



Indian opposition leader and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi (L) sports coloured powder marks on her forehead as she is greeted by supporters during celebrations for 'Holi' (Festival of Spring) at her residence in New Delhi yesterday. The colourful festival of Holi is celebrated in many areas of India in the month of Phalguna, depending on regional and local traditions but the common bond is the exchange of colours.

BJP tries to sell moderate image to Muslims

AFP, New Delhi

Has India's Hindu nationalist party changed its fundamentalist stripes so much that Muslims will do what might seem unthinkable and vote for it in upcoming general elections?

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is certainly working overtime to make that happen, pitching to Muslims its peace overtures to Pakistan and a booming economy while playing down its Muslim-bashing image and Hindu revivalist roots.

The key salesman is India's avuncular Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, seen as the BJP's moderate face.

"I seem to recollect the days when Muslims were told if the BJP came to power they'd be sent to Pakistan," Vajpayee told a New

Delhi rally last week.

"Where's the question of sending them to Pakistan? Now people travel freely between India and Pakistan," he said, referring to moves to restore transport links between the nuclear rivals after they nearly came to war in 2002.

Ever since Hindu zealots razed a mosque at Ayodhya in 1992, triggering savage religious riots in Gujarat, India's 120 million-strong Muslim minority has given an even wider berth to the BJP, which rode to prominence on a shrill Hindu revivalist plank.

But now, Muslims are switching sides from the secular Congress party, even in western India, scene of deadly Hindu-Muslim religious riots two years ago, as the BJP seeks to show a moderate face embracing all Indians -- Hindus and Muslims -- ahead of next month's elections.



An opponent of Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez participates in a demonstration in Caracas Saturday.

Red alert as Tigers, troops brace for factional war

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops are bracing for fighting between Tamil factions, a military official said yesterday, as breakaway rebels claimed their leader was being targeted by death squads and vowed to hit back.

Government forces, which have remained neutral in the deepening crisis within the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), were on red alert fearing being caught in the crossfire and ordered troops to take maximum precautions.

"We are facing a very dangerous situation," a military commander in the east of the island said by telephone. "They could target us to drag us into the crisis. We are keen to avoid getting involved and have alerted troops."

Rebels close to regional commander V. Muralitharan, better

known as Karuna, said he had received reports that death squads had been sent to get him after he was dismissed Saturday by Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, 49.

Karuna, 37, who is reportedly commanding 6,000 fighters, or about a third of the original LTTE force, was leading his army from a jungle base in the district of Batticaloa and was ready to fight back, rebel sources said.

The de facto number two in the LTTE led the unprecedented breakaway after accusing his boss of giving key positions to ethnic Tamils from the north, overlooking those from the eastern region.

Karuna's argument had been that the eastern province was providing the bulk of the fighting force of the LTTE while a disproportionate number of plum jobs

accepted the existing wording of the interim constitution, which was agreed to by the Governing Council last week, or if he had worked out changes to the wording with Sistani that would then have to be presented to the rest of the Council.

The interim constitution is crucial to US plans to hand power back to the Iraqis at the end of June.

The US-appointed Council was due to sign the constitution last Friday, but at the last minute five Shia members refused to sign after it emerged that Sistani, a 73-year-old Iranian-born cleric, had objections to two key clauses in the document.

One objection referred to a clause that would give the Kurds, who make up about a fifth of Iraq's population, an effective veto over

the permanent constitution once it is drawn up after elections next year.

Another involved the make-up of a presidential council. Currently the document calls for the creation of a three-member council, with one president and two deputies. Shias have said they now want a five-person council, with three Shias, one Sunni and one Kurd.

Earlier a delegation from Iraq's Governing Council met aides to the country's top Shia cleric on Saturday to try to salvage a deal on an interim constitution crucial to US plans to hand power back to Iraqis.

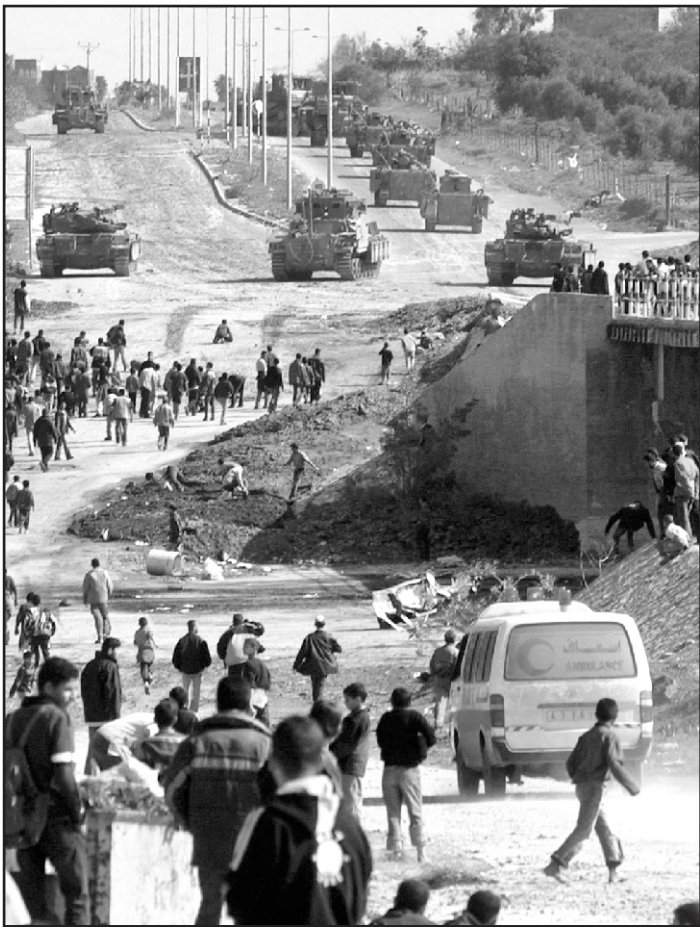
In Crawford, Texas, President Bush vowed to crush militants behind attacks this week that killed at least 181 people in Baghdad and Kerbala, and signaled a major push

against chief suspect Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Bush offered his first personal response to Tuesday's bomb attacks on Shia worshippers.

"Laura and I and the American people were filled with grief and anger at these terrible attacks of murder," he said. "We will defeat the terrorists who seek to plunge Iraq into chaos and violence, and... stand with the people of Iraq for as long as necessary to build a stable, peaceful and successful democracy."

The US Army said its troops had fired on a truck rigged with explosives in the "Sunni triangle" west of Baghdad on Saturday. The driver was killed and three US soldiers were wounded.



Palestinians throw stones at withdrawing Israeli tanks in the Nuseirat refugee camp in the Gaza Strip yesterday. At least 14 Palestinians were killed and some 70 others wounded early yesterday as Israeli troops targeted the al-Bureij and Nuseirat refugee camps in the Gaza Strip.

US team to make war crimes case against Saddam

AP, Washington

A team of 50 Justice Department prosecutors, investigators and support staff is going to Iraq beginning this weekend to assemble war crimes cases against former President Saddam Hussein and others in his former regime, a senior official said Saturday.

The goal of the effort is to sift through thousands of pages of evidence and provide a roadmap for Iraqis to use when they eventually bring Saddam and others in his administration before war crimes tribunals. US officials want the world to view the trials as an Iraqi process, not one run by Americans or other foreigners.

The US team includes main Justice lawyers, FBI agents, US Marshals Service members and

others involved in the federal criminal justice system, said a senior Justice Department official.

"It's one piece of the international effort to assist the Iraqis in putting together these proceedings," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "They are learning how to put together a legitimate legal system."

The Iraqi Governing Council has already set up tribunals consisting of three panels of five judges each, with nine other judges to serve on an appeals panel. The timetable for a trial of Saddam, who was captured by US forces on Dec. 14, is not yet clear, nor are the charges that might be brought.

The Justice Department team will be assigned to a new Regime Crimes Adviser's Office run by the Coalition Provisional Authority,

4 killed as TV news chopper crashes in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Four people were killed when a helicopter chartered by a television company to cover a fatal road traffic accident in central Japan crashed and exploded, police said yesterday.

Four bodies were recovered from the crash site at Nagiso town, some 200km west of Tokyo, local police said.

The helicopter appeared to have hit power lines, police said.

"The helicopter hit the power cables, broke up in mid-air and then fell straight down," one witness told public broadcaster NHK.

The four people in the helicopter included a reporter, a cameraman, a pilot and a mechanic, the TV station Shinsetsu Broadcasting Corp. said.

The accident the helicopter went to cover involved a collision between a car and a truck, which left one person dead and three people injured.

Haiti police hunt looters, council mulls new govt

REUTERS, Port-au-Prince

Haitian police with rusty shotguns hunted looters in the garbage-strewn alleys of a teeming Port-au-Prince slum on Saturday, seeking to reassert control of an area dominated by armed gangs who back the ousted president.

US and other international troops in Haiti since President Jean-Bertrand Aristide fled to Africa on Sunday want the local police to fight crime and disarm fighters after a month-long revolt, while they seek to restore order and support the creation of an interim government.

The death toll in the revolt is more than 200.

A council of elders chosen by opposition politicians, members of Aristide's Lavalas movement and international authorities was working to pick a new prime minister on Saturday. Authorities said one could be named within days.

But in a sign of possible turmoil that threatens to mar a political solution, furious Aristide supporters vowed daily protests against a "US occupation" and called for the return of Haiti's first elected president.

British military chief says Legal backing came days before Iraq invasion

AFP, London

Britain's military chief at the time of the Iraq war told a British newspaper yesterday that he was given "unequivocal" legal backing just five days before the invasion.

"I asked for unequivocal advice that what we were proposing was lawful," former chief of defence staff, Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, told the Observer weekly.

Boyce said he received an unambiguous one-line note from the British government's top legal adviser, Attorney General Peter Goldsmith, assuring him that the war was legal five days before fighting began.

Prime Minister Tony Blair has resisted pressure to publish the confidential legal advice on which he took Britain to war in Iraq on March 20 last year.

"What I eventually got was what I required... two or three lines saying our proposed actions were lawful under national and international law," Boyce told the newspaper.

Asked if he had considered resigning if the necessary advice

was not forthcoming, he said: "I really am not prepared to say... All I would say is that it was an important milestone."

Boyce said that he personally fully supported the ousting of Saddam and still believed weapons of mass destruction -- Blair's main justification for the war -- may have been hidden or destroyed at the last minute.

Concern about the legality of a US-led invasion of Iraq without an explicit UN resolution re-emerged at the end of February when the government abruptly dropped its prosecution of British intelligence linguist Katharine Gun.

She had leaked a January 2002 memo from the US National Security Agency asking Britain to help spy on UN Security Council member countries, at a time when Washington and London were seeking a final UN green light for war.

Speculation is rife that the case against Gun was dropped because, to prosecute her, the government would have had to spell out the legal justification for war in open court.

'Nepal committed to free, fair elections'

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa said he was committed to holding "free and fair general elections" as Maoist rebels continue to claim victims and call for the toppling of the monarchy.

Last month, Thapa promised to hold polls around November in the Himalayan kingdom following successful nationwide student union elections.

"We're preparing for a free and fair general elections to elect the people's representatives in the parliament," Thapa told AFP in an interview.

His comments came as Nepal's Maoist leaders Saturday urged all "leftists, nationalists and parliamentary forces" to unite to topple the monarchy and set up a republic.

Nepal has been rocked by months of student and opposition party protests against King Gyanendra's October 2002 dismissal of the elected government that has created a constitutional limbo.

Gyanendra said the elected government was not competent to tackle the revolt by the Maoists,

who have been battling since 1996 to establish a communist republic in a conflict that has claimed over 9,000 lives.

The king assumed executive powers himself and installed a prime minister from the royalist Rastriya Prajatantra Party to lead the government.

Many student demonstrators have also been calling for the establishment of a republic in the Hindu kingdom. Such calls would have been unimaginable a few years ago in the country where many citizens still regard the king as an incarnation of the god Vishnu, the protector.

Thapa gave no date for when elections would be held. But he said the king had made "public commitments twice recently on holding the elections in the country at the earliest possible opportunity."

He added he was "holding dialogues with different party leaders for their cooperation to hold the elections so the parliamentary system of government which has been in a long vacuum can be resumed."