



Pakistani policemen escort blindfolded militants to a court appearance in Karachi yesterday. Pakistani police said they had arrested six highly trained militants who were involved in bomb blasts in the southern Sindh province with the alleged backing of Indian intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

Indian parliament in chaos for third day

AFP, New Delhi

India's parliament broke up in chaos for a third day Friday following the controversial appointment of a government allied to the ruling national Congress party in the tiny eastern state of Jharkhand.

Livid opposition MPs bellowed for the dismissal of the state's governor after he asked Congress party allies to form a government after an election in which they won fewer seats than the Hindu nationalists and their partners.

Critics charge the uproar has tarnished the image of Congress, India's oldest political party, which had pledged clean rule when it ousted the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at national elections last May.

BJP leader Venkaiah Naidu said democracy was being "murdered" in

Jharkhand by the Congress party, led by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi.

State elections in Jharkhand last month resulted in a hung assembly but – despite the result -- Congress-allied governor Syed Sibtey Razi went ahead and swore in a Congress ally as chief minister on Wednesday.

Results from the poll showed the new chief minister, Shibu Soren, and his Congress allies had won 33 seats compared to 36 seats for the BJP and its allies. Both coalitions are claiming the support of 42 legislators in the 81-member house.

In the national parliament, BJP leaders jumped to their feet on Friday and demanded that New Delhi sack Razi, the Jharkhand governor.

The disarray forced lower house Speaker Somnath Chatterjee to

adjourn proceedings early, citing a "disorderly situation."

Similar scenes erupted in the upper house where proceedings also ended abruptly. Parliament will resume next Wednesday.

Razi, summoned by President Abdul Kalam to New Delhi on Tuesday to explain his actions, said he would ask the new government in Jharkhand to prove its majority ahead of a three-week deadline which expires March 21.

However, no date has been set for the government to prove its majority.

BJP leader Vijay Kumar Malhotra warned the BJP and its allies would continue the parliamentary protests until the Jharkhand governor is fired, prompting accusations from Congress that the opposition was "throttling" democracy.

Stopping Laden 'greatest challenge': Bush

REUTERS, Washington

challenge of our day."

Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Bush famously declared he wanted bin Laden caught "dead or alive," but in the years since he has been more sparing in bringing up the al Qaeda leader's name in public.

Bin Laden has eluded US efforts to hunt him down, and he occasionally surfaces in a video or audiotape to show followers he is still alive. U.S. intelligence agencies believe he is hiding in the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"We're on a constant hunt for bin Laden. We're keeping the pressure on him, keeping him in hiding," Bush said.

Zarqawi, blamed for orchestrating insurgent attacks against US forces and Iraqis, has become the most hunted man in Iraq. In December, an audiotape message purportedly from bin Laden formally named Zarqawi as the head of al Qaeda in Iraq.

Nepal extends arrest of political leaders

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has extended for two months the house arrest of two former prime ministers and four other top political leaders held since King Gyanendra grabbed power February 1, an official said Friday.

Political analysts say the veteran political leaders are being kept under detention for fear they could rally popular protests against the king's move.

"Earlier, the leaders were kept under house arrest for a month under the Public Security Act," Chief District Officer Baman Prasad Neupane, who helps oversees law and order in Kathmandu, told AFP.

"Now after completion of a month, it's felt their house arrest cannot be lifted immediately so it has been extended by two months," Neupane said.

Gyanendra assumed complete power in the impoverished Himalayan kingdom more than a month ago. He fired the government, imposed emergency rule and suspended civil liberties including

press freedom.

In a step that has drawn wide international condemnation, Gyanendra said he was forced to act to tackle an increasingly deadly Maoist revolt and has given himself three years to restore peace and democracy.

Those detained included Girija Prasad Koirala, Nepal's first prime minister elected in 1991 and head of the centrist Nepali Congress Party, and Sher Bahadur Deuba, whom Gyanendra sacked as prime minister along with his four-party coalition government.

Other leaders ordered to remain in their homes were the former finance minister in the last government, Bharat Mohan Adhikari, and sacked home minister Puna Bahadur Khadka.

The other two ordered to remain in detention were Madhav Kumar Nepal, general secretary of the Nepal Communist Party United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML), and Amik Sherchan, leader of the communist United Front Nepal.

Martha Stewart returns home from prison

AP, Katonah

Martha Stewart, released after five months in a West Virginia prison, arrived at her multimillion-dollar 153-acre New York estate early Friday to begin serving the home detention portion of her sentence for lying about a stock sale.

"The experience of the last five months ... has been life altering and life affirming," Stewart said in a statement issued on her Web site.

"Someday, I hope to have the chance to talk more about all that has happened, the extraordinary people I have met here and all that I have learned."

Stewart can return to work, start drawing her \$900,000 salary again and even throw lavish house parties as long as she doesn't invite any criminals. She must wear an electronic ankle to allow authorities to monitor her movements.

The homemaking maven left the women's prison in Alderson, W.Va., at 12:30 a.m. Friday and headed to a nearby airport, where she smiled, waved to supporters and boarded a private jet for the hour flight to New York.

Sharon determined to pursue Gaza pullout

AFP, Jerusalem

Buoyed by massive public support, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon looked more determined than ever Friday to end Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip, defying furious opposition within his own Likud party.

Newspapers and aides declared Sharon victorious after a rebel vote in his right-wing party for a referendum on the pullout was declared null and void because not enough people turned up for the informal show of hands.

Despite outrage from settlers and ultranationalists, the premier has refused to budge on his plan to recall 8,000 Jewish settlers from Gaza and several hundred from four northern West Bank enclaves, set to begin on July 20.

"I will not allow the extremist fringes to dictate their policies to me," he told the Likud central committee meeting, as rebels called for his resignation.

But less than a third of the committee's 3,000 members turned up, annulling the non-binding resolution under the terms of the party constitution.

"Those who voted do not represent the party and their real objective is to destroy the party's interior," Industry Minister Ehud Olmert, a close Sharon aide, told public radio.

However, the chairman of the parliamentary justice committee, Michael Eitan, said a referendum bill will be prepared for a first reading in the Knesset, or parliament, within 10 days.

But with no support from any other party, it has zero chance of passage.

The only remaining option for

the extreme right, which is bent on

bringing down the Sharon adminis-

tration to jeopardise the pullout, is

the 2005 state budget, which must

pass its second and third readings

by the end of the month.

"The prime minister himself did

what he does best: he spoke over

the heads of the central committee

members to the public, turning a

spotlight on the Likud rebels and

ignoring a referendum," said the

Maariv newspaper.

The Yediot Aharanot daily dis-

missed the vote as little more than

an lobbying ploy with the 2006

elections in mind.