

Blair set to retain power

Parties on final push to woo votes for today's polls

AFP, London

Britain's party leaders launched a hectic final push for votes before Thursday's general election, insisting the result was not the foregone victory for Prime Minister Tony Blair predicted by pollsters.

In a round of interviews and press conferences, Blair urged supporters of his governing Labour Party to simply turn out to vote, warning that complacency could turn the clock back and let the opposition Conservatives return to power.

The latest opinion poll showed William Hague's Tories closing to within 11 points of Labour, the closest they have come since the election campaign began more than four weeks ago.

Hague said the "forces of conservatism" once mocked by the premier were now back "on the march."

"If you have had enough of arrogance, and spin and broken promises, if you want a government that offers you only what it can deliver I say vote for what you value," he told an audience in London.

Blair, Hague and Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy were all to travel hundreds of miles (kilometres) in punishing schedules on their final day.

Irritated by predictions of a landslide victory for his party, Blair urged people to vote, as a predicted poor turnout would hurt his party most.

"Political history is littered with

examples of so-called sure things which didn't turn out to be sure things," he told GMTV television.

Later, in his final news conference, he said: "We have a long way still to go but Britain is a more civilised and decent place than four years ago."

"We ask people to let us continue the job we have begun (...) Let us get in the investment in public services.

The centre of Labour's re-election strategy has been its promise to invest in public services, notably health and education, with tens of thousands extra staff and a package of wide-ranging internal reforms.

It says its handling of the economy in its first term -- interest rates and unemployment down, investment and incomes up -- means it

can now push on with making Britain a fairer place for all.

As well as health and education, it means tackling poverty, reducing social exclusion and aiming toward full employment.

The Tories' key campaign promises are swingeing tax cuts, no entry into the European single currency for at least five years, reduced government, tougher action against immigration and crime and better public services.

The latest poll, for the Guardian, suggested turnout could be as low as 63 percent, which would be the lowest since 1918. In 1997 it was 71 percent.

The poll puts Labour on 43 percent, down from 46, the Conservatives 32, up from 31, and the Liberal Democrats up from 16 to 19 percent.



Prime Minister Tony Blair (R) and wife Cherie leave Beeston Youth and Community Center in Nottingham on Wednesday. Blair was in light spirits in the daily conference with the press before setting off on the last day of campaigning before today's general election. Blair and the Labour Party are strongly favored in the polls to retain power.

AIDS epidemic has just started: UN official

AFP, Cape Town

The United Nations warned here Tuesday, on the 20th anniversary of the discovery of AIDS, that the epidemic had only "just started" though more than 36 million people are infected and 22 million people have died.

Peter Piot, the director of the UN agency UNAIDS, told ETV, independent television that in parts of the world like Asia the epidemic was still in the early stages.

"In 20 years time nearly 60 million people have become infected, which is enormous... but when I look at Asia, eastern Europe and west Africa for example, it has really just started," he said, giving the total number of infections -- including the deaths -- in the past 20 years.

Piot said the progress of the killer pandemic would depend on whether people had the will and the resources to combat it.

3 killed in boiler explosion in Pakistan

AFP, Karachi

At least three workers were killed and eight wounded in a boiler explosion at the state-run Pakistan Steel Mills early Wednesday, officials said.

"A boiler at the steel-making department blew up early Wednesday taking the lives of at least three employees," said mill assistant manager Mohammad Javed.

Eight workers who were seriously wounded had been rushed to hospital, he said.

Officials said investigations were underway but it was too early to say what caused the explosion.

Pakistan Steel, located on the eastern outskirts of Karachi, is the country's largest steel-making plant.



Nepalese mourners queue up at the gates of the Royal Palace to offer condolence messages for the late King Birendra in Kathmandu on Wednesday.

Uneasy calm in Kathmandu as massacre probe stalled

AFP, Kathmandu

A veneer of normalcy returned to the Nepalese capital yesterday, as residents poured back onto the streets following two days of curfew imposed after violent protests.

But the threat of further unrest lay close beneath the surface, as fresh reports emerged of the killing last week of King Birendra and most of the royal family, and a promised official probe into the tragedy faltered before it even began.

In a broadcast on state radio, Home Minister Ram Chandra Paudel appealed for calm following riots that claimed at least three lives, with dozens injured in police firing and hundreds more arrested.

The main disturbances broke out on Monday following the crowning of Birendra's brother, King Gyanendra, who is not a popular figure and was a focus of the demonstrators' anger.

The streets of Kathmandu were peaceful and busy Wednesday morning, as some shops reopened and a scattering of foreign tourists made a welcome return to the souvenir stalls of the city's Thamel district.

"We are still in mourning, it is not appropriate to create disturbances," Paudel said in his radio address.

"The balance between the monarchy and the people, as enshrined in the constitution, must be main-

tained for the welfare of the country. If there is even a slight imbalance, it could threaten the existence of the country," he added.

An inquiry into the shooting of the late King Birendra and nine other royals at the palace on June 1 was blocked Wednesday by the continued refusal of the main opposition communist party to take up its appointed seat on the three-member probe panel, led by the chief justice.

The party argued that the committee had been set up unconstitutionally, because the proposal came from the king, rather than the prime minister.

Lanka parliament seeks impeachment of chief justice

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition party launched a move in parliament Wednesday to impeach Chief Justice Sarath Silva on charges of misconduct and immoral behaviour, party officials said.

The impeachment resolution was handed over to parliamentary Speaker Anura Bandaranaike who is expected to appoint a panel of legislators to investigate the allegations against the most senior judicial officer in the country.

The constitution requires that a minimum of 75 members in the 225-seat legislature support a resolution seeking the removal of the chief justice or any other judge of the highest court.

Rebels, troops clash in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Muslim separatist militants and Indian border guards were engaged in a fierce gunbattle Wednesday in Indian-ruled Kashmir, officials said.

So far one person, believed to be a foreign militant, has been killed.

The clash erupted after border guards began a house-to-house search in the Noorabad quarter of Sopore, an apple-growing town 50 kilometres (31 miles) north of Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital.

"So far one militant, believed to be a foreigner has been killed by our men," a Border Security Force spokesman told AFP.

Megawati's sister brands bid to oust Wahid a coup d'etat

AFP, Jakarta

A sister of Indonesian vice president Megawati Sukarnoputri on Wednesday lashed out at efforts to oust beleaguered President Abdurrahman Wahid, comparing them to a 'coup d'etat.'

Speaking on the 100th anniversary of the birth of their father, the country's founding president Sukarno, Rachmawati Sukarnoputri also accused the party led by her sister Megawati of abusing Sukarno's name.

Rachmawati's unexpected outburst was delivered in an anniversary speech commemorating the founding of Bung Karno University, which she chairs and is named after Sukarno.

Democrats take control of US Senate

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush busily courted political moderates Tuesday, appearing confident in his leadership abilities despite slipping public support in the polls, as rival Democrats prepare to take the reins of the US Senate.

On Wednesday Republicans must hand over control of the Senate, which plays a key role in US policy making, following the dramatic announcement last month that Senator Jim Jeffords was quitting his party to become an independent.

This historic power shift -- the first time control of the 100-seat

Senate has switched hands between elections -- will give Democrats a critical one-seat majority as well as greater ability to challenge Bush's conservative agenda by controlling what legislation comes to the Senate floor.

Faced with a new political reality, Bush has begun to court moderate Republicans and Democrats, inviting a group of congressmen including critic Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy to the White House Tuesday to discuss education reform.

"I think we have an opportunity -- I know we have an opportunity to show the American people that although the structure of the Senate

may have been altered somewhat, that we still can get things done in a way that's positive for America," Bush said prior to the meeting.

He is later to host Senator John McCain, his opponent for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination and a moderate who has frequently clashed with the Bush administration since it came to power in January, and McCain's wife Cindy to dinner.

McCain, who has denied reports he was considering leaving the Republican party, told reporters Tuesday "the political reality is when you have Democrats in control of the agenda it's going to require more consultation."

Sharon brands Arafat a 'murderer and liar'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has launched a scathing attack on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, calling him a murderer and a liar, in remarks to Russian television rebroadcast here Wednesday.

"One must understand we speak about a murderer. He is a murderer, a pathological liar," Sharon said in an interview with Russia's NTV.

They were Sharon's harshest public comments against Arafat since he became prime minister in March, although he has repeatedly accused forces under the Palestinian leader's control of being behind anti-Israeli attacks during the violence that has now entered its ninth month.

"It cannot be that he will go all around the world with a red carpet ...

he is not a head of state," said Sharon, a hawkish former general.

"There were some people who expected that he would behave like a head of state, but he behaves as the head of terrorists and murderers."

Meanwhile, Israel has worked out a deal with the United States on freezing Jewish settlement building in the occupied Palestinian territories, the respected Haaretz newspaper reported on Wednesday.

According to the formula mapped out by the two sides, "construction beyond current built-up areas will be frozen," the paper said.

It said that under the terms of the plan, no new settlements will be constructed, no additional land will be expropriated for building and there would be a freeze on building beyond existing built-up areas.

Russia proposes anti-missile defence system for India

AFP, Moscow

Russia upped the diplomatic ante over missile defence on Wednesday by offering to build a national air shield for its key Asian ally India and develop other high-tech military equipment with New Delhi.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov unexpectedly announced after talks here with Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh that Moscow would make a full proposal on the system shortly.

"This is a large and very complicated project," Interfax quoted Klebanov as saying, without providing further details.

However there was no immediate reaction from either Singh or other Indian sources to Moscow's proposal.

Klebanov added that India and

Russia would cooperate on the development "of the latest type of submarine" while Moscow would also go ahead with the sale of Su-30MKI fighter planes.

The two sides also agreed to jointly develop an Il-214 military cargo plane. "This will be a plane for the start of the 21st century," he said.

"Neither Russia or India have so far engaged in such massive joint ventures" in the military field, said Klebanov, who holds Russia's military-industrial complex brief.

However it was Klebanov's proposal for a missile shield for Russia that was the highlight of the Indian minister's three-day visit here, military analysts suggesting the proposed system would be based around existing, mobile S-300 anti-aircraft and missile complexes.

Pakistan won't agree to freeze LOC, says Sattar

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan has said it will not agree to any proposal to freeze the Line of Control (LOC) without finding a solution to the Kashmir issue during the proposed summit between Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Military Ruler Gen Pervez Musharraf.

Answering a question relating to the status of LOC Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar told the daily 'The News' the status quo is the problem. It cannot be a solution.

The Line of Control resulted from the ceasefire of December 17th 1971, and was so described in the Simla Agreement of 1972, he said.

It could not and did not prejudice or compromise the right of the people of Kashmir to self-determination. They as well as Pakistan have made it clear a settlement must be responsive to the aspirations of the people of Kashmir.

Sattar said the LOC which had a 30-year-long history was presently quite as Pakistan had taken a unilat-

eral decision to withdraw its troops from the area which he added it continued to honour despite the calling off of the ceasefire in Kashmir by India.

Asked to explain what Musharraf meant by stating that he would demonstrate flexibility during the proposed talks with Vajpayee, he said he would be going to the New Delhi meeting with an open mind and with the intention of making the summit a success hope the Indian side will also have the same approach.

UN backs tougher monitoring of sanctions on Taliban

AP, United Nations

Security Council members expressed support for beefed-up monitoring of UN sanctions against Afghanistan's ruling Taliban but Pakistan called for sanctions to be lifted as a first step to peace.

At an open council meeting Tuesday, many ambassadors endorsed a UN panel's recommendation last week for the establishment of international teams in countries neighboring Afghanistan to improve the monitoring of sanctions.

The Security Council froze Taliban assets and imposed an

international flight ban on Afghanistan's Ariana airlines in November 1999 to pressure the hardline Islamic militia to turn over suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden for trial in the twin US embassy bombings in Africa in August 1998. The council imposed an arms embargo on the Taliban in January.

Hostages safe: Abu Sayyaf

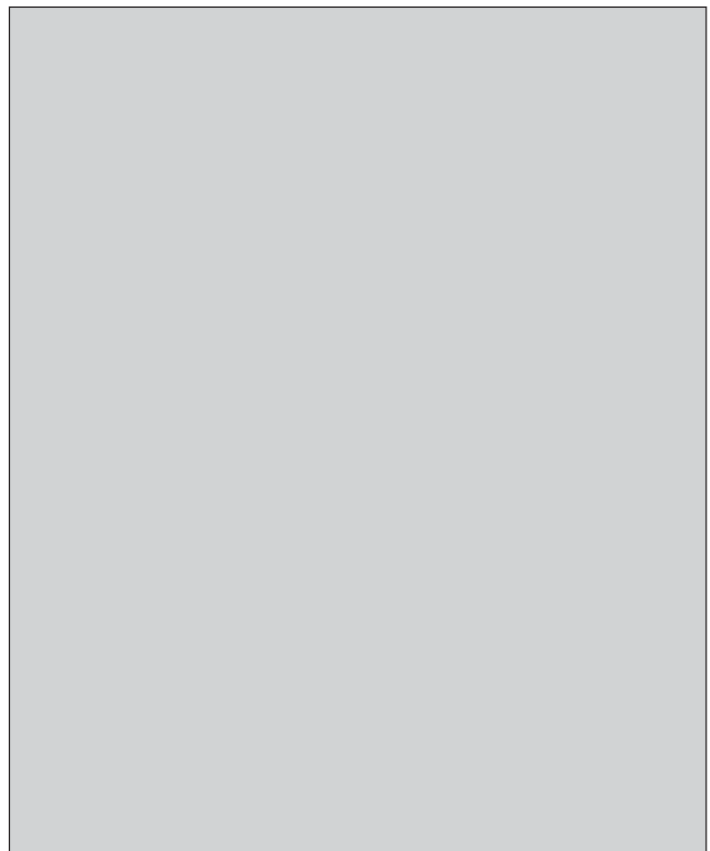
AP, Zamboanga

A Muslim rebel leader claimed yesterday his men beheaded three soldiers and that an American missionary was wounded during a clash three days ago, but reported the rest of their exhausted hostages were safe.

Abu Sabaya also claimed negotiations with a government representatives have begun with his demand

that the troops chasing the Abu Sayyaf rebels through the rugged jungle must be withdrawn.

"If they wanted to seriously talk to us, they should show it by removing the military," he told Radio Mindanao Network, apparently speaking by satellite telephone. "While the soldiers are here, there will be no talking."



Riot Police in Leeds city centre after hundreds of Asian rioters piled on to the streets setting alight cars and throwing bricks on Tuesday. After a two-hour stand-off in which police had kept their distance, trouble flared up again when riot police officers and police dogs moved into action.