

## SONIA TO ADVANI OVER CORRUPTION

# Do introspection first before pointing finger

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Congress President Sonia Gandhi has dismissed main opposition BJP's projections of a mid-term parliamentary polls and asked the saffron party to do some introspection on corruption within it instead of levelling allegations against her party.

A day after BJP chief L K Advani told a party convention in Mumbai that the UPA coalition government led by Congress would collapse sooner than expected due to internal contradictions, Sonia, in interviews to two separate TV news channels, said "I don't see this happening."

"I think we went into this coalition consciously. We worked together with Common Minimum Programme and later on with

legislations," she said adding the UPA government would complete its five-year tenure.

On Advani's charge that Congress was the fountain head of corruption, she said "I don't think they have any moral right to say anything (on corruption). They should first introspect and look within."

On corruption among some members of Parliament, which recently came to light leading to expulsion of 11 MPs, Sonia said "it was painful. I think people in public life must understand their responsibility and be more accountable."

She refuted allegations that there were two separate power centres in the government and described her relations with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as "perfect".



Those who talk about two power centres "don't know what they are talking about. The Prime Minister and I are in regular communication. We share a strong relationship and I have full faith in him", the Congress chief said.

"I think he (Manmohan Singh) has done a fine job. I have no complaints against him whatsoever. My

only complaint with Dr Singh is that he sometimes does not highlight his achievements enough", she said.

Asked if former foreign minister Natwar Singh, who quit in the wake of UN report over Iraqi oil-for-food scam, would be taken back into the ministry if a probe into the issue, gave him a clean chit, Sonia said "I don't discuss hypothetical questions".

On pressures from Left parties and UPA government constituent RJD, she said she did not think it would impact on the stability of the government. "Which government does not have pressures?.....You have to make certain adjustments from time to time. This does not mean that the government does not function."



A Sudanese man is beaten on the floor by Egyptian riot police during a forceful evacuation of thousands of Sudanese refugees on their third month camping outside UN offices in Cairo. Ten Sudanese asylum seekers, including two children, were reported dead.

## Avalanche kills 25 in northwest Pakistan

AFP, AP, Islamabad

At least 25 people were killed in an avalanche while hunting precious stones in a remote mountain range in northwest Pakistan, police said yesterday.

The incident happened on Tuesday in the rugged Karakoram range in Kohistan district, local police chief Ashfaq Ahmed told AFP. "There were around 120 people extracting gemstones when the avalanche struck, burying a number of them," Ahmed said.

"Twenty-four were killed and the rest are fine. Locals have dug all the bodies out of the snow," Ahmed said.

He said a military helicopter had been despatched to the hard-to-reach area and had so far brought back 12 bodies to Dasso, the main town in the region, where they were handed over to relatives.

Police only learned of the avalanche late Thursday, when residents of the far-flung village of Sputmali in the highlands arrived at their police post.



Former Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) listens as Indian opposition leader Lal Krishna Advani speaks during the concluding session of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) national convention in Mumbai yesterday.

## Vajpayee calls it quits

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee made a dramatic announcement on Thursday night that he would not enter electoral fray again and stay away from power politics, sending his Bharatiya Janata Party into a tizzy.

Addressing a rally in Mumbai to mark the party's silver jubilee celebrations, he said "I will not fight elections. I will not indulge in power politics any more."

Vajpayee's announcement during his brief speech was greeted with stunned silence and disbelief by his party leaders and workers. Vajpayee, who is a member of Lok Sabha from Lucknow constituency, had been a member of parliament since long.

It may be recalled that he had made a similar announcement in Rajya Sabha before the 1999 general elections.

Drawing from the epic the Ramayana, Vajpayee described BJP chief veteran L K Advani and young party general secretary

Pramod Mahajan as Rama and Laxman, leaving out second generation of leaders from his scheme of things.

Recalling a story from the epic, Vajpayee, flanked by Advani and Mahajan on the dais, made his point "I feel like Parasuram at the coronation of Lord Rama as the King of Ayodhya after he returned from 14-year exile. Parasuram was angry that the bow of Lord Shiva was broken. But I will not be angry. I have nothing more to say when our Ram and Laxman are ready."

The announcement by the former prime minister, who completed his 81 years on Christmas day, left BJP rank and file scratching their heads about its impact.

Advani later told reporters that Vajpayee had taken the decision not to contest elections on Thursday morning himself.

Other BJP leaders merely said they have to first analyse the context and background in which Vajpayee made the announcement before making any comment.

## LANKAN PEACE PROCESS

# Delhi offers support, but no direct involvement

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday repeated its support for Sri Lanka's peace process but skirted a request by visiting President Mahinda Rajapakse to play a greater role in helping end conflict in the troubled island.

Joint statement issued at the end of Rajapakse's four-day visit to India said New Delhi had offered "to provide intellectual and academic resources in support of the peace process" but made no mention of involvement at government level.

Ahead of his visit, Rajapakse had said he hoped India would get more involved in efforts to bring peace to the island where an upsurge in violence has triggered fears of a slide back to civil war.

India has sought to steer clear of the Sri Lankan conflict after its

disastrous military involvement during the 1980s in which it dispatched a peacekeeping force to Tamil-held regions but ended up battling the rebels.

New Delhi withdrew its forces after more than 1,200 Indian troops died.

Since then, India has preferred to concentrate on economic cooperation with its neighbour where more than 60,000 people have died in three decades of ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils.

In Friday's statement, India "reiterated its support for a process of seeking a negotiated political settlement acceptable to all sections of Sri Lankan society..."

"The Indian side expressed the hope that a political settlement of the ethnic issue ... would emerge

through negotiations between the parties concerned," it added.

Rajapakse, it said, had apprised Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of the surge of violence in Sri Lanka's northeast which has cost 83 lives this month despite the truce that has been in place since February 23, 2002.

"The two leaders deplored violations of the ceasefire, which could undermine the prospects for peace in Sri Lanka," it said.

"Both sides emphasized the need for the strict observance of the ceasefire and immediate resumption of talks aimed at strengthening the ceasefire."

Rajapakse's visit to India, which has a sizeable Tamil population, was his first foreign trip since winning the November 17 presidential election.

# Int'l team to review Iraqi polls results

## Opposition, US, UN welcome move

AP, Baghdad

An international team agreed Thursday to review Iraq's parliamentary elections, a decision lauded by Sunni Arab and secular Shia groups who have staged repeated protests around Iraq complaining of widespread fraud and intimidation.

Meanwhile, The New York Times reported Friday that American commanders are planning to boost the number of soldiers advising Iraqi police commando units. The report, which cited an unidentified senior commander in Iraq, said the aim was to curtail abuse that Iraqi units are suspected of inflicting on Sunni Arabs.

Under the plan the number of advisers working with the Iraqi units would be greatly expanded. The advisers themselves would be under the command of American officers.

Gunmen killed 12 members of an extended Shia family near Latifiyah, a Sunni Arab-dominated town about 30km south of Baghdad. Police said the men were taken from their homes, packed into a minivan and shot.

The decision by the International Mission for Iraqi Elections to send a team of assessors should help placate opposition complaints of ballot box rigging and mollify those groups who felt their views were not being heard, especially among hardline Sunni Arab parties.

"It is important that the Iraqi people have confidence in the election results and that the voting process, including the process for vote counting, is free and fair," US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad said.

He added that "these experts will be arriving immediately and we are ready to assist them, if needed."

The team was coming despite a UN observer's endorsement of the Dec. 15 vote, which gave the Shia religious bloc a big lead in prelimi-

nary returns. The observer, Craig Jenness, said Wednesday that his team which helped the Iraqi election commission organise and oversee the poll found the elections to be credible and transparent.

Sunni Arabs and secular Shias rejected Jenness' findings, saying their concerns which included political assassinations before the elections were not addressed.

There have been about 1,500 complaints lodged against the elections, including about 50 serious enough to alter the results in some districts. The overall result, however, was not expected to change.

On Thursday, the United Nations said it had encouraged Iraq's electoral commission to get more outside observers involved in the process, and Secretary-General Kofi Annan welcomed the participation of the International Mission for Iraqi Elections, his spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

## Pakistan urges foreign students to leave soon

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan backtracked yesterday on a demand for foreign students enrolled in Islamic schools to leave the country by year's end, but urged the hundreds remaining to go as soon as possible.

President Pervez Musharraf had ordered all foreigners studying at the schools, known as madrasas, to leave by December 31 as part of a drive to stamp out terrorism and religious extremism following the July 7 London bombings.

His order came after revelations that at least one of the four London bombers -- three of whom were Britons of Pakistani descent -- had spent time at a madrasa.

Officials have said that around 700 foreign students, out of a total of 1,400, have since left and madrasas have stopped enrolling more foreign students. But hundreds remain.

Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao told Reuters that foreign students might face "some administrative issues" in leaving by Saturday.

"As such, there is no deadline for them to leave, but we want them to

go back to their countries as soon as possible."

Sherpao said the government was not considering forced deportation of those who failed to meet the deadline.

"What action can we take against those students? The managements of the madrasas are responsible to arrange departures of their students and we are pushing them to help us in implementing our decision."

On Thursday, Sherpao had said that the deadline would not be relaxed.

Maulana Ghulam Rasool, a senior cleric at the Ittehad-e-Tanzeemul Madaris, (the Alliance of Organisations of Religious Schools), told Reuters that students and madrasa managements would resist any deportations.

"Not one foreign student wants to go back," he said. "They will give themselves up for arrest if the government uses force."

Authorities in the southern province of Sindh say they have cancelled the visas of 92 foreign students still at madrasas there.

## Bomb threats keep India's hi-tech hub on alert

AP, Bangalore

Suicide bombers threatened in letters sent to local media that they would target a top politician and launch attacks against New Year's revellers in the city of Bangalore, police said yesterday.

A letter from a previously unknown group outlining the threatened attacks in Bangalore was faxed to several newspapers late on Thursday, the director-general of police, BS Sial, said.

"It will be the most coordinated attack the country has ever seen," television channel CNN-IBN quoted the letter, written in English, as saying.

Six attackers will trigger explosions including, "two human bombs to target the state chief minister," Moin-ud-Din of the Al-Jehadi group said, according to the report.

"Newspapers have received the letter late last night, and we are trying to find out if it is a hoax. But we will not take any chances," said Sial, without giving further details.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) prepares to get down from a metro carriage at Connaught Place Metro Station in New Delhi yesterday. Singh inaugurated the 22.8km route from Bharkhamba Road to Dwarka, which will ease commuting for the city's 14 million people and reduce pollution.

## South Korean House endorses troop cut

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's parliament yesterday endorsed the government's plan to cut the country's troops stationed in Iraq by one-third next year.

The National Assembly voted by 110 to 31 for the defence ministry bill to cut the 3,200-strong South Korean troop contingent to 2,300 and extend its stay in Iraq for another year until the end of 2006.

South Korean troops, the third-largest force in the war-ravaged country after those of the United States and Britain, have been stationed in the northern Iraqi town of Arbil.

The government plans to reduce the contingent in the first half of 2006.

The ruling Uri Party, which holds 144 seats was helped by minor opposition parties to ram 20 bills through the 299-member assembly which has been boycotted by the main opposition Grand National Party (GNP).

The conservative GNP has held anti-government rallies outside the assembly since the ruling party railroaded a new private school law through parliament on December 9.