



Shekhawat new Indian VP

PTI, New Delhi

NDA nominee and former Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhairon Singh Shekhawat was on Monday elected the country's 12th Vice-President.

He defeated the joint opposition candidate Sushil Kumar Shinde by 149 votes.

In an electoral college comprising 788 Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha members, Shekhawat polled 454 votes against Shinde's 305.

In all, 766 MPs cast their franchise in a straight contest in which Shekhawat had a clear edge going by the NDA's combined strength in both Houses of Parliament.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian girl leans on her bag as she queues with others at the Kalandia Israeli checkpoint to leave the West Bank town of Ramallah on Tuesday. Many Palestinians in Ramallah, which is under Israeli military re-occupation travel to Jerusalem and other West Bank towns for work and to carry out their daily errands when the military curfew is lifted on the city.

Israeli court gives go ahead to deportation of militants' kin

AFP, Jerusalem

An Israeli military court gave its approval late Monday to the controversial policy of deporting the kin of wanted militants, complicating efforts by the Palestinian leadership to broker a truce by militant groups.

The three Palestinians, whose brothers are suspected of involvement in a July ambush of a Jewish settler bus, have until 1100 GMT Tuesday to make a final appeal against their expulsion from the West Bank in the first application of a widely criticised new Israeli deterrent policy.

The Centre for the Defence of the Individual, an Israeli rights group which provided the trio's legal counsel, said it would make the required appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court.

Their expulsion to the Gaza Strip would constitute "collective punishment contrary to international law and natural rights," it said.

Palestinian militant groups, which were earlier Monday engaged in talks on a possible halt to attacks inside the Jewish state, have threatened dire retaliation if Israel goes through with the policy of targeting their members' families.

The military court in the West Bank settlement of Beit El made its decision in the case of Intissar Adjuri, 34, from the Askar refugee camp near Nablus, public television reported.

But the ruling also applies to her brother Kifah, 28, and Abdel Nasser Assidi, 34, from the village of Tel, the television added.

The three were among 21 Palestinians arrested last month because they were related to militants who killed a total of 14 people in two bloody July attacks.

If their appeal to the Supreme Court fails, the trio are liable to deportation

to the Gaza Strip the same day for a period of two years, their Israeli defence team said.

If they are expelled from their homes in the West Bank, it will be the first time Israel has used the controversial penalty since the current Palestinian uprising began in September 2000.

The Israeli army and right-wing dominated government have sought tougher measures against the families of Palestinian militants as a new form of retaliation and deterrence.

Israeli law, inherited from the inter-war mandate period of British rule, allows for the transfer of Palestinians living in the West Bank or Gaza Strip if it transpires "they personally represent a security threat."

But the United States has voiced its disapproval of the controversial move, while Palestinians have called it a "war crime" in breach of international law.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has said he is "deeply concerned" by the proposed Israeli policy and urged it to respect the fourth Geneva Convention.

Critics say that if it can be proved that relatives aided and abetted a militant's crime, they should be prosecuted for doing so.

The military court's ruling came as militant groups held negotiations behind closed doors on a call from the Palestinian leadership to end attacks inside Israel.

All of the main militant groups have long made clear their furious opposition to any move by Israel to target the families of their members.

Islamic groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad threatened a bloody response when Israel originally announced the policy.

US closes American Centre in Islamabad

Washington reiterates travel warning to Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

US authorities have closed the American Centre in the Pakistani capital Islamabad over security concerns, embassy officials said Tuesday.

"It is temporarily closed," an official told AFP, declining to be named or to give further details.

A security guard on duty at the centre in downtown Islamabad said the closure was ordered on Monday.

"No employee is coming," he told AFP, adding "we are on security duty, we don't know the details."

US embassy spokeswoman Linda Chetham was quoted in the Dawn daily as saying the centre "has been closed for security reasons until further notice."

The closure of the well-guarded American complex, which houses a public library, comes just one week after the US consulate in Karachi was closed.

It was shut down on August 5

after Karachi authorities reopened traffic lanes alongside the building and removed concrete barriers from the front.

The road had been fully blocked after a suicide car-bombing outside the consulate on June 14 killed 12 Pakistanis.

This latest closing also followed a renewed warning to US nationals to avoid travelling to or staying in Pakistan.

The warning was reiterated in Washington on Monday, citing a high risk of terrorist violence and tensions between Pakistan and India.

The State Department noted "several recent attacks on Christian facilities" as well as a likely anti-US backlash after the sentencing of four men for the murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl.

"While we have no specific information concerning possible retaliation by sympathisers, the

potential exists for such action against U.S. citizens and interests," said the warning, reiterating a July 19 directive.

Islamabad's continued support for the US-led campaign against terrorists and military action in Afghanistan could mean that members of the al-Qaida network have crept into Pakistan and other countries, it said.

Meanwhile, the United States on Monday renewed a travel warning for US nationals to avoid traveling to or staying in Pakistan, as the risk of terrorist violence remains high and tensions with India still simmer.

The State Department warning noted "several recent attacks on Christian facilities" and the indefinite closing of the US consulate in the southern city of Karachi, as well as likely anti-US backlash after the sentencing of four men for the murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl.

Kalam asks Gujarat govt to expedite relief

PTI, Ahmedabad

Seeking to give a healing touch, President APJ Abdul Kalam on Monday made his much-talked-about first official visit outside Delhi to a camp of victims of communal riots that was devoid of any controversy and asked the administration to expedite relief and rehabilitation measures.

Beginning a two-day visit to the state with a trip to Mahatma Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram, Kalam then drove straight to a relief camp amidst slogan shouting in Naroda Patia where 90 people were killed and hundreds injured in one of the gory incidents of violence following the Godhra carnage.

Moved by the plight of victims during a brisk 30-minute walk of the lanes and bylanes of the congested minority dominated area in the company of Chief Minister Narendra Modi, the President asked the Collector to expedite relief and rehabilitation work after he heard the victims that there has been "gross negligence" during and after

the violence. After his interaction with survivors of the three-month old carnage, he told District Collector K Srinivasan that everything possible should be done so that the battered victims felt safe and secure.

Reflecting his special concern for children, an anguished Kalam told the collector that the child victims should be immediately put in school to restart their education.

Last his visit caused any political controversy, a presidential spokesman told reporters that Kalam did not give any instructions to the Chief Minister.

Meanwhile, a standby Air Force Boeing 737 was on Tuesday flown to Ahmedabad after President APJ Abdul Kalam's special plane developed a technical snag, Defence sources said.

The snag was detected during a detailed pre-flight check-up, they said. "The snag was rectified and the President flew from Ahmedabad to Bhubji by the same aircraft this morning," a source said.

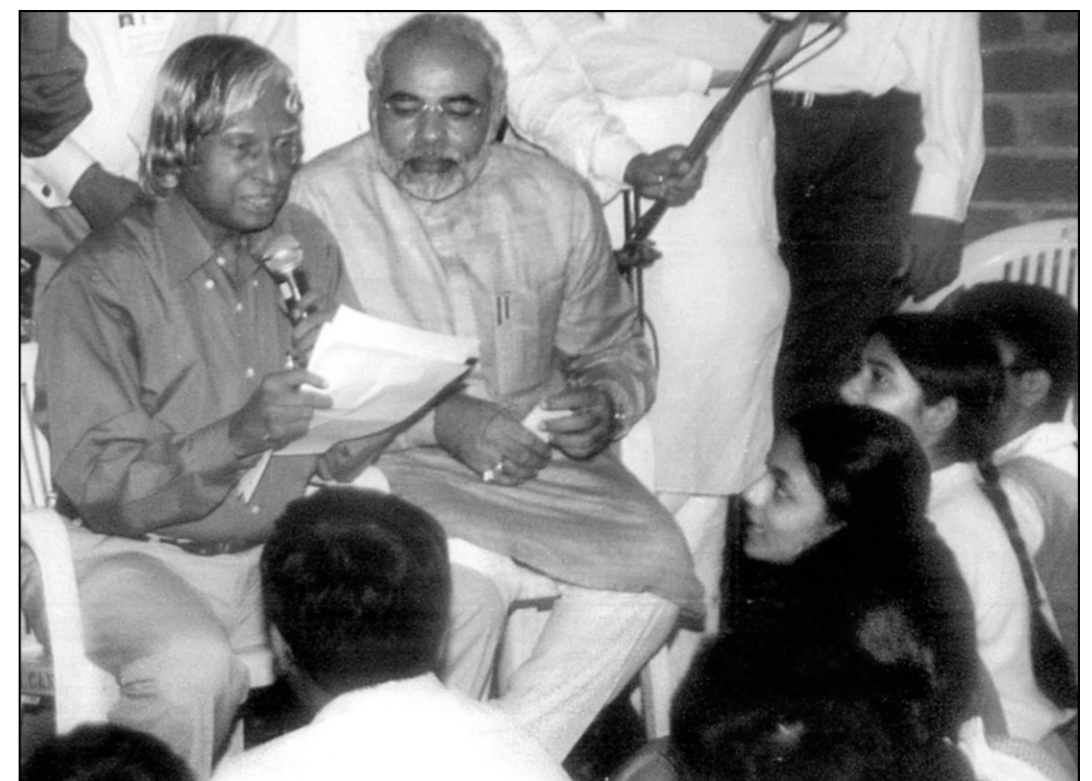


PHOTO: AFP

Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (L) talks to schoolchildren during his visit to the riot-torn city of Ahmedabad on Monday as Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi (R) looks on. Kalam, began a two-day visit to riot-hit Gujarat state, his first official trip since taking up his post, as local authorities continued frantic efforts to clean up areas he would see.

Nicolas Cage marries Lisa Marie Presley

AFP, Kona

Actor Nicolas Cage married Elvis Presley's daughter Lisa Marie in a romantic Hawaiian hideaway, the couple's spokeswoman said Monday.

"They got married on Saturday evening, at 6:30 pm in the big island of Hawaii in the Mauna Lani Bay Hotel and Bungalows," Michele Vega, Presley's spokeswoman, said.

"It was in front of their immediate family and friends. Her mother was there, her daughter Danielle was the flower girl and her son Benjamin with Nicolas' son Weston were the ring bearers."

Cage, 38, changed his original surname to avoid being connected with his famous uncle, director Francis Ford Coppola. He was previously married to actress Patricia Arquette.

Iraq asks US to drop war threat

Baghdad mulls arms inspections

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq on Tuesday urged the United States to abandon its hostile policy and the United Nations to continue negotiations with Baghdad as the defiant regime mulled demands to open up to disarmament inspections.

The call came after Foreign Minister Najib Sabri revealed Monday night that Iraq was still working on a response to UN demands for unconditional inspections.

"We are preparing a reply to his excellency the UN secretary general," Sabri told reporters without elaborating.

Kofi Annan's letter to Sabri was in response to an Iraqi invitation to the head of the UN arms inspectorate,

Hans Blix, to visit Baghdad to talk on the possible resumption of monitoring.

A US State Department spokesman scoffed at Iraq's statements.

"I don't see any particular news in that. I think we've been quite clear that Iraq continues to refuse to give a straightforward answer to the UN," spokesman Philip Reeker said.

"(The Iraqi government) refused to face up to its obligations and continue to obfuscate and look for ways to move the goal posts when it's a simple situation. (Iraqi President Saddam Hussein) understands exactly what needs to be done: that is comply fully with the UN Security Council resolutions and disarm."

However, Iraq's state-run media urged a re-think in Washington.

"The United States must review its hostile policy towards Iraq and deal with it taking into account its regional, Arab and international importance," the ruling Baath Party's Ath-Thawra newspaper said.

The daily told Washington to stop "putting pressure on the world body to prevent it from answering the legitimate concerns of Iraq and normalising relations," with the United Nations.

During three rounds of talks this year Iraq submitted to the Security Council a series of questions, notably on the lifting of sanctions and respect for its sovereignty, and is still awaiting an answer.

Government newspaper Al-Jumhuriya took up the same theme, stressing that "negotiations are the

most effective way of solving international conflicts."

"The intervention of a third party (United States), whose interests could be affected by a possible settlement, worsens the conflict instead of helping to solve it," al-Jumhuriya said.

"If the US administration wants to achieve serious results as governments across the world want, it should open channels of dialogue and stop marginalising the role of the UN," said Babel newspaper.

"Facts have proven that Iraq is an essential pillar of peace and security in the region and any attempt to damage the security of the country would threaten the region," warned the daily run by President Saddam Hussein's elder son Uday.

US tipped on al-Qaida threats to NY bridges

AFP, Washington

The FBI received a tip from a foreign government about potential al-Qaida threats against bridges in New York City and San Francisco and a major landmark in Chicago, The New York Times said Tuesday.

The paper said the reports were not specific and that New York's Brooklyn Bridge and San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge were given as examples of targets that might be attacked.

The reports came from a person the unidentified foreign government said had previously provided

reliable information. US officials said the reports were the second time in recent months it had received information about possible attacks on US landmarks.

The first came earlier this year from Abu Zubaydah, a senior aide to al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

Officials said the Central Intelligence Agency was uncertain whether the latest report was an "echo" of Abu Zubaydah's warning.

One US official said the report was so unspecific that it "didn't keep me awake at night."

Deaths soar as European floods in fury

Thousands evacuated from Prague

AFP, Prague

Thousands of people were evacuated from Prague on Tuesday as floods threatened to submerge the medieval center of the Czech capital and the death toll from the storms across central Europe rose to at least 74.

Thousands of firefighters, police, military and hundreds of volunteers worked feverishly against the rising waters across central and eastern Europe, just days after flash floods killed 58 on Russia's Black Sea coast.

The waters of Prague's Vltava river were steadily rising and were expected to reach their peak by early afternoon, flooding the medieval centre, Mala Strata, mayor Igor Nemeč told reporters.

Emergency accommodation was being provided for those evacuated in the Czech Republic, where some 6,000 firefighters, police, military, civil protection specialists and volunteers have been working around the clock.

The Czech government on Monday declared a state of emergency in the capital and four regions in Bohemia, where seven people have died following several days of heavy rainfall.

The Czech cabinet was to meet in emergency session later Tuesday to discuss rescue efforts and how to fund operations already under way, a government spokeswoman said.

Orders to evacuate 20,000 Prague residents were given by the

city's authorities as deadly floods wreaked havoc across Europe, with Austria's central city of Salzburg declared a disaster area.

Floods and mudslides claimed four lives in the worst rain Austria has seen in decades.

One fireman drowned in his car while returning home from duty west of Linz, while a second was killed

after being buried alive in a mudslide in the province of Upper Austria and another man found dead in his flooded cellar in Hallein, near Salzburg.

A third fireman drowned after being swept away Monday in Salzburg province. At least six people were missing and one was reported dead in the eastern

German state of Saxony in torrential rains that have ravaged regions of the country for days, police said.

The body of a 70-year-old man was recovered from the floods as mounting water levels on rivers in Saxony left dozens stranded in extreme weather that has left four Germans dead.

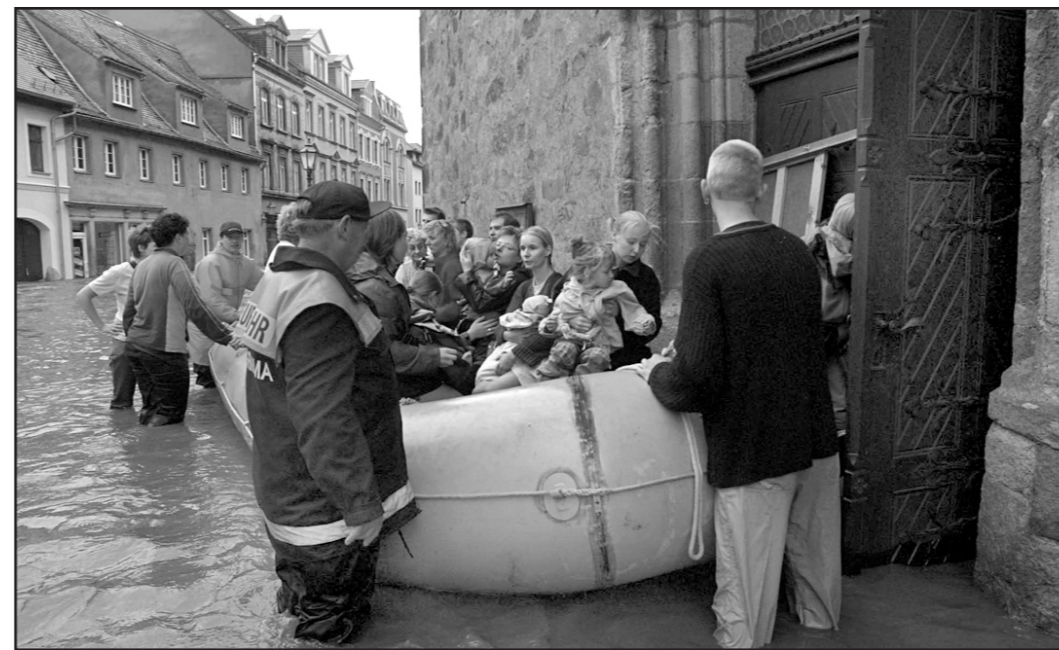


PHOTO: AFP

Firefighters evacuate residents with a dinghy on Tuesday in Grimma in the German province of Saxony. At least six people were missing and one dead early Tuesday in the eastern German state of Saxony in torrential rains that have ravaged regions of the country for days, police said.

Tigers win sea route

BBC, London

The government in Sri Lanka has agreed to allow the Tamil Tiger rebels the use of a controversial sea route.

A government spokesman told reporters that the rebels could move along the east coast twice a week, subject to certain conditions.

The decision, which fulfils a key demand by the Tamil rebels, is

expected to bolster prospects for the Norwegian-brokered peace talks between Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE.

Peace talks mediated by Norwegian observers originally expected in May, have been

pushed back with both sides engaged in preparing an agenda for talks.

The two sides signed a ceasefire agreement in February.

Reports say the conditions attached to the use of the sea route are yet to be fully spelt out.

But the government says the LTTE would be expected to inform the government about their movements in advance.

"Basically each boat, for the purpose of carrying LTTE cadres on leave, will carry a peace monitor and a Sri Lanka monitoring mission flag," the head of Sri Lanka government's peace handling body, Bernard Gunatillake, told Reuters news agency.