

International

Sonia launches initiative to revitalise Congress

NEW DELHI, Apr 12: Sonia Gandhi has launched an initiative to revitalise India's once-dominant Congress Party...

Mrs Gandhi, widow of assassinated former premier Rajiv Gandhi, was elected President of Congress last week. She has already appointed a six-member panel to prepare a "concrete agenda for revitalising the party."

The panel will be headed by former speaker of the Lower House, Purno Sangma and will submit a report by April 21, The Times said.

A Congress spokesman said Sonia Gandhi had met senior leaders of the party over the past few days to collect inputs for revamping the party.

The 113-year-old party is in decline after dominating politics under the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty for most of the half-century since independence. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was succeeded as Congress leader by his daughter Indira Gandhi who in turn was replaced by her son Rajiv. He was assassinated in 1991 while campaigning for a

return to office. Voted out of power in 1996, the Congress won 141 of 545 seats in February-March elections, close to its worst-ever showing two years ago.

The party, which has been rocked by a series of high-profile corruption scandals then turned to the 51-year-old widow in the hope that the aura surrounding the family name would arrest its political decline.

Sonia Gandhi, a mother of two, had shunned active politics since 1991 until last year, when she decided to campaign for Congress. She was chosen as the leader of the party last week.

Newspaper editor held in Congo

KINSHASA, Congo, Apr 12: The editor of the daily Record newspaper was arrested by soldiers Saturday at his office in Kinshasa, the paper's publishing group said, reports AP.

He was taken to the National Information Agency and later jailed. In his editorials, Michel Ladi Luya criticised President Laurent Kabila's government and called for greater efforts to distribute Congo's wealth among the poor.

Israeli warplanes attack guerilla bases in South Lebanon

NABATIYEH, Lebanon, Apr 12: Israeli warplanes fired missiles Sunday on suspected guerilla positions in southern Lebanon, for the second time since the Lebanese government rejected Israel's offer to withdraw from the region in return for security guarantees, reports AP.

Two Israeli jets fired 16 air-to-surface missiles on hills near the deserted village of Sojod in Iqlim al-Tuffah, a Hezbollah stronghold that faces an Israeli-occupied border enclave in southern Lebanon, said Lebanese security officials, speaking on customary condition of anonymity.

Plumes of black smoke billowed from the stricken area, but there was no immediate word on casualties from the 9:15 am (0615 GMT) raid, the second on Iqlim al-Tuffah in 10 days.

The raiding jets drew anti-aircraft fire from Lebanese army and Hezbollah gunners but missed, the officials said.

In Jerusalem, an Israeli army spokesman confirmed the raid, saying the planes returned safely after scoring "accurate hits."

Iqlim al-Tuffah, or Apple Province, a frequent target of Israeli warplanes, is about 10 kilometers (5 miles) northeast of the market town of Nabatiyeh.

The area is used by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah guerilla group as a base to launch attacks on Israeli troops and their allied Lebanese militiamen in the occupied zone.

The air raid came 11 days after Lebanon rejected Israel's offer to withdraw from southern Lebanon in return for security guarantees that guerillas do not attack its northern towns. Lebanon has insisted that Israel abide by a UN resolution that calls for an unconditional Israeli withdrawal from the south.

Hezbollah, or the Party of God, is leading a guerilla war to try to oust some 1,500 Israeli soldiers and 2,500 allied Lebanese militiamen from the border enclave, which Israel set up in 1985.

AFP from Beirut reports: Lebanon rejected on Saturday a US request to "seriously" study an offer by Israel to end its 20-year military occupation of

South Lebanon in exchange for security guarantees, saying Israel had pulled out unconditionally.

Resolution 425 adopted by the UN Security Council in 1978 requires an unconditional withdrawal and Lebanon will not negotiate the terms of its implementation. Foreign Minister Fares Bweiz insisted in a TV interview.

Bweiz confirmed he had received a message from US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright Friday asking him to "seriously" study the Israeli offer following her talks with Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai.

"Mrs Albright judged that he was sincere in his desire to bring about withdrawal from southern Lebanon," he said.

She believes this proposal deserves to be studied seriously and does not contradict the peace process.

But he insisted in the interview from Paris with the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, that he did not share the US Secretary of State's assessment.

Reuters adds from Jerusalem:

The Palestinian Authority sent letters on Saturday to 81 US Senators who had urged President Bill Clinton not to put public pressure on Israel regarding peace moves, a top Palestinian negotiator said.

"The Palestinian Authority calls on the Senators to support those who back peace because siding with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, no matter what the excuse is, is siding with the anti-peace camp," Saeb Erekat told Reuters.

"We hope that Senators will not fall for the false campaigns that are led by Netanyahu's supporters in Washington," he said.

A letter to Clinton earlier this month, signed by 81 Republicans and Democrats, expressed concern at reports that a disagreement between the administration and the Israeli government might result in the United States presenting a peace plan opposed by Israel.

"American Senators know who is impeding peace and who is trying to achieve peace with security for all the peoples in the region," said David Bar-Ilan, Netanyahu's adviser.

PA detains leading militant in showdown with Arafat

NABLUS, West Bank, Apr 12: Palestinian officials have arrested a leading militant in the death of a Hamas bombmaker as thousands of Palestinians rallied against Israel, calling for revenge for the slaying of Mohiyedine Sharif, reports AP.

Tayeb Abdel Rahim, the Palestinian Authority's secretary-general, confirmed Saturday's arrest of Hamas member Imdad Awadallah in the death of bombmaker Sharif.

And in a sign of growing friction between Yasser Arafat's government and its critics, Hamas lashed out at the Palestinian Authority, saying it should change its ways or get out of government.

Meanwhile, thousands of Palestinians cheered when a model Israeli bus and flags were set on fire at a rally calling for revenge against Israel for Sharif's death.

Hamas blames Israel for the killing, but an investigation by the Palestinian Authority said it was the result of a power struggle in the militant organisation. Palestinian investigators say Awadallah shot Sharif and then placed the body near a rigged car and set off the explosion to cover traces of the shooting. Sharif's body was

found March 29 at the scene in Ramallah.

But in a leaflet faxed to The Associated Press on Saturday, Hamas called the authority's investigation "laughable" and said its own investigation showed Palestinian security chief Jibril Rajoub cooperated with Israel in targeting Sharif.

Hamas swore revenge, but only against Israel. "The Zionists alone will pay the price for this ugly crime," the leaflet said.

Toyota to launch Sat broadcasts for moving vehicles

TOKYO, Apr 12: Toyota Motor Corp., Japan's largest automaker, is planning a satellite digital broadcasting business aimed at moving vehicles, a Japanese newspaper reported Sunday, reports AP.

The broadcasts would enable moving vehicles, such as automobiles, to capture images of compact-disc quality as well as sound and data, the Yomiuri newspaper reported, quoting Toyota officials.

The officials envision passengers being able to choose from about 30 television channels, the Yomiuri said.

Blair discusses peace accord with Major, Clinton

LONDON, Apr 12: British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Saturday telephoned his predecessor John Major and US President Bill Clinton and discussed how they could help cement the Northern Ireland peace deal, a spokesman said, reports AP.

"The Prime Minister telephoned John Major to thank him for his support and also to salute the role Major had played in paving the way for the agreement reached on Friday," Blair's official spokesman said on Saturday.

Friday's historic peace accord which seeks to end nearly 30 years of sectarian strife, is to be put to the people in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic in a referendum on May 22.

"They also discussed the role Major might play in the coming referendum campaign," the spokesman said.

He added that this raised the prospect of the two men campaigning together at some stage for a 'yes' vote.

The spokesman added: "The Prime Minister also spoke by telephone to President Clinton again to thank him for his support both over the years and over the last few days."

"They, too, discussed ways in which President Clinton might continue to offer support in the run-up to the referendum," he

continued. According to the Sunday Times, published late Saturday, Blair is to ask Major to accompany him on a trip to Northern Ireland in the near future.

Clinton is also expected to visit the province next month.

The Sunday Times quoted a source close to Major as saying the former conservative Prime Minister, who was spectacularly defeated by Blair and his Labour Party in May last year, would be "more than happy to help."

Another report adds: The largest Protestant party in Northern Ireland on Saturday backed the historic Northern Ireland peace agreement, after facing down a significant revolt within party ranks over the accord.

David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party supported the landmark deal between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists by a majority of two to one at a meeting of the party's executive.

Ahead of the confidence vote on Saturday, the party appeared split over the historic peace deal clinched on Friday and designed to end nearly 30 years of sectarian violence in the province.

Trimble, who has been accused by Protestant hardliners

of being a "traitor" to the unionist community, dismissed his critics as a fringe voice. He said he understood the deep reservations which he also shared but he said: "The people calling me a traitor are only a small group who have over the last number of years called everybody in this party names."

Iran to free more Iraqi POWs

BAGHDAD, Apr 12: Baghdad said on Saturday that Tehran would soon release more Iraqi prisoners from their 1980-1988 war after the two sides this week completed the Red Cross-supervised repatriation of over 5,500 POWs (Prisoners of War), reports Reuters.

Deputy Foreign Minister Riad Al-Qaysi told the official news agency INA that more Iraqi captives would be freed after a meeting starting at the end of next week of an Iraq-Iran committee that is resolving outstanding bilateral issues.

"Riad Al-Qaysi ... stressed that the groups of heroic captives who arrived home recently after a long wait will be followed by other groups," INA said.

BRIEFLY

Shanghai sells most flowers in China: This East China industrial and commercial metropolis now sells 300 million flowers annually, or one fourth of the country's total, according to statistics provided by the local flower trade association, Xinhua says from Shanghai.

Potted flowers also sell well here, with the sales volume standing at 15 million in 1997, twice the figure for the previous year. The city has established six flower trading centres, each at a cost of over three million yuan, in addition to more than 2,000 flower shops throughout the city.

Indian Sikh arrested in Canada: An Indian Sikh, who has been a refugee in Canada since 1991, has been arrested and charged with terrorism, the Globe and Mail reported on Saturday, AFP says from Toronto.

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) requested the April 2 arrest of Iqbal Singh, 32, and alleged that he was a leader of the Babbar Khalsa International Terrorist group, the daily reported. Singh arrived in Canada in February 1991, travelling from India via Nepal, Thailand and South Korea with false passports, the daily said.

11 die in Thai new yr exodus: An exodus of city dwellers to home towns in the provinces for the Thai new-year holidays has left at least 11 people dead and dozens injured in road accidents, a report said today, AFP reports from Bangkok.

Police said 11 people had died and 36 were injured in 35 car accidents since the annual exodus began on Friday, the Bangkok Post reported. Four people died in the worst crash, when a tour bus slammed into a ditch early Saturday after the driver appeared to fall asleep at the wheel, police said.

Easter weekend claims 82 in S Africa: A total of 82 people have been killed on South African roads since the start of the Easter weekend, South African Press Association (SAPA) reported on Saturday, Xinhua says from Johannesburg.

Police said 31 per cent of the road accidents involved pedestrians. "One of the major problems is the walking person's misinterpretation of speed. This is compounded by the pedestrian's lack of understanding of the traffic situation," SAPA quoted an "arrive alive" Road Safety Campaign spokeswoman as saying.

5 killed during festival in Japan: Five people were killed and 23 injured after a van driven by a man who had been drinking ploughed into a float during a shrine festival, police said Sunday, AP reports from Tokyo.

The accident occurred Saturday night in the town of Daigo, about 125 kilometres northeast of Tokyo in Ibaraki prefecture, or state, local police said. Police arrested the driver of the van on charges of negligence resulting in death or injury.

Pope leads Easter vigil at St Peters: Carrying a candle through the darkness, Pope John Paul II led a procession in St. Peter's Basilica as part of an Easter vigil Saturday evening, AP reports from Vatican City.

Thousands of worshippers lit their own candles and the packed church slowly filled with sparkling flames as the words "Iumen Christi" — light of Christ — were pronounced. The service, the most solemn of the Catholic liturgical year, includes baptism by the pope himself of a group of believers, usually from countries with symbolic meaning.

Indonesian pilgrims may return today: The first group of Indonesian pilgrims who travelled to Islam's sacred sites in Saudi Arabia is expected to arrive home on Monday, AP says from Jakarta.

Nearly 200,000 Indonesians made the annual hajj pilgrimage this year, which was marred by a deadly stampede at the holy site of Mecca. As many as 180 people were killed, President Suharto expressed his condolences over the tragedy, in which at least two Indonesians died.



Front pages of the British daily newspapers on Saturday headlining the historic accord between the parties involved in peace for Northern Ireland. Peace negotiators have proclaimed "a new beginning" for Northern Ireland. — AP/UNB photo



Thousands of Palestinians cheered as a model bus and flags were set on fire at the calling for revenge against Israel in the death of Mohiyedine Sharif on Saturday, in the West Bank town of Nablus. Supporters of the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas held the rally for Mohiyedine Sharif, the group's chief bomb maker who was killed two weeks ago. — AP/UNB photo

Indian women to fight for 33pc reserved seats in polls

NEW DELHI, Apr 12: Betrayed by political parties on the reservation issue-women leaders and activists now insist that only constitutional provisions can ensure their adequate representation in legislative bodies including parliament, reports PTI.

National Commission for Women Chairperson Mohini Giri says they will fight to the end till 33 per cent of seats are earmarked for women contestants in the next elections while former minister Margaret Alva says reservation is the only way to ensure more of their fraternity making it to parliament.

Last time all parties betrayed us on their commitment to pass a bill to ensure 33 per cent reservation to women, this time

prospects seem to be very bright, Giri says. She says Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee assured a now delegation that the women's reservation bill will be reintroduced in the Lok Sabha in the coming session.

Last time the bill fell through due to differences within most of the political parties.

Women's presence in Lok Sabha improved only marginally in the recent elections with the number going up to 41 from 39 in the previous polls. But the number of women contestants was only 267 down from 599 last time despite all political parties committed to 30 per cent reservation for them.

Food shortage grips DPRK

BEIJING, Apr 12: North Korea's meager harvest from a third year of drought has run out, forcing its people to rely on foreign donations and scavenge for roots and edible plants, a UN agency said Sunday, reports AP.

It could be years before North Korea can reform its centrally planned agriculture and feed its 24 million people, said Catherine Bertini, executive director of the World Food Program.

"The crisis is not over. Food aid must continue until they have a considerably better harvest and agricultural production," Bertini said after returning from a four-day visit to the secretive North.

North Korea also ran out of grain last spring, leaving it dependent on donations, foreign purchases and scavenged seaweed, grass and materials.

Flooding and drought have combined with years of communist mismanagement and the loss of Soviet bloc aid to push one of the last communist countries to the brink of widespread famine.

According to Chinese news reports, the autumn harvest produced only 60 per cent of the minimum amount of grain needed to feed the country. "Public distribution warehouses are empty," Bertini said. Bertini said that because of foreign aid, conditions are better for children.

Jayalalitha won't rest until Karunanidhi govt dismissed

CHENNAI, Apr 12: AIADMK supreme Jayalalitha today said she would not rest until Karunanidhi government was dismissed and president's rule imposed in Tamil Nadu, reports AFP.

Stating there were sufficient grounds for dismissal the state government, Jayalalitha said Tamil Nadu was the only state where action under Article 356 of the constitution was needed now and added she would not rest until she got this done.

Pol Pot captured?

SIEM REAP, Cambodia Apr 12: A senior Cambodian government general claimed Sunday that Pol Pot, Ta Mok and other notorious members of the Khmer Rouge have been captured inside Thailand by renegade members of their own guerilla faction, reports AP.

General Meas Sophea told reporters in Siem Reap that he had heard the news had been broadcast on Thai television, but added he had yet to confirm it himself.

"I have been told that not just Ta Mok but all the Khmer Rouge leadership were with him," Meas Sophea, the Cambodian Army's deputy chief of staff, said.

He added that besides Pol Pot and Ta Mok, this also included Nuon Chea, long the group's shadowy second in command, and other top cadres.

Lankan security forces impose state of maximum alert

COLOMBO, Apr 12: Sri Lankan security forces have imposed a state of maximum alert amid fears that Tamil Tiger rebels will use current national holidays to stage further deadly bomb attacks, reports AFP.

Already tight security has been upgraded in the capital, Colombo and at military bases, extra checkpoints have been set up and sniffer dogs are being used to deter potential bombers, a police spokesman said.

A series of suicide bomb attacks by Tamil Tiger rebels over the past six months has penetrated the tight security net, killing more than 150 people and injuring more than a thousand.

"There was a high level meet-

118 killed in stampede, says Saudi minister

DUBAI, Apr 12: Saudi Arabia's Minister for Pilgrimage Affairs said in an interview published today that more than 118 pilgrims were killed in the stampede on Thursday at Mina, near the holy city of Makkah, reports AFP.

"More than 118 pilgrims were killed and more than 180 others, including 34 Saudis, were injured," Mahmud Ibn Mohamed Safar said.

The Minister did not provide an exact figure for the number of people killed in the stampede, which occurred during a ceremony in Mina known as the "Stoning of Satan," in which pilgrims hurl pebbles at pillars representing the devil.

Bid to block students protests Police ring 2 Korean campuses

SEOUL, Apr 12: More than 1,000 militant students rallied at two provincial campuses for the third straight day Sunday, protesting an alleged government crackdown on their activities, a news report said, reports AP.

About 2,000 police surrounded the campuses of Kyungbuk and Youngnam Universities in the southeastern city of Taegu to prevent 1,300 students from elect their new leadership, Yonhap news agency said.

The students belong to Han-chongron, a nationwide militant campus group responsible for many violent anti-govern-

Ceasefire in Nagaland called off

GUWAHATI, Apr 12: India's government called off an eight-month-old ceasefire with a dominant tribal separatist group in the far-eastern state of Nagaland today, a defence spokesman said, reports AFP.

The spokesman said the rebels violated the ceasefire last week when they gunned down eight Indian soldiers.

"We will begin our counter-insurgency operations against the outlawed Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland soon, as they have betrayed the pact by the killings," he said.

US, Pakistan to revive bilateral campaign on drug trafficking

Islamabad's decision to pardon a Pakistani national working under cover for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is expected to revive bilateral cooperation to combat growing international narcotics trafficking.

A senior State Department official said the Pakistan government's decision to pardon the DEA's local employee Ayaz Baluch could even result in that country being given a clean bill by the White House next year as fully cooperating with the United States in efforts to stem illicit drug production and trafficking. Baluch was sentenced to ten years' hard labour for persuading a Pakistan Air Force (PAF) officer to carry drugs to the United States in a DEA sting operation.

A government statement released in Islamabad said Chief Marshal Parvaiz Mehd, acting on a mercy petition from

Aziz Haniffa writes from Washington

He said that drug trafficking in the region is increasingly harming Pakistan itself. "Afghanistan," he said, "has become the second largest opium producer in the world after Burma, and Pakistan is feeling the effects of that and we believe that we have every reason to be working closely with the Pakistani government and we want to do that."

The official emphasised that "it's a special priority that when we have that determination, that review next year, that we are able to see full certification."

This year even though Pakistan was found to be not fully cooperating with the US in anti-drug fighting measures, President Bill Clinton exercised his prerogative to invoke the vital national interests waiver clause and certified Pakistan

along with Cambodia, Colombia, and Paraguay. This meant that these countries would continue to receive US assistance despite their not fully meeting the criteria for certification.

A denial of the certification would have forced the US to slap economic and other sanctions on these nations, including voting against multilateral development bank loans to them.

Clinton had then said that the sanctions would irritate the broader US policy of high-level engagement, including our strong support for Prime Minister (Nawaz) Sharif's commitment to hold a dialogue with India as well as to strengthen democracy and reform the economy.

Denial of certification would also have jeopardised US assistance programmes to help

the government of Pakistan meet those goals," and required Washington to vote against Islamabad at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund "at a time when Pakistan is vulnerable to a financial crisis," the US President had added.

The risks posed by such sanctions outweigh the risks posed to US vital national interests by the government of Pakistan's inadequate counter-narcotics performance," he had pointed out.

In the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report of 1998, released by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the Administration had listed a slew of concerns for not certifying Pakistan as cooperating with the US in efforts against narcotics trafficking. Heading the list was the arrest and court-martialing of Baluch.

According to the report,