

INDIAN OFFICE OF PROFIT ROW

Govt seeks consensus to amend law

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government was poised to wrap up consultations yesterday with political parties to evolve a consensus on amending a law relating to office of profit in the wake of ruling Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's resignation from Lok Sabha.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Priyaranjan Dasmuni, assigned by Singh to talk to the parties for a consensus, spoke to Leader of the Opposition L K Advani at the weekend and followed it up with top leaders of ruling UPA, Left parties, which provide support to the government from outside, and other opposition forces on Sunday and yesterday.

While there appeared to be consensus that Parliament (Prevention of Disqualification Act) of 1959 be amended, most parties, excepting BJP, favoured an all-party meeting before a special session of Parliament is convened for the

purpose.

Dasmuni is expected to submit a report to the prime minister on the outcome of his talks with political leaders. The prime minister would then scrutinise the views and ask the government's legal experts to draft a new law.

In a rare convergence of interests across the political class, the opposition have joined hands with the ruling alliance to demand a Parliament session for redefining the office of profit because the issue affects every party.

Enacting amendment to the law relating to office of profit issue that cost Sonia her parliament membership—is a matter of some urgency not only to Congress but also to CPI (M) as the Election Commission is set to examine office of profit petitions against ten lawmakers, including Speaker Somnath Chatterjee, of the Marxist party.

The CPI (M) politburo has asked the government to expeditiously

resolve the issue in consultation with all parties. The party also rejected the demand for resignation of their MPs allegedly holding office of profit.

Efforts to frame a new law coincided as the office of profit controversy spread to a number of states where political rivals have petitioned against each others' lawmakers for allegedly holding office of profit.

But there is also a realisation that a partisan response to the issue could spell trouble for all parties, political observers said.

Sources in the parties said political appointments to government corporations and boards are very common and acquired further importance following a Constitutional amendment limiting the size of the ministries to 15 percent of the total strength of the legislatures. These appointments are given to placate those who cannot be accommodated in ministries, they added.

9 killed in Philippine bomb blast

AFP, Jolo

At least nine people were killed and more than 20 seriously wounded yesterday in a bomb blast on the restive southern Philippine island of Jolo, police and witnesses said.

"As of the moment, we have an initial nine dead on the spot," Jolo provincial police chief Ahiron Ajirin told reporters.

The bomb was planted on the ground floor of a two-storey building along a busy street in the centre of Jolo town. Those killed were mostly employees working in a cooperative there, he said.

Police set up road blocks around the town and many businesses closed early following the blast.

An AFP reporter said he saw more than 20 people with severe burns taken to Jolo's provincial hospital. Part of the building's facade fell to the ground after the explosion, the second deadly bomb attack to hit the area this year.

No group has claimed responsibility. Ajirin said one man had been taken in for questioning but would not say if he was a suspect.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters march during a demonstration against Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in Bangkok yesterday. Leaders of the protests seeking to oust Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra rejected an offer of a national unity government, saying the embattled premier was "insane".

Lankan rebel front warns of new attacks

Colombo bans deep sea fishing

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

A suspected Tamil Tiger front threatened yesterday to resume attacks on Sri Lanka's military, with the government and rebels seen unwilling to compromise weeks before talks aimed at averting renewed civil war.

Tension fell in the island's minority Tamil dominated northeast after the two sides met last month in Geneva for the first high level talks in three years. That followed violence that almost destroyed a 2002 truce, raising the spectre of a return to a two-decade war that killed more than 64,000 people.

The Upsurging Peoples Brigade, one of a string of suspected Tiger fronts that claimed responsibility for attacks on the military that killed dozens of servicemen in December and January, said they would resume attacks.

"The military and paramilitary groups ... have resumed their atrocities again," said a statement circulated in the eastern town of

Batticaloa and seen by Reuters.

It accused troops of destroying Tamil culture, harassing young Tamil women and spreading AIDS. The army denies any abuse charges.

"We are forced to resume activities recently stopped by us," the statement added in Tamil. "We shall resume our activities so the military ... are aware of the severity of our attacks."

Similar threats from suspected Tiger fronts were delivered in the run-up to the last round of talks, but no attacks followed.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka banned deep sea fishing off the island's troubled regions from Monday, two days after Tiger rebels blew up a navy gunboat and killed eight sailors, a defence official said.

The ban would apply to trawlers with immediate effect, the official said.

Vessels would need written permission from navy chief Wasantha Karannagoda to enter the prohibited zone.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian communist leader Jyoti Basu (2R) gestures as he pays his respects to Anil Biswas, Communist Party of India (Marxist) Politburo member in Kolkata yesterday. Biswas, who died after suffering a massive brain haemorrhage, was the key functionary of the state party organisation as former editor of party mouthpiece Ganashakti.

Olmert eyes victory in Israeli polls

AFP, Jerusalem

Acting leader Ehud Olmert appeared well on course for victory in polls published on the eve of an election set for today to usher in an unprecedented drive to fix the final borders of Israel.

Olmert, the loyal deputy who was catapulted to power when Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a massive stroke 12 weeks ago, is tipped to beat his rivals before starting the major task of separating from the Palestinians.

The final crop of opinion polls published 24 hours before the polling stations open put Olmert's Kadima party well ahead of its rivals with 34 seats in the 120-member parliament, if slightly fewer than in previous surveys.

Yet in an essentially lacklustre campaign for an election Kadima has always been expected to win, the last polls provoked concern over a significant proportion of undecided voters and the rising fortunes of the extreme right.

Olmert's main rivals, leader of the centre-left Labour Amir Peretz, was set to emerge the second force in parliament, while chairman of the right-wing Likud Benjamin Netanyahu was left facing the prospect of electoral disaster.

The Yediot Aharonot daily forecast Labour would win 21 seats — one up from its current 20 in parliament — and Likud 13 in Tuesday's election.

A rival survey published by the populist Maariv newspaper gave Kadima 34 seats, Labour 17, Likud 14 and Yisrael Beiteinu 12.

The Yediot poll predicted that the ultra-nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu would win 12 mandates and the ultra-Orthodox Shas 11, making them both potential kingmakers in the rush to form a governing coalition after the ballot.

A poll broadcast on Channel Two television predicted the extreme right Yisrael Beiteinu could even topple Likud as the third force in parliament.

Low turnout of Thais overseas for Apr 2 polls

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

Number of Thais overseas who cast the ballots for April 2 election have dropped by about 30 per cent, partly because they were not sure as to how the political situation in Thailand would evolve, Foreign Ministry's Consular Affairs Department Anucha Osathanond said on Monday.

Another reason for the low registration has to do with the lack of choices of candidates to choose, he said.

Thais who live in foreign countries are allowed by the election laws to exercised their rights. They have to register first before casting their votes by mailing in their votes or cast it personally at the Thai embassy abroad.

Anucha said 103,604 Thais have registered for the previous election over year ago. But as of today, only about 22 per cent have showed up to vote. This was almost 30 per cent reduction compared to the national election last year.

Nepal army attacks Maoist gathering

4 missing Polish trekkers found safe

AFP, Kathmandu

The Nepalese army yesterday attacked a Maoist rebel gathering with helicopter gunships and said ground troops were on the way to the scene.

The operation was carried out near a school where the rebels had gathered in Thokarpa village, 90km northeast of Kathmandu, an army officer said in the capital.

"Acting on a tip-off that the rebels were holding a gathering in the surroundings of Bagh Bhairav Higher Secondary School in the village, the troops launched an aerial attack at around 1 p.m. Monday," the officer said on condition of anonymity.

"We are still waiting for details as the ground troops have not yet reached the site," he said. A local journalist, who asked not to be named, told AFP that at least four Maoists and a civilian were killed in the two-hour aerial attack.

The rebels are waging a decade-

long insurgency in which more than 12,500 people have been killed.

Meanwhile, four missing Polish trekkers feared abducted by Maoist rebels in Nepal were found safe by police on Monday on a trail in the Mount Everest area, four days after they made an emergency call.

"I spoke to them personally over the phone today and they said they had a small argument with the rebels who had asked for money. The dispute was settled and the trekkers are safe," said Ang Tshering Sherpa, the president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association.

He said the four planned to continue their trek.

Marzena Stanisewska, Wojcick Mysiara, Konrad Kakolewski and Maria Los had called colleagues via satellite phone on March 23 and said they had been abducted by the rebels, according to Bharat Kumar Ghimire, general secretary of the Nepal Esperanto Association where two of the trekkers worked.

Immigration debate heats up in Senate

AP, Washington

The Senate tackles the hot-button election issue of what to do with the nation's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants this week, with President Bush coming down on the side of letting many of them stay if they have jobs.

Bush planned to use a naturalisation ceremony for swearing in 30 new citizens Monday to press his call for a "guest worker" programme. The Senate Judiciary Committee, meanwhile, faced a midnight deadline for completing a bill that would do it.

"We must remember there are hardworking individuals, doing the jobs that Americans will not do, who are contributing the economic vitality of our country," the president said in his weekend radio address.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, calls for tougher border security have dominated debate over the knotty problem of controlling immigration.

But a tough immigration-enforcement bill passed by the House last year has galvanised forces that want worker programmes for illegal immigrants already in the country.

Chinese village suffers second gas blast

AFP, Chongqing

A gas explosion has forced the evacuation of 11,500 people in an area of southwest China where a chemical disaster just over two years ago claimed 243 lives, officials said yesterday.

There were no reports of deaths in the latest accident in Chongqing municipality early Saturday, although state media said the local river had been polluted and farmers expressed fears for their livestock.

The accident in Chongqing's Xiaoyang village was the same location as another gas leak in December 2003 that killed 243 people in one of the nation's dead-

est industrial incidents.

Both accidents occurred in operations run by the Chuandong Drilling Company, which is owned by China's largest oil firm, the China National Petroleum Corporation.

CNPC confirmed in a statement on Monday the latest accident had happened but officials from the company refused to comment when contacted by AFP.

A broken pipeline leading to a gas well caused Saturday's blast, with local residents reporting hearing a "big bang" and seeing the nearby Gaoqiao river "rolling and foaming", the state-run Xinhua news agency said.