

South Asia mired in health crisis: Experts

AFP, Paris

The people of India, Pakistan and other countries in South Asia are in dramatically poor health, physical and mental, British and Asian health experts warn.

Pitifully low spending on health care, surging tobacco consumption, widespread depression and anxiety, shockingly high suicide rates among disaffected youngsters, wanton neglect of girls and women and unethical sales practices by the drug industry are among the problems that they outline.

"Half the people in South Asia live below the poverty line," says the British Medical Journal (BMJ), in a special issue next Saturday devoted to the region's health.

"The region is also home to a third of the world's child deaths and almost two-thirds of the global burden of malnutrition."

The BMJ angrily points the finger at the region's levels of

spending on health.

While the United States spends around 4,000 dollars per person per year on health care, spending in Nepal is just three dollars a head, and in India and Pakistan it is hardly better, at four dollars per head.

In Pakistan, with 152 million people the sixth most populous country in the world, psychiatric problems appear to be widespread, according to research published in the BMJ's rival, The Lancet.

It analysed 20 studies of adult mental health in Pakistan and found that, on average, 34 percent of people interviewed had depressive disorders and anxiety, especially people with financial or relationship problems.

The figure must be treated with caution, because most of the data came from only two provinces, Punjab and Singh, the authors say.

Lanka may have another hung parliament

Huge troops deployed for today's election

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka deployed thousands of troops ahead of today's parliamentary elections expected to return a hung parliament which could further undermine a faltering effort to end ethnic unrest.

Defence officials said military units were sent to areas in provinces where police expected trouble during voting. The police are activating 64,000 men for election duty.

"We will intensify mobile patrols and call in the military to assist police," said police deputy Inspector-General Jayantha Wickremaratne.

The election, the third in four years, was called by President Chandrika Kumaratunga to end her power struggle with Prime Minister

Ranil Wickremesinghe and differences over his handling of a Norwegian-backed effort to seek a political settlement with Tamil Tiger rebels.

Kumaratunga accused the premier, who is from a rival party, of conceding too much to the Tamil Tigers in talks aimed at halting the conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

The Tigers are expected to gain political clout after Friday's election in which 12.89 million people are eligible to vote a system of proportional representation.

The Tigers are not in the running but their Tamil National Alliance (TNA) proxies are expected to win about 15 to 18 seats from the 225 up for grabs.

They could emerge as

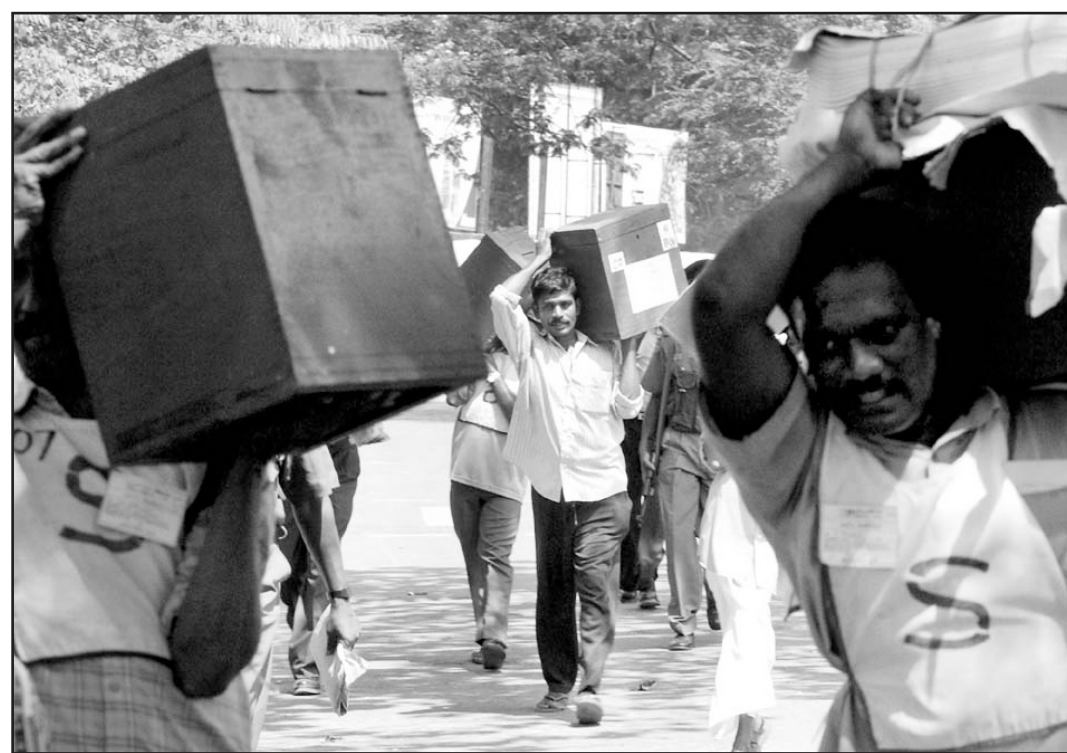
kingmakers with analysts predicting a hung parliament as the parties of Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe run neck and neck.

A minority government would be at the mercy of the world's most ruthless guerrillas who have been branded "terrorists" by many countries, including the United States and India.

For Wickremesinghe, the election is a referendum on his peace drive with the Tamil Tigers.

The return of his market-friendly United National Party (UNP) could push Sri Lanka back to the same uneasy cohabitation arrangement that brought about Friday's vote in the first place.

But Wickremesinghe played down fears of a constitutional gridlock.



Sri Lankan election officials carry ballot boxes to a waiting vehicle at the Ispathana college distribution centre in Colombo yesterday. Sri Lanka votes today in an election meant to end a power struggle but it is now widely expected that the polls will result in a hung parliament and could further undermine an already faltering peace bid.

Divided dynasties in India

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Dynasty seems to have ceased to be a dirty word in India's politics and electoral battles.

While it is nothing unusual to find politicians and their children take a plunge in polls fray, the coming Lok Sabha polls may well go down as unprecedented as far as the number of relatives is concerned.

Politics and the rat race for getting a party ticket to contest polls has also at times tended to put strain on ties among members of the political families, between husband and wife, brother and brother and father and son.

Leader of the opposition and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul in adjacent constituencies in Uttar Pradesh, Indian Finance Minister Jaswant Singh's son Manavendra in a constituency in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav and his son Akhilesh in their home state and senior Congress leader Murli Deora's son Milind in Mumbai -- all vying for a seat in Lok Sabha.

Apart from Jaswant Singh's son, the BJP has given nomination to the kin of some of its other senior leaders like Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Rajee's son Dushyant Singh, former party chief Bangaru Laxman's wife Sushila and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's niece Karuna Shukla.

Not to be outdone, Congress has given tickets to Maharashtra Chief Minister Shushikumar Shinde's wife Ujjwala, former Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram's daughter Meira Kumar, late bandit queen turned politician's Phoolan Devi's husband

Umed Singh and Jyotiraiditya Scindia and Sachin Pilot, sons of late party leaders Madhavrao Scindia and Rajesh Pilot respectively.

The Congress has given a ticket to senior tribal leader in eastern state of Orissa Giridhar Gamang to contest parliamentary poll and nominated his wife Hema to fight the elections to state legislature after the ties between the couple were on the verge of breakup over the race for tickets.

Congress also placated its veteran and now dissident leader K Karunakaran in the southern state of Kerala ruled by the party by giving him a nomination to Rajya Sabha, upper house of Parliament, a nomination to his daughter Padmaja to contest for Lok Sabha and inducting her brother K Muraleedharan into the state cabinet.

In Bihar, ruling Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Laloo Prasad Yadav, whose wife Rabri Devi is state Chief Minister, is contesting Lok Sabha polls and two of Laloo's brothers-in-law are members of the state legislature.

Two scions of political heavyweights in northern state of Haryana --Ajay Singh, son of state Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala, and Surendra Singh, son of former Chief Minister Bansi Lal, have already entered the electoral fray as is Kuldip Bishnoi, son of another former chief minister and senior Congress leader Bhajan Lal.

Former prime minister I K Gujral's son Naresh is a candidate for parliamentary elections in his home state of Punjab as representative of the main opposition party Akali Dal, an ally of BJP.

Gujral's immediate successor and former prime minister H D

Devegowda is in parliamentary polls fray in the southern state of Karnataka and his two sons Kumaraswamy and Revanna are aspiring for seats in the state legislature elections which are being held in tandem with Lok Sabha polls. The father and the sons are fighting for tickets of the Janata Dal (Secular) party.

The presence of members of the same family in diverse parties is nothing new. Sonia Gandhi and her son and daughter in Congress, their relatives Maneka and Varun in BJP.

The royal family of Scindia is also divided. The late mother Vijayraje was in BJP and her two daughters, including Vasundhara, are in saffron party even though their late brother Madhavrao was a staunch Congressman. Madhavara's son Jyotiraiditya is in Congress.

The latest addition to the spectacle is Lakshman Singh, brother of senior Congress leader Digvijay Singh, former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh state. Lakshman recently joined BJP and got a nomination from a parliamentary constituency, which he had won as a Congress candidate in 1999. Digvijay has said he would campaign to ensure the defeat of his young brother.

Indian Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat is also a senior BJP leader but his nephew Pratap Singh is a Congress candidate for the prestigious Jaipur parliamentary seat in Rajasthan.

When politics become family affair, it does not guarantee harmony among the siblings. Blood may be thicker than water. But political ambitions often prove more powerful.



Party workers of India's Samajwadi Party stand atop publicity vans bearing the image of party General Secretary Amar Singh, in Lucknow yesterday. India's general elections are scheduled to be held in five stages from April 20.

'Pakistan to quit talks if there is no progress'

Musharraf's statement reflexes his 'domestic compulsions': Advani

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf has said he has told key world leaders he would withdraw from peace efforts between India and Pakistan if progress was not made ending the Kashmir dispute through dialogue.

A solution to the 56-year-old dispute over the Himalayan region of Kashmir was essential for peace in the region, Musharraf told Pakistan Television's News Night programme broadcast Wednesday.

"We have to move forward on Kashmir. We have to resolve it. If we don't move forward, I am not in the process. They know that," the Pakistani leader said.

"I told everyone, absolutely unambiguously, if you think I am here to sell Kashmir, you are talking to the wrong man."

India and Pakistan have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir since independence from Britain in 1947. The nuclear armed neighbours came close to a fourth war in 2002 until intense US-led international diplomacy de-escalated the tension.

Since a gesture of friendship by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in April last year, the two countries have restored full diplomatic ties and resumed train and bus services.

They also re-established sporting links and an Indian cricket team this

month opened its first full tour of Pakistan in more than 14 years.

Musharraf and Vajpayee met in Islamabad in January and, after a lapse of more than two years, foreign secretaries of the two countries resumed dialogue in February to try to resolve outstanding issues, including the Kashmir dispute.

Musharraf said the foreign ministers of both countries would meet in August to review the progress in the dialogue process.

Musharraf has said before that Kashmir was key to resolving differences between the two nations, but India has said it is just one issue to be dealt with.

Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan and claimed in full by both.

The Indian zone of Kashmir has been rocked by a 14-year old insurgency which has claimed thousands of lives since 1989.

India accuses Pakistan of fueling the revolt. Pakistan denies the charge but backs the Kashmiri movement as a "legitimate struggle for self-rule".

PTI adds: Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani yesterday said that message by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf that he would not be a party to the peace process with India if there was no forward movement on Kashmir issue was due to "domestic compulsions".

"I think Musharraf's statement stemmed out of domestic compulsions but so long as he sticks to a course decided at the Secretary-level meeting, there should be no problem," he told reporters at Himmatnagar in Gujarat during his 'Bharat Uday Yatra'.

Hoping that differences between the two nations would be resolved through dialogue, Advani said the joint statement signed by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Musharraf in Islamabad was a landmark event. At the meetings between the Joint Secretaries and Foreign Secretaries of the two countries it was decided on how to proceed for a dialogue, he said.

"We should pursue the same direction," he added.

Pointing out that Indo-Pak problems, including the Kashmir issue, can be solved through talks, Advani said India has proceeded towards resolving bilateral differences with optimism.

Asked whether Pakistan's message was due to the recently acquired "major non-NATO ally" status from the US, Advani said, "We are concerned at it. We reacted strongly after it was done".

Replying to a question whether there is a possibility of ceasefire with terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir, he said "there is nothing as such at the moment".

China scolds US for radar sales to Taiwan

REUTERS, Beijing/Washington

China scolded the United States yesterday for its planned sale of long-range early-warning radar worth up to \$1.78 billion to Taiwan, which Beijing considers a break-away province.

The Pentagon said the ground-based, ultra-high-frequency radar would boost Taiwan's ability to "identify and detect ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and air-breathing target threats," or weapons that operate in the Earth's atmosphere.

The United States acknowledges China's claim to Taiwan, but makes no statement about Taiwan's status. It remains the self-ruling island's main arms supplier, major trade partner and biggest ally despite last month's controver-

sial re-election of pro-independence President Chen Shui-bian.

"We have always opposed US sales of advanced weapons to Taiwan," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan told reporters in Beijing.

"Especially under the current complicated and sensitive situation across the Taiwan Strait, we ask the United States to be faithful to what it says and abide by its promises and not send the wrong signal to Taiwan's independence (seekers)."

For his part, Chen urged the United States to take a "more active, constructive" role in encouraging dialogue between Taiwan and China, diplomatic and ideological foes since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949.

Afghanistan, 6 others ink accord on anti-drugs fight

AFP, Berlin

Afghanistan and its six closest neighbours inked a regional cooperation accord yesterday to step up the fight against narcotics by creating a "security belt" around the country.

With the drugs trade crippling reconstruction efforts, the deal is aimed at tightening border controls, tackling traffickers -- including the possibility of joint cross-border operations -- and exchanging information.

"We hope that this will be followed by steps on the ground," Afghanistan's foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah, said.

"We have not been alone in our fight against narcotics. We have the support of the international community in it."

The accord was agreed in Berlin at an international conference designed to shore up the country's

rebuilding and reformation process.

It was formally signed by officials from Afghanistan and the six bordering countries -- China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Britain, which has taken the lead international role in helping Afghanistan tackle the drugs problem, helped draw up the agreement.

"It will not be quick and it will not be easy but it must be done," British Foreign Office minister Mike O'Brien said.

"Afghanistan will return to peace and prosperity only if the drugs trade is eliminated."

"Defeating this cancer will be a long slog" but "the success of Afghanistan depends on it."

Afghanistan is the world's biggest producer of poppy-derived opium used to make heroin, part of a narcotics industry that accounts for about half of the country's annual domestic

product.

According to UN officials, the industry is in danger of turning Afghanistan into a failed narco-state, and Abdullah has compared drugs to terrorism as a "global menace."

In the declaration, the ministers "expressed their support for the concept of creating a security belt around Afghanistan with the purpose of organising an effective system to interdict trafficking of opium products."

The accord has eight points.

They include commitments to shore up border security; examine the possibility of coordinated operations; improve judicial and law enforcement measures; swap intelligence and information; destroy crops and disrupt supply chains; promote alternative trades and livelihoods; and seek to reduce local demand.

US, Canada smash drug ring with Asian link

AFP, Washington

At least 171 suspects were arrested in the United States and Canada early Wednesday, as police in both countries smashed a lucrative ecstasy and marijuana smuggling ring that allegedly funneled profits back to Asia.

Drugs and cash worth more than 40 million dollars have been seized both north and south of the border, US and Canadian police said.

More than 130 suspects were arrested in United States as part of a sweep dubbed "Operation Candy Box." US officials said. In Canada the crackdown went under two different code names, Project Okapi in Toronto and Project Codi in Ottawa.

The network ringleaders were arrested in Canada, include Ze Wai Wong, 46, a Chinese national picked

up in Toronto, and Mai Phuong Le, 38, a Vietnamese national arrested in Ottawa.

US and Canadian indictments allege Wong was the leader of a drug distribution ring operating in 18 US cities and Canada, and accuse Le of laundering the proceeds through bank accounts around the world, including Vietnam.

Canadian police said they arrested at least 12 in Toronto and 29 in Ottawa, while US officials said more than 130 were arrested across the United States.

"Through the work of many different agencies, we have achieved a top to bottom decimation of a dangerous drug organization and a complimentary attack on the fuel that drives the organization -- their money," said US Deputy Attorney General James Comey in a statement.



Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah (C) sits during the signing ceremony of a six-country accord to prevent the production and trafficking of narcotics, during the International Conference on Afghanistan in Berlin yesterday. With the drugs trade crippling reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, the deal is aimed at tightening border controls, tackling traffickers -- including the possibility of joint cross-border operations -- and exchanging information.