

VAJPAYEE ADMITS

Gujarat riots contributed to BJP defeat

PTI, AFP, Kullu

Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee yesterday admitted for the first time that Gujarat riots were one of the reasons for BJP's defeat in the Lok Sabha elections.

"It is very difficult to say what are all the reasons for the defeat (of BJP) in the elections... But one impact of the violence was we lost the elections," he told reporters on his arrival in Kullu for a week-long sojourn.

He was asked whether BJP lost the elections due to Gujarat riots.

He said the sentiments of the people during the Gujarat riots were exploited by the opposition at that time.

"They (Opposition) tried to reap political benefits out of it. But I don't blame them. This is politics and such things happen here," he said.

Vajpayee said whatever had happened in Gujarat was unfortu-

nate and had been condemned.

"I am confident that the people of the country have decided that such a blood-bath will not be allowed to take place anywhere in future,"

He said it was necessary to take steps to prevent such incidents from occurring again.

Asked why he did not become the leader of opposition, the former Prime Minister said it was good that LK Advani has taken up that responsibility.

"I was the leader earlier, now it is Advani. We share our work and responsibilities".

To a question whether he was ready to become the Prime Minister next time, he said, "I do not know what will happen then. Sonia Gandhi is not the Prime Minister, but she is the supremo of the Congress. But that has not in any way affected her work".

More than 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, died in the February 2002

riots, with human rights groups accusing the BJP-led Gujarat state government of turning a blind eye to the violence.

The unrest was triggered by the burning of a train compartment in which 59 Hindu activists and pilgrims were killed.

Vajpayee added: "We have all agreed, and I am sure the nation will also agree, that such an incident like the Gujarat riots should not be allowed to happen anywhere else."

Last month, Soli Sorabjee, who was legal adviser to Vajpayee's government, said the ex-premier was "anguished" over the Hindu-Muslim bloodshed but indecisive due to political compulsions from his right-wing base.

Vajpayee had been under pressure to dismiss Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi for his inaction over the rioting but the state leader was supported by hardliners within the BJP.

Most Americans now believe Iraq war unjustified

AFP, Washington

A majority of US voters no longer believe the war in Iraq was justified, but even more reject the idea of laying down a deadline for the withdrawal of American troops, according to a poll published Friday in The Los Angeles Times.

Fifty-three percent of those surveyed said they did not feel the situation in Iraq had merited war, while 43 percent said it had -- numbers essentially reversed since the same question was asked in November and March last year.

At the same time, however, 73 percent of those polled said they were opposed to the US administration fixing a specific date for pulling US troops out of Iraq.

And 41 percent said any decision on whether or not to reduce or increase the number of American soldiers should be left to the Iraq interim government that will assume sovereignty on June 30.



India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) places rose petals as he offers prayers at the Bangla Sahib Gurudwara Sikh Temple in New Delhi yesterday. Singh described bloody sectarian riots in the western state of Gujarat two years ago and anti-Sikh clashes in New Delhi in 1984 as "painful", as he called for communal harmony.

Blair faces party anguish over polls defeat

REUTERS, London

A humbled Tony Blair returns to Britain yesterday to answer critics in his own party after voter backlash against his support for war in Iraq brought an unprecedented trouncing in local elections.

Blair's aides tried to put the best possible spin on the election defeat while the prime minister attended the funeral of former US President Ronald Reagan in Washington.

But more than 460 Labor officials were voted out of local government, and Blair will have to convince party members with seats in national parliament that they will not suffer the same fate in a general election likely next year.

"I'd like to say I'm sorry to the (local) councillors who've lost their seats," Blair told reporters in Washington before heading home. "I think Iraq has been a shadow over our support."

But he said he was as determined as ever to stay on, and expected Iraq would become less of a liability as news improved with a UN-endorsed plan to restore sovereignty.



Former first lady Nancy Reagan (L) Patti Davis (R) and Ron Reagan stand over the casket of former President Ronald Reagan during the interment ceremony at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library on Friday in Simi Valley, California.

Reagan laid to rest

AFP, Simi Valley

Ronald Reagan was laid to rest late Friday in a sunset ceremony at his presidential library in California, following a stately funeral service in Washington at which world leaders paid glowing tribute to the Cold War warrior.

In an emotional end to a long day, the late president's 82-year-old widow, Nancy Reagan, finally lost her composure as she broke down and rested her head on his mahogany coffin, stroking it and whispering final words.

The ceremony, held on a hilltop overlooking the Simi Valley and Pacific Ocean, capped six days of mourning following Reagan's death Saturday at the age of 93 after a 10-year battle against Alzheimer's disease.

Earlier in the day, President George W. Bush, his father, former president George Bush and the former British and Canadian leaders, Margaret Thatcher and Brian Mulroney, had all paid their own tributes to Reagan at a regal service in the Washington National Cathedral.

'India has not changed its mind on sending troops to Iraq'

AFP, New Delhi

India's position that it will not send troops to Iraq has not changed, an official said, clarifying a statement by Foreign Minister Natwar Singh that New Delhi could review its stand.

"There is neither any proposal nor is India considering it," Congress Party spokesman Anand Sharma told reporters in New Delhi late Friday, when asked if there was any change in the government's policy of not sending peacekeeping troops to Iraq.

India's Marxists, who are lending key support to the new government, had demanded that Singh explain his "ambiguous" comments that it was too early for the new Indian government to rule out sending troops to Iraq.

"The ... government must make it clear that there is no question of sending Indian troops to Iraq to

bolster the American occupation," the Marxists said in a statement.

Singh, a senior member of the Congress party which leads the left-leaning government, was in the United States to attend the funeral of former president Ronald Reagan, but established contact with Secretary of State Colin Powell.

When asked about the possibility of India sending troops under the UN banner to Iraq, Singh told reporters in Washington: "It is premature for me to say aye or nay."

"We are a coalition government, so the matter will have to be discussed by the government and by the cabinet committee on security," the diplomat turned politician added.

Singh also said that the "situation" in Iraq had "changed" after a new UN Security Council resolution on Iraq passed earlier this week.

Pak troops converge on al-Qaeda hideouts

AP, Peshawar

Pakistani troops faced little resistance as they converged on a cluster of suspected al-Qaeda hideouts and a training facility in a remote tribal region near Afghanistan, a senior security official said yesterday.

A US military official said American forces in Afghanistan were closely following the action, and ready to move against any militants who tried to flee across the border.

The offensive focused on three al-Qaeda-linked compounds a training facility, a safe house, and the home of an alleged terror financier near the town of Shakai, about 15 miles west of Wana, the largest town in South Waziristan.

The operation continued Saturday after Pakistani forces used artillery and helicopter gunships Friday against rebels near Shakai.

Manmohan terms past riots 'painful'

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday described bloody sectarian riots in the western state of Gujarat two years ago and anti-Sikh clashes in New Delhi in 1984 as "painful", as he called for communal harmony.

Singh, a member of India's minority Sikh community, made the comments during a visit to a Sikh temple in the Indian capital New Delhi, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

The premier, who was sworn into office on May 22, said he understood the "pain and anguish" of Sikhs who were targeted after India's former prime minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh security bodyguards in October 1984.

Gandhi was shot dead after ordering Indian troops into Sikhism's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple in the northern

Indian state of Punjab in June 1984 to flush out Sikh militants fighting for an independent "Khalistan" state.

Her death triggered revenge attacks in which at least 3,000 Sikhs were massacred on the streets of New Delhi and elsewhere.

Singh, India's first Sikh prime minister, is a member of Gandhi's Congress party, some of whose politicians were accused of inciting the anti-Sikh riots.

The prime minister also expressed sorrow over the riots in Gujarat, which was triggered by the burning of a train compartment in which 59 Hindu activists and pilgrims were killed in February 2002.

More than 2,000 people -- mostly Muslims -- died in subsequent rioting, with human rights groups accusing the Hindu nationalist administration in the state of turning a blind eye to the violence.

'Top US general okayed pressure tactics on Iraqi prisoners'

AFP, Washington

The top US military commander in Iraq approved high pressure tactics used on inmates at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

US Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez approved letting senior officials at Abu Ghraib "use military dogs, temperature extremes, reversed sleep patterns, sensory deprivation, and diets of bread and water on detainees whenever they wished," according to the Post, citing US government documents.

Sanchez borrowed heavily from a list of interrogation tactics used at the detention center at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, according to the Post.

In early September 2003 Sanchez authorized prison officials to use the pressure tactics without having to seek authoriza-

tion from higher-ranking officials outside the prison.

However military officials at the Tampa, Florida headquarters of the US Central Command raised objections to 32 measures that Sanchez had approved.

By October 2004 those measures were ended, and prison officials were to obtain Sanchez's direct approval to use the remaining authorized pressure tactics, the Post reported.

Sanchez will be replaced by a four-star general -- possibly General George Casey, vice chief of staff of the army -- when the transitional Iraqi government takes office on June 30, senior Pentagon officials said in late May.

Pentagon officials said earlier that Sanchez's future would likely be on hold until the investigations are completed, emphasizing it was not a matter of punishment but of command accountability.

No breakthrough in talks with Tigers: Chandrika

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tiger rebels have yet to agree on reviving peace talks, President Chandrika Kumaratunga said yesterday, discounting reports of a breakthrough.

Kumaratunga's office in a statement said that there was no change in her position or of that of the Tamil Tigers on what should be included in an agenda for possible talks, but attempts were under way to reach a compromise.

"She said that the government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) are attempting to work out a compromise with regard to the agenda for the talks," the statement said.

"The two parties are still working out what the next round of peace negotiations should be about."

The statement discounted media reports that Kumaratunga had backed down from her position that the Tigers' self-rule plan

should be part of wider discussions on a final political settlement.

"The LTTE would like the talks to focus only on the proposals to set up an interim (self rule) administration while the government has indicated the need to engage in discussions on a permanent solution to the conflict, while prioritising the need to agree on the structures of the interim administration and on the urgency to set it up," the statement said.

Kumaratunga had previously agreed to discuss the LTTE's proposal for an Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA), which envisages financial and political autonomy for the rebels.

However, she insists that talks on the eventual nature and the shape of a final solution is also taken up in parallel talks, a demand rejected by the LTTE.

The LTTE has rejected the demand that the talks be held on a final settlement and wants talks to focus only on its Interim Self Governing Authority plan.



Anti-riot police with their shields blocked leftist protesters holding a caricature of US President George W. Bush near the US embassy in Manila yesterday. The protesters condemn the US presence in Iraq to coincide with the 106th anniversary declaration of Philippine independence.

McCain rejects Kerry's running mate offer

AP, Washington

Republican Sen. John McCain has personally rejected John Kerry's overtures to join the Democratic presidential ticket and forge a bipartisan alliance against President Bush, officials familiar with the conversations said Friday.

Kerry asked McCain in the last two weeks to consider becoming his running mate, but the Arizona senator said he's not interested, according to a Democratic official who spoke on condition of anonymity because Kerry has insisted that his deliberations be kept private. A second official involved in the discussions confirmed the account and said the Arizona senator made it clear he won't change his mind.

Both officials said Kerry stopped short of formally offering McCain the job, sparing himself an outright rejection that would make his eventual running mate look like a second choice.

"Senator McCain categorically states that he has not been offered the vice presidency by anyone," said McCain's chief of staff, Mark Salter, who would not confirm the officials' account.