



Priyanka Gandhi (L) daughter of India's Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi chats with party workers as she stands in line to cast her vote during polling for Delhi state assembly elections in New Delhi yesterday.

2010 Myanmar election plans on course

Says military leader

AFP, Yangon

The head of Myanmar's military regime has told supporters plans for elections in 2010 under a controversial "road map" to democracy are well under way, state media reported yesterday.

Senior General Than Shwe's comments to a pro-junta group followed a number of heavy jail sentences handed down by the country's courts, including the lengthening of a prison term given to Myanmar's most famous comedian.

"The state's seven-step road map is, indeed, the only way to smooth (the) transi-

tion to democracy as well as (its) own transitional work programmes," Than Shwe was quoted as saying by the New Light of Myanmar newspaper.

"The government and the people have to materialize in harmony," he told the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), a pro-military social organisation, the paper said.

Authorities say the group has 24.6 million members, about half of the country's 57 million population. Analysts have said the junta could turn the USDA into a political party ahead of the elections, which are due in two years.

Somali pirates hope for 'favourable' Saudi reply

AFP, Mogadishu

Somali pirates demanding 25 million dollars for a Saudi supertanker seized two weeks ago said Saturday they were hoping for a "favourable" reply as the expiry for the ransom loomed.

The pirates hijacked the 330-metre long Sirius Star on November 15 and have given the owners of the giant oil carrier up to Sunday to pay the ransom.

"Though the ultimatum for the payment of the 25 million dollars is about to expire, we are still expecting to get a favourable reply," Mohammed Said, the leader of the group holding the Sirius Star, told AFP.

Indian troops kill 7 rebels ahead of Kashmir polls

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops shot dead seven Islamic militants, including Pakistanis, in revolt-hit Kashmir ahead of another round of voting in state elections, police said yesterday.

Separatist politicians and rebels have appealed to Kashmiris to boycott the polls, arguing that elections strengthen India's sway over the disputed region.

But so far turnout for the seven-stage election has been strong in the Muslim-majority region where Islamic militants are battling New Delhi's rule.

"The militants were killed in two separate gunbattles in (southern) Pulwama and (northern) Bandipora districts," a police statement said.

Two of the militants were Pakistani nationals and "both were members of Lashkar-e-

Toiba" militant group, the statement said.

The hardline organisation has been blamed by Indian officials for multiple attacks on the country's financial centre Mumbai, which ended early Saturday and left nearly 200 people dead, including over 20 foreigners.

Lashkar spokesman Abdullah Ghaznavi has denied the group's involvement, saying the outfit was being named to "malign Kashmir's freedom struggle".

Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan, both of which have nuclear arms and claim the whole region.

The fighting came ahead of Sunday's third round of voting in the Kupwara district, considered "sensitive" by election officials because it borders the Pakistan-administered part of the region.



Foreign tourists who have been stranded in Thailand for days stand beside a Kuwait Airways aircraft on the tarmac of the U-Tapao military airport, some 140 km southeast of Bangkok, during their evacuation yesterday.

Thaksin warns coup will bring bloodshed

AFP, Bangkok

Former Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by the military in 2006, has warned of bloodshed if the army stages another coup to end the political turmoil paralysing the kingdom.

Thaksin also said in a video interview posted on a reporter's blog that the army had a duty to

enforce law and order as protesters force the closure of Bangkok's two airports.

"If the coup were to happen there will be bloodshed -- it will not be an easy coup like in the past because the people in Thailand, now they are in hardship," he said in the interview with US blogger Thomas Crampton.

Canadian govt delays vote of no-confidence

AFP, Ottawa

Canada's Conservative government faces possible defeat as early as December 8, after refusing to back away from a showdown with the opposition over stimulus measures and spending cuts.

Opposition parties had threatened to vote on Monday to oust the ruling Conservatives unless Prime Minister Stephen Harper rushed through an economic stimulus package to help Canadians facing a possible recession.

And while in talks to form a new coalition government to succeed Harper's team, the opposition also demanded funding for political parties not be cut -- as was proposed in a fiscal update on Thursday that kicked off the constitutional firestorm.

Harper responded by deferring the vote, avoiding a possible power grab or the nation's fourth elections in four years -- only six weeks after being returned to office with a stronger minority in the last election.

"Less than two months ago the people of Canada gave our party a strengthened mandate to lead Canada during the most serious global economic crisis in generations," Harper said.

Airstrike, fighting kills 53 militants in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

Gunbattles and airstrikes by Nato and Afghan troops killed 53 militants in Afghanistan, including a wanted Taliban commander who tried to hide from soldiers under a woman's burqa, officials said Saturday.

The US forces targeting the commander surrounded a house Friday in Ghazni province and ordered everyone inside to leave, a military statement said.

Six women and 12 children left the building, but while soldiers were questioning the women they discovered one was actually a man dressed in a burqa, the traditional all-encompassing dress that most Afghan women wear. The man, later identified as the targeted commander Haji Yakub, tried to attack the soldiers and was killed, the military said.

Yakub allegedly directed roadside bomb and suicide attacks against Afghanistan's government and coalition forces in Ghazni, according to the statement. Three other militants were killed in the operation, it said.

Meanwhile, Afghan and coalition forces killed 33 militants when their patrol came under attack in southern Helmand province

Friday, a military statement said. The troops responded to the attack with gunfire and air support, it said.

In Kandahar province, meanwhile, a three-day Nato-Afghan operation in Zhari district killed 12 militants, said police Chief Matiullah Khan. No police were killed in the operation, which finished on Friday, he said.

Police in western Farah province said they killed four insurgents setting up a makeshift base in a village, apparently aiming to launch strikes on Farah city.

Residents of Raj, about two miles (three kilometers) north of Farah city, tipped off officials that a convoy of enemy fighters had arrived in the village, provincial police chief Gen. Abdul Ghafar Watandar said.

Afghan army and police attacked the nine-vehicle convoy, killing four insurgents and wounding another three as other insurgents fled, Watandar said. An Afghan police officer was also killed in the gunbattle, he said.

Afghanistan has seen a spike in violence over the last two years as more international troops pour into the country to battle a growing militant insurgency. Some 65,000 international forces now operate in Afghanistan.

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