

Priyanka claims victory for Sonia

AMETHI, Oct 4: Priyanka Gandhi yesterday expressed confidence that her mother and Congress President Sonia Gandhi would emerge victorious from this Lok Sabha constituency as the rival BJP charged the administration with being biased towards Congress.

With an estimated 55 to 65 per cent voters having cast their votes till 1500 hours, Priyanka told PTI in Gorakhpur village, we have been receiving complaints from different parts of the constituency but I am convinced that we have won the election despite all this.

Her husband, Robert Vadra, touring Gauriganj assembly segment said, we will win and serve the people.

However, BJP candidate Sanjay Singh's wife Ameeta Singh told PTI, Priyanka Gandhi is being given special treatment. She is travelling with 35 cars. There is a distinct bias of the administration against us. Priyanka is being fed with information on wire- less.

She said the BJP had asked for repolling in five booths of Amethi assembly segment.

Bomb blasts rock Pak city

KARACHI, Oct 4: Two bomb explosions today rocked the Pakistani city of Hyderabad in the troubled southern province of Sindh, but no casualties were reported, police and residents said, reports AFP.

The first explosion occurred close to a packed court building in Hyderabad, 160 km from Karachi, the provincial capital. The home-made bomb caused panic and minor damage to buildings in the area, local police said.

Within 30 minutes, another bomb exploded in the city's residential Barrage Colony near the army cantonment, damaging windows and causing cracks in walls, residents said.

"Hundreds of paramilitary troops and police cordoned off the area as a crowd gathered around the site," a resident said. An Hyderabad police official said these were "acts of terrorism," without naming any group.

Police in Hyderabad defused two bombs during the last week. Hyderabad is the second largest city of southern Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital.

Deal for new coalition govt in Japan

TOKYO, Oct 4: Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party has settled a deal with two parties paving the way for a new coalition government, LDP officials said today, reports AFP.

"I am simply pleased," Jiji Press quoted Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi as telling reporters.

"I would like to form a new cabinet as soon as the accord is finalised by the heads of the three parties."

Japan's ruling party, which has dominated postwar politics, is in a coalition government with the Liberal Party.

Now Obuchi wants to strengthen his parliamentary majority by making a deal to bring on board the New Komeito party, which is backed by the largest Buddhist group in the country.

Obuchi will meet Liberal Party leader Ichiro Ozawa and Takenori Kanakari, head of New Komeito, later today to finalise the deal, an LDP official said.

France hands over 8 Mirage jets to Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Oct 4: France has handed over eight upgraded Mirage-V jets to Pakistan under a 1996 deal for 40 such used planes, news reports today quoted Pakistani air force chief Pervez Mehdi as saying, reports AFP.

The planes will be flown home by Pakistani pilots this week, Mehdi said in a report in The News daily.

Pakistan received the first batch of eight upgraded Mirage-V aircraft last year. The remaining 24 are to be delivered in the coming months.

Under the estimated-120-million dollar deal, French firm SAGEM was to buy the jets from the French air force and elsewhere and modernise and refurbish them for delivery.

China, Russia poised to hold joint naval exercise

BEIJING, Oct 4: China and Russia are poised to hold first ever joint naval maneuvers to celebrate 50 years of their diplomatic ties as the leaders of both the countries pledged to promote global peace and development, reports PTI.

Chinese president Jiang Zemin and his Russian counterpart Boris Yeltsin hailed the Sino-Russian relations during the past 50 years and highlighted the importance of their partnership to world peace and development, China State media reported yesterday.

"We are pleased to see that the relations between the two big neighbours of China and Russia have not only been set on normal tracks in a smooth and healthy way, but also are growing ripe, Jiang said in his message to mark the golden jubilee celebrations of Sino-Russian diplomatic ties.

No alternative to dialogue: Vajpayee

Pakistan hints at resumption of talks with India

ISLAMABAD, Oct 4: Pakistan yesterday hinted that the stalled Indo-Pak dialogue process could resume soon after possible meetings between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Durban and Kathmandu next month and claimed that international pressure was increasing on New Delhi to deal resolutely with Kashmir issue, reports PTI.

Foreign minister Sartaj Aziz, who returned here on Saturday from the UN General Assembly session in New York, told reporters here yesterday that the talks were expected to resume soon after the expected meetings between the two premiers during the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in Durban in Mid-November.

"I think as soon as possible," Aziz said when asked when did he expect the bilateral talks to resume.

By then the newly elected government in India would have about a month to settle down, he added.

There was also likelihood of another meeting between the two Prime Ministers during the SAARC summit beginning from November 26 in Kathmandu, Aziz said.

Aziz claimed that during his meetings on the sidelines of UN General Assembly with the envoys from different countries he mainly focused on the Kashmir issue and the security situation in South Asia.

"On Kashmir I found a deep concern among my colleagues and a desire for early progress towards the resolution of this issue, which would help in normalisation of the situation in the region," he said.

Aziz referred to a joint initiative of 60 US Congressmen urging President Bill Clinton to appoint a special envoy for Kashmir, saying it signifies increasing international pressure on India to deal resolutely with the Kashmir issue.

He, however, conceded that instead of mediation on the Kashmir issue, the prevailing opinion among the world leaders was that Islamabad and New

Delhi should initiate the dialogue process to resolve the issue.

At this stage, the issue is of promoting dialogue between the two countries, so they (world leaders) emphasised that peaceful solution requires dialogue, he said.

The foreign minister rejected the notion that Clinton had agreed to resolve the Kashmir issue, clarifying that the US President had not promised about resolving the issue but he had simply said promoting and intensifying dialogue between the two countries.

He (Clinton) has been doing this and I presume this effort to intensify the dialogue process will increase after the Indian elections are over and a new government takes over, he said.

Aziz claimed that during his interactions in New York, Pakistan successfully countered the Indian propaganda on Kargil issue. Pakistan has succeeded in effectively countering Indian propaganda about cross-border

terrorism and in shifting the focus of international attention from Kargil to the reality of the Kashmir issue, he said.

Aziz termed as truly and blatantly exaggerated the Indian charge that Kashmir issue arose due to infiltration of Islamic militants from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Earlier AFP says: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has pledged to resume talks with Pakistan if he returns to power as expected following elections which ended yesterday.

"There is no other way except reviving our dialogue," Vajpayee said in an interview published in the Indian Express newspaper today.

The prime minister said an earlier resumption of dialogue had been prevented by the election process, which began on September 5.

Official-level talks between India and Pakistan were broken off after the recent military conflict along the two countries' disputed Kashmir border.

Mars - hottest tourist spot of next century!

BOSTON, Oct 4: The hottest tourist spot of the next century could be Mars, according to experts meeting here, who insist astronauts will take their first step on the red planet as soon as in 10 years and space tourism to follow shortly thereafter, reports AFP.

"We could be on Mars in ten years," announced Robert Zubrin, president of the Mars Society speaking at the seminar called "Think Mars" being held here at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Taking a more prudent approach, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) said it could happen in 2014 or 2020.

But already the wheels are in motion on earth for exploration and even tourist voyages to the deserted red planet.

Zubrin, a former engineer at the US space firm Lockheed Martin, expects to launch his first space vessel to Mars as soon as 2005.

Once landed, the craft will use the carbonic gas in the atmosphere to produce an oxidant necessary for the release of a capsule which will bring astronauts back to Earth.

"The use of local resources not only makes the mission cheap, it makes it effective," Zubrin said. And two years later in 2007, the first astronaut team will return to Mars, he added.

NASA expects to launch its first craft to Mars in 2016, including a similar oxidant producing machine and a vessel for astronauts to return to earth in.

A first team will be rocketed up to space in 2018 and another will follow two years later. Each trip will last between four and five months, and the astronauts will stay on the red planet for a year and a half.

One ionic motor prototype permitting such a trip has already launched the Deep Space One spacecraft, but a more powerful model would be needed to enable the Mars mission.

Astronautical engineer Franklin Chang-Diaz, who created the first model, said "there is no technical problem" for making such a powerful ionic motor.

At the Johnson Space Centre in Houston, Texas, teams already are training in a cramped vessel where they will be expected to live for several weeks during the space voyage. The craft recycles water and used oxygen.

But getting to the red planet will be only half the battle for the astronauts, who also will have to learn how to work on Mars' environment.

Human expeditions to Mars will be very costly in the years to come and international private-public collaboration to finance these trips will be a necessary step for the numerous trips, experts agree.



Indians chant slogans in front of the Pakistan Embassy in New Delhi Monday to protest the planned border crossing by Kashmiri Islamic militants from Pakistan held Kashmir into the Indian zone. Indian troops opened fire along the disputed border in Kashmir as activists from the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) attempt to march across the Line of Control.

— AFP photo

Heavy fighting near Grozny

70 Russians killed, Chechen leaders claim

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 4: Russian forces battled Chechen rebels today for control of a village only 20 km northeast of the capital Grozny, Chechen officials said.

Federal forces stormed the village of Chervlennaya, on the north bank of the Terek river, with tanks and armored personnel carriers. Taus Basurayev, prefect of the neighboring Naursky region, told AFP.

Chechen forces had pulled in reinforcements into the zone, the Chechen official said. There were no immediate reports of the number of killed or wounded in the fighting.

The storming of Chervlennaya marks the closest federal forces have come to the capital Grozny since invading the rebel republic last Friday, and the closest since the disastrous 1994-96 Chechen war.

Earlier Monday, Russian officials had conceded their first casualties since federal forces stormed into the rebel republic on Friday, saying that two of its soldiers had been killed and seven others wounded.

Chechen leaders in Grozny meanwhile claimed that more than 70 Russians have been killed.

President Boris Yeltsin consulted on the escalating crisis with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, where he expressed his "concern" for the first blood-

shed in Russia's volatile north Caucasus in three years.

"President Boris Yeltsin is concerned by the anti-terrorist operation being conducted in the North Caucasus," Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said after a meeting with the Kremlin chief in comments broadcast on NTV television.

Russian forces entered parts of northern Chechnya in a bid to wipe out suspected terrorist bases in the breakaway republic, which fought a 1994-96 war for independence from Russia.

Yeltsin has not yet personally spoken about the fighting, which a senior Russian commander admitted for the first time Monday had caused fatalities among government troops.

It was not immediately clear when the deaths had occurred.

"In such cases, we have to deliver strikes against places which open fire on us," he told NTV. "We are being asked by the villagers to clean bandits out of their territories, so that the people do not suffer."

Over the weekend, government troops consolidated the positions in a self-styled security zone created some five kilometres (three miles) deep into Chechen territory.

Tens of thousands of army and interior ministry troops and special forces, backed by hundreds of armoured personnel carriers, heavy artillery, tanks and strike helicopters, are camped on three sides of

Chechnya in the neighbouring Russian republics of North Ossetia, Ingushetia and Dagestan.

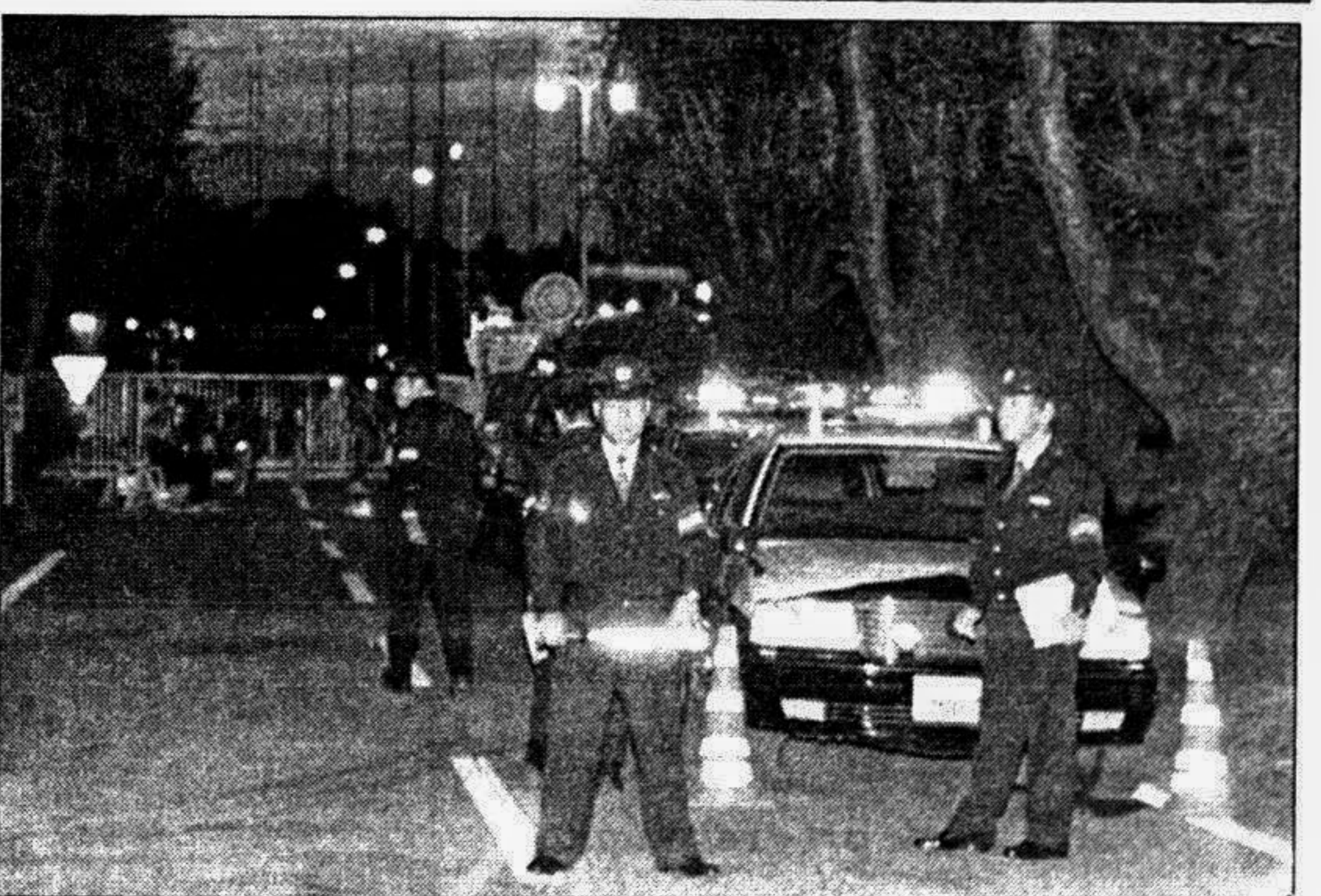
Putin ordered the military operation as part of a campaign to root out Islamic guerrillas behind two summer incursions into Dagestan and accused by the Russian authorities of murdering a wave of bomb attacks on apartment blocks which have killed 292 people since September 4.

The Russian air force has been bombing suspected rebel targets ever since, killing more than 600 civilians, according to Chechen figures. Warplanes flew 31 more sorties on Sunday, mostly for reconnaissance, Interfax reported, citing military officials.

The air campaign has triggered a huge refugee crisis, with Ingush President Ruslan Aushev saying 110,000 Chechens had fled west into his tiny republic since the start of the emergency.

Meanwhile, Chechen refugees fleeing Russian bombing raids are arriving in this city in neighbouring Ingushetia only to find that they have nowhere to sleep, and some are starting to turn back, reports AFP.

"We're going back to Chechnya," said Rayan Mezhdidova, 52. "What's the difference? We either die here of hunger or there under the bombs."



Police stand guard outside the main entrance of JCO's Tokaimura plant Monday after a nuclear leak at the plant on September 30 exposed at least 49 people and forced more than 320,000 people to shelter in their homes for more than 24 hours. Police are questioning managers of the uranium plant over astonishing details of incompetence as the Japanese Government ordered nationwide safety review after the world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl.

— AFP photo

BRIEFLY

US jets bomb Iraqi defence system:

US warplanes bombed an Iraqi air defence system Sunday in the no-fly zone over northern Iraq in response to Iraqi anti-aircraft fire, the US Military said, AP reports from Ankara.

The planes dropped bombs on a unit of an Iraqi integrated air-defence system after being fired upon twice by guns situated northwest of the city of Mosul, the military said in a statement released from the Germany-based US European Command.

Mosul is some 400 kilometres north of Baghdad. All aircraft returned safely to Incirlik air base in southern Turkey.

Series of bomb attacks in Istanbul:

Istanbul was rocked by three bomb blasts, late Sunday, causing only minor damage, but no casualties, the Anatolia news agency reported Monday. AFP reports from Istanbul.

Unidentified attackers placed bombs at a cafe and a car parked nearby in the city's Esenler district in the European quarter. The blasts blew out the windows of the cafe and the car, the report said. A petrol bomb thrown in front of a building in the same district, meanwhile, failed to explode, Anatolia added.

Actress arrested on drug charges:

A Filipina movie actress was arrested on drug charges shortly after arrival in Hagatna, Guam. AP reports from Hagatna.

Anjanette P Abayari, 29, was arrested Saturday at AB Won Pat Guam International Airport Terminal after a customs officer found crystal methamphetamine and a broken plastic pipe in her makeup bag, according to court documents. She was charged with importation of a controlled substance, possession of a controlled substance aboard an aircraft arriving on Guam, and unsworn falsification. She was being held on \$50,000 dollar bail.

Taliban execute mass murderer:

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban has executed a man convicted of killing nine people in the southern city of Kandahar, the official Radio Shariat news service announced Monday. AFP reports from Kabul.

"Dad Mohammad, a resident of Kandahar who had killed nine innocent people was recently captured by security forces. He admitted the crime without any coercion and was executed yesterday in the Kandahar sports stadium," it said.

The radio said the Taliban's supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar had personally approved the execution.



Indonesian presidential hopeful and leader of the Indonesian Democracy Party for Struggle (PDIP) Megawati Sukarnoputri (R) greets the Chairman of People Consultative Assembly (MPR) Amin Rais (L) at parliament in Jakarta Monday after an installation ceremony on the third day of the General Session. Rais is the first democratically elected Chairman of the MPR after a lengthy plenary session late on Sunday where 650 members voted in a secret ballot.

— AFP photo

'Japanese N-accident site still radioactive'

TOKYO, Oct 4: Radioactivity in parts of the Japanese nuclear disaster town of Tokaimura was falling today but still abnormal despite government assurances to the contrary, Greenpeace said, reports AFP.

The environmental group said it took its own readings around the site of Thursday's accident, 120 km northeast of Tokyo, which exposed at least 49 people to radiation.

Levels of radioactivity in an area of the town of Tokaimura remain well above background levels despite statements made by the Japanese government that they are now normal," Greenpeace said in a statement.

The accident forced more than 320,000 people to shelter in their homes for more than 24 hours and left at least two nuclear workers in critical condition with radiation poisoning.

According to Greenpeace, radiation on Genken road, 30 meters (66 feet) from the plant, was at 0.1 micro sieverts an hour today and 0.54 micro sieverts yesterday.

Greenpeace said normal background levels of radioac-

ity were at 0.1 micro sieverts.

It noted that Japan lifted an evacuation order for the road on Saturday, when Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirofumi Nonaka said radiation in the area was normal and posed "no safety problem."

Diederik Samson, a nuclear engineer and qualified radiation protection officer from Holland, led the Greenpeace team which took the measurements, the group said.

"The high level of radioactivity we measured on Sunday was in the middle of Genken road, which had been reopened to the public by Japanese authorities some 24 hours earlier," Samson was quoted as saying.

"The Japanese government needs to close this road to the public while radiation levels remain significantly higher than background levels," the activist added.

"If this had been a public road in Holland or Germany it would have been closed off to the public."

'Villages systematically destroyed in E Timor'

DILI, East Timor, Oct 4: Villages throughout the western districts of East Timor have been systematically destroyed, the commander of the international security force in the territory said today, reports AFP.

Australian troops with the International Force for East Timor (Interfet) have been patrolling the area since establishing a base at Balibo, close to the border with Indonesian-controlled West Timor, on Thursday.

Major General Peter Cosgrove, the Interfet commander, said he was deeply concerned at the disappearance of the civilian population.

"So far the soldiers there have encountered little by way of human presence," Cosgrove said. "It would appear that many of those villages have been depopulated."

There has plainly been a concerted effort to burn and deny (shelter) in that area," he added.

The commander said the burning of houses had clearly taken place some time ago, but added there was still stark evidence of violence.

The western districts of East

Timor were formerly infested with the anti-independence militias responsible for the orgy of violence that has devastated the territory since its August 30 vote for independence.

Cosgrove's depiction of the scale of destruction came as a senior UN official suggested up to half a million people could be sheltering in the hills of East Timor, too afraid to come for fear of further militia attacks.

"We are aware that there are many tens of thousands up in the hills," said UN Humanitarian Coordinator Ross Mountain.

Mountain said that according to figures given by the Indonesian authorities, some 250,000 East Timorese were in West Timor, and 100,000 were in Dili and other areas surveyed by the multinational force and the United Nations.

That left up to 500,000 unaccounted for when compared with East Timor's population before the August 30 vote on independence.

"Five hundred thousand people are still up in the mountains. We are working with our partners to get out (to those areas)," Mountain said.

Indian polls spark concerns of fresh instability

NEW DELHI, Oct 4: India's general election looks set to usher in another period of

damaging political instability, with exit polls predicting a fragile majority for the ruling Hindu nationalist coalition, reports AFP.

Three of four exit polls predicted a slim victory for the multi-party coalition led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party, with state-run television giving the alliance 287 seats in the 545-member parliament.

Analysts warned today such a result would mean a return of the incessant infighting which plagued the 13-month term of Vajpayee's previous coalition government.

"With the numbers predicted it will be a fairly stable government, at least for some time," said political analyst G.V.L.N. Rao, who conducted the state television poll.

"But it will be fragile. Even if one ally were to ditch them, the government will fall."

"If the numbers come down to 275, the government will be-

come extremely shaky," Rao said.

Another television exit poll gave the ruling coalition 295-305 seats.

India's marathon elections -- the third since 1996 -- concluded Sunday after five rounds of voting staggered over a one-month period.

The main opposition Congress party of Sonia Gandhi and its allies were tipped to win around 174 seats by state television, and communists and smaller parties 77.

C. Ramachandriah, whose regional TDP party is part of Vajpayee's alliance, admitted the new government could be in for a rough ride.

"The exit poll shows that government stability will be precarious," he said.

Vajpayee's earlier coalition government was toppled by one vote in a parliamentary motion of confidence in April.

The Hindu nationalists went into the September-October elections as hot favourites, but analysts and politicians agree things unexpectedly went wrong midway during the six-week

campaign.

By the time the staggered elections ended, Gandhi's Congress had apparently made major inroads in the country's north which in 1998 gave BJP almost half its total 182 seats.

A ruling alliance victory with the BJP stuck on its earlier 182-seat tally would leave Prime Minister Vajpayee overly dependent on his numerous allies.

"The stability of a coalition depends on the strength ratio of its largest partner to the smallest parties," said Mahesh Rangarajan, an analyst with the private Star TV network.

"None of the exit polls give the BJP more than 200 seats. It is possible it may get less. In that case, many of the problems that plagued the government last year will come back in a different form."

"But if the BJP gets 200 to 225 seats in its own right, it will become very strong."

Rangarajan stressed much would depend on a resolution of the ongoing power struggle between BJP hardliners and moderates.