing," he said, and added: "The question is not so much of reality on the ground, but how we want to react to it."

Clad said the BJP's declaration that it would re-evaluate India's present nuclear policy, which has caused ripples of concern in US administration circles here, was "simply cheap and easy rhetoric."

Even if they say India is a declared nuclear power, it means nothing," Clad said, and expressed confidence that "there won't be any change. The status quo will continue."

well advised to look for a comprehensive relationship with whoever took power and to take it easy," he said.

Clad predicted that the BJP-led coalition "is probably going to be a model of tolerance because firstly why should they give free ammunition to their opponents? Secondly, they have allies who are telling them that they can't go ahead with (reforming) the uniform civil code and many other things."

"Plus, the fact is, no matter what they say," Clad emphasised, "India is the world's second largest Muslim country after Indonesia. There are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan. So what kind of games can they (a BJP-led government) play?"

Clad agreed that the clobbering of the Shiv Sena received would afford the BJP greater flexibility and freedom vis-a-vis adopting a moderate posture.

Meanwhile, the Southern Asia Forum Cross-border Dialogue, conducted on the Internet by the Stimson Centre where the week's topic was "What changes, if any, can one expect in the state of Indo-Pak relations and the nuclear issue in the event of a BJP-led coalition government," generated a veritable consensus that the status quo would prevail.

Sumit Ganguly, professor of

Israeli minister holds talks with King Hussein

JERUSALEM, Mar 9: An Israeli minister held talks with Jordan's King Hussein in Amman on Sunday at a meeting signalling a thaw in relations between their countries, reports Reuters.

The king and Israeli Infrastructure Minister Ariel Sharon discussed deadlocked Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations and joint projects between Israel and Jordan.

A statement issued to Israeli reporters accompanying Sharon said King Hussein stressed the importance of implementing existing interim Israeli-Palestinian peace deals to pave the way to talks on a final peace settlement.

Relations between Israel and Jordan hit a spectacular low after a bungled Israeli attempt to kill a leader of the Islamist group Hamas in Amman last September.

King Hussein reportedly insisted that Israel must sack Mossad Secret Service Chief Danny Yatom before ties could improve.

Yatom was replaced last week by Efraim Halevy, a former Mossad deputy chief who was instrumental in making peace with Jordan in 1994.

"The problem has now gone," Sharon told Israeli reporters when asked about the bungled assassination affair.

Sharon also met Jordanian Crown Prince Hassan for talks on speeding up joint projects to cement the Israeli-Jordanian peace accord, officials said in Amman.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat salutes an honour guard upon arriving in the West Bank town of Ramallah, Sunday. Arafat refused to comment on a proposed four-stage plan by Israeli Premier Netanyahu to advance the stalled peace process. But Palestinian negotiator Ziad Abu Ziad dismissed the proposal as merely an exercise in public relations. — AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

HK airport resumes operations: Operations at Hong Kong's Kai Tak airport returned to normal yesterday after two days in which fog disrupted hundreds of flights and stranded thousands of people, civil aviation authorities said. Reuter reports from Hong Kong.

On Sunday more than 100 planes flying in or out of Hong Kong were delayed, diverted or cancelled because of poor visibility, leaving 4,000 travellers stranded at the airport. On Saturday, heavy fog affected some 360 flights.

Egyptian editor detained: The editor of an Egyptian opposition newspaper was detained on his return to the country Sunday to serve a one-year sentence for libelling a Cabinet minister, AP says from Cairo.

Magdi Hussein, the editor-in-chief of the prominent opposition newspaper, Al-Shaab, was in Iran last month when an appeals court upheld his conviction for libelling the two sons of former Interior Minister Hassan el-Alfy. The court reduced Hussein's sentence from two years with hard labour to one year with labour.

Iraqi FM arrives in NY: Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammad Said al-Sahhaf arrived in New York late Sunday from Amman to discuss the UN oil-for-food arrangement, Iraqi officials said. AFP reports from New York.

Sahhaf was to meet with UN chief Kofi Annan yesterday in the first meeting between an Iraqi official and Annan since Baghdad agreed on February 23 to open all its suspected weapons sites to UN inspectors. The Iraqi official's visit was expected to last a week.

4 die in Argentina storm: Four people were dead and one was injured after torrential rains and fierce winds battered Corrientes province, civil defence officials said Sunday. AFP reports from Buenos Aires.

The storm, which struck Saturday, also forced the evacuation of 1,000 people the officials said, warning that more rain could arrive Sunday. The victims were killed in accidents on provincial roads due to nearly zero visibility during the storm which uprooted trees and downed power lines in the southern part of the province.



Atal Behari Vajpayee (right), the prime ministerial candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and party president Lal Krishna Advani (left) meet Jayalalitha Jayaram, leader of one of the allies, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, in New Delhi yesterday. Jayalalitha has expressed the party's desire to lend outside support to Vajpayee-led central government. — AP/UNB photo

Annan sending official to Baghdad to lay groundwork for inspections

UN moves toward a test of its deal with Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 9: The UN chief is moving toward a test of his deal to open Iraq's presidential palaces, reports AP.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan was to submit his plan for inspecting those sites to the Security Council on Monday and was sending a top official to Baghdad to lay the groundwork for the inspections.

Annan said he will also refer a proposal to name a Russian deputy chairman of the inspection programme to the council. US Ambassador Bill Richardson says he will veto the plan unless it is endorsed by the chief inspector, Richard Butler of Australia.

Last month, Annan signed an agreement in Baghdad with Iraq's deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz, to open eight presidential palaces to UN inspectors seeking to determine if Iraq has destroyed all mass destruction weapons.

The inspectors must certify

that Iraq has destroyed its banned weapons before the council will lift economic sanctions imposed in 1990 after Iraq President Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, touching off the Gulf War.

Saddam's refusal to allow the inspectors to enter his palaces prompted the United States and Britain to dispatch thousands of troops to the Gulf last month and threaten air strikes.

Prospects for an attack were diminished after Annan signed his deal in Baghdad. US officials have said the forces will remain in the Gulf until the Iraqis carry out their commitments and allow the inspections to take place.

Under the agreement, the inspectors will be accompanied by diplomats to make sure that Iraq's dignity and national sovereignty are respected. The United States has insisted that the diplomats play no role in the operation of Butler's teams.

UN officials said the rules for the palace inspections have been written and would be presented to the council Monday. That will give the United States and Britain, Iraq's toughest critics, a chance to determine whether the rules conform to their demand that the inspectors — and not the diplomats — call the shots.

After the council meeting, the UN's top disarmament officials Jayantha Dhanapala of Sri Lanka, was to leave New York for Baghdad to prepare for the inspections.

Among other things, Dhanapala was expected to meet with Baghdad-based diplomats who will accompany the inspectors and explain the rules. American and British diplomats are not expected to take part since neither country maintains an embassy in Baghdad.

The UN Special Commission, which conducts the inspections, prefers to use diplo-

mats already stationed in the Iraqi capital to avoid tipping off the Iraqis when inspections are planned.

Meanwhile, Iraq's foreign minister, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, was to begin talks at UN Headquarters in New York on Monday on expanding the amount of oil Iraq can sell to buy food and medicine for its impoverished people.

The council agreed to double the amount of oil sales to 5.2 billion dollars for six months. But Iraq says it cannot meet that target because its oil industry is in disrepair after more than seven years of sanctions.

On Friday, UN spokesman Fred Eckhard confirmed that Annan was considering a Russian proposal to name a Russian as a deputy chairman of the Special Commission known as UNSCOM.

Butler now has only one deputy — American Charles Ducler.

Students protest Suharto's another term in office

JAKARTA, Mar 9: Students on at least two university campuses protested against the government Monday as a special assembly prepared to give President Suharto another term in office, reports AP.

Meanwhile, a newspaper reported that six students were arrested on Sunday after an anti-government rally in Yogyakarta, 600 kilometres (370 miles) east of Jakarta.

In the capital, hundreds of protesters urged Suharto's ouster at Atmajaya University, a Roman Catholic college near the Parliament building where government delegates planned to appoint Suharto to five more years in power on Tuesday.

Chanting students also gathered at a University of Indonesia campus on the outskirts of Jakarta, where they marched to the gates as police held vigil outside.

Labour leaders announced they would hold a rally in front of Parliament, where security is tight. However, no one turned up for the demonstration.

Despite a temporary ban on political rallies in Jakarta, students have staged frequent protests against Suharto and his handling of Indonesia's worst economic crisis since the 1960s. Authorities have largely tolerated the protests.

The students who were arrested in Yogyakarta were

among 50 people who marched from the regional legislature to a historical museum. The Indonesia Observer newspaper said police detained about 40 of the students and later released all but six.

Student protesters are calling for democratic reforms and fresh leaders to replace 76-year-old Suharto, who has been in power for 32 years.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II records her Commonwealth day radio broadcast at Buckingham Palace in London, Sunday. — AP/UNB photo

Whitewater figure McDougal dies in US prison

FORT WORTH, Texas, Mar 9: James McDougal, the flamboyant Arkansas savings and loan operator whose business dealings with President and Mrs Hillary Clinton spurred the Whitewater investigation, has died in prison. He was 57, reports AP.

He died at John Peter Smith hospital, a US medical prison, of cardiac arrest on Sunday, the US Justice Department said.

McDougal, who was serving a three-year sentence for fraud and conspiracy, suffered from a variety of ailments, including heart disease and blocked arteries.

The Clintons' former business partner was the owner of an Arkansas savings and loan and the architect of a series of fraudulent loans and land deals that he alleged the President and First Lady were aware of.

After years as the Clintons' staunchest defender, McDougal became a key cooperating witness for Whitewater prosecutors in 1996 and his death will significantly alter the complexion of their four-year criminal investigation, which began as a probe of McDougal's joint real estate venture with the Clintons — a small vacation home settlement on an Arkansas White River.

Questions about the development project arose during Clinton's 1992 campaign.

1st global confce to discuss emerging health threats

ATLANTA, Mar 9: In a world where infectious diseases have rebounded and are the No 1 cause of deaths across the globe, health officials warned of the dangers of complacency, reports AP.

More than 2,200 scientists from more than 70 countries are gathering in the first conference of its kind to discuss the most eminent of emerging health threats, including drug resistance, biological weapons and the need for better training on the front lines.

The conference, sponsored in part by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, began Sunday and runs until Wednesday.

The death toll that infections around the globe still take on human life is disturbing, said Dr David Heymann of the World Health Organisation.

"This is quite phenomenal when you think that the tools exist today to prevent and to control these diseases," Heymann said. "These tools, however, are being undermined by antimicrobial resistance and by new and emerging diseases."

The new flu strain that showed up in Hong Kong last year killed 6 of 18 people who became ill. A staph strain fending off the most common medicine used against it: Stronger, more resistant forms of tuberculosis and malaria are

appearing.

"I think it's fairly clear that there has been a lack of resources allocated to infectious disease control and preventing, with a few exceptions such as AIDS," said Dr Peter Drotman, programme chairman for the international conference on Emerging Infectious Diseases.

Malaria, for example, kills 3 million people a year and is becoming resistant to antibiotics at an alarming rate in some parts of the world. There is still no vaccine.

Charles, Camilla to appear together in public

LONDON, Mar 9: Britain's Prince Charles and his long-time companion Camilla Parker Bowles will appear together in public at his 50th birthday party in November, a press report said on Sunday, reports AP.

Queen Elizabeth II and her husband the Duke of Edinburgh have agreed to let Charles parade Camilla at a banquet and party for more than 1,000 people, including European royals, politicians and showbusiness stars, the mass-market Sunday Mirror said.

UK govt denies allegation of donations to parliament

LONDON, Mar 9: British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott denied Sunday claims that he had failed to declare a major political donation to Parliament, reports AP.

Prescott told the BBC that he had acted quite properly over the 27,750 pound (44,400 dollar) donation received from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in 1996, when he was in opposition.

"I did declare the donation and there is nothing to hide," he said.

Opposition Conservatives had called for Prescott to be suspended from the House of Commons if the allegation about the donation was true.

Prescott, now in charge of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, was said by the Sunday Times to have failed to disclose the grant on the register of members' interests at the House of Commons.

Prescott last month announced a policy to encourage more house building on already developed "brownfield" sites in urban areas, rather than in the

countryside.

The government had been lobbied by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to adopt a brown-field policy.

Prescott also denied any link with a property developer employing his son, also called John, who was reported Sunday to have bought up council-owned property cheaply in the northern city of Jull, Prescott's constituency.

Tigers kill 4 Lankan cops

COLOMBO, Mar 9: Tamil Tiger rebels attacked a police post in northeastern Sri Lanka early this morning, killing at least four policemen, police officials said, reports Reuter.

They said eight policemen were also wounded when dozens of rebels stormed the post at a village in northeastern Trincomalee district.

The attack was carried out by the LTTE on the police post," a senior police official in northeastern Trincomalee town told Reuters.

Crackdown on Kosovo US to drum up support to impose sanctions on former Yugoslavia

LONDON, Mar 9: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on Sunday sought to drum up support to impose sanction on former Yugoslavia for its bloody crackdown in Kosovo, ahead of a meeting here with top European and Russian officials, reports AP.

Albright arrived here late after earlier holding talks with French and German officials on the crisis in Kosovo where Serb security forces have mounted an operation against suspected ethnic Albanian separatists.

US officials travelling with Albright said that several options had been discussed during her meetings in Paris and Bonn. On Saturday she met with Italian officials.

Albright is due to meet today with foreign ministers from Britain, France, Germany, Italy and senior Foreign Ministry officials from Russia to discuss the violence in Kosovo, where at least 50 people have died in the last seven days.

The ministers representing the six nation Contact Group will consider proposals ranging from "pure diplomatic steps" to taking "punitive steps with or without economic consequences," a US official told reporters under cover of anonymity.

Earlier Sunday after a working lunch with French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine, Albright told reporters: "The only effective way to stop violence in that region is to act with firmness, unity and speed."

Past experience, she said, showed that "Moral condemnation and symbolic gestures of concern alone will get us nowhere."

French President Jacques Chirac meanwhile called for an "urgent, resolute reaction" by the international community to events in Kosovo, sparked by a series of deadly raids against Serb police by the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK), a shadowy militia whose aim is independence for the province.

"We cannot allow ethnic hatred to unfurl again on our continent. We cannot allow a civil war which would threaten... the stability of the whole of south-eastern Europe," Chirac said in a statement.

However, diplomats said

Paris remained unconvinced that sanctions would have any effect. They pointed to the latest statements Sunday by Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic that Kosovo was strictly an internal matter.

Among Contact Group members, Serbia's traditional ally Russia has spearheaded opposition to direct action.

Moscow is sending a Deputy Foreign Minister, Nikolai Afanasievsky, to London instead of Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov.

International responses to the crisis in Bosnia, for which the Contact Group was originally created, were frequently dogged by disputes and resulted in muddled and costly policy inconsistencies over the years.

Also Sunday, the Serb authorities allowed ambassadors accredited to Belgrade to tour the area where Serb police and paramilitary units have spent the last three days attacking a series of ethnic Albanian villages.



Ethnic Albanian women wave pieces of papers in front of the US centre in the town of Pristina, capital of the Serbian province of Kosovo on Sunday. Some 10,000 Albanian women participated to the demonstration, demanding more rights for the Albanians in Kosovo. — AP/ UNB photo