

Priyanka, Rahul address Congress workers in Amethi

PTI, Amethi

Priyanka Vadra and Rahul Gandhi joined Congress's campaign for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections in Amethi, asking party workers to "wipe out" the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

"There is no room for complacency. The need of the hour is to put to use all our might to trounce the NDA in the elections," Priyanka told a gathering of party workers at the Sanjay Gandhi hospital guest house near Munshiganj, about 30 km from Amethi.

Members of the party's frontal organisations attended the meeting, also addressed by Rahul Gandhi.

The Gandhi siblings asked party workers to fan out in villages and strengthen the Congress at the grassroot level. "Kyonki Amethi se uthe wale toofan se BJP ka poori tarah safaya ho jayega" (as the storm arising from Amethi will wipe out the BJP completely).

Earlier, they addressed a meeting of the Seva Dal, Youth Congress, Mahila Cell and block presidents at the guest house.

While Rahul spoke of his mother, the AICC president Sonia Gandhi, becoming the next prime minister, Priyanka hinted that his brother would henceforth be in-charge of the Amethi constituency.

Britain, France, Germany hold meeting in London

AFP, London

The British, French and German foreign ministers have met near London for a private three-way meeting, the Financial Times (FT) said.

The FT said the meeting, which was not confirmed by Britain's foreign ministry, indicated London's desire to boost its trilateral relationship with Paris and Berlin in the newly enlarged European Union.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw met with France's Dominique de Villepin and Germany's Joschka Fischer at Straw's official country residence at Cheneveng near London on Monday night, the newspaper said.

According to a senior British official quoted by the newspaper, Straw and British Prime Minister Tony Blair want London to hold trilateral policy meetings with their Paris and Berlin counterparts about every six weeks.

Democrats slam Bush speech

REUTERS, Washington

Democrats seeking to oust George W. Bush from the White House on Tuesday harshly criticised as empty promises for ordinary Americans the State of the Union speech by the president they hope to succeed.

They also accused Bush of pursuing reckless policies abroad that have alienated allies and left the United States to bear most of the costs and casualties of the Iraq war.

"The State of the Union may look rosy from the White House balcony or the suites of George Bush's wealthiest donors. But hard-working Americans will see through this president's effort to wrap his radical agenda with a compassionate ribbon," said former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, who hoped to bounce back from his third place finish in the Iowa caucuses in next week's New Hampshire primary.

Bush in a wide ranging speech defended the war in Iraq, outlined the ongoing threat of global terror-

ism, promised to promote economic growth and job creation, called for making permanent tax cuts he pushed through Congress and unveiled modest domestic initiatives on improving health and education.

But Democrats said he was ignoring the needs of average Americans while pushing policies that benefit the wealthy.

"I think there's just two different worlds here, the world the president talks about and the world Americans are living in," Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, who won Monday's Iowa caucuses, said on NBC.

Retired Gen. Wesley Clark, who bypassed Iowa to focus on New Hampshire, said, "The sad fact is that today, two years after he coined the term, we've got a new axis of evil ... of fiscal policies that threaten our future, foreign policies that threaten our security and domestic policies that put families dead last."

Clark said Bush will "spend billions on the war in Iraq, missile defense, and sending a man to

Mars. But he's going to spend a grand total of \$120 million for job training. That's just \$15 for each unemployed American. That's not much more than the cost of bus fare to the training center, lunch, and coffee."

Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, the most conservative Democratic contender, said Bush "seems to be in a state of denial about the state of our economy, our health care system and our relations with the world."

Democrats in Congress also ripped Bush for pursuing "a go-it-alone foreign policy" and mishandling the economy.

"The president led us into the Iraq war on the basis of unproven assertions without evidence; he embraced a radical doctrine of pre-emptive war unprecedented in our history, and he failed to build a true international coalition," said House of Representatives Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi of California.

"America must be a light to the world, not just a missile," she said.

Bribery scandal threatens Sharon

BBC NEWS ONLINE

An Israeli businessman has been charged with offering hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The charges against property developer David Appel relate to a property deal in Greece involving Mr Sharon's son.

The Israeli leader was questioned last year over the affair but denies any wrongdoing.

The BBC's David Chazan in Jerusalem says the charges could mean serious trouble for Mr Sharon.

Israeli media are speculating about whether he will face charges and if so whether that would force him to leave office, our correspondent says.

The police investigation has focused on the relationship between Mr Appel and Mr Sharon's son Gilad.

US press accuses Bush of ignoring serious issues

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush launched his reelection campaign with his State of the Union address without altering his policies, but ignoring completely the serious issues that lie ahead, leading US dailies said Wednesday.

The Washington Post was struck by the "small bore nature" of some of his proposals, "by the clear political cast of others, and most of all, by the failure to grapple with some of the serious issues facing the country."

As before, wrote the Post, "Bush skated past the challenges that lie ahead in Iraq and made no mention of the likely cost of overcoming them."

"And, as before, he proposed to spend still more and tax still less despite the government's rapidly mounting debts."

The New York Times wrote two editorials on Bush's speech: on his foreign policy -- which has "strained America's relationships with most of the rest of the world" - and on his domestic policy, which "comes down to one disastrous fact."



PHOTO: REUTERS

A Kashmiri woman walks behind a fencing of barbed wire of a security installation in Srinagar yesterday. Security checks and patrols have been intensified and many temporary barricades erected in Jammu and Kashmir ahead of Republic Day celebrations.

Kashmiri doves descend for crucial peace talks

PTI, Srinagar

A moderate faction of Kashmir's main separatist alliance, All Party Hurriyat Conference, is to meet the Centre on Thursday for talks aimed at ending nearly 15 years of bloodshed in the state.

The separatists will be led by cleric and chairman Maulana Abbas Ansari, elected chief of Hurriyat in July.

The meeting on Thursday follows a surprising turnaround by the Centre in October to allow deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani to hold formal talks with Hurriyat.

Separatists either want the Muslim majority region incorporated into Pakistan or for it to become independent.

However, their involvement in talks comes at a time of damaging division between hardline and moderate separatists.

In September the hardliners expressed no confidence in Ansari and declared the staunchly pro-Pakistan Syed Ali Geelani as their head.

Geelani's faction claim they are the real Hurriyat and oppose two-way talks between the Centre and Kashmiris, saying Pakistan needs to be included in the process.

Analysts have expressed doubt over the success of the talks because of the deep rift.

"In the absence of hardliners (in the talk process)... moderates can't win peace for the region," warned analyst Showket Ahmed.

Welcoming the Hurriyat-Centre talks, the Ladakh Union Territory Front has reiterated its stand that no group or individual have the right to decide or speak for the whole of Jammu and Kashmir.

The LUTF President, Tsering Dorjay, said, "All disputes related to the State of Jammu and Kashmir should be resolved peacefully through dialogue and people of all the regions of the state should be taken into confidence before reaching a final settlement of the dispute."

Although the Ansari-led faction does not enjoy the support of all the separatists opposed to Indian-rule in Kashmir, many Kashmiris who want to see an end to violence have welcomed the talks, saying the two sides have for the first time in 15 years broken ice and moved forward.

"Expecting much from these talks will be totally unrealistic," said Tahir Mohiudin, a journalist and political expert. "You can't expect

them to break the ground in the first meeting," he said.

Mohiudin believes the Hurriyat will press the Centre to declare a unilateral ceasefire against militants, reduce its troop strength in the region, release political prisoners and put an end to alleged excesses by security forces.

"The first meeting will be more of a confidence building exercise and not a one in which solutions will be discussed," he said.

Mohiudin sees Thursday's talks as part of effort by the US, India and Pakistan to get the issue of Kashmir resolved once and for all.

India and Pakistan earlier this month reached a breakthrough to reopen bilateral dialogue, including talks on Kashmir.

Ansari will be helped at the talks by two experienced separatists and former heads of Hurriyat, Abdul Gani Bhat and Umar Farooq.

They will be joined by Fazal Haque Qureshi, who maintains a low profile but is respected by separatists and rebels for his integrity.

The fifth member of the team is 41-year-old Bilal Lone, the elder son of assassinated moderate separatist leader Abdul Gani Lone.

Tigers warn of war over Chandrika's alliance

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday warned that Sri Lanka could return to war following President Chandrika Kumaratunga's latest political pact with a leftist party opposing autonomy for minority Tamils.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said Kumaratunga's deal Tuesday with the People's Liberation Front (JVP) could lead to a collapse of a truce in place since February 2002.

"This anti-peace political pact articulating an incoherent, confused and mutually contradictory position on a serious national issue might create objective conditions for the resumption of ethnic war," LTTE ideologue Anton Balasingham was quoted as saying in the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website.

The London-based

Balasingham, who is also the LTTE's chief negotiator, said the deal between the two main opposition parties in Sri Lanka failed to address the ethnic conflict which has claimed over 60,000 lives since 1972.

The LTTE's reaction to the latest political realignment in Colombo came as the alliance vowed to maintain the Norwegian-brokered truce if they are returned to power.

Elections are not due till December 2007.

However, Kumaratunga, whose party is in the opposition in parliament, is widely expected to call snap elections giving her new alliance a chance of toppling Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Kumaratunga's new leftist alliance said they will keep up peace talks with the LTTE, but the guerrillas said they will not talk to any group which fails to recognise them as the sole representatives of the minority Tamils.

Iranian cabinet ministers resign

AP, Tehran

Some Iranian Cabinet ministers and vice presidents have resigned to protest the disqualifications of thousands of prospective election candidates, Vice President Mohammad Ali Abtahi said yesterday.

Abtahi did not say how many officials resigned nor did he identify them.

"A number of Cabinet ministers and a number of vice presidents have resigned. Naturally, they are waiting to see how things go," Abtahi said after a Cabinet meeting at the Presidential Palace.

"The Cabinet ministers are very serious in their resignation."

When asked if he had also resigned, Abtahi smiled but did not respond.

The crisis was triggered when supervisory bodies affiliated with Iran's Guardian Council, an unelected body controlled by hard-liners, disqualified more than a third of the 8,200 people who applied as candidates in the Feb. 20 elections.

State media controlled by hard-liners say those disqualified failed to meet the legal criteria for candidacy, but reformists maintain the move was intended to skew the elections in favour of conservatives.



PHOTO: AFP

Georgia's president-elect Mikheil Saakashvili speaking at a conference as the 33rd World Economic Forum (WEF) opened yesterday with more than 2,000 economic and political leaders gathering in this Swiss ski town. They are meeting at this snowy Alpine resort for five days of public and private talks, with the main focus expected to surround Iraq and the weak dollar.