

## Nation split between Bush, Democrats

REUTERS, Washington

One year before the next presidential election, Americans are evenly divided between President Bush and a Democratic challenger, according to a poll released yesterday in The Washington Post.

Support for Bush has fallen to the point where 48 percent of those surveyed said they would vote for him if the election were held today, while 47 percent said they would vote for the Democratic Party's nominee, The Post said. Five percent said they did not know.

Bush's approval rating, which topped 90 percent after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, was at 56 percent, with 42 percent giving him a negative review. Bush received better marks for his handling of the war on terror than for Iraq or his stewardship of the economy.

## 22 killed as bus falls into valley in Maharashtra

PTI, Pune

Twenty two people were feared killed and several others injured when a luxury bus from Gujarat plunged into a valley in Pasarni Ghat near Panchgani in Satara district of Maharashtra late on Saturday night, police said yesterday.

The bus, going from Mahabaleshwar to Pune, fell into the 200 ft deep valley near Buha Saheb temple on the Panchgani-Wai road, the police said.

The driver of the bus, belonging to Sri G Tourism and Travels, lost control of the vehicle while negotiating a curve near the slope of the ghat section, the police said.

## UK keeps its door open to highly skilled migrants

PTI, London

In an effort to attract the brightest and the best from India and other places, Britain has effected changes in its Highly Skilled Migrant Programme, the Home Ministry has announced.

Under the new scheme, the overall points required to qualify will be reduced from 75 points to 65 and from next summer foreign nationals who have studied maths, science or engineering at a UK institution will be able to work in the UK for 12 months following graduation under the new Science and Engineering Graduates Scheme.

## Britons back William to be next king: Polls

AFP, London

Britons are increasingly backing Prince William to inherit the throne ahead of his father Prince Charles, according to a series of polls published yesterday.

A total 39 percent of respondents agreed that William, second in line to the throne, should succeed Queen Elizabeth II as Britain's next monarch, up 11 points since last year, a YouGov poll showed.

Those backing heir to the throne Charles to be the next king also stood at 39 percent, but represented a fall of nine points on a year ago, according to the survey published in The Mail on Sunday weekly tabloid.

The number in favour of Charles is in line with a separate survey of young Britons published Sunday, which showed that 38 percent of 16- to 24-year-old respondents wish to see him succeed the queen.

## Israeli pacifists remember slain Rabin

AFP, Tel Aviv

Tens of thousands of Israelis rallied here Saturday to mark the eighth anniversary of the assassination of Nobel Peace Prize winner Yitzhak Rabin, with the so-called Geneva initiative appearing to have injected a new lease of life into the peace camp.

The square where the champion of the 1993 Oslo accords was slain on November 1995 by an Israeli extremist was dotted with banners in favour of the unofficial peace plan, drafted last month by Palestinian figures and Israeli left-wingers.

"I am sure Rabin would have supported Geneva, because it's a logical continuation of the Oslo accords," said Israel Dresner, a rabbi from New Jersey visiting Israel.

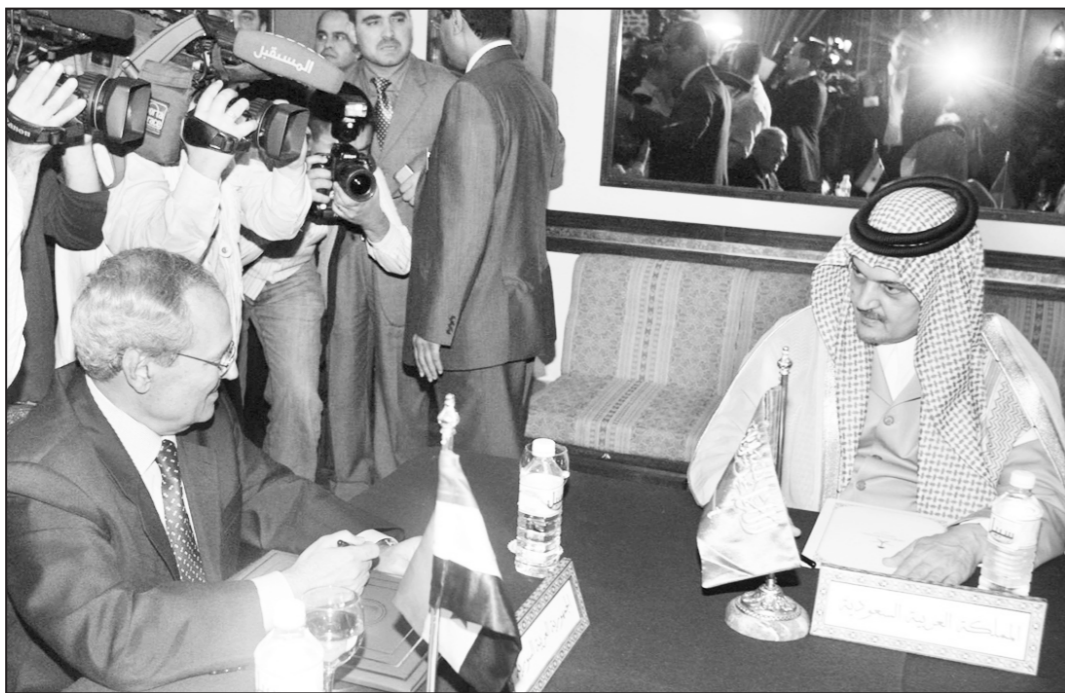


PHOTO: AFP

Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq Sharaa (L) chats with his Saudi counterpart Prince Saud al-Faisal at the start of a regional meeting on the growing instability in Iraq on Saturday in Damascus. Interim Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said he would boycott the talks, saying "the way the invitation has been extended was not in keeping with Iraq's dignity." Syria had called the meeting of top diplomats from Iraq's neighbours plus Egypt to discuss the impact of the violence in the country on the region's stability, but had initially failed to invite Zebari because of its continued misgivings about the legitimacy of his US-installed administration.

## Pakistan to sign nuclear plant deal in China

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan is expected to finalise a deal with China for the construction of a nuclear power plant, officials said Sunday, the second such plant to be built with the help of Beijing.

The agreement for the construction of the 300 megawatt nuclear power plant is expected to be signed during the visit of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to China.

"Yes, absolutely there is a possibility," Foreign Office spokesman Masood Khan told Reuters when asked whether the agreement would be finalised during the visit.

The nuclear plant will be constructed at Chashma on the banks of the Indus River, around 170 miles south of Islamabad and alongside the first plant that China helped to build, which has a similar capacity.

Khan said China had agreed in

principle to build a second nuclear power plant during the visit of Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali to Beijing in March.

He said the financing details of the project had yet to be worked out. Energy experts say the project is estimated to cost \$600 million and will take at least six years to complete.

The first Chashma nuclear power plant was built in 1999 and was connected to the national power grid in early 2000.

The United States has repeatedly urged China to halt nuclear cooperation with Pakistan, but both Beijing and Islamabad say they are not working together for military purposes.

Khan said the nuclear power plant would be constructed under the safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"It will be meant for civilian use of nuclear energy," Pakistan set up its first

nuclear power station in 1972 in the port city of Karachi with Canadian help. The Karachi plant has a capacity of 137 megawatts.

Western countries, under pressure from the United States, later halted nuclear cooperation with Pakistan, suspecting that Islamabad was clandestinely developing nuclear weapons.

Pakistan vowed to go nuclear after rival India exploded its first nuclear device in 1974.

Pakistan conducted five nuclear tests just weeks after India carried out three such tests in May 1998.

Beijing is the main supplier of military hardware to Islamabad. Musharraf's three-day visit to China ending on Tuesday comes on the heels of unprecedented joint naval exercises between the two countries.

# Iraq's neighbours ask US to restore security

AP, Damascus

Arab, Iranian and Turkish foreign ministers denounced terrorist groups operating in Iraq and urged US-led forces to restore security and stability there, according to a draft communique obtained yesterday on the final day of talks on the war's regional impact.

The foreign ministers of Syria, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Jordan, plus politically influential Egypt, met for almost two hours Sunday in a downtown Damascus hotel Sunday before breaking and traveling to Syrian President Bashar Assad's palace for talks.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari refused to attend the meeting after rejecting two last-minute invitations. He has also said the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council

would not accept decisions taken by the meeting.

Despite Zebari's no-show, the ministers said in the draft communique, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press, that they supported the Governing Council to "bear its transitional responsibilities until an elected Iraqi government with wide representation is established."

The communique also denounced terrorist groups operating inside Iraq and said US-led occupation forces must restore security and stability to the country they invaded in March.

The talks took place as violence flared again in Iraq. Thirteen US soldiers were killed and 20 injured Sunday when a US Chinook helicopter carrying dozens of soldiers to R&R leaves was shot down.

The draft communique, which is yet

to be officially announced, denounced terrorist attacks in Iraq aimed at civilians, humanitarian and religious institutions, international organizations and diplomatic missions.

The ministers condemned some terrorist groups who have been using Iraqi territory to endanger security in neighboring states, but rejected accusations against their countries of interfering in Iraq's internal affairs.

US officials have said foreign fighters may be behind a recent upsurge in attacks against coalition forces, international aid agencies and Iraqis in Iraq. Washington has accused regional states, particularly Syria, of not doing enough to prevent foreign fighters infiltrating through its eastern border into Iraq to attack US-led coalition forces.

The ministers reiterated their

support for Syria and stressed on the need to preserve Iraq's sovereignty and independence. They also called for strengthening the United Nations' role, particularly in drafting a new Iraqi constitution, holding elections and drawing up a time table to end the US-led occupation.

Syria and Iran strongly opposed the US-led conflict, while Kuwait was the launching pad for the invading American forces. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt are key US allies in the region.

Some worried Iraq's presence could divert the forum's focus from discussing the war's regional impact to direct involvement by neighboring states in the process of security and stability. The issue of military participation by Iraq's neighbors in a stabilization force was expected to be raised.

## Weather helps firefighters contain blazes in California

AFP, Los Angeles

Firefighters aided by favorable weather gained the upper hand with California's most destructive blazes yesterday, allowing many evacuees to begin returning to their homes, officials said.

After two days of cool, moist weather, even snow in some high mountain areas, the four biggest fires were 60 to 90 percent contained, officials said. Just six of the original 17 fires remained active.

And while thousands of firefighters were still on the job, some weary crews were able to go home and rest.

"Fire behavior has really diminished," Krystal Johnson of the US Forest Service said.

She reported "no additional fire spread and very little open flame" in the "Old Fire" that has charred 36,940 hectares (91,281 acres) in San Bernardino County east of Los Angeles since it started October 21.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani women activists of multi-party opposition, Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD), shout anti-government slogans as they hold placards during a demonstration in Multan Saturday. Pakistani police arrested the ARD President Javed Hashmi on October 29 and charged him with inciting mutiny in the armed forces, which triggered protests by opposition parties across the country.

## Advani disappointed at Pak response

PTI, Hyderabad

Terming as "very disappointing" Pakistan's response to India's fresh peace initiative, Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani yesterday said there was "no evidence of sincerity" on Islamabad's part in stopping cross-border terrorism.

"Our confidence building measures aimed at improving people-to-people relations will be purposeful only if infiltration from across the border and the killing of innocents are stopped," Advani told reporters after reviewing the passing-out parade of the 55th batch of IPS probationers at National Police Academy (NPA) near Hyderabad.

Pointing out that infiltration across the Line of Control (LoC) was still

continuing despite the hand of friendship extended by New Delhi, he said there were as many as 28 attempts at infiltration in September alone and all of them were thwarted by security forces who eliminated over 200 terrorists during the period, an "all-time high" in one month.

He reminded the neighbouring country of its responsibility to hand over 20 criminals named by India for their involvement in terrorist activity.

"Now that the United States government has declared Dawood Ibrahim as an international terrorist carrying out terrorist activities in India and working in conjunction with al-Qaeda, it is high time that Pakistan handed them over to India to enable the law to take its own course," the deputy PM said.

## Woman rams car into arena at Bush rally

REUTERS, Southaven

A woman rammied a car carrying children into a building where President Bush was campaigning on Saturday, drawing a swarm of police in her wake before being dragged away at gunpoint.

Bush was in his limousine ready to leave the arena when the screaming woman hit the same side of the building, near the exit the president's motorcade was to use. Bush was one level below, down a ramp about 75 yards away.

"We don't think there was any malice against the president... It was a matter of very bad timing," a DeSoto County Sheriff's Department official, who wished to remain anonymous, said.

Employees of the DeSoto Civic Center said they ran away from the

crash, scared that it was an attempted car bombing.

But the Sheriff's Department official said the woman had been awake all night arguing with her husband, was late for the event and grew increasingly frustrated as she was turned away from the building at checkpoint after checkpoint.

"She then took the matter into her own hands," he said.

The sheriff's department charged the woman, Betina Mixon, 29, with aggravated assault on a law enforcement officer.

While Bush was apparently in no direct danger during the security scare, the incident raised questions about how well the president is protected at a time when he is leading a war on terrorism.

## Lankan Muslims to offer counter peace plan

### Tigers raise peace hopes

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's minority Muslims are preparing their own peace plan in response to an historic power-sharing proposal offered by Tamil Tiger rebels, the main Muslim party here said yesterday.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) said its leadership, which is currently in London studying foreign devolution models, will finalise its proposals within two months.

The SLMC announcement came after the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) unveiled its first ever blueprint for ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

"There is no proper Muslim representation in the LTTE's proposals, but we are not bothered by that," an SLMC spokesman here said. "We will be making our proposals within two months."

The support of Muslims is seen as crucial for the success of any peace deal with Tamils, the island's largest minority. Muslims are the second largest minority, comprising 7.5 percent of the population.

The government has a slender two-seat majority in parliament and depends on the support of 12 Muslim legislators.

Meanwhile, a landmark power-sharing plan unveiled by Tamil Tiger

rebels has left a margin for manoeuvring and raised hopes of ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed in Sri Lanka, politicians and diplomats said yesterday.

The Tamil Tigers Saturday announced their first ever blueprint for peace under which they seek a majority in a proposed Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) for the island's war-torn northeast.

With the release of an eight-page document outlining its vision of a political settlement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said it was ending its eight-month boycott of Norwegian-brokered peace talks.

European Union ambassadors to Colombo welcomed the LTTE announcement as an "important step forward in the peace process."

"The EU Heads of Mission emphasise the linkage between assistance by the international donor community and substantial parallel progress in the peace process," the ambassadors said in a statement.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga who is opposed to the cohabitation government's handling of the peace process did not react immediately, but officials said she was meeting with party stalwarts to discuss the proposals.

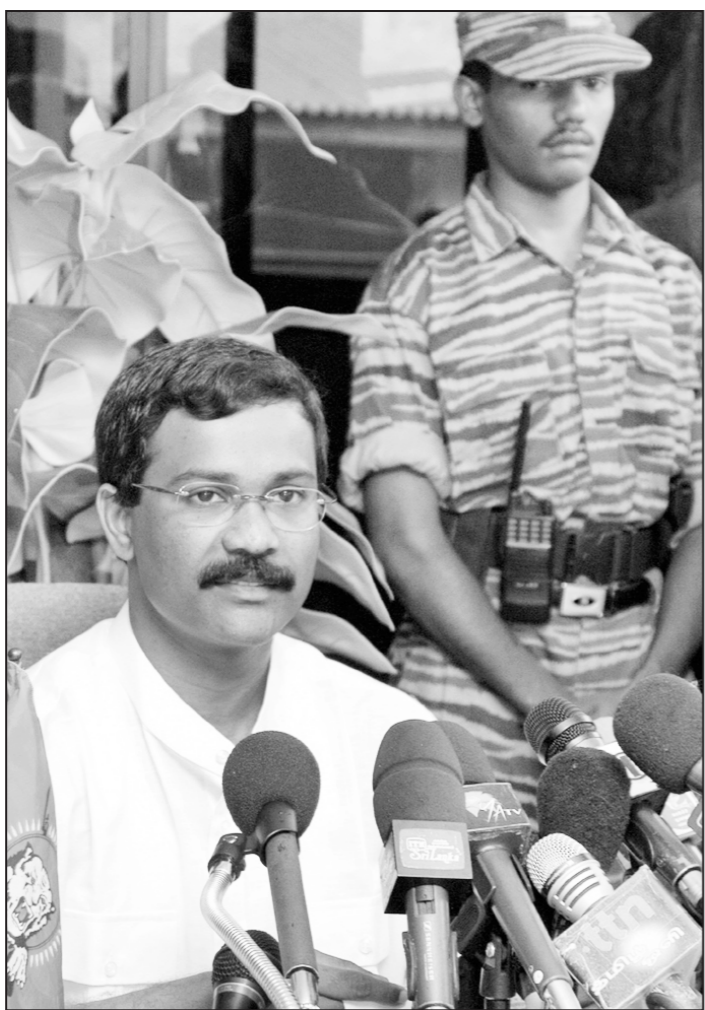


PHOTO: AFP

Rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leader S. P. Thamilselvan (L) addresses the press in the rebel-held northern Sri Lankan town of Kilinochchi yesterday. The LTTE called for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) in their first blueprint for peace in a country where more than 60,000 people have been killed in separatist violence.