

India calls for int'l confce on terrorism

AP, New Delhi

India urged the United Nations on Saturday to call a global conference on terrorism to seek new responses by both military and civilian institutions.

"Often, it is the medium through which proxy wars are waged. It is also a threat to democracy," Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said while inaugurating a conference on the role of the military in Asian democracies.

Vajpayee said the military's role was to defend, not to govern.

"While keeping to their well-defined role, the armed forces need to constantly raise the standards of probity, transparency, and accountability," he said.

Terrorism, a global menace, "becomes deadlier when it is combined with religious extremism and receives cross-border support," he said.

Vajpayee was apparently referring to Pakistan, whom India accuses of promoting cross-border terrorism by arming and training Islamic guerrillas fighting for the independence of India-controlled Kashmir since 1989.

Pakistan's military regime says it only provides moral and diplomatic support to the militants.

Two Sikhs beheaded in Kashmir

REUTERS, Srinagar

Two civilians have been killed and five injured in separatist violence in India's troubled northern state of Jammu and Kashmir, police said yesterday.

They said unidentified guerrillas on Friday beheaded two Sikhs at Lassan Top in Poonch district 480 km southwest of the state's summer capital Srinagar.

"The matter is being investigated," a police statement said. Last month, unidentified guerrillas shot dead six Sikhs and wounded five in Srinagar.

Suspected separatist guerrillas on Friday fired at the residents of two houses and injured five people including two women, police said.

Authorities say civilian and police casualties in Kashmir have spiked up since India suspended offensive operations in the troubled region.

Most of the militant groups fighting New Delhi's rule in Kashmir have rejected the ceasefire and stepped up attacks on Indian security forces.

India's coalition may seek trust vote

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's coalition government, reeling from an arms bribery scandal, could seek a parliamentary vote of confidence to demonstrate it still has a mandate to rule, officials and analysts said yesterday.

"A trust motion is one of the options being considered at this point... We have a mandate to rule for five years and that we are ready to prove again," said an official of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party, which leads the federal coalition.

Opposition groups, scenting their biggest opportunity since Vajpayee became prime minister in October 1999, have paralysed parliament all week demanding that the government resign in the wake of allegations of corruption in the defence establishment.

A film secretly shot by reporters for a news and entertainment Website showed a string of public figures, military officials and bureaucrats apparently accepting money to influence a fictitious arms deal.

The ensuing scandal has already forced the resignation of Defence Minister George Fernandes and the chiefs of two parties in the federal coalition, including the BJP.

"The entire government is seeped in corruption... We demand the departure of this government on moral

grounds," Sonia Gandhi, the head of the main opposition Congress party, told a party conclave in the southern city of Bangalore.

A regional party facing state elections has pulled out of the coalition because it said the government had been slow to respond to the allegations.

Another regional group wants more government heads to roll.

Analysts said the government would probably survive the crisis but its authority had been undermined and it would be more vulnerable to the demands of coalition partners many of whom oppose economic reform.

"Crisis staved, until the next one," ran a headline in the Times of India daily, which said the coalition's "squeaky clean" image was in tatters.

"A confidence vote would be a logical thing to do, it will unite the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) but there will be work to do," said political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan.

Vajpayee office had come under a cloud for the first time after the documentary made a passing reference to two powerful officials considered close to him, Rangarajan said.

Vajpayee went on state television on Friday night to tell the country he has ordered an inquiry by a judge of the supreme court, and would get to the bottom of the allegations.

Pak military regime to allow opposition views on state media

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's military regime has decided to allow opposition politicians to air their views on its policies on state-run radio and television, a senior military official said Saturday.

"The opposition parties will soon be invited for live discussions as part of the government policy to open up the electronic media," Major-General Rashid Qureshi told AFP.

"You will soon notice a visible change in the news coverage and a kind of freedom which even the so-called democratic governments in the country did not give," said Qureshi, who is spokesman for

military ruler General Pervez Musharraf.

The regime banned outdoor political activities including public meetings and rallies soon after Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup in October 1999.

"Top opposition leaders will be invited to express their views on government policies so that the people should also get the opportunity to listen to criticism on our policies," Qureshi said.

He said the decision was the first "major step" under the government's policy aimed at liberalising the electronic media.

An opposition politician gave a guarded welcome to the move.

"It is good news but what kind of coverage would the opposition get when there is no freedom of speech allowed on the streets," said Nisar Khuro, provincial head of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists Secretary General Fausia Shahid described the decision as "quite exciting."

More than a dozen Pakistani opposition parties, including the PPP and the faction of the Pakistan Muslim League which supports ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif, formed an alliance late last year to press for end to military rule.

Sharon threatens Arafat with total blockade

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon threatened to reimpose a total blockade on the Palestinian territories if violence flares, Israeli radio said Saturday.

The recent easing of the blockade will be cancelled if the Palestinians take advantage of the situation to step up the violence in the zones where the noose was relaxed,

Sharon warned Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in a message shortly before his trip to the US, the radio said.

There was no official confirmation of the report.

Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer announced Friday that some of the blockade measures would be relaxed, ahead of Sharon's visit to the United States, which has urged Israel to ease the

blockade on the Palestinian territories.

Some 500 Palestinian businessmen will be allowed to enter Israel, the Allenby Bridge crossing point between Jordan and the West Bank will be reopened during the day and trucks will be allowed to transit through it after security checks, a defence ministry statement said.

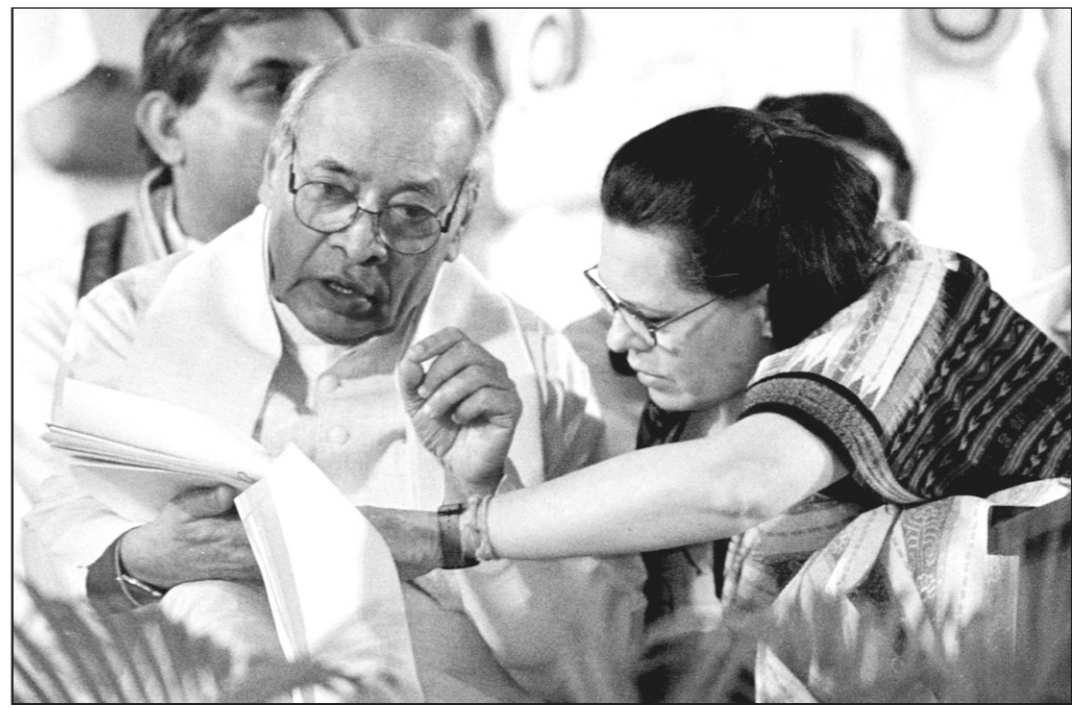


PHOTO: AFP

Congress (I) Party President Sonia Gandhi (R) discusses a point with former Indian prime minister P.V. Narsimha Rao (L) during the inaugural session of the 81st Plenary session of the party in Bangalore yesterday. Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi launched a scathing attack on the crisis-hit Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government, during her speech, saying that Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee had betrayed the nation in the wake of a damaging bribery scandal.

Bosnian Serb commanders face war crimes trial tomorrow

AFP, The Hague

Three Bosnian Serbs accused of running the so-called Keraterm concentration camp in the Bosnian town of Prijedor are due to stand trial before the UN war crimes tribunal here on Monday.

Dusko Sikirica, the commander of the Keraterm camp faces charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. Two of his commanders, Damir Dosen and Dragan Kolundzija, are charged with crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The three suspects have pleaded not guilty on all counts.

The prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) alleges that Sikirica, Dosen and Kolundzija oversaw a regime in the Keraterm camp in 1992 in which hundreds of non-Serb prisoners were tortured, sexually assaulted or killed.

Images from the concentration camps Keraterm, Omarska and Trnopolje in the Prijedor area shocked the world when they were broadcast in 1992.

Fikret Alic, an emaciated prisoner who was filmed standing behind a barbed wire fence in the Keraterm camp, became an icon of the horrors of so-called "ethnic cleansing" during the war in Bosnia from 1992-95.

Arms scam: Internet scoop triggers political crisis in India

AP, New Delhi

A feisty, year-old Internet media company disguised its reporters as weapons dealers, gave them piles of cash and dispatched them to expose corruption in India's political and military establishment.

The result was hours of videotape that captured defence officials accepting bribes for arms contracts an expose leading to the resignations of two Cabinet ministers and calls for the government to step down.

The scandal has set off screaming matches in Parliament and prompted Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Friday to promise an inquiry to "clean up the dirt." The furor forced UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to cancel a visit to Parliament.

"Our job was to blow the whistle on corruption in India's defence procurement. We wanted to nail them down," said Tarun J Tejpal, the 37-year-old chief executive officer of the media company Tehelka.com.

His company's upstart Web site which carries the banner "News. Views. All the juice" and runs an eclectic collection of news, political intrigue, literature and sports in English has hit a nerve among Indians.

Since it broke the scandal on Tuesday, the site has been flooded with 1,000 e-mails a day and millions of hits making it difficult to log on, said Tehelka.com's information manager, Sanjiv Kapoor.

Reactions to the expose have ranged from euphoria among its readers to calls for its young reporters to be arrested.

"I'm proud to be an Indian today! We've shown the

corrupt underbelly of India that they can no longer take us for granted," said Adnan Adeb in a letter to Tehelka.com.

The company launched itself in May by interviewing a key figure in a cricket match-fixing scandal.

Then in August, Tehelka.com began its undercover operation into India's defence purchases.

Their plan was to enter at the lowest level the section officer in defence procurement and work their way up.

Tehelka.com reporters Aniruddha Bahal, 25, and Mathew Samuel, in his early 30s, spent months pretending to be defence contractors and pushing a fake \$870,000 deal for hand-held thermal cameras and other equipment. They secretly filmed the transactions.

What they found astounded them.

"Eight months into the investigation we are still astonished at how incredibly high the ladder goes... we are still astonished at how blinding the greed was, that two rank amateurs with close to no knowledge of defence hardware, hawking a patently absurd product, could go so far as to slice open an entire industry of high corruption," said Tejpal, who has worked as a journalist for some of India's leading publications.

The scandal rattled Vajpayee's government, which took office in 1998 promising clean government. The opposition has called for him to resign.

The first head to roll was Bangaru Laxman, the president of Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party. He resigned Tuesday after Tehelka.com made public videotapes of him accepting \$2,175.



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese soldiers carry a survivor rescued from the rubble of a collapsed building on Friday after a series of mysterious blasts occurred early Thursday in Shijiazhuang, capital of Hebei Province. At least 18 people were killed following the explosions at residential buildings, but a human rights group said up to 200 were feared dead.

Norway's peace move may succeed: Lankan govt

AP, Colombo

The government said a Norwegian peace initiative to end Sri Lanka's protracted civil war stood a good chance of success because of growing international outrage over terrorism.

"We have approached the issue differently this time," Constitutional Affairs Minister Gamini Peiris said in a speech at the Foreign Correspondents' Association on Friday. "We now have a skillful facilitator."

In 1995, when the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam last met, there was no facilitator. Norwegian envoy Erik Solheim has met representatives from both sides several times in recent months in an attempt to bring them back to the table.

The government rejects the rebels' demand for a separate Tamil nation in the north and east. The rebels accuse the majority Sinhalese of discrimination in jobs and education. The government denies it. The civil war has killed more than 63,000 people since 1983.

The rebels have been outlawed in Sri Lanka, India and the United States. Last month, Britain announced its decision to ban the LTTE, a step that must be approved by Parliament.

Last week, Singapore cracked down on guerrilla groups raising funds in the island nation.

The growing condemnation of terrorism around the world could force the rebels to shun violence and choose a democratic path, Peiris said.

"The poignant reality of the war has come home to the Public, bringing about a change in attitude," Peiris said of the growing call in Sri Lanka for talks.

Further, a draft new constitution offers wide autonomy to Sri Lanka's eight provinces, including those where the country's 3.2 million Tamils are in the majority, and the government is prepared to accommodate any new proposals the rebels may make, he said.

Taliban shut down beauty parlours

DAP, Islamabad

Afghanistan's radical Taliban rulers have ordered beauty parlours in the country's western Herat city to close down for violating Islamic Sharia laws, reports yesterday said.

Also, the Taliban Department of Eliminating Vice and Promoting Virtue arrested five people for giving non-Sharia hair cuts to women, Pakistan's widely-read Urdu newspaper Jang (War) reported.

Bath houses for women are already closed in the town on the Iranian border.

In January, 25 barbers were thrown into jail in the Afghan capital of Kabul for violating a two-month-old ban on Western hairstyles, deemed "Un-Islamic."

The religious police hauled up the barbers for acceding to requests for the hairdo sported by the hero in the film "Titanic."

The hairstyle was fashionable among youths.