



PHOTO: AFP

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Venkaiah Naidu (L) addresses a press conference at the BJP headquarters in New Delhi yesterday while BJP general secretary Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi (R) looks on. Naidu said India's ousted Hindu nationalists and their allies would boycott the swearing-in ceremony of Italian-born Sonia Gandhi as prime minister to "express people's sentiments." But outgoing Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee would attend the ceremony in "keeping with the tradition."

LABOUR TOP BRASS SAY

Embattled Blair to stay in office

AFP, London

Top Labour ministers insisted Sunday that Britain's prime minister would not step down amid mounting criticism over Iraq, as the defence secretary dismissed media reports that the number of British troops in the war-torn country could be doubled.

"The prime minister has led and continues to lead and will lead for the future one of the most successful administrations for the last 60 years," Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told BBC Radio 4.

"Now, there are difficulties but people misunderstand our Prime Minister Tony Blair if they somehow think he is going to run away from his responsibilities because there is a lot of speculation in the newspapers."

Blair's popularity has been severely dented by Britain's involvement in the US-led occupation of Iraq, where soldiers from both countries have allegedly tortured Iraqi detainees and have failed to impose security and peace.

Israel hits Gaza, isolates Rafah for demolitions

US urged to halt home destruction

REUTERS, Gaza

Israel carried out air strikes Palestinian faction targets in Gaza City yesterday and sealed off Rafah refugee camp after saying it would raze hundreds of buildings to widen a border strip prone to militant attacks.

Shaken by ambushes that killed 13 soldiers in Gaza last week, the worst blow to Israeli forces since 2002, the army was preparing not only to flatten homes it believed were gun nests but possibly digging a moat to help block arms smugglers.

But Israel's clampdown has drawn flak from its key US ally as thousands of Palestinians could be made homeless, and from Palestinian officials contending that it contradicted Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to "disengage" from occupied Gaza.

UN relief officials said more than 1,000 Rafah refugees were already in the street after the army bulldozed about 80 homes in initial demolitions last week, temporarily halted by a Supreme Court injunction before it was lifted on Sunday.

The ruling panicked hundreds of Palestinians to flee homes near the "Philadelpi" buffer strip along Gaza's southern border with Egypt. Early Monday Israeli tanks and troop carriers moved in to cut off access routes to Rafah, witnesses said.

Israeli helicopters fired missiles at an office of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement -- which includes a militant group involved in last week's ambushes -- and another faction in Gaza City in the north of the territory.

Medics said the Fatah building and offices of the Democratic Front were empty and there were no

casualties in the missile strikes, the latest in a series since last week's ambushes.

Militants killed six soldiers with a bomb laid in the path of their troop carrier in Gaza City on May 10. They blew up five more soldiers the same way in the Rafah corridor the next day. Another two soldiers were killed by sniper fire on Friday.

Meanwhile, Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei appealed to the White House Monday for intervention to stop Israel's threatened mass demolition of homes in a Gaza refugee camp as panicked residents fled.

Qurei's plea at a Berlin meeting with US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice -- easing Palestinians' diplomatic isolation from Washington -- came after Israel sealed off Rafah refugee camp with armored forces to prepare for the crackdown.

Blasts outside HSBC branches in Turkey

AFP, Ankara

Three homemade bombs exploded overnight in front of branches of the British bank HSBC in Ankara and Istanbul, on the eve of a visit here by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, local media reported yesterday.

Two devices exploded at around 10:30 pm (1930 GMT) outside HSBC branches in Istanbul, the biggest city in the country, causing minor damage, the NTV and CNN-Turk television channel reported.

A third homemade bomb exploded noisily, but without great force, towards midnight outside another HSBC branch in central Ankara, the Anatolia news agency reported.

That blast blew out windows in the building and caused minor damage to cars parked near the bank, according to an AFP photographer at the scene. There were no reports of any injuries from the explosions.

Police beefed-up security at other HSBC branches in Ankara.

THE TIMES REPORTS

US, Britain plan to speed up Iraq pullout

AFP, London

London and Washington are drawing up plans to pull coalition forces out of Iraq "as soon as possible", a senior British source was quoted as saying in The Times yesterday.

"We are not about to cut and run. But the aim is to have a strategy which enables the Iraqis to take control as quickly as possible and allows us to leave as quickly, as soon as possible," the anonymous source told the influential daily paper.

The "gear change" has been agreed by London and Washington, according to the source.

Elsewhere The Times said that the deployment of additional British troops in Iraq was being delayed to avoid the impression that they were a direct

replacement for Spanish troops who are withdrawing following a change of government in Madrid.

British Defence Minister Geoff Hoon said Sunday that there was no need to seek parliamentary approval for troop reinforcements.

"Clearly if the commanding officer on the ground says at very short notice we require extra troops because of some significant deterioration in the security it would be irresponsible of me not to agree to that request and agree to it very promptly," Hoon said.

The defence minister dismissed a press report on Sunday that Britain may double its troop strength in Iraq, currently around 8,000.

"I simply do not know where reports that the UK presence could double have come from," he said.

Most British papers foresee an extra 2,000 British troops being sent to boost the coalition forces in Iraq.

In another report Iraqi interim foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari warned yesterday that any precipitate withdrawal by US-led coalition troops risked sparking civil war.

"A premature departure will mean disaster," Zebari told a conference on the political future of Iraq at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in this Dead Sea resort.

"Division and civil war will materialise if these forces are withdrawn prematurely. They are at the moment the best guarantors for Iraq's unity and .. for preventing regional intervention in Iraqi affairs," said Zebari, who hails from Iraq's long-oppressed Kurdish minority.

Myanmar constitution talks begin without NLD

REUTERS, Yangon

Military-ruled Myanmar kicked off constitutional talks yesterday despite a boycott by the country's main opposition party, led by democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.

The absence of the Nobel peace laureate, whose National League for Democracy (NLD) won elections in 1990 by a landslide but was denied power by the military, has stripped the convention of what little legitimacy it had, diplomats say.

The NLD opted out of the talks on Friday after the junta refused to free Suu Kyi and NLD vice chairman Tin Oo from a year of house arrest.

A total of 1,076 delegates from all walks of life in the impoverished Southeast Asian nation -- most of them handpicked by the government -- turned up for the talks in a tightly guarded military compound about 30 miles from the capital.

ARUNDHATI WARNS

Campaign against Sonia not over yet

New govt should try Modi for Gujarat riots

AFP, New Delhi

Novelist Arundhati Roy rejoices that Sonia Gandhi, who "doesn't play the princess," humbled the man who berated her and warns she will face a "blatant game" from a corporate world unmoved by the electoral verdict of India's poor.

Roy said she had been "exhaling slowly" since Sonia triumphed over all polls and a smear campaign by the ruling Hindu nationalists to become the frontrunner as India's prime minister heading a left-of-centre coalition.

"I'm always very happy with people who are slightly unsure of themselves. She has taken so many risks, and yet she's so unsure of herself and careful," Roy told AFP. "She doesn't play the princess."

But Roy, a leading activist and the only non-expatriate Indian to win the Booker Prize, warned that Sonia

had a tough road ahead against an establishment which the novelist believes firmly sided with the right-wing.

Roy noted that much of the media attention since Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's shock defeat had focused on the wild fluctuations of the Sensex, the benchmark index of the Mumbai Stock Exchange.

"It's almost like a set-up," Roy said. "It's as though you're mocking the electorate and bludgeoning this government by saying, 'Are you aware that the Sensex has fallen? Are you going to pull back on reforms?' So they're forced to say no."

"It's a blatant game. If you look at the television coverage, I keep on seeing them calling people from the stock market. But I haven't seen one farmer asked, 'Why did you vote for this government?'"



Arundhati Roy

"The kind of inequality between rural and urban areas was higher than it has been in the past 50 years or more, and obviously it was a vote to change those economic policies which the corporate world including the corporate media simply doesn't want to see," Roy said.

Arundhati Roy hopes the new left-leaning government puts on trial the Hindu nationalist leader of Gujarat state who is accused of abetting bloody anti-Muslim riots.

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi has been a rising star in the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), flying around India in the election campaign on an ultimately unsuccessful mission to stir up support among the Hindu majority.

Human rights groups accuse Modi's administration of doing little -- and at times actively encouraging -- vigilante violence that killed 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, in his state in 2002.

"From the chief minister downwards they must be tried, and it must be made public. That would do an immense amount of good to the public psyche. It would be just the most wonderful thing," Roy told AFP.

"And it must not be done in a cheap manner of political revenge. It must be done properly," said Roy, who won the 1997 Booker Prize for her novel "The God of Small Things".



PHOTO: AFP

A young girl walks among the wreckage of a building after a bomb blast in Kathmandu yesterday. The bomb was planted by Maoist rebels at a Labour Court building and the explosion caused huge material damages but no casualties. More than 9,500 people have died in Nepal since 1996 when the Maoists declared a "people's war" to establish a communist republic.

CIA was wrong on Iraqi 'mobile labs': Powell

REUTERS, Washington

The US Central Intelligence Agency was wrong about Iraq's purported pre-war mobile biological weapons laboratories, a key part of the case about suspected weapons of mass destruction, Secretary of State Colin Powell said Sunday.

"I'm very concerned," he said in reply to a question on the NBC programme "Meet the Press" about having used claims in a UN Security Council speech now known to have been "inaccurate and discredited."

"When I made that presentation in February 2003, it was based on the best information that the Central Intelligence Agency made available to me," he said.

Last month, Powell described the assertions he made about the purported labs as "the most dramatic" element of his Feb. 5, 2003, speech. He acknowledged on April 2 the information was suspect but stopped short of drawing any public conclusions.

In his comments on NBC, Powell went further.

"It turned out that the sourcing was inaccurate and wrong and, in some cases, deliberately misleading. And for that, I am disappointed, and I regret it," he said.

SUPPORT FOR CONGRESS Communists unveil list of demands

AFP, New Delhi

The Communist Party of India (CPI), a key ally of India's incoming Congress-led government, yesterday unveiled its list of demands which it said should be part of the coalition's common agenda for government.

While the CPI has decided to stay out of government and instead support Congress leader Sonia Gandhi's coalition from outside, its membership of the coalition remains important for the government to survive.

Should it pull its 10 MPs from the coalition and take the 43 fellow leftist MPs from the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) along with it, Gandhi's government would likely collapse.

Follows are the policy initiatives listed by CPI general secretary A.B. Bardhan at a news conference Monday:

- Top priority should be given to rural and agriculture; process of land reforms should be completed; investments should be made in the farm sector to help farmers.

- No question of reducing subsidies. In fact, they should be enhanced wherever possible.

- If possible free power should be given to farmers or at a subsidised

rate.

- No unscientific, unauthorised, unwarranted talk of linking of river waters.

- No increase in the price of kerosene and if possible, prices should be brought down.

- Quantitative Restrictions (QRs) on farm products should be removed and customs duties on these products reviewed.

- Privatisation of profit-making public companies should be halted and reversed. For other public companies, efforts should be made for a turnaround. The ministry of disinvestment is an anachronism, it should go, it has no function.

- Labour laws should be revised. Right to strike should be given back.

- School textbooks that were distorted by the government should be corrected by a review committee.

- Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) should be repealed. Those held under POTA and against whom no charges have been filed for six months should be released.

- On foreign policy, friendship with all countries but no special relationship with the United States. No subservience to US imperialism and aggression.

- Support of the cause of the Palestinian people.

China vows to crush move for Taiwan's independence

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday vowed to "crush" Taiwanese independence moves "at any cost" just days before President Chen Shui-bian is sworn in for a new four-year term, but it also offered to reward the island if it tows Beijing's line.

Taiwan's leaders must choose between recognising the island as part of the mainland or "following their separatist agenda to cut Taiwan from the rest of China and, in the end, meet their own destruction by playing with fire," Beijing said in a tough statement carried by the official Xinhua news agency.

The state-run China Daily, on its website, put it in plain terms: "Taiwan's leaders at crossroads -- peace or war."

While the rhetoric was fiery, the statement also spelled out incentives such as direct trade, transport links and increased access to mainland markets if Chen fell in line and acknowledged that Taiwan was part of 'one China'.

Taiwan's international status could also be addressed as a reward for good behavior, the Communist Party's Office for Taiwan Affairs and the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council said in a statement.

Lawmakers told of PoW abuse months ago

AP, Hagerstown

Two months before pictures of Iraqi prisoner abuse became public, the family of one accused soldier wrote to 14 members of Congress that "something went wrong" involving "mistreatment of PoWs" at Abu Ghraib prison.

Separately, a suspended Army officer in Iraq wrote to Republican Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania that he was being unfairly punished after "pictures of naked prisoners" were discovered. He sent the letter six weeks before the CBS program "60 Minutes II" first broadcast photographs of the prisoners on April 28.

The strongest reply any of them got was a note saying what they already knew that the Army was investigating, according to documents released last week by

Specter's office and the family of Army Reserve Staff Sgt. Ivan L. "Chip" Frederick.

Frederick, of the Maryland-based 372nd Military Police Company, faces a general court-martial on charges of conspiracy to maltreat detainees, dereliction of duty, maltreatment of detainees and wrongfully committing an indecent act.

In late February, his family sent letters or e-mails to 11 Democrats on the Senate Armed Services Committee, plus three of their local congressional members and Virginia Gov. Mark Warner, seeking information on Frederick's status, said Frederick's uncle, William W. Lawson, of Newburg, W.Va.

A Feb. 23 letter from Lawson to Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV of West Virginia said Frederick was relieved of prison-guard duty without expla-

nation Jan. 14, two days before the Army publicly announced a criminal investigation of alleged prisoner mistreatment.

"At some point, something went wrong at the prison related to mistreatment of PoWs," Lawson wrote.

Rockefeller responded on March 2 that the Army could not act on the request unless it came from Frederick's wife or mother.

Mark Ferrell, a spokesman for Rockefeller, said the letters sent on behalf of Frederick were "consistent with what had been in the news about a Pentagon inquiry into prisoner abuse but gave no indication that widespread abuse existed." Still, he said, several people on Rockefeller's staff have had telephone conversations with Lawson since receiving his letter in February.

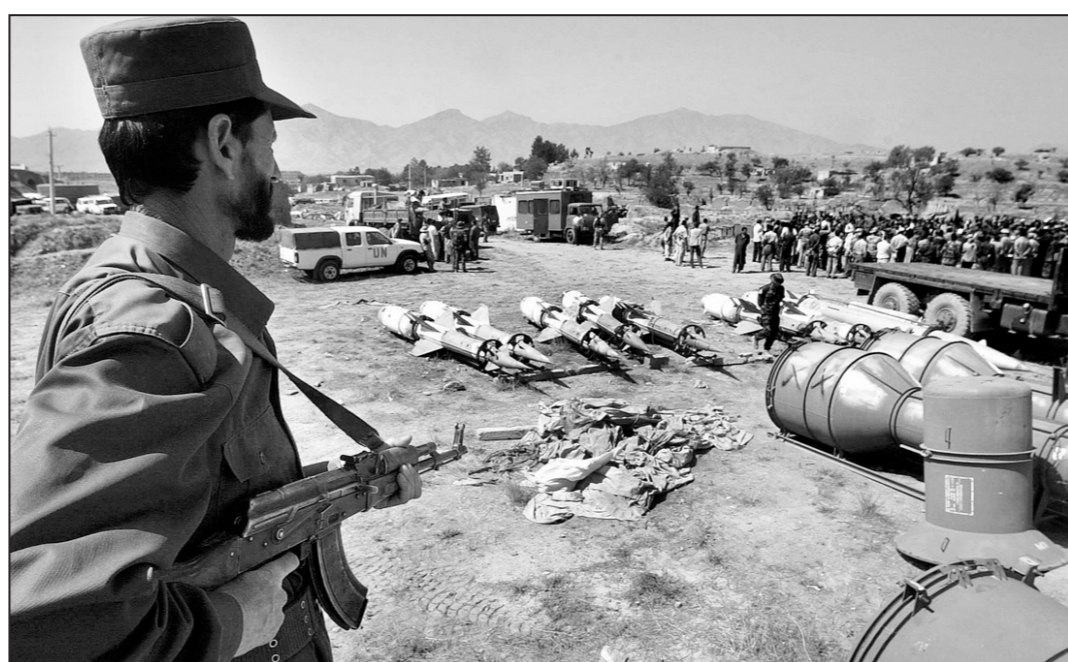


PHOTO: AFP

An Afghan policeman keeps vigil during the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration process (DDR) on the outskirts of Kabul yesterday. War-torn Afghanistan officially launched a disarmament campaign declaring there would be "no exceptions" to the national drive, which began in pilot form last October, to demobilise tens of thousands of irregular troops loyal to powerful warlords.