

PRESIDENTIAL POLLS Brisk voting in India

STAR REPORT

Indian national and state lawmakers voted yesterday for a new president, with former finance minister Pranab Mukherjee being seen set to chalk up a comfortable victory against opposition-backed challenger P A Sangma and take up the top constitutional but largely ceremonial post.

Mukherjee, the candidate of the ruling Congress-led alliance, is a respected conciliator, and as head of state he may play a role in who governs India after the general election due in 2014.

In brisk polling, as many as 4,120 legislators of state assemblies and 776 members of parliament with a total vote value of 10.98 lakh votes were eligible to cast their ballots in the election.

As per information received from 22 states, 2937 MLAs and 40 MPs had cast their votes in the election, the turnout being 72 per cent, reported our New Delhi correspondent.

In parliament, where 699 MPs and eight MLAs were eligible to vote, the turnout was 96.60 per cent with key leaders, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, BJP veteran L K Advani, Mukherjee and Rahul Gandhi voting before noon.

The outcome of the vote will be announced Sunday, but Mukherjee, 76, has far more support than his rival, former parliamentary speaker PA Sangma and expected to cruise to victory.

Mulayam 'votes' for Sangma, mistakenly

TNN, New Delhi

BJP presidential candidate P A Sangma's polling agent Satya Pal Jain on Thursday wrote to the returning officer requesting him for cancellation of vote cast by Samajwadi Party supremo Mulayam Singh Yadav during the polls here at Parliament House.

The Samajwadi Party MP first marked his vote in favour of Sangma. Realising his mistake, Mulayam immediately tore the ballot paper and cast his vote again in a second ballot paper in favour of UPA presidential candidate Pranab Mukherjee.

Jain - a former BJP MP - who claimed to have witnessed the entire episode, demanded cancellation of his vote and wrote to V K Agnihotri, the returning officer of the presidential election.



United Progressive Alliance government Chairperson Sonia Gandhi and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh watch as UPA presidential candidate Pranab Mukherjee casts his vote at Parliament House in New Delhi yesterday. Inset, Mamata Banerjee is casting her ballot in Kolkata.

PHOTO: AFP

Ferry disaster kills 38 in Zanzibar

Hope fades for over 100 missing

AFP, Zanzibar

An official yesterday said there was no hope for more than a hundred people still missing a day after a ferry sank off the Indian Ocean island of Zanzibar, with 38 bodies already recovered.

The vessel, which was officially carrying at least 290 passengers and crew, including more than 30 children, went down in choppy waters off Zanzibar after leaving Tanzania's commercial capital Dar es Salaam around midday Wednesday.

But there was now little hope of saving more people, spokesman for Zanzibar police said.

Officials said emergency workers had rescued more than 140 people so far, recovering 38 bodies.

UK, Pakistan back bid for Afghan peace

AFP, Kabul

Afghan efforts to negotiate with the Taliban need Islamabad's help to be successful, the leaders of Afghanistan, Britain and Pakistan emphasised yesterday, following three-way talks in Kabul.

British leader David Cameron and Afghan President Hamid Karzai met Pakistan's new Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf for the first time, as British and Nato combat troops prepare to leave Afghanistan in 18 months' time.

Karzai has long sought to negotiate with the Taliban, who have been fighting for a decade to topple his Western-backed government, but the Islamist militia has in public refused to deal with his administration, branding it an American puppet.

During the talks, Karzai reiterated the "urgency" of a political solution. His office said Ashraf and Cameron reaffirmed support for such a process, "led and owned by Afghans, facilitated by Pakistan and other regional countries".

Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan traditionally suffer from distrust and mutual blame for the Taliban violence that plagues both countries.

Earlier, British Prime Minister David Cameron warned the Taliban that the international community would continue to support the Afghan government after Nato troops pull out in 2014.

Attack on Damascus rocks Assad 'fortress'

REUTERS, Beirut

An audacious and deadly attack on President Bashar al-Assad's security cabinet is a major psychological and strategic setback that exposes a weakened Syrian establishment unable to protect its innermost centres of power.

The damage is compounded by Assad's failure to speak in public to rally his forces. State television only showed footage of him swearing in his new defence minister, the first images of the president since the bomb attack. Assad's younger brother Maher al-Assad, commander of the army's elite units, has however remained out of sight.

Maher is the strongman of the Assad clan, but its strategic brain, the president's brother-in-law Assef Shawkat, was assassinated along with at least two other security chiefs in Wednesday's bomb attack that killed half of the government's six-member crisis council.

"The fortress of Damascus is no longer a fortress", said Fawaz Gerges, Professor of Middle Eastern Politics at the London School of Economics. "Psychologically this is a shattering blow to both Assad and his supporters".

"It must make Assad and everyone at the top unsure how safe they are from their own peo-



ple", said Middle East columnist Rami Khouri. "This is a regime on its last legs".

The strike at the centre of power will further embolden the opposition, which has already taken its fight to the streets of central Damascus, vowing to liberate the capital from four decades of autocratic

Assad family rule.

Scenes of armed rebels from the Syrian Free Army pushing back regular army troops and torching police stations in the capital were unthinkable just a few days ago. They represent a point of no return for many in the armed forces, from which more soldiers have defected since the bomb attack.

The blast not only wiped out important elements of Assad's inner circle but sent an unmistakable message to the president and his loyalists: They are no longer immune or invincible and the tipping point is getting closer.

Analysts say the spectacular attack would probably also trigger more defections of senior Sunni army officers and loyalists who feel they can no longer trust a leadership unable to protect itself or its people.

The aftermath of Wednesday's attack suggests a government in disarray. Assad's silence speaks volumes.

Egypt ex-VP Suleiman dies

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's former vice president Omar Suleiman, long-time spy chief to deposed president Hosni Mubarak, died yesterday in the United States, the official MENA news agency reported.

"Former vice president General Omar Suleiman died in the early hours of Thursday in a hospital in the United States," the agency said.

"He was undergoing medical tests in

Cleveland," Suleiman's aide Hussein Kamal told AFP adding that arrangements were being made to return his body to Egypt for burial.

Suleiman was appointed vice president during the uprising that toppled Mubarak.

He left Egypt after a failed bid to run in the country's first ever free presidential elections in May.

Suleiman was widely believed to have formed part of the inner circle of Mubarak, who shortly before his fall named the intelligence supremo as vice president.

LETTER TO MANMOHAN Zardari hails resumption of cricket ties

IANS, Islamabad

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has written a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressing the hope that the resumption of cricketing ties after five years will be a confidence building measure.

Zardari on Wednesday sent the letter to Manmohan Singh welcoming the step, reported Dawn.

The BCCI on Monday invited Pakistan to play three one-dayers and two Twenty20 Internationals in December-January.

The resumption of cricket matches would help the bilateral ties, said Zardari.

Clash at Indian car plant kills 1

AFP, New Delhi

India's top carmaker Maruti Suzuki yesterday suspended production at a plant near New Delhi after rioting workers attacked managers, leaving one person dead and scores injured, the company said.

A burned body was recovered from the Manesar plant after the violence erupted late Wednesday, in which workers set a building ablaze, ransacked offices and damaged property.

A Maruti executive said over 90 supervisors had been injured and 50 were in hospital with serious injuries.

Rahul to play more active role in govt

AFP, New Delhi

Indian politician Rahul Gandhi, scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, yesterday pledged to play "a more proactive role" in government, drawing praise from his struggling ruling Congress party.

Gandhi, widely touted as a future prime minister, is the son, grandson and great-grandson of Indian premiers, and currently serves as a member of parliament and head of the Congress party youth wing.

The cherub-faced bachelor has been under pressure from party loyalists to take up a higher public profile, but he has declined to accept a government post and often keeps his distance from the daily political fray.

"I will play a more proactive role in the party and (in) the government," Gandhi told NDTV television in remarks that immediately triggered widespread speculation about him taking a cabinet post.

"The decision has been taken, the timing is up to the leadership," the 34-year old said, referring to his mother Sonia Gandhi, the Congress party president, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The politician, who rarely speaks to the media, made the comments after voting in presidential polls in New Delhi. Congress spokesman Janardan Dwivedi hailed Gandhi's commitment as a "welcome step" for the party, which has been struggling to contain inflation, a yawning fiscal deficit, sliding growth and a string of corruption scandals.

The development follows urgings by Law Minister Salman Khurshid for Gandhi to take a greater political role.

"Today we need an ideology to be given by our next-generation leader Rahul Gandhi to move forward. We have to be clear about what we want to go ahead with in the next elections," he added.

With premier Singh expected to stand down at the end of his current term, Gandhi's actions are being closely watched for signs that he will lead the Congress party into the next general election, due in 2014.



Can't rule on fate of parliament

Says Egypt court

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's administrative court yesterday said it had no jurisdiction to rule on two cases that determine the fate of parliament, leaving the future of the house hanging in a legal labyrinth.

Judge Abdel Salam al-Naggar, the head of Cairo's administrative court, referred to the Supreme Constitutional Court an appeal against a presidential decree to reinstate the dissolved parliament.

It was also looking into the legality of a constitutional declaration issued by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces -- which ruled Egypt after Hosni Mubarak was ousted last year -- which granted the military sweeping powers including legislative control.

Parliament has been at the centre of a power struggle between the military which oversaw Egypt's transition from Mubarak's rule, and Islamist President Mohamed Morsi who was sworn in last month.

Earlier this month, Morsi ordered parliament to convene, in defiance of a military decision to disband the house in line with a ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court.

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Ext: 1937, 1918, 1914, 1913, 1909, 1908, 1901. E-mail: salim2777@gmail.com, dr_salim2777@gmail.com, dr_ms.salim@northsouth.edu; mobasherajahan@yahoo.com hayat4008@yahoo.com, dr.arif@northsouth.edu; Visit: www.northsouth.edu, w3.northsouth.edu

For Information, Please Contact:

New probe opens into ex-UN chief's death

BBC ONLINE

A new inquiry is to be launched into the death of United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold when his plane crashed in Zambia in 1961.

A UN investigation in 1962 failed to find a cause for the Swedish-born diplomat's mysterious demise.

New evidence will be examined by an international commission of lawyers including South African judge Richard Goldstone, retired British judge Stephen Sedley, former Swedish diplomat Hans Correll and Dutch Supreme Court judge Wilhelmina Thomassen.

Hammarskjold's plane was travelling to Congo on a peace mission when it crashed in a forest near Ndola in Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia.

The crash occurred shortly before landing just after midnight on 18 September.

All but one of the passengers and crew on the flight were killed.

Three investigations have failed to determine the cause of the crash, and many conspiracy theories have swirled around Hammarskjold's death. Two investigations concluded that foul play could not be ruled out.

The plane crashed as he was trying to negotiate a ceasefire in Congo's mineral-rich Katanga province, where Moise Tshombe led Western-backed separatist rebels against the Soviet Union-allied Congolese government.

They hope to review the evidence, complete their report within a year and submit the findings to the UN.

The only person to be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize after his death, he established the first armed UN peacekeeping mission following the crisis in Suez.



Dag Hammarskjold

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