



Indian film stars Zeenat Aman (3-r) and Shakti Kapoor (3-L) arrive at the railway station in Amritsar yesterday prior to speaking at an election rally on behalf of the Congress Party. India is in the midst of parliamentary elections being held in five phases across the country, with the results to be tallied on May 13.

Indian Elections

Arunachal set for polls amid boycott call

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Polling in two parliamentary constituencies in India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh takes place today under the shadow of a boycott and general strike called by powerful All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union (AAPSU) protesting the inclusion in the voters' list of 1497 people it alleges Chakma and Hajong tribals from Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts.

On a directive from the Indian Election Commission, only those descendants of Chamka and Hajong communities who were born in Arunachal Pradesh between 1964 and 1987 were included in the voters' list in May last year.

But this has been resented by the AAPSU which gave poll boycott call and announced a strike coinciding with the polling today.

Despite the insignificant numerical presence of Chakmas and Hajongs in the overall electoral

landscape of Arunachal Pradesh, which has just two parliamentary seats, the issue has dominated the politics in the sensitive state, which has border with China, Myanmar and Bangladesh.

The Chakma and Hajong refugees fled Chittagong Hill Tracts crossed into India way back in early sixties following alleged persecution on them there. There are now an estimated 30,000 Chakmas and Hajongs in Arunachal Pradesh.

Arunachal Pradesh election office had at first rejected the inclusion of Chakmas and Hajongs in the voters' list after which the Committee for Citizenship Rights of the Chakmas of Arunachal Pradesh (CCRCAP) moved the Delhi High Court on their voting right.

"The granting of voting rights to Chakma and Hajong youths is a crucial step in our struggle for citizenship rights," said CCRCAP assistant general secretary Bimal Kanti Chakma.

Shoot-at-sight orders issued for Bihar polls

PTI, Patna

Amid shoot orders against both grabbers and sealing of Indo-Nepal borders, stage is set for polling in 12 Lok Sabha constituencies in Bihar in the fourth phase today.

Official sources said shoot-at-sight orders were issued against booth-grabbers if the lathicharge failed to quell them while trying to disturb polling.

Over 100 companies of central paramilitary forces, besides home guards and district armed police personnel have fanned out in the 12 constituencies, the sources said.

Police mobility between polling stations would be increased during the poll to enable the voters to cast their ballots fearlessly.

Indo-Nepal borders connecting the constituencies of Purnea and Araria were sealed to prevent anti-socials and Maoist rebels from creating disturbances during the poll.

INT'L RED CROSS SAYS

Iraqi jail abuse should lead to court action

AFP, Geneva

Any proven abuse of Iraqi prisoners held by the occupation forces in Iraq should lead to court action against those responsible, the International Committee of the Red Cross said yesterday.

Speaking to AFP, an ICRC spokeswoman also said that the International Red Cross regularly visited Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, the main facility where there have been accusations of torture in recent days.

"When there is information relating to torture it is extremely important that there should be a serious investigation, and if the allegations prove to be true, that such acts should be punished by the law," said spokeswoman Antonella Notari.

She also said that she considered measures taken by the United States since reports of the abuse surfaced to be "extremely positive."

KSA vows to protect foreigners

US envoy asks Americans to leave Saudi Arabia

REUTERS, Jeddah

Saudi Arabia vowed yesterday to strike with an iron fist against militants who staged an unprecedented attack on a Saudi energy site this week and said it was making every effort to protect foreigners.

"The Saudi leadership and people affirm their determination to strike with an iron fist in fighting this deviant group in order to uproot this wicked disease from the body of our nation," Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal told a news conference.

"The deviant groups target at random and have no aim but to kill, but despite this the government is doing all it can to protect all residents," he added.

No one has claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed two

Americans, two Britons and an Australian in the Red Sea town of Yanbu. The gunmen dragged the corpse of one American through the streets, but were later shot dead by police.

The Saudi interior minister has blamed Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network for the attack.

AP adds: The US ambassador traveled to this Saudi oil-industry city Monday with a simple message for the gathered Americans: Go home. We cannot protect you.

Huddled in a meeting room in a Holiday Inn still pocked with bullet holes after the latest in a string of attacks on Westerners killed two Americans and four others, many said they would heed his words.

The first to go were among the 90 foreign employees of ABB Lummus

Global Inc., a Houston-based oil contractor whose offices were attacked Saturday by four gunmen trying to encourage Saudis to join the resistance against the US occupation of Iraq.

The first ABB employees all Europeans boarded a van for the Yanbu airport Monday night.

"Money is money, but it's not worth your life," said Armando Rosiglioni, 63, of Venice, Italy, who arrived in Yanbu 10 days ago on a three-month contract. "I don't want to take a stupid risk."

He said a charter flight would take the employees to the Red Sea port of Jeddah, 220 miles to the south, where they were to take commercial flights to their destinations on Tuesday.

67 killed as Christians attack Muslims in Nigeria

AFP, Jos

Heavily armed Christian militants attacked a Muslim village in Nigeria's central highlands and triggered a clash that left at least 67 people dead, a police commander said on Monday.

Assistant commissioner Sotonye Wakama told reporters that he had led a team to the ethnic Hausa village of Yelwa Shendam after witnesses fleeing the area had reported an attack late Sunday by a large group of gunmen.

"We succeeded in removing 67 dead bodies, but we are continuing the search tomorrow and we might get more," he said.

Mohammed Ahmed, a motorcycle taxi driver from Yelwa-Shendam, told reporters he had fled after the village was attacked by a militia unit from the rival Tarok community, who arrived with two jeeps mounted with machine guns.

ME quartet tries to revive tattered roadmap

Israel troops kill two Palestinians

REUTERS, United Nations

The quartet of Middle East mediators struggles to patch up its road map to peace on Tuesday after a US Lok Sabha constituencies in Bihar in the fourth phase today.

Senior officials of the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations meet in New York with their peace map in shreds -- torn apart by the rejection by Sharon's Likud Party of a Gaza withdrawal and a major Bush administration policy change that infuriated Arab leaders but failed to reinvigorate the peace process.

Also dashing the quartet's hopes in recent weeks have been continuing Palestinian attacks on Israeli targets and high-profile Israeli military actions in Gaza including the assassination of two leaders of the Hamas militant group.

UN Secretary General Kofi

Annan is hosting Tuesday's gathering of Secretary of State Colin Powell, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, EU external relations chief Chris Patten and Foreign Minister Brian Cowan of Ireland, the current EU president.

AFP adds: Two Palestinian militants were killed and 23 injured when Israeli forces raided a southern Gaza Strip town overnight, Palestinian security sources said yesterday, adding that troops also demolished 20 houses.

Billal Mohammed Hamdan, 23, and Jamil Abu Mustapha, 18, both members of the radical Hamas movement, were killed in clashes with Israeli troops, who entered the town of Khan Yunis with around a dozen armoured vehicles, backed by two helicopters. Hospital sources said at least two of the injured Palestinians were in serious condition.



Thousands of supporters of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat gather outside his office at the Muqataa compound in the West Bank city of Ramallah Monday. Thousands of Palestinians flocked to Arafat's headquarters to show support to their leader.

China to build second N-plant for Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan and China was to sign an agreement yesterday to build a second nuclear power plant in Pakistan for civilian use, officials said.

The deal will be inked a day after a car bomb in southwest Pakistan killed three Chinese engineers helping to build a multi-million dollar seaport and injured 11 others including two Pakistanis.

"The deal will be signed by Pakistan Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali to build the 300-megawatt nuclear power plant at Chashma," a senior government official who requested anonymity told AFP Monday.

The plant will be built next to the first Chinese supplied plant, which became operational in 1999 at Chashma some 270 kilometers (167 miles) south of Islamabad, he said.

"The project would cost about 600 million dollars and is likely to

be completed in six years," he said.

"This project is for electricity generation and will be subject to the safeguards and surveillance of the International Atomic Energy Agency," the official said.

The deal was expected to be signed in November when President Pervez Musharraf visited key ally China but was delayed because further negotiations were needed on some technical aspects, he said.

"The deal underlines the close cooperation between the two countries," he said.

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

Pakistan confirmed it had nuclear weapons in May 1998 when it matched tests conducted by India.



The son of an Iraqi prisoner, held by US forces, stands at the entrance of the Abu Gharib prison as he waits with his family for information about him yesterday. Hundreds of Iraqi prisoners were released from the notorious prison as US authorities severely reprimanded six officers over the abuse of prisoners in Iraq.

GAZA PULLOUT PLAN Bush under fire from US ex-diplomats

Likud party rejects plan, Sharon holds talks for amendment to scheme

REUTERS, Washington/Jerusalem

More than 50 former US diplomats say President George W Bush's Middle East policy is costing the United States credibility, prestige and friends, in an open letter to be made public yesterday.

The letter, which was obtained by Reuters, expresses the signatories' support for 52 retired British diplomats who also sent a letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair last week.

"We former diplomats applaud our 52 British colleagues who recently sent a letter to Prime Minister Tony Blair criticising his Middle East policy and calling on Britain to exert more influence over the United States," the US letter begins.

Harshly criticising Bush for his support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the letter said: "Your unabashed support of Sharon's extra-judicial assassinations, Israel's Berlin-Wall-like barrier, its harsh military measures in occupied territories and now your endorsement of Sharon's unilateral plans

are costing our country its credibility, prestige and friends."

Sharon meanwhile took his first steps yesterday toward amending the controversial pullout plan that his Likud party rejected, holding consultations with cabinet ministers on a new blueprint.

He met Justice Minister Yosef Lapid, a senior coalition partner whose Shinui party holds 15 seats in the 120-member parliament. Lapid had threatened to take the party out of the government if the plan was dropped.

However, the Bush-bashing letter, according to Andrew Killgore, who served as US ambassador to Qatar from 1977 to 1980 and was coordinating the effort, was signed by several former ambassadors, including James Akins, who was US ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 1973 to 1976; Robert Keeley who was assistant secretary of state for African affairs from 1978 to 1980 and later ambassador to Zimbabwe and Greece; and John Gunther Dean, ambassador to India from 1985 to 1988.

Tigers agree to resume peace talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers told Norwegian peace brokers Monday they were willing to resume talks based on their plan for self-rule, but warned the new government here not to support renegade rebels.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) told a top Norwegian envoy the rebels were ready to open negotiations with the Sri Lankan government at any time provided talks were based on their peace blueprint unveiled in October.

"The Liberation Tigers are fully prepared to resume the negotiations on the same principles and atmosphere as it did with the previous government in Colombo," Tiger political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan said.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has already rejected the proposal which would set up an "Interim Self-Governing Authority" granting greater political and finan-

cial powers to the rebels in the island's northeast.

Speaking to reporters at the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi after talks with top Norwegian peace envoy Erik Solheim, Thamilselvan said the Tigers had satisfactory signals through Oslo that Kumaratunga's new government would abide by a truce agreement in place since February 2002.

However, Thamilselvan warned Colombo against supporting a breakaway Tiger faction led by a regional commander, V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, who went underground after an offensive last month by the main rebel movement.

Thamilselvan said Colombo "should stop the Sri Lanka army from giving continued support to Karuna and his men who are behind the recent violent incidents in (the eastern district of) Batticaloa."

"Failing to do so will have far-

reaching consequences," said Thamilselvan, as quoted by the pro-rebel Tamilnet website.

Solheim held the two-hour meeting with the Tigers a day after meeting with Kumaratunga and warning it would take time to revive stalled negotiations.

It was the Norwegians' first meeting with the rebels since Kumaratunga's leftist coalition narrowly won April 2 elections vowing to "thoroughly review" Oslo's role.

An influential party of Buddhist monks Monday accused Kumaratunga of inconsistency and said it will press in parliament to exclude Norway from the peace process.

"Norway is not an honest third party," said Buddhist monk and MP Athuraliyai Ratana. "Before the election, the president's Freedom Alliance said they will get rid of the Norwegians, but they are now welcoming them back."

Troops gun down 7 tribal rebels in Manipur

AFP, Guwahati

Indian troops shot dead seven tribal rebels in a night raid on a suspected separatist hideout in the hills near Myanmar, police said yesterday.

Troops late Monday stormed a thickly wooded area near Tuisonyang village in Manipur state, setting off a three-hour gunfight that left dead seven militants, a police spokesman said.

He said the dead belonged to the Kuki Revolutionary Army, an outlawed movement fighting for an independent homeland for Manipur's minority Kuki tribe.

The troops, who belonged to the paramilitary Assam Rifles unit, seized arms from the hideout and may have wounded other militants who fled.

The Kuki Revolutionary Army is one of 19 separatist groups fighting in Manipur, where more than 10,000 people have died in insurgency in the past two decades.

Discrimination against Muslims soars in US

AFP, Washington

Discrimination against Muslims in the United States soared in 2003, increasing by 69 percent over the previous year, a US Muslim organisation reported Monday.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations logged 1,019 complaints from Muslims in 2003, compared to 602 in 2002.

Most complaints related to employment discrimination and refusals to accommodate Muslims who wanted to practice their religion, which requires five daily prayers.

Incidents of physical violence against Muslims doubled to 93 in 2003 from 42 in 2002, according to CAIR's report.

CAIR attributed the rise in discrimination to "a lingering atmosphere of fear" since the September 11, 2001, attacks, tensions over the war in Iraq and

anti-Muslim rhetoric in conservative radio shows.

CAIR reported that the controversial USA Patriot Act -- a post-September 11 law that expanded police powers -- has been unjustly used against Muslims, especially with regards to immigration.

CAIR cited a report from the US Justice Department's Inspector General's Office, which it said "flatly criticized the government for its relaxation of rules that purposefully blurred the distinction between immigration cases and terrorism investigations"

The increased discrimination could explain an 11-percent drop in students from about 20 Muslim countries, according to statistics from US universities cited by CAIR. There were 45,242 Muslim students in 2003, compared to 58,555 in 2002.