

PANCHAYAT POLLS

Bengal Cong to go it alone in strongholds

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The Bengal Congress has decided to contest the panchayat elections alone wherever it is in a strong position. The party also continued to fire salvos at ally Trinamool Congress for its "arrogance and high-handedness".

Senior PCC member and Murshidabad MP Adhir Chowdhury on Sunday said there was no question of tying up with a party "that has been tormenting our workers". The Congress will go it alone in the panchayat elections "wherever we are strong", said Chowdhury, adding, "An all-India party like the Congress cannot take humiliation for an eternity".

He insisted that Trinamool leaders were "humiliating and tormenting us at all levels, flaunting their numerical superiority, which is never acceptable to a party with self-respect. A time has come when the Congress as a political unit should salvage its self-respect."

Similar views were aired by the Malda Congress leadership with local MP AH Khan Chowdhury saying that though the Congress had been instrumental in the ouster of the Left Front "our alliance partners are not giving us that credit". The Congress has decided to go it alone in Malda too.

The party has a strong base in these contiguous districts. It had won all the five parliamentary seats from these districts in 2009 general elec-

tions. Currently out of 18 district boards the Congress holds three while the Trinamool has two with it. The rest is with the Left Front.

The two parties share a tumultuous relationship at the Centre and the State, with each accusing the other of backstabbing.

On charges levelled by the Trinamool — that the Congress was trying to back the Left Front in an indirect manner — Chowdhury said,

'Without the help from the Congress, no party would have been able to come to power in Bengal'

"The world knows who is helping whom. The Congress has always fought against the CPI(M) in Bengal. Without the help from the Congress, no party would have been able to come to power in Bengal."

The Congress had a 13 per cent vote share in the State.

The Congress leaders' statements on Sunday come a day after PCC president Pradip Bhattacharya said he would not oppose the decision of local leaders if they chose to go it alone in the panchayat elections. "The PCC will not impose its decision," he had said.

Bhattacharya also criticised the Bengal Government, in which his party is also a partner, for "seizing" financial powers of district boards ruled by other parties, adding that his party was against attacking democratically-elected institutions.

The PCC also criticised the State Government's latest decision to throw out some newspapers from State-owned libraries.

Modi shows the way on agri-growth



PNS ■ AHMEDABAD

Chief Minister Narendra Modi has said that Gujarat has achieved record output in agriculture and dairy products despite the Centre's injustice towards the State.

Addressing a gathering of Akhil Bhartiya Chaudhary-Gudol Samaj at Dantiwada of north Gujarat on Sunday, Modi said Gujarat's agricultural growth rate has touched a record 11 per cent due to the toil of its farmers while the national average is nearly three per cent.

Having a dig at the Congress regarding their noises about protection of cow progeny, Modi said that the Centre pays subsidy on mutton export while cotton exports is taxed.

The Chief Minister said that the present Government in the State has given far more power subsidy to farmers as compared to past Governments led by the Congress.

This Government pays power subsidies of around ₹3,000 crore to the farmers while the past Governments were giving power subsidy of only ₹500 crore, Modi told the gathering at Dantiwada.

Challenging the Opposition Congress over the issue of land acquisition, Modi said that in the past 40 years the Governments had snatched away fertile lands from Ankaleshwar to Vapi to make way for industrial houses while his Government has set up industries on coastal areas and on arid lands.

Opp fireworks likely over CAG report

PNS ■ MUMBAI

MAHARASHTRA BUDGET SESSION

The leaked CAG report, which has indicted senior current and former DF Ministers like Vilasrao Deshmukh, Chhagan Bhujbal, Narayan Rane and Patangrao Kadam, is bound to ignite fireworks during the second phase of the Budget Session of the Maharashtra Legislature beginning on Monday.

When the two Houses of the State Legislature resumes after a four-day break, the BJP-led Opposition will take the Congress-led DF Government to task for the delay in tabling the CAG report and demand that it be formally tabled earlier than the scheduled April 16.

Normally, the State Government tables the CAG report on the last day of a Budget Session. However, on April 4 (a day before the House went into recess), a belligerent BJP put the State Government on the defensive in the Assembly over the leaked CAG report, rooted for tabling of the report and a debate on it. Similarly, the Shiv Sena put the Government on the mat in the Upper House.

The CAG report has indicted 10 current and former Ministers — including

Deshmukh, Bhujbal, Rane, Kadam, Harshvardhan Patil and Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil — for allegedly doling out largesse in the form of plots of land at cheap rates, to trusts run by their family members.

In the coming days, the State Government will in all likelihood blame the Opposition for leaking the CAG report, while the Opposition will demand cancellation of land allotments made to the trusts run by the former and current State Ministers. The Opposition is also likely to demand a judicial inquiry into the alleged misuse of office by Ministers.

In the midst of a raging controversy over the findings in the CAG report, NCP chief and Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar has spoken up. Pawar said it had been a long tradition in Maharashtra for the State Government to allot plots of land to social organisations especially the ones running educational institutions, at concessional rates.

"There is nothing wrong in the State Government's policy of allotting land to educational and other social organisations. If the State Government



FACING THE HEAT: Deshmukh, Rane and Bhujbal

allots its land to the educational and social organisations at concessional rates, it is because they cannot afford to purchase the land at market rates.... The Government making such land allotments to educational and social organisations at concessional rates long been a tradition in Maharashtra," Pawar told mediapersons at Nashik on Saturday.

Pawar, however, said that if any educational or other social organisation was making use of the land for purposes other than it was allotted for, then those found guilty should be punished.

Given that the State Budget Session will continue till April

20, the DF Government will have a tough time in dousing the blaze ignited by the CAG report, in both the Houses.

Apart from questioning the stand taken by Pawar on the CAG report issue, the Opposition is also likely to turn up the heat on the DF Government for its failure to address the severe drought prevailing nine districts in Maharashtra.

Through his criticism of the Chief Minister for the latter's failure to deal effectively with drought, Pawar has given a handle to the Opposition to put the State Government in the dock on the drought issue.

On his part, Chief Minister

BJP-LED OPPOSITION WILL TAKE CONGRESS-LED DF GOVERNMENT TO TASK FOR THE DELAY IN TABLING REPORT, WHICH HAS INDICTED SEVERAL CURRENT AND FORMER DF MINISTERS

Prithviraj Chavan has, belatedly though, initiated measures to tackle severe drought in the districts of Ahmednagar, Nashik, Dhule, Solapur, Satara, Sangli, Osmanabad, Pune and Latur, where there is acute shortage of drinking water and fodder to the cattle.

Pawar, who toured some of the drought-affected districts of Maharashtra during the last few days, has also hit out at Governor K Sankaranarayanan for his "failure" to visit the drought-affected areas, in his capacity as the governing head of the Statutory Development Boards for the backward regions, set up in the state under Article 371(2) of the Constitution.

It remains to be seen if the Opposition will make an issue of Pawar's act of dragging Raj Bhavan into drought-related controversy.

Deforestation threatens Nagaland's endangered tragopan

PTI ■ KOHIMA

Deforestation and conversion of land for agriculture has caused habitat loss leading to threat to Blyth's tragopan, an endangered bird, in Nagaland.

According to the latest annual report of the forest and wildlife department, large-scale hunting and snaring of this enchanting bird by people for food was also a big threat. It said, excessive human intervention into the pheasant's habitats was rapidly fragmenting the remaining habitats of this avian species.

The Blyth's tragopan is listed in Schedule-I of Wildlife (Protection) Act and classified as vulnerable on International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) red data list. The bird is found in the foothills of Saramati mountain bordering Myanmar, Fakim wildlife sanctuary, Dzuku valley, Khonoma, Pufsero, Meluri, Noklak and Mount Paona and Benreu in Peren district.

The report said the captive breeding project under World Pheasant Association (WPA) was successful in the state. But



though the number of birds increased, it said, its quality and character degenerated due to inbreeding.

Under the agreement, the WPA was obligated to promote the off-site captive breeding of the bird in the United Kingdom and to build up a viable stock in case of future requirement for re-introduction back in Nagaland, it said. The WPA also assured to train personnel in the technique of tragopan breeding.

Although captive breeding was initially carried out successfully at Kohima Zoological Park, it could not be sustained due to lack of proper infrastructure and technical proficiency.

SNIPPETS

RHINO CENSUS ENDS AT KAZIRANGA

Guwahati: The rhino census in the Kaziranga National Park in Assam concluded on Sunday with the officials expecting rise in the number of the animals. The census, which began on Saturday, concluded in all the ranges but bad weather hampered the process with many of the survey teams yet to return, Park Director S Baruah said.

13/7 BLASTS: ATS HUNTS FOR 5 MORE SUSPECTS

Mumbai: Maharashtra ATS, probing the 13/7 blasts case, is on hunt for five more alleged Indian Mujahideen operatives suspected to have played key role in the terror attacks, besides the group's top operative Yasin Bhatkal and two planters, police said on Sunday.

BRING CHANGE AT LOCAL LEVEL FIRST: HAZARE

Mumbai: Social activist Anna Hazare on Sunday said that people should first bring about a change in their own localities before thinking of changing the country. "First change your locality and then think of changing the country. The lanes should be developed first to bring about a change in the country," Hazare said.

MINOR ADMINISTRATIVE RESHUFFLE IN UP

Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh made a minor administrative reshuffle on Sunday. Divisional Commissioner Venkateshwar Lu has been appointed Commissioner, Consolidation. Manoj Singh is now Commissioner and Secretary, Board of Revenue and Director of Bhumi Adhyapti. Mohammad Mustafa, holding charge of Secretary of Science & Technology and Commissioner-Consolidation has lost the second charge.

35 ACRES LAND HANDED OVER TO WAQF BOARD

Hyderabad: Authorities of the Rangra Reddy district on Sunday handed over 35 acres of land in favour of the Waqf Board. The 35 acres in Hayatnagar mandal is part of a total of 85 acres Government land which belonged to the Baba Sharifuddin dargah.

Akhilesh to meet PM for Central boost to UP coffers

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav has sought an appointment with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to put up Uttar Pradesh's case for Central assistance to tide over the fiscal health of the State.

A highly placed source in the Chief Minister's office said a request letter had been sent to the Prime Minister's Office and if everything went well the meeting may take place on April 16.

Interestingly, last week Akhilesh was in New Delhi for a day and he wanted to meet the Prime Minister. However he was denied permission as Singh was busy in the BRICS meeting.

The meeting assumes importance as the Chief Minister may ask for a special assistance package from the Centre, particularly for Purvanchal region of the State.

The officials are tight-lipped over the amount but they said the assistance could come in form of plan outlay.

"We will not mind if the plan size of Uttar Pradesh is increased and carries a special package for eastern region of the State," the official said.



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The Chief Minister's wish list may contain a request to the Prime Minister to send back senior IAS officers working on deputation in New Delhi back to their parent cadre.

The source said that the

Chief Minister would carry a list of officers who he wants to return to Uttar Pradesh.

"The Chief Minister is likely to request the Prime Minister to ask the Department of Personnel and Training to expedite the procedure," the source said.

There are at least 120 officers, who are on deputation to the Centre. Thirty-two officers had gone on Central deputation during Mayawati's regime. Over 20 senior IAS officers of Uttar Pradesh cadre are working in international agencies like World Bank, UNICEF, IMF and 11 are on sabbatical.

Interestingly, Akhilesh's predecessor Mayawati had also sought a financial assistance of ₹80,000 crore as special development package for the State when her Government came to power in UP in 2007. But the money did not come and Mayawati continued to lash out at the Union Government for its failure to release special package.

Therefore, the SP Government is playing safe and has sought assistance in form of plan outlay, which would then become part of the State Budget.

Presidential elections: SP thumbs up for Kalam

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party might propose the name of former President APJ Abdul Kalam for the post of President provided all political parties give unanimous approval to his name.

In a high-level meeting, senior party leaders discussed possible names of luminaries whom Samajwadi Party could support for the post of President. "There was a unanimous view that former President Abdul Kalam should be given another term," a highly placed leader told *The Pioneer*.

The leaders, however, vouch that they have yet to get consent of Kalam. "Only hindrance seems to be his age," he said and added party would discuss this name with Congress leadership at an opportune time.

Kalam who was President of India from 2002-2007 had denied to contest for second term because Congress had refused to support his candidature. Then also Samajwadi Party and CPM had floated Kalam's name. Then Bahujan Samaj Party had supported Congress candidate Pratibha Patil, who ultimately was elected first woman President of India.

Election for President of India would be held in June. Congress needs the support of Samajwadi Party to get a free passage to its candidate. SP with 33 MPs and 225 legislators under its belt is really a force which Congress could not ignore in Presidential election. The SP knows it and therefore wants that candidate of his choice should be elected as President.

"Samajwadi Party wants to support a Muslim face in Presidential election. Mulayam Singh Yadav wants that Congress should also accept Kalam's candidature," the source said. So far Congress has kept its cards close to its chest and has not revealed candidate for its choice in the election.

CBI seeks overseas info on Jagan 'fund transfers'

PTI ■ NEW DELHI/HYDERABAD

After filing a chargesheet against YS Jaganmohan Reddy for alleged abuse of his official position, the CBI has sent a request to various countries seeking their assistance in probing alleged transfer of funds by the son of former Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, a charge denied by his party.

The letter of request, sent through diplomatic channel, alleged that between 2004 and 2009 when YS Rajasekar Reddy was the Chief Minister, his son Jagan and his family allegedly defrauded the public exchequer by way of obtaining several favours from the State Government in matters related to issuance of licences and permissions.

Jagan and his family have also been charged in the letter with obtaining favours in matters related to allotment of lands for special economic zones and mining leases to companies which made huge investments in companies floated by younger Reddy at abnormally high rates of premium.

Denying all the charges, Reddy's party YSR Congress in a statement said, "All investments into Jaganmohan Reddy's companies have been of sound commerce and have always complied with the law of the land. The companies which invested in Reddy's companies, have also invested in other blue chip companies here."

Rice-keeper of the nation rues loss of native seeds

KESTUR VASUKI ■ BANGALORE

His concerns are deep-rooted. He believes in farmers using traditional Indian seeds in the usual practice that has continued over generations. For him, culture and agriculture stem from the same gene. He is the keeper of hundreds of traditional rice varieties in the country.

Dr Debal Deb from Odisha is very firmly of the view that many multinational companies have come and, in the name of development, destroyed not only native rice species but knowledge too. He wants farmers to look beyond this so-called development to conserve desi seeds.

Deb, whose mission is to conserve local varieties of rice seeds, was in Bangalore to interact with farmers. He has over 720 varieties of desi

rice seeds, collected across the country, and feels it is a conspiracy of multinational companies to destroy traditional seeds.

Shared his thoughts with *The Pioneer*, Deb said the green revolution was the culprit. He is not only opposed to genetically-modified crops, but also to a few companies systematically controlling them.

Deb also speaks against agrochemical TNCs, genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) and chemical pesticides and is involved in farmers' organisations and networks with social action groups, scientists, health workers/professionals, environmentalists and academics.

He said, "India had nearly 1,10,000 varieties of rice till 1970 but this diversity has been lost as a result of the green revolution, with its



emphasis on mono-culture and hybrid crops. Now, only 6,000 species or varieties of rice survive."

Deb has studied extensively on Indian agriculture and rice history and says that rice

emerged in India 14,000 years ago. With a single variety, farmers experimented and amplified genetic diversity. In the course of the last 10,000 years, there emerged 1,10,000 varieties of rice, of which only

6,000 survive now.

Deb strongly believes in the ingenuity of farmers to enrich diversity. He has some rare collections of rice seeds and has created a gene bank to protect them. He has the double-grain

rice called Jugal, which was developed in Bengal five centuries ago. Sateer is a three-grain rice, which has now become extinct.

Deb is the only person in the country to have a repository

of this rare variety.

He said, "After the green revolution, a generation of farmers in India was injected with the belief that traditional farming methods were unscientific or anti-progress.

They came to believe in the efficacy of high-cost and high-end scientific research. But traditional varieties of rice were rich in iron and protein content, vitamin B and had medicinal value."

Drawing a co-relation between declining agricultural income and mono-culture, Deb advocated crop diversity and said it was the best insurance against uncertainty in the market due to glut in production of any one variety of crop. Farmers can fall back on other crops for income.

He believes the new generation of farmers are very receptive to new ideas and hopes to conserve more rice seeds to protect Indian agriculture. Deb also keeps the seed line alive, hoping to change the agricultural pattern to develop traditional seeds.