



PHOTO: AFP

Indian security personnel escort election officials transporting Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) on elephants leaving to polling stations of the Guwahati constituency on the eve of national elections in Nortap, Assam state yesterday. India's 14th general election since independence will be the first carried out only on electronic voting machines, in hopes of ending widespread irregularities -- and also the need for 7,700 tonnes of paper.

Indian Election

India deploys thousands of cops for election

AFP, New Delhi

Tens of thousands of paramilitary troops have been deployed in some of India's deadliest troublespots on the eve of national elections amid security fears heightened by attempts on the lives of two politicians, police and officials said yesterday.

Police said prominent regional politician Yerran Naidu survived a midnight landmine ambush in southern Andhra Pradesh state while outgoing Textile Minister Sahnawaz Hussain said assailants tried to run him down overnight in adjoining

Bihar.

In other pre-poll violence, Sushil Modi, president of the Bihar chapter of the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), survived an attack Sunday by unidentified men in the state capital of Patna.

Police also reported that federal election officials travelling to a Bihar constituency had a miraculous escape Monday when three landmines planted by Maoist rebels blew up before their bus drove into the ambush, police said.

Tuesday's voting is scheduled to be held in 140 of the 543 federal seats up for grabs, with elections to

the remaining seats staggered over four dates until May 10.

In all, some two million federal militia and state policemen are being deployed for the world's largest exercise in democracy, an election commission official said.

India's interior ministry said it had deployed paramilitary forces to 11 of the 15 states where Islamic, Maoist and tribal guerrillas have issued separate calls to boycott the parliamentary elections, the fourth since 1996.

A ministry spokesman said special attention was being paid to states such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar,

Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, Mizoram and Indian Kashmir where various insurgent groups are opposed to the polls.

"The entire exercise will involve over 1,300 companies (130,000 personnel), all taken together," he said, without giving numbers of those involved in Tuesday's first phase.

He said thousands of security personnel have been sent to Kashmir, where Islamic militancy has claimed more than 40,000 lives since 1989, to reinforce police during Tuesday's balloting in two of the region's six seats.

Vote positively, says president

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

The President yesterday appealed to the electorate to "vote positively" to elect members who would "guide the destiny" of the nation for the next five years.

This is the first time in the history of India's democracy that a President has issued such an appeal before parliamentary elections.

"You are sowing the seeds for the creation of a prosperous India, a happy India, a safe India, a secure India and above all an India with nobility," Dr APJ Abdul Kalam said two days before the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections.

"By casting your vote, you will be fulfilling the aspirations of the children and the youth of our nation and creating a powerful system that will make their dreams a reality," the President said. "The right to vote is a sacred right and an onerous responsibility that you owe to the motherland. Hence, exercising your franchise must become a priority activity for you and you should cast your vote positively."

Indian Election

Poll predicts clean sweep for BJP in riot-hit Gujarat

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Ahead of today's parliamentary elections in India's communally-sensitive state of Gujarat, most of the opinion polls have predicted a virtual clean sweep for ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

Most psephologists have given BJP headed by Chief Minister Narendra Modi not less than twenty of the total of 26 parliamentary seats in Gujarat, a result political analysts agree is the result of polarisation of votes caused by the communal riots in early 2002.

But this time around, when an estimated 3.36 crore voters are expected to exercise their franchise tomorrow to decide the fate of 162 candidates, the questions being

asked are: is the effect of the riots on the wane? Will Congress be able to overcome its organizational weaknesses, cash in on anti-incumbency factor and spring surprises by winning more than six seats it had won in the previous parliamentary polls in 1999?

Two years after the gruesome riots in the state, the issue has not taken a backseat in the electioneering for 2004 as Congress party raised it when attacking the Modi government in the state following the Supreme Court's order squashing the acquittal of 21 accused in the burning of 14 people in Baroda during the riots and shifting of the trial of the case outside Gujarat. The Congress also harped on the "misrule" of the BJP government.

The BJP, on the other hand, has

refrained from using its "Hindutva" card in the run up to parliamentary polls this time in sharp contrast to the party's campaign for December 2002 elections to the state legislature that brought the saffron party back to power in Gujarat.

Instead, the BJP has focused on the foreign origin of Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, the Supreme Court's permission to raise the height of a crucial dam on river Narmada and a much-publicised irrigation scheme launched by Modi government.

Interestingly, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in one of his election rallies in the state, praised the behaviour of Pakistani spectators during recent India-Pakistan cricket series and urged Indians to "learn from them". The political message of such a remark is not lost

UN COURT RULES

Srebrenica massacre was genocide

AFP, The Hague

The UN war crimes court ruled that the 1995 Srebrenica massacre was genocide, a historic decision that could determine the fate of others on trial including former Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic.

But in a move that sparked outrage among relatives of the Srebrenica dead, the appeals chamber of The Hague-based court overturned the conviction of a Bosnian Serb general who led troops into the UN-protected enclave where more than 7,000 Muslim boys and men were killed.

Instead, Radislav Krstic, who in 2001 became the first man found guilty of genocide over the worst atrocity in Europe since World War II, saw his conviction reduced to for aiding and abetting the genocide.

"The appeals chamber... calls the massacre at Srebrenica by its proper name: genocide. Those responsible will bear this stigma, and it will serve as a warning to those who may in future contemplate the commission of such a heinous act," said presiding judge Theodor Meron.

Krstic -- described in the 2001 verdict as a man who had "personally agreed to evil" -- was twitching nervously as the verdict was read out but appeared relieved when the court said his sentence had been reduced.

"The trial chamber... sets aside Radislav Krstic's conviction as a participant in a joint criminal enterprise to commit genocide and finds (him) guilty of aiding and abetting genocide," Meron said.

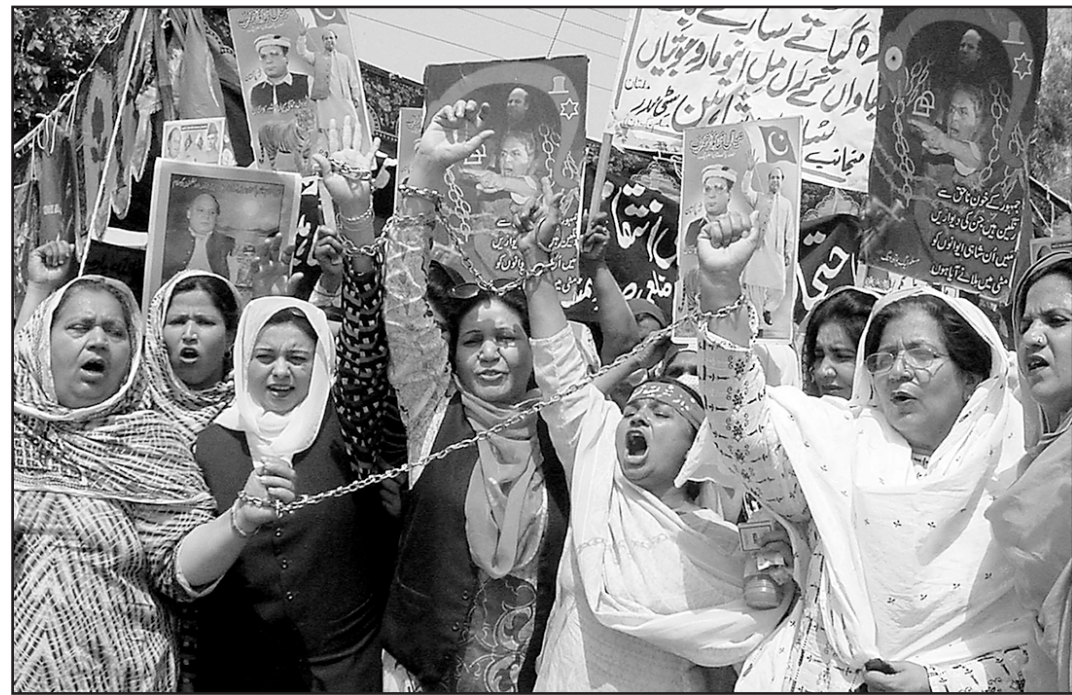


PHOTO: AFP

Activists of Pakistan Muslim League, Nawaz (PML-N) shout anti-government slogans during a demonstration in Multan yesterday. The demonstrators were protesting a court decision against their leader Javed Hashmi, who has been sentenced to 23 years in prison after he was arrested on October 29, 2003 on charges of defaming the government and the army, incitement to mutiny and document forgery.

Doubts mount over US power transfer in June

Iraqis not ready for security takeover: Bremer

AFP, Baghdad

Doubts over US plans to transfer sovereignty to an interim government in Iraq on June 30 mounted yesterday after the chief US administrator, Paul Bremer, warned that US-trained Iraqi forces were not on target to ensure the country's security.

"If former members of the Republican Guards, the mukharabbat, the Fedayeen Saddam and the Moqtadas militia are to be prevented from shooting their way into power, Iraqi security forces must have help until they are fully equipped and trained," Bremer said in a statement.

He was referring, in that order, to the crack army forces, military intelligence and militia which protected former dictator Saddam Hussein, as well as to forces loyal to Shia Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr leading the current uprising against the year-old US-led occupation of Iraq.

"It is clear that Iraqi forces will not be able, on their own, to deal with these threats by June 30 when an Iraqi government assumes sovereignty," Bremer said.

"Instead, Iraq and troops from many countries, including the United States will be partners in

providing the security Iraqis need." An upsurge in violence this month sparked by separate insurgencies from Sunni Muslim and Shia militants has left more than 90 US soldiers and hundreds of Iraqis dead.

In Fallujah, in the so-called Sunni triangle west of Baghdad, Iraqi mediators were to arrange another meeting on Monday between local civic leaders and coalition officials to consolidate an uneasy ceasefire in the city which has been under a US marine siege for two weeks.

Sadr's militia was out in force, meanwhile, in the Shia holy city of Najaf, where pilgrims gathered to mark Prophet Mohammed's death under the watchful eye of US forces massed outside the gates.

Pickup trucks filled with black-clad teenagers brandishing assault rifles and rocket propelled grenade launchers zipped through the streets, although US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers had told CNN television on Sunday it was not necessary to attack the city.

The task of the US-led forces was complicated when Spain's newly elected Socialist prime minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, announced on Sunday that he had ordered his country's 1,300 contingent to withdraw "as soon as possi-

ble and with maximum security."

The decision was not a surprise: more than 90 percent of the electorate opposed the presence of Spanish troops in Iraq, and Zapatero made a campaign pledge before last month's general election to withdraw them unless they came under United Nations command.

But he had previously indicated that they would serve out their mandate, which runs until June 30, and his decision was a rebuff to US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who promised on Friday to give the UN a central role in the transfer of power to an Iraqi interim government.

"It does not look like a UN resolution will match" Spanish demands on Iraq, Zapatero said in a television broadcast only one day after he was sworn in.

His announcement stirred up controversy at home and abroad.

Spanish opposition leader Mariano Rajoy accused him of ignoring parliament and acting "speedily and by surprise" and said withdrawing the troops would make Spain "more vulnerable" to terrorist attack.

Kim holds secret talks in China

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN

North Korea's reclusive leader Kim Jong-il held a closed-door summit meeting with his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao on the nuclear stand-off and other pending issues yesterday, according to press reports in South Korea.

Kim is on a secret mission to China amid rising global tension over his regime's nuclear weapons programmes. There, he is expected to reaffirm the alliance between the two countries and also request economic aid.

The communist leader is said to have left Pyongyang on Sunday by rail to China for an official four-day visit, where he is expected to meet other government heads including Premier Wen Jiabao and former president Jiang Zemin.

The reports also said Kim was joined by an entourage of 40 high-level officials in the ruling party, state and military, on a trip aimed at

shoring up ties with Beijing. The reports of the visit, however, have yet to be confirmed by authorities in Seoul and Beijing.

An official at Seoul's Foreign Ministry remained tight-lipped about information on Kim's trip, only saying that China and North Korea have a "unique relationship" and that a secret visit was possible since they have become more frequent in recent years.

"The past two visits by Kim Jong-il to China were also made secretly and announced only after the trips were completed," the official told The Korea Herald. "Either side may propose to keep it a secret and our mouths will be sealed until afterwards."

Declining to answer questions confirming the trip, the official said it was "difficult for a third-country to come out and discuss the matter." Officials agreed that rumors about Kim's visit to China had been circulating for some time.



PHOTO: AFP

India's former domestic workers and activists of the Sambhavan Trust, Rashida Bee (R) and Champa Shukla (L) were awarded Goldman Environmental Prize for their role in Bhopal disaster movement yesterday in San Francisco. Picture shows they interact with children in Bhopal Sunday. The two women, who for 20 years have battled on behalf of victims of the world's worst industrial disaster, say they will donate their prize money worth 125,000 dollars for the victims' treatment.

US braces for pre-polls terrorist strikes

AFP, Washington

The US government is taking "very seriously" the possibility that extremists could attempt new attacks on US soil in the hope of influencing the outcome of the November presidential election, a top White House official said.

The warning follows a series of train bombings in Spain that resulted in the defeat in parliamentary elections of the government of Jose Maria Aznar, a staunch conservative supporter of US President George W. Bush and his war in Iraq.

Coming just three days before the vote, the March 11 blasts are credited with swinging the Spanish electorate toward the Socialist Party of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, a vocal opponent of the Spanish participation in the Iraq war.

The new prime minister ordered all 1,300 Spanish soldiers out of Iraq on Sunday, one day after being sworn in.

This chain of events is seen by many in the United States as the first successful attempt by Islamic militants to influence an election in a Western democracy, and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice

warned Sunday there was no guarantee al-Qaeda or some other militant group would not try to pull off a similar feat here.

"I think that we do have to take very seriously the thought that the terrorists might have learned, we hope, the wrong lesson from Spain," she said, appearing on the Fox News Sunday television show.

"I think we also have to take seriously that they might try during the cycle leading up to the election to do something," Rice continued. "In some ways, it seems like it would be too good to pass up for them."