INTERNÂTIONAL



Party president Sonia Gandhi is garlanded by Delhi Congress leader Prem Sing during a last-ditch campaign rally in New Delhi yesterday. Sonia made a fervent appeal to voters as curtain falls on campaigning for the final round of balloting in India's staggered elections tomorrow, saying she was willing to die for the country.

I am willing to die for India, says Sonia

Sonia Gandhi, the main opposition Congress party chief, Friday made a fervent appeal to voters two days ahead of the final round of balloting in India's staggered elections, saying she was willing to die for the

"As I stand on this soil tonight, this soil in which the blood of my husband has mingled, I can assert there can be no greater honour for me than share his fate for the sake of our country," the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi said

The Congress president's husband and former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. allegedly by Sri Lankan Tamil Tiger rebels, in 1991 near Madras, capital of southern Tamil Nadu state.

Rajiv Gandhi's mother and ndia's most powerful prime minister Indira Gandhi was also assassinated in 1984 by her Sikh body-

"To those who attack me and my

family I would only like to state that it is the greatest honour to belong to a family that has lived and died for this country," Sonia said.

They cannot break my resolve to bring about a strong, resurgent, secular and just India."

Sonia Gandhi, who only assumed Indian citizenship several years after her marriage to Rajiv Gandhi, is the prime target of the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party in the ongoing parliament elections.

The BJP has made Sonia Gandhi's Italian origins an election plank, saying she cannot become prime minister as she was not born

Sonia Gandhi said Friday that she remained inspired by her husband and "his ultimate sacri-

"It was Rajiv Gandhi who took the country into the computer and technology age," she said. "But these strong foundations have been severely damaged in the last five Indian Election

CPI-M eyes victory in West Bengal

SAKYASEN MITTRA, Kolkata

The West Bengal is set to go to the polls tomorrow to decide the fate of 313 contestants who are vying for the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state.

Like the last few parliamentary elections the CPI-M-led Left Front looks set to again sweep the polls. In 1999, the Left Front had won 29 seats, followed by Trinamool Congress with eight, Congress party with three and BJP with two seats. This time, the Left looks set to increase their tally to somewhere around 32 seats with the Trinamool

Congress becoming a poor second. The rural belt has always been the strength of the CPI-M. However, this time, they are all set to make a mark in the city of Kolkata also. Kolkata and the suburbs had for the past few years proved to be the

encies of Kolkata North-East, Kolkata North-West, Kolkata South, Dum Dum, Barasat and Jadavpur had all voted for either the Trinamool Congress or the BJP during the 1998 and 1999 elections. This time, however, some Trinamool heavyweights like Ajit Panja and Krishna Basu may bite the dust. The situation is such that even Mamata Bannerjee, who had a margin of over 2,13,000 votes in 1999, is having to fight for survival. There is no doubt that she will win. But the

very well come down to less than 50,000. But then why have the urban middle class suddenly tilted towards the CPI-M? Simply because the whimsical attitude of Mamata banneriee has been a disappoint-

fact is that her margin of victory may

ment for the last couple of years. Bannerjee's lack of political acumer has been a major factor for the tilt She herself however, does not believe that her party is under severe pressure. "I do not care as to what the media says. This time we will double our tally from eight," she points out as she rattles the names of the constituencies where her party will win. But ask her the reasons for her confidence and she stutters for an answer. Finally she adds, "This time the CPI-M won't be able to employ rigging the way it has been doing in the past. We are very happy at the restrictions employed by the Election Commission." But the crux of the matter however is that she has no political definitions as to why her party would do well.

Indian Elections

Modi-Yadav sweat it out to win hearts of voters

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Laloo Prasad Yadav's battle to win votes turned to be a big draw in their campaign for BJP and Congress respectively in the Indian capital on the penultimate day of electioneering yesterday for the final phase of

Modi, who became the Hindutva mascot after the BJP's victory in state assembly polls in his state two years ago in the backdrop of communal riots, used high-pitched rhetoric targeting Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin in his election rallies last night.

A rabble-rouser, Modi did not disappoint BJP supporters. "People do not rent their house or rooms to strangers. So how can they hand over the reins of the country to a foreigner?' he said in a clear reference to Italy-born Sonia

Taking a dig at Congress and Sonia, Modi said "earlier the slogan of Congress used to be 'Vande Mataram' (by Bankim Chandra

ande-Mata-Rome'." On the other hand, Laloo Yadav, campaigning for Congress candidates in Delhi, regaled his audiences with his typical humor and mannerisms.

Chatterjee) but now the party says

The showman that he is. Yadav drew lusty cheers from the crowd every time he had a dig at BJP, so much so that it was only he who spoke at the meetings and no other Congress leader who took the back

He accused BJP of being "communal" and alleged this party had pitted Ram against Rahim. Ridiculing BJP's "feel good" camnaign. Yadav said this was limited to only people like VHP leader Pravin Togadia and did not extend to the

Megawati picks Hasyim as her running mate

THE STRAITS TIMES/ANN,

President Megawati Sukarnoputri announced her choice of Hasyim Muzadi as her running mate Friday, giving a boost to her chances of winning a second term in office, analysts said.

As the leader of Indonesia's largest Islamic group, the moderate 40-million strong Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), he could help bring her crucial support from Muslim voters in the presidential election on July 5.

The pairing also undercut one of her toughest rivals, retired general Wiranto, whose reinvigorated Golkar Party came up tops in the April 5 parliamentary poll. He had also been courting the cleric.

The President introduced her vice-presidential candidate in a nationally-televised ceremony at a park in central Jakarta where her father, Indonesia's first president Sukarno, proclaimed national independence in 1945.

Rumsfeld apology fails to calm Arab anger

REUTERS, Dubai

His apology was late and the damage done, said Arab and European commentators yesterday, reacting to Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

"While he (Rumsfeld) has been in charge, murder, torture and humiliation were heaped on Iraqi detainees almost as a matter of course," the Saudi daily Arab News "Rumsfeld's apology came too

late," said Jordanian analyst Hani Hourani. "I believe Rumsfeld should resign because the torture reflected

a widespread policy adopted by the US army in Iraq and maybe Afghanistan as well," he added. Rumsfeld took responsibility on Friday for abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US troops and offered his "deepest

world as well as the United States. But Rumsfeld said he would not resign just to satisfy his political

apology" to victims during US Senate

hearings broadcast live in the Arab

Arabic newspapers, from Egypt's opposition al-Wafd to Saudi Arabia's semi-official Okaz, fronted pictures of Rumsfeld looking troubled with his hands over his face.

The abuses by US forces recalled the brutality of Saddam Hussein's regime, said Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammad al-Salem al-Sabah.

"For us in Kuwait these (abuses) mean a lot of things, and recall the brutal acts by Saddam Hussein's regime in the same prison, Abu Ghraib, which held many Kuwaiti detainees," he was quoted on Saturday by newspapers as saying. The Arab News dismissed

Rumsfeld's review of the scandal. "Rumsfeld's suggestion that an independent inquiry be set up into what happened is a waste of time, and Iraqis simply do not have time to waste." it said.

"If he resigns without fuss, perhaps he may begin to redeem himself by making a tiny contribution to the restoration of America's good name in the world.



Nepalese demonstrators chant slogans during a demonstration in Kathmandu yesterday. Demonstrations con-

tinue in the Nepalese capital despite the resignation of Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa on Friday.

New Iraq abuse, torture claims hit UK regiment

Two British newspapers published vesterday new allegations accusing British soldiers in the Queen's Lancashire Regiment of systematically beating and abusing Iraqi

For the third time in a week, the Daily Mirror tabloid published claims against British troops of the troubled regiment, this time saying its soldiers even made CDs of beatings to keep as souvenirs.

Meanwhile, the Independent newspaper carried a separate allegation, this time from a former Iragi prisoner who claimed he was beaten -- on the neck, chest and genitals -- by troops in the same regiment.

In what the newspaper claimed to be the first evewitness account of abuse carried out by British soldiers. Kifah Talah, 44, was reportedly tortured and humiliated by up to eight soldiers at a time for three days.

This stream of allegations will add to a furore over the torture of Iraqis by US troops at the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad, which has imperilled the position of US Defence Secretary Donald

The front page of Saturday's Daily Mirror -- one of Britain's most widely read tabloid newspapers -carried a picture allegedly provided by a member of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment, currently pased in Cyprus. The picture allegedly shows a

soldier photographing a bound captive with bloodied teeth in the back of an armoured personnel carrier "There are no rules out there," a

man, known only as "Soldier D", was quoted as saying. "I saw the man dragged into the vehicle beaten up, kicked and punched. It lasted about a minute." he said. "I took the picture as I opened the

doors of the vehicle and could see dirt on his shirt and blood on his "You'd come back from Iraq and

people wouldn't know what you've been through "If you had pictures you could show them," he was quoted as

saying. "While we were out there we were told to get rid of all of them. But if they'd done a proper search they'd have found CDs and all sorts of US SOLDIER SAYS

Making prison a 'hell' was her job

REUTERS, Washington

Her job was to "make it hell" for Iraqi prisoners so they would talk, one of the six US soldiers accused of prisoner abuse was quoted as

The Washington Post reported that Spec. Sabrina Harman told it in e-mail interviews that detainees were handed over to her military police unit at the Abu Ghraib prison by military intelligence officers, or by civilian contractors who conducted interrogations.

She was assigned to break the detainees down for interrogation, Harman said in e-mails this week from Baghdad, the Post said on its Weh site. But she did not discuss specific charges against herself.

"They would bring in one to several prisoners at a time already hooded and cuffed," Harman, a military police reservist, was quoted as saying. "The job of the MP was to keep them awake, to make it hell so they would talk."

A Pentagon spokeswoman

declined comment on the Post article, saying the matter was unde investigation.

The spokeswoman also declined comment on whether military intelligence officers or civilian contractors delivered prisoners to the Abu Ghraib prison. The issue of who was in charge of the prison during the reported abuse was a prominent one in hearings on Capitol Hill on Friday.

A senior general, Air Force Lt. Gen. Lance Smith, said during one of the hearings that Abu Ghraib had been put under the control of military intelligence last November. Rep. Heather Wilson, a New

Mexico Republican, told the hearing she thought it was contrary to Army regulations to put military police under the control of military intelligence.

Harman, 26, said that prisoners at Abu Ghraib were stripped, searched and then "made to stand or kneel for hours." Sometimes they were forced to stand on boxes or hold boxes or to exercise to tire them out, she said.

RED CROSS SAYS

troops, losing at least five men.

British soldiers take position yesterday during clashes with militiamen loyal

to Shia Muslim radical leader Moqtada Sadr in the southern city of Basra.

Gun battles erupted in both Basra and the town of Amara further north as

members of Sadr's Army of Mehdi militia clashed repeatedly with British

Abuse in Iraqi prisons amounted to 'torture'

The International Committee of the Red Cross says the abuse it found in Irag's US-run prisons was systematic and amounted to torture, adding that it first raised concerns with the United States more than a year ago.

At a quickly-arranged news conference, the International Committee of the Red Cross' director of operations, Pierre Kraehenbuehl, said US authorities had broken international laws and their transgressions had been documented in an ICRC report.

"The elements we found were tantamount to torture... There were clearly incidents of degrading and inhuman treatment," he told reporters.

"There are elements... which refer to actions that were contrary to international humanitarian law very clearly in that report," Kraehenbuehl

The document, which was submitted to the US government in

February, summarized the findings of ICRC officials who visited coalition-run detention centres in Iraq between March 31 and October 24 last year to observe and conduct private interviews with prisoners. It said Iragis deemed to be of

intelligence value to the United States were at high risk of being subjected to "a variety of harsh treatments" ranging from insults, threats and humiliations to both physical and psychological coercion, "which in some cases was tantamount to torture," in order to force cooperation with their interro-

Iraqis confined to US-run detention centers were frequently subjected to hooding, which made their breathing difficult, and painful

handcuffing, the report said. They were paraded in front of other prisoners naked, sometimes with women's underwear over their heads, exposed to loud noise and music, handcuffed to cell bars for

uncomfortable positions.

Prisoners were also stripped naked and held in solitary confinement for days in an empty and completely dark cell that included a latrine, according to the report.

"These methods of physical and psychological coercion were used by the military intelligence in a systematic way to gain confessions and extract information or other forms of cooperation from persons who had been arrested in connection with suspected security offenses or deemed to have an intelligence value," the document said

Officials from the Geneva-based agency discussed their discoveries with US overseer in Iraq Paul Bremer and the head of US forces in the country Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez on February 26, Kraehenbuehl said.

Arroyo looks set to win presidential race

THE STRAITS TIMES/ ANN,

Her performance in the past three years has been underwhelming, she suffers from charisma deficit and she has not quite dispelled corruption allegations against her husband

For all her shortcomings, however, analysts reckon President Gloria Arroyo is likely to win next week's presidential race.

Although she initially trailed other aspirants in popularity surveys, the 57-year-old economist has been able to reverse her political fortunes by a combination of hard work, an extensive political machinery and the use of government resources.

"Her victory is likely, not because she is the best among the candidates, but mainly because her closest rival failed to articulate what he wants to do for the country," said Gladstone Cuarteros, an analyst at the Institute for Popular Democracy.



Supporters of former Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos attend the final campaign rally for opposition presidential candidate Fernando Poe Jr. yesterday in Manila's financial district of Makati. An opinion poll by the Independent Social Weather Station (SWS) organisation, the last survey before tomorrow's elections, gave Philippines President Gloria Arroyo 37 percent of the vote compared to 30 percent for Poe. The family of the late President Marcos have thrown their support behind the idolized actor Poe.