

Sonia Gandhi to celebrate b'day with J&K quake victims

AFP, New Delhi

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi will shun birthday celebrations at home on Friday and spend the day with survivors of the October 8 earthquake in Kashmir, reports said.

Gandhi, who turns 59 on Friday, will visit the quake-hit Poonch, Baramulla and Kupwara regions.

"She will spend time with the affected families," the statement said.

Sonia first visited Kashmir a day after the quake killed more than 1,300 there. It also claimed more than 73,000 lives in neighbouring Pakistan.

Gandhi wants to stay with the quake survivors in Uri on the night of December 9 "so that she could convey the message that she and the Congress party were concerned about them."



PHOTO: AFP

Workers from the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) shout slogans during a demonstration march to Parliament in New Delhi yesterday. Thousands of CITU workers demanded that the UPA government implement a basic minimum wage, extend comprehensive social security, abolish the contract system and regulate contract workers.

Monks and Marxists object to Norway's role in peace bid

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's hardline Buddhist monks and Marxists, key allies of the new president, Thursday opposed his invitation to Norway to resume peace efforts but pledged to maintain support for him.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's invitation Wednesday to Norway followed a recent surge in violence blamed on Tamil Tiger rebels that has claimed 29 lives, including 17 soldiers in a weekend blast.

The violence has heightened fears that the country could slide back into ethnic civil war after agreeing to a ceasefire in February 2002. More than 60,000 people have been killed in the conflict between 1972 and 2002.

The all-monk party of the JHU, or National Heritage Party, and the Marxists said they oppose Oslo's participation in the faltering peace bid aimed at ending the conflict between Tamil minority rebels and majority Sinhalese.

They accuse Norway of siding with the Tigers.

"We told the president even at the beginning of this week we were against Norway," JHU spokesman Champika Ranawaka said. "But we will not make it an issue to withdraw our support to the president."

The Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front also opposed Oslo's involvement but would not withdraw crucial support for the president, a party spokesman said.

"Norway's behavior is not reasonable," JVP spokesman Wimal Weerawansa said. "There's no change in our stance, but that does not mean that the president cannot take a decision going against our party policy."

Rajapakse won the November 17 election with support from the monks and the Marxists. He promised while campaigning to overhaul the peace bid and review the role of the Norwegians.

His request Wednesday to Norwegian ambassador Hans

Brattskar for Oslo to keep up its peacekeeping efforts marked a policy U-turn.

Norway reacted cautiously to Rajapakse's invitation and said it would continue its efforts under conditions that it did not immediately specify.

Norway's Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, during his visit to neighbouring India said they will get involved only if both Colombo and the Tigers show "real will" to peace.

"We are prepared to continue negotiation but there has to be real will on both sides," he told reporters in New Delhi before talks with Indian Premier Manmohan Singh.

"We will sit with both parties to see how to continue the process... We can play a role and proceed when there is willingness of both sides."

Bomb blast in Pakistan market kills 12

AFP, South Waziristan

Twelve people were killed and more than 40 wounded on Thursday when a powerful bomb blast ripped through a bazaar in Pakistan's restive tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, local officials said.

The bomb was planted in a hotel restaurant in Jandola, the gateway town to the troubled region of South Waziristan, and destroyed nearby weapons shops and other businesses, military and civilian officials said.

"I can confirm that it was a bomb blast," local administration official Sajid Salim told AFP. "Twelve people were killed and more than 40 people were hurt."

The area was already tense after

a series of incidents, including the reported killing of an Al-Qaeda commander, the abduction and murder of two soldiers and a clash between militants and criminals in which 15 people died.

"It was a terrorist attack, it was a targeted blast at a restaurant in a hotel," a military official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

However the official did not say whether the blast, which happened at around 9:00 am (0400 GMT), was believed to be linked to the other violence in the troubled border region.

Security forces have a heavy presence in Jandola, routinely checking all vehicles and people moving in and out of the rugged area.

Pakistan has deployed thou-

sands of troops in the tribal areas to hunt militants who sneaked across the mountainous border in late 2001 after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, and their local supporters.

But militants continue to fire rockets at government and military installations in the area and the military has carried out major operations in South and North Waziristan.

Also on Thursday the bodies of two Pakistani paramilitary soldiers were found, two days after they and two other soldiers disappeared in Wana, the main town in South Waziristan, military officials said.

"They were beheaded," one official said on condition of anonymity.

2 missing Pakistani soldiers found dead

AFP, Wana

The bodies of two Pakistani paramilitary soldiers were found Thursday, two days after they and two other soldiers disappeared in the remote tribal belt near the Afghan border, local officials said.

The men's throats had been cut with a knife, eyewitnesses told AFP in Wana, the main town in the troubled South Waziristan region, although that was not confirmed by officials.

"Two Pakistani paramilitary soldiers have been killed in the Wana tribal area near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border by unknown persons," a local official told AFP,

speaking on condition of anonymity. The four soldiers went missing on Tuesday night.

Authorities had barred the soldiers from leaving their camp in Wana as a security measure but the four ventured out to visit a market, a security official in the town said Wednesday.

Two of them were seen being forced into a vehicle and there were fears they had been kidnapped by militants linked to the Al-Qaeda network, the security official added.

Pakistan has deployed thousands of troops to hunt militants who sneaked into the area in late 2001 after a US-led invasion of Afghanistan, and their local supporters.

Cyclone closes in on Chennai

PTI, Chennai

The cyclonic storm in the Bay of Bengal lay 650 km east southeast of Chennai on Thursday morning as a result of which rains were likely from Friday, the weather office said.

The storm was now moving in a westerly direction, the office said.

On Wednesday the cyclonic storm was 800 km East-Southeast of Chennai, but overnight it covered 250 km and now lay east southeast of the metropolis, they said.

Due to this, the rains, which were expected to commence over coastal areas of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry from Thursday night, were now likely to hit these areas from Friday, they said.

Nepal court lifts ban on BBC broadcast

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Supreme Court lifted a royal government order blocking transmission of the BBC Nepali service on a local radio station, a court official said Wednesday.

Nepal police last month seized equipment from the radio station and arrested four journalists and a technician in moves to block the BBC service which planned to broadcast an interview with the Maoist rebel chief.

Sagarmatha radio station was later allowed to resume operating but the ban on the BBC service and its interview remained, prompting the station and other media organizations to lodge a petition with the Supreme Court.

The BBC had interviewed leader

Prachanda who spoke about last month's agreement between the rebels and a seven-party political alliance on forming a united front to restore democracy.

King Gyanendra sacked the government and seized power in February saying politicians were incapable of stopping a Maoist insurgency which has claimed more than 12,000 lives since 1996.

After the royal takeover, officials announced curbs on the media and on public protests.

"A division bench of justices Khilraj Regmi and Damador Prasad Sharma issued the order on a writ petition filed at the court (by) the Sagarmatha FM station on Dec 2," the court official who did not want to be named said.

Indian envoy to head to Nepal for talks

AFP, New Delhi

India's Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran will visit Nepal on Sunday for talks with King Gyanendra to push for the return of democracy in the Himalayan nation, an official said Thursday.

"Restoration of democracy" is an item on the agenda during the three-day visit, the official said requesting anonymity.

The Indian Express newspaper said other issues to be discussed include New Delhi's recent proposal to review the India-Nepal transit treaty and Kathmandu's reported acceptance of military aid from

China after India cut supplies following February's royal coup.

India had imposed unilateral trade embargo in 1988-89 after Nepal imported arms and ammunition from China.

The Transit Treaty, last renewed in January 1999, allows trade into the landlocked kingdom through 15 designated transit points on the India-Nepal border. The treaty comes up for review every seven years.

Saran's visit to Kathmandu will take place a month after Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met the Nepalese monarch in Dhaka on the sidelines of a South Asian summit.