

Israel approves limited Palestinian vote in Jerusalem

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel's cabinet on Sunday approved voting in Arab East Jerusalem in a January 25 Palestinian parliamentary election but said it would ban the militant Hamas group from listing its candidates on ballots there.

The government approved the decision unanimously, an official said, after US pressure to lift, in the interests of Palestinian democracy, opposition to voting in East Jerusalem, whose status is at the center of the Middle East dispute.

Palestinians had warned Israel against measures that would disrupt or postpone the parliamentary poll, in which Hamas is participating for the first time.

Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat condemned the cabinet's exclusion of candidates from Hamas, a group that advocates Israel's destruction, from East Jerusalem.

"All parties and candidates who registered with the Central Election Committee have the full right to campaign in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem," Erekat said.

Mushir al-Masri, a Hamas spokesman, said Israel's restric-

tions diminished Palestinian sovereignty over the election.

"Hamas and other factions are able to carry out their election campaign in many ways and in different methods despite the Zionist blackmail," Masri said.

Israel captured East Jerusalem in the 1967 Middle East war and annexed it in a move not recognized internationally. It regards all of Jerusalem as its capital. Palestinians want East Jerusalem as capital of a future state they hope to establish in the West Bank and Gaza.

Hamas, popular among many Palestinians for its social welfare network and anti-corruption policies, is expected to make a strong showing against the mainstream Fatah faction.

Earlier, political sources said interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert would continue to lead Israel until its own March 28 general election, barring a change in the condition of the comatose Ariel Sharon.

They said Attorney-General Menachem Mazuz planned to declare later in the day that Sharon, who suffered a massive stroke on January 4, was in a state of "protracted temporary incapacitation," effectively extending Olmert's tenure as his replacement.

Two journalists freed by US military in Iraq

REUTERS, Baghdad

The US military freed two Iraqi journalists who work for Reuters on Sunday after holding them for several months without charge.

Ali al-Mashhadani, a television cameraman who was arrested in August, and Majed Hameed, a correspondent for Reuters and Arabiya television who was detained in September, are both based in Ramadi, one of the centres of a Sunni Arab insurgency.

They were freed from Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison after being held there and at Camp Bucca, a US jail in southern Iraq.

At least three other Iraqi journalists for international media, including a freelance cameraman working for Reuters in the northern town of Tal Afar, remain in custody.

Reuters has urged the US military to free Samir Mohammed Noor, who has been held without charge since his arrest by Iraqi troops at his home in Tal Afar seven months ago. A cameraman for US television network CBS in Mosul has been held since April.

"We are delighted that Ali and Majed are now free although we continue to have grave doubts about the way in which they were held for so long without charge," Reuters Global Managing Editor David Schlesinger said.

Pressure on Saddam judge to reconsider

AFP, Baghdad

Pressure mounted Sunday on the Iraqi judge presiding over the trial of ousted dictator Saddam Hussein to stay in the job after he submitted his resignation in the face of criticism of his handling of the case.

Rizkar Mohammed Amin, a chief judge on the Iraqi High Tribunal, handed in his notice on January 10, according to an official close to the court, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Efforts are underway to try to get him to change his mind," he told AFP, adding that the resignation had not yet been accepted.

While the trial has taken up only seven courtroom days since it started on October 19, Amin has come under pressure both at home and abroad for allowing what critics see as theatrics by the defence counsels and the accused.

Amin would be the second judge on the five-strong panel trying Saddam and seven former aides to quit since the trial began in a high-security courtroom in Baghdad's Green Zone.

A spokeswoman for the office of Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari, who is currently out of the country, confirmed that his chief of staff received Amin's letter of resignation a few days ago.

Several other judges from the tribunal travelled to Amin's home city of Sulaimaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan on Saturday in a bid to persuade him to reconsider, said a source close to the Kurdish judge, also on condition of anonymity.

Amin is the only judge in the Saddam trial who has allowed himself to be identified in court. The other four remain anonymous for fear of reprisals for taking part in the high-profile case.

Two defence lawyers were shot dead shortly after the opening of the trial.

Amin wants to step down because of strong criticism by politicians at the way he has allowed the former president and his seven co-defendants to speak out in court and disrupt proceedings, the official close to the tribunal said.

The eight men are charged with crimes against humanity for ordering the massacre of more than 140 Shiites from the town of Dujail following a 1982 assassination attempt on the former Iraqi leader.

Saddam and his half-brother Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti have repeatedly sought to disrupt proceedings, with the former Iraqi leader alleging he was tortured in detention by US forces.



Kuwaitis mourn the death of their country's Emir, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, outside the Emir Palace, yesterday. The Emir died early yesterday after ruling oil-rich Kuwait since 1977.



A Palestinian woman, wounded early yesterday in an Israeli army shoot-out in the northern West Bank, is wheeled into a hospital in Nablus. The troops opened fire during an operation in Rujeb village, killing a woman and her 20-year-old son and injuring four other people who lived in the same house, security sources said. According to a witness, a member of the family had opened fire on the soldiers, fearing that they were burglars.

Japan battling deadliest winter in two decades

AFP, Tokyo

The death toll from heavy snow in Japan has reached at least 89, making it the deadliest winter in more than two decades as weather officials issued fresh avalanche warnings Sunday.

A 76-year-old man was found dead under snow late Saturday in Nagano prefecture, north of Tokyo, while a woman caught in a snow-blower died in northern Akita prefecture Saturday, local officials said.

"The woman may be a 71-year-old woman who had been missing," an official at the Akita prefectural government said. The woman may have already died, buried under heavy snow, before she was dragged into the snow-clearing machine.

The toll has now reached at least 89, surpassing 88 killed in snow-related accidents last winter and

the highest since 131 people died in the 1983-1984 season. Some local media have put the figure at 90 and 92, citing their own tallies.

Temperatures have risen since Saturday in many areas heavily blanketed by snow, causing avalanches, including one that was about 300 to 400 meters long and 30 to 40 meters wide at a ski slope.

No injuries have been reported although police were still determining whether anyone was caught in the avalanche in western Shimane prefecture.

The Japanese Meteorological Agency on Sunday issued new warnings for avalanches caused by a rapid rise in temperatures and increase in rain over the weekend in areas covered by heavy snow.

"Road officials have been maintaining round-the-clock patrol to find dangers of avalanches or other disasters promptly," the Akita official said.

Controversy over freed pope assailant

AFP, Istanbul

Lawyers and officials continued to wrangle Sunday over the legal procedures the man who tried to kill Pope John Paul II two decades ago must undergo following his release from an Istanbul jail.

Istanbul Governor Muammer Guler said Saturday night that Mehmet Ali Agca, 48, has until Wednesday to show up at Istanbul's major military hospital, GATA, to undergo tests on whether or not he should be drafted into the army.

The former extreme right-wing militant, who shot and seriously wounded the pope in 1981, never did the military service that is compulsory for all Turks aged over 18.

"If he does not present himself to the hospital by then, he will be taken by force," Guler said.

But Agca's attorney, Mustafa Demirbag, disagreed.

"No, he does not have to go there for the moment," he told a group of reporters, without going into detail.

Guler also said that until the military decide what to do with him, Agca must check in at a police station twice a day.

But Agca never showed up and has not been seen in public since he disappeared from a back door at the GATA hospital shortly after his release Thursday.

"Agca is a free man," Demirbag said.

He can go wherever he wants, the lawyer said, stressing, however, that his client had no intention of fleeing overseas.

"Agca wants to forget about his life of 26 years ago," Demirbag said. "He wants a new life, he wants to get married."

Agca first came to public attention in Turkey in 1979, when he shot and killed one of Turkey's most prominent journalists, Abdi Ipekci, the chief editor and columnist of the liberal daily Milliyet.

He escaped from the prison where he was awaiting trial and showed up at St. Peter's Square, Rome, on May 13, 1981, where he shot and seriously wounded John Paul II.



Winner of the Standard Chartered Mumbai Marathon 2006, Daniel Rono of Kenya, (C), runner-up Mandago Kipkorir of Kenya (R) and third-placed Stanley Leleito of Kenya wave during the prize-giving ceremony in Mumbai, yesterday.