

Indian govt to review river-linking project

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government has told the Supreme Court that it has not given up the previous BJP-led regime's ambitious river-linking project.

Solicitor General G E Vahanvati told a three-member bench of the apex court comprising Justice Y K Sabharwal, Justice D M Dharmadhikari and Justice P B Naolekhar that the government in principle has decided not to go back to the river-linking project.

The issue would be placed before the Indian cabinet in September for a comprehensive review of the Rs 500,000-crore project, Vahanvati added.

He said various reports on the project were being considered by the government and sought six weeks time to get back to the court.

Amicus Curiae Ranjit Kumar and Nikhil Nayar said the Task Force for implementation of the project, constituted on the direction of the apex court, was without a chairman for a long time since the resignation of Suresh Prabhu.

Kumar said the entire project has remained in a limbo since the new government in India has come to power and no Chairman of the Task Force has been appointed so far.

He said the Standing Committee of Water Resources Ministry has in a report proposed that the government give top priority to inter-linking of rivers in view of drought and floods faced by the country.

Sharon presents Gaza pullout timetable

AP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon presented the most detailed timetable yet for a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip to his Likud Party yesterday, and warned party rebels that the plan "will be implemented, period."

A Sharon ally in the Cabinet said the evacuation of Jewish settlements in Gaza could begin by the end of the year, or several months ahead of schedule.

The initial plan called for a withdrawal from Gaza and four small West Bank settlements in four stages, to be completed by September 2005. Each phase was to be presented to the Cabinet for approval.

However, with opposition mounting in Likud and in the Cabinet, Sharon has shifted tactics and is pushing for a swifter withdrawal. He also hopes to weaken settler resis-

tance by making early advance payments on compensation that would encourage many of the 8,000 Gaza settlers to leave voluntarily in coming months, according to officials in Sharon's office, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

In Gaza, meanwhile, a Palestinian man wearing an explosives belt hidden under his clothing was stopped at the Erez crossing into Israel. The man had waited in line with thousands of Palestinian workers making their way into Israel every morning.

Soldiers became suspicious when they spotted on him what looked like an activation device, the army said. Soldiers isolated him from the workers and ordered him to remove the explosives, which he did, the army said.

Erez has been a repeated target of Palestinian militants, though the vast majority of suicide bombers in

the past four years have come from the West Bank. Gaza is closed off, and militants have had trouble reaching Israel from the strip.

In Jerusalem, Sharon opened his meeting with Likud legislators with a warning not to sabotage the Gaza withdrawal. "You know my views on the subject. The disengagement plan will be implemented, period," he said.

The first key date in Sharon's timetable for a Gaza withdrawal is Sept. 14, when the Cabinet is to approve the principles of compensating and evacuating settlers. Officials said advance payments would be authorized at that session.

On Sept. 26, Cabinet ministers will be given draft legislation for carrying out the withdrawal, and the bill will be approved by the Cabinet on Oct. 24, Sharon said. By Nov. 3, the legislation will be presented to parliament for a first of three votes.



PHOTO: AFP
Women participate in the "Still We Rise" poor people's march and rally for justice on their way to Madison Square Garden where the opening session of the Republican National Convention began Monday in New York City, New York. The advocates marched for housing, healthcare, jobs and income support.



PHOTO: AFP
Israeli soldiers stand guard in front of Palestinians arrested during a military operation in the West Bank city of Jenin yesterday. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon unveiled an accelerated timetable for his Gaza pullout plan, brushing aside opponents by predicting it would win parliamentary approval in early November.

Bomb blast kills 3 in Pakistani sweet shop

AFP, Quetta

A bomb ripped through a sweet shop in southwestern Pakistan yesterday killing three people and wounding seven others, police said.

The bomb had been planted inside the shop in the main market in restive Baluchistan province's Qalat town, 150km south of provincial capital Quetta, police chief Chaudhry Yaqoob told AFP.

"Three people including the sweet merchant were killed in the explosion and seven others were injured," Yaqoob said. It was not immediately clear who was behind the blast.

Baluchistan is plagued by tensions between the government and ethnic groups who accuse Islamabad of neglecting their social and economic rights. They are also angry about the government's planned extension of military garrisons in the mineral-rich province.

More than a dozen paramilitary soldiers have been killed in the past month in various attacks in sparsely populated Baluchistan, where rockets have been frequently fired at key natural gas installations.

Rebels kidnap 22 health workers in Darfur

UN prepares to talk sanction

AFP, Khartoum

The Sudanese government said yesterday rebels in Darfur had kidnapped 22 health workers in the strife-torn region, following the abduction of eight Sudanese nationals working for international aid groups.

The spate of attacks came as the UN Security Council was preparing to discuss possible sanctions against Khartoum over the conflict in Darfur which has caused a major humanitarian crisis.

Officials said the 22 workers involved in a vaccination programme were seized by the Justice and Equality Movement in an area near the South Darfur state capital of Nyala, although there was no independent confirmation.

Another group of eight Sudanese nationals working for the Red Crescent and the UN's World Food Programme were kidnapped over the weekend in Darfur.

A WFP spokeswoman said the abduction occurred 80 kilometres

(50 miles) south of the North Darfur state capital of El Fasher as the group was registering some of the more than 1.2 million people displaced by a bloody government crackdown on ethnic minority rebels.

The government also blamed that kidnapping on rebels that have been battling the army and allied militias for the past 18 months, although a spokesman for the Justice and Equality Movement denied any involvement.

The Security Council is expected Thursday to hear a report on the situation in Darfur, where more than 30,000 people have been killed and an estimated 1.4 million people have fled their homes.

The council had set an August 30 deadline for Sudan to rein in pro-government militias accused of conducting an ethnic cleansing campaign in Darfur and to ease restrictions on humanitarian aid in the region or face possible sanctions.

Attempt on minister's brother in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The brother of an Indian cabinet minister survived an attack by suspected Kashmiri rebels yesterday as two militants holed up in a house were killed in a separate incident.

Gunmen opened fire in the direction of Ghulam Abbas, the brother of India's Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad, as he was walking near the town of Doda, 220km south of the summer capital Srinagar.

Abbas' bodyguard was injured and in serious condition but Abbas was unhurt, police said.

"The militants managed to escape from the scene," a police spokesman said.

Azad was head of the Kashmir branch of India's Congress party until becoming a minister when a Congress-led coalition won April-May national elections.

Separately, fierce fighting erupted late Monday when two militants being chased by troops sought refuge in a house in Sopore, 50 kilometers (31 miles) north of Srinagar.

REPUBLICAN CONVENTION Thousands continue protests

AFP, New York

Thousands of people demanding social reforms protested in New York Monday, as the Republican National Convention got under way.

"It's a shame that in the richest country in the world twelve million children are hungry every night," cried an activist from a small platform in front of United Nations headquarters, galvanizing a crowd of protesters under the watchful eye of police clad in riot gear.

Pacifists, anarchists, union members, defenders of the poor and others, several thousands of them gathered Monday at mid-day, one of two large marches of the day in Manhattan demanding social justice.

For them, opposing Bush is not just about marching against the war in Iraq. They point to what they say is the lack of social progress under the Bush administration.

"I came here to protest against the nursing home industry, to

defend all those people that are abused by being locked in institutions," said a man who gave his name as Jim, who belongs to a group that wants more government aid to help the handicapped.

Deaf and mute marchers joined single mothers and state employees from nearby New Jersey in the protest, each group with a particular grievance against the Bush administration -- and taking advantage that journalists from around the world are in town.

Julia Perkins represented a coalition of farm workers from Immokalee, in south Florida.

"The farmer workers that collect tomatoes for Taco Bell earn from 40 to 45 cents for every 32 pounds, their wages are the same they were in 1978," said Perkins.

The number of Americans living in poverty or without health insurance grew last year, according to government figures released Thursday.

MILOSEVIC SAYS War crimes charges are 'lies'

AFP, The Hague

Former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic began his long-delayed defence against charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity before a United Nations court yesterday, denouncing the accusations as "unscrupulous lies".

Milosevic, who is acting as his own lawyer, told the court that he needed more than the 150 days allotted to him to cross-examine more than 1,600 witnesses whom he has said he intends to call to the stand.

Rejecting the prosecution's claim that he masterminded the bloody wars that tore apart the Yugoslav federation in the early 1990s, he said in his opening defence statement that the international community was "the main force for the destruction" of the country.

He also blamed "the Nato pact" for the conflict in Kosovo, a province of his native Serbia, where more than 10,000 people died and about 800,000 ethnic Albanians -- one-third of the population -- were expelled in 1988 and 1999.

Milosevic faces a total of 60 counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity for his alleged role in the 1991-95 war in Croatia, the 1992-95 war in Bosnia and the Kosovo campaign.



PHOTO: AFP
Floral tributes were paid to Princess Diana on her 7th death anniversary in front of Kensington Palace in Hyde Park, London yesterday.

Spate of bomb attacks on filmgoers in Assam

Theatres empty as panic spreads

AFP, Guwahati

A spate of blasts targeting filmgoers in India's northeastern state of Assam has triggered panic and left most cinemas almost empty, an official said yesterday.

"For the past fortnight people have simply stopped coming although we are running three shows a day," said Tarakeswar Majumdar, a cinema manager in Assam's main city of Guwahati.

"Ticket sales have gone down by about 75 percent."

Three people have been killed and more than 120 wounded in the past few months in bomb attacks on cinemas which police blame on separatist guerrillas.

"There were at least seven attacks on cinema halls during the past few months, with militants belonging to the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) lobbing grenades," a senior police official said.

The attacks follow a ban by at least 11 separatist groups, including the outlawed Ulfa, on the screening of Hindi-language films, popularly known as "Bollywood" movies, in the northeastern region.

The militants called the ban last

November but the attacks have increased in recent weeks.

At least seven people including two policemen were injured last Wednesday when suspected Ulfa militants threw a grenade at a crowd outside a cinema in the eastern town of Dibrugarh.

The explosion took place minutes before the evening show -- featuring a Hindi-language movie -- was to end.

"I almost escaped death last week," said Narayan Baruah, a businessman in Dibrugarh. "Nobody is going to take a risk now, even if the cinemas were screening Assamese films."

India's northeast region boasts more than 300 cinemas with around 35 distributors catering to Hindi films. But many have already stopped buying such films.

The separatists have not imposed a ban on Western films, which remain popular in the region where English is more widely spoken than Hindi.

In Manipur state, a militant ban on screening Hindi movies has been in force since 2001 and is being heeded by all cinema owners.

Generals may pay the price for Iraq abuse

AP, Washington

The Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal could effectively end the careers of four Army generals who are linked indirectly to the misconduct but face no criminal charges.

The four are singled out for varying degrees of criticism mixed with instances of praise in two comprehensive investigative reports released last week. The investigators conclude that the generals are partly responsible, but not legally culpable, for the abuse last fall.

All four are "essentially finished in the military," even if they are not forced to resign, said Dan Goure, a defence analyst at the Lexington Institute think tank. "At the very minimum you could argue that they lost control" of their subordinates, he said.

The most senior of the four generals, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, already has been passed over for promotion to a four-star slot as chief of Southern Command because of an expectation by Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld that Sanchez would face trouble in a Senate confirmation hearing.

Sanchez was the top US commander in Iraq until the restoration of Iraqi sovereignty in late June, when he returned to Army 5th Corps headquarters in Germany, where he is the commanding general.