



Priyanka Gandhi, daughter of India's opposition Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi is surrounded by officials as she addresses media representatives during a polling station visit in Rae Bareilly, some 130km south of Lucknow yesterday. Priyanka's mother is contesting the seat of Rae Bareilly.

PHOTO: AFP

Gandhi dynasty claims gain

All eyes on Rae Bareilly, Amethi

AFP, Amethi

Millions voted as India's marathon election entered its third leg yesterday with two generations of the Gandhi dynasty seeking seats vowing a close contest against the ruling Hindu nationalists.

Under blazing heat, more than 34 million of 172 million voters exercised their franchise in the first five hours of balloting for 137 constituencies in 11 states where 1,278 hopefuls are in the fray, officials said.

All eyes were on main opposition leader Sonia Gandhi and son Rahul, 33, contesting seats in India's most vote-rich state, Uttar Pradesh in the north.

Rahul, the heir apparent of the dynasty that included India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, predicted he would win his family seat of Amethi with a "record margin."

"There is a great response and we hope to win with a good majority," said his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, 32, who is not running but is

seen by many as a charismatic face for the 119-year-old Congress party.

"You know, 300,000 votes just don't come like that," Priyanka said of her 57-year-old mother's victory margin in the last national election in 1999.

"But five years ago the (Congress) organisation was weak and we have worked and strengthened it and now we are hopeful that things will be in our favour," she said.

Exit polls since voting began April 20 have shown a lead for Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's coalition, but by a slimmer margin than predicted before the start of the election which ends May 10.

Vajpayee agreed the polls could no longer be seen as smooth sailing for his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which called the vote early hoping to cash in on strong economic growth and a peace process with Pakistan.

Voting is being watched closely in Uttar Pradesh, which returns 80 MPs to the 545-seat parliament with regional parties expected to outperform the two main adversaries.

Indian Elections

Regional parties may play kingmakers

Opinion polls predict fractured mandate

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

With the Indian parliamentary elections a little past the halfway mark and all opinion and exit polls forecasting a fractured mandate, political parties have already begun debating the coalition course.

If a decisive majority eludes either BJP or Congress or the allies they lead, the focus will shift to a number of regional parties like Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, which are powerful players in the key state of Uttar Pradesh, Nationalist Congress Party, a force to reckon with in Maharashtra, ruling AIADMK and main opposition DMK in Tamil Nadu, Rashtriya Janata Dal, ruling Bihar and Biju Janata Dal, ruling Orissa.

Of these, Samajwadi Party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav and BSP led by Mayawati have not forged alliance with either BJP or Congress.

The NCP, RJD and DMK are allies of Congress and BJD is a partner of BJP.

In the event of a hung parliament, these regional parties are likely to don the roles of kingmakers. Right now, the most talked-about is Samajwadi Party as it is widely tipped to emerge on top in Uttar Pradesh as far as the number of parliamentary seats are concerned.

Political signals emanating from both BJP and Congress are aimed at one common target: to woo Mulayam Singh Yadav, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh.

NCP chief Sharad Pawar, in fact, said yesterday his gut feeling is that neither BJP-led alliance nor Congress would get majority on their own and both Yadav and Mayawati will have a crucial role in government-formation after the elections.

Senior Congress leader Arjun Singh appealed to Yadav to with-

draw his party's candidates in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, which has 29 seats, to prevent a split in anti-BJP votes.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee recently had said BJP and Samajwadi Party were 'ideologically close' as both believed in nationalism and democratic values.

Picking up from where Vajpayee had left off, ruling alliance Convenor and Defence Minister George Fernandez said he and Mulayam were from the same socialist stable and favoured the latter's joining the BJP-led NDA.

Fernandez sought to play down Yadav's remark that there were differences between him and Vajpayee and said 'if the PM has agreed on one issue and disagreed on other issues with Yadav, it does not mean that they do not share thoughts'.

Explosive situation in Najaf

Fallujah elders appeal for UN mediation

REUTERS, Baghdad

A potentially explosive situation is brewing in Iraq's Shia holy city of Najaf, but progress has been made in peace efforts in the battered Sunni bastion of Fallujah, US officials said on Sunday.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Bulgarian President George Parvanov paid visits to their countries' troops in Iraq at a time when some states are withdrawing soldiers from US-led forces, who are suffering their bloodiest month.

The visits took place hours after coordinated suicide boat attacks on Iraq's primary oil export terminal, some 10km offshore from the southern city of Basra, in which three US sailors were killed.

Officials said a major disaster was averted by US-led forces in Saturday's attacks, but the terminal -- which handles about 85 percent of Iraq's 1.9 million barrels per day -- would stay shut until Monday for full damage assessment.

Iraqi Oil Minister Ibrahim Bahr al-Uloum told a news conference, however: "Exports will resume tomorrow."

Rebel Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who has spearheaded an uprising against the US-led occupation by his Mehdi Army militia and supporters, is holed up in Najaf -- a holy site to Iraq's Shia majority -- in the south of the country.

"Weapons and explosives are being hidden in schools, mosques and holy sites (in Najaf)," Iraq's US Governor Paul

Bremer told Arabic television station Al Jazeera.

Bremer, whose spokesman termed the situation "potentially explosive," said Sadr's militia operating in Najaf and the nearby city of Kerbala made the situation "very difficult because these two cities are holy."

AFP adds: Town elders from the Iraqi insurgent bastion of Fallujah have written to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan asking him to mediate between militants and US troops to maintain a troubled truce, a spokesman said Sunday.

They also urged Annan to set up an international investigation into the US-led occupation of Iraq, the spokesman added.

UK studying options to boost troops in Iraq

AFP, London

The government of Tony Blair has prepared a series of options aimed at boosting the number of British troops in Iraq to make up for the withdrawal of the Spanish contingent, The Times reported yesterday.

The options "range from sending 1,500 to 2,000 troops to fill the gaps left by the Spanish, to taking over command of a second multinational division in central south Iraq," the daily said.

"In return for increased commitment Britain is expected to demand a higher level of influence over how security is managed in Iraq," The Times said.

If British forces were to be deployed further north, around flashpoints like the holy city of Najaf, "one option for ministers was for

Britain to take over command of the central south division currently led by a Polish general," the paper quoted Ministry of Defence sources as saying.

The Times went on: "One suggestion is that Britain could ask NATO to allow the British led Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) headquarters in Germany to be released to take over command from the Poles."

The ARRC, headed by Lieutenant-General Richard Dannatt, is 60-percent composed of British soldiers. However, the paper said, NATO had ruled out allowing the ARRC to be deployed in Iraq under its auspices.

The British currently head the southeastern multinational division with about 8,000 men around Basra, Iraq's second city.

Bush policies endangering ME stability: Hillary

AFP, Beirut

Former US first lady Hillary Clinton said the "stubborn" policies of President George W. Bush's administration were endangering stability in the Middle East, a daily reported yesterday.

The New York Democrat senator told the London-based Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat that the Bush administration had not been "frank" with the American people concerning the human and financial costs in Iraq.

Clinton said the Bush administration did not have a plan for Iraq and did not have a full understanding of the situation there.

US lawmakers worry about Chalabi's role in new Iraq govt

AFP, Washington

Iraqi Governing Council member Ahmad Chalabi on Sunday sought to defuse reports that he would be sidelined in the interim government due to take political power in Iraq from June 30, amid mounting concerns in Washington about the long-time US ally.

"We should be very careful with this man. I think he's partly the solution and a significant part of the problem. He's not trusted in Iraq, and yet he's part of the government," Representative Christopher Shays told the "Fox News Sunday" programme.

Senator Richard Lugar echoed that concern, saying in retrospect the United States probably should not have given Chalabi responsibility for dismantling the Iraqi army.

"Now, of course, we come to the point in which Ambassador Brahimi, in trying to name the people, the 29 people for the new government, is pointedly pointing toward the fact that Chalabi will not be one of them," Lugar told CNN.

The top UN envoy to Iraq, Lakhdar Brahimi, last week laid out his proposals for a caretaker Iraqi government to be set up before June 30.

China rules out HK polls in 2007, 2008

THE CHINA DAILY/ ANN, Beijing

The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) adopted a decision Monday, which favors modification of the existing methods for selecting the Hong Kong's chief executive in 2007 and forming the Legislative Council in 2008, but rules out the possibility of universal suffrage for the upcoming elections.

The decision was made in response to Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa's report on whether such methods need to be amended.

"The method of universal suffrage shall not apply to 'the election of the Third Chief Executive of the HKSAR in 2007, nor to the election of all members of the Fourth Legislative Council of the HKSAR in 2008, the Decision said."

The half by half ratio for members of the Council from functional groups and from constituency election shall remain unchanged, the Decision said, adding that the procedures for voting on bills and motions in the Legislative Council shall remain unchanged.

However, the Decision said that specific methods for selecting the Chief Executive in 2007 and forming the Legislative Council in 2008 could be "appropriately modified" in the principle of gradual and orderly progress and in accordance with the Basic Law, the Decision said.

The NPC Standing Committee explained in the decision that Hong Kong's history for democratic election is not long, and it has been for

no more than seven years that Hong Kong residents have exercised the democratic rights of participating in selecting the HKSAR Chief Executive.

Since Hong Kong's return to the motherland, the number of directly-elected members in the Legislative Council has been increased remarkably. After half of the members are directly elected in constituency and half are elected by functional groups, the influence of the directly-elected members upon Hong Kong society's general operation, especially the influence upon the executive-led mechanism is yet to be tested by practice, it said.

Moreover, various social circles in Hong Kong currently still have considerable differences about methods for selecting the Chief Executive and for forming the Legislative Council after 2007, and no broad consensus has been reached yet, it noted.

Under such circumstances, conditions do not satisfy the general election of the Chief Executive and the general election of all Legislative Council members, the Decision said.

The NPC Standing Committee said, "It is the consistent stance of the Central Authorities" to develop democracy in Hong Kong in the principle of gradual and orderly progress and in the light of specific conditions of the region, in accordance with the Basic Law of Hong Kong.

Key Israeli ministers spurn Sharon's Gaza plan

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Three key ministers have spurned Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's appeal to help shore up sagging support for his Gaza pullout plan in a crucial upcoming party referendum, political sources said yesterday.

In a slap in the face to Sharon, Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and Education Minister Limor Livnat, heavyweights in the right-wing Likud, refused to campaign for the plan, which they have only reluctantly backed.

A confidant predicted that Sharon, struggling to halt erosion in support for his unilateral "disengagement" proposal ahead of next Sunday's Likud referendum, would exact "political revenge" against those who turned him down.

"Sharon doesn't forget," the source said.

The latest opinion polls indicate that approval of Sharon's plan, which calls for uprooting all settlements in the Gaza Strip and four of 120 in the West Bank, is far from guaranteed by the traditionally pro-settler Likud.

A survey on Friday in the Yedioth Ahronoth daily showed 49 percent of the party's 200,000 members in favor of it and 39.5 against it.



PHOTO: AFP

This World Food Programme (WFP) handout photo taken Monday and received yesterday shows a North Korean child, injured in the April 22 explosion in nearby Ryongchon, sleeping at the People's Hospital in Sinuiju. International aid agencies said they would return to the site of the devastating North Korean train blast, which killed at least 161 people and injured some 1,300, in an urgent effort to help victims.

N Korea meets donors, turns down South's aid offer

AFP, Dandong

The North Korean government met with international aid groups to map out a response to a devastating train blast, even as it turned down an offer for early South Korean relief.

With the attention of the global aid community fixed on Ryongchon, the city where the explosion killed at least 161 and injured many more, talks were taking place Monday in the capital Pyongyang on how to provide relief.

"All the aid agencies are meeting this afternoon to talk about where we stand, about what more is needed and what they intend to do," Gerald Bourke, a World Food Programme spokesman, said by telephone from Pyongyang.

WFP Asia regional director Tony Banbury was in meetings with the government all day, he added.

While North Korea has cooperated in the aftermath of the tragedy, it signaled that it was not prepared to use it as an opportunity for a thaw with the South.

In what appeared to be a setback for inter-Korean relations, North Korea turned down the offer that would have brought early relief to victims of Thursday's tragedy.

"North Korea rejected our proposed overland transportation of emergency relief goods," said Moon Won-Il, spokesman for South

Korea's National Red Cross.

"The North's rejection was made during a border contact between liaison officials of Red Cross authorities from both sides. North Korea did not elaborate on the reason."

Despite the North Korean gesture of defiance, it needed all the help it could get, said aid officials.

More than 300 out of 1,300 injured taken to a hospital in Sinuiju visited by aid workers over the weekend had horrible wounds, caused either by burns or by debris and glass thrown towards them at great velocity.

"Sixty or 70 are seriously injured," said Bourke, who visited the hospital near the blast site. "Between when they were taken there and when we arrived, seven died."

The WFP's Banbury painted a grim picture of conditions at the hospital, calling it a "terrible sight."

"Some people's faces had already turned black from the blast, others had black scabbing wounds, while some literally had their skin ripped off," he said.

The large number of patients meant an urgent need for anaesthetics and antibiotics as well as specialized hospital equipment, according to the Red Cross.

At the blast site, access to safe drinking water was a problem for thousands of families, after the explosion caused the water supply to be interrupted.

Water-purification tablets had been provided from a Red Cross warehouse five kilometers away, but supplies were now running low there, and more were needed, Red Cross officials said.

The Red Cross was preparing an appeal for help, which was expected to be sent out to the international aid community yesterday.

"It won't be simply for immediate needs," said John Sparrow, a Beijing-based Red Cross representative. "It will also be for longer-term support."

Thursday's explosion, which North Korea said was caused by a collision of rail wagons carrying ammonium nitrate fertiliser and fuel oil, destroyed virtually everything within 500 meters (yards) of the railway station.

The Red Cross said Sunday it needed more information to help the blast victims, although the World Food Programme Monday said it was happy with the response it was getting from the government in Pyongyang.

"The government has been full and frank in its attitude, very cooperative and cordial," said Bourke.

Stalinist North Korea's secretive state media only acknowledged the disaster 48 hours after it happened but has since taken the unusual step of publicising the aid effort in newspapers and on television.



PHOTO: AFP

Cybill Shepherd (L), Whoopi Goldberg (2L), Christine Lahti (3L) and Kathleen Turner (R) join thousands of women in Washington, DC, marching in support of abortion rights and opposition to the Bush administration's policies on family planning.

Abortion rights march draws 1.1m in US

AFP, Washington

More than 1.1 million people from across the United States and dozens of other countries took part in what organizers said was the largest ever women's rights protest on abortion, aimed at influencing politicians ahead of the November 2 presidential vote.

Older women in their Sunday best mingled with college students in T-shirts in a massive demonstration sparked largely by what they see as President George W. Bush's efforts to chip away at a women's right to an abortion.

Organizers put the turnout at 1,150,000, saying the count was done in designated grids on the National Mall, which are designed to hold a predetermined number of people, and verified by 2,500 volunteers at key entry points to the

march area. Police did not issue any crowd estimate.

Waving signs that read "Fire Bush" and "Keep Abortion Legal," the crowd packed onto the Mall -- the grassy esplanade that links the Congress, the White House, and America's most revered monuments and museums.

"All the people are here today not only to march on behalf of women's lives but to take that energy into the election in November," Senator Hillary Clinton told the crowd before the march began.

"What we need to do is to communicate as clearly as possible to all women and men who are fair-minded in America is that a vote for a pro-choice candidate is a vote for conscience," she said, urging the crowd to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate, Senator John Kerry.