

Pratibha Patil to face big challenge

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conceded defeat in the vote
Thursday for the largely ceremonial
post of head of state.

The voting followed a savage
debate over the past month about
her fitness for the job. Analysts
have described the presidential
campaign as the most vitriolic in
India's 60 years of independence.

Patil, a native of the western
state of Maharashtra, was championed
by ruling Congress party
president Sonia Gandhi, who said
her election would help the cause
of gender equality.

But Indian politics is rarely
without controversy. Patil has been
buffeted by accusations that she
protected her brother in a murder
probe and shielded her husband in a
suicide scandal.

There have also been charges
of nepotism and involvement in a
slew of financial scams.

The opposition also issued a
booklet entitled: "Does This Tainted
Person Deserve to Become the

President of India?"

Patil, who has denied all allegations
of wrongdoing, also has a
tough act to follow in outgoing
president Abdul Kalam, whose bid
for a second term was rebuffed by
Congress.

The silver-haired, shaggy-
locked missile scientist was
dubbed the "People's President"
for his populist style and large
following.

Patil, a lawyer who dresses
conservatively in a sari pulled over
her hair, has been mocked for
revealing to a television audience
that a dead spiritual guru gave her a
"divine premonition of greater
responsibility."

"The future president of India
speaks to dead people," wrote
Tavleen Singh, in a column for the
Indian Express newspaper. "This is
almost worse than her shady past."

Alongside opposition attacks,
the media has been busy digging
up skeletons from the bespectacled
Patil's past.

One paper unearthed a speech
she made in 1975 to the
Maharashtra state legislature in
which she said the government
was considering "compulsory
sterilisation" to check a burgeoning
birth rate.

India's top news magazine,
India Today, put her on its front
cover with the headline "Embar-
rassing Choice." Its editor-in-chief
Aroon Purie said the question was
not "Pratibha who?" but "Pratibha
why?"

"If the courts move against her
close relatives in ongoing cases,
her position will become untenable,"
wrote TN Ninan, the publisher of
the leading financial daily
Business Standard.

In India, presidential candidates
and their families are traditionally
expected to be free from any scandal.

Even though she has spent
nearly a half century in politics, the
Rajasthan governor was an
obscure figure nationally until

Gandhi's nod for her nomination
vaulted her to the front-pages.

"This is a very sad thing, a
nondescript person with all kinds of
strange allegations against her and no
attempt to get a person of eminence -- one more institution of
democracy gone down the drain," said
veteran columnist Prem Shankar Jha.

A long-time supporter of the late
prime minister Indira Gandhi and a
staunch Nehru-Gandhi political
dynasty loyalist, Patil is on friendly
terms with Indira's daughter-in-law,
Sonia.

"She is basically a hardcore
Congress party loyalist, that's why
she got the nod," said political
analyst Mahesh Rangarajan.

The key question going forward,
said analysts, was whether she
would be able to resist the
pressures of the ruling coalition and act
independently.

Under the constitution, the
prime minister wields most of the
executive power but the president
plays a role in forming government
at the state and federal levels,
which makes the job hotly contested.

"We have to wait and watch but
there is very little in her past to
inspire confidence," said
Rangarajan.

Rejoinder

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not possible because this kind of
small plant cannot be launched
under such a huge grid network, the
rejoinder said.

The government plans to com-
plete the plant's rehabilitation pro-
ject within June 2008, it added.

Our reply: The three-unit 100MW
Haripur plant went out of order three
years ago and now it is undergoing a
rehabilitation project. Had there
been no fault with the plant now, it
would have been running.

The necessity of the diesel
generator is proven through the fact
that the PDB floated its tender
thrice, although there was no positive
result.

The argument that in case of grid
failure gas pressure will increase,
and therefore the gas booster
compressor can start up on its own
is very weak. The gas pressure will
be high during the grid failure, but it
will go down as large plants will start
to go online. Each plant should be
independently equipped to operate
on its own, experts say.

We stand by our report.



PHOTO: STAR
An approach road to the bridge at Kamrangir Char is getting narrower due to soil erosion, making it difficult for vehicles to pass. The authorities have tried to prevent soil erosion with sacks of sand, but to no avail.

The scourge puts victims at fatal risk

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spread rapidly in the capital and
elsewhere in the last few years, but the
law enforcers woke up to the reality of

the scourge of this specific crime, only
recently. About 200 victims of such
criminal gangs were treated in Dhaka
Medical College Hospital (DMCH)
every month over the last four months,
and during the same period at least
four victims died.

Staff of the emergency department
of DMCH said only 5 to 10 such victims
a month used to get admitted to the
hospital five years ago.

"If strong narcotics are used on an
individual, that person might get killed
or his or her memory might get damaged,"
Prof Dr AH Mohammad Firoz,
director of the National Institute of
Mental Health, told The Daily Star. He
said large doses of sedatives or
narcotics might even cause permanent
mental disorder in a victim.

He said people of over 40 and
below 15 years of age are at high risk
of brain damage if drugged with large
doses of strong sedatives.

Dr AKM Azad Hossain, registrar of
the DMCH medicine ward, said
aggyan party members use large
doses of different types of sedatives to
make their victims unconscious as
quickly as possible.

A victim with a longstanding illness
might even die if the dose of sedative is
large and if the victim does not get

proper medical attention immediately
after the attack.

"If a victim has ongoing kidney or
liver complications those might get
severely aggravated if a large dose of
sedative is administered on the person.
It might also cause blood pressure
to rise," Azad Hossain, who has a
long track record of treating such
patients, told The Daily Star. If elderly
people become victims of such gangs,
they also might die from such sedation,
he added.

Over dose of such drugs sometimes
might damage brain tissues or
cells paralysing that particular part of
the brain.

HOW AND WHERE THE GANGS OPERATE

The gangs are mainly active in
crowded places like bus terminals,
railway stations, and launch terminals.
They first target a person and then
somehow feed the target the sedative
mixed with water, biscuits or other
foods including coconut water.

After their targets become uncon-
scious they make away with the
victims' belongings.

Passengers, taxi-cab and CNG
auto-rickshaw drivers, and rickshaw-
pullers are usually the prime targets of
the gangs.

Nowadays, Zia International
Airport (ZIA) has also become a
hotspot for the aggyan parties. People
of the working class, particularly the

ones returning home from abroad,
often become the victims of the gangs.

The sudden rise of such crimes
prompted the police authorities to
deploy a special team of the Detective
Branch (DB) to fight the menace,
which has been cracking down on the
gangs since the first week of June.

Additional Deputy Commissioner
Md Asaduzzaman, who is leading the
team, said they arrested at least 50
members of such gangs in the last one
month.

He said the gangs mix seven to eight
Lorazepam, a very strong sedative
tablets imported from Pakistan, in tea,
water or coconut water and serve it to
their targets.

THE PIONEER IN THE TRADE

DB claims to have arrested the
pioneer of 'aggyan party' recently. The
man named Pundit ostensibly narrated
to the law enforcers how he
formed his gang 25 years ago and the
way he used to run its activities.

Pundit told the police that he
started in 1981-82 with six members. A
few years into the inception he got
arrested and his followers split into
separate gangs. Since then the activi-
ties and number of the gangs have
been spreading. Now there are such
gangs even outside the capital.

Police often find it difficult to catch
the members of such gangs with
evidence as powdered sedatives,
which are their tools of the trade, can
be hidden or thrown away quite easily.

Cases filed in connection with
robberies after sedating them
with drugs or poison or other intoxicating
chemicals, could not be proved in

courts due to negligence of police and
lack of witnesses and evidence,
commented a lawyer of the Judge
Court in Dhaka.

He also said now anyone found
guilty of committing such a crime will
have to serve 10 years in jail. "The
punishment is not enough as a victim
might even die or be disabled permanently
from such intoxication. So the
punishment in such cases should be
more rigorous," the lawyer added.

THE ORDEALS

Most of the victims of such attacks
undergo serious ordeals as in most
cases they are attacked when they are
alone.

When a victim is admitted to
DMCH, where the most of such victims
in the city are usually admitted, he or
she quite often does not get proper
treatment as none of their relatives
could accompany them there to buy
medicines or to take care of them.

They are usually kept abandoned on
the veranda of DMCH. The process of
stomach wash administered on the
victims by doctors, is also very discom-
fiting and often painful.



Standard Chartered, Transaction Banking, has signed a MoU with the British Council in the city recently. Under the MoU, Standard Chartered will collect all examination fees on behalf of the British Council. The photo shows Mirza Aminur Rahman, director & head of Transaction Banking, and Richard Sunderland, acting director of British Council, signing the MoU.

Taiwan launches fresh UN membership bid

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan has launched a fresh
bid for membership of the
United Nations, a presidential
aide said yesterday, but the
move met with an immediate
rejection.

Deputy presidential secretary
general Chen Chi-mai said the bid
would use the name "Taiwan"
rather than the official title the
"Republic of China."

He also warned China not to

sabotage the move, saying that
Taiwan is a sovereign country and
not part of China.

Beijing has shot down Taiwan's
repeated efforts to join the UN over
the past 14 years under the name
"Republic of China," claiming the
island is part of its territory awaiting
reunification.

"The (Taipei) government will do
all it can to defend our sovereignty,
dignity and safety in the face of
China's boycott and suppression,"
Chen told a press conference at

the presidential office here.

"Since 1993 our allies had
proposed to solve the membership
issue (in the UN's General
Assembly)... but our modest and
rational approach has been
rejected. Therefore we are pre-
senting the (different) membership
case this year," he said.

But China's foreign ministry
spokesman Liu Jianchao said it
was a "separatist action by Taiwan
independence forces aimed at
splitting Taiwan from China."

He also warned China not to