

Squabbling factions urged to reunite

Sonia confirmed as Cong chief

NEW DELHI, Apr 6: Sonia Gandhi won confirmation Monday as the unchallenged leader by the highest body of the once-powerful Congress party, and urged her party to reunite its squabbling factions, reports AP.



After unanimous ratification of her election as Congress president, Sonia warned that the party which had suffered two successive election routs was in danger of disappearing from its central place in Indian politics.

"We have to get over our weaknesses and remain in touch with the people," she said, urging party stalwarts to regain the confidence of the lower castes and Muslims whose support once made Congress invincible.

"The revival of the party is going to be a long-drawn process," she said, exhorting activists to work hard toward a "politics of service," a phrase that her slain husband, Rajiv Gandhi had introduced.

Making her speech in Hindi and English from a dais where leaders sat cross-legged on white mattresses, she promised

greater democracy within the party that has not had internal elections for years, its leaders chosen by a small coterie in New Delhi.

Hundreds of Congress Party workers, dressed in white home-spun cotton trousers and shirts, cheered as she unfurled the party's flag to inaugurate the meeting.

The one-day session of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) a forum of state leaders, is the first since the general election that resulted in a coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

A political resolution prepared for the meeting questioned whether the BJP had put aside its Hindu supremacist agenda, as it had claimed to do when it assembled its broad-based coalition, and criticized the governing party for following the dictates of its most extreme factions.

Sonia's confirmation completes the transformation of the reclusive widow of slain former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi to one of India's most powerful politicians, something she had slummed for years.

For her critics, it is the revival of a dormant political inheritance that she could pass on to her son or daughter, both in their 20s who joined her on the campaign trail for elections in February and March.

Sonia, 51, who has stayed aloof from the public since her husband was assassinated in 1991, accepted the presidency

last month after the 18-member Congress Working Committee ousted the lackluster Sitaram Kesri whose divisive politics had driven dozens of leaders out of the party to set up splinter groups.

Sonia's formal election was welcomed by a thunderous cheer by the convention, which routinely endorses the choices of the party's bosses. As a show of unity, Kesri introduced the motion to confirm her as president.

Although out of the limelight, she has been considered a party power broker for years by virtue of her position as the heir to the party's political dynasty. Between her husband Rajiv, his mother Indira Gandhi, and her father Jawaharlal Nehru, her family led India for 35 of its 50 years since independence.

Daughter of a builder in a small northern Italian town, Sonia Manio met Rajiv Gandhi in a Cambridge University cafeteria in 1965 and they married three years later. She became an Indian citizen only after her husband entered politics more than a decade later.

Tigers launch mortar attack on Lankan troops

COLOMBO, Apr 6: Tamil Tiger rebels launched a mortar attack on government troops manning defences in Sri Lanka's northern Jaffna Peninsula and fresh skirmishes were reported elsewhere, the Defence Ministry said today, reports Reuters.

It said one soldier was killed and three others wounded in the fighting on Sunday at Pallal in the Jaffna Peninsula, former stronghold of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels.

It said troops retaliated with mortar fire, forcing the rebels to flee.

The statement also said troops involved in operation Jayasikuru (sure of victory), which aims to capture key northern highway, had killed four rebels in the Wannu region on Sunday.

Troops are currently attempting to take Mankulam, the last major rebel-held town on the highway that connects the government-held town Vavuniya with Killinochchi further north.



Palestinian protesters at a Hamas demonstration in Jenin, in the northern West Bank, hold up a poster and pictures of the late Mohiyedien Sharif, chief Hamas bombmaker, Sunday. The death of Sharif is being investigated separately by the Palestinian National Authority and Hamas, in which Israel is a chief suspect. — AP/UNB photo

Israeli PM accuses PA of not doing enough to stop terrorism

JERUSALEM, Apr 6: After a blast in a Hamas bomb factory in Palestinian-controlled Ramallah and accusations that his government was behind it, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has accused the Palestinian Authority of not doing enough to stop terrorism, reports AP.

Netanyahu said Sunday the explosion last week proved that there was a terrorist network in the Palestinian territory and used the incident to justify a go-slow approach in turning over more territory to the Palestinians.

Hamas, which lost its chief bombmaker Mohiyedien Sharif in the explosion, blames Israeli forces for the blast and has threatened revenge attacks.

And an appeal by a Palestinian negotiator for the United States to make public a plan to move the peace process was rebuffed by US Secretary of State Madeline Albright, who said its up to regional leaders to make a breakthrough.

"We do not have a plan," she said in Tobago. "There have been people who think there is

some kind of plan akin to some that have been presented previously. We have a set of ideas, a road map about how to narrow the gap between the parties."

In Gaza, there were signs of growing tensions between Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority and the militant Hamas.

Palestinian intelligence head Amin Hindi issued a blunt statement declaring that the Palestinian Authority was the party responsible for investigating Sharif's death and criticized anyone who was not providing information to Palestinian investigators.

Hamas has said it is conducting its own investigation.

Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi said Israel was "the main suspect" in Sharif's death. "The assassination ... and the explosion that accompanied the assassination bring up several questions," he said. "Was Sharif interrogated before he was assassinated? Or did he die during interrogation and the explosion was to cover up his torture?"

The police chief in Gaza, Ghazi Jabali, questioned Rantisi for several hours Sunday night about his assertions but said afterward there was no reason to arrest him.

Netanyahu said the Palestinian Authority must "put a halt to the inflammatory lies which blame Israel" for Sharif's death, and repeated his earlier warning that Israel would react severely if there was an attack.

Pathologist Jalal Jabri presented his report Sunday to Justice Minister Freij Abu Meideen, but refused to disclose its contents. Earlier police said the report found that Sharif was shot to death before the explosion, suggesting he had been assassinated. That account has been brought into question, however, with some officials suggesting Sharif could have been hit by metal fragments from the explosion, not bullets.

Meanwhile, Israel's Channel 1 television said Israeli military intelligence and the Shin Bet security service disagreed over whether Arafat was doing enough to fight terrorism.

BRIEFLY

**Blast claims 1 in S Lebanon:** A Lebanese civilian was killed and three others injured yesterday in a bomb blast in the Israeli-occupied "security zone" in Southern Lebanon, an Israeli-backed militia said, AFP reports from Marjayoun.

The bomb exploded as a vehicle passed by on a road which runs along the Israeli-Lebanese border, the South Lebanon Army (SLA) said, killing one civilian and injuring three. No group claimed responsibility for the blast. Israeli Radio reported earlier that two bombs had exploded early yesterday near an Israeli Army patrol just inside the buffer zone Israel occupies in South Lebanon.

**5 mourners killed in Georgia:** Five mourners were killed and eight wounded in former Soviet Georgia on Sunday when gunmen opened fire on a funeral procession for an opposition figure who took several United Nations personnel hostage a month ago, Reuters reports from Georgia.

A Georgian police spokesman told Reuters in the capital Tbilisi they had no indication of the identity of the attackers.

**34 bodies of Somalis retrieved:** Yemeni and UN Refugee Agency officials said on Sunday rescue teams had retrieved 34 bodies of Somalis believed to have drowned when their boat sank off Yemen's east coast last month, Reuters reports from Aden.

"The bodies were beyond identification. They were all buried in Yemen according to Islamic rituals," Mazen Abu Shanab, director of the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR in Yemen told reporters. He said search teams were still looking for more bodies.

Dismissal of Paula Jones' lawsuit Clinton feels 'freer' to continue with his tasks

WASHINGTON, Apr 6: President Bill Clinton says the dismissal of Paula Jones' sexual harassment lawsuit removes an obstacle from his duties to the nation, and keeping his private problems and public obligations separate has "been a test," reports AP.

Clinton scored a major victory last week when a federal judge in Arkansas threw out Mrs Jones' case against him. But he still faces independent counsel Kenneth Starr's investigation into his alleged sexual relations with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky, and Mrs Jones is expected to decide this week whether to appeal.

In an interview in this week's Time magazine, Clinton said that if he were "just an average citizen ..." he would have wanted the Jones case to go to trial so he could prove his innocence.

But as president, he said, having it dismissed "and putting this behind us is plainly in the best interest of the country."

Every president since George Washington, he said, has talked about how the country deserves a chief executive who can free himself of personal concerns "and become totally obsessed with the public interest. It's been a test. But I've tried to do that."

With the Jones case dismissed, Clinton said he was "freer to keep doing what I'm supposed to be doing," focusing on such issues as tobacco legislation, education and Social Security.

That was the theme of Clinton partisans on the Sunday television news programmes, who emphasised that the president continues to enjoy high marks among Americans for his political agenda.

This president has chosen the politics of ideas and the battlefield of ideas. His opponents have chosen the battlefield of insult and innuendo," senior White House adviser Rahm Emanuel said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

"I think (independent counsel) Kenneth Starr, no matter what bravado he may put forward now, clearly must be looking for an exit strategy," Sen Robert Torricelli, a New Jersey Democrat said.

'Pakistan's edn fact sheet is one of the worst in world'

ISLAMABAD, Apr 6: Pakistan's education fact sheet is "one of the worst in the world," says a human development report on South Asia released Monday in the federal capital, reports AP.

With nearly 50 million illiterate adults — the majority of them female — and 10 million children not attending school, "Pakistan has one of the worst education balance sheets in the world," said Mahbubul Haq, co-author of the report, which looks at education levels throughout South Asia.

The report was financed by the United Nations Development Programme and several bilateral donors including Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

Haq said the problems are enormous, but not insurmountable.

According to his report, Pakistan can put 12 million children in primary schools over the next five years at a cost of roughly 50 billion rupees (1.1

billion dollars) or less than .4 per cent of the gross national product.

By comparison Pakistan spends roughly 70 per cent of its 14 billion dollars budget on defence and debt servicing.

The government says its huge defence expenditures are necessitated by its often hostile neighbour India. Both countries, while listed among the world's poorest nations also are among the biggest defence spenders.

According to Haq's report, India has the largest illiterate population in the world and Pakistan's official literacy rate is only about 35 per cent.

"The government is abdicating its responsibility," says Haq.

Haq said the world is slowly waking up to the potential in this region and not all of it is good. Both India and Pakistan are believed to be capable of building nuclear weapons, although

both countries say their programme are for peaceful purposes.

"The world is beginning to realize the dangers in two totally impoverished nations like India and Pakistan having nuclear weapons while sitting on a virtual social explosion," said Haq in an interview with The Associated Press.

"The scale of human tragedy is so large ... two such impoverished nations having nuclear weapons and spending so much on the military."

The good news is that an educated work force, says Haq, could launch South Asia into economic prosperity, particularly given the economic downturn in East Asia and Japan.

"South Asia can be the next economic frontier ... it has the same potential as China," he said. "With education the work force here can produce the low-tech and medium-tech goods for the burgeoning middle class."

Fires devastate 180,000 hectares of forest in Indonesia

JAKARTA, Apr 6: Fires have razed more than 180,000 hectares (444,600 acres) of forest since the beginning of this year in the drought-stricken Indonesian province of east Kalimantan, reports said today, says AP.

Some 180,280 hectares had been devastated by fires in the Borneo Island province by April 2, the head of east Kalimantan's Environmental Impact Control Agency, Awang Faruk Ishak, was quoted as saying by the Bisnis Indonesia Daily.

The fires had caused estimated losses of 3,133 billion rupiah (365.4 million dollars), excluding losses related to the environment, health and ecological change, Ishak said.

Fires continue to burn in the province.

The military chief in the provincial capital of Samarinda, Lieutenant Colonel Dasril Liyas, said many of the fires were difficult to reach, adding "Some are located deep into the forest some 30 to 40 km from the main road and most have no road leading there."

The head of the east Kalimantan's office of Forestry and Plantation, Kayat Sutaryo, said

the fires had destroyed more than 45,500 hectares (117,000 acres) of protected forest in the province, Bisnis Indonesia said.

Afghan opposition alliance agrees to hold talks with Taliban

KABUL, Apr 6: Afghanistan's opposition alliance said on Sunday it had agreed to hold talks with the Taliban Islamic movement on forming a joint Islamic commission to seek an end to the Afghan conflict.

An opposition spokesman told Reuters "the offer of the Taliban was accepted in principle" in the alliance's talks with United Nations' special envoy on Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi in Ashgabat, capital of neighbouring Turkmenistan.

Earlier on Sunday, Brahimi said the alliance was ready to appoint representatives to meet their Taliban counterparts to "discuss problems in Afghanistan."

Brahimi said he hoped the meeting would be held in the Pakistani capital Islamabad.

Negotiators awaiting Mitchell's plan for N-Ireland accord

BELFAST, Northern Ireland, Apr 6: Twenty-two months ago former US Sen George Mitchell agreed to take the helm of negotiations on Northern Ireland's future. Now the time has come to put his cards on the table, reports AP.

His draft settlement, several patient months in the making, will spell out the most likely ground for compromise between Protestants and Catholics on how Northern Ireland should be governed.

Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, speaking after talking by phone or in person with several of the north's party leaders, said Sunday night that Mitchell's paper, which he expects to be presented Monday, "will reflect ... something that both governments can be satisfied with."

The British and Irish governments appointed Mitchell, the former Senate majority leader from Maine, chairman of the search for a settlement that started in June 1996 at Stormont, the centre of British administration in Northern Ireland.

Deadlocked much of the time by procedural wrangles, the talks picked up speed after the two governments jointly presented an outline of a settlement in January.

That outline envisioned Protestants and Catholics governing Northern Ireland together in a new Belfast assembly, and cooperating formally with the Irish Republic for the first time in a cross-border council.

Mitchell's far more difficult task is to put meat on those bare bones and strike a balance that somehow keeps both the Ulster Unionists, Northern Ireland's major pro-British Protestant party, and the IRA-allied Sinn Fein party on board for an agreement later this week.

His lengthy document needs to define the powers and operations of both the Belfast assembly and the cross-border council.

The north's growing Catholic minority demands that the cross-border council have wide-ranging powers to enforce policies equally in both parts of Ireland.



Pope John Paul II tours St Peter's Square aboard his open-topped "popemobile" during the Palm Sunday celebrations at the Vatican, Sunday. The Pontiff blessed palms and olive branches and dedicated his thoughts to youths preparing for a huge rally in Rome in year 2000. — AP/UNB photo

Saudis expect good return from investment for Hajj

MAKKAH, Saudi Arabia, Apr 6: Saudi Arabia has bet heavily on the success of the hajj by ploughing 20 billion dollars into improving facilities, but hopes to recover the cost in earnings from the annual Muslim pilgrimage, reports AFP.

Saudi authorities say they have invested the money since 1979 in upgrading roads, mosques, tunnels, and water reservoirs to accommodate some two million Muslims who make the ritual visit to Islam's holiest shrines in the south-western cities of Makkah and Madina.

The investment is a measure of the continuing financial importance of the hajj to the Saudi Kingdom which, until the discovery of oil in the 1940s, relied upon the pilgrimage for its largest source of revenue.

This year, the 1.2 million pilgrims coming from foreign countries are expected to spend 1.6 billion dollars the Saudi daily Arab News on Friday quoted Makkah's Chamber of Commerce and Industry as saying.

Pilgrims will buy sheep, lambs and camels destined for ritual sacrifice on Tuesday on the first day of the feast of Al-Adha, which commemorates the act of faith of Ibrahim who was

prepared to sacrifice his son for God.

During the hajj pilgrims also buy food for themselves and souvenirs to take back home, merchants in Makkah do a brisk business in electronic goods, clothes, prayer rugs and prayer beads.

Those purchases, according to Arab News, make up half of the money the foreign visitors will spend. But the faithful still must find the money for their lodging which if they choose luxury hotel rooms, can run into hundreds of dollars.

Makkah boasts more than 22 hotels, with prices for the best accommodation near the great mosque reaching 400 dollars a night.

The rest of the money spent by pilgrims will go on transport, as the "guest of Allah" move between the holy sites of the pilgrimage with the assistance of the Mutaufin organizations.

The Mutaufin help handicapped pilgrims complete the ritual of walking seven times around the Kaaba — a 15 meter high cube — in the courtyard of the grand mosque to start the pilgrimage. The walk pays respect to a Black Cornerstone which Muslims believe was given to Abraham by the

Archangel Gabriel.

To help move the crowds throughout the hajj, some 20,000 mass transport vehicles have been pressed into service, including 100 buses leased from Turkey. The buses, plus some 23,000 guides and helpers attached to them, are necessary because private vehicles are forbidden near the Holy places during the pilgrimage.

Worldwatch for upgrading forest policies to avert global disaster

WASHINGTON, Apr 6: The environmental lobby group Worldwatch Institute has called on governments around the world to upgrade their forest management policies, thereby averting global disaster, reports AP.

Worldwatch urged governments to pledge initiatives on forestry resources in advance of a UN environmental conference in Buenos Aires in November that will be held as a follow-up to breakthrough talks on greenhouse gas emissions in Kyoto, Japan, in December.

Off the Record

Very small passenger joins Flight 704 in midair

ABOARD CAMEROON AIRLINES FLIGHT 704: At 30,000 feet (9,000 metres), one very small and special passenger decided to join Flight 704. His mom saw to it, reports AP.

About midway into the 90-minute flight from Nigeria to the Ivory Coast, Saidatou Ayoni's water broke and she quietly went into labour. Somewhere over either Ghana or Benin, she gave birth to a healthy boy.

It was shortly after the plane had levelled off from its climb to about six miles (nine km) above Earth that a flight attendant came onto the public address system and calmly asked for a doctor.

Fortunately there was on board: Cameroon's John Yap, a pediatrician, eased Mrs. Ayoni through labour and delivered the yet-unnamed infant.

"It isn't unusual for a pregnant woman to fly," Yap said. "But she shouldn't have been on the airplane" this late in her pregnancy.

Apart from a few groans from the mother, the delivery was relatively easy, Yap said. He used several plastic bags and a blanket to craft a delivery area and he cut the umbilical cord with a Swiss Army knife.

Unaware of the commotion toward the rear of the aircraft — one row ahead of the smoking section — most of the passengers continued with their meals. When word spread, Mrs. Ayoni and her newborn became the centre of attention.

"I wonder what nationality he's going to be," quipped one passenger while the jet soared over West Africa's southern coastline.

Several passengers wandered to the back of the Boeing 727 jet to visit the infant, wrapped in a Cameroon Airlines blanket.

Tired but smiling, Mrs. Ayoni cradled her baby when the plane touched down in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. This is her fifth child — the others were born on the ground.

Do you know what Madonna wants the world to know?

NEW YORK: Madonna wants the world to know the father of her child may not be her husband, but he's still a big part of her life, reports AP.

"I was in love with him," Madonna says in the April 11 TV Guide. "A lot of people think I walked out on the street and looked at him and said, 'you're going to be my sperm donor.'"

Madonna had a daughter, Lourdes, with Carlos Leon, a personal trainer she met in New York.

"I had a relationship with him. I still have a relationship with him," Madonna said. "We are really good friends... The last thing I want my daughter to do is grow up without a father. I grew up without a parent."

Rebels or cannibals?

KAMPALA, Uganda: Rebels in remote western Uganda who are short on food have slaughtered, cooked and eaten a number of abducted villagers, a Ugandan Army Commander said Saturday, reports AP.

Lt. Col. Francis Okello, who is in command of units fighting the rebel Allied Democratic Forces, said the army had received intelligence reports that the rebels had killed and eaten a number of people who had been abducted earlier, as well as one of their sick commanders.

Independent confirmation of the report was impossible. The rebels, who are fighting to overthrow President Yoweri Museveni, have been launching sporadic attacks from the forests of the Rwenzori Mountains on the border with Congo.

Some Congolese tribes near the Uganda have a reputation for ritual cannibalism, which involves eating selected internal organs for spiritual purposes.