

Stock & International

BJP-led coalition to lose if snap polls held: Survey

NEW DELHI, Jan 7 : India's BJP-led coalition government would lose parliamentary majority if snap elections were to be held in the country, an Indian opinion poll forecast on Sunday, reports AFP.

The India Today magazine said a survey of 17,641 people in 514 parliamentary seats predicted the Hindu nationalist-led ruling coalition would lose 0.5 percent of the votes it won in national elections in 1999.

The loss would mean that the Hindu nationalist BJP party and its allies would be able to net up to 268 of 545 elected seats, putting it a whisker short of a legislative majority in the national legislature.

The poll predicted the main opposition Congress party and its allies would poll 2.5 percent more votes than it did in the last elections, giving the alliance up

to 218 seats, compared to the 140 seats it picked up in 1999.

The magazine poll, however, said BJP Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was far ahead of his rivals in the ratings for the nation's top job, gaining 43 percent of the votes.

Congress leader Sonia Gandhi was a distant second with 28 percent.

"The India Today ORG-MARG nationwide opinion poll does not sound a red alert for the government. It merely alerts it to the initial signs of a decline in its popularity," the news weekly said.

The poll showed the BJP-led coalition had lost significant ground in India's north, including the politically-strategic state of Uttar Pradesh, which plays a pivotal role in federal government formation.

"Its (BJP's) support-base

seems to be shrinking steadily and its disgruntled voters are increasingly looking to the Congress party as an alternative," the magazine said.

It said that Vajpayee's recent controversial remark on the construction of a temple on the ruins of a razed mosque in Uttar Pradesh state has not helped in whipping up Hindu sentiments in favour of the BJP.

It said the people polled said the key to the government's success could depend on how well it tackled economic issues such as inflation, unemployment and creating a business environment.

Recent initiatives by the Vajpayee government to usher peace into the troubled state of Kashmir also scored well politically, the poll added.



Iraqi soldiers march during a rally at the monument of the unknown soldier in Baghdad on Friday to mark the 80th anniversary of the formation of the country's armed forces. --AFP photo

Thaksin prepares to lead next Thai coalition govt

BANGKOK, Jan 7 : Billionaire businessman Thaksin Shinawatra today prepared to lead Thailand's next coalition government after unofficial polls results indicated he had scored a stunning victory over the ruling Democrats, reports AFP.

"We knew since last week that we would win, but not by so many seats," he told AFP as he awaited the official count from Saturday's national elections.

"I feel relieved after all the hard work we put in."

An Interior Ministry unofficial tally said his Thai Rak Thai party would send 257 MPs to the 500-seat House of Representatives, allowing it to form a government in its own right for the first time in Thai history.

However, the two-year-old populist party whose name means Thai Love Thai, is expected to establish a sturdier majority by forming a close-knit coalition with one or two smaller parties.

The Democrats led by Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai looked certain to be relegated to the opposition benches with just 127 seats in the lower house.

Chuan, whose fractious six-party coalition was punished for its failure to pull off a convincing recovery after the 1997 financial crisis, made a tacit admission of defeat Sunday.

"Now the result has become quite clear, and it will be easy for Thai Rak Thai to form a government with the help of one or two smaller parties," he said as he left his southern hometown of Trang for the capital.

Thaksin shied away from declaring victory until the release of official results, which the independent Election Commission said Sunday had been indefinitely postponed.

A host of technical errors, mishaps and graft allegations have hampered vote-counting in Saturday's ballot, which the EC has declared the "dirtiest ever" to be held in Thailand.

EC officials have predicted that at least two rounds of re-elections will have to be held as more than 100 winning candidates are disqualified for cheating, indicating the staggering extent of corruption here.

But even as a smiling and relaxed Thaksin acknowledged

cheers from his supporters, the nation's anti-corruption body issued a reminder that he still faced serious graft charges that could soon see him kicked out of office.

National Counter Corruption Commission chairman Ophars Arunin said Thaksin's case would next week be sent to the Constitutional Court, which will decide whether he faces a five-year ban from holding public office.

The telecoms tycoon, who was indicted just days before the ballot for failing to disclose all his assets, said Sunday he was not concerned about the prospect of a bruising legal battle to overturn the indictment.

"I feel comfortable, I feel comfortable. I think the Constitutional Court will give me fair treatment," he said, downplaying suggestions that the court might be under pressure not to convict a premier with such a large mandate.

"I don't think so, and I know myself that I'm innocent. This is not a corruption case. It is a mis-report which is not really a big deal," he said.

Hamas warns PA against cooperation with CIA

Palestinians in Egypt for secret talks with Israel

BEIRUT, Jan 7 : The Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, denounced the Palestinian Authority today for joining a Cairo meeting with Israeli officials and CIA chief George Tenet to reduce violence in the Palestinian territories and Israel.

In a statement sent to the AFP in Beirut, the militant Hamas castigated the Palestinian Authority for going to the session "whose goal is to abort the Intifada (Palestinian uprising) ... and to liquidate (Islamic warriors) for the objectives of the Zionist occupier."

"It is a blow against Palestinian national unity and the union of the Palestinian people, who have joined together to support the Intifada," the statement said.

The Palestinian Authority has freed dozens of Hamas militants since the start of the Intifada on September 28.

The security meeting in Cairo

convened at the initiative of US President Bill Clinton whose other peace efforts have been floundering since he presented the Palestinians and Israelis with a peace plan on December 23.

Earlier, Palestinian security heads were in Egypt today for talks with their Israeli counterparts and CIA director George Tenet to try to reduce three months of violence and pave the way for a new peace push.

A Palestinian official said the meeting would begin at a secret location in the evening, an event that is a key part of US President Bill Clinton's last drive for peace before he leaves office on January 20.

The Palestinian Islamic militant group Hamas has meanwhile warned Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority against resuming military cooperation with Israel under the auspices of

the CIA, the US Central Intelligence Agency.

A Palestinian official who asked not to be named said "the agenda of the meeting remains vague until now."

The Israelis demand an end to the Intifada, or uprising, that erupted after a controversial Israeli visit to a holy site in east Jerusalem on September 28. The Palestinians demand Israel stop military action on their people.

The head of Egyptian intelligence "Omar Seliman will take part in the meeting and CIA Director George Tenet, expected in Cairo in the next few hours, will head the American delegation," the Palestinian official added.

Neither the US nor Israeli embassies would say when their delegates would be arriving or anything else about the meeting.

Musharraf in Syria for talks on ME peace

DAMASCUS, Jan 7 : Pakistani military ruler Pervez Musharraf began a two-day visit to Syria today for discussions on the Middle East peace process and the two countries' economic ties, reports AFP.

Musharraf was greeted at the airport by Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Mustapha Miro and Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara. The Pakistani general was accompanied by his Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar.

Musharraf will meet in the evening with President Bashar al-Assad, according to the Pakistani embassy here. It would be the two leaders' second meeting, after they spoke on the sidelines of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference summit in Qatar in November.

Damascus is hoping Musharraf's trip will help secure agreements aiding Syria's economic development, said al-Baath, the newspaper of Syria's ruling party.

Blair to visit US, maintain good relations: BBC

LONDON, Jan 7 : British PM Tony Blair said he would travel to Washington to meet US president-elect, Republican George W. Bush, in coming months, on BBC television today, reports AFP.

Judging that Bush would probably not come to Britain in the near future, he told the BBC "it is more likely that I will go over there in the next few months".

Blair added that it was his job and duty to maintain good relations with the US, regardless of who steers the country -- Democrats or Republicans.

He fended off allegations by the press that the traditionally close ties between London and Washington would be compromised as a result of the change of power at the White House, calling the charges "absolute nonsense".

Statue of Virgin Mary oozes oil in Beirut

BEIRUT, Jan 7 : Oil has been oozing from a miniature statue of the Virgin Mary by the coastal entrance to northern Beirut, sparking a religious fervour, reports AFP.

The faithful have arrived en masse since Friday, clutching candles and crucifixes in hand and chanting blessings. They have also stopped their cars on the road in order to witness the miracle, creating a traffic jam in the process. Pulling up, some have even installed loud speakers on their vehicles' bonnets in order to blare prayers.

The 30-centimeter high (one-foot tall) statue shows traces of oil on the edges of the Virgin's hands and on her blue cloak. Since the statue started to ooze oil, it has been guarded by city employees.

Non-believers are not allowed to enter the area where the statue is housed in a small shelter.

Beijing admits rampant judicial corruption

BEIJING, Jan 7 : One of China's most senior justice officials has admitted corruption is still rife within the country's legal system, despite a major crackdown on illegal practices, it was reported today, says AFP.

Zhu Mingshan, vice president of the Supreme People's Court said more than 1,500 court staff were disciplined last year for violating laws, the Xinhua news agency reported.

"Corrupt practices still exist in courts, and they are very serious in some places," he said, adding that the extent of corruption was damaging to the reputations of the courts, judges, the Communist Party and the state.

"We must fully recognise the difficulties ahead and take forceful measures," he said.

Mr Zhu said 1,517 Chinese court officials had been dealt with in the first 11 months of last year. Of these 906 were subjected to Party disciplinary action, while a further 20 were prosecuted in connection with crimes.

Chechen Imam shot dead

MOSCOW, Jan 7 : The Imam of the Mosque in Urus-Martan, a Chechen town 25 kilometres (16 miles) southwest of the capital Grozny, was shot dead in an attack, ORT state television reported today, says AFP.

Kasmagomed Umalatov was killed on the doorstep of his home by unidentified gunmen late Saturday, the television said.

Separatist rebels have been targeting imams believed to be close to Akhmad Kadyrov, the former mufti, or Chechen religious leader, who heads the administration set up by Russia in June last year and is seen as a traitor.

In November, the imam in Gudermes, Chechnya's second city, was seriously wounded when assailants opened fire from a car as he was returning to his home from Friday evening prayers.

Thousands rally against violence in Germany

COTTBUS, Germany, Jan 7 : An estimated 10,000 people demonstrated in Cottbus today against extreme rightwing violence which the east German town has suffered in recent days, police said, reports AFP.

After a church vigil they marched to the site of a former synagogue which was destroyed by the Nazis during the Third Reich.

There the premier of the regional state of Brandenburg, Manfred Stolpe, declared that the protest showed the town of Cottbus "is not ruled by brainless Nazis". Wischnath, said that one must not close one's eyes to acts of open violence.

4 more killed, 30 hurt in Kashmir violence

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 7 : Four people were killed and 30 others injured in attacks today by Muslim rebels in Indian administered Kashmir, police said, reports AFP.

At least 26 civilians were wounded when a hand grenade thrown at Indian troops missed its target and exploded among shoppers in the township of Sopore, some 50 km north of Srinagar, police said.

A police spokesman said a dozen of the injured who were rushed to hospitals were in a critical condition.

Four Indian soldiers were also seriously injured when their

patrol vehicle drove over a landmine near the township of Berwa on the outskirts of Srinagar.

The army vehicle was completely destroyed in the landmine ambush, a security force spokesman said in Srinagar.

Muslim militants, meanwhile, gunned down four civilians in separate attacks in Kashmir on Sunday, the official added.

More than 34,000 people have died in separatism-linked violence in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state since 1989.