



India's Health and Parliamentary Affairs Minister and ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) main election campaigner Sushma Swaraj (C) wears a Assamese Traditional "Japi" Hat during campaigning in Guwahati yesterday. Some 105 million people voted on April 20 as India began the world's largest election, with the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) hoping soaring economic growth will win them a new mandate. The five phased elections will conclude on May 10.

Indian Elections

Tight security for today's 2nd round

AFP, Guwahati

Heavy security arrangements have been made for the next phase of India's marathon general elections today, when two seats in insurgency-hit northeastern Tripura state will be contested, officials said.

"We are fully geared up with security forces deployed across the state to prevent any separatist attacks on polling day," Tripura police chief G.M. Srivastava told AFP by telephone from the state capital Agartala yesterday.

Two frontline separatist groups operate in Tripura, carrying out hit-and-run guerrilla strikes on federal soldiers in the state.

A powerful faction of the banned Tripura National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) last week agreed to a ceasefire with New Delhi.

"The offer of a cessation of violence could augur well for a peaceful election this time," the police chief said.

He said the authorities were not taking chances, however, and had deployed additional men of the paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF) along the porous border with Bangladesh.

Elections in Tripura, a leftist bastion where the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) rules the state, is always fought on ethnic lines with both the communists and the opposition Congress making attempts to woo the tribals.

Tribals constitute about 30 percent of Tripura's 3.1 million people, down from pre-independence figures of

around 95 percent.

After India's independence from Britain in 1947, the state was subjected to waves of migration by settlers from the plains of then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, angering tribals and sparking the insurrection.

"Our focus will be on peace and development in the state," Gautam Das, spokesman for the ruling CPM, said by telephone from Agartala.

The authorities have flown polling teams to more than 20 voting stations that are inaccessible by road, Srivastava said.

"Most of these inaccessible polling centers are located close to the Bangladesh border and several of them are surrounded by rebel strongholds. So we have decided to airlift our poll officials by helicopter," he said.

In Tuesday's first round of the five-phased legislative poll ending May 10, up to 105 million people turned out to vote in 40 constituencies across the country.

Rebels opposed to the election launched sporadic attacks leaving at least 20 people dead, including in Kashmir and the insurgency-hit states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Manipur, which like Tripura is one of India's seven volatile northeastern states.

The northeast is a sensitive border zone where India meets China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

A total of 543 seats will be contested in India's polls an electorate of around 670 million.

Parties still reluctant to nominate women

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's major political parties may swear by giving adequate representation to women in Parliament. But when it comes to giving them nominations to fight the polls, they seem to be shying away.

Of the total of 2393 candidates in fray in the first two phases of polling in 2004 general elections covering 279 seats, only 141 are women.

Among all parties, main opposition Congress headed by Sonia Gandhi has fielded highest number of women candidates'20 out of its 210 nominees in the first two phases of polling.

Ruling BJP has given tickets to 13 women to fight the polls out of its 185 candidates for the first two laps of general elections.

The Bahujan Samaj Party headed by Mayawati has put up eight women out of a list of 203 candidates in the first two phases.

Nationalist Congress Party led by Sharad Pawar has nominated three women candidates out of a total of 24 contestants.

The two communist parties CPI and CPI(M) has not fielded a single woman candidate in the first two phases of polling, according to an official release.

Powell calls for delaying 'biometric' passports deadline

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell was to urge Congress Wednesday to give countries exempt from travel visas to the United States more time to issue high-tech passports to their citizens.

Under 2002 legislation aimed at enhancing border security and immigration regulations after the September 11, 2001, attacks, countries whose citizens can enter the United States without a visa must issue "biometric" passports by October 26.

Otherwise, the visitors must apply for a US visa.

The current law requires countries in the so-called "visa waiver program" to issue passports with "biometric indicators" -- computer chips with a digitally encoded record of the bearer's face and possibly fingerprints -- for their citizens to continue to be eligible for the scheme.

FBI warns of terror attacks in Asia

AFP, Beijing

Asia must be vigilant against terrorist attacks, US Federal Bureau of Investigation chief Robert Mueller said yesterday, and warned Beijing that Islamic fundamentalists in China were also a threat.

"Just because you have not seen substantial terrorist attacks in China does not mean there could not be in the future or in other countries in Asia," Mueller told journalists in Beijing.

Terrorists were "individuals who may subscribe to a greater or lesser degree to extremist Islamic fundamentalism," he said, including al-Qaeda, the group behind the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001.

"There are certainly individuals in China who could be described as having that same mindset as well as a desire to utilise terrorist acts to further their agenda whether you call it al-Qaeda or a group loosely affiliated with al-Qaeda or al-

Qaeda's leadership," he said.

During his three-day visit, Mueller sought to expand cooperation with China's Ministry of Public Security and its secretive Ministry of State Security to build a global anti-terrorism network.

He refused to comment on whether he specifically discussed with his Chinese counterparts Muslim groups in China's western-most Xinjiang region, or a recent demand by Beijing for Washington to list several groups linked to a Xinjiang independence movement as international terrorist groups.

"al-Qaeda, or al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, are spread throughout the world at this point," Mueller said.

"They might not be tightly tied to al-Qaeda, but they may nonetheless share al-Qaeda's world view and the desire to kill Americans, or Chinese, or Australians or others.

"Our view is that there is a threat and continuing threat and we will do all within our power, including

with our counterparts overseas, to address and eradicate that threat."

Mueller further said that the al-Qaeda-linked groups of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in Indonesia, which was responsible for the October 2002 Bali bombing that killed 202, and the Philippine-based Abu Sayyaf group were other examples of Islamic extremism in Asia.

"We all have to be vigilant in this day and age," Mueller said.

"I don't think Indonesia, prior to the attacks in Bali, understood fully the threat to the tourist industry in Bali that could be undercut by the attack that did occur."

Meanwhile, Mueller warned al-Qaeda against carrying out attacks ahead of this year's US presidential elections, saying America was on high alert and terrorists would be found.

"We want al-Qaeda to know that while the threat level may not go up, the United States will be on high alert," Mueller told journalists during a visit to Beijing.

US renews easing of some Iran sanctions

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration has extended a temporary suspension of some US sanctions on Iran that were eased to speed relief supplies after a devastating earthquake last December.

The president of the American Iranian Council, Hooshang Amirahmadi, on Tuesday hailed the move as "another (US) gesture of goodwill to Iran" but a State Department official dismissed the decision as "matter of fact, not political."

The decision to renew the suspension, which had been due to expire last month, became public on Tuesday, as the United States faces an increasingly chaotic conflict in Iraq and is looking to neighboring countries, like Iran, to help calm the situation.

An official Iranian delegation traveled to Iraq last week to try to defuse a standoff between radical Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and US troops in the holy Shia city of Najaf.

Iran and the United States have not had formal diplomatic relations since the Iranian revolution when radical students held 52 American hostages for 444 days from 1979-1981.

Islamic nations to rally opposition to US policies in ME, Iraq

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The world's Islamic nations will try to rally international support against United States policies in the Middle East and Iraq at an emergency meeting here today, Malaysia's foreign minister said yesterday.

The meeting of the 57-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) will press Washington to drop its backing for Israel's latest strategy on the Palestinian territories and for a bigger United Nations role in Iraq, Syed Hamid Albar told reporters.

The special conference of the world's biggest grouping of Muslim nations was called after US President George W. Bush last week endorsed Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to keep some Arab land captured in the 1967 war.

The OIC would call for Israel to stick to the international roadmap for peace and for the early establishment of a Palestinian state, Syed Hamid said.

"We want the international community to play a stronger and more meaningful role, to support the roadmap and to change the US attitude which openly supports Israel," he said in a television interview.

"For as long as they get the backing of their superpower ally, then Israel will continue to reign in the Middle East... it's as if they are the

special people of the world and are untouchable."

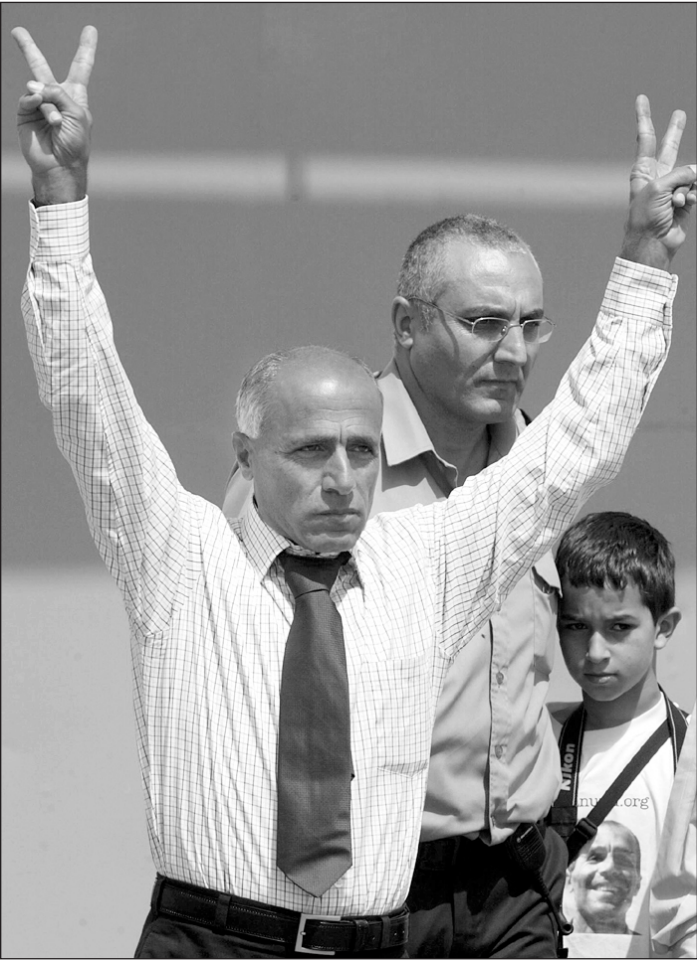
Bush's support for Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip but keep some Jewish settlements in the West Bank triggered anger in the Arab world and led Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to ask Malaysia, the current chair of the OIC, to call an urgent meeting.

Plans were already afoot to hold an OIC conference next month on the deteriorating situation in Iraq, but it was brought forward and the Middle East issue now appears to top the agenda.

Syed Hamid condemned Israel's assassination of Hamas leaders Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and Abdelaziz al-Rantissi in the past month as contrary to international law and likely to provoke more violence by the Palestinians.

"It will create more anger and even more violence. So you can't blame those who are committing violent acts, committing suicide. Although it is wrong, these are people who are left with no hope, no light at the end of the tunnel. They will do anything," he said.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Tuesday tried to reassure Arabs and European allies that Washington remains committed to the roadmap and will not pre-judge the outcome of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.



Former Israeli nuclear technician Mordechai Vanunu flashes the V-sign as he walks free out of the high security prison of Shikma in Askelon, southern Israel yesterday. Vanunu said he was "proud and happy" to have blown the whistle on Israel's nuclear programme as he was released at the end of an 18-year prison sentence. The nuclear whistleblower said that his treatment was "cruel and barbaric" and insisted that he had "no more secrets" to reveal.

Israel frees nuclear whistleblower Vanunu

AP, Ashkelon

Mordechai Vanunu was released from prison yesterday after serving 18 years for spilling Israel's nuclear secrets, saying he was proud of his actions and complaining he was treated cruelly by his jailers.

Vanunu, dressed in a checkered shirt and black tie, flashed victory signs and waved to cheering supporters as he walked into the courtyard of Shikma Prison in the coastal town of Ashkelon. Counter-demonstrators booed.

In the courtyard, Vanunu held an impromptu news conference, flanked by two of his brothers. Vanunu said was given "very cruel and barbaric treatment" by Israel's security services.

"I am proud and happy to do what I did," Vanunu said in accented English. He refused to answer questions in Hebrew because of the suffering he said he sustained at the hands of the state of Israel.

Vanunu, who converted to Christianity in the 1980s, said he was mistreated because of his religion. He also said there is no need for a Jewish state.

He said he had no more secrets to reveal. "I am now ready to start my life," he said.



A reception was accorded on March 26 marking the Independence and National Day of Bangladesh in Nepal. Picture shows Prime Minister of Nepal Surya Bahadur Thapa (R) is making a point to Ambassador of Bangladesh M Humayun Kabir during the reception at Hotel Hayatt Regency in Kathmandu.

June 30 not 'a magical date' for Iraq: US

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration Tuesday called the June 30th transfer of authority in Iraq just a step toward self-rule and not "a magical date" to hand over control of the country to Iraqis.

The Pentagon also said it was weighing whether it would need more money before next year to pay for its larger troop deployment and stepped-up operations in Iraq. The White House had publicly ruled out sending a new spending request to Congress before January 2005, after the presidential election.

Pressed on how Iraq would assume sovereignty amid weeks of

spiraling violence, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz called June 30th "just one step in a process," and not "a magical date" in which the US-led occupation will shift responsibilities to a new Iraqi government. Wolfowitz's remarks differed somewhat from President Bush's at a news conference on last Friday that emphasized the date's significance.

"No citizen of America or Britain would want the government of their nation in the hands of others and neither do the Iraqis. This is why the June 30th date for the transfer of sovereignty will be kept," Bush said.

In two Senate hearings, lawmakers pressed for details on how the

US role in Iraq will change after June 30, and on the insurgencies that have produced the highest death rate for US soldiers this month of any time during the war.

In the first three weeks of April, the death toll has about matched the 109 killed in combat from the March 2003 start of the invasion until Bush declared an end to "major combat" operations six weeks later.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John Warner, a Virginia Republican, said the White House should say it was handing over "limited" sovereignty to Iraq in June, since the United States would keep control of security and have other major functions.

9 killed as Pak building collapses

AFP, Islamabad

At least nine people were killed and 16 injured yesterday when a three-storey building was destroyed by an explosion in the Pakistani garrison city of Rawalpindi, police officials said.

"Nine people have died, the victims were mostly shopkeepers or people living in the building" city police chief Iftekhar Ahmed told AFP.

He said 16 people had been admitted to the hospital, where condition of several injured was "critical."

The debris has been cleared, he said.

Police and witnesses said the explosion caused by bursting of a gas cylinder was so massive that the entire structure collapsed.

"The explosion was caused by a gas cylinder in one of the shops in the building," local police officer, Mohammad Latif, told AFP.

US top court takes hard look at Guantanamo detention

REUTERS, Washington

US Supreme Court justices Tuesday sharply questioned the administration's detention of enemy combatants at what their lawyer termed a "lawless enclave" at Guantanamo Bay without access to the courts, in the first big legal test of the war on terrorism.

The justices seemed deeply divided over whether President Bush had the legal authority to order the indefinite holding of foreign citizens captured abroad while denying them the right to challenge their detention in court.

US Solicitor General Theodore Olson defended the Bush administration's controversial policy, which has come under attack by civil liberties and human rights groups.