

## Olmert leads Israeli polls

Vote viewed as referendum on West Bank pullout, bomb kills 2

REUTERS, AFP, Jerusalem

Israelis voted in an election yesterday seen as a referendum on uprooting some West Bank settlements while enlarging others to impose Israel's final borders if peacemaking with the Palestinians stays frozen.

Interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, whose centrist Kadima party is expected to win, aims to unilaterally dismantle remote settlements by 2010 and move uprooted settlers to bigger blocs on occupied land Palestinians want for a state.

Some 20,000 police and volunteers were on patrol for possible Palestinian bombings as Israelis voted. Media exit polls will be issued after balloting ends at 10 p.m. (3 p.m. EST)

Opinion polls have shown Kadima will win some 34 seats, enough to form a governing coalition in the 120-member parliament.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon founded Kadima last November before he suffered a stroke and went into a coma.

A smiling Olmert was among the first to cast his ballot.

"Go out and vote, all of Israel," Olmert said, referring to predictions of a low turnout because many Israelis see the result as a foregone conclusion.

Israelis were voting a day after the Islamist militant group Hamas presented its cabinet to the Palestinian parliament for approval, showing no sign of softening its stance on the Jewish state. Hamas, which triumphed in Palestinian elections in January, is formally sworn to Israel's destruction.

For Olmert, victory would mean approval of "consolidation," his term for the go-it-alone steps he plans should Hamas refuse to recognise Israel, disarm and accept interim peace accords.

The World Court has ruled that all settlements are illegal. Israel disputes this.

"These elections will determine the state's character, its borders and moral identity," elder statesman and Kadima candidate Shimon Peres said after voting.

Palestinians condemn Olmert's proposal, saying it would destroy any prospects for peace and deny them a viable state by grabbing land Israel occupied in the 1967 Middle East war.

But unilateralism appeals to many Israelis worn down by a five-year-old Palestinian uprising and concerned by Hamas's rise to power in the West Bank and Gaza.

"I'm in favor of some withdrawals. I hope there won't be any more wars," said Tovah Weiss, an elderly woman who said she voted for Kadima.

The trauma for settlers of any withdrawal from land they see as a

biblical birthright could dwarf that of last year's Gaza Strip pullout, which Sharon championed in a reversal of policy.

Some 60,000 West Bank settlers could be affected by Olmert's plan, far more than the 8,500 removed from Gaza. Around 240,000 Israelis live among 2.4 million Palestinians in the West Bank.

Meanwhile, two Israelis were killed yesterday in an blast near the border with the Gaza Strip in what Palestinian militant movement Islamic Jihad said was an attack designed to disrupt the country's election.

Two civilians, a Bedouin and his child, were killed in an explosion near the Nahal Oz kibbutz in southern Israel. The army said the blast was either caused by a fresh rocket attack or a dormant rocket that exploded.



PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli woman waits to fill her ballot at a polling station in Jerusalem yesterday during general elections. The Israeli election, viewed as a referendum on settlement pullout, may redraw the map of the Jewish state and uproot tens of thousands of settlers from the occupied West Bank.

## Blast kills 2 foreigners, 3 Afghans

AFP, Kandahar/Kabul

A remote-controlled bomb exploded in southwestern Afghanistan yesterday, killing two foreign nationals and three Afghans working for a US security firm, a governor and police said.

The bomb ripped through a vehicle carrying the men who were working for the USPI security firm in Nimroz province, governor Ghulam Dastageer Azad told AFP.

"Two foreign nationals, their two Afghan bodyguards and their Afghan driver were killed in a roadside remote-controlled bomb attack today in Nimroz," Azad said.

A local policeman, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the foreign nationals were South Africans but this could not be immediately confirmed.

The officer said the men were maintaining security for a Turkish reconstruction company in the area, which borders Iran.



PHOTO: AFP

Dallas area high school students protest in front of the Dallas City Hall Monday in Dallas, Texas. Hispanic high school students from all over the Dallas area left school to stage rally protesting the immigration reform bill HR4437, which considers an unlawful presence in the US a felony, with undocumented immigrants facing potential jail term.

## Bush, Republicans clash over immigration bill

Thousands continue protests

AFP, Washington

The US Senate prepared to take up a bill yesterday on illegal immigration that has President George W. Bush at odds with Republicans seeking tough measures, as thousands of Hispanics take to the streets to defend their rights.

A key Senate panel endorsed a bill Monday that would allow illegal workers to obtain visas, sending the legislation to the full Senate for a likely heated debate in an election year.

The House of Representatives in December passed its own immigration bill that would make illegal entry in the United States a crime and heavily penalize employers of undocumented workers, opening the floodwaters of protest in the Hispanic community.

On Monday, some 50,000 people marched through Detroit, Michigan, and 36,000 students walked out of high school classes in the Los Angeles region, where more

than 500,000 people staged a rally at the weekend. More protests are planned.

Surprised by the outcry, Bush Monday said there had to be a "civil" debate about planned changes to immigration laws, which have caused new divisions between the White House and the Republican Party.

The struggling president renewed his call for a guest worker programme that would allow some undocumented workers to reside legally in the United States, putting him at odds with some Republicans who want to punish employers hiring illegal entrants.

At a swearing-in ceremony for dozens of new US citizens, Bush said the United States had been "enriched" by immigrants and remained a "welcoming society" that sought to encourage, rather than shun, immigration.

Bush's plan would allow many undocumented workers to register for legal status on a temporary

basis, and ultimately, if they qualify, for US citizenship.

Senior Republican Party members remain divided over how to tackle immigration reform as opposition Democrats seek to win back control of Congress in November elections.

The divisions were highlighted Monday as the Senate Judiciary Committee voted 12-6 to endorse temporary guest worker legislation that would allow illegal immigrants to apply for a three-year work visa by paying fines and having a clean criminal record, among other conditions.

The bill would also pave the way for guest workers doing low-wage jobs shunned by many Americans to apply for citizenship.

Four Republicans joined eight senators in backing the bill, while the six "no" votes came from Republicans. The bill's opponents said it was equivalent to giving amnesty to people who broke the law by entering the country illegally.

## British, US diplomacy saved India, Pakistan from war: Straw

AFP, London

Intense diplomatic efforts by Britain and the United States prevented nuclear neighbours India and Pakistan from going to war four years ago, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said on Tuesday.

The Foreign Office, headed by Straw, and the US State Department, under then secretary of state Colin Powell, worked tirelessly to defuse the stand-off between the countries over the disputed region of Kashmir, the ministers said.

He was responding to a question about hopes for a peaceful settlement of the Kashmir problem following a speech in London to British diplomats.

"In early 2002 the anxiety internationally ... was whether Pakistan and India would move towards a conventional war -- after all they have had three of those -- which in turn could turn into a nuclear war," Straw recalled.

"If that had happened the conse-

quences for the world would have been catastrophic," he said.

"It took very active diplomacy by the United States and the United Kingdom -- and it was those two countries and bluntly no others."

Straw said he and Powell were heavily involved in negotiations with the warring neighbours, travelling repeatedly to the region during three months of discussions.

"In the end, Pakistan and India looked over the abyss, saw starkly that they simply couldn't start another conventional war, where it might lead and pulled back," said Straw.

Rather than a frozen conflict developing, this move led to a thawing of relations between the two countries.

Former Indian prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee followed by his successor Manmohan Singh agreed to dialogue with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf over a range of issues including Kashmir, the Himalayan territory that is divided between India and Pakistan.

## 26 die in Pak tribal factional clash

US shuts consulate in Peshawar

REUTERS, AFP, Peshawar

At least 26 people have been killed in clashes between factions led by rival Muslim clerics in Pakistan's tribal region on the border with Afghanistan, intelligence officials said yesterday.

A Pakistani cleric incited tribesmen to attack Afghan families settled in the Khyber area, who were following a rival Afghan preacher, the officials said.

The clashes took place around Fort Salop, some 15 km southwest of Peshawar, the main city in North West Frontier Province.

Armed tribesmen attacked the house of a local supporter of the Afghan cleric, and shot dead at least

18 people before setting the house alight on Tuesday, witnesses and intelligence officials said. One of the attackers was also killed.

"Dead bodies are still lying there and paramilitary troops have sealed off all roads leading to that place," Mohammed Nisar Afridi, vice president of a local trade union, told Reuters.

The clashes had begun on Monday evening, when seven tribesmen were killed and 25 wounded before paramilitary troops opened fire to disperse a mob.

The Pakistani tribesmen had also taken an unknown number of people hostage, an intelligence official said.

"The attackers have taken hos-

tage women and children," one intelligence officer said, requesting anonymity.

Meanwhile the US consulate was temporarily closed for security reasons Tuesday in Peshawar, the capital of North West Frontier Province, which adjoins the tribal areas.

A spokeswoman for the US embassy in Islamabad said there had been a "specific and credible" threat while a Pakistani official told AFP that a consulate official had received a telephone threat.

Pakistan, a key ally in the US-led "war on terror", has deployed 80,000 troops along the border to hunt down al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

## BUSH ADMN SAYS No renegotiation of nuke deal with India

AFP, Washington

The Bush administration said Monday it was not prepared to renegotiate a landmark nuclear deal with India despite resistance to the agreement by legislators whose endorsement was mandatory.

Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said the administration was open to ideas from the Senate and House of Representatives "as long as they don't require us to go back and break the agreement, reopen negotiations."

Speaking at a forum of the Council on Foreign Relations, an influential US think tank, Burns said "we frankly think it is such a complex deal and we probably won't be able to put it back together again" if it was renegotiated.

Henry Hyde, the Republican head of the House's international relations committee that would scrutinise the civilian nuclear agreement, had said that Congress could give only conditional approval to the deal, clinched on March 2 by US President George W. Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The deal gives energy-starved

India access to long-denied civilian nuclear technology in return for placing a majority of its nuclear reactors under international inspection.

For it to be effective, the US Congress has to amend the US Atomic Energy Act, which currently prohibits nuclear sales to states not signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

India has refused to sign the NPT and developed nuclear weapons on its own.

Hyde had said Congress "may seek conditions" for approval of the deal.

"This is a complex agreement with profound implications for US and global interests. Congress will need to take a close look at its many provisions in order to come to an informed decision," Hyde said.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is expected to be grilled by legislators during a Congressional hearing on the agreement next week.

Burns said Monday the administration was open to ideas by legislators that could "strengthen" the agreement.



PHOTO: AFP

Arab leaders pose for a group picture before the opening of the annual Arab summit in Khartoum yesterday. Leaders from the 22-member Arab League met yesterday in a summit that put focus on the mounting chaos in Iraq and Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But several most influential leaders in the region stayed away from the summit.

## 'Crisis will only worsen after Thai polls'

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

After the controversial election the political crisis will become systemic and spread throughout society, a renowned social critic warned.

Even if his Thai Rak Thai Party wins 30 million votes on Sunday, caretaker Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's legitimacy will continue to be called into question due to his lack of ethics, Thirayuth Boonmee said Monday.

Thirayuth, who held a press conference at Thammasat University to launch a fresh attack on Thaksin, said the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) should be more selective about staging protests against Thaksin and prepare for a fight that might last a year or longer.

Failure to oust Thaksin will see Thailand become like the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos or Argentina under military rule, he said.

"I won't accept him even if he gains 30 million votes due to his [lack of] morality and ethics. The electoral system is too narrow a rule [for the whole of democracy]" Thirayuth said. "Do you think that things will end after [the election on] April 2?"

Unlike those who believe the election might help whitewash Thaksin and give him a fresh mandate, the Thammasat sociologist said it would likely have the opposite effect by further highlighting the illegitimacy of Thaksin's rule.

"I'm not afraid of the election. I think it will create more problems and reduce the legitimacy of Thaksin, and Thaksin will not be able to govern the country," he said.

After the election the Thai Rak Thai Party might not have the 500 MPs required by law, due to the high probability that its candidates will not attain 20 per cent of the votes in some uncontested constituencies, Thirayuth said.

If this happens the House of Representatives will not be able to convene and a new prime minister may not be appointed.

"This problem will be huge," Thirayuth said.

But even if Thaksin manages to return to power, the election will not remove the stain of corruption left by the tax-free sale of Shin Corp to Singapore's Temasek Holdings, Thirayuth said.