

Congress to sail alone in future elections

PANCHAMARHI, India, Sept 6: India's main opposition party wants to go it alone in future elections in a bid to resurrect its former glory, party officials said today, reports AFP.

Most leaders of Congress supported party president Sonia Gandhi's view that short-term alliances with regional groups all over the country were only harming the 113-year-old party.

"Sonia Gandhi is right," Sharad Pawar, a party strongman and a former defence minister, said on the final day of a three-day strategy meeting.

"Alliances do not work in the long run and at the national level."

The Italian-born Sonia, widow of murdered former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, told around 250 national and regional party leaders gathered at a hill resort that it was time to rebuild the Congress.

She said the country's oldest party should shun alliances with small and regional parties for short-term gains because these were only harming its long-term interests.

The Congress, faced with rapidly shrinking support after ruling India for most of the 50 years since independence in 1947, has increasingly forged election alliances with other parties.

Congress officials said Sonia told delegates on Friday and Saturday that "a coalition, if absolutely necessary, should be

entered into with utmost care and caution."

A section of the party had

Kabila set to lead DRC team at peace summit in Zimbabwe

KINSHASA, Sept 6: President Laurent Kabila seemed set on Saturday to lead the Democratic Republic of the Congo's team at a peace summit in Zimbabwe, although the presence of the rebels at the Victoria falls talks was less certain, reports Reuters.

"The president is likely to lead our delegation there," one official of Kabila's presidency said. Information Minister Didier Mumentzi stressed that no formal decision had been taken.

An alliance of troops from Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia is fighting alongside Kabila loyalists to put down a Tutsi-led rebellion in the former Zaire.

Bizima Karaha, rebel spokesman and former Foreign Minister in Kabila's government, told Reuters the rebels favoured negotiations but had reservations about the venue.

"We have always said we are ready to negotiate a ceasefire and work out a political arrangement to resolve the problems facing our country," he said by telephone from rebel headquarters in Goma.

pressed for alliances with other centrist groups in parts of the populous north and east where the Congress has been virtually wiped out in recent years.

But a party leader, who did not want to be identified, argued against such a line.

"It does not matter if we are routed in another election, but there should be no alliance with parties formed on the basis of caste or region because this will demote our party further," he said.

"If we need to again play a dominant role in national politics, we must sail alone," he added.

Public support for Congress has gradually fallen away in the past 10 years, with its share of the vote plummeting to an all-time low of barely 30 per cent in the February-March general elections.

Despite the Hindu nationalists' failure to fulfil their electoral pledge of providing a stable government in India, the Congress has failed to push itself forward as a viable alternative.

Some opposition leaders blame the inexperience of Sonia Gandhi, who remained out of active politics until late last year when she stunned India by deciding to campaign for the Congress.

Many analysts credit the rapid growth of the Hindu nationalists in recent years chiefly to the decline of the once-dominant Congress as well as dilution of its secular and left-of-centre image.

Muslim militant group warns Clinton against Pakistan visit

KARACHI, Sept 6: An armed Muslim militant group Saturday warned President Bill Clinton not to go through with a visit to Pakistan next month, and threatened resistance if he dares to go ahead with his plans, reports AP.

"We know that he is likely to cancel his visit to Pakistan, but if he doesn't, we will resist it," Hafiz Mohammad Syed, chief of the Lashkar-e-Tayaba group, said in a news conference. He refused to say what means the group might consider.

Later Saturday, Clinton's chief security aide said India and Pakistan have made insufficient concessions on their nuclear weapons programs to justify a presidential visit to the area.

"There's been some movement (but) not enough at this point to justify going," Sandy Berger said in Ireland, where Clinton is visiting. "The trip is very much tied to what they agree to do."

The Lashkar-e-Tayaba is engaged in an armed struggle in the portion of the predominantly Muslim Kashmir province that is controlled by India, a country dominated by Hindus.

A US attack against terrorist training camps in the Muslim nations of Afghanistan and Sudan last month has fanned anti-American sentiment in much of the Muslim world, including Pakistan.

The US strikes were in retaliation to the bombings of its embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Vajpayee speaks of diplomatic success during NAM Summit

NEW DELHI, Sept 6: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee returned home Saturday after a week-long foreign tour and spoke of his diplomatic achievements which included extracting a reported apology from the hosts of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit for embarrassment caused to New Delhi, reports IANS.

Although Vajpayee did not refer to South African President Nelson Mandela's remarks on Kashmir at the summit in Durban, the Indian Prime Minister said there was a "departure" from the NAM tradition of not raising bilateral issues.

"NAM has a convention of not taking up bilateral issues. Since there was a departure from this, I had to forcefully make it clear that in the resolution of India-Pakistan disputes, there was no place for third party involvement," Vajpayee told reporters on return.

South African Deputy President Thabo Mbeki reportedly apologised to India for Pretoria's perceived indiscretion and the authoritative Hindu newspaper said that "Mbeki came to the seat of the Prime Minister (Vajpayee) in the plenary hall of the summit and expressed regret for the Kashmir reference (by Mandela)."

India would like to believe it won all at the NAM summit in Durban. Contrary to earlier apprehensions, the Indian delegation led by Vajpayee ensured there was no censure of India on account of its nuclear tests.



An earlier version of the draft resolution released had said the nuclear tests by Pakistan and India had contributed to escalation of tension in South Asia, but after some hectic lobbying by India and Pakistan the final version simply said the "complexities" arising out of the nuclear tests conducted by the two south Asian countries "underlined the need to work even harder to achieve disarmament objectives".

Weapons Convention." India is happy with NAM's decision to hold an international meet for the elimination of all nuclear weapons within a time-bound framework.

Vajpayee also spoke of "forward movement" during the India-Pakistan talks on the sidelines of the NAM summit.

Although the much-awaited meeting between Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif could not take place as the latter called off his Durban trip at the last minute, New Delhi and Islamabad are finally expected to resume their stalled dialogue following a Vajpayee-Sharif meeting in New York later this month.

Significantly, on his first bilateral visit since taking office at the head of the alliance led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vajpayee travelled to the Gulf state of Oman whose ruler "expressed full understanding of the developments in our region."

The two governments also agreed to have more joint venture projects. Vajpayee said he found that the large Indian community in Oman "enthusiastically support(s) the policies of my government."

Namibia, the second stop on his four-leg tour, also backed India's decision to conduct the nuclear tests in May. New Delhi and Windhoek have agreed to hold Foreign Office consultations. India will extend a five million dollar credit to Namibia denominated in ru-

pees. Vajpayee also announced a gift of edible oil and milk powder to the African nation. Vajpayee described the visit to Mauritius as the "most rewarding." One of the spinoffs of his "wide ranging" talks with his Mauritian counterpart Navinchandra Ramgoolam, who travelled with him from Durban to Port Louis, was that Mauritians can now see more of popular Indian television with the Indian government's Doordarshan channel deciding to beam to the Indian Ocean island nation round the clock.

The summit was also an opportunity for India to take up its concerns about the situation in Afghanistan. Vajpayee met both ousted Afghan President Buranuddin Rabbani and President Mohammed Khatami of Iran, whose country is seen as having a key role to play in resolving the Afghan issue.

Political observers noted that Vajpayee could concentrate on foreign policy concerns for the moment as the five-and-a-half month-old ruling coalition was relatively stable at this juncture with troublesome allies and the opposition unsure of toppling his government.

Back home, Vajpayee was picking up the threads of his troubled relationship with a key ally. However, political analysts said that the threat of imminent collapse which once faced the 17-party ruling coalition, had receded during the days the Prime Minister was abroad.



Indian actor Kabir Bedi — known for his TV role of Malaysian pirate "Sandokan", meets Pope John Paul II during a private audience in the Vatican on Saturday. AP/UNB photo

Pilot of Swissair flight 111 chose to fly to Halifax

HALIFAX, Sept 6: The pilot of doomed Swissair flight 111 chose to fly to Halifax rather than Boston when he learned how much closer Halifax was, Canada's transportation safety board said Saturday, reports AFP.

At a news briefing, TSB chief investigator VIC Gerden released parts of the transcript from a taped conversation between cockpit crew and air traffic controllers in the last 15 minutes or so before the plane vanished from the radar screens.

It started with a Swissair pilot radioing the international distress signal "pan pan pan" to their air traffic control in Moncton, New Brunswick. "We have smoke in the cockpit, request deviate immediate right turn to a convenient place, I guess Boston."

Air traffic control replied: "Would you prefer to go in to Halifax?"

Swissair 111: "affirmative for Swissair one eleven... prefer Halifax from our position."

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position."

In a TSB note attached to the transcript, it was pointed out that at that time the plane was 70 nautical miles from Halifax and 300 nautical miles from Boston. It was flying at 33,000 feet.

After clearing the flight for landing at Halifax, the controller said: "You've got 30 miles (48 kms) to fly to the (runway) threshold."

The cockpit replied: "We need more than 30 miles. Air traffic control, turn left to lose some altitude." Swissair 111: "Roger. We are turning left."

Another report adds: Canadian navy and police divers joined a manned submarine and two small unmanned submarines Saturday in the search for wreckage and the flight recorders of Swissair Flight 111.

But after a morning of intense searching, investigators admitted they had little to go on in determining what caused the crash except for a few minutes of conversation between the cockpit crew and air traffic controllers prior to the plane's disappearance from radar screens.



Rescue workers assist injured people who were removed from the rubble of a church in the city of Osasco, about 15-km southwest of Sao Paulo, Brazil on Saturday. At least 23 people died and more than 500 were injured when the roof of the Universal Kingdom of God Church building in this city collapsed during a vigil celebrated in the early morning hours of Saturday. AP/UNB photo

Protest decrying polls result continues Sihanouk pessimistic about Cambodia's future

PHNOM PENH, Sept 6: As demonstrations decrying the results of the recent national election continued in the capital Sunday, King Norodom Sihanouk expressed pessimism that talks he is mediating will lead the country out of its political crisis, reports AP.

The 75-year-old monarch is presiding over three days of meetings in the northwestern province of Siem Reap which he had hoped would help bring an

end to the political deadlock that has followed the July 26 parliamentary elections.

The talks bring together representatives from the three rival political parties, the national election committee and the country's highest appeals body.

Cambodian leader Hun Sen's ruling party won a slight majority in the polls, but not the two-thirds needed to form a government on his own.

The leading opposition party, FUNCINPEC, and its ally the Sam Rainsy Party have accused Hun Sen of cheating at the polls. They have threatened to boycott the new National Assembly if their allegations of fraud — dismissed as baseless by election authorities loyal to Hun Sen — are not properly investigated.

So far disagreements between the opposing sides at the talks are "total and irreversible," the king said in a letter to US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, released by the palace as the second day of talks opened Sunday.

"I am very pessimistic and I am not anticipating that the responsible Cambodian parties will, through an honorable compromise, lead our unfortunate country and our unhappy people out of this more and more tragic crisis," he wrote.

Tensions have been mounting in Phnom Penh since the July 26 parliamentary elections, and demonstrators in the capital have been holding an around-the-clock vigil against Hun Sen for two weeks.

Opposition politician Sam Rainsy led 10,000 people through the streets of Phnom Penh Sunday.

Pope receives British film star

VATICAN CITY, Sept 6: Pope John Paul II received Saturday British film star Ben Kingsley, Indian television actor Kabir Bedi and Argentinian model Valeria Mazza, the Italian news agency ANSA reported, says AFP.

The three were recording a television programme at the Vatican on Mother Teresa, the Albanian nun famous for her work for the poor in India, who died a year ago.

Kingsley is famous for his 1982 film portrayal of Indian pacifist Mahatma Gandhi, while Bedi acted in the Indian television series "Sandokan", Mazza, though of Argentinian origin, is well-known in Italy.

Yeltsin meets lawmakers today

MOSCOW, Sept 6: President Boris Yeltsin will meet face to face on Monday with lawmakers and union leaders in an attempt to reach a compromise on forming a new government to handle Russia's burgeoning economic crisis, his press service confirmed, reports AP.

Yeltsin proposed the meeting on Friday, prompting lawmakers to postpone a second vote on confirming acting Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. The Communist-dominated parliament has already rejected Chernomyrdin once.

Yeltsin's press service said Sunday that he would hold talks Monday with eight members of the State Duma.

Satellite launch: S Korea yet to verify North's claim

SEOUL, Sept 6: Three days after North Korea announced that it had successfully launched a "scientific satellite" into Earth orbit, South Korea said Sunday it still could not verify or deny the North's claim, reports AP.

It has not been determined yet what North Korea did exactly — a missile firing or a satellite launch," chief presidential spokesman Park Ji-won told reporters.

"We're closely cooperating and exchanging information with the United States and Japan to determine the truth of

the North Korean claim," he said.

Rejecting Western denunciations accusing it of test-firing a medium-range ballistic missile across Japan on Monday, North Korea said Friday that it had successfully launched a "scientific satellite" into orbit.

The United States, Japan and South Korea said the North had fired a Taepo Dong 1, a new missile with an estimated range of 2,000 kilometers (1,250 miles), over Japan.

But North Korea said that assessment was wrong. "Some people... suspected it

to be a ballistic missile launching test, expressed some apprehensions and described it as a serious event," the North's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

North Korea said the satellite, put in orbit by a locally developed, three-stage rocket, was circling the Earth transmitting revolutionary hymns praising the late President Kim Il Sung and his heir and son, Kim Jong Il.

But South Korean officials said Sunday they could not detect any signals or hymns from such a satellite.

"All 11 monitoring stations throughout the country could not detect any signals," one Telecommunications Ministry official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

No country has been able to officially deny or verify the North Korean claim, although Russia's ITAR-TASS news agency reported that Moscow's space observation center had spotted the satellite.

South Korea reserved judgement, saying that regional stability was being threatened either way.

"The problem is that whether it's missile or a satellite is worrying the world and negatively affecting peace in East Asia, particularly the Korean Peninsula," the presidential spokesman said.

Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa dead

TOKYO, Sept 6: Japan's most famous film director, Akira Kurosawa, died at his home on Sunday at the age of 88, Kyodo news agency reported, says AP.

Kurosawa's films included epics such as "The Seven Samurai" and "Rashomon." His work inspired a generation of directors both in Japan and in the United States.

The cause of death was not immediately known.

Kurosawa, known as "The Emperor" for his perfectionism and extravagance, was one of the few Japanese directors to find fame on international screens.

The Cannes Film Festival honoured Kurosawa with a special trophy for achievement upon the debut of his 28th film, "Ran," or "Chaos" in 1985.

BRIEFLY

Blast kills 2 in France: At least two people were killed and 17 were injured Saturday when a gas explosion ripped through an apartment building in southern France, AFP reports from Le Carnet.

Police blamed the blast on a man upset by an unhappy love affair who committed suicide. They confirmed he had died in the explosion, along with a woman in another flat. The blast destroyed seven apartments on the top two floors of the building in Le Carnet, just north of Cannes, rescue services said. The man was identified as a council employee in his thirties who had told colleagues of his suicide plans in a letter.

Megawati prepares for polls: Defying a rival party faction, one of Indonesia's most prominent opposition leaders said Sunday she would run in general elections next year, AP reports from Jakarta.

Hundreds of cheering supporters turned out to watch Megawati Sukarnoputri, a longtime critic of former President Suharto, open an office of the minority Indonesia Democratic Party. "The next general election is a very important and strategic election," said Megawati, the eldest daughter of Sukarno, Indonesia's founding president. Dressed in red and black, the party colours, crowds clapped and chanted her name. Megawati was ousted as head of the party, known by its Indonesian acronym PDI, in a 1996 party congress sponsored by the government of the autocratic Suharto.

2 cops hurt in N Ireland blast: Two police officers were in hospital, one of them in a serious condition, after being injured in a blast bomb attack in Northern Ireland police said yesterday, AFP reports from Belfast.

The officers were in a group of police which came under attack in Portadown, a town some 40-km southwest Belfast just before midnight Saturday. The province's Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) said seven blast bombs — small but deadly improvised explosive devices — were thrown at them.

Chirac, Kohl discuss situation in Russia: French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl discussed the situation in Russia by telephone for about 10 minutes on Saturday, aides to the French leader said, Reuters reports from Paris.

No details were given about their conversation, which began with Chirac reporting to Kohl on visits he made this week to Ukraine and Moldova.



An unidentified 4 and a half year-old girl from Newton carries flowers as she visits the crash site at Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia on Saturday. The young girl's aunt was a passenger on the Swissair jet that plunged into the sea Wednesday night killing all 229 people. — AP/UNB photo