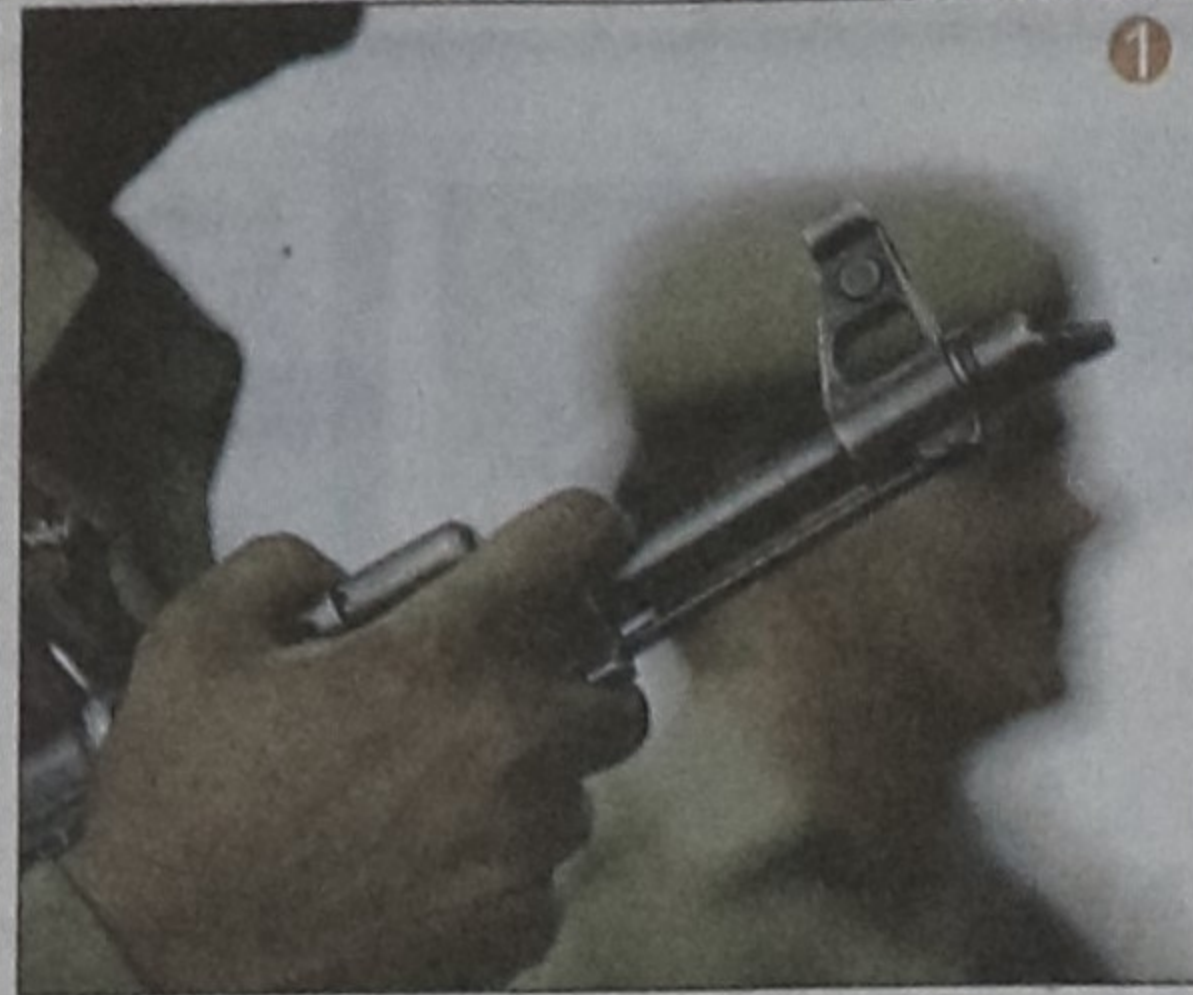
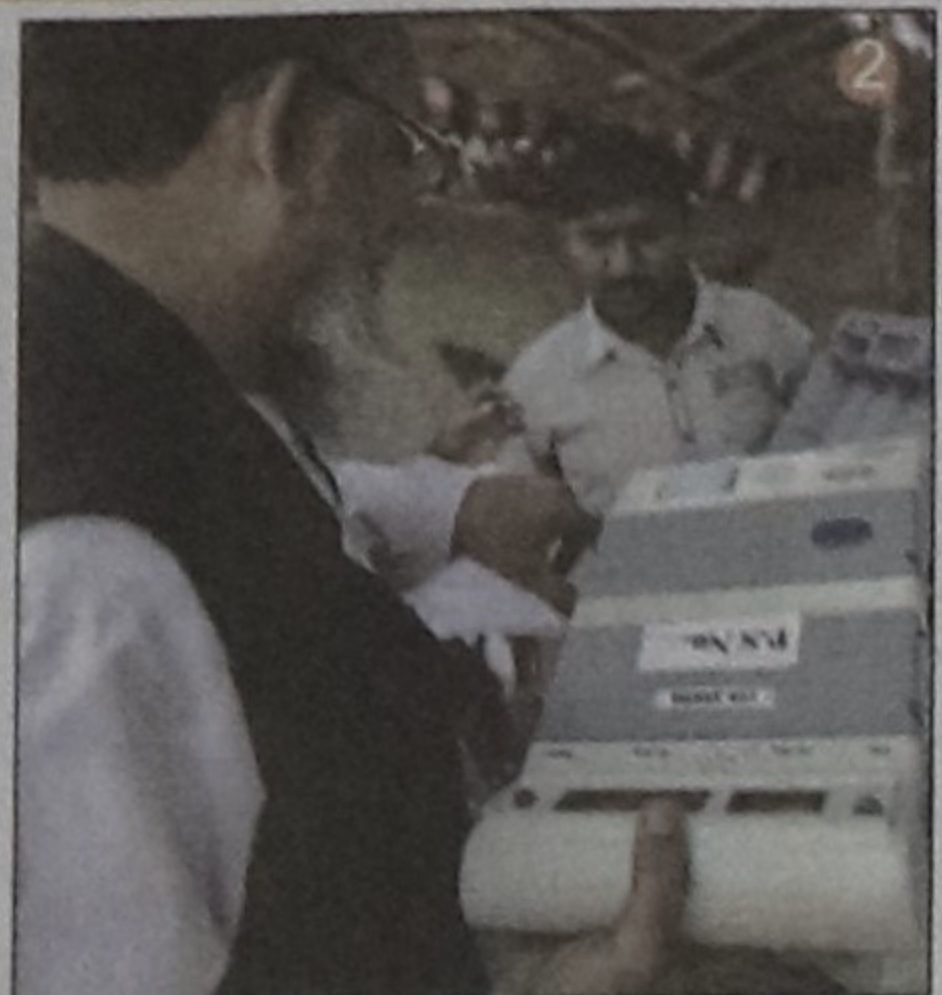
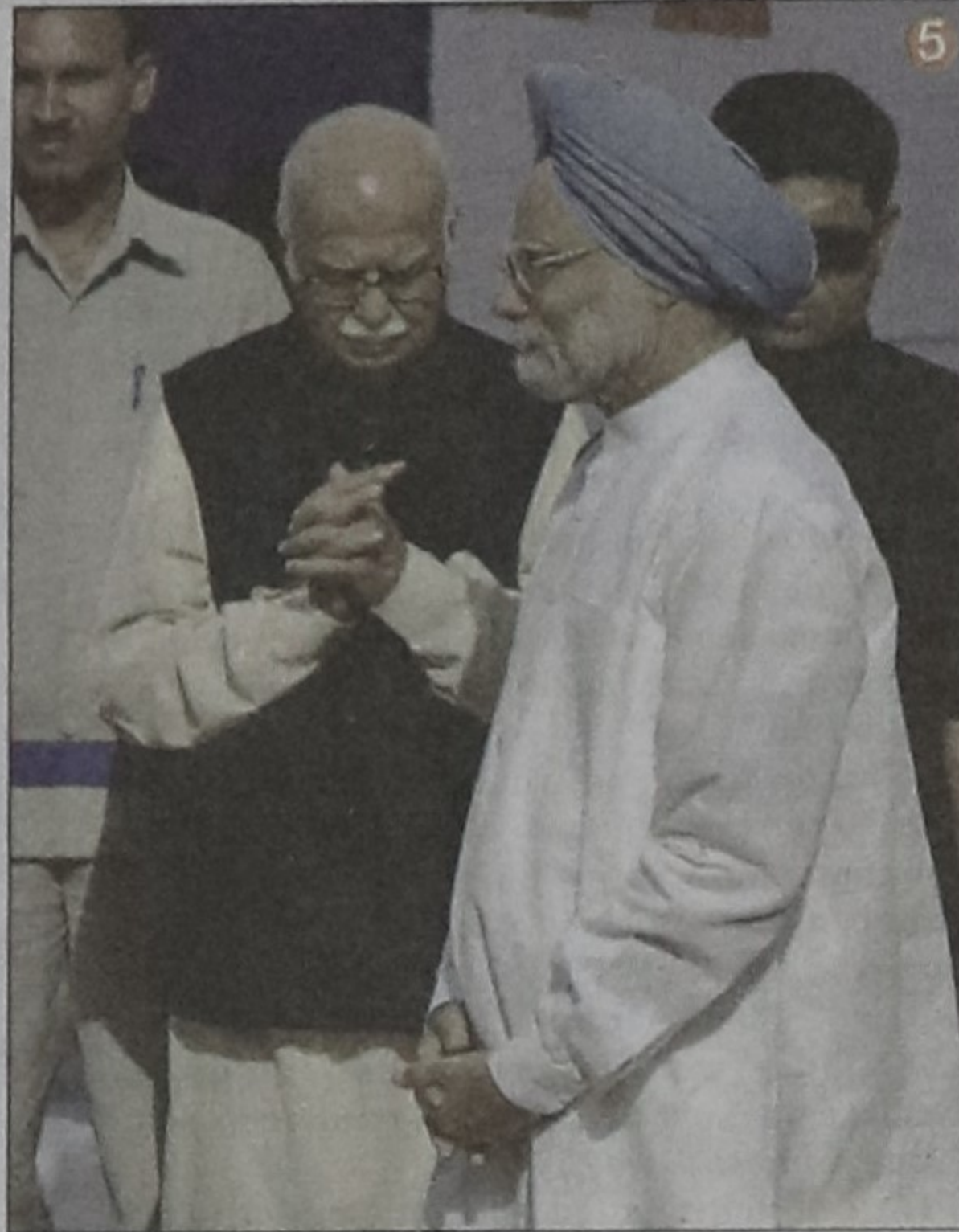


INDIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION 2009



Counter-Clockwise: (1) Indian policemen watch as unseen colleagues search commuters' bags during a random security check ahead of the first phase of parliamentary elections in Jammu yesterday. (2) Indian polling officers collect Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) from a centre in Hyderabad. (3) Polling officers check the working of Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) after receipt from a distribution centre at police lines in Varanasi. (4) Indian actress and Samajwadi Party candidate for Lucknow, Nafisa Ali (R) and Bollywood film star and Samajwadi Party secretary general Sanjay Dutt (L) wave to supporters during an electoral road show in Lucknow. (5) Earlier, Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) Prime Ministerial candidate, L K Advani (L) greets Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during the birthday anniversary celebration of Dalit icon Bhim Rao Ambedkar in New Delhi on April 14.



PHOTOS: AFP

Congress faces BJP as votes open for 15th Lok Sabha

AGENCIES, New Delhi

Millions of Indians are due to vote in the first round of the country's 15th general elections today.

Voters in 124 constituencies will be taking part in Thursday's vote. There are four other phases between then and the last phase on 13 May.

More than 700 million Indians overall are eligible to vote for seats in the lower house of parliament.

The incumbent Congress-led coalition government is facing a challenge from the main opposition BJP-led alliance.

It is also competing against a third front of communist and regional parties in a poll that is too close to call.

Results are due on 16 May and a new parliament must be in place by 2 June.

Voting takes place today in constituencies spread across the country, including volatile areas in north and central India.

States where voting takes place are Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

More than two million security personnel are expected to be deployed, especially after a string of recent attacks by Maoist rebels who have threatened to disrupt the vote.

Thousands of police and paramilitary troops have been deployed across the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, which will vote for both national and state assembly representatives.

Neither main party is expected to gain a clear majority.

"We have taken every necessary measure to ensure peaceful, free and fair elections. Now you go out and vote," state director general of police AK Mohanty said in the state capital, Hyderabad.

Thousands of troops have also been placed on alert in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, which has the most seats in the national parliament. Polling takes place for 16 of the state's 80 seats on Thursday.

Security concerns are also likely to be high in the eastern state of Bihar, where heavily armed Maoist rebels on Wednesday attacked a paramilitary camp set up for the elections, wounding one soldier, senior police official Vikas Vaibhav told the Associated Press news agency.

The district where the attack took place is 140km (87 miles) south-west of the state capital, Patna. It too goes to the polls Thursday.

Neither of the two main parties in the election - Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - is expected to gain a clear majority.

Both may have to depend on the support of smaller parties to form a government - and correspondents say the campaign rhetoric in recent days has become increasingly

bitter. While security and the economy are key election issues, especially after last year's attacks in Mumbai (Bombay), global economic meltdown and local and regional issues are all expected to be key issues.

Hours before the first round of battle, as the word war between the Congress and the BJP continued without any loss of acerbity, uncertainty grew among political leaders about the outcome of the 15th Lok Sabha elections. Many appear to be working on compromise formulas based on post-poll alliances even before the first vote has been cast.

The Congress had won 148 seats in the last general election and then added to its numbers by winning bye-elections. But this time party managers are reluctant to predict the number of seats the party will win. "We will get a substantial number of seats and emerge the largest single party," they feel. Congress leaders were of the opinion that the Left combination, which had won 59 seats, might not be able to play king-maker as it could lose heavily in the red bastions. "The Left parties might not be in a position to dictate the prime ministerial candidate since they also would not be in a position to support a BJP-led front," a Congress functionary said.

Both the Congress and BJP are working out the arithmetic of the regional players' inability to form a government without their support. The calculations of the Congress

and the BJP indicate that the regional players would have to support either of them, failing which they would be unable to stay united in the power game, a Congress functionary observed.

According to Congress managers, no party (BSP, SP and BJP) would be able to get more than 30 seats in UP. They expect to get over 25 seats of the total 45 from Punjab (13 seats), Haryana (10), Delhi (7), Jammu and Kashmir (6), Uttarakhanda (5) and Himachal Pradesh (4).

Meanwhile the titans, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and NDA PM candidate LK Advani, who had been locked in an acrimonious word war, finally came face to face on Tuesday. They shared the dais at a function in Parliament to commemorate the birth anniversary of B.R. Ambedkar. The cold vibes between the two heavyweights leading their parties to the polls were apparent; they shook hands briefly and then the Prime Minister went about his business greeting others and later paying floral tribute before a portrait of Ambedkar. Advani, too, kept himself busy with other leaders.

The NDA prime ministerial candidate, who has been describing Dr Singh as a "weak Prime Minister", later refused to attend a farewell dinner being hosted by Prime Minister Singh for outgoing Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee on Tuesday evening. The Prime Minister had taken a dig at Advani on Monday, saying the BJP's "iron

man was quick to melt in the heat of the Kandahar hijacking incident". Later, speaking at another function at Rashtrapati Bhavan, the Prime Minister said, "I do not want to get into personalised politics."

If that was a fight between the big two, accusations and counter accusations flew from other leaders too. RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav, TRS supremo Chandrashekhara Rao and other leaders, like the BJP's Murli Manohar Joshi, NTR's daughter D. Purandeswari and former Union minister B. Dattatreya were all pointing fingers at each other.

The results tomorrow will show to some extent how the public took all this.

(BBC Online, PTI, The Asian Age)

Seven dead in Indian Maoist pre-poll raids

AFP, Ranchi

Five Maoist rebels and two troopers were killed yesterday in eastern India in an upsurge of left-wing violence on the eve of general elections starting Thursday, police said.

The attack in tribal-majority Jharkhand state, a hotbed of Maoist activity, followed a 12-hour gunbattle between the paramilitary troops and rebels on Sunday after guerrillas stormed a bauxite mine in neighbouring Orissa.

The latest violence saw rebels detonate landmines as two buses carrying 80 paramilitary soldiers passed through the Maoist stronghold of Latehar, 140 kilometres (87 miles) from the state capital Ranchi. A driver died in the blast.

India rules out talks with Pakistan

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday ruled out resumption of talks with Pakistan as long as it allows terrorists to use its territory against India and does not show "sincerity" in bringing the perpetrators of Mumbai attacks to justice.

He also rejected as "not true" Islamabad contention that India has not provided sufficient evidence to Pakistan in connection with the 26/11 attacks.

"The present situation is so long as Pakistan chooses to allow its territory to be used against India, no negotiation can take place."

"We are for engagement with Pakistan but Pakistan must prove its sincerity by bringing the perpetrators of 26/11 attacks to book," he said in an interaction with members of the Editors Guild of India.

On US suggestion that India should involve itself in its new Afghanistan-Pakistan policy, he said "we are worried about growth of terrorist elements both in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

"If the international community and the US work to eliminate terror, in this we are willing to cooperate with them," Singh said. PTI

Mumbai attacks suspect bemused by trial start

AFP, Mumbai

Mohammed Ajmal Kasab -- referred to as "accused number one" -- was ushered into court yesterday under a dirty white blanket, flanked by paramilitary soldiers in flak jackets and riot helmets.

Police officers outside the special prison court in Mumbai craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the 21-year-old through the barred windows of the courtroom, while inside about 70 reporters jostled for a better view.

What emerged from underneath the blanket was striking in its ordinariness.

Slightly built, about five feet five inches (1.65 metres) tall, and wearing a grey T-shirt, blue three-quarter-length track suit trousers and flip-flops, Kasab looked just like any other young man on the streets outside.

The suspect, who is charged over the gunning down of scores of people in the attacks on Mumbai last November, had a wispy beard and a tuft of jet black hair sticking up on his head.

With all eyes trained on him, Kasab looked around the court, and smiled as judge M.L. Tahaliyani and lawyers argued over his legal

representation.

After the court's doors were bolted shut, he rubbed his wrists as if to soothe marks left by handcuffs.

Unable to understand the proceedings, which were mostly in English with an occasional Hindi phrase, Kasab -- an Urdu speaker -- looked bemused in a trial that could end with him sentenced to death.

Beside him in the dock were "accused number two" Fahim Ansari and "accused number three" Sabaudhin Ahmed, who are charged with providing logistical support for the 10 Mumbai attackers, of whom Kasab is the only survivor.

Clean-shaven Ansari, 35, in a faded pink and grey polo shirt and jeans, repeatedly looked towards his wife, who sat in the well of the court on a wooden dining chair, her face covered by a full-length veil.

Twenty-four-year-old Ahmed, with a full beard and wearing a white T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms, sat next to him.

The trio exchanged words and laughed as they lounged on a wooden bench in the dock, until the judge made Ansari switch positions with Ahmed to keep them quiet.

The world's largest democracy votes

Elections on April 16, 22, 23, 30 and May 7, 13



JU VC

FROM PAGE 1 men from behind to make the JU campus unstable," he told reporters emerging from a meeting with Home Minister Sahara Khatun at her Secretariat office.

Replying to a question, Dr Sharif, who was appointed JU VC on February 24 by the AL government, said there is no problem in BCL. A vested quarter from outside the campus might have instigated trouble on the campus, he alleged.

He claimed that he knows the perpetrators and even he has information about the troublemakers. He denied any involvement of Chhatra League in tender bidding, which is one of the main reasons behind the violence on the university campus.

The JU campus witnessed intra-party conflicts between rival BCL factions in recent times. The JU authorities on April 5 expelled six BCL men, also the students of the university, for their involvement in clashes. BCL central committee dissolved its JU unit on February 17.

Asked how he becomes sure about JCD's involvement, VC Dr Sharif, who is also the president of JU unit Bangabandhu Parishad, said that he has definite information on JCD's involvement. "I know who are instigating the incidents on the campus."

The VC said he sought assistance from the home minister to restore congenial academic atmosphere

on the campus, freeing it from criminals.

"We sought the home minister's help so that criminals are not able to conduct their terror activities on the campus," he said, adding that he also requested the Home Minister to set up a police camp on or near the university campus.

Dr Sharif said that the home minister assured him of providing all out cooperation to ensure a peaceful atmosphere on the campus.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, State Minister for Home Affairs Tanjim Ahmed Sohel Taj said that the home minister assured JU VC of taking all necessary steps to ensure congenial atmosphere on the university campus.

The state minister said stern action will be taken against the culprits and no matter what party they belong to.

Asked his comment on Dr Sharif's allegation about JCD activists' infiltration into BCL, Sohel Taj said there are some persons who 'change their colours' and start thinking themselves as ruling-party activists.

"They will be identified and none of them will be spared," he said giving a note of warning against such troublemaking turncoats.

Home Secretary Abdus Sobhan Sikder was present during the meeting.

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