

French rights eye victory in today's election

AFP, Paris

France took a day off from campaigning Saturday on the eve of parliamentary elections, which are expected to bring in a big majority for centre-right supporters of President Jacques Chirac.

The official campaign ended at midnight Friday, and after that no opinion polls or interviews with candidates are allowed to be broadcast.

On Sunday candidates are contesting 519 constituencies in the second round of the parliamentary vote. Last Sunday's first round saw the direct election of 58 deputies who took more than 50 percent of the poll.

In most constituencies the election is a two-way race between Chirac supporters and the left, but candidates for the far-right National Front (FN) qualified for round two in 37 seats and in nine of them it will be a three-way contest between the centre-right, left and far-right.

Infiltrators keep Indian troops on their toes along border

AFP, Mendhar

Sharp cracks of gunfire ring out over a low hill in Indian Kashmir's border area of Mendhar as soldiers swiftly move among bushes and pine trees to encircle a rundown house.

Five people come out with their arms raised, but one is shot down after he fires at troops and tries to escape.

As gunshots are fired from the house, troops throw a stun grenade inside which bellows thick white smoke.

Another man runs out and is killed immediately while the last man is cornered by soldiers inside the house.

The encounter is a mock one, staged for visiting journalists, but such gunbattles with infiltrators who sneak into the Indian zone of Kashmir from Pakistan -- the border is barely a few hundred metres away -- happen every day in this hilly region.

"Even with our best efforts, we are only able to stop one out of three terrorists coming in. They usually make their attempts on moonless nights or bad weather days," said the Indian army's Major General Randhir Singh.

"They (Pakistani soldiers) fire shells at us and under this cover, the infiltrations are made. They also shell us to degrade our defences and also just to be a bloody nuisance," he added.

"Sometimes when cornered by troops, they (the militants) use the villagers as human shields to try and make their escape," Singh said.

The militants typically hide in border village homes where they lie low

until they can move deeper into Indian territory.

Army officials say villagers provide the militants with food and shelter because they fear they will be killed otherwise.

A Muslim insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir has killed more than 35,000 people since 1989.

The Indian army claims that more than 1,000 infiltrators have entered India since 1999 and soldiers show off a pile of automatic AK-47 guns, smaller pistols, grenade launchers and other weapons captured from militants over the last three months.

New Delhi says three such infiltrators crossed over the border last month before travelling down to Indian Kashmir's winter capital Jammu where they attacked a bus and an Indian army camp, killing 32 people, mostly women and children.

"Mothers were shot through quilts while they were sleeping, huddled so as to protect their children. In many cases, the bullets pierced the children's bodies as well," said Major General Sudhir Sharma.

He said dead bodies of infants were found on toilet seats and in front of dressing tables.

"It is very difficult for me to understand how the countries who are supporting such people can call them anything else but terrorists," said Sharma, adding they had intercepted Pakistani army radio messages congratulating the militant groups.

"These people are like rogue animals who can turn in any direction," he added.

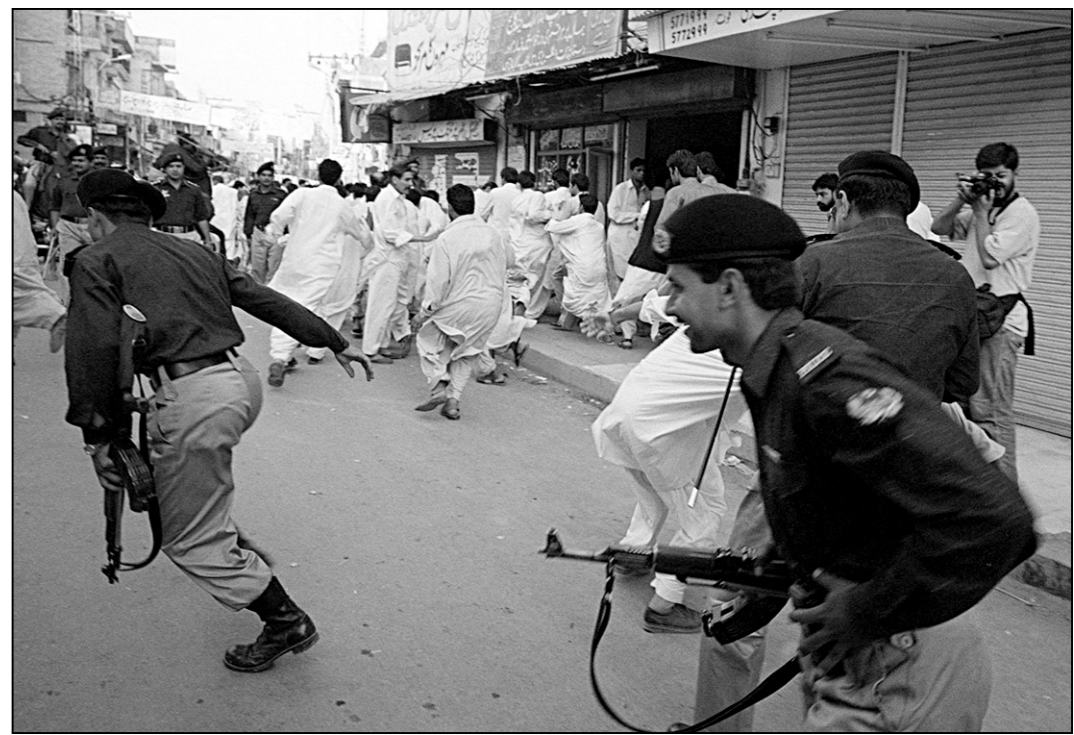


PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani police arrests activists of deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League party in Rawalpindi, some 25 km from Islamabad on Friday during an anti-India rally. Some 200 supporters of Sharif were baton-charged by the police during a rally against the Indian forces' aggression and shelling on civilian population in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

US bishops vote to bar abusive clergy

AFP, Dallas

US bishops were to wind up their two-and-a-half day conference here Saturday with a morning of prayer, after overwhelmingly approving reforms to address a long-festering crisis of paedophilia by Catholic clergy.

Leaders of the embattled US Catholic Church voted Friday to bar sexually abusive clergy -- even those guilty of a lone offence -- from priestly duties.

But the bishops stopped short of removing offending clergy members from the priesthood altogether -- to the great disappointment of victims' advocates.

"Based on their vote today, a sexual predator can still carry the title of father and that's one of the tools of a sexual predator," said Mark Serrano, a board member of the group "Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests" (SNAP).

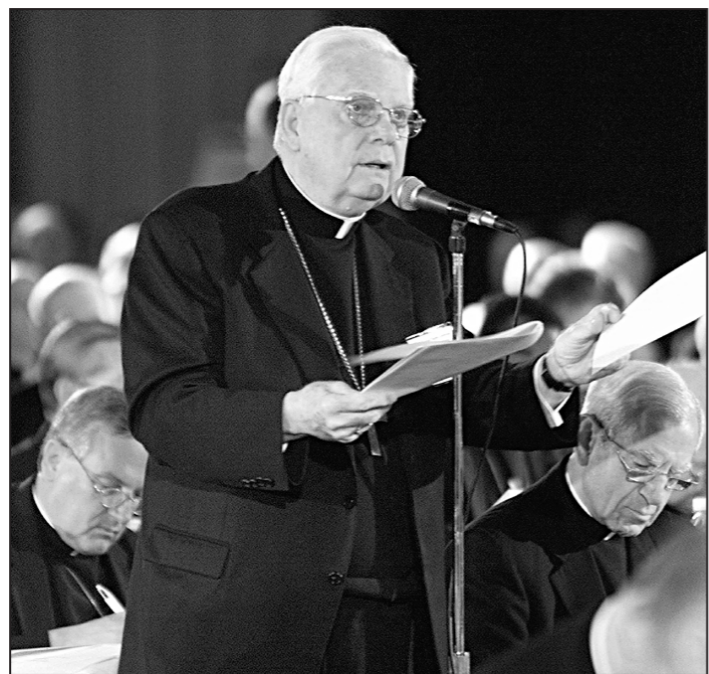


PHOTO: AFP

Bishop Bernard Law of Boston holds a draft of the policy as he asks for clarification during the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on Friday at the Fairmont Hotel in Dallas, Texas. The bishops are scheduled to vote on a policy concerning clergy sexual abuse and the option of zero-tolerance policy for past and future sexual abuse.

Kashmir CM escapes grenade attack

Militants plotting blasts detained

AFP, Srinagar

The Chief Minister of Indian Kashmir, Farooq Abdullah, had a narrow escape on Saturday when militants fired two rocket propelled grenades near a building where he was attending a function, police said.

One of the shells exploded in a stream 200 yards (metres) away, while another hit a wall of the building but did not explode, a police spokesman said. It was later defused by a bomb disposal squad.

Indian commandos whisked the chief minister away from the government building, which he was opening, in the Bemina area of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

Counter-insurgency police backed by the Indian army carried-out house-to-house searches in the area in an attempt to arrest those

responsible.

Meanwhile, police in Indian-administered Kashmir Saturday arrested a suspected Islamic militant and his accomplice who they allege were planning bomb blasts in the Hindu-dominated districts of the disputed state.

They said the man belongs to the Pakistan-based Lashker-e-Toiba (LeT) militant outfit and that he, along with his accomplice, was planning a series of blasts in the Hindu-dominated Jammu district which is also the state's winter capital.

The man, identified by police as Zulfikar, alias Abu Jihad, is the second Pakistani alleged to belong to the LeT to be arrested in Jammu during the past fortnight, said inspector-general of police P.L. Gupta at a press conference here.

Pak police keep up manhunt for Karachi bombers

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani police on Saturday intensified their investigation into a devastating bomb attack on the US consulate here, which killed 11 people and injured more than 50, a spokesman told AFP.

Although a small high-roofed Suzuki van was initially believed to be carrying the bomb, police now believe it could have been a Toyota Corolla owned by a local driving school that was blown to pieces in the blast.

A bomb could have been planted in the vehicle, perhaps unbeknown to the female driving instructor and three women passengers, and detonated by remote control as it passed the consulate in Karachi Friday, police sources said.

"Without ruling out a suicide attempt, we are now also working on the option of remote control device usage," said home secretary of southern Sindh province, Brigadier

Mukhtar Sheikh.

So far police have not been able to find any remains of a suspected bomber, he said, leading them to believe it might not have been a suicide attack as had first been thought.

Sheikh said the death toll in the attack rose to 11, including six women, after the grisly task of collecting dismembered remains from the area in front of the consulate was completed.

"Pieces of a another body have been found which appears to be that of a woman and it pushes the death toll to 11. These pieces were found from the scene of the blast. The body has not yet been identified," he said.

A senior police investigator said the owner of the Khanum Driving Institute, Meraj Khanum, was interrogated for several hours Friday.

"We called Meraj Khanum to find out about the car, when and where it went and whether it was being followed by another car, as we are

now keeping all options opened from suicide to the remote control bomb," he told AFP.

Meraj told police that her instructor had taken the three women to a traffic police office in southern Karachi to receive their licences and that they were returning to the institute when they become victims of the blast.

"I can't add much to what I have told you and have no idea if terrorists planted a bomb in the car or not," the investigator quoted Meraj as saying.

A team of foreign investigators including members of United States Federal Bureau of Investigation visited the site of the blast for over two hours Saturday.

"A 20-member team of foreigners visited the site, some of them took notes, and closely inspected the wreckage of two or three damaged cars which are still lying on the spot," said a police official who declined to be identified.

US to expel Iraqi UN diplomat for 'spying'

AFP, United Nations

The United States has ordered the expulsion of an Iraqi diplomat to the United Nations over espionage allegations, the State Department said Friday.

US officials have "informed the Iraqi mission to the United Nations that one of its diplomats was being expelled for engaging in activities that are incompatible with his status as a diplomat," deputy spokesman Philip Reeker said.

The phrase is diplomatic jargon for espionage.

Reeker declined to identify the diplomat, detail the charges against him or say when he would be required to leave the United States.

Castro seeks 'referendum' to make socialism 'inalienable'

AFP, Havana

Cubans prepared Friday for a weekend "referendum" on President Fidel Castro's plan to enshrine socialism in Cuba's constitution.

Castro told Cubans in an address Thursday that they would be allowed to "vote" on making socialism an inalienable part of the constitution. He said it would represent "a compelling response to a liberator that no one has invited," in apparent reference to US President George W. Bush.

Bombay boosts security at banks fearing attacks

AFP, Bombay

Police have beefed up security in and around key financial institutions in Bombay after the finance ministry warned of a possible attack by terrorists, including al-Qaida and Taliban operatives, a senior police official told AFP Friday.

Security had been tightened at the central bank, the Bombay Stock Exchange and leading state and private banks, the official said.

"We received the intimation from the ministry few days back after which security in these institutions was reviewed and boosted," he said on condition of anonymity.

Karzai cabinet set to bypass Loya Jirga

AFP, Kabul

New Afghan leader Hamid Karzai was unlikely to present his cabinet to Afghanistan's Loya Jirga as the grand assembly became bogged down in heated debate on its fifth day, sources said Saturday.

Instead the newly elected head of state was expected to unveil his line-up to a national assembly, or mini-parliament, whose members were also due to be selected at the grand tribal gathering.

Karzai said the council would run for the course of his transitional government until Afghanistan's first full elections in 2004.

"It is not part of the Bonn agreement but I think it's good to have a national assembly since Afghanistan is going towards being ruled by the people," he said.

The Bonn accord, thrashed out after tortuous negotiations in December under the direction of the United Nations, outlined a political future for Afghanistan after the fall of the hardline Taliban regime.

"A council should be formed to stay here for 18 months (the life of the transitional government). The delegates should sit together and elect their deputies so that they can serve to ward us (the cabinet) off from any deviation."

Israeli troops enter Jenin to hunt 'would-be bombers'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli troops entered the West Bank town of Jenin Saturday in the latest operation to head off would-be suicide bombers, as US President George W. Bush and top aides prepared to hammer out a highly anticipated statement on Middle East policy.

Palestinian security sources said a dozen tanks, covered by two helicopter gunships, had entered Jenin and that an exchange of gunfire had ensued.

They did not say whether there had been any casualties in the operation, which an Israeli army spokesman said was "launched following information on prepara-

tions in Jenin of anti-Israeli attacks."

The spokesman gave no further details, but Jenin is considered a hot-bed of militant activity.

The last incursion into the autonomous Palestinian town, located close to the Green Line separating Israel from the West Bank, was on June 7. Some 20 tanks moved in briefly following a suicide bombing in northern Israel earlier in the week that killed 17 Israelis and whose author was from Jenin.

Saturday's operations followed sweeps a day earlier through the towns of Tubas, north of Nablus, and Tulkarem and Hebron. More than two dozen Palestinians were arrested, including six on a wanted list for anti-Israeli attacks.

NSCN rebels jeopardising ceasefire: Nagaland govt

AFP, Guwahati

The government in India's north-eastern state of Nagaland Saturday accused a tribal separatist group of jeopardising ongoing peace talks by violating a five-year-old ceasefire.

"The outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) was taking part in regular incidents of extortion and kidnapping, besides moving around with weapons and donning camouflage uniforms which they are not supposed to do," Nagaland chief minister S.C. Jamir, said.

"The NSCN is obviously not honouring its commitment towards maintaining peace and have been blatantly violating the ceasefire ground rules," the chief minister told

AFP by telephone from the state capital Kohima.

Leaders of the NSCN, which wants an independent tribal homeland in Nagaland, were not immediately available for comment.

Led by guerrilla leaders Thuingaleng Muivah and Isak Chishi Swu, the group entered into a ceasefire with the federal government in August 1997, ending more than 54 years of violent insurgency which has killed 25,000 people.

There have since been several rounds of peace talks in neutral cities in South East Asian countries. The last talks between the NSCN leadership and the government's chief negotiator K. Padmanabhai were in May in the Thai city of Chiang Mai.

NC asks Nepali PM to reinstate parliament

AFP, Kathmandu

The president of Nepal's ruling party, the Nepali Congress (NC), has told caretaker prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba he must reinstate parliament if he wants his expulsion from the party to be withdrawn, party sources said Saturday.

The NC, led by Deuba's arch-rival and predecessor as premier Girija Prasad Koirala, last month expelled Deuba from the party for three years to protest his decision to disband parliament and call elections two years early.

The move blocks the premier from contesting the elections as an NC candidate and looks set to split the party, which has ruled the king-

dom for most years since the restoration of democracy in 1990. Deuba's supporters have since moved to form a breakaway party.

On Friday Koirala attended a regional meeting of the NC in his home town of Biratnagar at which he indicated he could be prepared to withdraw the expulsion order if Deuba admitted his mistakes and moved to reinstate the dissolved house, party sources said.

There was no immediate comment from Deuba.

The decision to dissolve parliament came as it looked set to defeat his proposal to extend emergency rule, which was imposed in November to counter an increasingly violent Maoist insurgency.



PHOTO: AFP

US pop singer Michael Jackson (R) attends a fundraising event for Children with Aids and Support for Africa at Exeter Football Club at St James Park, Exeter in Devon on Friday. Others are unidentified.