

Israel halts campaigning in east Jerusalem

Palestinians threaten to cancel vote

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli police stopped two leading candidates from canvassing in occupied east Jerusalem on the first day of the Palestinian election campaign yesterday, prompting new threats to cancel the whole ballot.

Mustapha Barghuti, runner-up in January's presidential election, and the former peace negotiator Hanan Ashrawi were both attempting to defy a ban on any election activity in the eastern half of the city which was occupied and then annexed by Israel after the 1967 Six Day War.

Barghuti's office said the rights activist had been arrested while on a walkabout in the Arab quarter of the walled Old City while Ashrawi, who is a resident of east Jerusalem, was ordered to stop canvassing in the same area.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas has already said he will cancel the election scheduled for January 25 unless residents of east Jerusalem can join the democratic process, a threat repeated by his prime minister Ahmed Qorei.

The Islamist movement Hamas

however warned against any such move, denying there was any agreement with Abbas's Fatah faction for a postponement without voting in east Jerusalem.

Barghuti's office said the candidate had been "meeting with ordinary Jerusalemites near Damascus Gate, discussing their needs and the situation of Palestinians in east Jerusalem."

"He was approached by six undercover Israeli security agents, arrested, and taken to the Russian Compound jail where he remains under detention," said a statement.

Although there was no immediate comment from the police, as a resident of the West Bank, Barghuti would have been automatically liable for arrest unless he had prior authorisation to be in the city.

Ashrawi escaped being detained but only after police had forced her to stop displaying a banner for the Third Way, a line-up of independent candidates which also includes the outgoing finance minister Salam Fayad.

"All we did was explain our platform to the Palestinians in east

Jerusalem," said Ashrawi.

"It is our right to explain our platform to our constituents. There is no reason to intervene forcibly and take down our banners."

Shortly before police intervened, Ashrawi had told reporters that she had decided to launch her campaign in Jerusalem "because it is the capital of Palestine and an occupied city."

Reacting to the arrests, Qorei reiterated his assertion that "the elections will not take place without Jerusalem."

"Jerusalem is an occupied city and all the candidates should be able to campaign there freely," he said.

"They (Israel) should not only allow the people of Jerusalem to cast their ballots but also authorise candidates to campaign unhindered," added the premier who is not standing for re-election.

In an interview on Monday, Abbas said that "if (east Jerusalem) is not included, (Palestinian) factions are unanimous that there will be no election."

Ismail Haniya, who heads the list of Hamas candidates, however

denied there was any such agreement.

"We do not believe that postponing the election should be the solution," Haniya said at Hamas's campaign launch in Gaza.

The participation of Hamas, responsible for the majority of anti-Israeli attacks in the last five years, was one of the reasons cited by Israel when it initially announced it would not allow voting in east Jerusalem.

Residents had been allowed to cast their ballots in post offices in the last parliamentary election a decade as well as in the January presidential election.

Senior Israeli foreign ministry official Gideon Meir said that a final decision on east Jerusalem was still awaited.

"Discussions are ongoing but no decision has been made yet," Meir told AFP.

"However, we can say categorically that a terrorist organisation such as Hamas should not take part in the elections as it calls for the elimination of the state of Israel and orders the murder of our nationals."



Holding a press conference under a portrait of Hamas' assassinated leader Abdel Aziz Rantissi, Ismail Haniya (R) addresses the crowd as he is surrounded by fellow senior members of the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas during the launching of their electoral campaign in Gaza city yesterday.

Southern India on high terror alert

AP, Hyderabad

Police put hundreds of officers on the streets of this southern Indian city yesterday following the arrest of two suspected Islamic militants and warned residents to be prepared for attacks.

The heightened security coincided with a visit by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who was in Hyderabad, the capital of India's Andhra Pradesh state, to inaugurate a conference of scientists from around the country later Tuesday.

Southern India has been in a state of alert since last week, when gunmen opened fire outside a prestigious science institute, killing a retired professor and wounding four people in the city of Bangalore, the capital of neighbouring Karnataka state and India's technology hub.

Late Monday, police in Hyderabad arrested two men they said were part of a larger network and seized a large quantity of explosives. They said the men were planning attacks on software and technology companies in Hyderabad and warned there were more attackers in the city.

"This is not the end," said Police Commissioner Rajiv Trivedi, adding the attackers were planning to use sophisticated

bombs that can be triggered by cell phones.

The two arrested men "were part of a terror network which is planning to carry out series of bombings and suicide attacks," Trivedi said.

Police set up barricades, patrolled streets and searched cars at checkpoints across the city on Tuesday.

It was not clear whether the arrests in Hyderabad were linked to last week's attack in Bangalore.

Commissioner Trivedi said that police had "reasons to believe that the arrested militants had links with radical Islamic groups in Pakistan and Bangladesh." He did not elaborate.

India has long accused Pakistan of aiding separatist Muslim rebel groups in Jammu-Kashmir state where more than a dozen groups are fighting for the Himalayan region's independence or its merger with Pakistan.

Andhra Pradesh state also has a history of communist insurgency. The northern part of the state is a stronghold of Maoist rebels who have been fighting for more than three decades, demanding land and jobs for agricultural workers and the poor.

The rebellion has claimed at least 7,000 lives.



A rescue worker of the German Red Cross stands with his sniffer dog in front of the collapsed roof of an ice rink in Bad Reichenhall, southern Germany Monday. Police said that at least ten people, many of them children, died as the roof collapsed under heavy snow.

10 Germans killed as ice rink roof collapses

AP, Bad Reichenhall

An ice rink roof collapsed onto dozens of skaters after heavy snowfall in the Bavarian Alps on Monday, and at least 10 people were believed dead, with other victims feared trapped between debris and the frozen surface of the rink.

In the hours after the collapse, parents called out their children's names, and rescue workers swarmed around the building in the town of Bad Reichenhall. Doctors set up a makeshift infirmary at a sports hall next door, where injured people lay with intravenous hookups, and fire crews worked to shovel away debris.

A helicopter kept a floodlight on the scene as rescue workers scrambled into the early hours Tuesday to find victims and prop up what remained of the roof. With the structure stabilized, rescuers with dogs went into the building a little before midnight.

Six victims were recovered from the building, and another four had been located inside and were

believed dead, said Christoph Abriss, a spokesman for the local council. He added that "there are still people missing," but it was unclear how many.

At least four children were among the victims of the collapse, which occurred at 4 p.m. on a school holiday Monday with about 50 people inside. Recovery efforts were initially hampered by heavy snow, and help was called in from neighbouring Austria.

Police said 18 people were hurt while 16 people escaped without injury. Some 360 rescue workers were at the scene.

Early Tuesday, police spokesman Franz Sommerauer said rescue crews had gained access to around half the hall, but still had not reached the people trapped. They were trying to remove the largest chunks of debris with the help of six cranes.

Officials clung to hope that more survivors would be found after a 6-year-old girl was rescued late Monday with no major injuries more than five hours after the collapse.

Monitors start reviewing Iraq vote results

AFP, Baghdad

A team of international monitors yesterday started to review contested results from Iraq's December general elections following accusations of fraud by Sunni-based and secular parties.

"An international delegation started to look into complaints and objections," Adel Lamy, a member of Iraq's electoral commission, told AFP.

The international assessors were invited by the commission to look into their work.

"Two of the team's five members are already at work," Lamy said.

The assessors are from the International Mission for Iraqi Elections, an independent body set up in December 2004 which helped monitor general elections held in Iraq in January and a constitutional referendum in October.

Lamy said the team would check ballot samples and tally votes.

Members of the team "will also

meet with representatives from political parties which have raised objections to the results and look into their complaints," Lamy said.

The Sunni-based alliance, along with a number of small secular parties, including the National List of former prime minister Iyad Allawi, have alleged widespread fraud in the December 15 ballot and have threatened to boycott the new four-year term parliament.

Initial results, issued by the electoral commission, suggest that Shia-based religious parties and their Kurdish allies will be returned to power.

Final election results are not expected until the international monitoring team has finished its work.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan have praised Iraqi authorities for inviting the monitors, hoping they will help Sunni parties accept the results of the election which both the United States and UN observers earlier declared fair.

The electoral commission said

it had received some 1,500 complaints, including more than 20 that might affect the results of some constituencies. But it suggested that cancelling tainted votes would not change the overall election result.

"In the next few days we will cancel results in some polling stations that have seen vote rigging in some governorates," commission member Abdel Hussein al-Hendawi said recently.

"I welcome the invitation of the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq to international monitors and experts to observe and review the December 15 elections, including the complaints settlement process," Rice said in a statement.

"The United States strongly supports the election review process," she said.

"It is important that the Iraqi people have confidence in the election results and that the voting process, including the process for vote counting, is free and fair," US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad said for his part.

Pakistan in talks to buy Chinese N-reactors

REUTERS, London

Pakistan is in talks to buy up to eight nuclear power reactors from China for between \$7 billion and \$10 billion, Britain's Financial Times reported yesterday.

Construction on the plants could start by 2015 and end 10 years later, the newspaper said, quoting an unidentified senior Pakistani official.

The new power stations would add 3,600-4,800 megawatts of capacity using a series of 600 megawatt reactors, according to the report.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz formally launched construction last week of a Chinese-supplied nuclear plant at Chashma in the eastern province of Punjab.

In September, Pakistan called

on the United States and other Western countries for help in developing civilian nuclear technology that would meet its growing energy needs. However, there have been international concerns over Pakistan's activities since its top nuclear scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan, admitted in 2004 selling nuclear technology to Iran, North Korea and Libya.

Khan, once revered as the father of Pakistan's atomic bomb, ran a nuclear black market supplying technology to make highly enriched uranium for nuclear bombs.

Pakistan has said its civilian nuclear facilities are run under International Atomic Energy safeguards and it is ready to accept such measures if additional sites are built.

'5 students shot dead by Lankan troops'

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday accused troops of shooting dead five Tamil students in the restive northeastern port town of Trincomalee.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the victims together with family members were relaxing at a seafront park on Monday when they were initially attacked with a grenade.

Within minutes, troops rushed to the scene and opened fire, a rebel statement said.

"As five of the students were being shot and killed, four other students tried to escape by running," it said.

"As they ran, the Sri Lankan military's special forces fired at them and the escaping students incurred injuries on their arms and legs."

COLD HITS QUAKE ZONE

Aid flights grounded for third day

REUTERS, Muzaffarabad

Relief flights were grounded for a third-straight day in northern Pakistan's earthquake zone yesterday and aid workers scrambled to help cold, wet survivors after two days of heavy snow and rain.

Despite the bad weather, health agencies said they had seen no spike in numbers of sick people since the snow and rain started on Saturday night, nor any deaths related to the cold.

"There's been nothing over the last two days in terms of new patients coming in," International Committee of the Red Cross spokeswoman Jessica Barry said of

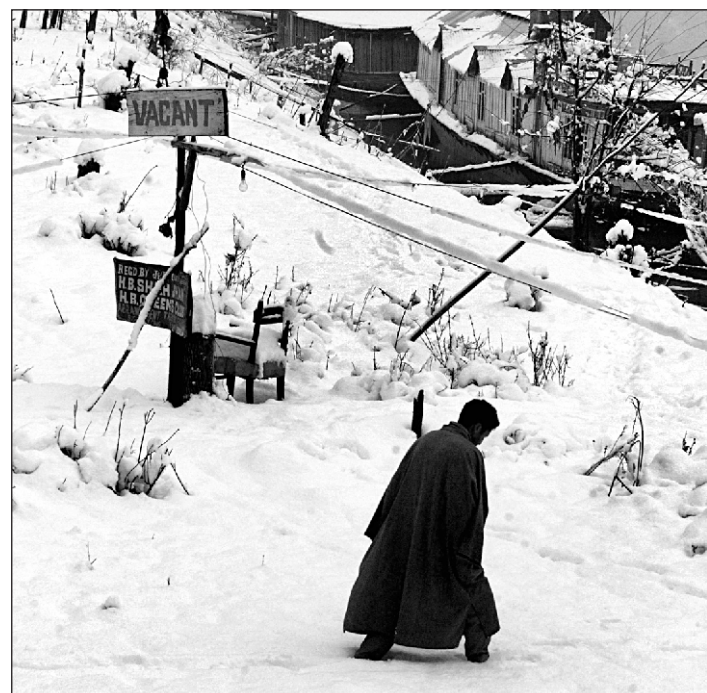
the group's main field hospital in Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistani Kashmir.

ICRC clinics had also seen no great rush, she said.

"There's been no leap, the signs are looking good," she said.

More than two million people have been living in tents or crude shelters patched together from their ruined homes since the Oct. 8 quake killed more than 73,000 people.

The World Health Organisation also said it had not seen any surge in the numbers sick people, despite more than a foot of snow that fell across the mountains and days of drenching, icy rain in the valleys after an unusually dry December.



An Indian Kashmiri man walks through the snow in Srinagar yesterday. Heavy snowfall in Indian Kashmir shut down key highways and lashed areas hit hard by the October 8, 2005 earthquake, which left some 1,300 people dead in Indian Kashmir and more than 150,000 homeless.

NEW BOOK SAYS

Iraq had no WMD, but CIA ignored the information

AP, Washington

A new book on the government's secret anti-terrorism operations describes how the CIA recruited an Iraqi-American anaesthesiologist in 2002 to obtain information from her brother, who was a figure in Saddam Hussein's nuclear programme.

Dr. Sawan Alhaddad of Cleveland made the dangerous trip to Iraq on the CIA's behalf. The book said her brother was stunned by her questions about the nuclear programme because he said it had been dead for a decade.

New York Times reporter James Risen uses the anecdote to illustrate how the CIA ignored information that Iraq no longer had weapons of mass destruction.

His book, "State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration" describes secret operations of the Bush administration's war on terrorism.

The major revelation in the book has already been the subject of extensive reporting by Risen's newspaper: the National Security Agency's eavesdropping of Americans' conversations without obtaining warrants from a special court.

The book said Dr. Alhaddad flew home in mid-September 2002 and had a series of meetings with CIA analysts. She relayed her brother's information that there was no nuclear programme.

A CIA operative later told Dr. Alhaddad's husband that the agency believed her brother was lying. In all, the book says, some 30

family members of Iraqis made trips to their native country to contact Iraqi weapons scientists, and all of them reported that the programmes had been abandoned.

In October 2002, a month after the doctor's trip to Baghdad, the U.S intelligence community issued a National Intelligence Estimate that concluded Iraq was reconstituting its nuclear programme.

In the book, which quotes extensively from anonymous sources, Risen said the NSA spying programme was launched in 2002 after the CIA began to capture high-ranking al-Qaeda operatives overseas, and took their computers, cell phones and personal phone directories.