

BJP drafts agenda for early polls

AFP, Hyderabad

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Hindu nationalist leaders yesterday charted out a strategy for parliamentary elections, which they want to hold within months to cash in on India's economic growth.

Vajpayee was due to address a rally of workers of his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during the two-day meeting in the southern city of Hyderabad that could set a date for general elections.

"The focus will be on the issue of advancing elections," BJP president Venkaiah Naidu said.

"The party will deliberate and make known its preference but it is the prerogative of the prime minister to take a final decision."

Party spokesman Prakash Javadekar told AFP the conclave would pass resolutions on political and economic issues, as well as last week's South Asian summit in Islamabad where India and Pakistan agreed to restart a stalled dialogue.

BJP leaders met behind closed doors in a convention centre festooned with the party's trademark saffron and green flags and its election symbol, the lotus.

Posters of Vajpayee and banners hailing his government's performance decorated a four-km stretch of road leading to the venue.

The tone for the conclave was set Saturday with party general secretary Pramod Mahajan suggesting elections be held in March. The deadline is September 30.

Another BJP spokesman, Vijay Kumar Malhotra, said the polls should be held by mid-April before the harvest season sets in.

Javadekar said the BJP wanted to take advantage of a strong showing in December regional elections and on a "feel-good" factor with soaring growth and peace moves with Pakistan.

The economy shot up 8.4 percent in the quarter ending September on the back of a bountiful monsoon.

Naidu said the BJP had also "secured the consent" of allies in the coalition of some 20 parties on the timing of parliamentary polls.

As if on cue, the BJP's biggest ally in southern India, the Telegu Desam Party headquartered in Hyderabad, Sunday voiced support for early national polls.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) and Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani (R) listen to Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president Venkaiah Naidu (C) as he makes an address at the party's National Executive Meeting in Hyderabad yesterday. Senior leaders of India's ruling Hindu nationalist party BJP, including Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee are attending the two day-long meeting to reach a consensus on possible early parliamentary election.

'Iraq invasion planning started before Sept 11'

AP, Crawford

Former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill contends the United States began laying the groundwork for an invasion of Iraq just days after President Bush took office in January 2001 more than two years before the start of the US-led war that ousted Saddam Hussein.

"From the very beginning, there was a conviction that Saddam Hussein was a bad person and that he needed to go," O'Neill told CBS's "60 Minutes" in an interview to be aired Sunday night.

The official American government stance on Iraq, dating to the Clinton administration, was that the United States sought to oust Saddam.

But O'Neill, who was fired by Bush in December 2002, said he had qualms about what he asserted was the pre-emptive nature of the war planning.

"For me, the notion of pre-emption, that the US has the unilateral right to do whatever we decide to do, is a really huge leap," according to an excerpt of the

interview that CBS released Saturday.

The administration has not found evidence that the Iraqi leader was involved in the Sept. 11 attacks but officials have said they had to consider the possibility that Saddam could have undertaken an even larger scale-strike against the United States.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan would not confirm or deny that the White House began Iraq war planning early in Bush's term. But, he said, Saddam "was a threat to peace and stability before September 11th, and even more of a threat after September 11."

"It appears that the world according to Mr. O'Neill is more about trying to justify his own opinions than looking at the reality of the results we are achieving on behalf of the American people," McClellan said in Texas, where the president is staying at his ranch.

O'Neill's interview was part of his effort to promote a new book about the first half of Bush's term, "The Price of Loyalty," for which O'Neill was a primary source.



An Israeli soldier throws a tear gas grenade toward Palestinian demonstrators in the Balata Palestinian refugee camp of Nablus Saturday. Exasperated by the stalled peace process and Israel's controversial West Bank barrier, the Palestinians have reasserted their right to declare independence on their land.

'Blister agent found in old Iraqi shells'

AP, Baghdad

Danish and Icelandic troops have uncovered a cache of 36 shells buried in the Iraqi desert, and preliminary tests showed they contained a liquid blister agent, the Danish military said Saturday.

The 120mm mortar shells are thought to be left over from the eight-year war between Iraq and neighboring Iran, which ended in 1988, said US Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt.

The shells were found by Danish engineering troops and Icelandic de-miners near Al Quamah, north of the city of Basra where Denmark's 410 troops are based, the Danish Army Operational Command said in a written statement.

The shells were wrapped in plastic but had been damaged, and they appeared to have been buried for at least 10 years, the statement said.

It said British experts did a preliminary test and said the shells contained "blister gas," but did not elaborate.

Before the war, the United States alleged Iraq still had stockpiles of mustard gas, a World War I-era blister agent that is stored in liquid form. The chemical burns skin, eyes and the lungs.

Blasts kill 5 Afghan soldiers, 4 Taliban

AFP, Kandahar

Five Afghan soldiers and four suspected Taliban militants have been killed in two separate explosions in southern Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

Five Afghan soldiers were killed and three injured Saturday in an attack by Islamic fundamentalist Taliban militants in the frontier district of Sharawak near the border with Pakistan, the military commander of the province, General Khan Mohammad, said.

An unknown number of attackers had crossed the border to carry out their operation and escaped back into Pakistan later, the general said.

In the neighbouring southern province of Helmand four suspected Taliban were killed when the bomb they were building exploded as they worked on it.

"Yesterday four Taliban who were preparing a bomb, a remote-controlled bomb in a pressure cooker, were killed when the bomb went off," Helmand police chief Abdul Rahman Sabir said Saturday.

"The investigation is going on. We have the bodies but we don't know yet whether they are all Afghans; we will be able to tell you their identity after we finish the investigation."

The explosion destroyed the room in which the men were working in the Sangin district of the province, some 490 kilometres (304 miles) from the capital Kabul.

Southern and southeastern Afghanistan have of late experienced an increased number of militant attacks and kidnappings, the most violent being a bomb explosion in the southern city of Kandahar last Tuesday which killed 15 people and injured scores with most of the victims children.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan plans to hold its first democratic elections this summer despite spiralling security issues, factional infighting, low voter-registration and warnings that premature polls could further destabilize the country.

President Hamid Karzai said Saturday he aimed to hold the elections as planned, despite earlier saying they may be put off for several months due to logistical reasons.

"We are trying to reach the date we have set for ourselves which is the month of June or July so we should try to do that," he said.

The comments echoed US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, who said last week: "I am not of the view at this point that elections cannot take place this June, or this summer."

Pakistan makes terror funding a non-bailable offence

ANI, Islamabad

In what appears to be a yet another step towards curbing the menace of terrorism, Pakistan has declared financing of terrorism a non-bailable offence with minimum four and maximum 10 years imprisonment.

The decision was taken at a Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali here on Saturday.

The Cabinet approved amendments to the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, in the light of UN Security Council resolutions, reported The News on Sunday.

"Any individual or entity, involved in financing of terrorism shall be punished with rigorous imprisonment for a term of four to 10 years in place of the original punishment of six months to five years as provided in Section 11 (N) of the Act," the paper quoted Information Minister Shaikh Rashid Ahmed as saying after the meeting.

"Financing of terrorism shall be a non-bailable offence and all societies and other institutions which have a potential to act as conduits for such financing shall be obliged to establish bank accounts and maintain information about their employees, clients, failing, which they will face fine and revocation of licence," the minister further said.

'Half of Britons believe Blair lied over Kelly'

AFP, London

Fifty percent of British voters believe Prime Minister Tony Blair lied over the outing of David Kelly, the Ministry of Defence expert on Iraqi weapons who killed himself last year, a poll showed yesterday.

The poll was released as Blair awaits publication of a report by senior judge Brian Hutton after he oversaw an inquiry late last year into Kelly's death.

Blair indicated to parliament last Wednesday that he would quit if it was proven that he lied over Kelly.

Kelly, 59, was found dead with a slit wrist on July 18 not long after he was exposed as being behind allegations that the prime minister's office "sexed up" intelligence on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction to rally support for the US-led war.

Half of Britons agreed with the statement that Blair lied in saying he did not authorise the leaking of Kelly's name, according to the online YouGov poll published in The Mail on Sunday newspaper.

Less than a quarter of respondents, 23 percent, agreed Blair told the truth, while 27 percent were undecided. YouGov interviewed 2,093 people online

between January 8 to 10.

Observers had expected Hutton to release his report around January 15, but they now believe he is unlikely to do so later this month or in February.

Blair is expected to be grilled over Kelly later Sunday when he appears on a BBC television news show.

Kelly was named as the source of a BBC radio news report last May that alleged Downing Street beefed up intelligence on Iraq.

The allegation centered on a claim in a September 2002 intelligence dossier, released by Blair's government to rally public support for an Iraq invasion last March, that Iraq could deploy chemical weapons in as little as 45 minutes.

The suicide of the soft-spoken and respected former UN arms inspector hurled Blair -- US President George W. Bush's staunchest ally on Iraq -- into the worst political crisis of his more than six years in office.

In testimony before the Hutton inquiry, the most senior civil servant at the Ministry of Defence, Kevin Tebbit, said Blair had chaired a meeting where the decision was taken to expose Kelly to the press as the BBC's source.

Top Iranian reformist blasts 'coup d'etat' by hardliners

AFP, Tehran

Prominent Iranian reformist MP Mohsen Mirdamadi yesterday accused Tehran's powerful hardliners of staging a "coup d'etat" by disqualifying large numbers of reformers from standing in next month's parliamentary elections.

"I consider this rejection of candidates to be an illegal coup d'etat and an act of regime change by non-military means," said Mirdamadi, head of the parliament's foreign policy and national security commission.

"If this decision is upheld, there will not be elections but designations," he told reporters outside the parliament, or Majlis.

Mirdamadi was one of around 80 incumbent reformist MPs who have been barred from standing in the February 20 elections by the Guardians' Council, an unelected and conservative-controlled political watchdog.

A brother of President Mohammad Khatami and head of the Islamic Iran Participation Front

(IIPF) -- the Islamic republic's largest pro-reform party -- said the move by the Guardians' Council was a mockery of democratic values.

"This is the biggest rejection of candidates in Iranian parliamentary history. If this decision is upheld, it will show that religious democracy is nothing but a mere slogan," said Mohammad Reza Khatami, another MP whose candidacy was also barred.

The Majlis building, where reformist MPs were gathering for a sit-in, would be transformed into "a centre of resistance against this illegal action," he said.

According to Mirdamadi, the bulk of disqualified MPs were found by the Guardians' Council to have been in violation of an article in the electoral law which stipulates candidates for public office must show their commitment to Islam and respect the revolutionary principle that gives Ayatollah Ali Khamenei his position of supreme leader of the Islamic republic.

Mars rover ready to roll

REUTERS, Pasadena

The US robotic rover on Mars completed its transformation from folded landing craft to mobile explorer earlier than expected and may roll off its landing pad as early as Tuesday, scientists at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory said Saturday.

The Spirit rover was set to begin a three-month search for signs of water on the Red Planet on Thursday -- its 14th day on Mars -- but the ease of the stand-up maneuver and a quick fix to a problem with the lander put the mission ahead of schedule.

On its seventh Martian day, or sol seven, Spirit flawlessly executed one of the most complex space deployments ever to morph from its tetrahedron landing shape into a six-wheeled, golf cart-sized vehicle, scientists said.

The lander retracted a lift mechanism that raised Spirit to its full height, allowing the rover to push its front and rear wheels into place in the final steps of a "reverse robotic origami," said Chris Voorhees, mechanical systems engineer.

US team saw potential nuke component in North Korea

AFP, Washington

North Korean officials showed what they said was recently reprocessed plutonium, a potential ingredient for a nuclear weapon, to a visiting US delegation this week, The Washington Post said yesterday, quoting a US official who heard initial details of the trip.

"One official said it appeared that the delegation had been shown what the North Koreans described as recently reprocessed plutonium," the daily said.

"North Korean officials told the experts the material has not been placed in a nuclear device and that it was prepared to 'freeze' it to resolve the crisis over Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions," it said.

Pyeongyang's official media said Saturday that North Korea showed its "nuclear deterrent force" to US scientists and congressional officials who visited the North's main nuclear complex at Yongbyon.

"As is known, the United States

compelled us to make a nuclear deterrent force, which we displayed to (Lewis) and his group," the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) quoted a foreign ministry spokesman as saying.

The North Korea report did not say exactly what the delegation was shown.

Delegation members questioned by reporters as they arrived in Beijing Saturday also kept mum, saying they wanted first to inform the US government about the trip.

Stanford University scholar John Lewis, head of the US delegation, confirmed that the group had visited Yongbyon, becoming the first outsiders to go there since UN inspectors were expelled a year ago.

Delegation member Siegfried Hecker, the former head of Los Alamos National Laboratory, plans to testify about the visit before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on January 20, the Post said.



King Abdullah II (L) of Jordan smiles as he is greeted by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Aziz upon his arrival in Riyadh. The King, on a brief visit, will focus on the "deterioration of the situation in the Palestinian territories and Israel's repressive policies, as well as the separation barrier" Israel is building to cut itself off from the West Bank in talks with the Saudi government.

Asian media overcoming censors, though slowly

AFP, Singapore

Asian media are slowly winning the battle against authoritarianism and breaking the shackles of censorship thanks largely to technology and economic advancements, industry analysts and watchdogs say.

However they caution government-imposed and self-censorship continue to plague the region while corruption, intimidation and violence often descend on the press as soon as freedoms are gained.

China and Vietnam continue to be among the worst offenders, with Beijing's current crackdown on the feisty press in the south of the country illustrating the communist rulers' determination to quash attempts at free expression.

"In both countries obviously all the communists have left is politi-

cal control," Bangkok-based Asian consultant for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Lin Neumann, told AFP.

"They are doing everything they can to keep people from using the Internet and the press to challenge the government's authority."

In China, authorities have reacted by filtering e-mails, blocking websites and ordering Internet service providers to censor their own sites, as well as orchestrating the high-profile and intimidatory arrests of on-line dissidents.

"The arrests of a few prominent Internet users who distribute politically sensitive articles serve as a potent warning to all Internet users," the CPJ's senior research associate for Asia, Sophie Beach, said.

But Neumann was adamant the Chinese authorities would not be able to hold back the tide.

"It's difficult to exaggerate how extensively it has changed the whole system... it's not just the Internet, it's the whole means of communication," Political and Economic Risk Consultancy managing director Bob Broadfoot said.

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US to set up office in Libya for arms inspectors

AFP, Washington

The United States is considering plans to set up an office in Libya to assist US and British arms inspectors as they verify the dismantling of Libya's weapons of mass destruction programs, US officials said Saturday.

The officials said the proposed office -- first reported by The Washington Post -- would give the inspectors logistical, technical and secretarial support, but they took issue with the Post's description of it as a diplomatic mission.

"Of course we want to support the verification teams with office space, computers, maybe a small staff, et cetera," one senior official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"But we're not talking about a diplomatic mission in the traditional sense of an embassy or even a small consulate," the official said. "That would be way, way prema-

ture. We don't even have diplomatic relations with Libya yet."

The Post reported that Washington would dispatch a dozen diplomats and intelligence officers to Libya to staff the mission in a move that would mark the return of US diplomats to the country after more than two decades.

It said the office would be the first US "diplomatic presence" since the US embassy in Tripoli was closed down in May 1980, shortly before it was pillaged and burned.

But the paper quoted one US official as stressing that the mission would not be an embassy.

"There's no real planning for that yet," the official told the Post. "But there is a belief that we have to have a group of people on the ground basically as a special mission to help this (disarmament) process over the long term."