

Historic elections begin in Britain

LONDON, May 6: Historic elections to reshape the constitutional map of Britain got underway slowly Thursday, with voters asked to elect the first Scottish parliament in three centuries and a Welsh assembly, reports AFP.

In what has been dubbed "super Thursday," some 30 million Britons are also voting in local elections that are as big a test of the fragmented opposition Conservatives as a mid-term referendum on Tony Blair's government.

Polling stations opened at 7:00 a.m. (0600 GMT) to a slow start and will close at 10:00 p.m.

First results from Scotland and the municipal elections are expected soon after they close and from Wales on Friday morning.

For Scotland and Wales, the ballots are part of a sweeping constitutional change promised under Blair's pet project of devolving power from Westminster to the regions.

The vote for Scotland's 129-seat assembly is effectively a two-way battle between pro-independence nationalists and Blair's ruling Labour party.

Although Labour is expected to win comfortably, last opinion polls suggest it will fall to

get an absolute majority, forcing a likely coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

It would make the separatist Scottish National Party (SNP) of Alex Salmond a sizeable opposition, enshrining its position at the heart of a new Scotland and giving it a permanent platform from which to campaign for independence.

"It must be the worst May morning I have ever seen," said Labour's leader in Scotland, Donald Dewar, as he cast his vote in the rain early on.

"Let's beat the weather and the opposition."

The new parliament will have its powers confined to local concerns such as health, education, housing, tourism, transport and law and order, but will be able also to vary the national income tax rate by up to three pence and to make laws.

Reserved for London will be foreign and defence policy, economic strategy, and crucially, the power to engineer further constitutional change.

Wales is getting its own less assembly too, but it will be less powerful, with no ability to alter tax rates or legislate.

Labour support there is rock-solid, with most opinion polls suggesting it will win an absolute

majority of the 60 seats.

Alun Michael, the party's choice to be the assembly's First Minister, said it was "a tremendous day for Wales" and called for a large turnout.

Meanwhile, 13,000 council seats on 362 municipal authorities in England -- except London -- Scotland and Wales were also up for grabs.

In Scotland, it is the Conservatives who arguably have most at stake. The party is riven by splits over the legacy of former prime minister Margaret Thatcher, with the leadership trying to edge away from her pure free-market policies.

If the Tories fail to make significant headway, it could cost party leader William Hague his job.

Political analysts predict Labour will lose more than 1,000 council seats, but it can afford to do so from the huge majority it won after trouncing the Conservatives in the last municipal vote in 1995.

Hague must realistically aim to win at least 1,500 seats from Labour to be able to proclaim some sort of political comeback in June last year -- Scotland and Wales.

Labour currently controls 172 of the councils up for election, the Liberal Democrats 37 and the Tories just 12.

The elections in Scotland and Wales are the first time that proportional representation methods have been used in the United Kingdom outside Northern Ireland.

In Scotland, 73 of the 129

deputies will be elected by constituents, and eight electoral regions will each pick seven additional members.

Recent polls put Labour on course for 56 seats, the SNP 43, the Tories 17 and the Liberal Democrats 11.

Two-thirds of the Welsh assembly will be elected on first-past-the-post in constituencies and the rest on the regional list system.

Latest polls put Labour with 34 seats, Plaid Cymru on 13, the Conservatives on seven and the Liberal Democrats on six.

Both the Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly plan their first meetings in Edinburgh and Cardiff, next Wednesday.

When the counting is over, the United Kingdom will have four parliaments, the national legislature at Westminster and one each in Northern Ireland -- elected in June last year -- Scotland and Wales.



Refugees from Kosovo arrive at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey on Wednesday before they are transferred to a housing set up at the US Army Garrison at Fort Dix, United States. More than 450 Kosovar refugees arrived Wednesday after a 13-hour journey from Macedonia. — AFP photo

Lanka extends emergency powers of security forces

COLOMBO, May 6: Sri Lanka's parliament Thursday extended by one month the emergency powers of the country's security forces fighting the Tamil Tiger rebels, reports AP.

The measures allow soldiers and police to detain any suspect without trial for 90 days and search civilian houses on mere suspicion that a guerrilla may be harbored inside.

The military said it had killed 14 Tamil guerrillas Wednesday in four clashes in the north, where the separatists are fighting to carve out an independent homeland for the country's minority Tamils.

In the national capital, Defence Minister General Anuruddha Ratwatte accused the rebels of continuing "atrocities" in different parts of the country.

"In the circumstances the government cannot take any chances," he told Parliament deputies in his argument to extend the emergency powers.

Although Sri Lanka has an elected government, the "Public Security Ordinance" gives sweeping powers to the police and the military to deal with members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the main rebel group.

Defence weekly says India developing Agni-III missile

LONDON, May 6: Indian scientists are reportedly developing a longer version of the intermediate range ballistic missile Agni-III with 3,500 km range capable of engaging targets deep inside China, according to the Jane's Defence Weekly, reports PTI.

Together with the just test-fired two stage solid fuel 2,000-km range AGNI-I, designed to carry nuclear warhead, AGNI-I, already test fired three times, and short range surface-to-air Akash and Trishul missiles and to be acquired Russian 300v anti-tactical Ballistic Missile, the under development AGNI-III will form India's minimum nuclear deterrent (MND), it said in a country defence profile on India.

The defence journal claimed that along with land based missiles, India was also on the threshold of deploying submarine launched ballistic missile "Dhanush" which would be later deployed on surface warships.

Quoting Indian sources, it said defence planners were working out estimates to develop a hugely expensive command structure of the country first ever minimum nuclear deterrent force. The weekly, however, reported squabbling between the army and the air force over rights to command such a force.

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