

BJP rules out change of guard in Gujarat

PTI, Gandhinagar

Refuting reports that Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi has 'threatened' to resign in the wake of brewing dissidence among the MLAs, the ruling BJP yesterday categorically ruled out any change in leadership in the state.

"There is no question (of change of guard) and no partyman had made any such demand", Agriculture Minister and state BJP General Secretary Bupendrasinh Chudasama said, while denying that any discussion was held about change of leadership.

Asked about the several rounds of meetings between senior BJP leaders and legislators, Chudasama said these meetings were only an attempt to keep the party together and analyse the post-political scenario.

Chudasama said these MLAs were "only venting out their feelings" but refused to elaborate when sought a detailed reply, saying "We will say everything regarding representations of MLAs at an appropriate time".

New govt to step up focus on education

'Credible' Indian nuclear programme to go on

REUTERS, AFP, New Delhi

Congress-led government will not privatise profit-making state-run companies but would selectively sell stakes in loss-making state-owned firms, the new administration's policy agenda says.

"The United Progressive Alliance will not pursue privatisation of the Navratna (nine jewels) firms and profit-making public sector units. But privatisation of loss-making state firms will be on a case-by-case basis," said the document seen by Reuters yesterday.

The Navratnas are the nine large, profitable state-run firms in the core sectors of oil, power and

heavy engineering. Parts of the Common Minimum Programme seen by Reuters said the Government planned to increase spending on education to six per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and encourage foreign investment in the hydrocarbon sector.

Interest rates would favour pensioners and senior citizens, the document said.

India also planned to talk with Pakistan on all issues on a sustained basis, it added.

The new agenda also said state banks would get managerial autonomy.

AFP adds: India's new left-

leaning ruling coalition said yesterday it remained committed to keeping a "credible" nuclear weapons programme, but believed in a nuclear-free world and peace with rival Pakistan.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's coalition, known as the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), defeated the Hindu nationalist-led government, which in 1998 carried out shock nuclear tests, in polls this month. Pakistan carried out its own tests within days.

"The UPA government is committed to maintaining a credible nuclear weapons programme while at the same time it will evolve demonstrable and verifiable confidence-

building measures with its nuclear neighbours," the coalition's governing agenda said.

It added: "It (the government) will take a leadership role in promoting universal nuclear disarmament and working for a nuclear-weapons-free world."

Reiterating statements by Singh and his cabinet, the governing agenda said the new administration would maintain the current peace process with Pakistan launched by the previous government.

"Dialogue with Pakistan on all issues will be pursued systematically on a sustained basis," it said.



Congress President Sonia Gandhi and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) attend a prayer ceremony at Shanti Van, the memorial of former Indian Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru, in New Delhi Wednesday. Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress President Sonia Gandhi paid their homage to the late Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on the occasion of his 40th death anniversary.



Iraqi boys play in front of a mural depicting the Statue of Liberty (L) and a painting copied from a widely published photograph taken in the US-run Abu Ghraib prison showing a hooded Iraqi prisoner, in the Shia Muslim suburb of Sadr City, in Baghdad yesterday. Radical Shia Muslim leader Moqtada Sadr has agreed to withdraw his militia from Najaf if US troops follow suit, in a potential breakthrough to one of the most intractable problems in Iraq before the handover to sovereignty on June 30.

BJP asks governors not to quit

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

The BJP has informally told Governors appointed during the NDA regime not to tender their resignations in the hope that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) will follow the convention of not changing Governors midway and may allow them to complete their terms.

The BJP feels a convention has been established since HD Deve Gowda became Prime Minister that the ruling government at the centre would not force resignation of governors appointed by previous governments.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee government, which came to power in 1998, did not change Governors before they completed their terms.

The Congress does not appear to be in a hurry to change governors. In fact, it does not have too many senior party leaders to fill the vacan-

cies. Names which are being discussed include Motilal Vora, Mohsina Kidwai, ML Fotedar, Balram Jakhar, Vasant Sathe, Buta Singh and K Karunakaran.

Already the posts of Governors in Kerala and Madhya Pradesh are vacant due to the deaths of Sikander Bakht and Ram Prakash Gupta, and the Delhi Lt Governor, Vijai Kapoor, has already resigned. There will be some vacancies in June.

However, the Congress may be under the pressure of the Left parties and the Rashtriya Janta Dal to change governors such as Madan Lal Khurana (Rajasthan), Vishnu Kant Shashtri (Uttar Pradesh), Kailaspati Mishra (Gujarat) and Kedar Nath Sahani (Goa) whose closeness with the BJP and the RSS is well known. Madan Lal Khurana was reportedly keen to put in his papers as he wanted to become active in Delhi politics.

Indo-Israel defence ties to continue: Pranab

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

India's close defence ties with Israel could continue regardless of the sniping by members of the Congress-led coalition, the defence minister, Pranab Mukherjee, said yesterday.

Asked about the questions raised by a senior leader of one of the Leftist parties about India's ties with Israel, Mukherjee said: "Running a coalition government is a problem... But whatever is for the safety and security of the country will be done. I do not visualise a problem from that point."

Israel is one of India's close collaborators and supplies a lot of defence equipment. These include big-ticket items like the Phalcon radars for the airborne

warning aircraft to Barak anti-missile missiles and a large variety of sensors and electronic equipment. The defence forces are buying unmanned aerial vehicles, aerostat radars and special missiles from Israeli firms.

Speaking to reporters today, the defence minister said cross border terrorism was the biggest threat and the menace had to be fought. Meanwhile, talks would continue and efforts would be made at the political level as well.

On the NDA regime bringing George Fernandes back into the Union Cabinet, he said it was improper as the Tehelka commission of inquiry was yet to submit its report. He added that at least some defence deals could be

looked at. The government would be transparent and if there were specific charges, there would be

inquiries. He also added there was no need to panic. Speaking about deals in the pipeline, he said they could reassessed depending on how far the issue had gone.

Asked about the continuing personnel problems in the Indian Air Force, he said the issue had not been placed before him as yet. He also accepted there were problems about resources and their proper utilisation.

He said he would look at integration of the three armed forces and would consider appointing a chief of defence staff.

Replying to charges about atrocities on civilians by army men, he said there could be one or two black sheep but there was a proper system of reporting and taking action on these issues.

Sharon revises his Gaza pullout plan

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, bolstered by reports that he will avoid prosecution for corruption, on Sunday will unveil his revamped Gaza Strip withdrawal plan to his cabinet, where aides say he is likely to win a tight vote.

Public radio reported that ministers were to receive written drafts of the proposal for their review on Thursday, three days before the crucial weekly cabinet meeting.

The new plan calls for a phased military pullout as well as the evacuation of 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and a few in the northern West Bank.

Sharon got much-needed good news when Israeli media reported that Attorney General Menahem Mazuz would opt in mid-June not to indict him in connection with a lingering corruption scandal due to lack of evidence.

Although sources close to the inquiry said no final decision had

been made, Mazuz was leaning toward closing the case, in which Sharon and his son Gilad were suspected of accepting bribes from influential contractor David Appel for help in securing a Greek property deal.

Such a decision would free Sharon from the threat of indictment that has dogged him for months and would likely have forced him to resign.

On the political front, the situation also looks brighter for Sharon ahead of the key cabinet meeting.

Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told military radio that Sharon had clinched the support of "12 or maybe even 13 ministers" in the 23-member cabinet for his so-called "separation plan".

Humiliated on May 2 when his own Likud party rejected his first draft proposal to unilaterally withdraw from Gaza, Sharon has tirelessly worked to convince skeptical ministers to accept the modified plan, which has US backing.

Dixit appointed Indian nat'l security advisor

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Seasoned diplomat and India's former Foreign Secretary J N Dixit has been appointed to the powerful post of the country's National Security advisor.

A former Deputy High Commissioner to Bangladesh soon after its liberation, Dixit had handled some very sensitive assignments like being India's high commissioner to Sri Lanka and Pakistan in the eighties and early nineties before returning to become the Foreign Secretary when the Congress government headed by P V Narasimha Rao was in power.

Dixit, who had joined Indian Foreign Service in 1958 and joined Congress party two years ago, steps into the shoes of Brajesh Mishra who had occupied the post during the rule of BJP-led government. An official notification said Dixit's appointment is for three years.

Dixit, along with External Affairs Minister and another seasoned diplomat Natwar Singh, was instrumental in drawing up Congress' foreign policy vision in the run up to recent parliamentary elections and is currently the co-chairman of the party's foreign affairs department.

Asia bucking trend towards abolishing death penalty: AI

AFP, London

Asia executed more people in 2003 than the rest of the world combined, human rights watchdog Amnesty International said Wednesday, warning that the region was bucking a trend to abolish capital punishment.

While executions occurred regularly in China and Singapore, Vietnam was fast becoming a chief offender, the Asia report of the rights watchdog's global report said.

As in previous years, respect for the right to life was lacking in many Asia-Pacific countries, the report said.

The region bucked the worldwide trend towards abolition of the death penalty.

Singapore, which the report said was believed to have carried out the highest number of executions per capita in the world since 1994, has

executed more than 400 people since 1991.

China, meanwhile claims to have recorded 1,639 death sentences and 726 executions, although, the report said, the true figures were believed to be much higher.

Although Hanoi had removed a number of executable offences from its statute books, Vietnam saw a surge in death sentences.

According to information collated from official sources, 103 people were sentenced to death in 2003; 63 were convicted of drugs-related charges and four women of fraud. There were reports that 64 were executed, many in public; the true figures were believed to be much higher.

Amnesty was particularly concerned about the situation in Japan where convicted prisoners on death row are not told of when they will be executed.



Iranian President Mohammad Khatami addresses Iran's new conservative-dominated parliament in Tehran yesterday. Iran's new conservative-dominated parliament was sworn in following February elections in which thousands of reformist candidates were banned from running.

'Iran may halt snap IAEA inspection'

REUTERS, Tehran

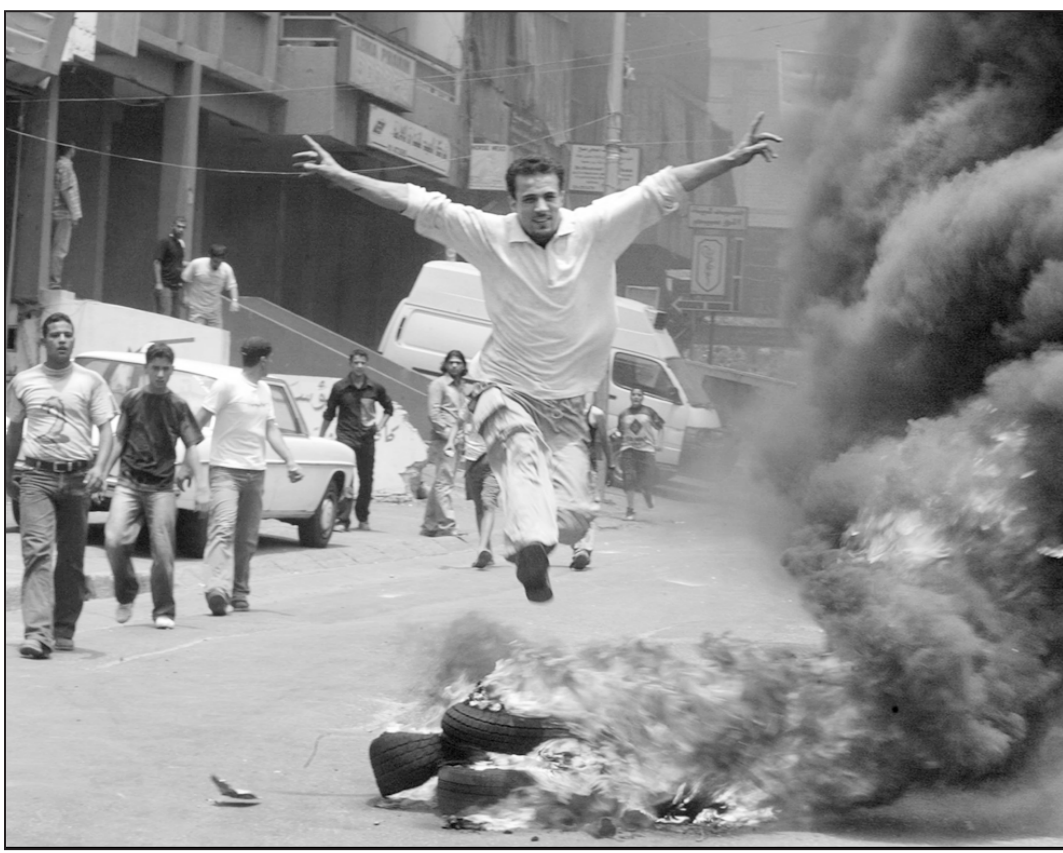
Iran warned the UN's nuclear watchdog yesterday it might resume uranium enrichment and halt snap inspections of its nuclear sites if the body did not recognise Tehran's cooperation at a board meeting next month.

"The (International Atomic Energy Agency's) decision will have an influence on our cooperation with the agency," President Mohammad Khatami told reporters.

"We suspended (uranium) enrichment voluntarily, we implemented the Additional Protocol (on snap inspections) voluntarily, so we can stop that at any time," he said.

Under intense international pressure following revelations it had engaged in an 18-year cover-up of sensitive nuclear research, Iran agreed last year to halt uranium enrichment activities which can be used to make bomb-grade material.

Iran has also signed and agreed to implement the Additional Protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) allowing short-notice, intrusive inspections of its nuclear facilities.



A Lebanese protester jumps over burning tyres during a demonstration in the Hay al-Sellom neighbourhood in the southern suburbs of Beirut yesterday. Lebanese troops shot and killed three protestor after firing on stone-throwers in the neighbourhood during the demonstration against high gasoline prices.

Donors to push Lanka to resume peace talks

AFP, Washington

An international donors meeting on Sri Lanka next week is expected to push for a resumption of peace talks between the Sri Colombo and Tamil Tiger rebels, the US State Department said Wednesday.

The meeting in Brussels will be among Norway, Japan, the European Union and the United States, which are leading efforts to drum up financial aid for Sri Lanka's peace drive.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said they would review assistance efforts, discuss humanitarian and basic reconstruction aid to war-devastated areas, and express support for a resumption of peace talks.

The Brussels meeting of the donor co-chairs of the Tokyo Conference on Reconstruction and Development of Sri Lanka will be hosted by the European Union's External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten.

Boucher said Deputy Secretary of State Richard

Armitage will represent the United States at the talks.

There has been no major breakthrough since the Norwegian-brokered peace negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were suspended since April 2003.

Sri Lanka's main financial backer, Japan, sent special envoy Yasushi Akashi last week to help jumpstart the negotiations, but he ended his four-day visit saying no one should expect quick results.

Chief Tiger negotiator Anton Balasingham had raised peace hopes by announcing earlier this month that a date for resumption of talks could be made "in a day or two."

But on Wednesday, the Tigers insisted on an interim administration to run their own affairs before discussing any final peace deal and rejected Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's call to discuss "core issues" along with their proposal for self-rule.