

Voting quiet as Japanese expect little change from election

AFP, Tokyo

Voting in Japan's general election was subdued yesterday under sombre grey skies and a light drizzle in Tokyo as a steady stream of mainly middle-aged voters turned out to vote amid expectations that the status quo would be preserved.

With opinion polls in the run-up to election day suggesting little prospect of the incumbent Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-led coalition of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi losing power, the mood was more of business as usual, than excited anticipation.

"This time it's the same as always and I expect the Koizumi government to stay in power. I expect no change in the government. I prefer stability to change, said restaurant owner Kimiko Miyashita, 53, who voted in Chuo ward near Tokyo's famous Tsukiji fish market.



PHOTO: AFP

A Japanese woman casts a ballot for Japan's Lower House election at a polling station in Tokyo yesterday. Polls opened in Japan's Lower House general election, giving 103 million voters their chance to pass judgement on Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's government.

US Senate Republicans halt Iraqi arms probe

AFP, Washington

The leader of US Senate Republicans has suspended a politically damaging inquiry into possible inadequacies or misuse of pre-war intelligence on Iraq, saying it was being manipulated "to politically wound the president of the United States."

The announcement by Senate Majority leader Bill Frist in a floor speech Friday capped a heated political row in the upper congressional chamber triggered by a leaked Democratic memorandum outlining a strategy for using the probe for political gain.

Children's toys litter Saudi bombed compound

REUTERS, Riyadh

Charred palm trees, twisted car metal and a carpet of shattered glass surrounded a deep crater in the heart of a once-peaceful Saudi housing compound yesterday after bombers blew an avenue of destruction right through it.

Shattered concrete and children's toys littered the road dividing two rows of collapsed villas. Sofas, baths and beds spilled into the open from wrecked homes in the Muhaya compound in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

"Oh God, this is unbelievable, heartbreaking," cried a young Lebanese businessman who moved into the compound only four months ago.

Diplomats said the powerful mid-night bombing, blamed by a Saudi security source on Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda, probably killed between 20 to 30 people.

"I feel like I am lost. Everything is gone," said the businessman, who asked not to be named. "I survived the Lebanese war for 10 years and I never saw anything like this."

"I know a lot of beautiful people who left their homeland to build a future here."

Residents of Muhaya on the desert outskirts of west Riyadh were predominantly Lebanese, with a smattering of other Arab nationalities.

"There was an amazing, beautiful community spirit. We lived together and prayed together. It was unbelievable," said the businessman.

Another resident, a Jordanian who identified himself only as Alaa, reported heavy gunfire before the blast. "I heard shots, many shots, and then one big explosion."

Saudi officials said the attack matched suicide bombings in Riyadh sixth months ago when militants stormed Western compounds with gunfire before detonating powerful bombs. Authorities blamed al-Qaeda for those attacks.

Israel warns Palestinians not to choose 'Arafat's way'

Israeli ministers debate Hizbollah prisoner swap

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel warned yesterday that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will seek to undermine the new Palestinian cabinet and urged its ministers to choose the path of democratic reforms.

Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei (also known as Abu Alaa) announced Sunday that negotiations on a new government had been completed and that the 24-minister line-up would be submitted to parliament Wednesday.

"Arafat is going to try to block Abu Alaa's government, the way he blocked Abu Mazen's," Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's spokesman Raanan Gissin told AFP.

Gissin was referring to the previous

Palestinian government led by Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen), who resigned in September following a bitter struggle with Arafat over the control of the security services.

"If they want to go the way of Arafat's terrorist cartel, they're not going to have a state," Gissin said.

"However, we are willing to give a chance to Abu Alaa. Any government, whatever its composition will be judged by its performance in implementing the roadmap to peace," he said.

The roadmap is a peace blueprint drafted by the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States, which calls for an end to violence and paves the way for the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005.

Reuters adds: Israel's cabinet debated yesterday whether to approve a prison exchange with the Lebanese Hizbollah guerrilla group that has put Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's political prestige on the line.

While Sharon tried to persuade his cabinet to back the deal, Yasser Arafat appeared to emerge the winner in a struggle with Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei over composition of a new government to pursue peacemaking and on the delegation of security powers.

Under the German-mediated prisoner deal, some 400 jailed Palestinian and Lebanese would be traded for a kidnapped Israeli businessman and the bodies of three

Israeli soldiers killed in a Hizbollah border raid in 2000.

But the swap has run into opposition in Israel over Sharon's willingness to release the prisoners without receiving in return information about the fate of Ron Arad, a missing Israeli airman who parachuted from his fighter-bomber over Lebanon in 1986.

"There is no need to define the importance of the decision the cabinet is being asked to make today," Sharon said in broadcast remarks at the start of what was likely to be a lengthy meeting.

'India, US may share bio-warfare information'

ANI, Islamabad

Defence experts and top scientists from India and the United States are likely to meet next week to discuss and sign an agreement to share bio-warfare technology information.

According to the Daily Times, the agreement will come at the conclusion of a first-ever Indo-US workshop on life sciences, a collaboration among the Indian Army, its research wing - the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and the US.

The information to be shared during the workshop was declared off-limits for India after it detonated a nuclear device in 1999.

Particulars of the agreement were reportedly discussed at the Indo-US Joint Technological Group (JTG) over five sittings.

US military chief warns of rogue missile attacks

REUTERS, Orlando

Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, warned NATO allies yesterday that conventional forces were vulnerable to cruise missile attacks from rogue, non-state militants, saying "it won't be long before that threat is upon us."

Myers spoke behind closed doors to the Defence and Security Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, meeting in Florida.

The media was barred from the speech but in a recording obtained by Reuters, Myers presented the threat from cruise missiles and short-range ballistic missiles as a hole in US and

allied defenses that could be exploited by "non-state actors," which he did not further identify.

"You don't hear about the cruise missile threat, but if you think about it, cruise missiles, can be made to have very low radar cross sections, so they're hard to see," said Myers.

"They fly typically low to the ground, they fly relatively fast and they carry significant warheads, especially if you think about biological weapons or radiological weapons or even conventional weapons, for that matter, and they can be launched from almost anything -- from the back of trucks," Myers said.

"I only hope that people realize that this is a real threat. Short-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, are prevalent in many countries," he said. "It won't be long before that threat is upon us."

Myers did not say what groups he meant when he spoke of "non-state actors" but he was believed to be referring to groups like al-Qaeda.

A spokesman for the general later told Reuters that Myers was not referring to any specific or imminent threat, and that the United States does not believe opposition forces in Iraq have access to cruise missiles.

Iran to accept tougher nuke checks, halt uranium enrichment

REUTERS, Vienna

Iran again pledged Saturday to give the UN nuclear watchdog crucial letters making official its acceptance of tougher nuclear inspections and a suspension of its controversial uranium enrichment programme.

However, several diplomats said they were losing patience with Iran, which has yet to stop its enrichment activities, which Washington believes are at the heart of a secret atomic weapons program, three weeks after promising to do so.

"Next week, we will get the letter by Iran for conclusion of the Additional Protocol, which is a positive step," International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Mohamed ElBaradei told reporters after a 90 minute meeting with the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Hassan Rohani.

Iran initially promised the letter

confirming acceptance of tougher inspections weeks ago. Even though Rohani did not bring it to the meeting, ElBaradei called their talks "very fruitful."

He said Rohani promised a second letter formally announcing the "suspension of all enrichment-related activities" next week, another promise Tehran has yet to fulfill.

Asked when the uranium enrichment would be halted, Rohani declined to give a date. Speaking through an interpreter, he said only: "In the next week I will announce that."

Reporters asked ElBaradei if he agreed with Rohani's statement to reporters which said Tehran had satisfactorily answered all outstanding questions about its nuclear program.

ElBaradei said his answer would be in next week's report on Iran, but added: "We have been getting satisfactory cooperation from Iran...I hope this is something that will continue."

Israeli equipment in use to check infiltration in Kashmir: India

AFP, Jammu

Troops manning the de-facto border with Pakistan in troubled Kashmir Sunday claimed they were successfully preventing infiltration of rebels into Indian-Kashmir thanks to new thermal imaging cameras from Israel.

"The Israeli hand held thermal imagers have proved effective in tracking down groups of infiltrators on the Line of Control (LoC) in Poonch and Rajouri districts," a senior army officer told AFP.

Army officials said the imagers, with a range of up to four kilometres (2.5 miles), had helped to gun down as many as 70 militants on the LoC in the Poonch and Rajouri districts, west of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, in the past six months.

"Patrol parties of the security forces have eliminated groups of infiltrators after watching their movement on the thermal imagers," said Dilip Trivedi, inspector general of the paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF).

Lankan president denies peace process at risk

AFP, Colombo

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has denied that the peace process with Tamil Tiger rebels is at risk due to her takeover of three key government portfolios, in an interview broadcast yesterday by the BBC.

"I don't see how the peace process could be at risk unless I ordered the forces to go to war or something," the president said, answering the charge of her arch-rival, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, that her actions had put the Norwegian-led initiative in jeopardy.

Kumaratunga, taking advantage of Wickremesinghe being out of the country, Tuesday suspended parliament for two weeks and sacked the defence, information and interior ministers.

In a televised address to the nation on Friday, she made it clear she intended to hold on to the three key portfolios and would from now on closely monitor the peace process, believing it had endangered the nation's security.

She complained that she had not been asked to sign the accord in February last year between

Wickremesinghe's government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), an omission which she said made it invalid.

Despite this, she had, as the new defence minister, ordered Sri Lanka's military to respect the truce, she said.

In the interview with the BBC's World Service Television, Kumaratunga said she had been excluded from the peace process even though her assent was required for key decisions.

"Sometimes I was not consulted but as head of government I am part of the peace process and nothing in that peace process can become law without my being part of it," Kumaratunga said. "So perhaps now one could work closer together."

Defending her takeover of defence, she said she had merely "assigned to myself defence powers which are exclusively assigned to the Sri Lanka president under the constitution".

Asked if she was optimistic about the future of the peace process, she questioned the sincerity of the Tamil Tigers, who on October 31 unveiled their first ever blueprint for a political settlement.

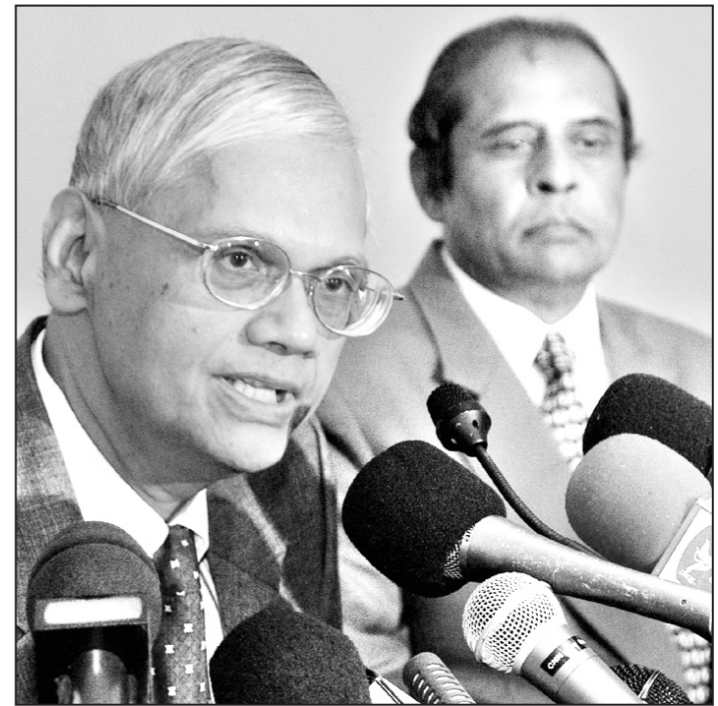


PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan government's chief peace negotiator, G.L. Peiris (L) speaks at a press conference in Colombo yesterday as former defence minister Tilak Marapana (R), who was sacked on November 4 by Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, looks on. Sri Lanka's beleaguered government has asked its international backers to examine the possibility of getting hostile President Chandrika Kumaratunga to handle the peace process with Tamil Tiger rebels, the senior minister Peiris said.

34 perish in Iranian desert road carnage

AFP, Tehran

Thirty-four people died and 10 were injured when a bus and a truck collided on a desert road in central Iran and when another truck plowed into the scene of the crash, the official news agency IRNA reported yesterday.

The report said the carnage occurred late on Saturday on the road between the cities of Yazd and Tabas, situated in the Dasht-e Kavir desert, when a passenger bus headed for the northeastern city of Mashhad veered off course and smashed head on into a truck loaded with rocks.

Another truck then smashed into the site of the crash, claiming even more lives.

At least 21,000 people are killed on Iran's roads every year. Most accidents are blamed on reckless driving habits, badly maintained vehicles and poor roads.

300,000 Iraqis may be in mass graves

AP, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein's government is believed to have buried as many as 300,000 opponents in 263 mass graves that dot the Iraqi landscape, the top human rights official in the US-led civilian administration said Saturday.

Sandy Hodgkinson said the administration has been sending forensic teams to investigate those grave sites reported to US officials. So far, the existence of about 40 graves has been confirmed.

"We have found mass graves with women and children with bullet holes in their heads," she said.

President Bush has referred to Iraqi mass graves frequently in recent months, saying they provide evidence that the war to drive Saddam from power was justified.

But some human rights activists have criticized the US-led administration in Iraq for moving too slowly to protect grave sites and begin excavations, and have expressed skepticism that it will ever fully identify who is buried in the mass graves.

"There is just no way technologically, financially that they're going to deal with mass graves on this magnitude," said Susannah Sirkin of Physicians for Human Rights in Boston.

The US-led administration held a workshop Saturday to train dozens of Iraqis to find and protect the mass grave sites. Hodgkinson said the workers would be crucial in protecting the sites from desperate relatives trying to dig for evidence of their missing loved ones.



PHOTO: AFP

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze walks surrounded by bodyguards outside parliament building in Tbilisi yesterday. The stand-off in the former Soviet republic of Georgia between the opposition and President Eduard Shevardnadze took an unexpected turn Sunday when the embattled head of state mingled and chatted with the protesters calling for his resignation. Flanked by about 15 bodyguards, 75-year-old Shevardnadze appeared suddenly outside the parliament building where about 300 protesters had been keeping a vigil overnight.