

Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Kerry (D-MA) celebrates after winning victories in more than half of the seven states holding primaries or caucuses Tuesday in Seattle, Washington. With his combined wins, Kerry has emerged as the undisputed front-runner in the Democratic candidacy for President.

PHOTO: AFP

Kerry surges ahead

Lieberman bows out of race

REUTERS, Washington

Democratic front-runner John Kerry took a huge stride toward the presidential nomination on Tuesday with wins in five states, but victories by John Edwards and Wesley Clark kept the race alive.

Kerry, riding a wave of momentum from back-to-back wins in the first two contests last month, won in Missouri, Arizona, Delaware, North Dakota and New Mexico as seven states voted on the biggest day yet in the race to find a challenger to President Bush.

Edwards, a senator from North Carolina, and Clark, a retired general, scored wins in South Carolina and Oklahoma, respectively, throwing up at least temporary speed bumps on Kerry's cruise to the nomination.

Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman, the Democratic nominee for vice president in 2000, was shut out on Tuesday and pulled out of the race, saying "the judgment of the voters is now clear."

Fallen front-runner Howard Dean also went zero-for-Tuesday, but put a brave face on his poor

showing and promised to keep "going and going and going."

Kerry, the Massachusetts senator and decorated Vietnam veteran who had faced questions about whether he could compete nationwide, answered with strong finishes in seven states in the South, East, West and Midwest.

"Now we will carry this campaign and the cause of a stronger, fairer, more prosperous America to every part of America," Kerry said at a victory rally in Seattle.

"We will take nothing for granted, we will compete everywhere, and in November, we will beat George W. Bush," he said.

Clark, the former commander of NATO and a political novice, scored a narrow win over Edwards in Oklahoma, where he led by 1,300 votes with all precincts reporting.

"As an old soldier from Arkansas, I couldn't be prouder of your support in this first election I've ever won," Clark told supporters in Oklahoma City.

According to early delegate projections by MSNBC, Kerry picked up at least 88 delegates on

Tuesday for a total of 201. Edwards picked up 59 for a total of 100, putting him in third place behind Clark, who picked up 3 for 117. Clark picked up 24 for a total of 55.

Lieberman had been hoping for a win in Delaware, but dropped out after meeting with staff members and conferring with his family.

"I have decided tonight to end my quest for the presidency of the United States of America," Lieberman said at a rally near his campaign headquarters in Arlington, Virginia.

Tuesday's votes offered the first nationwide test for the candidates, who spent almost all of January battling in Iowa and New Hampshire, largely white and rural states that hosted the first two nominating tests.

South Carolina was the first contest in the South and the first in a state with a large black population, while Arizona and New Mexico hold the first contests in states with large Hispanic populations.

BBC ONLINE

A former senior official at the British Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS) has again voiced his concerns over the dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Dr Brian Jones told the daily Independent the DIS' "unified view" was for there to be careful caveats about assessments of Iraq's chemical and biological weapons.

But, he said, they were overruled by the heads of the intelligence agencies, leading to a misleading dossier.

The claims came ahead of MPs debating the Hutton Report later on Wednesday.

The Hutton Report into the death of weapons expert Dr David Kelly last week concluded that Downing Street had not inserted material in the dossier against the wishes of the intelligence services.

On Tuesday Tony Blair set up an independent inquiry to examine the intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) - in the light of the failure to find any since Saddam Hussein's fall.

Dr Jones was the former head of the nuclear, chemical and biological weapons section of the defence intelligence staff - a military assessment service inside the Ministry of Defence - but is now retired.

He blamed the heads of the intelligence agencies for "overruling" them - despite the fact that his staff were, in his opinion, the "foremost group of analysts in the west" on chemical and biological weapons intelligence.

It would be a "travesty" if they were now blamed for any intelligence failings with regard to Iraq's WMD.

He said that if - as he had been told - there was other, top secret,

intelligence which would have removed his reservations, that should now be made public.

Dr Jones' views echo the concerns he expressed to the Hutton inquiry last summer, when he said parts of the dossier were overruled.

Conservative leader Michael Howard backed Dr Jones' call for the secret intelligence to be published.

Such a move could alter his decision to accept Lord Hutton's conclusions, he suggested.

"Of course, if new evidence comes available which cast doubt on the Hutton findings then it would be foolish not to take that new evidence into account," he told BBC Radio 4's Today programme.

Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman Sir Menzies Campbell said Dr Jones was among those set to dash the government's insistence

the new inquiry should not be a rerun of the Hutton hearings.

"The government hopes this story will lie down. Every time it tries to drive a stake into it, the story just jumps up again," he told Today.

The Lib Dems are refusing to take part in the latest inquiry because they say it will not consider the political judgements that were made on the intelligence.

And former Tory Chancellor Ken Clarke called for an inquiry into the real reasons for the war, which America decided to wage at a very early stage with WMD as just legal cover.

Wednesday's Commons debate, which follows the weekly prime minister's question time, will be opened by Mr Blair with Mr Howard and the Lib Dems' Charles Kennedy replying for their parties.

Angry trucker may have sent toxic ricin to White House

AFP, Washington

Toxic ricin powder found in the US Senate may have been sent by an angry trucker, who last year also sent letters to the White House and the Department of Transportation, officials said.

The deadly poison, which has no known antidote or cure, was found Monday in the mailroom of the head of the Republican majority in the Senate, Bill Frist.

Officials said Tuesday that parcels containing ricin also were sent to the White House and the Department of Transportation last year, but those cases were not disclosed at the time.

The White House letter was sent in November, but was intercepted at a military screening facility.

The letter to the Department of Transportation was sent one month before that, and was found at a mail facility in South Carolina.

Halliburton to repay US govt millions of dollars

AFP, Washington

Halliburton, the energy and services giant once run by Vice President Dick Cheney, is to repay the US government 27.4 million dollars for possible overcharges for services to the US military in Iraq and Kuwait.

The Washington Post quoted the Defence Department as saying the money would be reimbursed after the military was overcharged for meals by a Halliburton subsidiary KBR.

Halliburton already said last Friday it had repaid the government 6.3 million dollars following allegations two employees involved in Iraq took kickbacks that resulted in overbilling.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga (R) and her arch rival Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe attend the country's independence day celebrations in Colombo yesterday. For the first time in six years, the military was publicly parading its weaponry in Colombo's Independence Square where Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, was granted independence from Britain in 1948.

No hint of snap poll in Chandrika's I-Day speech

PTI, Colombo

There was no hint of snap parliamentary elections in Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Independence Day oration in Colombo on Wednesday.

When the entire country was

seemed to be conducive for a peaceful settlement.

Kumaratunga did not attack the United National Front (UNF) government led by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. Instead, she noted with satisfaction that all forces in South Sri Lanka, and the LTTE too, were for peace and a negotiated settlement of the ethnic conflict. She said that this provided a golden opportunity for making united efforts to find a peaceful solution.

"This is one moment, as we have never seen before, in post independent Sri Lanka, when all political forces and their leaders seem to agree on one policy for the resolution of the problem that has dogged us for half a century. If we are reap productive results from this golden opportunity, we must learn to set aside considerations of a narrow and personal nature," she said.

Though the President did not explicitly mention the much talked about possibility of snap elections, it was clear that she did not want anything that would divide the country further when the climate

is ripe for conflict.

HC clears Rajiv Gandhi in Bofors case

AGENCIES, New Delhi

The Delhi High Court has cleared former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the Rs 64 crore Bofors pay-off case, a private TV channel said on Wednesday.

The court on Wednesday upheld the decision of a Special Court framing charges of cheating and conspiracy against three Hinduja brothers in the Rs 65 crore Bofors pay-off case but quashed charges against them under the Prevention of Corruption Act and of abetment under Indian Penal Code.

Europe-based Hinduja brothers - Srichand, Gopichand and Prakashchand had challenged the November 2002 order of the trial court on the ground that there was no material on record to prove their involvement in the Rs 1437 crore deal.

The High Court also upheld the charges of fabricating documents under Section 465 of Indian Penal Code against Swedish company AB Bofors which supplied the Howitzer Field 155MM guns.

AB Bofors, now known as Kartongen Kemi Och Forvaltning AB, had also sought quashing of the charges on the ground that a body corporate could not be prosecuted for conspiracy as it did not have a mind of its own.

Iran bans student demonstration

BBC ONLINE

Iranian students say they have been banned from holding a demonstration to support reformist candidates barred from this month's election.

The student news agency, ISNA, quoted the Tehran governor's office as saying no authorisation had been given for a rally planned in the city on Wednesday.

Student protests last year sparked a national security crackdown.

Iran has been embroiled in a three-week row between conservatives and reformists over the 20 February poll.

The Tehran University branches of the Islamic Association said they had requested permission to stage a demonstration outside the main campus.

But Ali Taala, director of political and security affairs for the city, was quoted as telling the students: "No gathering will be allowed outside the entrance of Tehran University."

Correspondents say students are often seen as a driving force behind the reformist movement.

Last week, the main pro-democracy student movement, the Office to Consolidate Unity, OCU, called for a national boycott of the elections from which thousands of candidates have been banned by the conservative Guardians Council.

US soldiers' death toll climbs in Iraq

AP, Washington

Nearly two months have passed since Saddam Hussein's capture, yet American soldiers still are dying at a rate of more than one a day.

Forty-five soldiers died in January and three more in the first three days of February. The January toll was five more than in December, despite hopes that Saddam's Dec. 13 capture would weaken the Iraqi insurgency and slow the killings from roadside bombs and other attacks.

The number of deaths in January will rise to 47 when the Pentagon changes the status of two soldiers who are missing and believed to have died in the Tigris River on Jan. 25. That would make the second highest monthly total since last April when daily combat from the invasion was still under way.

The worst month was November,

when 82 died. In October there were 43, September had 30, August 35.

All told, 528 U.S. troops have

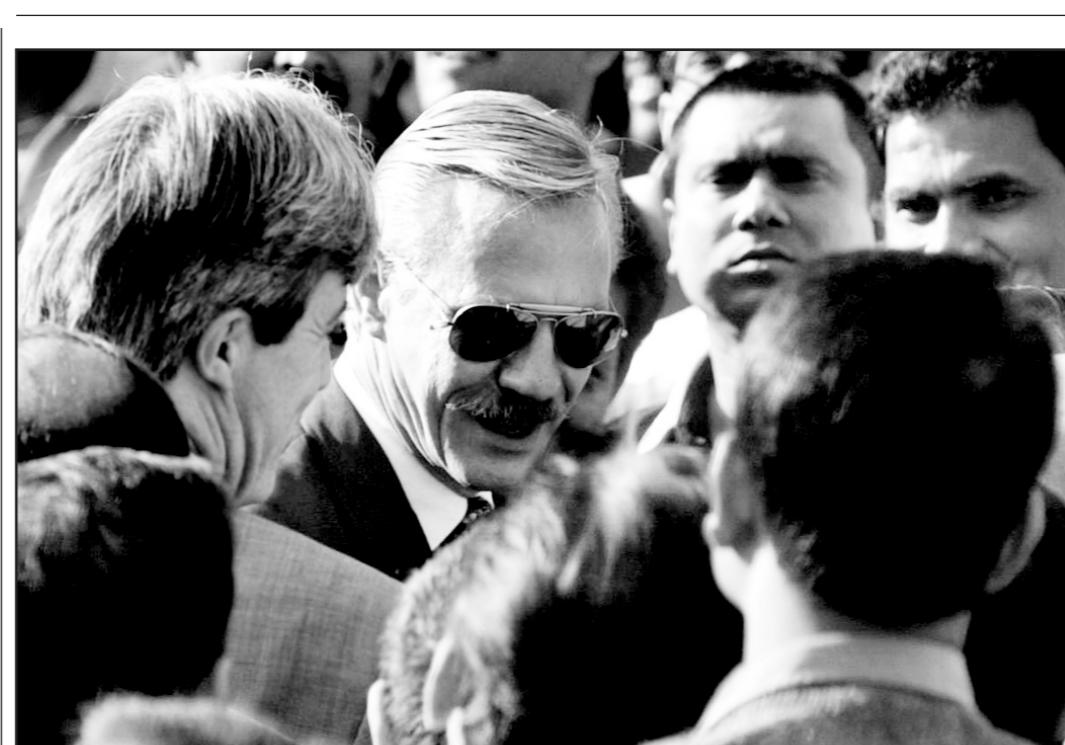


PHOTO: AFP
Briton Peter Bleach (C) and British Deputy High Commissioner Andrew Hall (L) walk through a waiting crowd of media after leaving Alipore Jail in Calcutta yesterday. Bleach who was serving a life sentence in the jail after being convicted of gunrunning, was released from custody following a recent talks between India's Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani and British Home Secretary David Blunkett.