

## Communists win majority in Moldova

DPA, Chisinau

The Communist Party looked set to take power again in the republic of Moldova following parliamentary elections Sunday, according to first results issued by the election commission yesterday.

The Communists polled 55 per cent of the vote, followed by the Alliance Bagrash, a centre-right coalition built around Prime Minister Dmitri Bagrash which received 13 per cent.

Sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania, Moldova is the smallest and poorest of the former Soviet Republics.

The Christian Democratic Peoples Party collected just under 7.6 per cent of the vote.

In a first reaction, Bagrash said he hoped the communists would continue the course set by his government.

Voter turnout was given as 61 per cent.

Snap elections were called when President Petru Lucinsci last December dissolved parliament, after legislators failed in several attempts to elect a new president.

Moldovan Communist Party leader Vladimir Voronin had already predicted Sunday his party would gain an outright majority in the 101-seat house.

## Estrada postpones trip to US

AFP, Manila

Ousted Philippines president Joseph Estrada, facing possible indictment for alleged corruption, has shelved plans to travel to the United States to seek medical treatment, the Philippine Inquirer newspaper reported Monday.

He earlier announced plans to seek government permission to fly to Boston to have a cataract surgically removed from his left eye. But he told the Inquirer in a recent interview that he would no longer make the request because it could be "misinterpreted again" as an attempt to evade the course of justice.

Estrada was deposed in a military-backed popular uprising last month. He has since challenged the legality of the succession in the Supreme Court, which ordered government lawyers to postpone the filing of any criminal charges against him until March 22.

Former movie star Estrada, 63, hopes to be recognized as the legitimate president to win immunity from suit. The then vice president, Gloria Arroyo, was sworn in to take his place on January 20.

## Chinese quake death toll 10

AFP, Beijing

At least 10 people were reported dead or missing and 109 injured after an earthquake measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale struck China's southwestern province of Sichuan last week, state press said Monday.

Nearly 60,000 homes were damaged in the mainly ethnic-Tibetan regions of Kangding, Yajiang, and Jiulong, while 23,900 homes were completely destroyed, Xinhua news agency reported.

The earthquake struck some 20 rural villages in the mountainous region early last Friday, the report said.

Fissures had appeared in 70 to 80 per cent of the homes in the Yajiang district, where some 1,000 people were now living in tents, while roads and telecommunication links in the region were also damaged.

The earthquake was the second to strike the region in 10 days, following a February 14 tremor that registered 5.0 on the Richter scale.

Relief efforts were well underway with medical teams dispatched and the government sending in clothes, quilts, tents and food, the report said.

## 22 MILF rebels surrender in Philippines

AFP, Zamboanga

Twenty-two guerrillas from the Philippines' main Muslim insurgent group have voluntarily surrendered in southern Mindanao island, the military said Monday.

Other members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have also sent surrender pleas in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte to avail of an amnesty program, military southern command spokesman Colonel Fredesvindo Covarrubias said.

The 22 surrendered on Sunday to the army in Lanao del Sur's Marawi City, turning over a cache of firearms including automatic rifles, anti-tank rocket launchers and mortars, Covarrubias said.

He said the government will pay the rebels for the weapons they surrendered under a guns-for-cash program aimed at curbing proliferation of firearms.

## Hearing on Benazir's appeal begins in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani Supreme Court Monday started hearing former prime minister Benazir Bhutto's appeal against her 1998 corruption conviction, court officials said.

The seven-member bench will hear five different petitions from Benazir, who has lived in self-imposed exile since shortly before her 1998 conviction, and her jailed husband Asif Ali Zardari.

Benazir and Zardari have, among other cases, challenged their high court conviction for corruption involving multi-million-dollar contracts awarded to a Swiss company during her last term in office.

They were both given five-year prison sentences, fined 8.6 million dollars and disqualified from parliament for seven years.

While Zardari is still in prison with failing health Benazir has divided her time in exile between London and Dubai.

The appeal could have incendiary consequences for Pakistani politics.

Success would pave the way for Benazir to end her government.

exile to lead the democracy movement against the military government of General Pervez Musharraf, who took power in a coup in 1999.

The two-time prime minister has said her suitcase is packed to return to Pakistan, although she has not set a date.

Witnesses in court said lawyers representing Benazir opened their case Monday by requesting alleged telephone tapes suggesting her conviction was politically motivated be admitted as fresh evidence.

The alleged conversations between the high court judge who convicted her and senior associates of ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was in government at the time, were published recently in Britain's Sunday Times.

The judge and the political figures have denied any such conversations took place.

Before adjourning the packed hearing for lunch, the bench led by Justice Muhammad Bashir Jahangiri said it would seek the state's position on the tapes before deciding whether they could become evidence.

## 4 guerillas killed in Kashmir

REUTERS, Srinagar

Four guerillas were killed in a clash with security forces in Indian Kashmir, four days after the government extended a unilateral ceasefire in the region by another three months, police said yesterday.

Last week, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced that the three-month old suspension of offensive operations against militants would be extended until the end of May.

But violence has continued in the restive region despite the ceasefire which most militant groups have rejected as an Indian ploy to gain international sympathy.

Police said the Indian army shot dead four unidentified militants on Sunday night at Anantnag district, 55 km south of Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir.

## When a joke hits the brain

AFP, Paris

The brain uses different pathways to figure out a joke but uses a "reward" centre to assess whether the gag is worth a laugh, say researchers.

Vinod Goel and Raymond Dolan of London's Institute of Neurology used a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanner to get a picture of brain activity among 14 healthy, right-handed volunteers.

The guinea pigs listened to 60 jokes. Half were phonological (puns of the kind "Why did the golfer wear two sets of pants?... He got a hole in one") while the others were semantic (such as "What do engineers use for birth control?... Their personalities").

The jokes were then modified so that the punchlines were merely descriptive, such as "Why did the golfer wear two sets of pants?... It was a very cold day" and "What do engineers use for birth control?... The Pill."

While they were in the scanner, the volunteers were asked to press a button to record whether they found the joke (or non-joke) funny.

## Storm hits Mississippi: 7 killed

AFP, Washington

Severe weather hit five northern Mississippi counties overnight, with seven storm-related deaths now confirmed, as the governor declared the zone a disaster area, Emergency Management Agency officials said Sunday.

"There were high winds, hail, rain. We don't have a confirmed tornado report yet," said state public information officer Amy Bissell. "The weather service had issued warnings. Pontotoc was the worst hit," she added.

According to Bissell, the storm, part of a deadly weather system that started in the area around Dallas, Texas, unfurled in Mississippi at approximately 9:00 pm Saturday (7:00 BST Sunday), ending around 4:00 am (15:00 BST) the next day after making its way through the states of Louisiana and Arkansas.

Five of the seven deaths occurred in Pontotoc, some 25 km west of Tupelo, Lee County's capital, according to Pontotoc County Sheriff Leo Mask, who insisted that a tornado ran through his part of the state.

## African leaders mull Burundi peace process

AFP, Arusha

African heads of state meet here Monday for a progress report on Burundi's peace process, but the launch of a major offensive on Bujumbura by Hutu rebels provided an unpromising backdrop.

At least 15 people died Sunday on the eve of the summit here intended to thrash out a list of people to lead a 30-month transition government in Burundi.

The offensive by the National Liberation Forces (FNL) followed a leadership crisis within the group between supporters of peace talks with the government and those who condemn any dialogue, who seemed to have gained the upper hand.

The main issue of Monday's summit, and of talks Sunday night involving Burundian politicians and chief mediator South African former president Nelson Mandela, is the make-up of the transitional government provided for in an accord the politicians - but not the rebels - signed here last August.

"We have made great progress up to now and there is no reason why we should not make progress on this specific issue of the transitional government," Mandela said on arriving at this northern Tanzanian town on Sunday evening.

## Iraq warns against new UN resolution ahead of talks

AFP, Baghdad

Baghdad warned against the UN adopting a resolution the United States and Britain were preparing to further extend the decade-old sanctions regime, ahead of talks between Iraq and the United Nations in New York.

"Iraq puts no hope in this dialogue because it's being carried out with a body that is incompetent when it comes to taking decisions," said Ath-Thawra, mouthpiece of the ruling Baath party in Baghdad.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammad Said al-Sahhaf are to meet Monday to discuss the lifting of

crippling sanctions imposed on Baghdad after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait as well as the need for humanitarian aid.

"We can find excuses for the secretary general, but we will never excuse him if he makes this dialogue a way to pass a new resolution" on Iraq, Ath-Thawra warned.

According to the paper, such a resolution was being prepared by "the United States and Britain and probably other countries who call themselves humane while they have not one grain of humanism in them."

The paper was referring to Washington and London's current efforts to come up with "smart

sanctions that better target President Saddam Hussein's regime, while not harming the Iraqi people.

"The concerned parties seem to have ripened their plot and are waiting only for the failure of the talks (in New York) to undertake their new initiative," Ath-Thawra charged.

Norway, which heads the UN's sanctions committee on Iraq, said Friday that the UN Security Council was sympathetic to a partial lifting of sanctions against Iraq.

According to Norway's NRK radio, Oslo's proposal was to lift 80 percent of the sanctions in place against Iraq.

## Koreans get new chance to breach Cold War frontier

AFP, Seoul

Five decades of grieving and longing were again turned into tears of joy Monday as 200 people from either side of Korea's Cold War frontier met long-lost relatives.

One hundred North Koreans arrived in Seoul for three days of meetings with families from the South they had not seen since the 1950-53 Korean War.

One hundred South Koreans went to Pyongyang for similar reunions, the third since the leaders of the rival states held a historic summit last June.

"Mother! I've finally made it," shouted Choi Kyong-Sok, 66, as he looked down at his mother Mo Ki-Sul, 84, in a wheelchair in the ballroom of a grand Seoul hotel.

Choi's three sobbing sisters tightly gripped his arm and shoulder. "Mom, this is the brother," said one of the sisters. The elderly woman seemed to barely recognise the son she had not seen in 50 years.

A similar eruption of joy and pent up sadness erupted at each of the 100 white clothed tables in the ballroom.

But as at previous reunions, some North Koreans seized the opportunity to put across the communist state's message as South Korean cameras approached.

Kim Su-Jo, 69, an organiser of North Korea's mass displays, opened a box to deliver a pot, containing an azelia named after North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il, to his South Korean relatives.

"This is a Kimjongilia, a flower honouring the achievements of our great leader Kim Jong-Il," said Kim with a North Korean flag pin on his left chest.

Many of the North Koreans spoke loudly about reunification of the two rival countries to South Korean reporters.

The South Koreans were taken back on the Air Koryo flight to Pyongyang to meet their parents, brothers, sisters and children at the

Koryo Hotel in the North's capital. Bringing together families has been one of the key achievements of last year's summit between the South's President Kim Dae-Jung and North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-Il.

Since the summit, 200 people from each side have attended gatherings with relatives at earlier rounds of reunions in August and December.

The two Koreas have also agreed to allow 300 separated family members to exchange mail on March 15 at the border truce village of Panmunjom.

But more than seven million South Koreans are believed to have relatives in the North, not knowing if they are dead or alive.

With public interest in the temporary events waning, the South has pressed the North to agree the setting up of a permanent family reunion center to retain public support for the rapprochement.



PHOTO:AFP

Madurese refugees crowd the Surabaya Port in East Java as they disembark from the Telek Ende Navy ship after fleeing the riot-torn city of Sampit in central Kalimantan on Monday. Thousands of desperate refugees fled the Borneo town of Sampit after a week of ethnic bloodshed between Dayaks and Madurese migrants which so far has left some 400 dead.

## Troops, aid arrive in Borneo as Dayaks go on rampage

AFP, Palangkaraya

Fresh troops and aid for the victims of the ethnic violence in Indonesian Borneo arrived by air Monday as bands of armed Dayaks rampaged unchecked through the provincial capital of Palangkaraya.

Fourteen tonnes of food, medicines and blankets arrived aboard a military Hercules plane for the thousands of victims of the ethnic violence that by official count has left more than 270 dead over the last week.

But unofficial reports, including from the state Antara news agency, have said hundreds more have been slaughtered in Central Kalimantan, where armed Dayak tribesmen are trying to drive out Madurese settlers in an orgy of beheading and killing.

"I'm not game to estimate the total number of deaths. We're only just starting to collect all the corpses," district medical officer Qomaruddin Sukhami told AFP.

"The problem is lots of them have been thrown into the river so we'll never be able to know the real number," said Sukhami speaking by phone from the hardest-hit city of Sampit, 220 km southwest of Palangkaraya.

Truckloads of armed Dayaks roamed through the city of some 160,000 people torching, smashing and looting

Madurese shops and houses, most of them abandoned by their terrified occupants.

But there were no reports of killings in the city by midday Monday despite the security forces standing by as the destruction went on.

"The military here knows if they try to stop the Dayaks, they could be killed, because there is a mob out there," said one armed Dayak.

"This is getting out of control. There's nothing I can do to stop them," a plainclothes policeman was heard saying on his mobile phone, apparently to a colleague.

Schools were closed, but many shops owned by non-Madurese remained open.

Meanwhile, two Hercules transport planes dropped off 650 crack Strategic Command (Kostrad) troops at the city's airport, to be deployed in Palangkaraya and the coastal city of Pangkalanbun, 440 km west.

"It's to anticipate the situation in that city (Pangkalanbun), because there is a greater chance for potential violence there," Tanjungpura military command spokesman Major Joko Purwadi told AFP.

No violence has so far been reported in Pangkalanbun.

## Indian Cabinet to propose defence reforms to PM

AFP, New Delhi

A group of Indian cabinet ministers was due to propose Monday wide-ranging defence reforms to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, including the creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff.

A senior defence ministry official said the proposals would be submitted Monday evening by the ministerial group set up to consider the findings of a report into national security concerns highlighted by the 1999 border conflict with Pakistan-backed forces in Kashmir.

The appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff has been a long standing demand of the Indian military establishment.

"The Indian armed forces is the only force of this size and significance that operates in compartments," said Major General (retired) Ashok K. Mehta.

The post is expected to integrate several functions - like procurement of defence hardware, logistics, planning, intelligence gathering and strategy, which are currently looked after by the three services individually.

"The most important element is that it will streamline defence preparedness, leading to integrated planning and a more cohesive approach to operational strategy and doctrine," Mehta said.

According to General V.N. Sharma, a former chief of Army staff, the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff is long overdue.

## 'Gladiator', 'Traffic' triumph at British film awards

AFP, London

"Gladiator" and "Traffic" took top awards at Britain's BAFTA film awards on Sunday, each taking home several statues for their mantles and hoping to add more at next month's Oscars ceremony.

"Gladiator," the Roman epic directed by British-born Ridley Scott, carried home the best film award, as well as British Academy of Film and Television Arts prizes for best cinematography, best production design, best editing and the audience award.

"Traffic," US director Steven Soderbergh's sprawling tale of the international drug trade, won honors for best adapted screenplay and for Benicio del Toro as best supporting actor.

Both films are also gunning for more gold at the United States Oscar ceremony March 25. "Gladiator" has earned 12 Oscar nominations, while "Traffic" is up for five Oscars categories.



PHOTO:AFP

Jamie Bell (R) receives a cuddle from American actress Goldie Hawn after he won the award for Best Actor for his role in Billy Elliot during the Orange British Academy Film Awards at the Odeon in London's Leicester Square, late Sunday.