

Rival Indian MPs locked in scuffle over bribery scam outside parliament

AFP, New Delhi

The escalating verbal war over an arms bribery scandal rocking the Indian government turned physical Monday, as ruling and opposition MPs almost came to blows outside parliament.

Minutes after both houses were adjourned for the fifth straight working day, security guards had to separate rival legislators, who traded shoves and insults, with opposition MPs chanting: "The PM is a thief."

The scuffles followed opposition leader Sonia Gandhi's weekend war cry for a nationwide assault on the scandal-tainted government.

The battle will almost certainly have to be fought outside parliament, which has not been allowed to function since last Tuesday and looks set to remain paralysed all week as the opposition keeps up its demands that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his cabinet resign.

The main opposition Congress party is kicking off the week on a stronger footing than the government, which is still struggling to contain the damage done by a website's video expose of corruption in defence procurement circles.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi enjoyed an upbeat party conference in Bangalore at the weekend, lashing the government with the video charges of bribery and graft, and urging party workers to prepare for elections.

"Let the message go forth from Bangalore that we will fight every battle, wage every war, make every sacrifice to ensure that the country is liberated from the shackles of this corrupt, shameful and communal government," Sonia said.

Congress was scheduled to unveil a national strategy on Monday

aimed at exposing the "corrupt and venal" activities of Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party and its allies in the ruling coalition.

"It will be a mass awareness campaign," deputy Congress leader Madhavrao Scindia told AFP on Monday.

"All the state party units will be given the task of going to the people and making them aware of what this government is doing," Scindia said.

"This is because the official media has completely blacked out the true picture."

As for the government, there can be fewer better illustrations of the old adage that a week is a long time in politics.

Since last Tuesday when the scandal broke, Vajpayee has lost his BJP party president and defence minister, as well as a key coalition partner, and his administration has come under criticism from its own backers, as well as opponents.

"Vajpayee has gone from being the cheerful leader of a harmonious coalition to becoming the increasingly beleaguered head of a squabbling family," remarked an editorial in the Hindustan Times.

Aware that it will have difficulties defending its position in a paralysed parliament, the government has decided to take to the streets, announcing a major rally in New Delhi on March 25.

On Sunday, Vajpayee told a meeting of BJP workers that the Congress demands for the government to step down were empty rhetoric based on the knowledge that the opposition did not command the required numbers in parliament.

The Congress is "upset with the achievements of my government -- stable government sound economy and social harmony. That is why it wants to topple the government."



Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori (L) is escorted by US State Department official Bill Koepler (R) upon his arrival at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland on Sunday. Mori is in the US for a meeting with US President George W. Bush.

Mori, Qian arrive in US

AFP, Washington

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori and Chinese Vice Premier Qian Qichen have arrived in the United States ahead of separate talks with President George W. Bush later in the week.

Mori's plane landed at Andrews Air Force Base just before 4:00 pm (0300 BST) Sunday, a day before he is scheduled to visit Bush.

In comments to reporters while en route to the United States, Mori said the talks would cover the faltering Japanese economy, security ties between Japan and the United States.

"I believe it is extremely important that Japan and the United States confirm economic policies at the top leaders' level at this point in time," Kyodo News quoted Mori as saying on a government flight to Washington.

Also figuring high on the agenda was last month's sinking of a Japanese trawler by a US nuclear submarine.

Mounting uncertainty over Mori's lameduck premiership and political fallout from a disaster at sea off Hawaii that saw a US nuclear sub-

marine slam and sink a Japanese fishing trawler will cloud the meeting planned as a bid by Bush to reinvigorate US ties with Japan.

The meeting also comes amid concerns Japan's slumbering economy may be about to slip back into crisis, just as the United States experiences its own slowdown -- an issue likely to be high on the agenda at the talks.

Qian arrived in New York for a series of talks with US officials to culminate with a meeting with Bush on Thursday.

A foreign policy veteran, Qian is hoping to size up Bush's new administration, which only weeks after taking power has shown every sign of living up to a campaign pledge to take a firm stance towards Beijing.

"The purpose here is to start the dialogue," said a senior administration official, admitting the "complicated" nature of Sino-US relations.

Looming over the talks are policy clashes about Taiwan, human rights and Beijing's staunch opposition to Bush's plans to develop a missile defense shield, fuelling a view here the two giant states are on a collision course.

Tribal violence in Assam: 6 dead

AFP, Guwahati

Separatist rebels have shot dead six people and wounded five others in inter-tribal violence in India's restive northeastern state of Assam, police officials said yesterday.

A police spokesman said heavily armed militants of the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) fighting for an independent tribal homeland attacked a rival group of tribals late Sunday in Ramgaon, 70 kilometers (45 miles) west of Assam's capital Guwahati.

"The NDFB militants swooped down at Ramgaon, rounded up villagers and shot at them from close range, killing six on the spot and injuring five more," said the police spokesman in Guwahati.

The police said the NDFB militants had attacked the villagers in a bid to drive them out of the area.

At least 2,000 people have been killed in the continuing ethnic clashes between the two tribal communities in the past eight years.

Wahid threatens to fire attorney general

AP, Jakarta

The future of Indonesia's attorney general was in doubt Monday after President Abdurrahman Wahid threatened to dismiss him unless "three important people" were arrested by the end of the month.

In an interview with Australian journalists in Jakarta, Wahid said he was under pressure to replace Attorney General Marzuki Darusman for failing to bring to justice several key individuals accused of corruption and human rights abuses.

"I said to the attorney general that he has until this month to detain three important people. If not, then I will replace him," Wahid said. "I will not disclose their names, it is not fair."

Wahid gave no details about the suspects alleged offenses.

Darusman's position has been shaky since September, after the corruption trial of ex-dictator Suharto was abandoned because of health concerns. It was further eroded when Suharto's playboy son, Tommy, escaped authorities in November after he was convicted on separate graft charges.

Some Suharto cronies have been convicted for graft but most others including those accused of human rights violations, remain at large.

Earlier Darusman brushed off speculation that he was going to be fired.

Macedonia goes on war alert, mobilises reserve troops

AFP, Tetovo, Macedonia

Macedonia went on a war footing Sunday, mobilising reserve troops and using tanks and heavy artillery against a growing ethnic Albanian insurrection near the border with Kosovo.

Amid sharply rising tensions, Macedonian Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski accused the United States and Germany, whose troops guard the Kosovo-Macedonia border, of refusing to arrest extremist leaders in Kosovo.

Macedonian special police continued to pound rebel-held hilltops on the edge of the north-western town of Tetovo with mortar fire for a fifth day as army tanks and heavy artillery were spotted by NATO troops in Kosovo blasting guerrillas in the mountain on the border.

Macedonian defence ministry spokesman Georgi Trendafilov said reserves would be told to

report for duty.

Officials say the Macedonian army has an estimated 15,000-20,000 ground troops, although according defence experts it can only actually muster around 10,000 troops. But a general mobilisation could swell its ranks to 120,000.

Macedonia has so far preferred not to use the army, many of whose troops are themselves ethnic Albanians, defence sources say, while the special police has a higher percentage of Slav Macedonians.

The army decision came just after 10,000 people gathered in central Skopje demanding that tougher measures be taken to combat the spreading insurrection.

Massing in front of the parliament, the demonstrators, including many from Tetovo, shouted that the government should take "urgent action against the terrorists so we can go home."

At least 2,000 people have fled Tetovo since the fighting began.

Last Wednesday the rebels of the self-proclaimed National Liberation Army broke out of mountain bases near the Kosovo border and attacked Tetovo, a major town in the northwest with a mainly Albanian population.

The protest followed a gathering outside the parliament late Saturday, when 3,000 mostly Slav residents of Tetovo whistled at President Boris Trajkovski who urged them to stay calm.

In response, many chanted: "Give us weapons!"

The parliament pledged "urgent and effective measures" to counter the rebels.

And Georgievski, whose government imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in Tetovo, accused the United States and Germany of accelerating the crisis by failing to act against rebel leaders directing operations from UN-run Kosovo, whose borders are guarded by NATO-led peacekeepers.

Historic victory for socialists in Paris vote

AFP, Paris

The French left was celebrating Monday after the Socialist party won control of Paris for the first time in more than a century but its historic victory was tempered by a string of losses in some 40 towns and cities across the country.

In Paris the Socialists overturned 24 years of rule by the Gaullist RPR party in Sunday's runoff vote, dealing a powerful personal reverse to its leader President Jacques Chirac, and the left also won an important victory in the country's third city of Lyon.

But elsewhere candidates of the left fared badly, losing Strasbourg, Nimes, Orleans and other major towns, while several ministers in Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's government failed in their attempts to take or hold key towns.

The last national test before presidential and parliamentary elections next year, the vote was closely scrutinised for hints about the public mood, but both left and right claimed signs of a resurgence of support.

In Paris, Socialist candidate Bertrand Delanoë, one of the few openly gay politicians in France, won 49.7 percent of the vote city-wide, and took control of 12 out of 20 arrondissements (districts), making his election as mayor a certainty.

As results came in, some 10,000



Bertrand Delanoë

jubilant supporters gathered around the Hotel de Ville, or City Hall, good-naturedly demanding the keys to the door to celebrate the left-wing's first taste of power over the capital since the short-lived revolutionary movement known as the Commune in 1871.

"Today, Parisians have freely decided in favour of a change of power in the capital," Delanoë told a cheering crowd at his campaign headquarters. "It is a demand for a renewal of culture and of democratic practice, and for a profound change in the way the city is run."

Socialists described Delanoë's victory as a turning-point. "It is an

event as important as 1981," said Culture Minister Catherine Tasca, referring to the first victory of the late Socialist president Francois Mitterrand.

The right's desperate efforts to retain control of the city were hampered by the bitter relationship between two rival candidates: the official RPR contender Philippe Seguin and the incumbent mayor Jean Tiberi, who was dropped by the RPR last year.

But more importantly, the Socialists, who formed an alliance with the Green party for the second round of the vote, were able to capitalise on the RPR's reputation for institutionalised corruption after a quarter of a century in power and the popular demand for an alternation of power.

Delanoë's campaign slogan -- "changeons d'ere" -- let's change era -- caught the mood in a city whose demographic make-up has altered enormously over the last decades, with a new core of liberal-leaning professionals.

The vote was a personal buff for President Chirac, because he was Paris mayor for 18 years, used the Hotel de Ville as his political power-base, and took a close interest in the city elections.

With a year to go before he is expected to run against Jospin in the presidential race, the result is sure to dog his campaign.

Fire at Taiwan N-plant

AP, Taipei

A small fire closed a Taiwanese nuclear power plant, but there were no radiation leaks and the island will not suffer an electricity shortage, officials said Monday.

The Taiwan Power Co said it still has about 3,000 megawatts in total power capacity reserves that would make up for the 1,900 megawatt shortfall from the plant in southern Pingtung county, said Huang Hui-yi, a spokeswoman for the company.

The plant was shut down early Sunday immediately after a small fire broke out in one of the electricity generators vital to cooling the plant's two nuclear reactors, the company said in a statement.

The malfunction did not occur in the nuclear reactor and did not cause any radiation leaks or injuries among the workers, Huang added.

Initial findings showed that salty deposits had accumulated in four electric transmission lines, causing a circuit breaker to malfunction in one of the generators and starting the fire, the company said.

Jewish settler killed in West Bank as Sharon visits US

AFP, Jerusalem

A Jewish settler was shot dead by Palestinians in a West Bank ambush Monday in a fresh outburst of anti-Israeli violence as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon kicked off his first visit to the United States as Israeli leader.

The man was shot several times near the Jewish settlement of Neve Daniel south of Bethlehem while he was driving to work and lost control his car which crashed into a truck, the army said.

Israeli radio said the man, from the settlement of Efrat south of Bethlehem, was shot at from a car containing Palestinians.

His death brought to 440 the number of people killed since the start of the Palestinian intifada or uprising on September 28: 360 Palestinians, 66 Israelis, 13 Israeli Arabs and one German.

It came as Sharon was in the United States for talks with President George W. Bush on his

first trip abroad since taking over as head of a broad-based government less than two weeks ago.

Sharon, who is to meet Bush at the White House on Tuesday, said Sunday he had ordered security meetings to resume with the Palestinians "aimed at operations to reduce the violence where possible."

But he said talks leading to a political settlement cannot resume "as long as there are murders and attacks."

However Palestinian number two Mahmud Abbas said on Voice of Palestine radio Monday that unofficial contacts were under way with Israel on "all the issues," not only security matters.

The Haaretz newspaper reported that Sharon was ready to evacuate some Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip if Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat accepted his plan for long-term interim agreements.

However, Israeli public radio quoted a senior official travelling

with Sharon as saying the report was "without foundation."

Haaretz said the proposal was one of the "cornerstones" of what Sharon is prepared to offer in any revived negotiations with the Palestinians which have all but moribund since the outbreak of violence in late September.

A final round of talks in Egypt between the Palestinians and the former Israeli government of Ehud Barak ended in January without agreement.

Haaretz said the plan, designed to give Arafat's self-rule authority more territorial contiguity in the densely populated strip, does not extend to the West Bank.

"The underlying assumption in Sharon's plan is that there is currently no chance for a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians that would settle all outstanding differences between the two peoples and reach an end to the conflict," Haaretz said. "Therefore his proposal to the Palestinians is based on partial agreements."

Four fans of British pop group die in stampede

AFP, Jakarta

Four young Indonesian girls were crushed to death in a stampede by hundreds of fans of the British pop group A1 who were trying to get their autographs at a Jakarta shopping mall, police said Monday.

"Four young girls died in the stampede at Taman Angrek mall yesterday (Sunday)," said an officer who identified himself only as Jumali.

The four, aged 13 to 20, were among hundreds of fans, mostly teenaged girls, who had massed on the third floor of the huge shopping mall to see members of the boy band during a promotional appearance at a music store there, Jumali said.

"There were several other girls who fainted during the stampede, but none were in critical condition," Jumali said.

Police have arrested two of the organisers on suspicion of negligence leading to death, the SCTV private television said.

They were identified as project officer Sonny Subagio and the person responsible for the holding

of the event, Agung Priambodo.

West Jakarta police chief Senior Commissioner Iwan Ismet told SCTV that more suspects, including the owner of the music shop, could be arrested.

Ismet said about a dozen people were being questioned over the incident, and Jumali said among those quizzed were executives of the organising committee and several mall security guards.

An employee at the morgue of the Cipto Magunkusumo general hospital said the four bodies had all been identified by late Sunday and claimed by their families.

"Doctors said they died of suffocation, of lack of oxygen," the morgue employee said.

Jumali said a crush developed after some girls at the front of the store began to ask for signatures from the four-man pop band.

The Kompas daily said the four members of the band were at the mall for only about 10 minutes and had already left when the stampede began. One of its reporters who was there when the stampede took place, estimated the crowd at more than 2,000.

Fuel tanker crash kills 14 in Philippines

AP, Manila

A fuel tanker smashed into five jeeps on a Manila coastal road and a container van collided with a passenger bus in accidents that killed at least 25 people before dawn Monday, police said.

The tanker apparently went out of control and struck two large passenger jeeps and three privately owned jeeps along a coastal road in suburban Paranaque City, killing 14 people, including at least two children, police said.

Paranaque police chief Ronald Estilles said the truck's gasoline tank exploded on impact, setting several of the smashed jeeps on fire and charring bodies scattered on the road. The tanker's driver escaped, he said.

The fuel tank on the back of the truck, though badly charred, did not explode.

Those killed were aboard the jeeps and commuters on a roadside near a seafood market waiting for a ride. Several more were injured and taken to hospitals, Estilles said.

Luciano Lozada, who was aboard one of the jeeps, said he and his wife jumped out of the vehicle

when they saw the wayward tanker speeding toward them.

"We ran but suddenly there were pockets of fire flying about," Lozada told Manila radio station DZMM. "I saw my wife's back on fire and she rolled over on the road to put it out."

Lozada's wife was in a hospital with third-degree burns.

For several hours after the accident, dozens of police, soldiers and firefighters used bolt cutters and other tools to cut through the charred, mangled jeeps, extracting one by one the dead, some burnt to bone.

In a separate accident, a passenger bus and a container van collided shortly after midnight on a highway in Bocaue town in Bulacan Province, killing at least 11 people aboard the bus and injuring eight other passengers, police said.

Police are investigating the cause of the smashup in Bocaue, about 25 kilometers north of Manila but said the van apparently lost control and skidded across the grassy island divider into oncoming traffic.

Both road accidents caused huge traffic jams.

Discovery undocks from Int'l Space Station

AP, Cape Canaveral

Space shuttle Discovery undocked from the international space station, bringing home the first, trailblazing crew of the orbiting outpost.

"Sail her well," the station's departing commander, Bill Shepherd, urged his successor.

The two spacecraft parted company late Sunday night 245 miles above South America, after more than a week of linked flight. It marked the end of four and a half months of space station duty for Shepherd and the two Russian cosmonauts who served under his command.

Discovery is due back at the Kennedy Space Centre on Wednesday.