

Arunachal CM quits BJP to rejoin Cong

PTI, New Delhi

In a virtual repeat of a Bhajan Lal act in Haryana over two decades ago, Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Gegong Apang yesterday rejoined Congress along with his ministerial colleagues giving a big jolt to the BJP ahead of the Assembly elections in the state.

Apang imitated Lal, who as Chief Minister had led the entire cabinet into the Congress leaving the then Janata Party after Indira Gandhi's return to power in 1980.

Apang and his ministerial colleagues were welcomed to the party fold by AICC media department chairperson Girija Vyas and CWC member Ramesh Chennithala, who is in charge of party affairs in the state.

The longest serving Chief Minister of the state announced his decision to quit BJP and rejoin Congress at a special press conference in New Delhi at the AICC headquarters saying, "In fact, it is a homecoming for all of us. It is the Congress Party alone, which has always had a presence at the grass-root level in Arunachal Pradesh.

Iran steps up capability to deter enemies

IAEA must accept Iran's right to enrich uranium: Khatami

AFP, Tehran

Iran's Defence Minister Ali Shamk-hani said yesterday that the country's "deterrent capabilities" have been stepped up in order to counter "regional enemies".

"Relying on its domestic abilities, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been able to increase its deterrent capabilities against the constant military conspiracy of the regional enemies," Rear Admiral Shamkhani told state television.

He only added that all "ground, air and marine force and missile needs" had been addressed.

In recent weeks there has been a mounting war of words with Israel, which accuses Iran of seeking to develop nuclear weapons. The spat has increased speculation that the Jewish state may attempt to attack Iranian nuclear facilities.

Tensions have also mounted with

Iraq's interim government as well as the United States, amid allegations that Tehran has been supporting unrest in its neighbour.

Shamkhani did not specify who the "enemies" were, but the term is frequently used to refer to Israel and the US.

Meanwhile, the UN nuclear watchdog must accept Iran's right to enrich uranium as part of its civil nuclear programme, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said yesterday.

"We are still hoping that with the negotiations we have had, we will arrive at a logical solution that they recognise our right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes and accept us into the club," the president said.

"After that there will be no problem" between the Islamic republic and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), he added.

The IAEA is due to hold a fresh round

of discussions on Iran's suspect nuclear programme and examine the progress of inspections on September 13.

Under pressure from the IAEA, Iran agreed last year to suspend enriching uranium -- one of the most sensitive parts of the nuclear fuel cycle that can, depending on the level of enrichment, provide both fuel for power stations or for nuclear bombs. But Iran has backed away from a pledge to also suspend its work on other parts of the cycle, resuming the assembly of centrifuges, carrying out uranium conversion and building a heavy water reactor.

The three main European powers -- Britain, France and Germany -- have been pushing Iran to abandon its fuel cycle work altogether, even if such work is technically permitted under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

3 killed in Chechnya pre-polls violence

AFP, Moscow

Three people were killed and at least one hurt in separate incidents, including a raid on a bomb-making cell, in Chechnya, Interfax news agency reported Saturday on the eve of a critical election in the war-torn republic.

In one incident, Chechen security forces conducted a raid "to eliminate a group of guerrillas manufacturing explosive devices" in the republic's Sunzha district, resulting in the deaths of one of the suspects and of a police officer, Interfax said. Separately, a Chechen police investigator named as Lieutenant Ruslan Murtazov was killed when unidentified attackers fired on his car in Chechnya's capital city, Grozny, the report said, quoting an unnamed Chechen interior ministry source.

The violence occurred one day before voters were to go to the polls to elect a new leader for the republic following the assassination last May of the previous leader, Akhmad Kadyrov.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi municipal workers clean up the area of the Imam Ali shrine in the holy city of Najaf yesterday, a day after the three-week standoff between radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr's Mehdi Army militia and US-led Iraqi troops came to an end. The municipality of Najaf was busy trying to clean up the worst of the wreckage, while the fire department received the help of colleagues from the neighbouring cities of Karbala, Hilla, Samawa and Diwaniya.

Najafis return to their demolished homes

Deep resentment towards Sadr's militias

AFP, Najaf

Residents of Najaf's Old City were fuming at the militia loyal to radical Iraqi cleric Moqtada Sadr yesterday as they returned to the ruins of their homes and shops after weeks of intense combat.

While few dared to pronounce the name of the firebrand Shia Muslim leader or his Mehdi Army, which has led a months-old rebellion against US-led occupation forces, most of their ire was not directed at the coalition.

"Look at what they've done to Najaf. Most of these people are not even from here. They represent maybe five percent of the population, yet 70 percent of the Old City is destroyed," said Nadem Eidan.

The 55-year-old sat in front of his charred refrigerator shop on Jadaida street. Part of the roof was collapsed and

most of the facade had crumbled onto the road churned up by tank tracks.

"I don't even know why I'm sitting here. There's nothing left to steal or break in my shop," the dejected man mumbled into his white beard.

On Saturday, Najaf was nothing but a vast field of smoking ruins over a perimeter of a kilometre around the Imam Ali shrine, the epicentre of a bloody weeks-long standoff between the militia and US troops.

As the city woke up free of violence, families shuffled through the rubble and mangled iron scraps to get back to their homes for the first time in days.

Medina street, which saw some of the most fierce fighting, was engulfed in the stench of sewage water and rotting donkey carcasses.

"Why did I even come back? My home is almost untouched but my shop is destroyed, so I am unemployed and

the living conditions are atrocious," said Halim Mohammed Rasool, standing in front of his gutted bakery.

"It's possible to repair it but I can't afford it. The government promised compensation but I'd be surprised if we got anything," said the 40-year-old father of seven.

The municipality of Najaf was busy trying to clean up the worst of the wreckage, while the fire department received the help of colleagues from the neighbouring cities of Karbala, Hilla, Samawa and Diwaniya.

"No matter how hard they try, Najaf will never look the same again," said Rasool's neighbour, Mohammed Masood, as he failed to stop a fire engine speeding down the street to get help removing two unexploded mortar shells inside his demolished hotel.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (2L) administers the oath of office to newly elected Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (R) in Islamabad yesterday. The former finance minister and Musharraf's key loyalist Aziz took the oath of office as the country's new prime minister, one day after his parliamentary election was boycotted by the entire opposition.

FBI probes if US official spied for Israel

AP, Washington

In a spy investigation that could strain US-Israeli relations and muddy the Bush administration's Middle East policy, the FBI is investigating whether a Pentagon analyst fed to Israel secret materials about White House deliberations on Iran.

No arrests have been made, said two federal law enforcement officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the continuing investigation. A third law enforcement official, also speaking anonymously, said an arrest in the case could come as early as next week.

The officials refused to identify the Pentagon employee under investigation but said the person is an analyst in the office of Douglas J. Feith, undersecretary of defence for policy, the Pentagon's No. 3 official.

The link to Feith's office also could

prove politically sensitive for the Bush administration.

Feith is an influential aide to Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld who works on sensitive policy issues including US policy toward Iraq and Iran. Feith's office includes a cadre assigned specifically to work on Iran.

He also oversaw the Pentagon's defunct Office of Special Plans, which critics said fed policy-makers uncorroborated prewar intelligence on President Saddam Hussein's Iraq, especially involving purported ties with the al-Qaeda terror network. Pentagon officials have said the office was a small operation that provided fresh analysis on existing intelligence.

The Pentagon said in a statement that the investigation involves an employee at "the desk officer level, who was not in a position to have significant influence over US policy. Nor could a foreign power be in a position to

influence US policy through this individual."

One of the law enforcement officials said the person was not in a policy-making position but had access to extremely sensitive information about US policy toward Iran.

The investigation centers on whether the Pentagon analyst passed secrets about Bush administration policy on Iran to the main pro-Israeli lobbying group in Washington, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which then was said to have given the secrets to the Israeli government, one official said. Both AIPAC and Israel deny the allegations.

President Bush has identified Iran as part of an "axis of evil," along with North Korea and the Iraqi government deposed by the US-led invasion last year.

'al-Qaeda may target American hospitals'

REUTERS, Washington

al-Qaeda and other Islamic militant groups may be considering attacks against Veterans Affairs hospitals in the United States, US law enforcement officials said.

Citing reports of "suspicious activity" at VA hospitals in Colorado and Bethesda, Maryland, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security issued a bulletin on Thursday urging law enforcement agencies around the country to be vigilant.

The agencies stressed they had no credible information about any specific planned attacks.

US officials have warned of possible attacks in the run-up to presidential elections in November. On Aug. 1 they raised the terror alert to "high" for financial institutions in New York, New Jersey and Washington.

al-Qaeda and affiliated groups may

be eyeing Veterans Affairs hospitals as symbolic targets, believing they are less heavily defended than traditional military installations, the agencies said.

"These facilities may be considered attractive targets due to their association with the military and a perception that such an attack may be more successful than an attack against traditional military targets," the agencies said.

They said concern was sparked by reports of possible reconnaissance being conducted at military medical facilities, including hospitals in Bethesda, a suburb of Washington, D.C., and Aurora, Colorado.

It advised officials to watch for signs of "similar surveillance activities at VA hospitals and other key facilities."



PHOTO: AFP

Philippines President Gloria Arroyo (R) greets residents in the flooded city of Pampanga, northern Philippines yesterday. Three days of typhoon-induced torrential rains triggered floods and landslides that killed 17 and injured four others across the country.

Bush signs orders for intelligence reform

AP, Washington

President Bush Friday signed executive orders designed to strengthen the CIA director's power over the nation's intelligence agencies and create a national counterterrorism center, responding to election-year pressures to enact changes called for by the Sept. 11 commission.

Democratic critics questioned whether Bush's proposed changes were too modest. Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry said Bush had been reluctant to act and still was not doing enough.

Bush signed four separate orders before embarking on a weekend of campaign stops leading up to the Republican National Convention, which begins Monday in New York. His press secretary, Scott McClellan, said the moves will "improve our ability to find, track and stop terrorists."

Bush's first order gives the CIA director additional authority on an interim basis to perform many of the functions of a proposed national intelligence director, who would have increased power to oversee all 15 of the nation's intelligence agencies. White House officials said that includes a stronger hand to set budgets.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian spiritual leader and founder of 'The Art of Living Foundation', Sri Sri Ravishankar (C) inspects a "onapukalam" - flower arrangement depicting the flags of various countries at its Ashram in Bangalore yesterday together with some followers from Pakistan and Iraq. The Art of Living Foundation founded in 1984 by Ravishankar offers programmes in techniques of yoga and physical exercises through their centres located in more than 140 countries.

Republicans want Bush to draw attention off Iraq

AP, New York

Nervous Republicans are urging President Bush to unveil a robust second-term agenda at his convention next week to shift voters' focus from the unpopular war in Iraq and other issues that are a distraction to his re-election drive.

Some contend the party should ditch the GOP-fueled controversy over rival John Kerry's combat record in Vietnam.

"If he gets on the future and effectively talks about the challenges that are ahead that only he can meet, then he'll be fine," said Joe Gaylord, a Republican strategist from Washington. "But if this campaign continues to be about Vietnam and the past, I don't think he's going to do so fine. I think it's a little dicey."

As they packed their bags for the trip to New York, several convention delegates and GOP operatives said they had hoped Bush would be comfortably ahead of the Democratic challenger by now. They still like Bush's chances against Kerry, the party faithful said, but only if Bush takes full advantage of the convention spotlight. They offered a wide range of advice, including:

Condemn Kerry's 19-year record in the Senate, and perhaps even his stint as

lieutenant governor and prosecutor in Massachusetts.

Remind voters of Bush's performance after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, which produced the highest approval ratings of his presidency.

Defend his first-term record, but not so much that it overshadows his vision for a second term.

The good news for the White House is the convention script hits each of those marks. The bad news is that the advice reflects a concern among Republicans that Bush is more vulnerable than they would like certainly more exposed to a Nov. 2 defeat than they ever thought possible before the Iraq war.

"There has been a lot of noise out there, with Iraq and even this Vietnam stuff," said Terry Grose-nheider, a delegate from Madison, Wis. "He hasn't been able to talk about his accomplishments or, more importantly, his solutions to the problems people are facing."

Sig Rogich, a Republican strategist in Nevada, said Bush has to take the fight to Kerry.

Five die in stampede at religious fair in India

AFP, Hyderabad

Five people were killed and 13 injured in a stampede early yesterday at a Hindu religious fair in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, an administration official said.

The stampede took place as thousands of devotees gathered for a dip in the river Krishna, said Prabhakar Reddy, administrator of Vijaywada, 270km east of Andhra Pradesh state capital Hyderabad.

"Four people died while one drowned as the person lost his footing and fell into the Krishna river early this morning," Reddy said adding that 13 people were injured in the incident at a bathing area known as Krishnaveni Ghat.

"It seems somebody tripped and there was a lot of pushing which led to the stampede," he said.

The fair began Saturday and is to continue for 12 days, during which the administration expects 30 million people to take a dip at bathing points along the river banks, Reddy said.

He said the administration had 47,000 security and other personnel on duty to ensure the smooth conduct of the festival.

Traces of explosives found on both planes

Russia focuses on female 'Chechen' passengers

AFP, Moscow

Russian investigators announced yesterday that explosives were found on both planes that crashed with the loss of 90 lives, as attention focussed on the roles of two dead female passengers believed to be of Chechen origin.

The Russian press was quick to paint the pair as the latest in a line of female suicide bombers from the strife-torn Caucasus republic to strike, citing their suspected ethnic origins and the fact no relatives have come forward to claim their remains.

The crashes reinforced fears of attacks by Chechen extremists on an already nervous Russian public, with officials now suggesting Russia should copy the stringent security measures used by Israel on its flights.

While security services have made no link between the two women and the crashes, traces of the powerful explosive Hexogen were found in the fragments of both planes that crashed on flights to southern Russian cities late Tuesday.

"An additional analytical examination of fragments of the Tu-134 plane, which crashed Tuesday in the Tula district, showed traces of Hexogen," a spokesman for Russia's FSB intelligence service said, according to Russian news

agencies.

The same substance had been found a day earlier in the other plane, which fell to the ground near the city of Rostov-on-Don at an almost identical moment. Officials have already described that crash as an act of terror.

For the press, however, there was no doubt who was responsible for the attacks, which came just days ahead of Sunday's presidential elections in Chechnya to replace murdered president Akhmad Kadyrov.

The daily Izvestia spoke to an official in the home town of one of the women -- a 27-year-old named as Amanta Nagayeva -- who told the paper that one of her brothers had been taken away by security forces four years ago and never heard of since.

"Amanta Nagayeva had a clear motive to die: by blowing herself and the plane up she avenged herself for her brother," it said, commenting that several past suicide bombings in Russia had been carried out by the wives or sisters of Chechen fighters. The picture on the front page of the daily Kommersant -- the eyes of a Muslim woman peering out between the narrow slit of a veil -- was intended to lead its readers to only one conclusion.