

No friends or foes in politics: Manmohan

Indian PM rules out any rifts with Sonia

PTI, Onboard Pm's Special Aircraft

There are no permanent allies in politics and no permanent enemies either, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said yesterday.

"In politics, there are no permanent enemies or friends," the prime minister told reporters on his way back from a trip to Japan and Thailand.

He was responding to a question on whether the Congress would make up with the Left or the Trinamool Congress ahead of the next general elections.

Meanwhile, rejecting reports of a rift between him and Sonia Gandhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday asserted that there was no truth in it as the two worked together almost on all issues.

"In all truthfulness, there is no difference of opinion between me and the Congress president," he told



reporters on his way back from the five-day visit to Japan and Thailand.

"We work together on almost every issue and where consultations are needed, I consult the Congress president," he said.

He was responding to a question about perception of a trust deficit and divergences between him and Gandhi.

"This perception that on certain issues there were differences of opinion, there is no truth in that," he said.

He was also asked whether Gandhi had nudged him against his wishes to get the resignation of Ashwani Kumar as law minister and whether he faced a tough situation when CBI director Ranjit Sinha named a joint secretary in the PMO as having made changes in the agency's affidavit to the Supreme Court on Coalgate but the prime minister did not spell out his response to this.

Russia to supply fighter jets to Syria

Denies missile delivery to regime; UN adds Al-Nusra to sanctions list

AFP, Moscow

Russia could supply 10 ultra-modern MiG-29 fighter jets to Syria under a possible contract being discussed with a visiting delegation from Damascus, Interfax reported as media reports yesterday denied any S-300 air defence missile systems delivery to the Syrian regime.

The Russian news agency quoted MiG corporation director general Sergei Korotkov as saying that the details of the contract were now under discussion.

"There is a Syrian delegation in Moscow at the moment. We are determining the details of this contract," Interfax quoted Korotkov as saying.

"I think that they will be delivered to Syria," he added in apparent reference to the MiG-29 fighters, which are one of the most modern jets used in the Russian airforce today.

The Interfax and RIA Novosti news agencies said the contract



MiG-29 fighter jet

involved 10 fighters but gave no other details.

On Thursday, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad appeared to imply that Russia could have already shipped part of the highly controversial consignment, without naming the missiles directly.

But both sources quoted by Kommersant and Vedomosti newspapers said that no delivery of the missiles had taken

place yet. The contract was agreed in 2010 and according to Vedomosti is worth \$1 billion.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Security Council yesterday added the Syrian militant group Al-Nusra Front to its global sanctions list because of its links to al-Qaeda.

The group, a feared force battling President Bashar al-Assad, is now subject to an international asset freeze and

arms embargo, according to an announcement made by the Security Council's al-Qaeda Sanctions Committee.

France and Britain jointly sought Al-Nusra's designation after blocking a demand by the Syrian government.

Al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al-Jawhri last month pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, confirming suspicions of ties between the rebel group and the militant group.

The US government designated Al-Nusra a terrorist organization last year.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's parliament yesterday voted to extend its mandate and delay elections after failing to adopt a new electoral law at a time of deep divisions over the war in neighbouring Syria.

In Washington, Secretary of State John Kerry warned that delivering Russian S-300s to Syria would be "not helpful" to the US-Russian peace bid.

US defence chief arrives in Asia

AFP, Singapore

US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel yesterday arrived in Singapore for an Asia-Pacific security conference at which he is expected to press China on cyberattacks and reaffirm Washington's strategic shift to the region.

The Pentagon chief is expected to urge Beijing to agree to "rules of the road" to mitigate cyber threats after a US report found evidence of a broad Chinese spying campaign against top US defence contractors and government agencies.

"The United States knows where many of these incursions come from," Hagel told reporters on his plane as he travelled to the Shangri-La Dialogue, an annual international security conference in the city state.

"It's pretty hard to prove that they are directed by any specific enemy but we can tell where they come from and we've got to be honest about that."

His comments came after a Pentagon report found that Chinese hackers have gained access to secret designs for a slew of sophisticated US weapons programs, possibly jeopardising the US military's technological edge.

During his four-day stay in Singapore, Hagel is expected to meet many of his Asian counterparts although there will be no high-level talks with the Chinese.

However, Pentagon officials said he would have the opportunity to speak with Chinese military officials on the sidelines of the talks.

General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Beijing in April and Hagel has invited his Chinese counterpart Chang Wanquan to Washington in August, while President Barack Obama is set to meet with new Chinese leader Xi Jinping next week in California.

ODDLY enough

Marriage secret to happiness!

MAIL ONLINE

Getting married makes people happier with their lives than earning big salaries, having children or believing in God, new research shows.

The poll revealed that people who have tied the knot are happier than cohabiting couples and singletons.

Oops! You are wrongly crowned



AFP, Ottawa

Losing is never easy, but for one unlucky contestant in Canada's Miss Universe competition the bad news came 24 hours later -- after she'd been crowned the winner.

Red-faced organizers admitted on Wednesday that a typo led to a counting error that resulted in Denise Garrido, 26, being wrongly named the victor at the event.

"I was shocked. I'd achieved my dream and suddenly after a day of it sinking in it was suddenly taken away from me," a heartbroken Garrido told AFP, after losing her chance to represent Canada at the Miss Universe final December.

BHUTAN POLLS AT A GLANCE



Population: 738,300 (voters number less than 400,000)

Head of state: King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (Fifth ruler of Wangchuck dynasty in power since 1907)

Political development:

► **March 2008 general elections** ended absolute power for the king and ushered in a new era of constitutional monarchy

► **2013 elections**

- April 23: National Council (upper house) vote for 20 seats

- May 31: National Assembly (lower house), voters will choose from 4 parties for the primary round of voting

- July 13: Two most popular parties from May 31 will then contest a run-off round to form next government

PHOTO: AFP

Bhutanese women stand in line outside a polling station as they line up to vote in Paro yesterday.

Bhutan braves rain to vote

AFP, Thimphu

Voters in Bhutan yesterday braved rain and treacherous mountain paths to cast their ballots as the "land of the thunder dragon" began electing a government for only the second time.

Wearing traditional dress and sheltering under umbrellas, Bhutanese queued patiently at polling stations in the isolated Himalayan nation in the first round of voting to determine the lower house of parliament.

Many took the secret ballot seriously and were unwilling to disclose their vote, but true to Bhutan's reputation, happiness was high on the agenda.

Bhutan is the only country in the world to pursue "Gross National Happiness", a development model that measures the mental as well as material well-being of citizens.

Other policies that have set the country apart include banning television until 1999, keeping out mass tourism to shield its Buddhist culture and aiming to make all of its farming 100 percent organic. Bank loans

and imports of cars and luxury goods are still banned in Bhutan.

While the electorate comprises fewer than 400,000 people, voting is a huge logistical challenge across the rugged country, where democracy was ushered in just five years ago after Bhutan's "dragon kings" ceded absolute power.

Voters were scheduled to choose from four parties in yesterday's primary round of voting for the National Assembly. The two most popular parties will then contest a run-off round on July 13 to form the next government.

The first results were expected late yesterday. In the country's first election in 2008, the centre-right Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) won a huge landslide and secured 45 of 47 seats available against the People's Democratic Party.

This time two new centre-left parties are joining the contest, both led by women, but the DPT is generally expected to win again through its popularity with rural communities, which make up about 70 percent of the population.

Bleak future for Zardari in new Pak parliament

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's new National Assembly will be sworn today, completing the country's first ever democratic transition of power, but for President Asif Ali Zardari the political future looks bleak.

Pakistan's 65-year history has been punctuated by three periods of military rule and Zardari was credited with steering the country to its democratic milestone by holding together the fractious coalition government led by his Pakistan People's Party (PPP) for its full five-year term.

But the PPP was routed at the polls, blamed by voters for five years of apathy and drift which saw crippling power shortages worsen and militancy continue almost unabated.

Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) romped to victory and will command 177 of the 342 seats in the new assembly, giving it significant leverage to oust Zardari from the president's house when his term expires in September.

In the run-up to the May 11 election there



Asif Ali Zardari

had been suggestions the PML-N would allow Zardari, the widower of PPP icon Benazir Bhutto, to stay on in return for his party's cooperation in the lower house.

But analyst Imtiaz Gul said that while the PML-N was unlikely to seek an immediate confrontation with Zardari, his days in the top job were numbered. Veteran PML-N leader Sartaj Aziz has been tipped as a possible replacement.

PPP TO CONTEST FOR PM POST

PTI, Lahore

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) will field senior leader Makhdoom Amin Fahim against Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N) chief Nawaz Sharif for the election of the new premier in Parliament on June 5, rejecting a request to facilitate an unanimous vote.

However, the PPP's move will not affect Sharif as the PML-N has a majority in the 342-member lower house of the Parliament.

RICIN THREATS TO WHITE HOUSE

Bloomberg blames gun lobbies

AFP, New York

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg says a ricin-laced letter sent to him was "obviously" meant to show opposition to his lobbying for tighter gun ownership laws, but vowed to never "walk away."

Another suspicious letter addressed to the White House has been intercepted, the Secret Service said Thursday.

The letters "obviously referred to our anti-gun efforts," Bloomberg said at an event late Wednesday.

ABC television posted what it said was an exclusive picture of the letter sent to Bloomberg on its website. The stained, type-written letter, containing numerous spelling errors, reads:

"You will have to kill me and my family before you get my guns. Anyone wants to come to my house will get shot in the face."

"The right to bear arms is my constitutional God given right and I will exercise that right til the day I die. whats in this letter is nothing compared to what ive got planned for you."

Red Cross halts movement after Afghan attack

AFP, Kabul

The International Committee of the Red Cross has halted all staff movement across Afghanistan and closed its office in Jalalabad which was hit by a deadly suicide and gun attack.

The two-hour assault on Tuesday, which left one Afghan guard dead, was the first time ICRC offices have been targeted in Afghanistan since the organisation began work there 26 years ago.

An International Organization for Migration (IOM) complex in Kabul came under sustained attack less than a week earlier, and the two incidents raise the prospect of a new phase in the Taliban's 12-year insurgency in which no organisation is considered off-limits.

The ICRC, with 1,800 employees nationwide, had 36 staff including six expatriates in Jalalabad, which is close to the Pakistani border and surrounded by some of Afghanistan's most unstable districts.

TWO-CHILD RULE FOR ROHINGYAS UN, US condemn Myanmar

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations on Thursday called on Myanmar authorities to end a ban on families having more than two children in two Muslim-majority townships in a troubled state.

UN deputy spokesman Eduardo Del Buoy said that pressing the policy in Rakhine state, where there have been widespread clashes between Buddhists and Muslims, would infringe "fundamental human rights".

The United States has appealed to Myanmar to immediately shun its plan of a two-child policy for Rohingya Muslims.

"We are deeply concerned over reports that local officials in Myanmar's Rakhine state plan to enforce a two-child limit for Rohingya Muslims," State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki said, asserting that Washington will oppose any such "coercive and discriminatory birth limitation policy".

"We have pressed senior Myanmar government officials to abolish this local order. We urge the government to eliminate all such policies without delay," Psaki said.

Rakhine authorities say the two-child rule has been reaffirmed in two townships in the state where most people are Rohingya Muslims. The rule was first imposed by Myanmar's military junta.

UN deputy spokesman Del Buoy told reporters that the United Nations was aware that Myanmar authorities planned to impose the two-child rule.

"If enacted this policy would be considered discriminatory and would infringe upon the fundamental human rights of the Muslim and the Rohingya communities in those places," del Buoy said.

Wreckage of Amelia Earhart plane found!

AFP, Washington

Aviation buffs are wondering if they have detected the long-sought wreckage of Amelia Earhart's plane at the bottom of the Pacific.

Earhart in 1932 became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic, going from Canada to England.

In 1937, she disappeared while flying with navigator Fred Noonan on a Lockheed Electra going from Papua New Guinea to California. It was the final stage of a journey to fly around the globe along an equatorial route.

Now, a sonar image found near a remote Pacific island called Nikumaroro during a new expedition known as Niku VII is getting intense attention.

"It's exciting. It's frustrating. It's maddening. There is a sonar image in the data collected during last summer's Niku VII expedition that could be the wreckage of Amelia Earhart's Lockheed Electra," says the website of Tighar, or The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery.

"It looks unlike anything else in the sonar data, it's the right size, it's the right shape, and it's in the right place," it added.

The image was detected at a depth of 183 meters (600 feet), and seems to be less than 10 meter long (32 feet). The fuselage of



Earhart with her plane

Earhart's Electra was 11.76 meters (38 feet 7 inches), the web site says.

The team said it would have to go back and have another look.

When she took off in 1937, Earhart planned to land on Howland island to refuel. While flying, however, she radioed that she could not find the island and was low on fuel.

That was the last anyone heard from her. No trace of her plane was ever found.

TIGHAR members say Earhart may have made an emergency landing and survived for some time at Nikumaroro, which is 480 kilometers from Howland.

NEWSIN brief

Obama approval ratings plunges

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama's approval ratings took a hit over the past month as he wrestled with controversies over the IRS, Benghazi and the secret seizure of journalists' phone records, a poll showed Thursday.

The Quinnipiac poll found that 49 percent of those surveyed had a negative opinion of Obama's job performance while 45 percent approved. Those numbers were the near inverse of a poll on May 1 that found 48 percent approved of the job he was doing, while 45 percent did not.

AFP freelancer gets Pulitzer photo prize

AFP, New York

Javier Manzana, a freelance photographer working for AFP in Syria, received a prestigious Pulitzer prize Thursday in New York for his artistic photograph of a rebel sniper's nest in Aleppo.

Manzana, 37, said he was "honored" by his feature photography nod for the picture taken in October, showing rebel fighters lit up by sunlight coming through bullet holes in the side of a warehouse. He received a \$10,000 cash award, along with the certificate.

SARS-like virus death toll hits 30

AFP, Geneva

The global death toll from a SARS-like virus has risen to 30, the World Health Organisation said Friday after three people died of the illness in Saudi Arabia, which is bearing the brunt of the outbreak.

Health officials have expressed concern about the high rate of fatalities compared to the number of cases, warning that the disease could spark a new global crisis if it acquires an ability to spread more easily.

Court acquits Milosevic's ex-intel chief

AFP, The Hague

Serbia on Friday hailed a UN tribunal's acquittal of two top figures from the regime of the late Slobodan Milosevic of war crimes during the former Yugoslavia's brutal 1990s conflict.

Milosevic's former intelligence chief and his deputy were on Thursday cleared of running Bosnian death squads, after the tribunal said they could not have known the units would commit such crimes. Bosnian survivors of the conflict condemned the acquittals handed down by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia's (ICTY).

Iranian gets 25 yrs in Saudi plot

AFP, New York

Iranian-American citizen Manssor Arbabsiar was sentenced Thursday to the maximum 25 years prison by a US judge who said his role in a bizarre plot against the Saudi ambassador to Washington could not be "tolerated."

Arbabsiar, 58, pleaded guilty last October to conspiring with Iranian military elements to hire assassins from the Mexican drug mafia to kill the Saudi envoy.