

Campaigning for polls ends in 5 Indian states

AFP, New Delhi

Campaigning for polls in five Indian states, marred by violence in the northeast, ended yesterday, 48 hours before voters decide the fate of two of the world's oldest communist governments.

Thursday's state assembly elections in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry were also seen as a popularity test for the ruling federal coalition, tainted recently by an arms bribery scandal.

Attacks by militant separatists in the northeastern Assam state in the run up to the elections left up to 60 people dead, including a poll candidate, and wounded at least 180 in the past month.

The outlawed militant group United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was suspected of fomenting

violence after it called for an election boycott, police said.

Most of the political leaders targetted belong to the ruling Assam Gana Parishad and its electoral ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which heads the ruling federal coalition of Prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

The state elections have generated much heat with the BJP accusing Sonia Gandhi's main opposition Congress Party of colluding with militants for political supremacy in the 126 member Assam Assembly.

In West Bengal state (eastern India), the world's longest-serving elected Communist government is looking vulnerable as it faces the strongest ever challenge to its rule by a combine of the regional Trinamool Congress and Gandhi's Congress party.

The Left Front, dominated by the

Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), will face its first election without Jyoti Basu, the charismatic Marxist leader who stepped down in November as chief minister -- a post he had held uninterrupted since 1977.

The Marxist-led nine-party combine in the state has drawn visibly less crowds during this election campaign, compared with previous election rallies in its 24 year state rule.

Popular Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee has made no secret about her ambition of toppling the communist government, after quitting the ruling federation coalition following an arms bribery scandal in March.

"Central and state security forces are being deployed all over the state to ensure a fair and peaceful polling," West Bengal Election Commissioner

Sabyasachi Sen said.

Mamata Banerjee had voiced fears of a violent campaign being unleashed by communists, but so far only stray incidents have occurred.

The CPI-M, which also heads the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) in the south-western state of Kerala, was also seen on shaky ground.

Kerala's left-wing credentials are almost as long-standing as West Bengal and it boasted the world's first elected communist government in 1957 but media surveys last week have written off the state government of chief minister E.K. Nayanar in the polls.

Nayanar, however, says his Communist-led coalition will survive.



PHOTO: AFP

Veteran Communist leader Jyoti Basu gestures as he addresses a Communist Party of India- Marxist (CPI-M) election rally in Kolkata yesterday on the last day of campaigning ahead of local assembly polls. The CPI-M is facing a stiff challenge from the Trinamool Congress (TC) and Congress (I) alliance that could put an end to over two decades of Communist rule in West Bengal.



PHOTO: AFP

A Burmese asylum seeker fans her baby during an indefinite hunger strike by members of the Burmese community in front of the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) office in New Delhi yesterday.

US loses seat on UN Narcotics Control Board

REUTERS, United Nations

In a second embarrassing blow to Washington at the United Nations, the United States was voted off the International Narcotics Control Board, which the State Department on Monday called regrettable.

The vote by secret ballot, not announced at the time, occurred last Thursday in the UN Economic and Social Council. The body's 54 members on the same day threw the United States off the UN Commission for Human Rights, the top UN rights group, based in Geneva.

One Western envoy speculated that the US lost both back to back votes for the same reason. Europeans, who pay their bills to the world body on time, voted and campaigned for their EU colleagues, with France, Austria and the Netherlands edging out the US candidate, Herbert Okun.

Peru, India, Brazil and Iran also won seats.

Okun had been a respected member for 10 years on the board, which monitors compliance with UN treaties on substance abuse and drug trafficking.

A former ambassador to the now-defunct East Germany and a deputy ambassador at the United Nations, Okun, 70, assisted former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in trying to devise a UN peace formula for Bosnia in the early 1990s.

He then moved to other diplomatic ventures for the United Nations related to the Balkans.

Expressing his regrets at Okun's loss, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher, said, "Well, there's something happening out there. I'm not sure I want to give too much meat to the various arguments that have been advanced for what it is."

But he said "I think it's fair to speculate there may be issues related to how we handled ourselves, to how we pushed very hard for human rights."

The board monitors and enforces three treaties: one in 1961 on narcotics control, a second in 1971 on psychotropic and synthetic substances and a third one adopted in 1988 on drug trafficking and money laundering. It also reports on the status of legal drugs.

Pope calls for 'constructive dialogue' to ensure ME peace

AFP, Damascus

Pope John Paul II left Syria for Malta yesterday after calling for "constructive dialogue" to open "the door to peace" in the Middle East in front of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at Damascus airport.

He left in a Syrian airlines plane, with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad heading a government delegation gathered to wave him off.

"For the door of peace to open, fundamental issues of truth and justice, of rights and responsibilities must be resolved," he said at the end of his historic four-day visit.

"The world looks to the Middle East with hope and concern, expectantly awaiting every sign of constructive dialogue," he said in front of the Syrian President.

"The first steps towards peace

must be a steadfast conviction that a solution is possible within the parameters of international law and the resolutions of the United Nations."

"I appeal once more to all the peoples involved, and to their political leaders, to recognise that confrontation has failed and will always fail," he said.

He also expressed the wish that "Syria's long tradition of harmonious relations between Christians and Muslims will endure and become even stronger."

Bashar for his part hit out at accusations of anti-semitism levelled against him by Israel and Jewish organisations, saying that Arabs themselves were Semites.

"It is regrettable that there are still parties who fear historical truths being mentioned and who accuse us Semites of being anti-semitic," he said.

"These parties have adopted double standards," he said, "falling back on the logic of force and arrogance instead of using the strength of logic and of law, but all this will not cancel the truth and will in no way change the conviction of the Arab people in these truths," he said.

Assad told the pope he appreciated his "comments on justice, resolutions of international legality and on the law of self-determination" demanded by the Palestinians.

He said he was "satisfied with the results of the historic visit" of John Paul II in Syria, "the cradle of the civilisation of religions."

The pope arrived in Syria from Greece, on his three-nation tour in the footsteps of St. Paul.

US pays \$18 m to family of woman killed by police

AFP, Chicago

The city of Chicago Monday agreed to pay 18 million dollars to the family of a 26-year-old woman shot and killed by a police officer in what authorities later determined was unnecessary use of force.

The family of LaTanya Haggerty had sued the city for 100 million dollars following her death in June 1994, but ultimately settled for what is still the largest pay-out for a wrongful death suit in the city's history, city spokeswoman Jenny Hoyle said.

The agreement came one day before the two sides were due to go to trial in the civil case which was brought on behalf of the family by a Chicago law firm, headed in part by Johnnie Cochran, the attorney that made his name defending the former US football great, O.J. Simpson.

5 killed in arson attack in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Five people were killed and four injured Tuesday after a man stormed into an office of a consumer credit company in northern Japan and set it on fire, a police spokesman said.

The man, who appeared to be in his 40s, entered Takefuji Corp.'s branch in Aomori, 550 km north of Tokyo, and demanded money from the branch manager, the police spokesman said.

2 arrested for bomb attack on church in Bihar

AFP, Patna

Two Hindu men were arrested in connection with a bomb attack on a church in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, police said yesterday.

Bihar Director General of Police R.R. Prasad said Harender Kumar and Santosh Kumar were arrested at their homes in Bihar's Muzaffarpur area where the church was bombed Sunday.

IAF practises against N-arms backdrop at war games

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian air force is practising new methods of intercepting enemy aircraft laden with nuclear weapons in the biggest ever wargames along the sensitive Pakistan border, officials said yesterday.

Air Marshal S. Krishnaswamy, in charge of the air element of the exercises, told a press conference his men and officers were practising against a nuclear arms backdrop.

"Every day we are including methods of detection which come in handy to intercept an enemy aircraft with nuclear weapons," Krishnaswamy said.

"Our troops have also been directed to wear special apparatus if a scene of nuclear or biological attack is created."

The biggest war games in 13 years, codenamed "Operation Complete Victory", began on Saturday and are being conducted jointly by the Indian army and air force.

Around 60,000 troops have been mobilised, as have 120 fighter and transport aircraft, including state-of-the-art MiG 29s and Mi17 IV helicopters.

The exercises have one main objective, which is to train men in a "war-like" situation, Krishnaswamy said.

"The important issue here is the training. I am training. I am not demonstrating. We're certainly not

demonstrating," Krishnaswamy said.

The Air Force has conducted 720 sorties since Saturday and is likely to conduct a total of 900 to 1,000 sorties by May 10, the day of the final assault.

India and Pakistan, which remain prickly neighbours, both carried out their first nuclear tests in May 1998.

The two countries have fought three wars since the division of the sub-continent in 1947, and came close to the brink of conflict over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir in 1999.

Pakistan reacted angrily to "Operation Complete Victory", saying it was not given adequate notice by the Indian government.

New Delhi, however, vehemently denies this saying Islamabad was informed well in advance.

Under a 1991 agreement between the two countries, each side is required to give advance notice to the other of all exercises at corps level within a distance of 75 km from the border.

Despite the protests, witnesses reported that columns of armour had rolled into the hot deserts of the north-western state of Rajasthan, the main battleground for the exercises.

Apart from traditional fighter planes like MiG 21, MiG 29s, the air force is also testing a new hi-tech radar system called Indira II.

"It is performing beautifully

despite the extreme weather conditions," Krishnaswamy said.

An intense heat wave is currently covering north India, especially in the Bikaner sector of Rajasthan where the main action is taking place.

Spy Planes or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles called "Lakshya" are also being heavily used for identifying targets for fighter jets.

These planes, along with the fighter jets, are flying "day and night" testing pilot skills and machine performance in all conditions.

An accident took place on Sunday when a MiG 21 crashed during the sortie killing the pilot. An inquiry has been ordered to determine the cause of the mishap.

Krishnaswamy also said that the forces were implementing all facets of electronic warfare, such as jamming enemy radars and air communication controls and deceiving enemy planes while attempting an assault.

Live gunfire in anti-aircraft guns and airborne guns fitted on fighter jets are also being used.

The manoeuvres will end with the firing of high-calibre live ammunition rockets and other battlefield missiles in Pokhran, the site of India's nuclear tests.

Jiang to meet Clinton in HK

AFP, Hong Kong

Chinese President Jiang Zemin is set to meet with former US leader Bill Clinton on the sidelines of a global economic forum here, the Hong Kong Mail reported yesterday.

The two men, who met on several occasions when Clinton was in the White House, would meet on Wednesday afternoon at the Harbour Plaza Hotel where Jiang is staying, the English-language daily said in a report.

Gunmen kill Pak police official

AP, Islamabad

Two unidentified gunmen shot and killed a police officer in northwest Pakistan, the state-run news agency reported yesterday.

Ijaz Ahmed Langrial senior superintendent of police, was shot several times Monday by gunmen using automatic weapons. The attackers fled the scene in Dera Ismail Khan, some 300 km south of the federal capital Islamabad, the Associated Press of Pakistan reported.

No one claimed responsibility for the attack. There was no information about the motive of the murder.

US resumes spy flights off China

Beijing blasts resumption, says spy plane can't fly home

AFP, Washington

Unarmed and unescorted, a US Air Force surveillance plane flew off the coast of northeastern China Monday, resuming intelligence-gathering flights that were suspended April 1 after a navy surveillance plane collided with a Chinese fighter, a Pentagon official said.

China has demanded that the surveillance flights be stopped, but the United States has insisted that its aircraft have a right to fly in international airspace.

"As we indicated they would, US surveillance activities are continuing in a variety of places around the world," said Bryan Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman. "They continue to operate in international airspace and water as they have over the years."

The White House had no com-

ment on the resumption of surveillance flights.

The first flight was conducted by an RC-135 "Rivet Joint" jet that flew from Japan on a route off northeastern China, said a Pentagon official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The flights were suspended after a mid-air collision between a US Navy EP-3 surveillance plane and a Chinese F-8 fighter that intercepted it over the South China Sea.

The Chinese fighter crashed into the sea and its pilot was killed, but the US aircraft managed to make an emergency landing at an air base on China's Hainan Island where it has been held since.

Because of tensions with China over the collision, the Pentagon had considered protecting the flights with fighter escorts when they resumed.

But the official said the RC-135, which is unarmed, flew without a fighter escort.

Meanwhile, China said yesterday a US spy plane stranded in southern China could not fly back to the United States as it protested the resumption of US surveillance flights near its coastal waters.

"The Chinese side has several times stated clearly in relevant Sino-US negotiations that it is impossible for the US EP-3 plane to fly back to the US from Hainan Island," Xinhua quoted foreign ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi as saying.

The plane has been stranded on Hainan since the April 1 collision with a Chinese F-8 fighter jet, in which the Chinese plane was downed and the pilot killed.

"The US side should take a pragmatic and constructive attitude so that the issue on handling the US

plane could be properly settled," Sun said.

China has blamed the US for the incident and demanded an end to the surveillance flights near its coast, while Washington has blamed the incident on reckless flying by the Chinese pilot and demanded the return of its plane.

But a Pentagon official said the surveillance flights had resumed on Monday, drawing further anger from China.

"China has constantly opposed US spy flights off China's coast and will continue to lodge serious representations with the United States on the resumption of such flights," Sun said in a separate dispatch quoted by Xinhua.

Sharon blames Arafat for arms shipment

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon accused Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat of commissioning an arms shipment stopped by the Israeli navy Sunday, saying the boat had made at least three previous voyages to the Gaza Strip to deliver weapons.

"We know from the captain of this boat it was the fourth time. Maybe one of those four times it didn't succeed," Sharon said.

"The only ones who could have collected that were the Palestinian Authority," he told a press conference. "No-one else had the means on the beaches of Gaza to collect such quantities of weapons."

"No doubt Arafat would like to get as much as possible by negotiations, but he prepares himself to put further pressure in order to get more in the future. Otherwise it's hard to

explain why he had to violate the agreements he himself signed," Sharon said.

The Israeli military authorities announced Monday they had intercepted a ship -- the Lebanese-registered San Torini -- carrying 40 tonnes of arms, including four SA-7 "Strella" anti-aircraft missiles, Katyusha rockets, mortar bombs, guns and ammunition.

Under agreements signed by the Israelis and Palestinians, the Palestinian Authority has undertaken not to acquire heavy weaponry.

Meanwhile, the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) of Ahmad Jibril denied Tuesday links with a ship carrying arms seized by Israel two days ago.

Court issues arrest warrant against Laloo Prasad

AFP, Patna

A court issued an arrest warrant yesterday against the maverick former chief minister of Bihar state, Laloo Prasad Yadav, in connection with a massive embezzlement case.

The court in Ranchi in the eastern state of Bihar, dubbed India's most lawless, issued the non-bailable warrant at the request of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

Yadav, who handed the Bihar chief ministership over to his illiterate wife, has had several scrapes with the law but has managed to escape fairly unharmed each time.

Yadav was arrested last year over the same embezzlement case

but was freed from jail on November 23, 2000 after a court granted him bail.

Yadav and his wife, Rabri Devi, are accused of embezzling four million rupees (89,000 dollars) between 1990 and 1996 during his tenure as Bihar chief minister.

Yadav, 53, installed Devi as chief minister in 1997 after he stepped down from the post over another 700-million-dollar financial scandal which has yet to be resolved.

Yadav, who leads a regional party, remains the true powerbroker in Bihar, and has accused Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government of using the CBI to try to topple his wife.



PHOTO: AFP

Celina Jaitley, Miss India 2001, poses in her evening gown during the Miss Universe 2001 Presentation Show at the Ruben Rodriguez Coliseum in Bayamon, Puerto Rico on Sunday.