



Rahul Gandhi talks with an Indian village woman (R) at Jagdishpur village in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh yesterday. Rahul Gandhi, son of Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi and assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, is to contest for the Congress Party in the forthcoming elections from Amethi.

Rahul Gandhi gets rousing reception at Amethi

AFP, Amethi

Rahul Gandhi, scion of India's famed Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, won an ecstatic reception Monday as he plunged into campaigning for next month's polls in the constituency that elected his slain father, former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi.

A sea of supporters cried "Long live Rahul Gandhi" as the 33-year-old financial consultant who bears a strong resemblance to his father emerged from his car flashing a dimpled smile in the long-time family-held seat of Amethi.

Hundreds of motorcycle riders wearing the Congress Party's saffron, green and white caps and flags fanned out to accompany his motorcade as he entered the constituency under banners saying, "Welcome our next Prime Minister".

Villagers scrambled onto rooftops to shower him with rose petals

and shout greetings as Rahul drove through the sprawling constituency's dusty roads, stopping at one village after another.

"It's a great feeling to be here," said Rahul, one of the so-called Gen-Next candidates of the onemighty Congress party, now facing an uphill battle to unseat the ruling Hindu nationalist-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance.

"I'll carry on the work my father Rajiv did here. I promise to live up to my father's dreams," he said.

He often stopped the convoy to talk to labourers, embrace children and drink tea as huge crowds pressed forward.

Rahul was on a whistle-stop tour of the seat once held by his grandmother, former prime minister Indira Gandhi, assassinated by Sikh separatists in 1984.

The constituency in the electorally pivotal state of Uttar

Pradesh also returned his father to parliament three times -- in 1984, 1989 and 1991 -- the year he was killed by a female suicide bomber.

Rahul, surrounded by heavy security due to the assassinations of his father and grandmother, told reporters the response to his political debut was "overwhelming".

The Congress, out of office since 1996, announced earlier this month it would field Rahul in what analysts say is an attempt to revive the party's fortunes in elections due to be held in stages starting on April 20.

"I've seen several generations of Nehrus (former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru) and Gandhis," said one elderly villager, Ram Praful, now in his 90s. "I've now come to see Rahul and we have a lot of hope. We will not let the sacrifices made by the family go in vain."

Rice rejects calls for public testimony

AP, Crawford

White House allies and Republicans investigating the Sept. 11 attacks pressed Sunday to hear open testimony from national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, with one commissioner calling her refusal a "political blunder of the first order."

Rice said in a TV interview that she wants to meet with the families of the Sept. 11 victims because she knows they are disappointed she cannot testify publicly.

"Nothing would be better, from my point of view, than to be able to testify," Rice told CBS's "60 Minutes." "I would really like to do that. But there is an important principle involved here: It is a longstanding principle that sitting national security advisers do not testify before the Congress."

President Bush, spending a long weekend on his Texas ranch, gave no ground, and several aides said he will not change his mind on letting Rice testify. But Bush sent her and other top administration officials out for television interviews to rebut fresh attacks on the way his administration has handled the threat of terrorism.

Kashmiri group calls for polls boycott

JKLF pulls out of Hurriyat Conference

AFP, Srinagar

A leading separatist group yesterday called on Kashmiris to boycott India's national elections next month and announced it was pulling out of the restive region's main separatist alliance.

"My party is for a total boycott of elections in the state," said Mohammed Yasin Malik, head of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) which wants independence for the Indian and Pakistani zones of divided Kashmir.

"I hope people will heed my call," said Malik.

He also announced he was pulling his party out of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, a coalition of 23 Kashmiri separatist groups formed in 1994.

"JKLF is not part of any faction of Hurriyat," said Malik, who took his militant group into the coalition in 1995 after declaring a unilateral ceasefire against the Indian forces in Kashmir the previous year.

He declined to be drawn on the reasons for his decision to quit Hurriyat.

Malik's remarks come two days after a moderate faction of the alliance held a second round of talks with India and agreed to meet again in June to find a solution to the 15-year-old insurgency that has left thousands dead.

Media reports said Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani had offered Hurriyat a quid pro quo that at the talks: if it did not call for a boycott of the upcoming poll the Indian government would recognise it as "representative of the popular will of the Kashmiris."

The moderates were lauded Monday by Advani for turning up for the talks despite the "tremendous pressures" they faced from

hardliners.

"There has been a change in the attitude towards us as they agreed to go ahead with the talks with us despite pressures that they should not talk to any Indian government," Advani said in Gandhinagar, in India's western Gujarat state.

Muslim rebels and separatist politicians have boycotted all Indian elections since the rebellion broke out in 1989.

India goes to the polls in five stages starting April 20 in an election expected to return the ruling Hindu nationalist-led coalition to power.

"We have already launched our election boycott campaign alongside our signature campaign," said Malik of the JKLF's drive to gather signatures of those wanting Kashmiris to be involved in the ongoing peace talks between India and Pakistan.

Kerry hits Bush for leading US down 'dead-end'

REUTERS, St. Louis

Democratic White House candidate John Kerry on Sunday charged that President Bush's economic policies have led the United States down "a dead-end road paved with broken promises."

At the New Northside Baptist Church in a largely black suburb of St. Louis, Kerry invoked scripture to portray Bush as a man of words not deeds and a divider rather than a uniter.

The Bush campaign accused the Massachusetts senator of the "sad exploitation" of scripture for political attack. Spokesman Steve Schmidt called it "beyond the bounds of acceptable discourse."

Kerry, who will lead the campaign trail for four days this week while he has minor shoulder surgery in Boston, told diners earlier at a pancake house that the tear in his sub-scapularis tendon was not bothering him much.

His campaign has set a goal of raising \$80 million by the Democratic convention in late July and Kerry kicks off the effort in California on Monday.

French voters dump Chirac's party

BBC ONLINE, Paris

President Jacques Chirac's party has been humiliated in French regional polls, amid speculation that PM Jean-Pierre Raffarin could be sacked.

The socialists and their allies won 50 percent of the second-round votes, leaving Chirac's centre-right governing UMP party trailing on 36.9 percent.

The socialists held eight councils and grabbed another 12 from the UMP.

Voters are thought to be angry at high unemployment, a stagnant economy and unpopular public sector reforms.

The centre-right has won only Alsace so far, with the results from Corsica still to come.

The election was seen as a mid-term test of opinion on the Chirac government.

Raffarin said lessons had to be

learnt by the government, but "reforms must be continued, very simply because they are necessary".

The first round last Sunday saw the UMP lose heavily to the socialists and their communist and green allies.

Socialist party leader Francois Hollande says voters have expressed their rejection of both Raffarin's government and Chirac.

Our correspondent says the result is expected to lead to a major cabinet reshuffle, with Raffarin tipped as the first to lose his job.

One of the high-profile casualties already claimed by the poll is former President Valery Giscard d'Estaing, who lost the presidency of the Auvergne region to a socialist.

The far-right National Front confirmed its position as the country's third political force, with nearly 13 percent.



Authorities in Basra, 500 km south of Baghdad, arrive to negotiate with protesters that rioted repelling British troops attempting to evict squatters from a governmental building yesterday. The squatters remained there while troops withdrew.

Defiant Sharon shrugs off doubts over ability to remain in office

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon yesterday told a parliamentary committee that he was capable of carrying out the duties of his office despite corruption allegations hanging over him, army radio said.

When challenged by a left-wing MP about his capacity to continue as premier while under suspicion of taking bribes, Sharon retorted that he "was able to do all the tasks the role called for".

Yossi Sarid, from the dovish Meretz party, was sharply rebuked by the chairman of the foreign affairs and defence committee who said it was not the place in which to confront the premier with such questions, the radio said.

Israel's chief prosecutor Edna Arbel on Sunday recommended that attorney general Menachem

Mazuz indict Sharon for receiving bribes from contractor David Appel.

Meanwhile judicial sources said the Supreme Court on Monday ordered Gilad Sharon to turn in all documents relevant to the investigation of his father.

Five judges determined that Sharon's son must hand over the documents to the police, the sources said.

Earlier, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert expressed confidence Sharon would remain in power despite growing pressure over the scandal.

"I don't have the slightest doubt Sharon will continue to be prime minister. He was comfortably elected twice and he doubled the number of Likud's seats in parliament," Olmert told public radio.

Tight security to protect Mother Teresa's Nobel medal

AFP, Kolkata

Security has been beefed up at the offices of the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa, where her Nobel medal and other articles are kept, Indian police said yesterday.

The move comes in the wake of last week's sensational theft of Asia's first Nobel medal given to poet-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore -- an icon of India's freedom movement.

The medal and 30 other items belonging to Tagore vanished from his museum in Shanti Niketan, 200km north of Kolkata.

"As a precautionary measure, we have stepped up security at Mother House," said city police deputy commissioner Soumen Mitra, referring to the head office of the Missionaries of Charity.

The organisation was founded by Mother Teresa in Kolkata in 1950 to care for the destitute and disabled.

MUSHARRAF SAYS Pak govt not involved in nuclear proliferation

AFP, Washington

The United States knows Pakistan's government was not involved in nuclear proliferation, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said in a taped television interview broadcast Sunday.

"They know that nuclear proliferation has not been done by the government," Musharraf told ABC's "This Week" news show, in the interview taped Friday in Islamabad. "They know that there are some individuals who have done it."

Musharraf has been roiled in a controversy over top Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan's involvement in leaking nuclear secrets.

Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, last month publicly confessed that he had shared nuclear secrets with Iran, Libya and North Korea. Musharraf later pardoned Khan.

In a separate Sunday interview

with ABC, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said he had seen no evidence that Musharraf was involved in leaking nuclear secrets, but he could not say if Pakistan's military was involved.

"I do not believe that there's any evidence or any suggestion that President Musharraf was involved," Rumsfeld said.

Asked whether high-level Pakistani military officials were involved, he said: "You can't say that I know that every person connected with the Pakistani military over some sustained period of time had no knowledge or participation whatsoever. That's silly. I couldn't do that."

The impact of Khan's leaks is unclear, the Pakistani leader said.

"People are, I think, over-assessing the physical damage of the proliferation that he has done," Musharraf said. "We have to be clear now, what was the impact?"

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders held talks with UN advisors yesterday on how to regain sovereignty from the US-led coalition, after persistent violence killed two foreigners and a minister escaped an assassination bid.

"Official meetings with the United Nations team of experts have started this morning at the headquarters of Iraq's interim Governing Council," a council spokesman who did not wish to be identified told AFP.

"About seven or eight members of the Governing Council are participating in the meeting," he said.

The UN team is made up of technical experts due to give advice on holding elections, conducting a census and assembling a caretaker government set to rule when sovereignty returns to Iraqis on June 30.

The team, which started its visit Friday amid political wrangling over the country's interim constitution, will be joined later this week by a UN political delegation

headed by special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi.

Shia spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has been the most vocal critic of the interim constitution, threatening to boycott talks with the advisors unless the United Nations declares it non-binding.

Sistani has criticized the interim law for granting broad rights to the Kurdish and Sunni minorities.

But an aide to the revered cleric said Sistani would not call for protests even if his reservations over the law were ignored.

The political machinations come amid an upsurge of violence which Sunday killed a British security guard and his Canadian colleague in the northern city of Mosul, and left scores of US soldiers and Iraqis wounded.

But the boldest attack was a failed assassination bid against interim Iraqi public works minister Nasreen Barwari, a 37-year-old Kurd and the only woman in the government, east of Mosul.

She escaped unharmed, but three of her bodyguards were killed and a fourth wounded.

Early Monday, three Iraqi paramilitary police were wounded in a landmine explosion near Baquba, north of Baghdad, police said.

A series of explosions and mortar attacks rocked residential neighborhoods in Samarra, further to the north, overnight but police said there were no immediate reports of casualties.

Late Sunday, a man and his wife were killed when an explosive charge blew up as they were walking near a school in the center of Samarra, 120km north of Baghdad, Lieutenant Colonel Rashid Omar Alisaid Monday.

In the capital, an order from US overseer Paul Bremer to shut down for 60 days a weekly newspaper owned by a firebrand Shia cleric, on charges of inciting violence, has stirred protests.

Explosion kills 2 in Tashkent market

AP, Tashkent

An explosion ripped through the Uzbek capital Tashkent on Monday, killing at least two people, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported. The Uzbek Foreign Ministry blamed terrorists.

Ministry spokesman Ilkhom Zakirov said that there were "several terrorist acts," arrests had been made and an investigation was underway. He confirmed that there were casualties but could not give further details.

At least one of the blasts occurred around 9 a.m. local time at the Chorsu market in the Old City, said Alimzhon Turdakulov, spokesman for the National Security Service. Russia's Echo of Moscow radio, citing the RIA-Novosti news agency, said several people had been killed.

Russia's ITAR-Tass news agency reported that initial information indicated a suicide bomber had blown herself up. It said that its correspondent had witnessed the explosion and reported that people had been thrown several yards by the blast.



International election observer, US citizen Shannon Turner-Covell, marks the region allotted to her during a meeting of election observers in Colombo yesterday.

Lanka may be heading for more trouble

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is seeking stability as it faces its third elections in four years Friday, but opinion polls and analysts say the country may just be heading for more trouble.

At the root is the feud between President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who are at loggerheads over Oslo-backed attempts to end war with Tamil Tiger ethnic rebels.

The two once played together as children and share privileged backgrounds -- Kumaratunga is a daughter of two prime ministers and Wickremesinghe is a nephew of the country's first executive president.

Now, however, they have little in common. The president, who is elected separately, called elections nearly four years ahead of schedule after sacking the legislature controlled by her rival. She accused him of conceding too much to the Tigers.

She is hoping that her alliance in January with the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, will allow her to topple Wickremesinghe's right-wing

party, but opinion surveys point to a hung assembly.

Political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda says the election is unlikely to settle the power struggle and the country could see prolonged instability.

In an election where the two main parties are neck-and-neck, the minority Tamils could hold the balance of power. They lean towards the prime minister's party although there are no guarantees of actual support.

However if Wickremesinghe forms the next government, Sri Lanka would be back to square one as far as the cohabitation crisis is concerned. Wickremesinghe plays down fears of constitutional gridlock after the April 2 vote.

"The president has gone to the people asking for a new mandate," Wickremesinghe told AFP last week. "When people give us that mandate, she has no option but to work with my party."

He accused Kumaratunga of turning their rivalry into a personal feud when there were pressing issues confronting the country.