

US awaits Israeli list of outposts to be dismantled

AFP, Jerusalem

The United States is awaiting an Israeli list of Jewish settlement outposts in the West Bank slated for evacuation, a US diplomatic source in Israel said yesterday.

"It's a formal commitment made by Israel, and we have been waiting for this list for several months already," the official said on condition of anonymity, stressing that Israel had until May 14 to produce it.

The commitment was made by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's top aide Dov Weisglass during a meeting with White House National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, he added.

According to the Israeli daily Yedioth Aharonot, US Ambassador to Israel Dan Kurtzer urged Sharon to immediately dismantle outposts during a meeting this week.

How many outposts will be included in this list remains unclear.

According to the international "roadmap" peace blueprint launched last year, the 56 West

Bank outposts erected since Sharon took office in March 2001 should be removed.

Sharon for his part has promised to remove what he calls "illegal" outposts, built without the government's approval, but their number is much lower.

The Israeli anti-settlement organisation Peace Now says there are more than 100 outposts in the West Bank. They are generally set up as makeshift settlements with caravans but are often later legalised.

The handful of outposts that were dismantled by the army in recent months were almost systematically rebuilt within a few days.

The international community considers all Jewish settlements in the occupied territories to be illegal.

A report made public Wednesday by the State Comptroller accused the housing ministry of funneling 6.5 million dollars in public funds for the construction of these outposts.

Indian Election

'BJP may need new partners after polls'

AFP, New Delhi

Exit polls from India's ongoing elections show ruling Hindu nationalists within striking distance of a parliamentary majority but analysts said yesterday they may have to woo new partners to govern.

Most of the television polls broadcast after Wednesday's fourth and penultimate round of India's marathon parliamentary vote put the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) some four to nine seats adrift of the 272 majority needed to form a government.

One poll, however, said the alliance, led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), would cruise in with up to 282 seats, while at the opposite end of the scale another said it would fall short by 27 seats.

The election is being held in five phases, with 361 of the 543 parliamentary seats up for grabs already having been contested. Voting in the remaining 182 constituencies will take place in the biggest round yet

on May 10. Results are expected on May 13.

"Most of the television exit polls have not yet given the BJP-led coalition 200 seats in the four rounds of voting already held," said Yogendra Yadav, a political analyst.

"It will be really surprising if they get more than 80 seats needed for a majority, in the last round. If they fall short, then the wheeling-dealing will begin," he said.

The BJP's key ally in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, the Telegu Desam Party headed by Chandrababu Naidu, appeared to have suffered a huge defeat, according to the television polls.

Analysts said that the party's allies in key states of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in Monday's last round of polls appear to be in a weak position.

"It will be a real challenge as the BJP-led coalition will need to pick up 50 percent of the seats (91). Last time, it was the BJP's best-ever performance and they picked up 82 seats," said Yadav.

The BJP's general secretary Pramod Mahajan told reporters

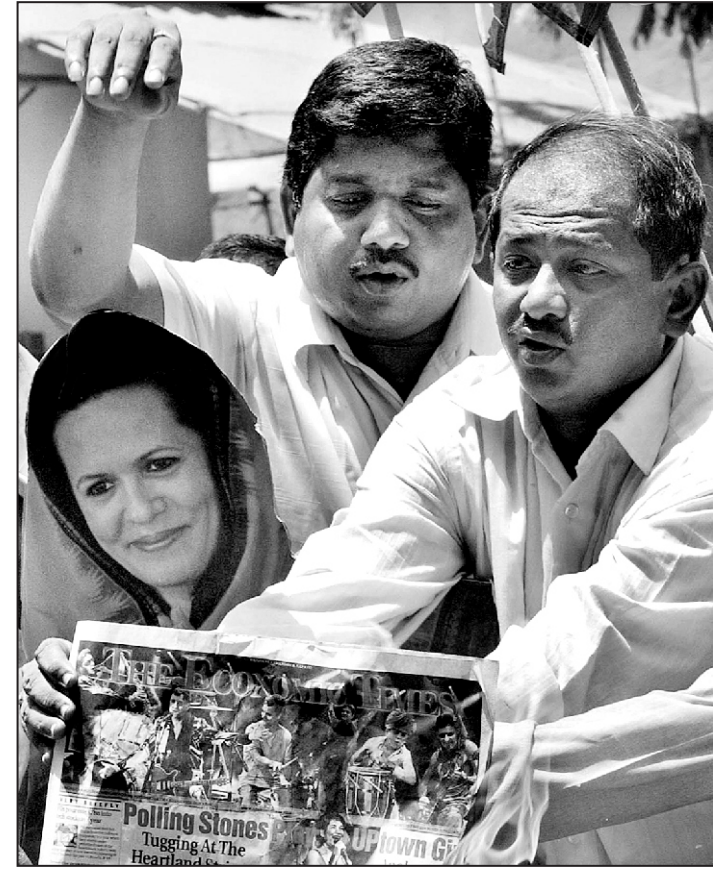
Wednesday the party was open to tying up with some additional smaller parties in order to muster the magical number of 272 seats.

"Though we are confident of gaining a clear majority in the next parliament, we could take help from smaller political parties in case we fall short by a few seats," he said.

A western diplomat said that if the exit polls trends are confirmed on Monday and the BJP falls short of an absolute majority by some 10-20 seats, making up the shortfall could be politically costly.

"They could have to pay a high price to some very small parties which could demand five ministries each even though they don't represent a substantial segment of the electorate," he said.

The Hindustan Times daily said in an editorial that a hung parliament scenario "would be terribly unfortunate" as the small parties could desert the government as soon as the political weather turned rough.



15 killed as cold storage shelves collapse in China

AFP, Beijing

Fifteen people were killed after shelves collapsed at a cold storage in central China, state media said yesterday.

The 10-metre (33-foot) high shelves at Chenzhai Cold Storage in Zhengzhou, capital of Henan province, contained "flower stalk of garlic" and collapsed on Wednesday morning, trapping 34 workers, Xinhua news agency said.

After a 12-hour rescue effort, 15 people were confirmed dead with the remaining 19 recovering in hospital.

The storage owner, surnamed Zhang, was in police custody and investigations into the cause were continuing, Xinhua said.

Chinese workplaces in general have awful safety records due to lax prevention measures.

Hazardous working conditions are also the cause of many illnesses, however they rarely show up in workplace injury statistics as they are not usually logged.

Political activists from India's Congress Party burn a copy of 'The Economic Times' protesting its use of a composite photograph of Priyanka Gandhi, daughter of Congress leader Sonia Gandhi, in Mumbai yesterday. The activists demanded an apology from the newspaper's publishers for the use of the photograph, which accompanied an article entitled 'Polling Stones Tugging At The Heartland'.



A Nepalese riot police officer looks away as he argues with demonstrators outside the venue of the ongoing Nepal Development Forum (NDF) meeting in Kathmandu yesterday. The demonstration was called as five opposition parties who declined to cooperate with the royalist government called for the postponement of the NDF meeting.

BJP leaders meet to talk polls strategy

PTI, New Delhi

With the exit polls projecting the NDA nearing the half-way mark, just short of absolute majority in 14th Lok Sabha, top BJP leaders are meeting in New Delhi yesterday to review the last three phases of polling and draw up a strategy for the fourth and final phase on May 10.

The meeting to be chaired by party President M Venkaiah Naidu, is being attended among others by party general secretaries Sanjay Joshi and Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, besides Union Ministers Arun Jaitley and Sushma Swaraj.

Besides the exit polls predictions, the party is expected to review the feedback on the last three phases of elections received from its whole time chunav sahayaks (poll assistants), party sources said.

The party is also expected to review the efficacy of nigrani dals (vigilante squads), comprising its youth and women's wing activists, which were deployed at over 700

sensitive booths across the country during the third phase of polling, they said.

The party leaders are also expected to draw up a strategy for 'full scale' offensive and 'carpet bombing' by its top leaders in the remaining 182 constituencies going to polls on May 10.

Meanwhile, Star News TV channel and C-Voter polling agency Wednesday said the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party was heading towards a majority with 270 to 282 seats of the 543 being contested.

However, polls by other channels showed the alliance could fall short by about nine seats, with one saying the shortfall could be as much as 27.

A party or an alliance needs 272 seats to be able to form a government.

The fifth and largest round of voting will be held on May 10 and results of the mammoth election are expected three days later.

India pushes economic pact with Lanka govt

Tigers step up child soldier recruitment

AFP, Colombo

India will pursue a comprehensive economic partnership agreement with Sri Lanka's new government amid plans for an aid package to rebuild the island's embattled regions, a top envoy said yesterday.

The Indian High Commissioner (ambassador) here, Nirupam Sen, said talks initiated with the previous government on the economic agreement would continue with the new administration that came to power after last month's election.

He said New Delhi was keen to push ahead with greater economic cooperation between the two countries and noted that a 150 million dollar Indian credit line had been well utilised to import commodities and merchandise.

New Delhi was also ready to put together a package of aid and

grants to help rebuild Sri Lanka's embattled northeast region, Sen told reporters here after gifting a mobile library to a Ramakrishna mission in the island's north.

He said India would await a proposal from the new government here to work out the package.

"We understand that the rehabilitation of the northeast is a priority for the government here," Sen said. "We are ready to put together a package that will include both grants and aid."

Sri Lanka's former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe initiated talks on a comprehensive economic partnership agreement to upgrade the free trade pact between the two South Asian neighbours when he visited New Delhi in October.

The balance of trade which favoured India 15 to one when the free trade agreement was signed in

1998 has come down to five to one, according to the central bank here.

Bilateral trade reached a billion dollars in 2002 with Indian exports amounting to 831 million dollars, up from 604 million dollars in 2001.

Sri Lanka's exports to India rose more dramatically to hit 167.7 million dollars in 2002, up from 70.8 million dollars in 2001.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels have stepped up recruiting hundreds of child soldiers amid renewed moves by peace broker Norway to revive stalled talks, officials and residents said yesterday.

Tamil Tigers have begun enlisting young fighters in the northern Wanni district in the past two weeks after demobilising nearly 1,000 child soldiers who were loyal to a renegade commander, a local official said.

N Korea set to test new missile engines

AFP, Seoul

The United States has stepped up surveillance over North Korea as the Stalinist country is set to test engines for a ballistic missile capable of hitting US territory, a newspaper reported here yesterday.

North Korea has restored facilities for missile engine testing destroyed by an explosion in December 2002, the JoongAng newspaper said, citing South Korean diplomatic and defence sources.

The 6,000-kilometer (3,600-mile) range would bring Hawaii, Alaska and the western fringes of the United States within the missile's scope, it said.

The United States has accused North Korea of being a leading global proliferator of weapons of mass destruction. But the cash-

strapped country has refused to stop missile exports, a major source of hard currency earnings.

The United States and South Korea stepped up surveillance following intelligence reports that North Korea resumed the development of Taepodong-2 missiles, the newspaper said.

Pyeongang stunned the world in August 1998 by test-launching over Japan a Taepodong-1 missile with a range of up to 2,000 kilometers, claiming it was a satellite launch.

A 30-meter (33-foot) launching pad was restored late last year in the Musudan missile complex in North Hamgyong province, JoongAng said.

The Taepodong-2 missiles use Chinese liquid fuel engines as a first stage rocket and a Rodong missile as a second stage, it said.

Thai PM visiting Muslim south despite security warnings

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said yesterday he was making a trip to the restive Muslim south despite warnings from security agencies and pleas from his family not to go.

"It's true that everyone is concerned about security for my visit to the south, including my wife and my children who asked me to postpone the trip, but I insisted on going ahead," he told reporters before his departure.

Thailand's intelligence agencies, both civilian and military, had also advised him not to make the trip for fear he could be targeted, he said.

INDIAN SC SAYS

Too late to stop 'criminals' contesting polls

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court rejected a lower court ruling yesterday banning people in jail from contesting national elections now under way, saying it was too late to implement such a decision, a report said.

But the ruling held open the possibility of action by the Supreme Court to stop such people contesting future elections.

The three-judge bench said "when the elections have reached the last stage, the directions of the (Bihar) High Court are not practically implementable," the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

India's five-phase elections began April 20 and are set to end

May 10.

The decision ended uncertainty over the candidacies of at least five people being held in prison in the lawless eastern state of Bihar on charges ranging from murder and rape to abduction in the current elections.

Indian electoral laws bar convicts from contesting elections but several national political and regional parties have fielded candidates who have dozens of criminal charges pending against them.

Bihar's lower court had issued a ruling last week barring people facing charges from contesting elections while in jail.



Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri (L) gestures beside Nahdlatul Ulama leader Hasyim Muzadi (R) as her younger brother Guruh Sukarnoputra (C) looks on during a press conference at the Proklamasi Square, where her father Sukarno (statue-background) and vice president Hatta announced Indonesia's independence almost 60 years ago, in Jakarta yesterday. Megawati teamed up with the head of Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama leader Hasyim Muzadi as her vice-presidential candidate, in an attempt to reenergise her flagging campaign for a second term ahead of the July elections.

US set to offer written assurance to Jordan on ME peace

AFP, Washington

The United States will grant Jordan's request for written assurance on negotiations for an eventual Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, US officials said Wednesday, ahead of King Abdullah II's White House meeting.

King Abdullah had asked for written assurance that an eventual peace deal will be defined by direct negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians and not be prejudiced by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's controversial disengagement plan, US officials said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said the king would be happy with what Washington will present to him when he meets Thursday with US President George W. Bush at the White House.

"We'll see the king tomorrow and I think the king will be pleased," Powell told reporters at the State Department when asked about the status of the guarantees which were the subject of intense debate in the administration.

Another US official said Abdullah

would "get a letter" from Bush but that it was not entirely clear how far it would go toward reassuring him on Washington's stance.

Abdullah requested a written document affirming the US position after postponing a meeting with Bush last month amid intense Arab anger at the president's endorsement of Sharon's plan, which calls for Israel's complete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip but allows some Jewish settlements to remain on the West Bank.

In embracing the plan, which was dealt a setback when Sharon's right-wing Likud party rejected it in a week-end referendum, Bush also implicitly rejected the longstanding Arab demand that Palestinian refugees be allowed to return to land they lost when Israel was created in 1948.

His statements, which called for the recognitions of certain demographic "realities" on the ground, were met with fury by the Palestinians and other Arab leaders who said Bush had undercut the Palestinians negotiating position and damaged US credibility as an "onest broker" in the peace process.

