

# Palestinian unity talks in Cairo hit deadlock

AFP, Cairo

Palestinian factions in Cairo for marathon unity talks were deadlocked yesterday after failing to agree on the composition and obligations of a unity government, officials said.

Senior delegations from the Islamist Hamas and the Western-backed Fatah faction of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas began work five days ago in committees they agreed to form to resolve their differences.

"The committees have done all their work with the exception of the two difficult issues," said senior Fatah official Nabil Shaath, the faction's representative in the committee tasked to agree on a national government.

"The difficulties are, first, what kind of commitments the government ought to give to gain international acceptance and, second, whether (the government) is composed of (representatives of) the

organisations or independents," he told AFP.

Palestinian officials said the committees would wrap up their work on Saturday and submit the outcome of their discussions to a steering committee, that would include Egyptian officials, for arbitration.

Fatah and Hamas have been bitterly divided since Hamas, which won a majority in a 2005 parliament election, seized control of the Gaza Strip in a week of deadly fighting in June 2007, limiting Abbas's writ to the West Bank.

"In the past few days, none of the essential issues have been practically resolved," said Osama Hamdan, Hamas's representative in Lebanon.

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum said the factions had narrowed the choice of government either to one that would be decided by a cross-faction agreement, or to one that would reflect the size of the blocs in parliament, where Hamas enjoys

a majority.

"Reconciling these positions is not very difficult. But the problem is the government's programme," he said, referring to previous commitments made by Fatah-led Palestinian governments to Israel.

Barhum stressed that Hamas would not agree to abide by previous commitments either by Fatah-led governments or the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, which signed a peace accord with Israel in 1993.

The stakes are high after a devastating 22-day war between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip in January and December.

Countries pledged 4.5 billion dollars in reconstruction aid to Gaza at a conference in the Egyptian resort town Sharm el-Sheikh earlier this month.

But many donor countries, backed by Abbas's government, have said they will not deal with the Hamas authorities in Gaza.

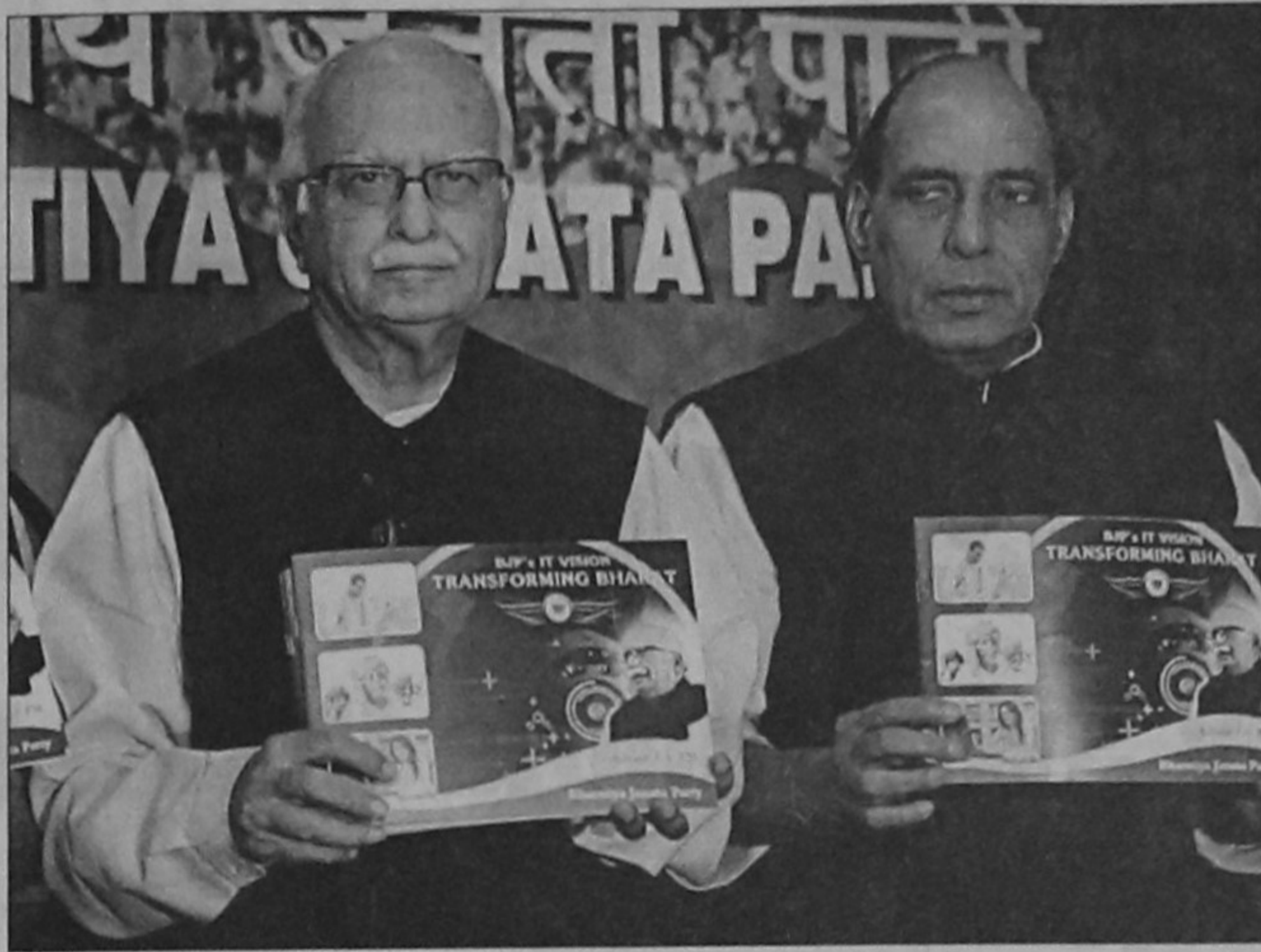


PHOTO: AFP

India's opposition leader and prime ministerial candidate from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Lal Krishna Advani (L) and BJP president Rajnath Singh hold copies of a document entitled the BJP's vision for transforming Bharat (India) in New Delhi yesterday.

## Cuba, Venezuela could host Russian bombers

AP, Moscow

A Russian Air Force chief said Saturday that Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has offered an island as a temporary base for strategic Russian bombers, the Interfax news agency reported.

The chief of staff of Russia's long range aviation, Maj. Gen. Anatoly Zhikharev, also said Cuba could be used to base the aircraft, Interfax reported.

The Kremlin, however, said the situation was hypothetical.

"The military is speaking about technical possibilities, that's all," Alexei Pavlov, a Kremlin official, told The Associated Press. "If there will be a development of the situation, then we can comment," he said.

## US concerned over Lanka 'safe zone' deaths

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa on Friday to express her 'deep concern' over mounting deaths in a government safe zone, a US official said.

Hillary Clinton told him that Sri Lankan troops "should not fire into civilian areas of the conflict zone" and urged him to

allow humanitarian groups full access to people in need, said a State Department spokesman, Gordon Duguid.

The secretary called Rajapaksa to "express the United States' deep concern over the deteriorating conditions and increasing loss of life" in the government-designated zone in the country's north, he said in a statement.

Last month the government in Colombo asked men, women

and children to move to a stretch of coastline as troops advanced on rebel positions in the north in a bid to crush all remaining pockets of resistance by Tamil Tiger rebels.

"The secretary stated that the Sri Lankan Army should not fire into the civilian areas of the conflict zone," according to Duguid who was replying to a question from AFP about the substance of the phone call.

## Kashmir govt to initiate talks with separatists

3 militants holed up in mosque killed

ANI, AFP, Srinagar

Former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah has said that the National Conference was ready to talk to separatists after the upcoming general elections.

"Either now or after the elections, the Chief Minister will open the negotiation channel with separatists so that new ideas will be floated for settlement of the state," Abdullah told reporters after the customary Friday prayers in Srinagar.

The National Conference and Congress party defied a separatist boycott to win the election in the disputed region in January and forged a coalition government.

Many Kashmiris saw the victory a hopeful sign that some deal could be reached to help end a conflict that has provoked two of India and Pakistan's

three wars.

Meanwhile, Indian troops in revolt-hit Kashmir shot dead three Islamic militants on Saturday who barricaded themselves inside a village mosque to evade arrest, police said.

"The army and police killed three militants after our repeated attempts to persuade them to surrender failed," a police spokesman said.

The three fled into the mosque when soldiers, backed by counter-insurgency police, began a search operation in a village in southern Kishtwar district.

"The mosque is being thoroughly searched to ensure there are no more militants inside," the spokesman said, adding the slain rebels were members of hardline Lashkar-e-Taiba -- the Islamic militant group blamed for the Mumbai attacks.

## 4 PLCs, local govt bodies

FROM PAGE 16

government however placed separate bills in parliament seeking to enact laws for continuation of the local government bodies' activities. But none of the bills was passed till date.

Against this backdrop, legal experts said functioning of the PLCs and local bodies might be impeded if anybody challenges in court their legal authority to function.

Senior officials of the law ministry however claim that Section 24 of the General Clauses Act 1897 safeguards their functioning although the ordinances ceased to have effect.

But legal experts say Section 24 of the Act does not provide legal coverage to the local bodies' activities as it deals with continuation of orders etc issued under enactments repealed and re-enacted. When the bills placed in parliament will be passed giving retrospective effect, it will give legal coverage to their previous functioning, they argued.

"But what is the legal authority that allows them (local bodies) to function during the interim period," questioned eminent jurist Shahdeen Malik.

"There is scope to think that they have no legal authority," he

said when contacted.

The jurist noted that if anyone challenges the legal authority of their functioning, the litigant might get court order in his favour at this stage.

Advocate Rahmat Ali, chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on LGRD ministry, which is scrutinising three bills on city corporation, municipality and upazila parishad, said they have no legal status at this moment.

"In fact, they are now flying in the sky," commented Rahmat Ali, who is also a member of the parliamentary standing committee on the law ministry.

The AL lawmaker, who was chief of the parliamentary special committee for selecting the ordinances for ratification in parliament, said both the PLCs and the local government bodies should continue their activities considering the prevailing situation.

"They should not handle any financial matters till the bills are passed giving them legal authority," he said, adding the bills will be passed giving retrospective effect.

He however said it is difficult for them to continue functioning during the interim period.

Apart from the four PLCs, six

city corporations, 308 municipalities and 4,482 union parishads across the country are now functioning.

The long due election to upazila parishads was held on January 22 and almost all the newly elected chairmen and vice-chairmen took oath of office at the end of February. But the newly constituted upazila parishads cannot begin functioning in the absence of the relevant law as the bill seeking revival of the upazila parishad act 1998 is yet to be passed by parliament.

Meanwhile, the High Court (HC) on March 11 questioned the legality of judicial magistracy as the ordinance promulgated by the caretaker government separating the judiciary from the executive was not ratified by parliament by February 24.

In a suo moto rule on the government, the HC asked it to explain by March 19 why the ordinance regarding separation of the judiciary was not ratified in time.

On expiry of effectiveness of the ordinance, the government placed a bill in the House seeking enactment of a law for continuation of separation of the judiciary. But the law is yet to be made.

## A farewell in forests

FROM PAGE 1

from a Tipra man in Bishamoni of Srimongol. It was only about two months old. Then it was brought to Satesh Babu in Srimongol town.

Satesh Babu maintains his own private zoo. But it is in a pathetic condition. Phayre's Langur is a globally threatened primate and in Bangladesh it is critically endangered.

"Its population is declining very fast and the present total number may not exceed 200," Dr Anwar told us as we were travelling to Srimongol to rescue the animal. "Habitat loss and poaching for its gallstones believed to have medicinal value are leading to its fast extinction."

The wildlife circle of the forest department has recently set up a rescue centre, but it has not been used since. Dr Anwar thought it would be a good place to keep the baby langur until it is fit enough to be reintroduced in the forest.

We carried the baby to our car. She sat there happily on my lap and trilled. She looked around with curious eyes, and shuddered as the AC was put to full blast. In forest, you don't get air conditioners.

As the car started rolling the langur became agitated; she screeched and jumped from one lap to another. Here eyes round with excitement.

"Cool down, my baby. Cool down," Satesh was trying to soothe the langur. She then hid under his arm.

When we entered the Lawachhera forest, the langur became excited again. She looked at the trees and howled. She knew forests were where she belongs.

The rescue centre sits inside the forest; a one-storey building with caged rooms. The langur baby would be the first resident of the centre.

A room had been prepared for the primate with thick tree branches, car tyres and ropes so that she could play and learn the life skills. She looked inside the room with incredulous eyes and clutched to Dr Anwar's chest. He took her gently off his chest and put her on a branch. She protested. Now she was sobbing loudly just like a human baby, breathing heavily.

We tried to shove her onto the tree branch. She screeched. We

quickly put her there and moved back. She gave out a loud wail, ran along the rope and jumped on Satesh's chest. She held him tightly and sobbed.

"Meye, eita to tomar ghor. Kaindo na. (Baby, this is your home, don't cry)," Satesh patted her head buried into the fold of his shirt. "Meye, tumi vala thakba (girl, you will live well here). Amit make roj dekhaia jamu (I will visit you everyday)."

Satesh could not say anymore. His voice choked. He gave her an apple. She would not take it.

We suddenly took her off, put her on the branch and shot out of the room. The door clamped tightly.

The langur screeched and wailed. She was desperately hanging onto the wire net and looking at us with her pleading eyes.

We did not stay there. We were walking down the dirt road. She started sobbing loudly again.

We were walking fast, but faster travelled her cry. But we knew, one day the little girl would be a nice, young woman and then walk away into the forest where she belongs.

## Madagascar opposition appoints own PM

AP, Antananarivo, Madagascar

Madagascar's opposition leader declared himself president and appointed a prime minister as head of a transition government Saturday, as the authority of embattled leader Marc Ravalomanana crumbled.

An opposition statement said new presidential and parliamentary elections would be held within two years.

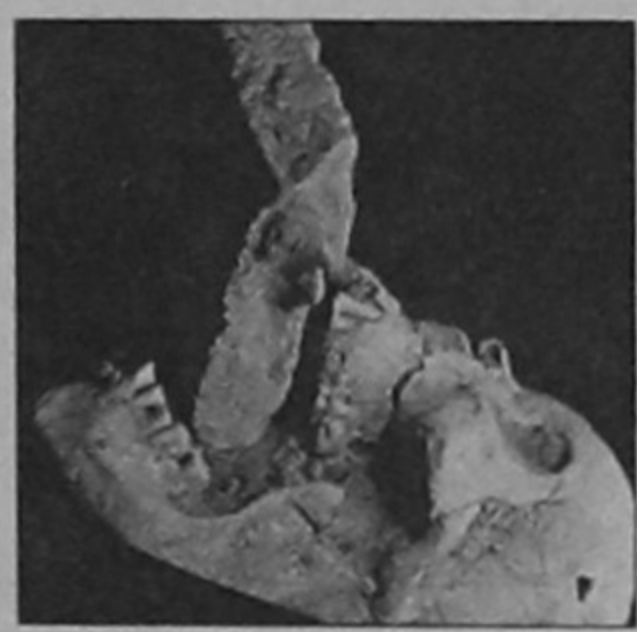


PHOTO: AP

This photo released by forensic archaeologist and anthropologist Matteo Borrini of Florence University, Italy, Friday, shows the 16th-century remains of a woman with a brick stuck between her jaws unearthed in 2006 in an archaeological dig near Venice, northern Italy.

Italy dig unearths female 'vampire' in Venice

AP, Rome

An archaeological dig near Venice has unearthed the 16th-century remains of a woman with a brick stuck between her jaws, evidence, experts say, that she was believed to be a vampire. The unusual burial is thought to be the result of an ancient vampire-slaying ritual. It suggests the legend of the mythical bloodsucking creatures was tied to medieval ignorance of how diseases spread and what happens to bodies after death, experts said.

The well-preserved skeleton was found in 2006 on the Lazzaretto Nuovo island, north of the lagoon city, amid other corpses buried in a mass grave during an epidemic of plague that hit Venice in 1576.

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