

NDA vows to make India economic superpower

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling coalition yesterday unveiled its agenda for the next five years and said it voted back to office it would strive to turn the nation into an economic superpower and fight for peace.

The ruling National Democratic Alliance, which is headed by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party promised to create 10 million jobs every year if it wins parliamentary elections starting April 20.

It said it would allocate 5.5 billion dollars for defence modernisation and 2.2 billion dollars for infrastructure development.

Vajpayee, unveiling the coalition's joint manifesto, said most of the promises made in 1999 had been fulfilled.

"But we are not fully satisfied as a lot more is to be done. There is a great potential which needs to be

tapped," Vajpayee said.

The ruling coalition promised to extend electricity to India's 600,000 villages by 2009.

"We plan to make India into an economic superpower. The world now agrees that India is poised for a great leap and for this we have to work together," Vajpayee said.

The manifesto also pledged to carry forward a peace initiative that has already improved ties with Pakistan.

"The new agenda is an agenda for development, good governance and peace," said Defence Minister George Fernandes, the coalition's convenor, at a press conference by NDA leaders following the release of the manifesto.

In a clear attack on the Italian roots of opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, the manifesto said a law would be enacted to bar people of foreign origin from holding high constitutional offices.

Attack on Kashmir polls rally: 4 killed

2 state ministers hurt, Jaish commander among 16 others killed in separatist violence

AFP, Srinagar

Suspected rebels attacked an election rally in Indian Kashmir yesterday, killing at least four people and injuring 35, including two state ministers while 16 others killed in separatist violence.

The attack was the first violence in the disputed state ahead of Indian elections beginning this month.

An explosion went off as state Finance Minister Muzaffar Hussain Beigh and Tourism Minister Ghulam Hassan Mir were about to speak at the rally in Uri, 100km north of the summer capital Srinagar, police said.

"The explosion was followed by firing. We could not see who was

firing, but I could see many people lying in a pool of blood," said Fayaz Ahmed, a cameraman covering the event for Asian News International.

"There were screams and shrieks from all sides," Ahmed told AFP by telephone.

Police said four people were killed of the some 200 who had come out for the rally, held in the yard of a school.

Beigh, the finance minister, was hurt in the leg but his injuries were not life-threatening, a police officer said.

"Mir was bleeding profusely, but he was still talking," the officer said.

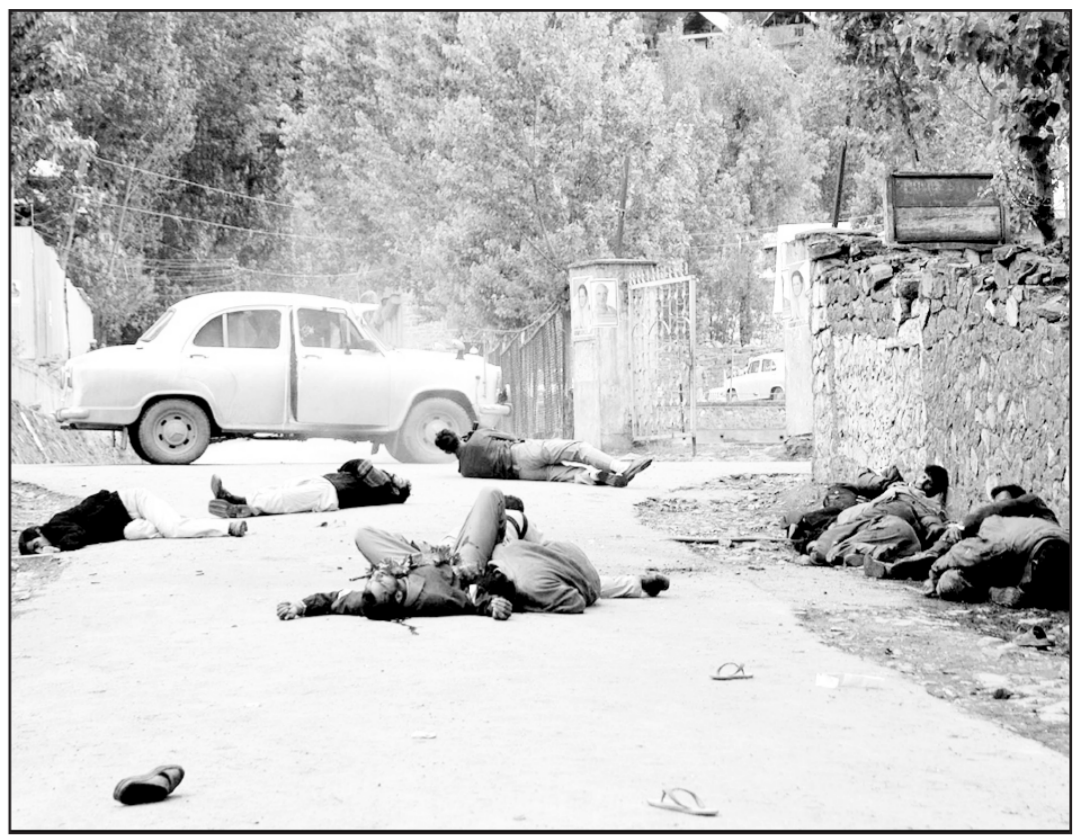
The chief of Indian Kashmir's ruling People's Democratic Party, Mehbooba Mufti, was also at the

rally but was not hurt in the attack, police said.

Indian troops immediately sealed off the venue and one person was arrested, police said.

Meanwhile, Indian troops yesterday shot dead the chief commander of hardline rebel group Jaish-e-Mohammed and four of his associates in a surge of violence in Kashmir which claimed a total of 16 lives, officials said.

Qari Asif, alias Sehrai Baba, one of the most wanted rebel commanders in Indian Kashmir, was gunned down during a clash with troops in the village of Sogan in northern Kupwara district, a police officer said.



Dead and injured supporters of Indian administered Kashmir's ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) lie at the scene of an explosion in Uri some 100kms north of Srinagar yesterday. Four people were killed and 35 injured when suspected rebels lobbed a hand grenade at a PDP rally in Uri.

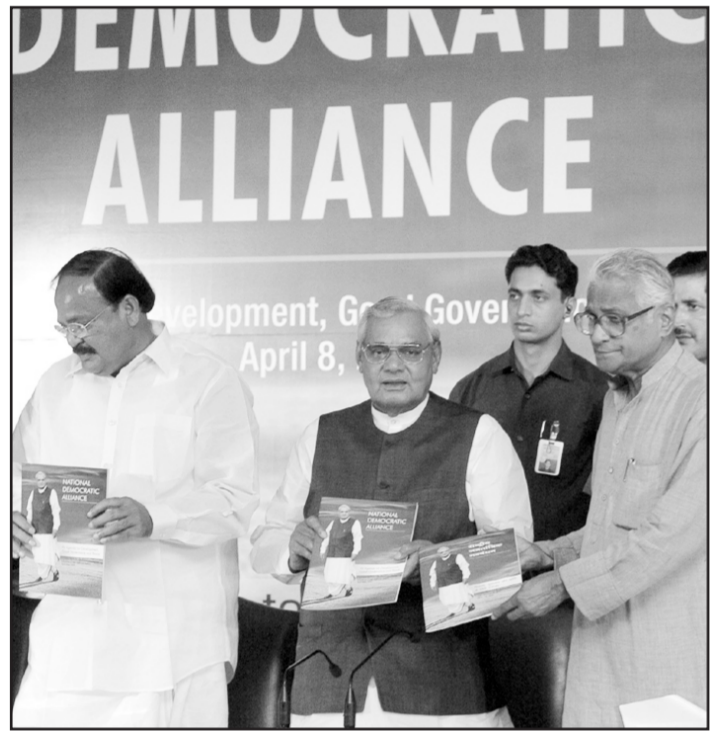


PHOTO: AFP

India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), President Venkaiah Naidu (L) and Samata party leader and Convener for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) George Fernandes (R) pose with copies of the NDA manifesto after its release in New Delhi yesterday.

NDA to enact law to bar 'foreigners' from high posts

PTI, New Delhi

Finance Minister Jaswant Singh yesterday said NDA was committed to bringing in a legislation to bar people of foreign origin from holding high public offices.

"Every statement in the NDA agenda is a commitment made by the NDA," he told reporters after Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee released the manifesto of the ruling alliance.

He was replying to a question, addressed to the Prime Minister, whether the NDA would bring in a law to debar people of foreign origin from holding Constitutional posts and if this was directed specifically at Congress president Sonia Gandhi.

Vajpayee paused for a few moments and then asked Singh to take the question.

Singh said "We do not indicate individual preferences. What is stated is the principle to which we all subscribe".

Pak parliament okays bill to set up national security council

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's federal parliament yesterday approved a bill to create a controversial civil-military National Security Council, amid vehement opposition protests that its passage was an attack on the parliament's sovereignty.

Opposition MPs surrounded speaker Chaudhary Amir Hussain and tore up the copies of the bill in protest, shouting, "We do not accept the council."

The NSC will be headed by the president and comprises the prime minister, four military chiefs, chief ministers of four provinces and leader of opposition. It was written into Pakistan's constitution by President Pervez Musharraf in August 2002.

Musharraf allowed the NSC clause to be deleted from the constitution late last year after an accord with Islamist opposition parties who had paralysed parliament through a bitter, year-long campaign against his powers.

However, the agreement between six-party Islamist alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) and ruling Pakistan Muslim League provided for creation of the NSC through an Act of Parliament.

Information Sheikh Rashid said the NSC would work as a "consultative body" and its decisions would be implemented after parliamentary approval.

But MMA leader Farid Paracha said: "The NSC bill is an attack on the sovereignty of the parliament and democracy."



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (R) greets Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmud Kasuri in Beijing yesterday. Kasuri arrived here for talks with Chinese leaders on improving bilateral ties.

Mallika ready to take on Vajpayee

AFP, New Delhi

Bollywood's new sex symbol, Mallika Sherawat, is ready to contest upcoming parliamentary polls against Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, a report said yesterday.

Sherawat announced her willingness to stand against Vajpayee, who has been elected four consecutive times from Lucknow constituency in northern India, while on a promotion tour of her latest movie, "Murder", the Indian Express reported.

"More than 70 percent of the voters in Lucknow are young people who will readily vote in my favour. I am willing to contest, the only condition being all non-BJP parties should declare me as the unified candidate," she said, referring to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

Sherawat's steamy skin flick "Murder" has set screens on fire with 90 percent of seats sold in cinemas where it has been showing since it was released last Friday.

'Sonia must be quizzed in Bofors case'

AFP, New Delhi

Testimony from India's Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi is crucial to solving a 1.3 billion dollar bribe scandal involving Swedish arms firm Bofors and Indian politicians, an investigator said yesterday.

The comments by Swedish investigator Sten Lindstrom come at an awkward time for Sonia Gandhi and her party as they prepare to take on India's ruling Hindu nationalists in national polls starting April 20.

Lindstrom, leading the probe into the arms bribery case, said in an article published in the Asian Age newspaper that Italian-born Gandhi should be quizzed alongside an Italian businessman to unravel attempts to confuse investigators.

"I said earlier that the truth will come out one day ... Ottavio Quattrocchi, the Italian middleman who negotiated the political pay-

off... must be interrogated. Sonia Gandhi must be questioned. All else is detail," he said. The Bofors bribery case, India's biggest arms scandal, toppled the government of former Congress prime minister Rajiv Gandhi -- Sonia's husband -- in 1989. Gandhi was assassinated two years later during an election campaign.

After years of investigation, the Delhi High Court in February this year finally cleared Rajiv Gandhi of wrongdoing in the arms bribery affair dating back to 1986.

The court ruled there was not a "scintilla of evidence" showing wrongdoing in the deal by Rajiv Gandhi.

An Indian investigation is still pushing ahead with the Bofors case, but last week suffered a major blow when a Malaysian court rejected their attempt to extradite Quattrocchi, living there since the 1990s, who denies involvement.

Myanmar junta invites NLD to convention

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government has formally invited political parties, including Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), to a convention aimed at kickstarting democratisation, parties said yesterday.

"Yes, we have received the invitations to attend the national convention," said Than Tun, from the NLD's decision-making Central Executive Committee (CEC).

The convention, set to open May 17, is aimed at drafting a new constitution for the country, a process which could take months and even years.

"We cannot say whether we will attend it or not until all nine persons of the CEC have met and decided on the issue," Than Tun told AFP.

He said the junta presented the invitation Wednesday and the party would issue a statement about it Thursday.

China calls for Indo-Pak reconciliation

AFP, Beijing

Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing in talks with Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mehmud Kasuri urged continued reconciliation efforts between nuclear neighbors Pakistan and India yesterday, while also calling for greater bilateral economic and trade ties.

Li met Kasuri at the Diaoyutai State Guest House in Beijing where both ministers praised the traditional links between the two countries that have seen close cooperation in security and military fields.

During the talks, "Li has especially stressed the question of relations between India and Pakistan," foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan told journalists.

"He welcomed and supported

the momentum of reconciliation that recently appeared between both countries," Kong said, and urged that the momentum be continued.

Kasuri was scheduled to meet with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao later Thursday.

The visiting diplomat arrived in China on Tuesday, but spent his first two days in Shanghai. He departs on Friday.

Kong refused to say if the two ministers discussed plans for a second Chinese nuclear power plant to be built in Pakistan, but said that the two sides were actively engaged in discussions on the issue.

The plant was discussed during a visit to China by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in November, but there has been no subsequent announcement. Meanwhile the United States has

reportedly urged Beijing not to allow the deal.

The 300 megawatt nuclear power plant at Chashma, in central Pakistan's Punjab province, is to be built next to a Chinese-supplied plant completed in 1999.

Observers have noted that Beijing's help in the second phase of the Chashma project would allow Islamabad to obtain enriched plutonium, a sensitive issue as Pakistan has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Pakistan has relied heavily on China for its defence equipment since 1990 when the United States stopped supplying it with military hardware amid claims Islamabad had acquired the capability to produce nuclear weapons.

Maoists free most of abducted Nepalis

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels released most of 1,500 people they abducted in rural Nepal but took more hostage after a raid on a police station that left at least four people dead, officials said.

The violence came as shops were closed and traffic off the streets across the Himalayan kingdom on the last day of a three-day Maoist strike.

Most of 1,500 youths snatched Tuesday were freed after the Maoists, who want to set up a communist state, made them attend an indoctrination session, said Bhanu Dev Badu, chief administrator of the southwestern Kanchanpur district.

"The villagers were taken to a place 35km away and most were released after a Maoist-affiliated peasant organisation held a meeting with them," Badu told AFP.

But in another southwestern district, Ilam, a large band of Maoists attacked a police post where 65 police were stationed, killing a police inspector and a junior officer, a police spokesman said.

He said the bodies of two Maoists had been recovered but more could have been carried away by the rebels when they fled.

Eighteen policemen who were in the post at the time of the attack had contacted authorities but "45 other policemen are feared to have been abducted by the rebels and a search is on to find them," the spokesman said.

A wave of abductions by the rebels has prompted criticism at home and abroad amid reports that villagers in southern Nepal were fleeing for safety across the Indian border.

Lanka seeks to revive talks with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's incoming government will revive talks with Tamil Tiger rebels, President Chandrika Kumaratunga said Wednesday.

Kumaratunga's overtures came as her top aide sought a more direct role for neighbouring India in peace efforts with the Tigers, who warned Monday they could take up arms again unless they are granted self-rule.

"The new government takes office at a difficult moment in our history," Kumaratunga said in her first national television address since her Freedom Alliance came narrowly on top in Friday's parliamentary election.

"We have a ceasefire... without even commencing to talk with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) on the possible final solutions," she said.

"I regret to say that this is not a happy situation for the country. The new government is working on resuming peace talks with the LTTE," she said.

Kumaratunga did not say how she would revive negotiations with the rebels, which have been stalled for more than a year, even with a more conciliatory government in

power.

Before her address, Kumaratunga met with defeated Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, whom she had accused of conceding too much to the Tigers in his drive to solve the three-decade-old ethnic war.

Lakshman Kadirgamar, tipped to be foreign minister in the new government, called for India to play a more direct role in ending the conflict which has claimed over 60,000 lives.

"The government would start discussing the possibility of India playing a more direct role in the peace process," Kadirgamar said after meeting Indian envoy Nirupam Sen. "We have not gone into the details of that."

India provided training and safe haven to Sri Lankan Tamil groups until a bilateral 1987 accord that sought to end Tamil separatism on the island.

But India ended a 32-month deployment to the island in 1990 after its soldiers wound up battling the Tamil Tigers. New Delhi has since taken a more hands-off approach to its southern neighbour.

expected on Wednesday would take place at an unspecified later date.

Kumaratunga's Freedom Alliance won 105 seats in the 225-member assembly and has been desperately looking for at least eight more legislators to cross the magic number of 113 needed for an absolute majority.

A minority party, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), which won eight seats had begun informal talks with Rajapakse, but they ended abruptly when CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman suddenly travelled to India.

Sources close to Thondaman said he was not expected to return to Colombo before April 22, when the new government is due to have its first session in the new parliament.

The government was in hectic talks with minority groups in a bid to secure their support, but complicated ties prevented any party from openly propping up the leftist alliance, political sources said.

Tamil Tiger rebels through their proxies had 22 members elected to the parliament, giving them considerable clout to make or break governments. But they gave no indication on how they wanted to use their new-found leverage.

Muslims in Manila living in fear of clampdown

AFP, Manila

Most Muslims in the Philippines capital these days try to make it home before nightfall to avoid what they describe as unprovoked, systematic harassment by the security forces.

Most of the city's 400,000 Muslims are used to being harassed by police, but over the past two weeks it has become more intense following the recent arrests of six alleged Abu Sayyaf terrorists in Manila.

"If we are not being accused of running drugs, we are accused of kidnapping," said Charlie De Makuta, a trustee of the Islamic Centre in Quiapo, just across the river from Malacanang Palace and the seat of Philippine power.

"But since the arrest of the so-called Abu Sayyaf terrorists, the harassment has reached a new level where people are becoming very afraid ... afraid to even leave their homes," he told AFP.

In a crowded restaurant near the Islamic Centre he discusses the recent spate of arrests with other local Muslim leaders.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian walker Manjit Rai Bhardwaj, 66, strides through traffic on a street of Madras yesterday. Bhardwaj started a "Peace Mission on Foot" from Srinagar on November 6, 2003 he has travelled some 5300km so far, covering an average of 35kms per day. He plans to reach India's southern most point Kanyakumari and then return to Srinagar, with the aim of educating people.

Fighting rages in Afghan province

6 killed in clashes

REUTERS, AFP, Kandahar

Three Afghan security men and three Taliban guerrillas were killed in clashes in a southern province in which a US soldier was also wounded, security officials said yesterday.

The fighting took place in two districts of Helmand province on Wednesday, they said.

An Afghan soldier was killed and two were wounded, along with an American soldier, when a guerrilla opened fire as the troops searched a house in a joint operation in the province's Sangin district, a senior provincial official said.

One Taliban guerrilla was killed and four were arrested in the operation, he said. A US military spokesman said he had no information about a wounded US soldier.

Later in the same district, three guerrillas were wounded after attacking a security post elsewhere in the district, local security commander Bahadur Khan told Reuters.

The bodies of two Taliban guerrillas believed to have taken part in the attack were found 25 km to the north, Khan added.

In the Kotali Dahna area of Helmand's Nauzad district, meanwhile, three police vehicles providing security for opium eradication efforts also came under Taliban attack.

Two police officers were killed and three wounded and one of their vehicles was set on fire, Helmand's security chief Abdul Rahman Sabir told Reuters.

A US military spokesman said on Monday that remnants of the Taliban regime overthrown in late 2001 and their al-Qaeda allies no longer posed a threat to the US-backed government in Kabul.

But the guerrillas have continued to mount hit-and-run attacks in the south and east of the country, adding to concerns about security for elections due to be held in September.

Meanwhile, fighting raged for a third day in northern Afghanistan yesterday between forces loyal to the central government and those supporting a powerful regional warlord, the provincial governor said.