



PHOTO: AFP

Election workers take a nap next to a vote tallying machine at a polling station in Srinagar on Tuesday while a soldier of the Border Security Force (BSF) stands in front of the remains of a house after it was reduced to rubble during an encounter with militants in Srinagar. The second round of voting got underway in month-long staggered elections in Kashmir. One militant was killed in the encounter.

## Violence keeps Kashmir voters indoors

AFP, Srinagar

Legislative polls closed Tuesday in Indian Kashmir after a day which saw a near total boycott in the insurgency-hit summer capital Srinagar, where a gunbattle, poll boycott and general strike kept voters indoors, but brisk voting in the southern Jammu district.

A majority of voters in Srinagar district and adjacent Budgam observed a boycott of the polls called by Muslim separatist groups, with most stations reporting only handfuls of voters.

But the sombre mood and deserted polling stations in Srinagar contrasted with long queues in the Hindu-dominated southern Jammu district of the disputed state, where voting was generally brisk and sometimes festive.

The day was marked by a fierce early-morning gunbattle near a polling station in Srinagar, where police and paramilitary units blasted a house suspected to belong to Islamic rebels seeking to disrupt the polling.

At least one militant was killed in the attack, which followed an all-night standoff between police and militants. One policeman was killed and another three were trapped in the house when they tried to storm it Monday night.

The policemen were rescued from the house at daybreak, allowing paramilitary units and counter-insurgency police to launch a fresh assault.

One of the militants went on to the roof of the house, where he was shot dead.

With the house burning, the militant or militants inside continued firing at the security forces, who retaliated with small arms fire and rockets, witnesses said.

The clash, covered extensively by Indian television networks, only

served to underscore the threat of violence which has permeated the four-phase staggered elections for the state legislature.

More than 480 people have died since India on August 2 announced the dates of the elections. Thirty-three of the dead were activists from parties contesting the vote.

Despite threats by militants to disrupt polling and kill those taking part, no major attacks were reported on polling stations during voting.

In Budgam district, militants fired from a distance at a polling station. The fire was returned by security forces and there were no injuries or disruption of voting, police said.

In the southern Poonch district, Indian troops killed four militants Tuesday in a shootout after cordoning off a rebel hideout.

Rebels were also held responsible for the overnight deaths of three people, including the uncle of a candidate in the first round of voting September 16.

Two more rounds will be held to elect Kashmir's 87-member assembly, on October 1 and October 8.

Throughout the insurgency-hit Kashmir Valley, polling stations reported dismal turnout Tuesday. Nearly all stores in Srinagar downed their shutters and the only vehicles seen on the streets were those of Indian security forces, with troops posted at every street corner.

Officials, however, reported turnouts of between 23 and 33 percent in various parts of Jammu in the first five hours of voting.

Police and paramilitary troops guarded polling stations where electronic voting machines were being used for the first time.

Women voters outnumbered the men in the border districts of Akhnor, R.S. Pora and Samba, electoral officials said.

## US courts Arab support amid mounting criticism at home

AFP, Washington

The administration of President George W. Bush was to continue Tuesday to court Arab support for possible military action against Iraq, despite mounting domestic criticism of the plan.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell was set to meet with Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Moasher to discuss developments in the region as well as US plans for "regime change" in Iraq.

Speaking Monday before the Council on Foreign Relations here, Moasher warned that a unilateral US strike against Iraq would throw the Middle East peace process "out the window."

But he also implied that should such a strike occur, Jordan would side with the United States, saying his country had "excellent political and economic relations with the United States ... which we will not jeopardise."

Bush, meanwhile, reiterated his call for the United Nations to adopt "strong" disarmament resolutions regarding Iraq or face irrelevance.

"I want to see strong resolutions coming out of that UN: a resolution which says the old ways of deceit are gone; a resolution which will hold this man to account," Bush said during a day-long stop in Trenton, New Jersey.

Bush said the world body must act if it did not want to be seen as a mere "debating society."

"Either you can become an organisation which is nothing but a debating society, or you can be an organisation which is robust enough and strong enough to help keep the peace. Your choice," the US leader said.

A day after Iraq defiantly announced it would not comply with any new resolution on the return of UN inspectors, Bush angrily countered: "There are no negotiations with Saddam Hussein about what he should do or not do."

Meanwhile, US military experts inside and outside the government mulled various battle plans, including possible worst-case scenarios that could result in high US casualties.

Joseph Hoar, former commander-in-chief of the US Central Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that his "nightmare scenario" would see six Iraqi Republican Guard divisions and six heavy divisions reinforced with several thousand anti-aircraft artillery pieces defending Baghdad.

"The result would be high casualties on both sides, as well as in the civilian community," Hoar said.

"US forces will certainly prevail, but at what cost and at what cost as the rest of the world watches while we win and have military rounds exploding in densely populated Iraqi neighbourhoods?" he asked.

Democratic members of Congress considered making deep changes to a draft resolution on Iraq submitted by the White House last week, complaining that as is, the draft gave Bush a "blank check" to use force against Iraq and in the region.

The latest CNN/USA Today/Gallup opinion poll made public Tuesday showed Americans were closely split on the wording of the proposed resolution, with 47 percent saying Congress should give Bush "unlimited authority to use military action against Iraq whenever he feels it is necessary" and 51 percent saying Congress should not grant this.

The survey showed 57 percent of respondents would support sending US ground troops into Iraq while 38 percent opposed it. But only 38 percent of those polled favoured sending troops into Iraq, if US allies refused to back the operation while 59 percent opposed it.

## Cops recover hit maps from Pak militants

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani police have recovered maps and plans from arrested Islamic militants which indicate that places of worship and foreign establishments were to be targeted for future attacks, an investigator said Tuesday.

The detainees belong to Harkatul-Mujahideen al Alaami, a group which is accused of staging deadly bomb attacks against foreign targets in this southern city.

"These maps and plans are related to some places of worship and foreign establishments which they were planning to attack," the investigator told AFP on condition of anonymity.

## Iraq urges UN to resist US bid to turn it into war council

AFP, Baghdad

Baghdad dismissed Britain's "baseless" charges about its arsenal on Tuesday and urged the UN Security Council to resist US attempts to turn it into a "War Council".

Prime Minister "Mr. (Tony) Blair is against Iraq so all his claims are baseless," Culture Minister Hamed Yussef Hammadi told reporters.

"Those claims will be challenged by his own Labour Party at the House of Commons," Britain's lower house of parliament, where a debate on Iraq was due to take place later Tuesday, he added.

Hammadi spoke shortly after the British government released a dossier on Iraq's arsenal, in support of US plans to topple President Saddam Hussein.

The file claimed that if Baghdad obtained fissile material "and other essential components from foreign sources ... Iraq could produce a nuclear weapon in between one and two years."

The dossier also claims Iraq could deploy chemical and biological weapons in 45 minutes.

The British "allegations are part of a campaign of lies orchestrated by world Zionism," Hammadi said.

"All the reports presented to the UN by former weapons inspectors have shown that Iraq does not possess such weapons which were destroyed either by the teams of inspectors or by Iraq itself," he added.

The British dossier alleged that Saddam has continued to produce chemical and biological agents and has military plans to use them in weapons, including against Iraq's own Shiite Muslim population.

It also claimed Iraq has retained up to 20 al-Hussein missiles, with a range of 650 km, capable of carrying chemical or biological warheads.

However military analysts noted that on first reading, the report added little new to previous assessments of Iraq's military capabilities.

Blair wrote in a preface to the dossier that Saddam had to be stopped.

## ROK, DPRK set up military hotline

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea's Defence Ministry set up a hotline with the North Korean military Tuesday to help liaison between the rival states as they reconnect rails and roads through their heavily mined frontier.

Previously, the only connection was a rickety Soviet-era landline between the North Korean military and a United Nations guard post in the truce village of Panmunjom in the heart of the Demilitarised Zone bisecting the Korean peninsula.

Military officials from North and South Korea agreed on September 17 to install the first direct line between the two militaries to ensure mine-clearing troops could work safely and without misunderstandings.

Testing of the line would be carried out Tuesday, an official at the South's Defence Ministry told Reuters.

## Palestinians tell US, EU Sharon heading for 'point of no return'

### Mubarak asks Tel Aviv to guarantee Arafat's safety

AFP, Jericho

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said Tuesday he had held urgent talks with US and EU officials to urge them to restrain the Israeli army, saying the situation was heading for "the point of no return".

Erakat also said he had cancelled another scheduled meeting with the Israelis to discuss the siege of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Ramallah headquarters, in protest at a raid in Gaza that left nine Palestinians dead.

He told the EU representative for the Middle East, Miguel Angel Moratinos, the US vice consul to the Palestinian territories, Jeff Feltman, and a representative of the Danish foreign ministry that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was "leading the region to the point of no return."

He said he had asked the western envoys to "stop Israel's attacks and end the siege (of Arafat's base) unconditionally," after Israel brushed aside a UN resolution calling for Israel to withdraw from Arafat's Ramallah compound.

The United States abstained from the 14-0 vote in favour of a resolution, which also called on the Palestinians to curb attacks on Israel.

Erakat met Monday with Israeli officials to discuss terms to end the Ramallah stand-off which began last Thursday, but said the talks failed when the Palestinians refused to hand over a list of all those trapped with Arafat in his offices.

He said he cancelled new talks planned for Tuesday in protest at the "massacre" in Gaza City, when a column of 80 Israeli armoured vehicles backed by helicopters killed nine Palestinians, at least two of them wanted militants, in a major incursion.

Meanwhile, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has asked Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer to guarantee that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will not be harmed, the official MENA news agency said Tuesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians, holding a portrait of their leader Yasser Arafat as well as national, Fatah and Hezbollah flags, demonstrate in the West Bank town of Qalqilya on Monday to protest the ongoing siege of Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has refused permission to the European Union's special envoy to the Middle East, Miguel Angel Moratinos, to visit Arafat, a French foreign ministry official said on Monday.

## Indonesian farmers storm parliament

AP, Jakarta

Hundreds of farmers protesting government policy tore down the main gate of Indonesia's Parliament on Tuesday. Police fired water cannons to break up the demonstration, and some protesters threw stones in response.

More than a thousand farmers from West Java took part in the noisy protest coinciding with Indonesia's Farmers Day, demanding more support from the government.

There were no immediate reports of injuries among the protesters who had gathered at the gates of Parliament since the morning.

Most of the demonstrators ran into the parliamentary compound after breaking down the gate, though they did not enter the parliament building itself.

Other rallies were held by farmers outside local council buildings in other cities.

The protesters say existing laws work against farmers. Many are demanding higher prices for rice and other staples.

Dozens of riot police were deployed in Mataram, the provincial capital of West Nusa Tenggara on Lombok Island in central Indonesia, where hundreds of protesters demanded that the government grant greater land concessions to natives.

They claimed that many land owners are maintaining vast tracks of land uncultivated, creating a shortage of jobs.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian workers armed with bamboo sticks try to break the steel gate of the parliament building in Jakarta on Tuesday during a protest. About 1,000 Indonesian workers stormed the parliament building in a protest against a draft labour law which they said favours employers.

## Muslims make key concession to end Lankan bloodshed

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main Muslim party, which could make or break the island's fledgling peace bid, said Tuesday it was no longer pressing for a separate administrative enclave and added it was willing to share power.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) which is a key player in the Norwegian-backed peace process between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels, made the concession in an attempt to settle a conflict that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

Asked if the Muslims had shed their demand for a separate Muslim administrative enclave in the island's eastern province, SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem said: "It is not a necessary question now."

"If we put forward this argument of a (Muslim enclave) everything will collapse," he told a press conference.

"Ultimately everyone wants to share power. It is a question of power. Definition of power not by territory, but by power itself," Hakeem said. "We must avoid dominance of one party by another."

It is the closest the Muslims have come to shedding a demand for a separate Muslim enclave to counter Tamil demands for an independent homeland called Eelam.

During peace talks with the government last week in Thailand, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) announced they were dropping their separatist demand for Eelam, and instead wanted "regional autonomy and self-government."

The Tigers also made a key concession to Muslims by recognising the island's disputed northern and eastern regions as the "traditional homeland" of both the Tamils and the Muslim communities.

Previous political settlements had failed partly due to the inability to address Muslim grievances.

Sri Lankan Muslims who constitute about 7.5 percent of the 18.66 million population are officially listed as a distinct ethnic community apart from their separate religious identity.

Muslims speak both Tamil as well as Sinhalese depending on where they are living. Tamils are the main minority, accounting for 12.6 percent of population. Sinhalese are in the majority with 74 percent.

Hakeem, who is also a government minister and was a member of its delegation for the Thai talks, said he was "cautiously optimistic" that the Norwegian-backed peace bid would help bring about a final settlement to the drawn out conflict.