

Indian Election

Vajpayee warns of instability if NDA fails to retain power

AP, New Delhi

India's Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee warns of political instability unless voters return his ruling alliance to power with a parliamentary majority as he wraps up campaigning ahead of the final round of national elections.

In the last few days on the campaign trail, Vajpayee appeared worried that his National Democratic Alliance could lose its majority and be forced into horse-trading with smaller parties to form a government.

"The decision you have to make is whether we need a stable, strong, lasting and performing government, or instability," Vajpayee said at his last election rally in the northern city of Ludhiana, in Punjab.

Although the NDA was far ahead of the main opposition Congress party and its allies, most pollsters have predicted from the previous four rounds of voting that the 11-party coalition will not win the 272 seats required for an outright majority.

In order to form a government, the NDA would then need to rope in new partners from smaller groups. That raises the risk of an unstable government, which may not last the full five-year term or be able to implement its policies.

On Monday, 16 states will vote for 182 of Parliament's 543 elected seats.

After dismissing the exit polls conducted by private TV stations, Vajpayee spent the last weekend of the campaign warning of political chaos and instability if voters don't give his Bharatiya Janata Party and

its allies a strong mandate.

He said the economy and the country's development will suffer in the absence of a stable government.

"If the NDA does not get a majority, the country will slip into political anarchy," Press Trust of India news agency quoted him as saying on Friday. The opposition "will not be able to run the government... There will be a prime minister every six months," he said.

Vote counting begins May 13 and the results are expected more quickly than in previous polls because a million electronic voting machines have been installed around the country, absolving the need for manual counting.

There are 670 million people eligible to vote, and the turnout has averaged above 55 percent.

The main opposition Congress party remained upbeat, with pollsters predicting a big improvement in its seat tally in the last phase of voting.

"We have to start a new era, make a new history," the party's Italian-born leader, Sonia Gandhi, told a crowd of 10,000 at a rally in the Indian capital, New Delhi, on Saturday. "Bring victory to Congress, defeat BJP, save the nation," she said.

A survey by the Indian Express-New Delhi Television network, published Saturday, said Vajpayee's NDA was expected to win 240-260 seats. Congress and its allies were expected to collect 190-210 seats, with the remaining 90-110 seats going to smaller groups and independents, the survey indicated.



A supporter of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party dances during an election rally addressed by DMK president M Karunanidhi in Madras yesterday. Indian political leaders made fervent last-ditch appeals for support ahead of the final and biggest round of the election today.

Pricey polls

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The parliamentary election of 2004 in India is no doubt the biggest democratic exercise in the world but there has been a phenomenal rise in expenditure in undertaking the shows over the years.

Official estimates say the interim budget presented in February this year made a provision of Rs 818.38 crore for the current elections, slightly less than Rs 880 crore that were required for conducting the previous polls in 1999.

The last four parliamentary elections 1991, 1996, 1998 and 1999 have witnessed a huge increase in the total amount spent on them. The fragile coalitions have seen three general elections between 1996 and 1999 costing Rs 2143 crore to the state exchequer.

While the total expenditure on ninth parliamentary polls was about Rs 154 crore in 1989, it went up to more than Rs 666 crore for the 1998 elections.

The first elections in free India conducted in 1952 had cost Rs 10.45 crore before it had come down to half that figure five years later.



Iraqis demonstrate yesterday in central Baghdad against the participation of former Baath members in the new Iraqi government. The US civil administrator in Iraq Paul Bremer announced on April 23 steps to reinstate some former members of Saddam Hussein's disbanded Baath party in the new army, as well as in schools and universities.

'Saddam was badly injured in 1991 Gulf war'

AFP, Dubai

Saddam Hussein was seriously wounded during an allied bombing raid in the 1991 Gulf war and had to be operated on, the deposed Iraqi president's personal doctor said in comments published yesterday.

"The main operation I carried out on the former president took place during the Gulf war, to be exact on February 1 (1991) after he suffered deep wounds," Ala Bashir told Asharq al-Awsat in an interview.

"I was called out in an emergency to the Ibn Sina hospital which was reserved for Iraqi leaders and found Saddam Hussein in the operating theatre, his face and uniform covered in so much blood I thought he was dead.

"Saddam told me he had been hurt in a road accident, but it was clear from the state he was in that it was the result of bombing," the doctor related.

'Israel should bomb strategic targets in Damascus'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Transport Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who heads a far-right party in the governing coalition, said yesterday that the military should bomb "strategic targets" in Damascus, such as the army headquarters, the central electricity board, the telephone exchange, the public broadcasting house or the presidential palace, even if this last site has a more symbolic character, Lieberman told army radio.

"In order to put an end to Hezbollah's attacks, it is necessary to attack strategic targets in Damascus, such as the army headquarters, the central electricity board, the telephone exchange, the public broadcasting house or the presidential palace, even if this last site has a more symbolic character," Lieberman told army radio.

"It is effectively Syria which is responsible for everything that is going on in Lebanon, and it is through (Syrian) territory that the weapons from Iran reach Hezbollah," said the minister, who heads the National Union

party.

His comments came just days after a major flare-up on the border with Lebanon, which left one Israeli soldier dead and five injured.

Despite the clashes with Hezbollah, chief of staff Moshe Yaalon said Sunday he doubted the Lebanese militia was looking to escalate the situation.

"I get the feeling that Hezbollah knows it is not in its interest to provoke such an escalation, but in any case we have the means to make it understand," Yaalon told public radio.

On Friday, the head of Israel's northern command, Benny Gantz, warned both Syria and Lebanon against any military escalation, saying it would be "catastrophic" for them.

"Hezbollah understands the price of an escalation," he said.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Sunday he was cancelling a planned trip to

Washington as the cabinet discussed his controversial Gaza withdrawal plan which was voted down by his own Likud party.

Shortly after the start of the session, Sharon told cabinet members he was calling off his trip to Washington planned for mid-May, public radio reported.

He had been expected to be in the United States on May 14-15 to speak at an annual meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) lobby group, which is traditionally attended by the US president.

But doubts over the trip emerged after his right-wing Likud party trounced his "disengagement" plan which had been warmly endorsed by President George W. Bush.

Implications of the Likud 'no' vote in a May referendum of the party's members topped the agenda Sunday at the weekly cabinet meeting, in what was its first session since the vote.

22 Maoist rebels killed in clashes

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 22 people have died in renewed fighting with Maoist rebels since Nepal's royalist prime minister stepped down last week in hope of ending political turmoil in the kingdom, an official said yesterday.

The violence came as opposition parties which had sought the sacking of pro-royal Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa vowed to step up more than a month of protests unless their communist candidate became the new premier.

A security official said 22 rebels were gunned down in at least four clashes since the prime minister's resignation Friday.

He said the rebels, who want to overthrow the monarchy, also snatched 36 teachers and students from a school Friday in the western Sindhuli district and were believed to be forcing them into indoctrination sessions.

Superiors must answer for prison abuse: US senators

AP, Washington

The Army investigation into the Iraq prison scandal should have repercussions for higher-ups, not just the military police accused of abusing detainees, lawmakers said Saturday.

"I think command responsibility has to be looked at just as seriously as the abusers," Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said in an interview. "The culture that led to this outrageous conduct has to be addressed just as much as the conduct itself."

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., added: "I think we need to move beyond scapegoating here of privates and sergeants to get at the facts as to what truly did happen."

Both lawmakers, members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said testimony from Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Friday helped answer some questions, but many remain about the photographed abuse by US soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison.

While Massachusetts Sen.

Edward Kennedy and other prominent Democrats have called for Rumsfeld to resign, Nelson said he wasn't yet ready to go that far.

The investigation needs to run its course, he said, but he cautioned that, "I may get there depending on what other information comes out."

As for whether Rumsfeld will survive the scandal with his job, that is "still up in the air," said Nelson. "What I'm hearing is that there is a genuine concern about his ability to perform in his office in the way that he needs to."

Those urging President Bush to fire his defence chief should proceed carefully, Graham said, maintaining that Rumsfeld can still be an effective leader.

"I hope people will understand that replacing a secretary of defence during a war is a very big deal and should be done with lots of concern and caution," Graham said.

Rumsfeld warned of more horrific images of prisoner abuse to come, but Nelson and Graham both said they have not seen the additional photos and video that the

secretary alluded to during his testimony.

Graham said there have been allegations of rape and murder at Abu Ghraib, and that it would not be far-fetched to fear additional pictures may show such crimes.

Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, said Saturday he assumes Rumsfeld's job is safe. "I certainly hope it is," he said during a break at the Utah GOP convention. "And I don't think there needs to be a congressional investigation."

But Rep. Jim Matheson, Utah's only Democrat in Congress, said at his party's convention that "we have to hold people accountable. This was kept from Congress for a number of months. That bothered me."

Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash., said Friday: "In order to protect our women and men in the military, we need to fully prosecute the individuals who perpetrated these acts. We must also hold accountable those who allowed these events to occur from the top to the bottom of the chain of command."

Top US military officers question Washington's goals in Iraq

AFP, Washington

Deep divisions are emerging at the top of the US military over the course of the occupation of Iraq, with some senior officers saying the United States faces the prospect of taking high casualties without establishing a democratic Iraq, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

The newspaper said the officers' major worry was that the United States was prevailing militarily but failing to win the support of the Iraqi people.

That view was far from universal but it was spreading and being voiced publicly for the first time, the report said.

Army Major General Charles Swannack, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, told the Post he believed the US military was still winning tactically, in fighting on the ground, but was losing strategically.

Colonel Paul Hughes, who last

year was the first director of strategic planning for the US occupation authority in Baghdad, noted that a pattern of winning battles while losing a war characterized the US failure in Vietnam.

"Unless we ensure that we have coherency in our policy, we will lose strategically," he told the Post.

Inside and outside the armed forces, experts generally say the US military should remain in Iraq but should change its approach, the paper said.

Some officers say the way to begin restructuring US policy is by ousting Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, whom they see as responsible for a series of strategic and tactical blunders over the past year, according to the report.

Several of those interviewed said a profound anger was building within the army at Rumsfeld and those around him, the Post said.

Tigers warn truce in danger

AFP, Colombo

Suspected Tamil Tigers shot dead a soldier in eastern Sri Lanka yesterday after the rebels warned that Norway's renewed efforts to broker peace in the island were in jeopardy, a local official said.

The victim, a member of an intelligence unit, was taken off of a bus and killed in broad daylight near the town of Batticaloa, the official said.

The killing came on the eve of a visit to Sri Lanka by Norway's Foreign Minister Jan Petersen in a bid to jumpstart peace talks to end the three-decade ethnic conflict.

The Tamil Tigers said a ceasefire brokered by Norway in place since February 2002 was at risk because government troops were behind the killing Thursday of two rebels in Batticaloa, 300km east of Colombo.

The military has denied the charge.

"It is apparent that the killers have all the assistance from the SLA (Sri Lankan army)," the Tigers' political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan said in a letter to Scandinavian truce monitors.

"We request you to advise the government that if the SLA continues to act in this manner the entire peace process and the ceasefire agreement are being placed in heavy risk and dire consequence have to be faced," he said.

"We are afraid that it may become impossible for us to be patient onlookers of this cavalier fashion in which killing are being carried out."

Thamilselvan asked Trond Furuhoed, a retired Norwegian army general who heads the ceasefire monitors, to investigate the two killings and take action.

Local officials said Thursday's killings appeared to have been a retaliatory attack for the slaying of another rebel who was from the remnants of a renegade faction crushed by the Tiger leadership last month.

Diplomats said the killings are likely to figure in to the Norwegians' talks this week to revive peace negotiations which have been on hold since April last year.

The Norwegian foreign minister

is due in Sri Lanka Monday and has a meeting schedule with the elusive Tiger Tamil chief Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The LTTE brought its London-based chief negotiator Anton Balasingham, 65, to the rebel-held Wanni region Friday ahead of the hectic shuttle diplomacy expected in coming weeks.

Diplomats said Petersen's visit will be followed by one from Japan's special peace envoy to Sri Lanka Yasushi Akashi, who last June helped boost peace prospects by raising 4.5 billion dollars in aid pledges to rebuild Sri Lanka.

"There is a concern that a lack of progress in Sri Lanka will force donors to turn their attention to other troublespots needing help," a diplomatic source close to the peace process said.

"It's difficult for Norway to keep Sri Lanka in the international agenda unless the parties make progress," the source said. "The huge support last year was due to the feeling peace was possible in Sri Lanka."

Undecided Filipino voters hold the key

THE INQUIRER/ ANN, Manila

The Queen may have pulled away from Da King in the surveys, but it is the undecided and the "soft" voters - nearly a quarter of the electorate - who will decide today that who will govern the country in the next six years.

Pollster Social Weather Stations (SWS) gave the analysis in its final voter survey, released on Friday night, which shows President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo racing to a seven-point lead over Poe, 37 percent to 30 percent.

"As the campaign winds up, the outcome of the top two posts hinges on the decisions of the undecided and the uncommitted, who combine for almost one-fourth of the electorate," SWS head Mahar Mangahas said.

The survey, sponsored by the Manila Standard, ABS-CBN and Pollstrat International, involved face-to-face interviews with 2,000 respondents from May 1 to 4, SWS said. It has an error margin of 2 percent.

Mangahas gave an insight on how long it takes some Filipinos to make up their minds.



Incumbent Philippines President Gloria Arroyo follows the sermon during a "unity mass" by presidential candidates in Manila's historic San Agustin cathedral yesterday for today's election.

More bad news may be on way for Bush

AP, Washington

In one of the darkest weeks of his administration, President Bush saw America's reputation sullied, the US effort in Iraq damaged and his own campaign for reelection clouded. And more bad news may be on the way.

While the world already has been horrified by pictures of American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners, the Pentagon warns there are many more photos and videos that have not been disclosed.

They show "acts that can only be described as blatantly sadistic, cruel and inhuman," embattled Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told Congress.

From the White House to Capitol Hill, policy-makers are worried that the United States faces lasting damage abroad, particularly in the Middle East from the pictures of naked Arab men being tortured and humiliated by American soldiers, the same forces sent to Iraq to liberate the country from Saddam Hussein's torture and repression.

Analysts describe the pictures as great recruiting tools for al-Qaeda and other extremist groups and said they undermine America's claims to

a moral high ground. Rumsfeld said the impact was "radioactive."

Bush, in his weekly radio address Saturday, said, "They are a stain on our country's honor and reputation." He said the abuses were the work of a few and do not reflect the overall character of the 200,000 members of the US military who have served in Iraq in the past year.

Six months from the November elections, Iraq weighs heavily on the president.

April was the deadliest month yet for American soldiers in Iraq and May is off to a bloody start.

On the diplomatic front, the administration does not know who will take power in Iraq from the United States in a June 30 hand-over.

Costs are soaring. The administration has sent Congress an unexpected \$25 billion request for Iraq and Afghanistan.

Day after day, the extraordinary apologies from the president and his top deputies dominated the news.

Pollsters and presidential experts are scratching their heads over how the prisoner scandal will affect Bush's re-election hopes.