

Indian EC puts ad row ball in govt court

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Yet another surrogate election advertisement this time making an oblique reference to the Prime Minister hit the air waves Saturday even as the Election Commission asked the government to arbitrate on the propriety of "personal attacks".

The new ad being aired on a private TV channel begins with black-and-white clips of the Quit India Movement and ends with a "letter" that has a portion circled. This is purported to have been written by Atal Behari Vajpayee seeking his release from detention.

The ad, which ends with the message "Mukhibiron (informers) ke haton mein satta! Kabhi nahin," has been sponsored by Sajji Virasat Trust, the organisation that had earlier released an ad taking digs at the "India Shining" campaign.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian workers clean Congress Party symbols at party headquarters in Amethi, some 200km south-east of Lucknow yesterday. Rahul Gandhi, son of Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi and the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi will contest the seat of Amethi in Uttar Pradesh starting a new generation of political involvement for the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. He is scheduled to start his election campaign in the Northern Indian town today.

Senior al-Qaida official hurt & on the run, says Pakistan

AP, Islamabad

A senior al-Qaida leader has been seriously wounded and is on the run, Pakistan's military spokesman said Saturday, while claiming that an operation to rid the western border areas of suspected terrorists has been a success.

But observers critical of the massive military sweep called it a political failure, citing the high number of troop casualties and officials' failure to capture any so-called "high-value targets".

Recently gathered intelligence and eyewitness accounts indicate that al-Qaida commander Tahir Yuldash was badly wounded and is in hiding, military spokesman Maj. Gen. Shaukat Sultan said. He admitted, though, that Pakistani forces are not close to capturing Yuldash.

Yuldash, also known as Tahir Yuldashev, is the leader of an Uzbek terror group Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan which Pakistani officials say has been subsumed by al-Qaida since the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

Bremer hands over keys of first Iraqi ministry to interim council

AFP, Baghdad

US overseer Paul Bremer handed over the keys of the first of Iraq's 25 ministries to the country's interim leadership yesterday in a ceremony aimed at highlighting the gradual handover of power by June 30.

"You are in the driver's seat on the road to sovereignty," Bremer told interim health minister Khidir Abbas at the ceremony held less than a fortnight before the first anniversary of the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Nine doctors, two of them women, in sparkling white coats sat on a stage for the ceremony beneath a streamer bearing the message: "The transfer of powers is the first step towards independence and democracy".

Bremer boasted of the work accomplished at the health ministry since the US-led invasion, noting that polio has been eradicated from the country.

Arabs blast Tunis decision to delay summit

AFP, Ramallah

Arab politicians reacted with dismay yesterday to Tunis's decision to delay a key summit, with Palestinians saying it will spur Israeli attacks and the Arab League warning of "dangerous consequences".

However, Israel welcomed the surprise announcement as a sign the Arab world is changing for the better.

Iraq's US-installed interim Governing Council said it risked being robbing of an opportunity to explain the transition process from occupation to independence ahead of reclaiming its place in the league.

"We strongly regret this postponement because the Arab nation is passing through a delicate and dangerous phase," said council member Muaffak al-Rubaie.

Tunisia stunned Arab foreign ministers late Saturday by calling

off the summit it was to host from Monday, an unprecedented move it said resulted from a failure to include its changes to a plan on Arab political reform.

The Arab League swiftly accepted an offer from Cairo on Sunday to take over and host the gathering -- the first formal gathering of Arab leaders since the US-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein last April.

However, the meeting was already looking to be overshadowed by Israel's assassination of the spiritual leader of the radical Palestinian militant group Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, and US pressure to reform the region.

In the West Bank town of Ramallah, Palestinian negotiations minister Saeb Erakat worried the infighting came after Yassin's assassination in Gaza on Monday and a US veto of a UN Security Council resolution to condemn the hit.

"We are afraid that this will

allow Israel to carry out even bigger or large-scale actions against the Palestinians," he said.

Arab leaders have universally condemned Israel's killing of Yassin and the Palestinians had been hoping that the Tunis summit would increase diplomatic pressure on the Israelis.

The new leader of Hamas, Abdelaziz Rantissi, also told AFP that Arab leaders had failed to rise to the challenge posed by Yassin's death.

"We were hoping that the Arab nations would rise to the challenge but we have seen them pull back," he said.

The speaker of the Lebanese parliament, Nabih Berri, said the postponement amounted to another blow against Yassin.

"The summit's cancellation was a second death blow for Sheikh Yassin," Berri said. "Arab leaders gave Israel a way out of the crisis."

Israel itself was delighted.

Nepali polls to be held by April next year: King

AFP, Kathmandu

King Gyanendra announced yesterday that general elections will be held in Nepal before mid-April next year, paving the way for a return to democracy in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

Speaking at a public function in the western town of Pokhara, the king called on Nepal's political parties and other groups to help create a suitable environment to hold the ballot.

"The elections must be free," he said in the address, which was broadcast live on state television and radio.

King Gyanendra fired the elected government in late 2002, saying it was not competent to tackle an ongoing revolt by Maoists and named a loyalist administration in its place. Parliament was also dissolved.

The appointed government had earlier this year pledged elections

around November but set no definite date.

"We ... call on all concerned to create an environment wherein the governance of the country can be handed over to elected representatives by initiating elections to the House of Representatives within the year 2061," the king said.

The Nepali year 2061 ends mid-April next year.

"Every adult citizen must strongly feel the franchise can be exercised to elect the representative of one's own free will," he said.

"We are hopeful that necessary cooperation will be forthcoming from all those who have faith in multiparty democracy including political parties," the king said.

The last general elections for the 205-member lower house of parliament were held in May 1999.

Since the dissolution of parliament, the five main political parties represented in the house have been waging an ongoing protest

campaign to pressure the king to call fresh elections or restore the elected legislature.

The parties accuse him of seeking to return to the days when his family ran Nepal before the country became a constitutional monarchy in 1990.

"Violence, terrorism and destruction can only reap ruin," the monarch said Sunday as he urged all Nepalese to unite in the cause of peace and progress.

He was referring to an uprising by Maoist rebels bent on installing a communist republic in Nepal that since it began in 1996 has claimed more than 9,500 lives.

"To fulfill the people's desire to bring to an end disruptive terrorist activities, we are confident that all those who have faith in the constitutional process and democratic ideals will contribute towards promoting peace, understanding and creativity in the welfare of the nation and people," the king said.

Pressure mounts on Sharon as his indictment in sight

AFP, Jerusalem

Pressure mounted on beleaguered Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon yesterday after the state prosecutor reportedly favoured his indictment for receiving bribes, overshadowing his invitation to the White House next month for talks on his plans to pull out from the Gaza Strip.

One of his cabinet ministers said Sharon would have no option but to stand down if he is charged with accepting bribes from contractor David Appel in the so-called Greek island affair.

Widespread media reports said state prosecutor Edna Arbel is to recommend that Attorney General Meni Mazuz prosecute Sharon.

They came two months after Appel was indicted on charges of trying to bribe Sharon when he was

foreign minister, through the latter's son Gilad, in exchange for their help in securing a major Greek property deal.

"Under such circumstances, the prime minister should resign," National Infrastructure Minister Yosef Paritzky told public radio.

"If he is charged, the prime minister should submit his resignation and not merely suspend his activities," said Paritzky, who is a member of the centrist Shinui party, the second largest faction in Israel's governing coalition.

The prime minister would not be in a position to run the country as he needs to "devote himself entirely to his defense", added the minister.

The state prosecutor's office refused to comment on the reports Sunday as did the prime minister's office.

But one of Sharon's lawyers, Avigdor Klasberg, told the radio that the prosecutor general's office had "deliberately leaked" the news in a bid to heap pressure on Mazuz.

Sharon himself was chairing a meeting of his cabinet in Jerusalem. Most ministers refused to make any comment as they entered the meeting but Tourism Minister Benny Elon, of the far right National Union party, praised Arbel's "courage".

Elon's party is vehemently opposed to Sharon's plans to evacuate most of the Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and other opponents of his plans have accused Sharon of pushing his proposals in order to divert attention away from the corruption scandal.

Sharon himself is expected in Washington on April 14 for talks

with US President George W. Bush in a bid to secure support for what he has dubbed his "disengagement plan".

Under the terms of his project, Israel is likely to evacuate all but a handful of Gaza settlements and a small number in the northern West Bank in return for strengthening control over others in the West Bank.

The Bush administration has so far withheld its backing but a senior aide to Sharon expressed confidence that it would be won round.

"There's a very good chance of coming to an agreement in Washington and contrary to the views expressed in the press the Americans have a positive view about the disengagement plan," he told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Afghanistan delays polls

AP, Kabul

Afghanistan's landmark national elections will be delayed until September to give the United Nations more time to register voters and organise the balloting, President Hamid Karzai said yesterday.

Officials had warned repeatedly that the country's first post-Taliban elections, originally scheduled for June, would be delayed because of logistical problems and security fears.

"We are ready to manage both elections, for the parliament and presidency, in September," Karzai told reporters at his palace in the Afghan capital.

So far, only 1.5 million of an estimated 10.5 million eligible voters have been registered for the elections, and it remains unclear how the United Nations intends to carry out a plan to register most of the others in May.

The Afghan government said on Saturday it will disarm 40,000 irregular Afghan militia soldiers and round up heavy weapons around the country in time for the vote to reduce the risk of voter intimidation.

London attack was very much in Laden's mind

AFP, London

Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden instructed his operations chief to target London's main Heathrow airport soon after the September 11 attacks in the United States, The Sunday Times reported.

In a dispatch from Kabul, the British newspaper said it has seen transcripts of the interrogation of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the most senior al-Qaeda operative to be captured in the US-led war on terrorism.

Mohammed, 37, who was seized in Rawalpindi, Pakistan in March last year, stated that he met Bin Laden in the Afghan capital Kabul several days after the September 11 attacks.

"It was at this time we discussed the Heathrow operation," he was quoted as saying in the transcript.

"Osama declared Blair our principal enemy and London our target," he said, referring to British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

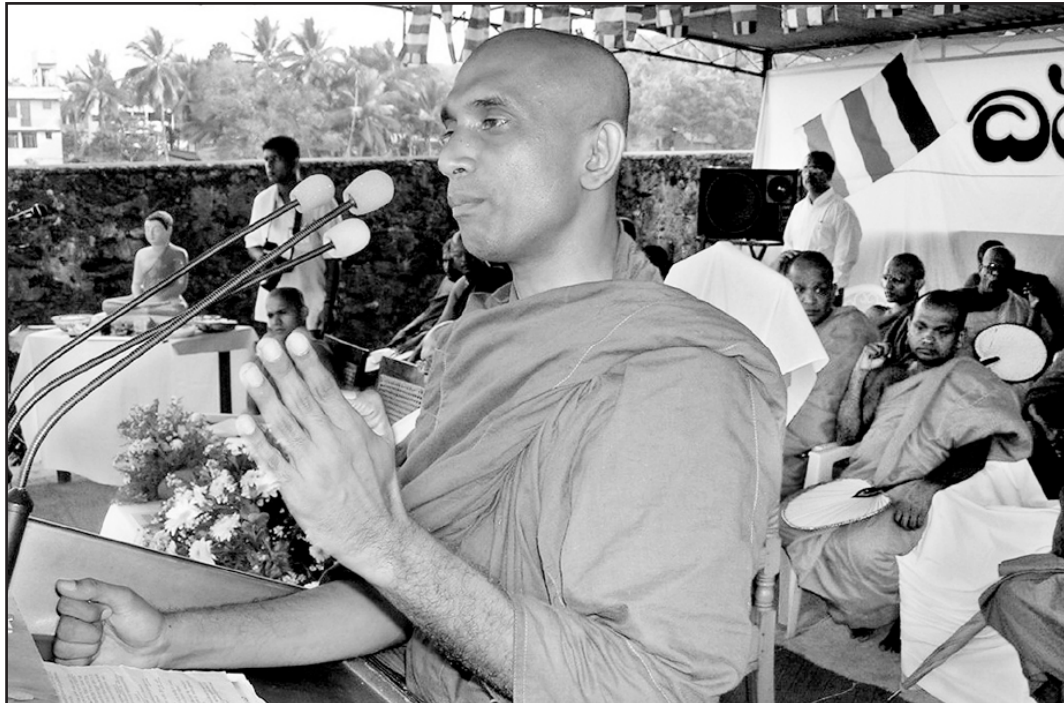


PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Buddhist monk Athuraliya Ratana speaks out against "cultural pollution" at an election rally of his nationalist National Heritage Party (NHP) at the industrial town of Horana on Friday. The monks who are fielding an all-clergy list of candidates to contest April 2 parliamentary elections vow to take vulgar movies off national television if their party is made king-makers.

Lanka on alert as polls violence escalates

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's security forces have stepped up their guard after gunmen shot and wounded a top election official and a candidate amid fears of more violence ahead of April 2 elections, officials said yesterday.

An alert was sounded in eastern Batticaloa district following the overnight shooting of the region's top civil administrator, Ratnam Manoguruswamy, military officials said.

The victim is also the top official responsible for conducting Friday's vote in the region.

In a separate incident, Tamil candidate T. Maheswaran was shot and wounded in the capital Colombo Saturday as he left a Hindu temple, police said.

Doctors said he was recovering in a private hospital here. Maheswaran is running for parliament as a candidate from Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP).

He was also minister for Hindu

religious affairs before he was sacked by President Chandrika Kumaratunga last month after she dissolved parliament and called elections four years ahead of schedule.

Kumaratunga called early polls to head off a power struggle with the prime minister, whom she accused of conceding too much to Tamil rebels in efforts to end three decades of ethnic bloodshed.

A UNP candidate was shot dead March 1 by Tamil Tiger rebels in Batticaloa town, and a few days later the guerrilla movement split.

Earlier this week, a university lecturer in Batticaloa was shot and wounded by suspected Tiger guerrillas.

That shooting was linked by the police to the ongoing rift within the Tiger movement between renegade regional commander V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, and the group's main leadership in the island's north.

On Friday, the Tigers warned they were preparing "to get rid" of Karuna and asked Tamils not to support him.

Independent poll monitors last week expressed fears of an escalation in violence in the final week of campaigning.

The private People's Action for Free and fair Elections (PAFFREL) and the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) said their observations indicated a lower level of violence compared to the previous election campaign, but they expected more trouble in the coming week.

"Our experience is that there could be a spurt of violence in the final week of campaigning," a PAFFREL spokesman said.

Police said the level of violence in the campaign this time was far lower than that recorded in the December 2001 parliamentary election.

"There is better enforcement of election laws by the police and that in turn has ensured fewer cases of criminal activity," police chief Indra de Silva said last week.

DYNASTIC POLITICS

Cong attacks BJP for its 'hypocrisy'

PTI, New Delhi

In a counter attack on BJP's criticism that the Gandhi family promoted dynastic politics, Congress yesterday attacked the saffron party and its allies as "hypocrites" who promoted their children and relatives.

The BJP should justify the reason for fielding Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's niece Karuna Shukla, the sons of Finance Minister Jaswant Singh and Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje and a "host of others" in the coming Lok Sabha elections, Congress spokesman Kapil Sibal said.

Sibal gave a long list of political leaders encouraging their wards in politics and said, "If this is a reality in Indian politics, why focus only on the Gandhi family?"

"Basically all political parties are afraid of the Gandhis. They are afraid of their charisma... They are the progenies of Nehru family, all members of which had taken a plunge in the nationalist movement... You cannot take that away from them (Gandhi siblings)," he said.

He threw a challenge at the BJP and its allies saying it should be the electorate who should decide

between Sonia Gandhi on one side and the Bangaru Laxmans, Judeos and DP Yadavs on the other side.

But the BJP was raking up "videshi mool" (foreign origin) of Sonia Gandhi only as an emotive issue during the election though there was "no logical, constitutional or legal impediments" for her to become the prime minister.

This is so, especially, after she became the leader of opposition in the last Lok Sabha after defeating the "swadeshi bahu" (daughter-in-law) Shushma Swaraj of BJP, he added.

Asked whether Priyanka would contest, Sibal parried the question but said she would certainly campaign for the party.

Charging the BJP with raising a "needless" debate on Sonia's origin, Sibal said the ruling party was bereft of any achievement in its five year tenure and was resorting to such "low-level politics".

Sibal termed the Sangh Parivar as "collaborators" of the British during the freedom struggle, and demanded a law to ban those from contesting elections who "joined hands with videshi".

"All those RSS men who collaborated with British should be banned by law from contesting elections.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian President and leader of Indonesia Democratic Party in Struggle (PDI-P) Megawati Sukarnoputri (L) accompanied by her husband Taufik Kiemas (R), delivers speech during her party campaign in Jakarta yesterday. Tens of thousands of supporters of Megawati packed the streets of Jakarta as she addressed her party's last major campaign rally in the capital before the April 5 general election.

Conscientious objector from Iraq war to face US court-martial

AFP, Washington

The first Iraq war veteran to publicly object to the morality of the war will face a special court-martial on a charge of desertion, officials said Saturday.

But the Army said Florida National Guard Staff Sergeant Camilo Mejia will be spared a possible death sentence, the most severe penalty for desertion in wartime.

The special court-martial, to be held on a military base in Fort Stewart, Georgia, means Mejia, 28, could receive no more than one year in a military prison and a bad conduct discharge if convicted, Fort Stewart spokesman Rich Olson said Friday.

A bad conduct discharge rules out veteran's benefits, but can be appealed and replaced with a general discharge ensuring full benefits, said Olson, adding no date for the court-martial had been set.

Olson said he did not have an explanation for why Fort Stewart commanding officer Major-General William Webster decided Friday on a special court-martial for Mejia, whose surrender in the Boston area earlier this month attracted widespread attention.