

SRI LANKA TERROR ATTACK

India warned Lanka after detaining IS suspects

India warned Sri Lanka of possible suicide bombings weeks before the Easter attacks, based on "threatening" Islamic State-influenced material seized from suspects in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, a source with knowledge of the investigation told AFP yesterday.

Father of two bombers suspected of helping sons

One of the Sri Lanka suicide bombers was previously arrested by police and then released, a senior government official told CNN yesterday. Iham Ahmed Ibrahim — one of two sons of a spice tycoon who blew themselves up in Sunday's attacks — detonated a device at the Cinnamon Grand hotel in Colombo, the official told CNN.



Sri Lanka halts low season visa-free plan after blasts

Sri Lanka's government said yesterday it was suspending plans to grant citizens of 39 countries visa-free entry during the country's tourism low season after deadly Easter bombings that killed hundreds.

Israel tells citizens to leave Sri Lanka

Israel yesterday urged its citizens travelling in Sri Lanka to leave the country, citing an "elevated concrete threat" following deadly Easter bombings there.



People attend the funeral of Dhami Brindya, 13, a victim of a string of suicide bomb attacks on churches and luxury hotels on Easter Sunday, in Negombo, Sri Lanka yesterday.

POLITICAL INFIGHTING

Lanka paying deadly price

Crucial intelligence that could have prevented Sri Lanka's Easter attacks went ignored in part because of feuding between the country's leaders, experts say.

The government has admitted "major" lapses in its failure to act on intelligence warnings, and analysts say a longstanding political crisis is to blame.

The warnings were clear: On April 11, Sri Lanka's police chief issued an alert saying that radical Islamist group National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ) planned suicide bombings of "prominent churches", citing alerts from a foreign intelligence agency.

The document was addressed to several top officials, but neither the prime minister nor the deputy defence minister were among the recipients.

That comes as little surprise to experts familiar with Sri Lanka's messy political scene, which has been dominated by wrangling between Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and President Maithripala Sirisena.

With elections due this year, the government is under mounting pressure.

'CRIMINAL NEGLIGENCE' The attempt to shut out Wickremesinghe follows efforts by Sirisena to sack the premier last year.

Hours after the Easter Sunday bombings that killed 359 people, Wickremesinghe called an urgent meeting of the armed forces chiefs.

But Sirisena was still out of the country on holiday and the military leadership initially refused to attend, saying they answered solely to the president, official sources told AFP.

They only agreed to the request after Wickremesinghe turned up at their headquarters in the defence ministry, the sources added.

Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, head of the Colombo-based Centre for Policy Alternatives, said, "The leaders are there to protect the people and that they have failed to do and... (people) have paid with their lives. This is criminal negligence."

'LOOKING FOR LEADERSHIP' But bickering alone does not explain why Sri Lanka's security apparatus -- populated by officers with years of experience fighting a decades-long Tamil insurgency -- ignored warnings of an attack.

Political commentator Kusal Perera said the police were familiar with the NTJ and its potential to carry out attacks, referring to a raid in January at a training camp that turned up explosives and detonators.

"Is it only their responsibility to collect intelligence, not question suspects? During the civil war they never waited for the president and prime minister to instruct them before rounding up suspects and interrogating people," Perera said.

ICG analyst Keenan told AFP that "Sri Lankans have an absolute right to be very angry but the problem is there is no way to hold anyone to account."

"What you have is a fearful, brokenhearted public who are looking for leadership and not finding it."

No Priyanka vs Modi

Congress again fields Ajay Rai from Varanasi

TNN, New Delhi

The Congress yesterday fielded local leader Ajay Rai from Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, ending weeks of speculation that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra could contest from the seat against Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Congress also fielded Madhusudan Tiwari from Gorakhpur against BJP's actor-turned politician Ravi Kishan.

Priyanka had earlier said that she will be happy to contest from Varanasi if asked by her brother and Congress president Rahul Gandhi.

The Congress had fielded Rai against Modi in 2014 as well. He finished third in the contest, after Modi and Aam Aadmi Party's Arvind Kejriwal.

Last week, in response to a question on whether he planned to field his sister against PM Modi, party chief Rahul Gandhi had said, "I will leave you in suspense. Suspense is not always a bad thing."

Priyanka herself triggered speculation that she might contest from the temple town when, in response to a question last month if she will make her electoral debut from her mother Sonia's constituency Rae Bareilly, she quipped "why not Varanasi?"

BJP contesting more seats than Congress

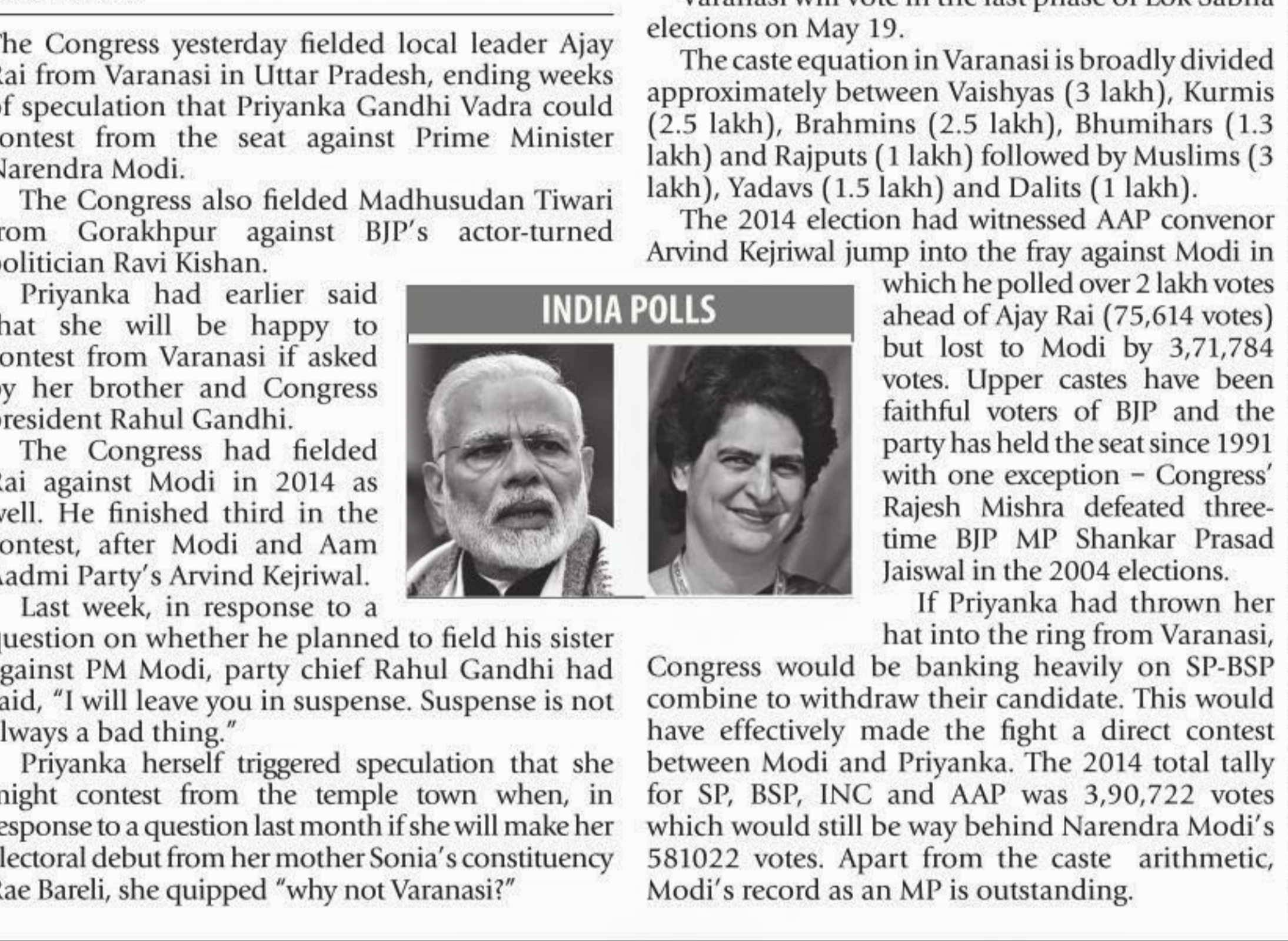
OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

In a first, the Bharatiya Janata Party is contesting more seats than its chief rival the Congress in the ongoing Indian parliamentary election.

The BJP has so far declared 437 candidates for this year's polls to the 543-member Lok Sabha, the highest number of constituencies the saffron party has ever contested since it made its debut in national poll in 1980.

On the other hand, the Congress has fielded 423 candidates in this year's election and may announce a few more.

Ever since the BJP came to power in May 2014, the party has been winning a series of state assembly elections many of them at the expense of the Congress.



'Rich are playing with fire'

Indian SC hints at plot to malign judiciary after alleged conspiracy to discredit CJ

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday said it was anguished over the "systematic attack" on the judiciary and said time has come to tell the rich and powerful of this country that they are "playing with fire" and this must stop.

The apex court also ordered a probe headed by retired judge Justice A K Patnaik into an alleged conspiracy to discredit Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi.

The court made it clear that the inquiry by Justice Patnaik would not affect the Supreme Court's in-house probe by a panel of three senior judges of the apex court into the allegations against the Chief Justice.

The panel is led by justice S A Bobde. This is the first time in the nearly seven-decade history of India's top court that a sexual harassment complaint against the Chief Justice of India will be probed by a committee of three judges.

A special bench, headed by Justice Arun Mishra, expressed anguish with the way the judiciary has been treated for the past 3-4 years.

"The way this institution is treated in the last few years, we must say that we will not survive if this will happen," the bench, also comprising Justices R F Nariman and Deepak Gupta, said.

"There is a systematic attack, systematic game to malign this institution," the bench added.

The bench's remarks and order came on an affidavit filed by lawyer Utsav Bains claiming a conspiracy to frame Chief Justice Gogoi with sexual harassment allegations levelled by a sacked junior assistant of the court.

The bench said the allegations of "bench fixing are so serious that it requires investigation."

"The day has come when we have to rise and tell the powerful and rich people - you can't run the institution," said the bench adding "whenever big persons are involved these things are happening."

China-linked cyber attack

Hong Kong office hit: Amnesty

AFP, Hong Kong

Amnesty International's Hong Kong office has been hit by a years-long cyberattack from hackers with known links to the Chinese government, the rights group said yesterday.

The attack comes at a time of growing concern in Hong Kong over shrinking freedoms as Beijing flexes its muscles and western nations fret about the global dominance of China in telecommunications networks.

Amnesty said it first detected its systems had been compromised on March 15 when its Hong Kong office migrated its IT infrastructure to the rights group's more secure international network as part of a scheduled upgrade.

The group brought in a team of experts to investigate. "Cyber forensic experts were able to establish links between the infrastructure used in this attack and previously reported APT campaigns associated with the Chinese government," the group said in a statement.

Advanced persistent threats (APTs) are the most complex and effective hacks that deploy significant know how and resources -- and they are usually carried out by, or on behalf of, a state.

China has long been accused by western governments, businesses and cyber analysts of using APT groups to carry out corporate and political espionage as well as pursue critics and opponents overseas, allegations it denies.

Iran denounces US talks with Taliban

AFP, New York

Iran on Wednesday criticised US talks with the Taliban on ending the Afghanistan war, saying Washington was elevating the role of the militants.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif acknowledged that Iran had also opened dialogue with the Taliban but said that the US push for a deal with the extremists was "seriously wrong."

"An attempt to exclude everybody and just talk to the Taliban has alienated the government, has alienated the region, has alienated everybody else and it achieved nothing, as you've seen from the statement that came from the Taliban," Zarif said, apparently referring to the militants' announcement of a new spring offensive.

"I was the first to say that in any peace in Afghanistan, the Taliban cannot be set aside or isolated," Zarif said at the Asia Society in New York, which he was visiting to take part in a UN session.

"But you cannot negotiate the future of Afghanistan with the Taliban. The Taliban only represent a segment of Afghan society, not all of it," he said.

No screen time for babies

UN report suggests only 1 hour for kids under five

AP, London

The World Health Organization has issued its first-ever guidance for how much screen time children under 5 should get: not very much, and none at all for those under 1.

The UN health agency said Wednesday that kids under 5 should not spend more than one hour watching screens every day -- and that less is better.

The guidelines are somewhat similar to advice from the American Academy of Pediatrics. That group recommends children younger than 18 months should avoid screens other than video chats. It says parents of young children under two should choose "high-quality programming" with educational value and that can be watched with a parent to help kids understand what they're seeing.

Some groups said WHO's screen time guidelines failed to consider the potential benefits of digital media. WHO's screen time advice "overly focuses on quantity of screen time and fails to consider the content and context of use," said Andrew Przybylski, director of research at the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford.

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NEWS IN brief

Gunmen kill polio vaccinator in Pak

REUTERS, Quetta

Gunmen shot and killed a female polio vaccinator yesterday, the fourth this week in the latest surge of violence against efforts to rid the world of the crippling childhood disease, an official said. Polio workers have come under attack in some parts of the world including Pakistan where hardline clerics and militants say the polio vaccine is a foreign ploy to sterilize Muslims and campaign workers are Western spies.

S Africa floods toll 'around 70'

AFP, Durban

Around 70 people have been killed in devastating floods in South Africa, an official said yesterday, while 1,000 people have been forced from their homes. Heavy rains have lashed the southeast of the country, tearing down homes and ravaging infrastructure in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Eastern Cape provinces.

Two children killed in Yemen fighting

AFP, Dubai

Two children were killed yesterday as fighting resumed between pro-government militias in Yemen's southwestern city of Taez, local officials and medical sources said. The clashes left a number of others wounded including civilians, the sources said. Fighting in the city has pitted militiamen from the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Al-Islah party against fighters with the Salafist movement.