



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian election official (R) marks the finger of a female voter (L) with indelible ink before she casts her vote at a polling centre in Mandal some 40km east of the capital of the Indian state of Tripura, Agartala yesterday. The second round of voting in India's marathon general elections began yesterday with polling underway in the restive north-eastern state of Tripura amid high security after a boycott call by separatists.

Indian Election

Congress to return to power, claims Sonia

PTI, Rae Bareilly

Dismissing the projections of various opinion and exit polls as contradictory, Congress president Sonia Gandhi yesterday claimed the results would be in favour of Congress which would form the government at the Centre.

"We are heading towards forming a government at the Centre," Sonia Gandhi said at a press conference in her Lok Sabha Constituency, once held by her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi.

The projections of various exit polls conducted after the first phase of elections on Tuesday are contradictory when the "truth is that the poll results would go in favour of the Congress," she said on the second day of campaigning here.

Sonia Gandhi, however, refused to hazard a guess on how many seats the party was likely to win in UP and said the results would be positive.

Before embarking on her road show, she paid floral tributes to the statue of Indira Gandhi and addressed reporters in a garden

named after the late former Prime Minister.

Overwhelmed by the people's response, an emotional Sonia said she was touched by the respect that was being showered on her in the "family constituency." She also expressed hope that she would win by a huge margin.

Brushing aside reports that she had a soft corner for UP Chief Minister Mulayam Singh, she said it was necessary for secular parties to unite for the defeat of communal forces.

However, to a specific query on an alliance with SP, she said without naming anyone that "some parties have a tacit understanding among themselves."

Meanwhile, the Election Commission yesterday ordered re-polling in as many as 349 polling stations in Bihar, which witnessed violence during the first phase of Lok Sabha polls on April 20.

The Commission has also ordered re-polling in 49 stations in Jharkhand besides six more polling stations in Manipur, EC sources said.

Vajpayee to complete his term if NDA retains power

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In the backdrop of talk about his successor, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said Wednesday night that if returned to power he would not quit midway during his next tenure as the head of government.

In an interview to All India Radio, he said "who am I to hand over the baton? There is no monarchy here that one can decide who the successor will be. This question should not arise at all. The party functions in a democratic manner and there is no question of my leaving midway."

Vajpayee said only the party can decide on the leadership issue. His remarks came close on the heels of his remarks during an interview to a TV channel that the party has already decided on a successor but declined to reveal the name.

He said there is as yet no sign that one party would get the requisite number to form a stable government and "we are going towards a coalition government."

'Mars may become home for humans after 30-yr'

PTI, Bangalore

President APJ Abdul Kalam yesterday predicted that the planet Mars would become a home for human habitation in the next three decades.

"Mars might become a base for human habitation after 30 years and the Moon would be a powerful space industry base," he said interacting with BEL employees from New Delhi over video conference during the golden jubilee celebrations of the public sector giant.

"You are already in Mars...In our planet (earth), we have a population of six billion and by 2020 it would reach eight billion. We might face shortage of minerals which we probably are going to source it from other planets," the President said to a query by a BEL employee.

Urging the nation to gear up to capture a slice of the potential \$300 billion nanotechnology market, Kalam said, "India should gear up itself in terms of research, design and development...This is going to be an important field in another 20 years and it even might replace micro-electronics".

New terror threat targets 8 allies of US in Iraq

Washington repeats terror attack warning on Asian finance hubs

AP, Seoul

A self-proclaimed "anti-American" group is threatening terrorist attacks against eight US allies by the end of the month, including South Korea, Japan, Australia and the Pakistan, a South Korean official said yesterday.

The group, called the "Yello-Red Overseas Organisation," warned in a one-page letter sent to the South Korean Embassy in Thailand that it will launch the attacks through April 30, embassy spokesman Ryoo Jung-young told The Associated Press.

The group described itself as "anti-American" and threatened to attack diplomatic compounds, airlines and public transportation systems in eight countries that are US allies or have plans to send troops to Iraq. They are: South Korea, Japan,

Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Australia, Kuwait and Pakistan.

Ryoo said it was the first time South Korean authorities had heard of the group and were investigating the threat's credibility. The embassy notified South Korea's Foreign Ministry, the Thai government and police, he said.

The letter was received Wednesday and Thai police said they were stepping up security around the South Korean Embassy in Bangkok.

The South Korean Foreign Ministry in Seoul said it had not notified other nations on the list but that it had confirmed that the Pakistani Embassy in Bangkok had also received a similar letter, an official said on condition of anonymity.

South Korean diplomatic mis-

sions worldwide were alerted to the threat.

South Korea plans to send some 3,000 more troops to Iraq, which would make it the biggest coalition partner behind the United States and Britain.

The deployment, pledged earlier this year, was put on hold amid concerns it would involve combat operations in violation of a parliamentary mandate for peacekeeping.

Last week, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said mounting violence in Iraq has prompted her government to study whether to withdraw its nearly 100 troops from Iraq, although she later said the troops would stay.

Thailand has expressed similar concerns over its 445 noncombat troops in Iraq.

Japan and Australia, which also have troops in Iraq, have pledged to keep them there.

Reuters adds: US officials warned Asia yesterday to be on guard against terror attacks in crowded sea lanes and in financial centers such as Hong Kong.

Speaking in Singapore, a top State Department official said Washington had good reason to believe that terror groups would target economically critical shipping lanes such as the Malacca and Singapore Straits.

"We have begun to focus on the potential of a disastrous maritime terrorist incident," Matthew Daley, deputy assistant secretary of state, told a security conference.

Asia faces more Sars like epidemics

AFP, Penang

Asia faces the threat of more deadly epidemics such as Sars, which could have cost regional economies up to 50 billion dollars, Southeast Asian health ministers were told yesterday.

"New diseases like the bird flu and Sars have been emerging at the rate of one per year and the trend is certain to continue," said Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak.

He was opening a conference of health ministers from the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), which aims to forge a common action plan against epidemics.

Najib said a recent survey showed the impact of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) so far on Asian economies was 10.6 billion dollars and could eventually total as much as 50 billion.

He gave no details, but Sars devastated the region's vital travel and tourism industries when it killed nearly 800 people and infected more than 8,000 in more than 30 countries last year, mostly in Asia.

A year after Sars spread from China, the World Health Organisation has warned that the

deadly disease, like the outbreak this year of bird flu, remained a "major area of concern" and pointed to wild animals as the probable source of Sars transmission.

Bird flu affected some 10 Asian nations, killed at least 23 people and led to the culling of millions of chickens.

Najib said the epidemics had shown that pathogens jumped species barriers and that the high mobility of people in the region meant no country could insulate itself.

"The need to cooperate cannot be over emphasised. These diseases would not be the last of their kind to spread rapidly. The world it seems shall never be free from the threat of epidemics," he said.

A rapid and effective regional response mechanism would contribute to the ability to combat future outbreaks, he said.

With the theme "Health Without Frontiers", the health ministers plan to adopt a blueprint on coordinating their efforts over surveillance and emergency responses to health crises.

Drama over Lankan Speaker election

AFP, Colombo

A third vote for a Speaker in the new Sri Lankan parliament was ordered yesterday after the first ended in a tie and the second in confusion, an AFP correspondent said.

Parliament secretary general Priyani Wijesekara ordered the third vote after MPs from President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Freedom Alliance stormed the well of the house during the second round and sat on the ballot box to prevent opposition lawmakers from casting their votes.

Kumaratunga's political future is riding on the vote after her Freedom Alliance at the April 2 polls won 105 seats in the assembly -- eight short of a simple majority.

Failure to install Kumaratunga's chosen speaker could spell the end for her plans of governmental reform that would allow her to seek a third term when the current tenure ends in December 2005.

Hectic political manoeuvring went on overnight with both the main opposition United National Party of former premier Ranil Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga trying to woo smaller parties.

In Thursday's first vote, the government candidate, Communist Party general secretary D.E.V. Gunasekara and opponent, ex-Buddhist affairs minister W.J.M. Lokubandara, each had 108 votes.

One vote was rejected as the ballot paper had been spoiled, while seven of a group of nine Buddhist monks who hold seats in the 225-member assembly, abstained. One MP failed to show up.

Opposition MPs claimed the government side knew it would lose the second ballot which is why it torpedoed the voting.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian Foreign Minister Farouk Kaddoumi (L) and his Pakistani counterpart Mian Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri listen to proceedings during the opening ceremony of an emergency Special Meeting on the Middle East in Putrajaya yesterday. The world's Islamic nations began an emergency meeting here with a strong attack on United States policies on Israel and a call for a central United Nations role in Iraq.

AFP, Peshawar

A Pakistani tribesman spearheading resistance to efforts aimed at capturing up to 400 al-Qaeda fighters has opened talks with authorities after persuading them to put off a deadline for military action, an official said yesterday.

"Nek Mohammad and his foreign and local associates have established contact with authorities," chief of security for Pakistan's northwest tribal belt Brigadier Mehmood Shah told AFP.

"They have contacted us through various channels and we have responded positively in a way by suspending hunt by the tribal laskhar (militia)."

Nek Mohammad, a leader of the Yargulkhel clan, tops a list of five tribesmen wanted by the government for harbouring and fighting alongside an estimated 300 to 400

al-Qaeda fugitives in areas along the mountainous Afghan border.

His overtures, conveyed through leaders of a 2,000-strong armed militia which has taken the hunt into its own hands, led to the postponement of Tuesday's deadline for the surrender, capture or killing of the fighters and their tribal supporters.

The latest deadline is April 30. Shah said the government had revised its estimates of the number of foreign fighters hiding along the border in the tribal district of South Waziristan.

"Earlier we had intelligence information that some 500 to 600 foreign terrorists were in the areas, but according to latest reports now there are some 300 to 400 local and foreign terrorists," he said.

"The rest of them have either fled the area or were killed in the operation last month."

Talks were held late Wednesday

between North West Frontier Province governor Iftikhar Hussain, Mohammad's intermediaries, MPs from the region, and elders of the Zalikhel tribe, which is related to the Yargulkhels and leads the newly-former militia. "The government has asked them to either handover the wanted persons to authorities, expel them, or kill them," Shah said.

Alternatively, they could stay in the region if they agreed to lay down their arms.

"If the concerned tribes give guarantees that the wanted persons lay down their arms and surrender to authorities and want to live peacefully in the area, they may be allowed," he said.

The government has made several offers of amnesty to the foreign fighters, offering either to provide them safe passage out of Pakistan or allow them to stay and live in peace.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani paramilitary personnel armed with heavy weapons hold a position in Wana, South Waziristan yesterday. Nek Mohammad, a leader of the Yargulkhel clan who tops a list of five tribesmen wanted by the Pakistani government for harbouring and fighting alongside an estimated 300 to 400 al-Qaeda fugitives in areas along the mountainous Afghan border, has opened talks with authorities after persuading them to put off a deadline for military action.