

Rahul won't be PM candidate

Decides Congress chief

TNN, New Delhi

The Congress has decided not to project party vice-president Rahul Gandhi as its prime ministerial candidate yesterday, the PTI has tweeted. Instead, the ruling party in India has decided to make Rahul its campaign committee chief for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

According to reports, it was Congress president Sonia Gandhi who decided to go against the wishes of the Congress working committee, which wanted the party vice-president to be its prime ministerial candidate.

Sources say Rahul Gandhi has accepted the role given to him. He said, "I am a dedicated worker of party, whatever responsibility party gives me, I will carry it out".

Congress leader Janardhan Dwivedi reportedly said: "All in CWC wanted Rahul to be named PM candidate, but the Congress president intervened. She said this is not the party's tradition (to announce its PM candidate before elections)."

In the past, Rahul Gandhi had appeared reluctant to take up any responsibility in the government. However, he has said that he was a foot soldier of the Congress and was willing to undertake any responsibility given to him by the party.

Speculations were rife that the Gandhi scion would be anointed as the Congress's prime ministerial candidate on January 17, which would have made him take on BJP's PM nominee Narendra Modi.

Benghazi attacks were preventable

Says US Senate report

AFP, Washington

The US government could have prevented deadly attacks on its mission in the Libyan city of Benghazi by fixing "known security shortfalls," a damning Senate report concluded Wednesday.

Four American citizens, including Ambassador Chris Stephens, died in the double attack targeting a US diplomatic facility and the nearby CIA annex on September 11, 2012.

A Senate Intelligence Committee inquiry held hearings and interviewed dozens of witnesses, against a back-drop of partisan point-scoring from both sides of Washington's political divide.

Some Republican lawmakers accuse President Barack Obama of concealing evidence that al-Qaeda-linked jihadi groups were behind the outrage and of failing to properly protect the outpost.

Obama's administration initially suggested the attacks were a spontaneous protest by Benghazi residents angered by a privately-made American anti-Islamic film posted online.

Wednesday's bipartisan report emphasized the security shortfalls that allowed protesters and armed militants to storm Stephen's Benghazi compound and to torch the US residence.

The report said the State Department had failed to heed warnings to reinforce protection at the sites despite the rapidly deteriorating security environment in Libya.

And it blamed intelligence agencies for not notifying US military officials in the US Africa command that a CIA annex even existed near the Benghazi



Chadian women in tears and terrified children sit on a Chadian military truck in the PK12 district of Bangui yesterday to flee the Central African Republic (CAR) and return to Chad. The UN yesterday warned that bloodshed in CAR could turn into a genocide. Tensions remain high in the capital, where French forces are patrolling in a bid to quell unrest that continues to simmer between Muslim ex-rebels and the Christian majority.

PHOTO: AFP

Defence cuts threaten US, UK military ties

Says Robert Gates; Cameron refutes claim

BBC ONLINE

David Cameron yesterday dismissed a warning from ex-US defence secretary Robert Gates that armed forces cuts would diminish the UK's military standing.

The prime minister said Britain has the world's fourth largest defence budget and was a "first class-player in terms of defence".

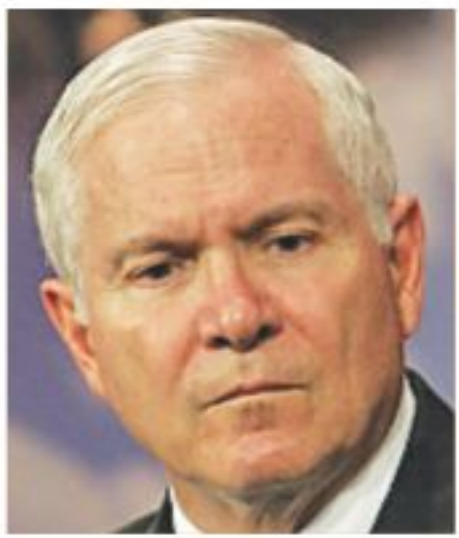
The UK plans to cut 30,000 armed forces personnel by 2020, leaving 147,000.

Gates said the erosion in Britain's capabilities had reduced its ability to be a "full partner" to the US.

He told BBC Radio 4's Today programme the "fairly substantial reductions" in UK defence spending meant it "won't have full spectrum capabilities" - meaning the ability to fight on air, land and sea - that it had previously.

Cameron, however, said Gates was "wrong", adding that Britain was investing in its "future capabilities".

"We've got a massive investment programme of £160bn in our defence industries, in our equipment," he said.



"We are a first-class player in terms of defence and as long as I am prime minister that is the way it will stay."

The Ministry of Defence said the UK - like the US - had had to take "tough decisions" on defence spending but had "the best trained and best equipped armed forces outside the US".

Gates, who served under presidents Obama and Bush, singled out cuts to the Royal Navy as particularly damaging and changes to the way the deterrent was deployed.

Gates warned against nuclear disarmament by the UK, but acknowledged that there was scope for changes to the way the deterrent was deployed.

Under the government's proposals, by 2020 the Army will lose 20,000 soldiers, the Royal Navy 6,000 personnel and the RAF 5,000 - although there are also plans to increase the number of reservists in each service.

Gates's comments echo the concerns of senior military figures in the UK.

Russia hosts Iran, Syria foreign ministers

Denies 'hidden agenda' ahead of peace talks

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday denied having a "hidden agenda" on Syria as it launched a fresh round of crisis diplomacy by hosting the top diplomats of Iran and Damascus ahead next week's historic peace talks.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif arrived in the Russian capital from Damascus on the same jet as Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem.

Zarif met Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov before the three diplomats were due to try to come up with a joint stance that would keep President Bashar al-Assad in power when the Syrian peace talks begin in Switzerland on Wednesday.

"This does not mean that we have some tri-party (peace) draft," Lavrov told reporters at a joint press appearance with Zarif.

"We have nothing to hide," said Lavrov. "We have no hidden agenda."

Zarif also met Russian President Vladimir Putin later yesterday.

The whirlwind diplomacy in Moscow comes four days after a "Friends of Syria" meeting in Paris of mainly Western and Gulf nations backing the rebels.

"There is a strong Tehran-Moscow-Damascus axis emerging," said Russian PIR Centre research institute analyst Andrei Baklitsky.

"Russia and Iran support Assad and a political settlement to the conflict - and this is the only thing working right now," said the analyst. "The West has no other alternative."

Putin has been on the ascendant ever since managing to avert seemingly inevitable US strikes against Russia's closest Middle East ally in September



Indian students from the Swaminarayan Gurukul participate in the 'Magh Snan' or 'Holy Winter Bath' in Ahmedabad, yesterday. Students of Swaminarayan Gurukul take a cold bath daily for a month in order to make the body immune to the atmosphere and ultimately for good health.

PHOTO: AFP

Thai anti-graft panel to probe PM Yingluck

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's anti-corruption authorities launched an investigation against Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra yesterday in a new setback to her government following weeks of mass opposition protests.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission said the inquiry would probe possible negligence of duty by Yingluck in connection with a controversial subsidy scheme for rice farmers.

The panel will charge 15 other people, including a former commerce minister, with corruption linked to the rice programme, commission spokesman Vicha Mahakun told a news conference.

The scheme has been strongly criticised by Yingluck's opponents, who have occupied major intersections in the capital since Monday as part of their efforts to force her elected government from office and install an appointed "people's council" in its place.

The protesters aim to rein in the political dominance of Yingluck's billionaire brother, fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra, whom they accuse of controlling the government from self-exile.

Critics say the rice programme was designed to shore up Yingluck's popularity in her party's northern heartlands, but has left the country with a mountain of unsold rice.

Yingluck has called an election for February 2 in an effort to defuse the crisis but the main opposition Democrat Party is boycotting the polls, which they fear will only return the Shinawatra family to power.

Police yesterday said the demonstrators' self-styled "shutdown" of Bangkok appeared to be losing momentum with a dwindling number of protesters on the streets.

The rallies are the latest twist of a political crisis that has gripped Thailand since Yingluck's brother Thaksin was ousted in a military coup seven years ago.

'Rich, poor disparity biggest global risk'

AFP, London

The growing gulf between the rich and the poor represents the biggest global risk this year, the World Economic Forum yesterday declared ahead of this month's Davos summit.

The institution issued the gloomy warning in its annual Global Risks survey, published before its annual get-together of decision-makers at the Swiss mountain resort of Davos from January 22-25. "The chronic gap between the incomes of the richest and poorest citizens is seen as the risk that is most likely to cause serious damage globally in the coming decade," the WEF concluded.

In its Global Risks 2014 report, which is based on a survey of more than 700 experts from industry, government, academia and civil society, the WEF outlined possible events that could damage the world economy this year.

After income disparity, the next most likely risk that could cause systemic shock across the globe was extreme weather, followed by unemployment and underemployment, climate change, and cyberattacks. The WEF added that the global risk that was of "highest concern" to respondents was the potential for more fiscal crises, in the wake of the eurozone debt drama.

"Economic, societal and environmental risks dominate the list of global risks that the respondents are most concerned about, with fiscal crises emerging as the top issue," the WEF said.

"Despite the efforts of many eurozone countries to control their deficit and debt levels, concerns regarding fiscal crises persist."

"They are also fuelled by the high levels of public debt in Japan and the US, where political gridlock has exacerbated perceptions."

"Fiscal crises can severely affect the stability of the global economy," it warned.

In addition, the WEF also cautioned about the potential for profound political and social instability. There was a possibility of the failure of a major financial mechanism or institution that could spark fresh mayhem on world financial markets.

Online paedophile ring busted in Philippines

AFP, Manila

Police around the world yesterday said they had dismantled a paedophile ring that streamed live sexual abuse of Filipino children as young as six over the Internet, with victims' parents involved in some cases.

Fifteen victims aged between six and 15 have been rescued as part of Operation Endeavour, Britain's National Crime Agency said, adding that 29 people had been arrested, including 11 in the Philippines.

Three other ongoing investigations into paedophiles who pay to see abuse via webcams have identified 733 suspects, the agency added, warning of a "significant and emerging threat" in developing nations.

Under Operation Endeavour British police worked alongside counterparts in the Philippines and Australia.

Police said that severe poverty had forced many youngsters into prostitution or into working in so-called cybersex dens, a booming business believed to be focused on the central island of Cebu.

Britain's crime agency said Operation Endeavour began in 2012 with the discovery of obscene videos on a British paedophile's computer.

The British man, Timothy Ford, was sentenced in March last year to eight and a half years in prison while an associate, Thomas Owens, was convicted four months later.

Hariri murder trial opens in Hague

AFP, Leidschendam

Four Hezbollah members went on trial in absentia at a special UN tribunal yesterday accused of murdering Lebanon's former premier Rafiq Hariri in a 2005 car bombing, as sectarian tensions ran high in the Middle East country.

The trial opened in a suburb outside The Hague nine years after the huge Beirut blast that killed the billionaire Hariri and just hours after another car bombing killed at least three in a Hezbollah stronghold in Lebanon near the border with war-ravaged Syria.

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) is unique in international justice as it was set up to try the perpetrators of a terrorist attack and because it can try the suspects in absentia.

A packed public gallery looked on as the repeatedly-delayed proceedings began, with a large scale model of downtown Beirut where the 2005 attack happened on a table before judges.

Hariri, Lebanon's Sunni prime minister until his resignation in October 2004, was on his way home for lunch when a suicide bomber detonated a van full of explosives equivalent to 2.5 tonnes of TNT as his armoured convoy passed.

The February 14, 2005 seafront blast killed 22 people including Damascus opponent Hariri and wounded 226, leading to the establishment by the UN Security Council of the STL in 2007.

Meanwhile, a likely suicide car bomb yesterday ripped through the main square of Hermel, a Hezbollah bastion in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, killing three people in the latest attack linked to Syria's war.

Finally, Snowden to get his answer

AFP, Washington

After months of gushing intelligence leaks and warnings the US national security state has gone rogue, President Barack Obama will finally give his response to Edward Snowden today.

In a long-awaited speech, Obama will propose curbs on ravenous worldwide National Security Agency (NSA) phone and Internet data dragnets, exposed by the fugitive intelligence contractor.

The event will mark Obama's latest attempt to remold the national security apparatus born in the fearful months after the September 11 attacks and cemented by a decade of terror wars.

Obama is also expected to back extra privacy protections for foreigners swept up by the programs and limits on spying on friendly world leaders.

His challenge will be to prove that data mining programs, made possible by swift advances in technology, can enhance national security while restoring public confidence that individual freedoms are safe.

"I think what we are likely to see is less reform than civil libertarians would like, and more of a reform than the security services would like," said Neil Richards, a professor of law at Washington University, St Louis.