

Cong faces call to project Rahul as PM candidate

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Even though parliamentary election in India is due early next year, the demand for projecting Rahul Gandhi, the scion of Nehru-Gandhi family, as prime minister candidate grew louder from within the ruling Congress on Monday and it was welcomed by a key component of the ruling alliance.

Senior Congress leader and Human Resource Development Minister Arjun Singh told reporters here that he saw nothing wrong in projecting 35-year-old Rahul, son of Italy-born party chief Sonia Gandhi, as the prime ministerial candidate in the next general elections.

"Why not?" was the reply of septuagenarian Singh when asked if Rahul should be projected as the prime minister.

Singh, known since long as a loyalist of Nehru-Gandhi family, said Rahul has "all the qualities of his father (Rajiv Gandhi) who was

assassinated in 1991). He is making sincere efforts in acquiring information and knowledge that is required".

Another senior Congress leader Vayalar Ravi said Rahul Gandhi has already emerged "not only a leader of the Congress party but the most acceptable leader of this country".

Hours later on the same day, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) chief and Chief Minister of southern state of Tamil Nadu M Karunanidhi welcomed Arjun Singh's proposal.

"I will be happy if Rahul is made the prime ministerial candidate", Karunanidhi, whose party is a constituent of India's ruling United Progressive Alliance, told reporters in Chennai.

It remains to be seen if Karunanidhi's remarks would develop into an approval of other alliance partners to the leadership of Rahul Gandhi as the prime ministerial candidate.

It was only earlier this month that

Sonia Gandhi had said that Rahul turned down an offer to become a cabinet member headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The remarks by Arjun Singh and Karunanidhi's response came weeks after Sharad Pawar, the chief of Nationalist Congress Party, another constituent of UPA, favoured projecting incumbent Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, as the man for the top job again.

Pawar, who quit Congress opposing Sonia Gandhi as prime minister because of her foreign origin, openly praised Manmohan Singh for his democratic way of running the coalition government and wanted him to take up the top job once again if the UPA was voted back to power.

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Carter offers to be Hamas go-between

AP, Airport City

Heading into talks with Palestinian leaders, former US president Jimmy Carter offered to ferry messages from the militant Islamic Hamas group to the United States and even to Israel.

However, both potential recipients expressed displeasure at his planned meeting Friday with an exiled Hamas leader in Damascus, Syria. Carter meets Tuesday with Palestinian leaders in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Carter, who brokered Israel's historic peace accord with Egypt in 1979 on Monday defended his plan to meet Hamas supreme leader Khaled Mashaal, saying that isolating Hamas is counterproductive. He has no plans to visit the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.

Opponents say engaging Hamas in talks would grant legitimacy to the violently anti-Israel group and undermine moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as he tries to make peace with the Jewish state.



EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana (R) welcomes Amnesty International Secretary General Irene Khan yesterday before their bilateral meeting at EU headquarters in Brussels.

21 burn to death in Ugandan school

AP, Kampala

An overnight fire at a primary school dormitory in Uganda killed 19 school children and two adults, police said yesterday.

By the time the fire brigade reached the school, most of the girl's dormitory had already burned down at the school about 7 1/2 miles from the capital, Kampala. The students were between the ages of 7 and 10 and the adults were their matrons.

Police spokeswoman Judith Nabakooba said authorities were investigating the cause of the blaze.

The doors to the dormitory had been locked from the outside and there was no electricity during the time of the fire, said school worker James Kiiza.

"We suspect that bad people are responsible for the fire," he said. "We cannot say it was due to electricity short circuit. And the door was locked from outside, which shows that someone could have first locked the door before setting the fire."

Putin to lead Russia's ruling party as PM

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday agreed to head Russia's ruling party in a significant shift of the political landscape three weeks before he hands power to successor Dmitry Medvedev.

Putin, who leaves the Kremlin after two terms on May 7, also confirmed he would become prime minister under Medvedev.

"With gratitude I accept the proposal of the party members and their leadership... I am ready to take on the additional responsibility and head United Russia," he told a party congress in Moscow after being urged to take the post.

The 55-year-old ex-KGB officer's announcement, carried live on state-run television, signalled a reordering of Russia's political mix on the eve of Medvedev's presidential debut.

During his eight years in the Kremlin, Putin has steadily centralised power, with United Russia his tool for ensuring loyalty of an increasingly emasculated parliament.

Becoming head of the party, which won a constitutional majority with 63 percent of the vote in controversial December elections, will now hugely strengthen Putin's status as prime minister.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) walks behind President-elect Dmitry Medvedev to reach the podium to deliver a speech at the United Russia party congress in Moscow yesterday. Putin agreed to become leader of Russia's ruling party in a significant shift of the political landscape three weeks before handing power to his successor Dmitry Medvedev.

Global food crisis is now emergency: UN chief

AP, United Nations

A rapidly escalating global food crisis has reached emergency proportions and threatens to wipe out seven years of progress in the fight against poverty, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned Monday.

He called for short-term emergency measures in many regions to meet urgent food needs and avoid starvation and urged longer-term efforts to significantly increase production of food grains.

The international community

needs "to take urgent and concerted action in order to avoid the larger political and security implications of this growing crisis," Ban told international finance and trade officials who came to a UN meeting following weekend talks in Washington.

Ban's appeal came as President Bush ordered the release of \$200 million in emergency aid to help nations where surging food prices have deepened hunger woes and sparked violent protests. The money will come from a reserve fund known as the Bill Emerson

Land mine blasts kill 3 in Pakistan

AP, Quetta

Pakistan police say land mine blasts have killed three men and injured five others in insurgency-plagued Baluchistan province.

Police officer Bashir Ahmed says two men were riding a camel early Tuesday in the town of Dera Bugti when it hit a land mine, killing one man and the animal and injuring the second man. In the same area, one man was killed and another injured when their motorcycle hit another land mine.

Police officer Abdul Rasool Baksh Rind says another land mine explosion late Monday killed a worker for the state-run power company and injured three others near Baluchistan's capital of Quetta.

Authorities accuse rebel tribesmen of planting mines to target government forces.

Berlusconi wins third term by surprise margin

AFP, Rome

Conservative billionaire Silvio Berlusconi won Italy's general elections by an unexpectedly wide margin on Monday, securing a third term as prime minister but warning of tough times ahead for the country in the grip of an economic downturn.

"I will govern for five years," the 71-year-old media magnate told public television after his centre-right rival Walter Veltroni conceded defeat. "We have difficult months ahead that will require great strength."

He offered "an affectionate kiss to all Italians" before ending the telephone interview.

Veltroni, Rome's former mayor, said: "As is the custom in all Western democracies, I telephoned Berlusconi to acknowledge his victory and wish him good luck in his work."

Berlusconi will return to the prime minister's office for the third time since 1994, the year after he burst onto the political stage with his party of the time, Forza Italia.

Berlusconi's People of Freedom party (PDL), formed last year, absorbed the National Alliance.

Court scraps demand for Zimbabwe polls results

AP, Harare

Zimbabwe's opposition political party called a nationwide strike Tuesday after the country's High Court rejected an appeal for the immediate release of delayed presidential election results.

The court's decision dashed hopes for an end to Zimbabwe's paralyzing political crisis.

Opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai says he won the March 29 election outright and has accused President Robert Mugabe of holding back the results to try to maintain his 28-year grip in power.

Independent tallies show Tsvangirai won, but did not receive enough votes to prevent a runoff.

Police have banned all political rallies and Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change said that Tuesday's action would be a quiet "stay away," not a raucous strike with street protests.

Every Zimbabwean should stay at home until (the electoral commission) announces the results for surging inflation.

the presidential poll," MDC spokesman Nqobizitha Mlilo said in a statement.

There had been little publicity of the strike ahead of Tuesday and morning traffic was typically heavy in the capital as stores and businesses looked to be opening as usual.

The state-run newspaper called the strike an "illegal" action and said that police plan to "deal severely with anyone who breaches the law."

Assistant Police Commissioner Wayne Bvdzijena was quoted as saying in the Herald: "The National Reaction Force has been activated" to beef up the number of police to protect Zimbabweans who want to go to work as usual.

It was unclear what impact a work stoppage would have in an economically ravaged country that has 80 percent unemployment. Past strike calls have been met with resistance by impoverished workers who can't afford to lose even one day's wages in a country with surging inflation.

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