

## India launches spy satellite

**BANGALORE (AFP)** — India put an Israeli-built spy satellite into orbit Monday, aimed at boosting its defense surveillance capabilities in the aftermath of the Mumbai militant attacks.

The satellite, which can see through clouds and carry out day-and-night all-weather imaging, has been a long-standing demand of the Indian military.

Its acquisition was fast-tracked after the November 26-29 Mumbai siege in which 10 gunmen went on a shooting spree, killing 165 people.

The 300 kilogram (650 pound) RISAT 2 was launched by the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle rocket from the Sriharikota launch site, 90 kilometers (56 miles) north of the southern city of Chennai.

"It has been successfully placed in the orbit 20 minutes after lift off this morning," G. Padmanabhan, a scientist from India's Space Research Organization told AFP by phone.

India says the Mumbai attackers came by boat from the Pakistani port city of Karachi.

India's existing satellites get blinded at night and in the monsoon season.

The new acquisition will also provide New Delhi with the capability to track incoming hostile ballistic missiles.

India treated Israel like a pariah for decades, but has forged close military links with Tel Aviv in recent years with the Jewish state replacing France in 2007 as its second-largest arms supplier after Russia.

## Briton freed by Nigeria militants

**PORT HARCOURT, Nigeria (AFP)** — Nigeria's main armed group MEND on Sunday freed one of two British hostages held captive for the past seven months, the militants, security and British diplomatic sources said.

"The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) can confirm that the British hostage, Mr. Robin Barry Hughes regained his freedom about 1730 Hrs today, Sunday April 19, 2009 after he was handed over to contacts who in turn handed him over to his employers," the group said in a statement.

The second hostage, Matthew Macguire "will remain in our custody until further notice", the group said.

A security source in the oil hub of Port Harcourt earlier told AFP they had received Hughes and that he was receiving medical attention.

"He is in a stable condition," said the source.

The hostage's family in Britain also confirmed he was free.

Hughes, believed to be in his late 50s, and Maguire were part of a group of 27 oil workers including five foreign nationals and 22 Nigerians seized by gunmen who hijacked their vessel in September 2008.

MEND said then it had rescued the hostages from other gunmen and released all but the two British nationals.

It had vowed to hold the two Britons in the creeks of the volatile oil-rich Niger Delta until MEND's leader Henry Okah, who is facing treason and gun-running charges, is freed by Nigeria. Okah was arrested in 2007.

Earlier Sunday MEND said Hughes would be freed on health and age grounds. It said the release was at the behest of Okah.

"Credit for this release goes to Henry Okah who requested that Robin be released on compassionate ground," said MEND.

Hughes was released at the banks of Batholomew River by the Atlantic Ocean, for onward transmission to his employers Hydrodive, an offshore oil and gas services firm, said a security source.

# India's all-important Muslim vote

By Suvojit Bagchi

**NEW DELHI (BBC)** — The Indian government's "war against terror" may cost the Congress Party dearly in the election.

Arrests and alleged extrajudicial killings of Muslim youths have angered many in the Islamic community.

"People in power have branded us as terrorists and used us as a vote bank, this cannot go on," said the all-powerful cleric of Delhi's Jama Masjid mosque, Syed Ahmed Bukhari, in a recent press conference.

Speaking about the deaths of two Muslim students allegedly at the hands of police in South Delhi's Muslim area last October, Bukhari said the Muslim community "wants justice".

This sense of injustice has resulted in the formation of new Muslim political parties over recent months.

These parties believe in Indian parliamentary democracy and say they are working to "strengthen" it.

The party manifestos unanimously emphasize the "safety and security" of all communities, especially Muslims.

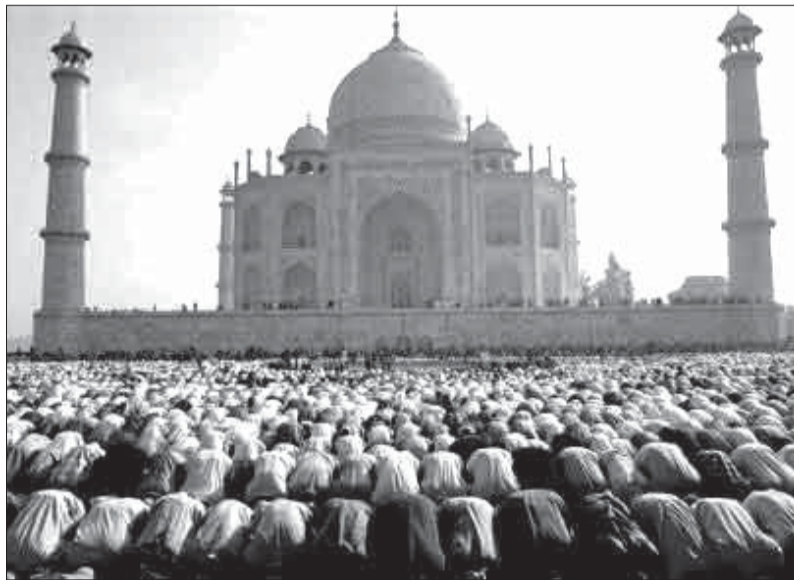
"The security of Muslims is one big issue, as after every blast in India a series of arrests of Muslim youths takes place," said a spokesperson for the influential All India Muslim Personal Law Board.

Muslim men were "systematically killed" in routine police encounters, he alleged.

Muslims comprise more than 13% of India's population and many are aggrieved that proportionately they only have about half that much representation in parliament.

More than two dozen Muslim political parties, big and small, are contesting these elections -- almost double the figure of the last election.

The prominent players are the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF), Ulema Council and Indian Peace Party in Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Muslim Munetra Khazhagam in



Tamil Nadu, the People's Democratic Council in West Bengal and veterans like the Muslim League and Indian National League in Kerala, the Democratic Secular Party in Bihar and the Majlis-e Ittihad al-Muslimin in Andhra Pradesh.

Interestingly, even the staunchest supporters of these parties do not believe they are going to win.

"Our primary aim is to erode the vote of the Congress party and then to win a few seats," says Buranuddin Qasmi, an election analyst of the AUDF.

Meanwhile, many Muslims are questioning the logic behind the hasty launch of such parties.

They argue that a party like the Ulema Council will not even be able to emerge as a minor player because it lacks proper planning and goals.

Statistics show the parties that manage to win the votes of low caste people along with the Muslim vote bank have a strong chance of winning.

Since India's independence from British rule, Congress has been getting a sizeable chunk of Muslim votes at national level, largely because Muslims felt they had to prove their loyalty to India in early post-partition days, experts say.

In India, the Muslim League and

chief of the party's Minority Cell.

He also brushed aside the fact that there is any kind of "insecurity among Muslim youth", calling it a "non-issue".

But whatever Kidwai says, in at least one state a Muslim party is creating serious trouble for Congress.

The Islamic vote in Assam makes up more than 20% of Muslim votes and appears to be making forays into Congress bastions.

The Hindu nationalist BJP -- which Muslims tend to vote against -- could win in the state.

But that has not stopped the AUDF from running anti-Congress campaigns.

"Enough of that -- whenever Muslims vote against Congress, it is said to be in favor of the BJP. Can't we ever raise our voice because of right-wing parties like the BJP?" the AUDF's election analyst, Buranuddin Qasmi, asks.

The real Achilles' heel for Congress is the Sachar Report -- a prime ministerial committee that recommended several measures to improve the living conditions of Muslims in India.

Initiated by Congress and tabled in parliament in 2006, the report has become central to the Indian Muslim community and is often quoted to voice their grievances.

During election campaigns, Muslim parties have pointed out that none of the recommendations of this report have been implemented.

"Congress and Manmohan Singh may have done a commendable job in commissioning a report of this magnitude. But the minority affairs ministry has done literally nothing to implement it, with the exception of giving scholarships to Muslim students," Dr Abu Saleh Shariff, member-secretary of the Sachar Committee Report, told the BBC.

However, Imran Kidwai says that 19 out of 22 of its recommendations have been implemented.

"Muslims will vote for Congress," he confidently predicted.

## ANC still dominates South Africa politics

By Robyn Dixon

**SOWETO, South Africa** — Christopher Sadiki is convinced that Jacob Zuma, the president-in-waiting for the ruling African National Congress, is guilty of corruption. But that won't stop the 21-year-old from choosing the ANC when he votes for the first time this week.

"Corruption is everywhere," he said, shrugging. "They're all corrupt."

And don't ask him about the opposition -- he doesn't want to know.

"I don't support them. I don't know anything about them. I don't even want to know about them," said Sadiki, who lives in a \$2-a-week shack in one of Soweto's shantytowns.

Fifteen years after South Africa's first democratic elections, the ANC is predicted to win yet again with a large majority in Wednesday's parliamentary election, which would catapult Zuma into the presidency weeks after corruption charges related to a multibillion-dollar arms deal were dropped.

Opposition parties have managed to attract a sliver of support among whites and the rising black middle class, but the election poses the question of whether they will ever attract the solid support among poor unemployed blacks that is necessary to challenge ANC dominance.

Of the galaxy of opposition parties, only three are expected to attract more than 2% of the vote each, according to a recent poll by the Ipsos-Markinor research firm.

"The biggest problem is that Africa has always had very dominant ruling parties," analyst William Gumede said.

He said the opposition appealed mainly to better-off voters worried about issues such as crime and corruption.

"It seems Zuma and the ANC don't care what the thinking classes think, because the thinking classes won't bring the votes in," Gumede said.

The Ipsos-Markinor poll suggested that the ANC, which first came to power in 1994 under Nelson Mandela, would win about 65% of the vote.



Supporters of the ANC splinter group COPE arrive for a rally in Cape Town. Opposition groups have failed to attract unemployed young black men, the ANC's main base.

An ANC breakaway group, the Congress of the People, or COPE, launched after President Thabo Mbeki was ousted in September, seemed to offer the possibility of a viable alternative to the ANC. But it has flopped organizationally and is predicted to secure only 8% or 9% of the vote, the poll showed.

The opposition Democratic Alliance, led by a white woman, Helen Zille, won just over 12% in the last election and is predicted to get about 11% this time.

A third group is the Inkatha Freedom Party, which won about 7% of the vote last time.

In the black townships and shantytowns, people such as Sadiki talk about the lack of jobs and services, but the opposition has failed to capitalize on the problems, Gumede said.

"I think the reason this election was so important was that the opposition had a chance to do something, but they failed miserably," he said. "The political space opened up with people leaving the ANC, but they still needed to work hard, which they haven't done."

Ian Davidson, a spokesman for the Democratic Alliance, said voting patterns in South Africa have revolved around race since the first free elections in 1994.

"COPE has now opened up those

opportunities in the sense that people feel safe voting outside the ANC," he said. "It's an offshoot of the ANC, so they're not voting against their identity."

Davidson predicted that his party and others in the opposition would form an alliance after the election that eventually would be capable of challenging ANC dominance.

"It's our hope to work closely with them to be able to be in a position together to challenge for power in 2014," he said. "Sixty percent is a large number, but we believe the ANC is falling apart so quickly."

Democratic Alliance leader Zille, whose campaign has targeted some ANC strongholds, warns that South Africa risks becoming a failed state if the ANC's dominance continues.

Opponents in the ANC call her racist and colonialist. Despite the Democratic Alliance's efforts to recruit leading black candidates, some black voters fear that a win by Zille would mean a return to apartheid.

The Soweto shantytown where Sadiki grew up has always voted overwhelmingly ANC and is expected to do so this time around.

But when Sadiki condemned all opposition politicians as corrupt, a quiet voice interrupted. A slight 18-year-old schoolgirl, Numfundo Mlotshwa, also voting for the first time, contradicted him.

"Helen Zille is not corrupt. I think Helen Zille would be the best president for South Africa," said Mlotshwa, chin jutting defiantly, as the young unemployed man, sitting in the sun, gawked at her in surprise. The polls suggest Mlotshwa's view is shared by few.

Davidson argues that if COPE gets even 8% of the votes, it will pave the way for other parties. "What is important is that they have opened up the political space, because more and more people are dissatisfied with the ANC. As Helen would say, it's very difficult for people to cross from one bank of the river to the other. They sometimes need pebbles to help them across."

(Source: LATimes.com)

## NATO forces foil pirate attack on tanker

**ON BOARD NRB CORTE-REAL (Reuters)** — NATO forces foiled an attack by Somali pirates on a Norwegian oil tanker, and briefly detained seven gunmen after hunting them down under cover of darkness, NATO officials said on Sunday.

It was the latest assault by sea gangs from Somalia who have hijacked dozens of ships, taken hundreds of sailors hostage and made tens of millions of dollars in ransoms -- defying an unprecedented deployment by foreign navies in the region.

The violence has disrupted aid supplies, driven up insurance costs and forced some companies to route cargo round South Africa.

Michael McWhinnie, a spokesman on the Canadian warship Winnipeg, said it, a British naval supply ship and U.S. warship Halyburton all responded after pirates attacked the 80,000-ton MV Front Ardenne in the Gulf of Aden late Saturday.

The gunmen, who were armed with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades, fled south in their skiff as the NATO forces approached, dumping most of their weapons overboard.

McWhinnie told Reuters a helicopter dispatched by the Winnipeg fired several warning rounds in front of the pirates' small craft from its machinegun, but they ignored it.

The Canadian warship then pursued them for hours through the night, extinguishing its lights to hunt the gang in the dark.

"We blocked their path. We were faster and surprisingly more maneuverable than the pirate skiff," McWhinnie said by phone from the Winnipeg to the Corte-Real, a Portuguese warship that is also part of NATO's anti-piracy mission in the area.

The Canadian ship then sent a boarding party to search the pirate vessel and found an RPG round, which they seized.

"Most weapons went over the side but they must have overlooked it when they started discarding objects," he said. After documenting the evidence they let the pirates go.

"Canada's mandate is not to normally take detainees in this mission," McWhinnie said.

On Saturday, Dutch commandos freed 20 Yemeni hostages and briefly detained seven pirates who had forced the Yemenis to sail a "mother ship" attacking vessels in the Gulf of Aden.

Gunmen from Somalia also seized a Belgian dredging vessel and its 10 crew, including seven Europeans. The Pompei was hijacked early on Saturday about 600 km (370 miles) from the Somali coast en route to the Seychelles. It has two Belgian, four Croatian, one Dutch and three Filipino crew on board.

A pirate source who said he was on board the Pompei said they would sail it to Harardheere, a stronghold of the sea gangs.

Regional analysts and security experts say that without political stability in Somalia, which has been mired in civil war for 18 years, the pirates will continue to cause havoc.

The Somali government plans to present its proposals to tackle the maritime crime wave at a major donors' meeting on Somalia taking place in Brussels on Wednesday and Thursday.

### Mistake is regretted

The news story: "Zimbabwe land reform irreversible" published on April 20 was a press release from Zimbabwe's Embassy in Tehran and not reported by BBC. The mistake is hereby regretted.

Editor