

Pratibha promises to fight for women's rights, unborn girls

AFP, New Delhi

India's first woman president was sworn into office yesterday and promised to fight for the rights of women and an end to the widespread practice of aborting female foetuses.

Pratibha Patil, 72, also said the country's hundreds of millions of poor should reap the benefit of India's blistering economic growth of over nine percent.

"India stands at the threshold of a new era of progress, and it should be a combined endeavour. We must ensure that every section of society are equal partners in the development process," she said.

"Our combined endeavour should be to ensure that the rate of economic growth is sustained and it is socially inclusive," Patil said after taking the oath as India's first woman head of state since independence from the British 60 years ago.

"A developing country of over a billion people should live together and move forward together," she said as she assumed the largely ceremonial position.

Under India's constitution, the prime minister wields executive power but the president plays a role in forming governments at state and federal levels, making the post hotly contested in India's fractured political landscape.

Patil, a diminutive bespectacled figure, was plucked from relative political obscurity by Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of former premier Rajiv Gandhi and the powerful head of the ruling Congress party.

She was elected by federal and state legislators last week, and replaces respected missile scientist Abdul Kalam, a 72-year-old respected for his populist style.

But Patil endured a bruising campaign, with the opposition accusing her of protecting her

brother in a murder probe, shielding her husband in a suicide scandal and involvement in a slew of financial scams.

Patil, who was governor of the northwestern desert state of Rajasthan, denied all wrongdoing, saying the allegations were politically motivated.

In her speech, Patil promised to use her influence to focus on India's stubborn list of social ills.

"We must banish malnutrition, social evils, infant mortality and female foeticide," said Patil, who was dressed in a white sari with a green border. "We must fight poverty, ignorance and disease."

India loses an average of 7,000 girls every day through abortions because of a traditional preference for sons, according to a Unicef report last year.

Abortions have also resulted in a severely skewed gender ratio in India, where there are only 927

females for every 1,000 males -- far lower than the worldwide average of 1,050 females.

"I am deeply committed to the cause of education... the empowerment of women is particularly important to me," Patil added in the speech to parliament.

After the ceremony, Patil was driven in a black stretch limousine accompanied by horse-mounted bodyguards to the presidential palace, where she was given a 21-gun salute.

Sonia Gandhi had said Patil's election would be an historic moment for the world's largest democracy and second-most populous nation, and boost the cause for women in a country where many face massive sexual discrimination.



India's newly sworn-in president Pratibha Patil inspects a guard of honour at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi yesterday.

Indian cabinet okays nuclear deal with US

AFP, New Delhi

India's cabinet yesterday approved a landmark civilian nuclear cooperation accord with Washington, the first in a series of approvals required before the deal can be implemented.

The deal, allowing the United States to sell atomic technology and fuel to India, still requires the nod from India's Congress-led government's Communist allies.

The Communists have been bitterly critical of the deal, but their support is needed for it to clear the Indian parliament.

"All concerns of India have been reflected and have been adequately addressed," Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee told reporters after two cabinet committees both "approved the agreement."

The accord is aimed at helping India meet its soaring energy demands by reversing three decades of US sanctions imposed over nuclear tests carried out by India in 1974 and 1998.

The fine-print of the accord, broadly clinched during a visit to India by US president George W. Bush in March 2006, was hammered out last week in Washington during a visit by National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan and Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon.

The implementation agreement, or "123 agreement," is intended to capture all operational aspects of the nuclear deal, which is also aimed at galvanising strategic ties between the world's two biggest democracies.

Another person to die for Mumbai blasts

AFP, Mumbai

An Indian anti-terrorism court yesterday sentenced another person to death over serial bomb blasts that shook financial capital Mumbai in 1993 killing 257 people, prosecutors said.

The "Black Friday" attacks, which also injured more than 800 people, were believed to have been staged by Mumbai's Muslim-dominated underworld in retaliation for deadly Hindu-Muslim clashes a few months earlier.

The court sentenced to death Mohammed Pawle for acts of terror by planting bombs at the landmark Air India building and a petrol pump in central Mumbai," chief prosecutor Ujjwal Nikam said.

Twenty people died and 84 were injured in the Air India blast.

Pawle, who was ill, lay on one of the court benches as Judge Pramod Kode read out the sentence.

"No other sentence can be given (for these crimes) other than capital punishment," Kode said, according to media reports.

So far, 92 of the 100 people convicted in the case have been sentenced, with 11 receiving death sentences and 17 getting life sentences, Nikam told AFP.

Those sentenced are expected to appeal.

Food, clothes and cinema bring comfort to British flood victims

AFP, Oxford

Shaken evacuees from the flooded British city of Oxford were being helped back on to their feet yesterday by charities offering dry clothes, food, massage and free cinema trips.

About 150 people including pensioners and families with small children have been taken from their homes in the deluged city centre to a football stadium on the outskirts of the university city.

There, charities including the British Red Cross and St John Ambulance are giving them food, clothing, basic toiletries and a place to sleep -- often in hospitality boxes which overlook the football pitch.

There are also hand and shoulder massages for people whose bodies were strained by the evacuation and a prayer room for moments of quiet contemplation.

Joanne Way, a 34-year-old mother of six, said she and her children, aged between one and 14, left their home Sunday as tributaries of the River Thames burst their banks, spilling dark water onto the streets.

Although full of praise for the charities' work, she said she was frustrated by the varying advice coming from authorities about the flooding levels.

The flooding in Oxford was initially expected to peak Monday night, but now even higher water levels are expected in the coming hours.

"It's up and down and up and down and that's what's really frustrating," she told AFP.

"I've been down there every day and it's like, 'what's the situation today?' -- well, it's quite alright today actually, we think we're going to be alright'. Then you go five hours later and all hell's broke loose, it's like a



PHOTO: AFP

Sand bags attempt to keep the rising River Thames at bay in Oxford yesterday.

completely different story."

Like many, she said she had no housing contents insurance and was worried about the cost of replacing her possessions.

"Everything's new -- brand new cookers that we've put in ourselves and fridges and freezers and washing machines," she said.

"That takes time getting all that stuff. There's no way we can afford to do it in one."

Officials at the stadium say it could accommodate up to 1,500 people for as long as they need shelter, although the local council is beginning to find temporary housing for some.

British Red Cross team leader Carol Mackay, who has worked on disasters including the July 7, 2005 suicide bombings in London, said spirits were "extremely high" and that

they were executing a pre-laid contingency plan.

The neighbouring Holiday Inn Express hotel is housing many of the elderly people who have been evacuated from their homes, including Kathy Nissim, 85, who was forced out by the rising waters Wednesday morning.

"At half past six this morning, the police were on my doorstep offering to remove me and I said, 'yes please'," she said, adding she felt "very depressed" at what had happened to her home.

"My lovely carpets were inundated, my white covered furniture is inundated so it's ruined my house. Basically, I might move out altogether."

Bird flu breaks out in Manipur

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday reported an outbreak of bird flu among poultry, the first since it declared itself free of the disease last August, sparking public fears despite official calls for calm.

The government's department of animal husbandry said on its website that the outbreak had occurred on a farm in northeastern Manipur state, where 132 of 144 chickens died earlier this month.

The department did not say whether the chickens had succumbed to the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of avian influenza.

"All preventive measures are being taken," Bimal Singh, an official at the state chief minister's office in Imphal, told AFP by telephone.

However, people in Manipur were already starting to worry.

"People have already stopped eating chicken or even eggs," said Mani Singh, a businessman in Imphal, the state capital.

Manipur borders Myanmar, which has reported two outbreaks of the H5N1 strain among its poultry flocks this year.

A team of experts from the animal husbandry department were dispatched to Manipur to work out strategies to tackle the outbreak and prevent its spread, Singh said.

"Chickens are being culled in a five-kilometre radius from the farm where the deaths were reported," a senior veterinary official said in Imphal.

Rice to tour Middle East next week

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is to embark on a four-day Middle East tour next week to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and stability in Iraq, the State Department said Tuesday.

The trip is to include Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the Palestinian territories and will run from July 30-August 2, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates is to accompany Rice to Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, and Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for talks specifically focused on Iraq, McCormack said.

"The two will meet with their counterparts to discuss the ways in which Iraq's neighbors can help advance the cause of security and stability in that country," he said.

Arab ministers in Israel to push peace plan

AFP, Jerusalem

The first Arab League delegation to visit Israel was yesterday locked in "historic" talks with Israeli leaders in west Jerusalem to promote a newly revived Middle East peace plan.

The foreign ministers of Egypt and Jordan arrived separately but were spending the day together in a series of talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defence Minister Ehud Barak.

Their countries are the only two Arab states to sign peace with Israel and they hope to persuade it to accept a peace initiative that was revised by Saudi Arabia and re-adopted by the Arab League in March.

Egypt's Ahmed Abul Gheit and

Jordan's Abdel Ilah al-Khatib met right-wing opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu and the largely ceremonial head of state Shimon Peres, before heading into flagship talks with Livni.

The 22-member League tasked Egypt and Jordan with persuading the Jewish state to accept the plan, which was adopted at its summit in Riyadh last March.

The blueprint offers Israel normalisation of ties with Arab nations in exchange for full withdrawal from Arab land occupied during the 1967 Six-Day War, the creation of a Palestinian state and a return of refugees.

The ministers will take to Israel "the message (that there is) a joint and serious offer for peace in the region and we hope there will be a positive

reaction," Khatib told AFP in Amman before travelling to Jerusalem.

Israel's foreign ministry hailed the talks as "historic" and said it wanted to see moderate Arab states play a greater role in peace efforts.

"This is the first time that a delegation has arrived in Israel under the auspices of the Arab League," ministry spokesman Mark Regev told AFP.

"An official Arab League body has authorised this mission to come to Israel and that is historic.

"We think the Arab world should play a positive role in supporting Palestinians who believe in peace and reconciliation ... The Arab world has to be more involved and they can be more involved," Regev said.

India to face serious water shortages in days to come

PTI, Washington

An international study group has warned that the water shortages in India and other parts of the world will be a serious problem in days to come.

"Scores of countries are overpumping aquifers as they struggle to satisfy their growing water needs, including each of the big three grain producers -- China, India, and the US. More than half the world's people live in countries where water tables are falling," Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute has said.

In India, water shortages are particularly serious simply because the margin between actual food consumption and survival is so precarious.

In a survey of India's water situation, Fred Pearce reported in New Scientist that the 21 million wells drilled are lowering water tables in most parts of the country.

"In North Gujarat, the water table is falling by 6 metres per year. In Tamil Nadu, a state with more than 62 million people in Southern India, wells are going dry almost everywhere and falling water tables have dried up 95 per cent of the wells owned by small farmers, reducing the irrigated area in the state by half over the last decade," Brown has noted.

"As water tables fall, well drillers are using modified oil-drilling technology to reach water, going as deep as 1,000 metres in some locations. In communi-

ties where underground water sources have dried up entirely, all agriculture is rain-fed and drinking water is trucked in,"

Tushaar Shah, who heads the International Water Management Institute's groundwater station in Gujarat, said of India's water situation.

The situation over water is equally serious in Pakistan whose population is growing by three millions a year and a country that is mining underground water.

"In the Pakistani part of the fertile Punjab plain, the drop in water tables appears to be similar to that in India. Observation wells near the twin cities of

Islamabad and Rawalpindi show a fall in the water table between 1982 and 2000 that ranges from one to nearly two metres a year," Brown has said in his latest finding.

"In the province of Balochistan, water tables around the capital, Quetta, are falling by 3.5 metres per year. Richard Garstang, a water expert with the World Wildlife Fund and a participant in a study of Pakistan's water situation, said in 2001 that within 15 years Quetta will run out of water if the current consumption rate continues," he pointed out.

Heatwave claims 500 in a week in Hungary

AFP, Budapest

Hungary said Tuesday as many as 500 people may have died last week in a heatwave which was continuing to stifle much of southern and eastern Europe and spark deadly brush fires.

Searing temperatures across the region have claimed scores of lives, including in southern Italy where a wildfire Tuesday burned two people alive in their car and suffocated another pair on a beach nearby.

At the same time, Britain was struggling to cope with its worst flooding for 60 years, which has seen some towns turned into islands and hundreds of thousands of homes left without power or running water.

Hungary's chief medical officer Ferenc Falus said that from July 15 to July 22 the heat in the central region of the country had "contributed to the early death of 230 people, which nationally means about 500 deaths".

Temperatures in Hungary hit an all-time high of 41.9 degrees Celsius (107.4 degrees Fahrenheit) on Tuesday in the southern city of Kiskunhalas.

Authorities in the Balkans warned people to stay indoors to avoid the extreme heat that had already killed 30 people in Romania and two in Bulgaria and Greece, with another two deaths reported in Croatia.

Temperatures in the region were commonly above 40 degrees Celsius, with Greece experiencing 45 degrees

on Tuesday and Italy a high of 44. Rome recorded one of its warmest nights ever Monday at 27.1 degrees.

Bulgaria sweltered in its hottest temperatures since records began with the mercury shooting above 45 degrees Celsius in parts of the country, and more than 860 people were reported to have fainted in the streets in Romania.

The heat also fanned several fires, with one of the most serious on Tuesday raging near the southern Macedonian city of Bitola.

One person died and thousands were evacuated as the blaze lay waste to some 1,000 hectares of forest near Macedonia's second-largest city.

The Italian wildfires that claimed four lives Tuesday near the town of Peschici, in southern Puglia region, prompted the defence minister to send in the military to help.

Four campsites were destroyed and about 4,000 people were evacuated by sea from the beach at Peschici because of the blaze, the coastguard said.

Greece was also recovering from a season of blazes that in the past month have devastated 32,000 hectares, according to the government.

One of the larger fires destroyed 5,600 hectares of forest on Mount Parnitha overlooking Athens, including more than a third of a national park that was supposedly among Greece's best protected areas.