

# Reformists likely to sweep Iranian polls

## Early turnout was thin in Tehran

TEHRAN, Feb 18: For the first time in two decades, Iranian voters are expected today to give reformists a majority in the powerful parliament that has traditionally been a bastion of conservatism, reports AP.

Iran's 38.7 million voters headed to polling stations set up at mosques and schools to choose between liberals promising social and political reforms and conservatives backed by hard-liners in the ruling clergy.

But turnout was very thin in many polling stations in Tehran in the first 30 minutes after voting began at 9 am (11:30 am BST). Authorities appealed to Iranians in radio broadcasts not to delay casting their votes.

Supreme leader Ali Khamenei, the ultimate power in Islamic Iran, and the hard-liners main backer, voted in a mosque near his office in central Tehran, and he too appealed to Iranians not to leave voting to the last minute.

This is a significant election and I want you to be careful. Elect those who will be helpful to you and to Islam," he told state Tehran radio after he voted.

The hard-liners want Iran to

stick to the ideals of the 1979 Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini that ousted the pro-US Shah and brought the Shi'ite Muslim clergy to power.

Liberals have promised to work toward greater press freedom, and respect rule of law. Some have suggested that Iranians should decide in a national referendum whether or not to establish ties with the United States, a move conservatives strongly oppose.

The hard-liners' stand puzzles many who were born after 1979, when relations between the two nations were severed after radical students took over the US Embassy and held 52 Americans hostage for more than a year.

The conservatives would like to stop all kind of contact with the outside world. They know that the more we know, the more we will dislike them," said Mehdi, a chemical engineering student, standing outside the Tehran University hostel.

"They think that people are ignorant and only they are intelligent," said Mehdi, who refused to give his full name for fear of reprisal.

Though there are no opinion polls in Iran, reformists are ex-

pected to do well because of mounting frustration with the restrictions of clerical rule.

Young people complain that 21 years of Islamic rule by Khomeini's followers and successors failed to bear the promised fruit: jobs and prosperity. Instead, youth were barred from mixing freely with the opposite sex, listening to pop and Western music or watching foreign television programmes. Women were told to cover themselves from head to toe and the clergy, in its role as the interpreter of God's will, was deemed above criticism.

More than half of Iran's 62 million people are under the age of 25. About 20 million of them are in high schools and universities that have traditionally been the harbinger of change and the barometers of public discontent.

Drawn by a promise of reforms, Iranians elected President Mohammad Khatami to office in a landslide victory in May 1997.

"People have shown in previous elections that they support the reforms and we are sure in these elections they will do the same," Ahmad Borhani, a reformist candidate said during a recent election rally.

Some of the leading re-



Iranian police guard a polling station while people line up to vote in northern Tehran Friday. Polling stations opened all over Iran at 9:00 a.m. local time to elect a new parliament, in a battle between reformists and conservatives. Of the country's more than 60 million inhabitants, 38.7 million are called on to vote in the sixth general elections since the Islamic Republic was proclaimed in 1979.

formists have said that if they win a majority in the 290-member Majlis, one of their first acts would be to defeat a pending bill that calls for jail terms for those who write articles critical of the ruling clergy. Several newspaper managers have been jailed and their publications closed in recent years but no journalist has been penalised.

Analysts have said a higher

turnout will mean more votes for the reformists. The hard-liners have a slight majority in the outgoing parliament.

But even if they win, reformists would face many hurdles, including the conservative Guardians Council that must approve all legislation passed by parliament.

The hard-liners also control the judiciary and other key institutions such as the radio and

television and the armed forces. About 5,800 candidates including 424 women are contesting the election — both record numbers. More than 36,000 polling stations have been set up for the polls.

The first results in the election will start coming in Sunday, but final results were not expected until February 25. All votes will be counted by hand.

## Amnesty International says China's human rights white paper is a whitewash

BEIJING, Feb 18: Amnesty International (AI) today rejected China's latest human rights report as a whitewash and accused Beijing of waging the largest crackdown on peaceful dissent for more than 10 years, reports AFP.

The London-based human rights group said the white paper released by China on Thursday contained empty guarantees and failed to address repressive legislation and rampant abuse of power.

"Constitutional rights have been severely proscribed by newer laws or are simply not delivered in practice," said an Amnesty statement faxed to AFP.

Amnesty rejected the Chinese government's long-held view that it must put the priority of feeding and improving the lot of its 1.3 billion people ahead of Western interpreta-

tions of human rights. "This is a weak and unconvincing explanation for Beijing's failure to act decisively against torture, to allow thousands to be detained, to carry out unfair trials and to deny constitutional rights to critics and perceived opponents of the regime," said the statement.

The 15,000-word report, the ninth human rights white paper issued since 1991, trumpeted the economic and social development of China under 50 years of Communist rule.

It said life expectancy had doubled to 70 during the period, and that the amount of people living in poverty had fallen from 250 million in 1978 to just 4.2 million.

The paper reiterated Beijing's view that it can always

China has come under particular fire for its ongoing crackdowns on political dissent, in particular the banned China Democracy Party (CDP), and the outlawed spiritual Falungong movement.

Rights groups say several thousand Falungong have been rounded up across China this month. China admitted to detaining 35,000 between July and November last year, and sentenced group leaders to up to 18 years in jail.

A prominent member of the CDP was jailed for six years on Wednesday, the 21st CDP member to be jailed for "subversion" since December 1998. Another 15 are awaiting trial.

Amnesty described the crackdown as the worst since the pro-democracy movement was crushed in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

## UN plans for disarming fighters after wars

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 18: The United Nations outlined recommendations Thursday for disarming fighters when wars come to an end, with special proposals to help child soldiers return to normal life, reports AP.

The United Nations has already recommended that special protection advisers be sent on two UN peacekeeping missions — in Sierra Leone and Congo — to deal specifically with the needs of child soldiers, Secretary-General Kofi Annan said.

The initiative should be a model for future missions, he said in a report to the Security Council.

The United Nations estimates that as many as 300,000 children under the age of 18 have been recruited as soldiers around the world.

"The experience of children in armed conflict is generally characterised by enormous risk to their physical, emotional and social well-being," Annan said. "Even if they survive the rigours and risks of combat, they may suffer severe long-term psychological consequences."

Reuniting the children with their families and getting them proper counselling, education

and job training should be a priority, he said.

In addition, the United Nations should be prepared to deal with girls who may have been sexually abused and the children of their own, and child soldiers who have become addicted to drugs, Annan said.

In the report, the secretary-general also outlined general strategies to disarm adult soldiers and reintegrate them into society. The United Nations should make clear its willingness to oversee such programmes as a means of building confidence with the warring sides, Annan said.

"Since disarmament generally comes early in a peace process, combatants have to make a leap of faith in giving up their weapons," he said. "Former combatants may therefore need considerable reassurance in advance of and during the disarmament phase."

The United Nations has undertaken disarmament programmes in several countries emerging from years of unrest, such as Liberia, where it helped gather 30,000 weapons and 2 million rounds of ammunition that were set on fire in a massive pyre in July.



Exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai lama offers a prayer during a ceremony to commemorate the 60th anniversary of his enthronement at Dharamsala's Main Temple Friday. The Dalai Lama, speaking to thousands of devotees, called for a renewed struggle against alleged Chinese oppression in his homeland.

## US House members urge Clinton to visit Pakistan for peace

WASHINGTON, Feb 18: Six House members advised President Clinton on Thursday to visit Pakistan in the interest of world peace, reports AP.

They wrote Clinton that his intervention could defuse tensions with India over the disputed territory of Kashmir and might even achieve a settlement.

The six who signed the letter were Reps. David E. Bonior, the second highest ranking Democrat in the House — Tom Campbell, James P. Moran, Major R. Owens, Dale E. Kildee and John F. Tierney.

Clinton, at a news conference Wednesday, left the door open to visiting Pakistan and offered to help mediate the volatile Kashmir dispute.

Because India never has accepted outside intervention, the president's offer to intercede as he has in the Arab-Israeli dispute and in Northern Ireland may be academic.

But asked whether he would be willing, Clinton responded, "Absolutely, I would," and then said, "Unless we are asked by both parties to help, we can't get involved."

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over Kashmir. Their dispute over the part of the Himalayan state controlled by India is considered even more dangerous now that they

both have exploded nuclear devices.

Clinton intends to visit India, the world's largest democracy, and Bangladesh next month, but has made no decision on Pakistan. This week Sandy Berger, his assistant for national security affairs, met with several experts on the region at the White House to discuss the pros and cons of a presidential visit.

Clinton said he would base his decision on what would best serve US interests in trying to stop "a nuclear arms race."

Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military ruler, urged Clinton earlier this month not to bypass his country, saying a visit would go a long way toward easing tensions with India. The military took control of the nation after an October 12 coup that overthrew the democratically-elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

The House members said they were not condoning the replacement of an elected government by a military one, but they said the tension over Kashmir was rising.

"We are concerned that a failure to meet with officials of the Pakistani government might set back America's ability to serve a useful mediating role," they said.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) greets Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen during a welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace in New Delhi Friday. Hun Sen is in India for a two-day official visit. — AFP photo

## Judge warns Mahathir over Anwar case

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 18: The judge in jailed former finance minister Anwar Ibrahim's sex trial told Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad today to refrain from commenting on the case after the leader said his testimony was not needed, reports Reuters.

High Court Judge Arifin Jaka put off a decision on whether to accept a defence request and call Mahathir to the witness stand in the nine-month trial that has split Malaysia.

"I haven't made up my mind yet on whether to ask the PM to appear in court or not," he said. "You have to satisfy me on whether the facts are relevant."

The judge told lawyers for Anwar and his adopted brother Sukma Darmawan, jointly charged with sodomising the Anwar family's former driver, to present written arguments on Tuesday as to why they thought Mahathir should appear.

The landmark trial with political overtones has reached a critical juncture with the defence and government prosecutors arguing over whether Mahathir should be forced to take the stand.

The prosecution this week objected to a request by lawyers defending Anwar and Sukma that Mahathir be called to the stand in the trial, which has split Malaysia along political lines.

In October the judge, acting on a request by Sukma's lawyers, issued a subpoena ask-

ing Mahathir to appear, but the trial was interrupted by Anwar's lengthy testimony and an extended break due to the judge's ailing back that coincided with snap polls.

Anwar's lawyers asked for a fresh subpoena this week, but government prosecutors quickly objected.

The judge had said he would take a decision today, but now has asked defence lawyers to present their arguments on Tuesday as to why Mahathir should testify. He did not say when he would rule on the issue.

He would testify if required but he thought it was unnecessary as "all the evidence has already been given". Defence counsel Karpal Singh today brought Mahathir's statement to the attention of the judge.

"The prime minister has been making statement infringing upon the merits of the trial. He has even said he will hang all lawyers if he could, especially me," said Karpal, who last month was arrested and charged with sedition for alleging in September that Anwar might have been poisoned by enemies.

"He (Mahathir) said it is unnecessary for him to be called as a witness in the trial as he says all evidence had been given. He has closed the case for all of us," Karpal said.

The first prime minister who has come to court. Many others have. This can't go on. Judges must stand up, my Lord.

## Lankan troops beat back LTTE advance in north

COLOMBO, Feb 18: Government troops repulsed a Tamil rebel attack on a strategic northern army base, killing 21 guerrillas and losing seven soldiers, the defense ministry and the militants said Thursday, reports AP.

The area is in our control after we beat the terrorists back," spokesman Col Ranjith Witana said of Wednesday's rebel attack on Elephant Pass. The first report from the area on Wednesday had put the rebel casualties at 14.

"Now we have recovered 17 bodies and we believe that the actual casualties must have been higher," Witana said. "The terrorists, whenever they can, carry back the bodies of their fallen comrades."

But the clandestine rebel "Voice of Tiger" radio admitted they lost 21 guerrillas in one of their worst set backs in recent weeks.

Elephant Pass, 285 km north of the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, is near a causeway that links the northern Jaffna Peninsula with the mainland. Since December, the rebels have been trying to dislodge government troops from the area so that they can open up a land route to Jaffna, the centre of

Tamil culture. Jaffna, which served as the rebel capital, was wrested back by the government in 1996. The loss of the peninsula, 300 km north of Colombo, was a huge blow to the guerrillas.

The Elephant Pass could also provide the rebels a platform to threaten Jaffna. The area got its name as elephants once waded across the shallow lagoons in the area.

The defense ministry on Thursday released a video clip of Wednesday's fighting, showing bodies of the rebels.

The rebels are fighting for an independent homeland for the country's 3.2 million minority Tamils, accusing the majority Sinhalese of widespread discrimination in education and jobs. The Sinhalese control the government and military and make up 14 million of the country's 18.6 million people.

AFP adds: Tamil Tiger guerrillas have shot down an airforce helicopter gunship in northern Sri Lanka, killing two crewmen, officials here said today.

The Bell-212 helicopter was hit probably by heavy machine gunfire from the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in the Jaffna peninsula on Thursday night, officials said.

## 4 policemen killed in Assam

GUWAHATI, Feb 18: Four police personnel, including an officer-in-charge, were killed and twelve others injured in separate incidents of ambush in the last 24 hours in Nalbari and Dhubri districts involving bomb blast, IED explosion and firing, reports PTI.

Three police personnel, including an officer-in-charge, were killed and five others injured today in a bomb blast in Nalbari district official sources said here.

A police patrol party led by the officer-in-charge of Chograpar police station, was returning from night patrol from an interior village, Satra, when a powerful bomb kept near a roadside ditch exploded killing three personnel on the spot.

## CDU to delay decision on naming new leader

BERLIN, Feb 18: Germany's embattled Christian Democrats said on Thursday they would delay a decision on naming a new party chairman until April to give the party's grass root supporters a voice in the choice, reports Reuters.

Trying to repair damage caused by former Chancellor Helmut Kohl's campaign finance scandal, CDU leaders said after an emergency meeting of the party's executive board they would not rush to replace Wolfgang Schaueble, who resigned under pressure.

"The last thing we need now is to be hectic," said Volker Ruehe, a board member and potential successor to Schaueble, who quit as chairman and parliamentary floor leader after struggling for months to hold his slumping party together.

## Zhirinovsky barred from presidential election race

MOSCOW, Feb 18: Maverick ultranationalist leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky was barred Thursday from running in Russia's upcoming presidential election, the Central Electoral Commission said according to Interfax, reports AFP.

The electoral commission said Zhirinovsky a right-wing firebrand who ran in Russia's previous presidential polls in 1991 and 1996, would not be allowed to stand because of a false property declaration.

The unreliability of the information provided by the candidate is substantial, the election body preparing for the March 26 polls was quoted as saying.

## BRIEFLY

**Violence claims 11 lives in Aceh:** Separatist violence flared again in Aceh province when Indonesian security forces and rebels clashed several times, the military said Friday. AP reports from Banda Aceh. Local military commander Col Syarifuddin Tippe said a total of 11 people were killed on Thursday. The worst of the violence was in West Aceh when soldiers raided the local headquarters of the separatist Free Aceh Movement and killed six rebels. He said the bodies of two other people were found in the same area.

**Child rapist gets life term in WB:** A Palestinian man was tried, convicted and sentenced to life in prison early Friday for raping a five-year-old girl at knife point, AP reports from Nablus, West Bank.

**Albright arrives in Croatia:** US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright arrived in the Croatian capital early yesterday to attend the inauguration of President Stipe Mesic later in the day. AFP reports from Zagreb. The trip, her second visit to Zagreb in less than a month, is seen as a show of solidarity with Croatia's new reformist government, which Washington officials hope will serve a model in neighbouring Serbia for foes of Yugoslav strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

**2 die in Malaysian road mishap:** Two Thai fishermen were killed and nine others injured on Friday when the van they were travelling in collided with a bus, a news report said, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

The van was heading to the Thai province of Narathiwat, 1,100 kilometers south of Bangkok, from the northeastern Malaysian town of Kemaman, when it rammed into the oncoming bus while trying to avoid a cow, Bernama news agency said quoting the police.

## INS official arrested on charges of spying for Cuba

MIAMI, Feb 18: A US immigration officer with a secret security clearance has been arrested on charges of spying for Cuba, the FBI said early today, reports Reuters.

Mariano Faget, 54, a native of Havana, was arrested on Thursday and held overnight in Miami pending a schedule court appearance on Friday afternoon, the law enforcement agency said in a statement.

The FBI said "Faget worked for the Immigration and Naturalisation Service in Miami, where he supervised cases, including those involving the granting of resident status and claims of political asylum."

The Miami Herald cited a 1996 published report that said Faget was a ranking officer at the INS and had worked there for at least 34 years.

Faget had a "secret security clearance" that gave him "access to classified and sensitive files relating to confidential law enforcement sources and Cuban defectors," the FBI said.

Authorities said Faget made "unauthorised contacts" with Cuban intelligence officers in Miami and in other American cities.

## Fierce fighting in Philippines: 24 killed

COTABATO, Philippines, Feb 18: At least 22 Muslim guerrillas and two soldiers have died in fierce fighting in the southern Philippines after security forces launched an offensive on a rebel camp, the military said today, reports AFP.

Twenty-two soldiers and six civilians have been wounded in battles between government forces and the Muslim separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front's (MILF) following the attack starting Wednesday on the MILF's Camp Omar in the province of Maguindanao, 850 km south of Manila, military officials said.

About 100 guerrillas on their way to reinforce Camp Omar seized two villages on the border of Maguindanao and North Cotabato on Thursday, trapping hundreds of residents but later left before dawn Friday, local army spokesman Captain Lito Aso said.

In what is believed to be a diversionary tactic, another group of about 100 MILF rebels entered and occupied the village of Kauran, Ampatuan town before dawn Friday before retreating in the face of military attacks, army Major Julieto Ando added.

About 2,000 families, most of them Christian settlers, fled the village, but seven villages, including a school principal, his wife and son and a church worker, were taken by the rebels who are using them as human shields, Ando said.

Helicopter gunships continued to harass the retreating rebels who appeared to be heading towards Camp Omar, Ando added.

The tension in Ampatuan forced the closure of a major highway linking the cities of Cotabato and General Santos, the military said.

Military chief General Angelo Reyes said in a radio interview in Manila that the military offensive against Camp Omar, involving about 3,000 troops, was aimed at preventing the guerrillas from using their vantage point to harass and snipe at government positions.

He said the troops captured several hilltop outposts on the perimeter of the camp as well as two rifles and grenade launchers from the MILF.

Reyes said Camp Omar, which overlooks several government outposts is a major training base with about 400 regular rebel fighters and a "big cache of firearms."

Military officials here said fighting outside Camp Omar has subsided on Friday.