

PM post not important to Gandhi family: Priyanka

AFP, New Delhi

Priyanka Gandhi, daughter of India's Italian-born opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, said her mother did not care whether she became prime minister if the Congress party won the country's elections.

"It's not important to my mother, brother or myself, that she (Sonia) become prime minister," Priyanka, 32, told reporters after casting her ballot in New Delhi in the final and biggest phase of the five-round general elections.

"My mother is doing her job to the best of her capacity. It (power) is not a priority for any of us," said Priyanka, who is often touted by the media as a potential Indian prime minister due to her political charisma.

Leaders of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party-led alliance have repeatedly raked up Sonia's Italian origin as an election issue, saying her foreign birth ruled her out to lead the country.

Priyanka, scion of the influential Nehru-Gandhi dynasty which has given India three prime ministers, is not contesting the elections slated to conclude Monday. Results of the marathon five-stage elections will be known on Thursday.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian electoral official (R) marks the finger of Priyanka Gandhi, daughter of India's opposition leader Sonia Gandhi, with indelible ink before she casts her vote at a polling station in New Delhi yesterday.

Indian Elections

High turnout marks West Bengal polling

EC files case against Left Front chairman

SAKYASEN MITTRA, Kolkata

Peaceful election with only four deaths and around 28 injured were overshadowed by the FIR filed by the office of the Election Commission against the Left Front Chairman Birman Bose here yesterday.

The EC yesterday filed an FIR at the Talitola Police Station against politburo member Bose for his statements against the Election Commission and its officers. The Chief Election officer of West Bengal Basudev Bandopadhyaya yesterday said, "Bose had made some derogatory comments about a few of our officers. He was inciting the people of the state."

So we had to file an FIR. Now let the law take its course. The special observer appointed for West Bengal, Afzal Amanullah against whom Bose had mainly given vent to his anger stated, "How could the Left Front chairman state that the police would arrest us. He had done

so and for that he will have to face legal consequences."

Meanwhile, there was quite a huge turnout as far as voting was concerned. According to Bandopadhyaya, there was a 70 percent turnout, which was quite unexpected considering the weather. There were a few stray incidents which led to three deaths.

In the Murshidabad district, one CPIM supporter was shot to death by Trinamool Congress miscreants. In the Barrackpore constituency, a Trinamool worker was hacked and he later on succumbed to his injuries. In the Kolkata North-East Constituency two persons died as home made bombs exploded while they were being assembled. In the same constituency three persons were injured as they tried to prevent the CPIM office being burnt down by a horde of Trinamool Congress supporters.

In the Basirhat constituency, close to the West Bengal-Bangladesh border, a huge skirmish between Trinamool Congress and

CPIM supporters took place which left 14 injured, eight of them critically. But overall, polling was quite peaceful in most parts of the state compared to the other occasions.

Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya mentioned in the evening that he was happy at the way the voting had taken place. "We have proved once more that West Bengal is a trouble free state," he stated. Bhattacharya stated that he was apprehending Naxalite created violence. "I am happy that the people have rejected their claim of boycotting the votes," he added.

The Congress also expressed their satisfaction at the way the election had been conducted. The former state unit President, Somen Mitra said, "Other than a few instances of booth capturing, the situation was under control. We have no real complaints. In the elections, minor skirmishes will always occur."

US commander takes full responsibility for prison abuse in Iraq

AFP, Manama

US general John Abizaid took full responsibility yesterday for the prisoner abuse by his troops in Iraq, but skirted round a direct question about resignation.

"We military commanders are responsible for everything that happens in our area," the head of US Central Command told a press conference.

"My area stretches from Afghanistan to Kenya ... and I'm responsible for the actions of United States military in that area and I believe that I should be held accountable for what happens."

However he did not directly reply when asked if he would resign if the US military command was found at fault.

The US military is preparing for the trial of Specialist Jeremy Sivits in Baghdad on May 19, the first court martial of a soldier over the alleged abuse of prisoners.

The charges relate to Sivits' time as a guard at the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad, and include "maltreatment of detainees" as well as "failing to protect detainees from abuse, cruelty and maltreatment".

The announcement came as US magazines published graphic new reports of Iraqi prison abuses, including a photo showing a naked man cowering under threat from two

US military dogs and witness accounts of beatings and rape.

Seven US guards have been charged with criminal offences in relation to the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib.

"The terrible events that have taken place at Abu Ghraib prison are isolated incidents done by a few but that subject is under investigation," Abizaid said. "We will take the investigation ... as far as it needs to go."

"I think this particular problem is isolated but we can't conclude there aren't systemic problems that need to be investigated as well. We will correct the system so that abuses like this cannot happen again," he vowed.

"I am deeply disappointed that something like this can happen and as an Arab-American I am deeply disappointed," Abizaid added.

Meanwhile, the scandal over abuse of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers is having a "very unfortunate" impact in the Muslim world, a senior US official said yesterday.

"It's having a very unfortunate effect. It's not what America stands for. It's not what our military efforts stand for," Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, James Kelly, told reporters during a visit to Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-populated country.

GI faces court-martial over prison abuse

AP, Baghdad

Stung by a worldwide outcry, the US military Sunday announced the first court-martial in the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse allegations, ordering a reservist to face a public trial in Baghdad on May 19.

Spc. Jeremy C. Sivits of Hyndman, Pa., a member of the 372nd Military Police Company, will face a military court less than a month after photos of prisoners being abused and humiliated were first broadcast April 28.

Both the speed of the trial's scheduling and the venue in the Iraqi capital underscore the military's realization that it must demonstrate resolve in prosecuting those responsible for a scandal that

threatens to undermine the US mission in Iraq and President Bush's reelection chances.

Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, announcing the trial date, said the proceedings would be held in the Baghdad Convention Center, which houses the coalition press office, and be open to media coverage.

Bush promised Saturday that "we will learn all the facts and determine the full extent of these abuses. Those involved will be identified. They will answer for their actions."

Sivits is one of seven soldiers facing charges but appears to be a lesser figure in the case. Some of the others will likely face a general court martial, which can give more severe punishments than the "special" court martial that will try Sivits.

His trial could produce evidence for prosecuting others believed more culpable.

Sivits is believed to have taken some of the photos that triggered the scandal. His father, Daniel Sivits, said last month his son "was told to take a picture, and he did what he was told." He said his son trained as a mechanic but found himself performing military police work for which he was unqualified.

The family said it had no comment Sunday morning.

Sivits was charged with conspiracy to mistreat detainees, dereliction of duty for failing to protect prisoners and maltreatment of detainees. Seven officers have received career-ending reprimands.

BJP top brass reviews political situation

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani and Finance Minister Jaswant Singh yesterday reviewed the political situation as the fourth and final phase of polling for Lok Sabha was underway.

The top Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders took stock of the possible scenarios that could emerge after the fourth phase of polling and the steps that may need to be taken in the post-poll situation, party sources said.

The sources described the meeting as one that "merely took stock of the political situation".

With 182 seats at stake in this fourth and final phase in many of the States where BJP and its allies are not expected to do well, the leaders discussed the pros and cons of the possible outcome, the sources said.

Meanwhile, Four BJP workers sustained injuries in a clash with Congress men outside the district police chief's residence on Sunday night, police said in Rohtak.

The incident occurred when unidentified persons smashed the windscreens of the vehicle of BJP candidate from Rohtak Parliamentary constituency Capt Abhimanyu, they said.

Abhimanyu alleged that as he got down from his vehicle some Congress supporters travelling in another vehicle tried to run him down but he was saved, they added. Abhimanyu's younger brother and Union Minister Sahib Singh Verma's son-in-law Dev Suman was also accompanying him at the time of the incident.

One of the injured has been admitted to PGIMS hospital here, they said, adding police have registered an FIR in the case.



PHOTO: AFP
Philippine President Gloria Arroyo (C) looks at the list of candidates as she casts her ballot in her hometown of Lubao north of Manila yesterday.

'Torture in US-run jails not isolated incidents'

REUTERS, Baghdad

Torture, abuse and humiliation of prisoners is widespread in US-run detention centers in Iraq, and not limited to a few cases, non-governmental organisations in Iraq and an American Christian group said Sunday.

"We are here to tell the world that the cases of torture of Iraqi prisoners are not isolated incidents and they are not limited to Abu Ghraib prison, nor to the six US MPs," a spokeswoman for the Iraqi Human Rights Organisation (IHRO) told a news conference in Baghdad.

Seven US Military Police (MPs) have been charged with abusing Iraqi prisoners after a global scandal erupted with the publication of photographs of naked detainees being humiliated at Abu Ghraib prison just outside Baghdad.

US spokesman Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt said Specialist Jeremy Sivits would face a court martial in Baghdad next week, accused of abusing detainees.

President Bush has said the acts were "the wrongdoing of a few" and did not reflect the character of the 200,000 military personnel who have served in Iraq.

But rights groups disputed those assertions.

"These are part of a systematic method of torture and inhuman treatment," the IHRO spokeswoman said.

People who said they had been victims of torture and relatives of detainees told the news conference of their degrading treatment in the US prisons.

None of the accounts could be verified independently and there was no immediate comment on

these specific cases from the US military. However, Kimmitt told a separate news conference all allegations would be investigated.

"The primary objective is to point out that there are systematic abuses taking place in the American prisons," said Stewart Vriesinga of the Christian Peacemakers Team.

"Iraqis are treated in a dehumanized way."

Issam al-Hammad said the Americans came to his village near al-Qaim on the Syrian border looking for his father, Abid Hammad al-Mahoosh, a major general in the disbanded Iraqi army.

He wasn't there, so they took Issam and his three brothers, the youngest of them age 16. "We spent five and a half months in four detention centers," Issam al-Hammad said.

Mandela blasts US, UK over Iraq war

AFP, Johannesburg

South African freedom hero Nelson Mandela yesterday harshly criticized Britain and the United States over the war in Iraq, saying South Africa, by contrast, provided inspiration to the world.

In an address to parliament ten years to the day after he was sworn in as South Africa's first black president, Mandela referred to the international uproar over the publication of photographs of Iraqi prisoners tortured in Iraq.

"We live in a world where there is enough reason for cynicism and despair," the frail-looking Mandela, 85, told a joint session of the house.

"We watch as two of the leading democracies, two leading nations of the free world, get involved in a war that the United Nations did not sanction."

"We look on with horror as reports surface of terrible abuses against the dignity of human beings

held captive by invading forces in their own country," he said to loud applause from the chamber.

"We see how powerful countries -- all of them so-called democracies -- manipulate multilateral bodies to the great disadvantage and suffering of the poorer developing nations," Mandela said.

Mandela has been an outspoken critic of the US-led war in Iraq, even once describing President George W. Bush as "a president who can't think properly" for his policy on Iraq.

The Nobel Peace prize winner drew a contrast between the US and British failures on the world stage, and South Africa, which this year is celebrating the 10th anniversary of the end of apartheid.

"We should take heart from our own experience and performance. In a cynical world we have become an inspiration to many," said Mandela.



PHOTO: AFP
British Prime Minister Tony Blair (R) walks to No. 10 Downing Street with the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao after Wen had inspected a Guard of Honour at the Foreign Office yesterday.

Amnesty warned UK about torture a yr ago

AFP, London

The British government was told a year ago of allegations that British troops had tortured Iraqi prisoners, the human rights group Amnesty International said Sunday, contradicting claims that the charges did not surface until February.

"We have had a series of meetings and correspondence with the government over this for a year now. Now it is saying it only became aware of the allegations in February," an Amnesty spokesman said here.

On Saturday the government said it had received in February a confidential report from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) detailing the abuse of Iraqi detainees by US and British troops.

"The UK Government has known about allegations of torture and one death by British troops since last

May," Amnesty said.

It said it had sent a memorandum to the Ministry of Defence in May 2003 reporting the death and torture of Iraqi detainees.

Senior staff had met defence and Foreign Office officials in June and a further memorandum had been sent to Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon in July and a letter in October expressing concern, it said.

"Amnesty met with the Ministry of Defence in June 2003 to discuss the allegations. But instead of an impartial and civilian-led inquiry to get to the truth, we continue to see secretive investigations by the Royal Military Police who lack the independence that international law demands," the group's spokesman said.

The charges were taken up by the defence spokesman for the opposition Conservative Party, Nicholas Soames.