

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.

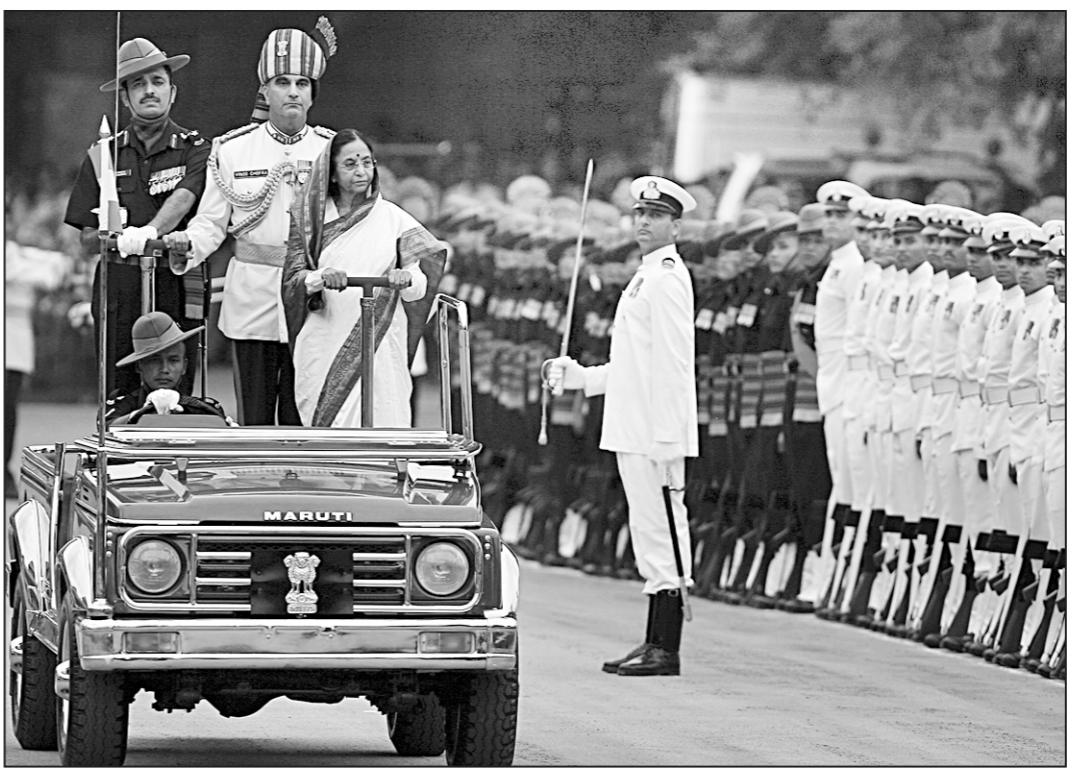


PHOTO: AFP

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

Food, clothes and cinema bring comfort to British flood victims

AFP, Oxford



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."

"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.

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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.

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Arab ministers in Israel to push peace plan

AFP, Jerusalem

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 flagships 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 normalization of ties with Arab nations in exchange for full withdrawal from 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.

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.

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

Tushar 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 million 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 policy, 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.