



PHOTO: AFP

President of India's Congress Party Sonia Gandhi (R) smiles after being given a rose by her son and newly elected Member of Parliament (MP) Rahul Gandhi (L) during a Congress parliamentary party meeting at Parliament House in New Delhi yesterday. Sonia was unanimously elected the parliamentary leader of the party, taking her one step closer to becoming Prime Minister of India, and leader of the world's largest democracy.

Mom is my 'real hero', says Rahul

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's son Rahul Gandhi has ruled out joining a party-led government and said his mother is his "real hero".

Asked by reporters if he would join the government, Rahul, who won from Amethi parliamentary constituency by a handsome margin, replied in the negative last night.

The 34-year-old Nehru-Gandhi dynasty member ridiculed suggestions that he was in the race for the post of Prime Minister saying "if it is a serious question, then it is ridiculous."

Rahul said he would say "no" even if there was pressure from Congress party for his occupying the post of Prime Minister. "I will accept any command of the party except this," he added.

Replying to a question, he said the verdict of the general elections was clearly a rejection of Bharatiya Janata Party whose campaign focused on a few individuals, an apparent reference to the criticism of her mother's foreign origin.

Cong to pursue reform policy: Manmohan

PTI, New Delhi

Setting at rest any rollback of disinvestment of cash-rich oil companies in the wake of blue chip oil firms taking a beating in the stock market, Congress yesterday said it will pursue the reform policy but was against their privatisation as they were "strategic companies".

"Disinvestment, yes. Privatisation, we will have to think. You will have to make a distinction between disinvestment and privatisation," senior Congress leader Manmohan Singh, who is tipped to become finance minister, said after the Congress Parliamentary Party meeting which elected Sonia Gandhi as its leader.

Even BJP was against privatisation of ONGC, Singh said adding disinvestment upto 51 per cent of government equity in oil companies was a possibility.

The oil industry was "strategic". The oil companies were also profit-making companies. If they can

perform and compete against private oil companies, he wondered why should they be privatised.

"We are not for privatisation as an ideology," he said indicating Congress would not be averse to pursuing this reform measure where privatisation and disinvestment were in the interest of the country, helped raise resources and provided more elbow room to public sector undertakings.

Asked what would be the economic agenda of the new Congress-led coalition government, Singh said "we will have to move further on road to peace, prosperity and economic growth."

"We can't be still and static and provide all answers. We have to progress all around. We have to ensure whatever reforms we contemplate, they do address the concerns of the people, our parties and our workers, concerns of social safety net", he said implying that his

government would pursue reforms with a human face.

Singh also said he would lay emphasis on addressing the concerns of social sector and infrastructure development.

To a question if economic reforms pursued by the NDA would be continued, Singh said "Life is not static. If there are aberrations, they need to be corrected."

Asked if there would be any dilution in Congress' reforms agenda in the face of the alliance with Left parties, Singh said the Common Minimum Programme was being worked out and it would take a few days to complete it.

Singh is heading the committee which is entrusted with the task of preparing the Common Minimum Programme. It also includes senior Congress leader Pranab Mukharjee and Jairam Ramesh.

Plane with 33 aboard crashes in Brazil

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

A Brazilian plane carrying 30 passengers and three crew was crashed in the Amazon region near the northern city of Manaus, airline officials said yesterday.

The wreckage was spotted by search helicopters about 20km from Manaus, near the river Negro, but there was no immediate word if there were any survivors.

The Rico Airlines plane -- a Brazilian-manufactured Brasilia -- took off from the town of Sao Paulo de Olivenca near the border with Colombia and was scheduled to stop at Manaus but never arrived there, the officials said.

"The last radio contact with the pilot took place on Friday at about 2200 GMT, when the plane was approaching Manaus," said one Rico representative.

Shortly after that conversation, the plane failed to make radio contact with a regional monitoring system and quickly disappeared from radar screens.

Fractured verdict, says Advani

THE STATESMAN/ANN, New Delhi

Describing the Lok Sabha election results as a "fractured verdict," the Deputy Prime Minister, L K Advani, Friday said the "unexpected"

people's mandate this time around isn't in favour of any party.

He, however, denied that it was entirely a fallout of anti-incumbency, but "more an outcome of local issues and local situations, including the alliances."

"This time the verdict is not in our favour, neither the BJP nor the NDA, but it's also not in favour of any other party... There was no wave... It's a fractured verdict. Therefore, the PM and the Cabinet decided to tender their resignation," said a relaxed-looking Advani, while speaking to media persons at a tea hosted at his official 30-Prithviraj Road residence Friday. Advani's family including wife, daughter, son too played host at the sprawling lawns here this evening. "We accept the verdict with respect and congratulate those who will form the new government," he added.

The Deputy Prime Minister, meanwhile, refused to comment on speculation about his future role in the party nor on how long the new government may last.

CPI-M should play role in Cong-led govt: Jyoti Basu

SAKYASEN MITTRA, Kolkata

There comes a time in every politician's life when he or she feels contented. The former chief minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu is probably feeling the same.

But at present, Basu feels that the most opportune moment for the CPI-M to attain national recognition has arrived. Ninety plus Basu is well aware of the fact that he may not survive to see another Lok Sabha election.

So he wants the CPI-M should play a proactive role in the Congress-led coalition government. The octogenarian has no second thought on this issue. "People expect us to play a more prominent role in the government. That is why they have overwhelmingly voted for us. We should respect their view and join the Government," said aid Basu.

But politburo members like Sitaram Yechury and Prakash Karat have a different opinion on this issue.

Basu, however, feels that it will be beneficial for the party if it partici-

pates in the day-to-day governance. And he has quite a few supporters.

If Basu is upbeat with the results, the Trinamool Congress is still trying to analyse the cause for their annihilation. Immediately after the results Mamata Bannerjee shed a lot of crocodile's tears to try and emotionalise the rout.

Her problems have compounded, as she cannot simply blame "rigging" as the cause for defeat. Prior to the elections she had been all praise for the steps taken by the Election Commission to prevent rigging.

Now, she has no other option but to say that elections have been fair. She has tried to bring up the topic of "rigging and terror" unleashed by the CPI-M. But the media and the voters are not buying that. Presently, however, her main cause of concern is the possible disintegration that the Trinamool Congress is facing.

Quite a few leaders of the party have already started sending feelers to the Congress for a possible "comeback".

MYANMAR JUNTA SAYS Convention to proceed without opposition

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's ruling junta said yesterday it would proceed with next week's constitutional convention despite a boycott by the pro-democracy opposition which it said had made "unreasonable demands".

The National League for Democracy (NLD) said Friday it could not attend the forum starting Monday while the junta kept its leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her deputy Tin Oo under house arrest, and ignored other key demands.

But the military government said in a statement that "in the interests of national unity" it would push ahead with the convention, the first step in its so-called "roadmap to democracy".

"The NLD has opted to reject the convention when the authorities were doing their utmost to satisfy their wishes and seeking their patience and understanding for the circumstances under which U Tin Oo and Daw Aung San Suu were obliged to be kept for the present," it said.

Israel hits Gaza militant targets

BBC ONLINE

Israeli helicopters have carried out a series of missile attacks in the Gaza Strip against the Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad.

The group says it set a recent ambush that killed five Israeli troops.

In the southern Rafah refugee camp, a missile hit the home of senior leader Mohammed Sheikh Khalil.

Earlier, missiles hit buildings used by the group in Gaza City, in what Islamic Jihad says was an attempt to assassinate another of its leaders.

No-one was reported killed in either attack, but Islamic Jihad has threatened what it said would be earthquake-like retaliation.

The latest Israeli strikes come at the end of a week in which 13 Israeli soldiers and about 30 Palestinians were killed in fighting in the Gaza Strip. Israeli troops have demolished scores of homes in a move they say is designed to expand a buffer zone along the border with Egypt.

The UN agency responsible for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) says more than 1,000 people have already been made homeless by the demolitions.

Spokesman Paul McCann said 88 buildings housing more than 200

families had been destroyed in Rafah.

Israeli officials revealed the plan on Friday, saying it was needed to ensure the protection of troops and prevent the smuggling of weapons.

Meanwhile, Palestinians across the West Bank and Gaza have been preparing to hold demonstrations to mark the Naqba, or catastrophe, their commemoration of the creation of Israel in 1948.

And supporters of Israel's opposition Labour Party will gather in Tel Aviv later in the day to back Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan for a withdrawal from all Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and four in the West Bank.

The Israeli army said the missile attacks in Gaza, which came during the night and at noon local time (0900 GMT), were aimed at offices being used to co-ordinate terrorist activity.

Afterwards, the Israeli army said that the building had been used to store weapons and make explosives. Mr Sheikh Khalil, who is known to be a leading figure in the military wing of Islamic Jihad was in his house immediately before the noon attack, but reportedly heard the helicopter and fled.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians walk amid the rubble of their houses that were demolished by the Israeli army in the southern Gaza Strip refugee camp of Rafah near the Egyptian border. More than 1,000 Palestinians have been made homeless in Rafah after two days of intensive demolition activity by the Israeli army.



PHOTO: AFP

Members of the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps (ICDC) frisk two Iraqi men at a checkpoint outside Baghdad's Shia neighbourhood of Sadr City yesterday. ICDC and US forces were distributing leaflets in Sadr City urging people to sell their weapons to the US-led coalition. They offer 25 US dollar for a Kalashnikov and 200 dollar for a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG).

US forces move to limit interrogation tactics

AP, Washington

Amid the uproar over the abuse of Iraqi prisoners, the senior US commander in Iraq is moving to eliminate most coercive interrogation tactics.

The Pentagon says Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez is letting military intelligence chiefs know that their requests for such methods, which had been allowed with specific permission, will be turned down. Sanchez issued the order Thursday.

In its most comprehensive outline to date of methods that interrogators can use to question detained Iraqis, the Pentagon said Friday that Sanchez had approved 25 requests to isolate prisoners for interrogation since mid-October.

He had turned down three requests to put prisoners into uncomfortable positions to get them to talk, the officials said, speaking

on condition of anonymity.

Senior military officials also insisted that all interrogation techniques that have been approved have been allowable under international law.

Seven soldiers are facing military charges related to the abuse and humiliation of prisoners captured by the now-infamous photographs at Abu Ghraib, a prison in Baghdad. The soldiers and their lawyers have said military intelligence officials running the interrogations told military police assigned as guards to abuse the prisoners to make interrogations easier.

Direct questioning without any physical contact and other such techniques are still permitted without approval from high-level officers, said the officials, who help draft and approve such rules in Iraq.

Until Thursday, more stressful techniques were allowed with

Sanchez's approval, such as depriving detainees of sleep for more than 72 hours or forcing them into "stress positions" making them kneel or stand uncomfortably for more than 45 minutes.

Sanchez told military intelligence officers Thursday that he would not approve any stressful techniques other than putting prisoners alone in cells or in segregated units with only a small number of other detainees.

Critics say the interrogation rules, first laid out in September after a visit to Iraq by the then-commander of the prison for terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, amounted to a green light for abuse. Pentagon officials heatedly deny that, saying prisoners always are treated under guidelines of the Geneva Conventions.

How will history remember Vajpayee's achievements?

BBC ONLINE

Before the general election, few people thought they would soon be analysing the legacy of the prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Yet on Thursday, the man many thought was sure of a fourth term in office, appeared on TV screens to deliver details of his resignation and, for one last time as premier, list his achievements.

Economic development, national unity and a "historic peace process" with Pakistan, he said, had left India better off than when he took office.

"My party and alliance have lost, but India has won," Vajpayee said. Then with the philosophical words, "victory and defeat are a part of life which are to be viewed with equanimity" and a farewell "Jai Hind" (Hail India), he was gone.

Perhaps it is too soon for Indians to properly assess Vajpayee's achievements, but there are many who would agree with his own verdict.

Vir Sanghvi, writing in the Times of India, said the premier's exit was not the one he expected and not the one he deserved.

"Regardless of the circumstances of the Bharatiya Janata Party's shock defeat on Thursday, history will remember Atal Behari Vajpayee as one of India's finest prime ministers," Sanghvi wrote.

This would not have been the verdict after his first term in office in 1996 - it lasted less than a fortnight.

Nor even after the second, which began in 1998 and lasted 18 months.

But his third lasted the full term and was achieved as the head of a multi-party coalition.

It was the first time since independence that a non-Congress party government had completed its term.

For many observers, Vajpayee's successful steering of what appeared to be an unwieldy coalition was his biggest achievement.

It also changed the complexion of Indian politics. It is now widely believed that India can no longer be ruled by a single party and that only a multi-party coalition can truly represent the people of this vast democracy.

A traditional war cry in elections is, "It's the economy, stupid", but for Vajpayee the health of India's economy was a double-edged sword.



Roh apologises, takes blame for political crisis

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun yesterday took responsibility for two months of instability triggered by his impeachment and apologised for corruption scandals involving his aides.

In his first public appearance following a Constitutional Court's ruling Friday to overturn the impeachment motion against him, the 57-year-old leader blamed his own failings for the political paralysis that followed the March 12 parliamentary vote to remove him from office.

He indicated that with his powers restored, his presidential style would change and he would take a more conciliatory approach to critics.

"My beloved people, how much you had to pass through over the past two months. All that stemmed from my failings," Roh said in a speech televised nationwide from the presidential Blue House.

France, Russia, Canada have no plans to send troops to Iraq

AFP, Washington

France, Russia and Canada said Friday they would participate in the reconstruction of war-torn Iraq but would not send troops, even after an interim authority takes control from June 30.

The foreign ministers of the three countries made the statement on the sidelines of a meeting of the Group of Eight industrialised powers here.

"Well, the issue of French troops on the ground is a nonquestion from our point of view," French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier said.

"And I can say and will say again here that there will be no French troops in Iraq, not tomorrow, nor later," he told a joint news conference after a meeting of the foreign minis-

ters that was dominated by Iraq.

Barnier said any "exit strategy" in the Iraqi crisis was a political approach and not a military solution.

"I have said this already, and I'm saying once again that there will be no French troops, not here, not now, not tomorrow," the minister repeated.

But Barnier said France was prepared to help in the "political and economic reconstruction" of Iraq.

The whole reconstruction process would start as soon as possible, in parallel with the establishment of the interim authority on June 30 and pick up speed when a fully legitimate government is elected in January, he said.