



Security forces personnel look at the body of a suspected militant on Tuesday inside the gates of a polling station at the Doda town hall on the fourth and final day of Kashmir's state assembly elections. Two militants disguised in police uniforms lobbed grenades at the polling station in the town hall before opening fire with automatic weapons, leaving two policemen and a suspected militant dead.

Curtain falls on Kashmir polls

AFP, Doda

Voting in staggered assembly elections in Indian-administered Kashmir, which began on September 16, finally ended Tuesday afternoon when electoral officials in the dangerous Doda district declared the poll closed at 4:00 pm (1030 GMT).

The final round vote, in which the remaining seven seats in the 87-seat state assembly were contested, was rocked by a daring early morning assault by suspected Islamic militants on the main polling station in the town of Doda.

Two policemen were killed and two policemen and a civilian were injured, while one of the two rebels who launched the attack was gunned down. The other escaped.

Electoral officials reported that two bomb blasts had occurred near polling stations elsewhere in the district, but said no one was injured.

Some 80,000 security force members were deployed in Doda, a mountainous and forested militant stronghold in the southeast of Indian Kashmir.

Electoral officials predicted that despite the violence, around 40

percent of the electorate turned up to vote in Tuesday's final round -- about the same as in the first three rounds, when various other districts went to the polls.

Official figures were expected to be released late Tuesday.

Some poll candidates alleged there had been rigging of votes in certain polling booths Tuesday and around 40 people staged a protest

outside the election control office in Doda town.

Election officials, however, dismissed the allegations as baseless.

Around 700 people have been killed in the state since the election was called early August, including two candidates and 40 party workers.

Counting of votes begins on Thursday, with results expected by the weekend.



Fighting erupts in Afghan province

AFP, Islamabad

Heavy fighting has erupted in the troubled eastern Afghan province of Khost after forces of rebel warlord Padsha Khan launched an attack on government troops, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported Tuesday.

Intense clashes are continuing in an area just seven kilometres west of Khost, the Pakistan-based private news service said quoting residents.

"Fighting is heavy but so far our forces have made no advance. But we will capture Khost," a spokesman for the rebel tribal leader told AIP.

The spokesman gave no casualty figure.

AIP said an atmosphere of fear has gripped the town, which is just kilometres from the Pakistan border, and markets were partially shut.

"Fighting is near the town. People can hear thuds of guns and heavy weapons fire," a resident was quoted as telling the AIP.

No end to Gaza raids: Sharon

Palestinians term it a declaration of war

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Tuesday army raids into the Gaza Strip would go on, a day after a bloody incursion killed 14 Palestinians and drew strong international rebukes, including from Israel's top ally Washington.

The right-wing leader, forced to bow to US pressure last month to end his siege of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's base, was in a defiant mood despite Washington's saying it was "deeply troubled" by Monday's storming of the Gaza town of Khan Yunis.

"The complicated operation we carried out (Monday) was a success. It was an important one and there will be other anti-terrorist operations of this sort in the Gaza Strip," Sharon told army radio.

His comments appeared to fly in the face of US attempts to calm the region ahead of expected strikes against Baghdad, as Israel warned that while it respected Washington's agenda, it had its own security priorities.

An official from Sharon's office insisted that despite Washington's call for restraint, the US administration of President George W. Bush "recognises Israel's right to defend itself against terrorism."

"The Israeli army will continue its operations if the Palestinian Authority does not decide to prevent terrorists from carrying out attacks," he said.

"If we have no other option, we will do the work ourselves in order to guarantee the security of Israeli civilians," the official said.

Israeli tanks and helicopter gunships stormed into Khan Yunis

in an operation the army said was aimed at rooting out militants from the Islamic group Hamas, who had fired mortars at nearby Jewish settlements.

Meanwhile, a top advisor to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on Tuesday called Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's vow to continue raids on Gaza "a declaration of war."

"Sharon's announcement was a declaration of war against the Palestinian people and a major challenge to UN Security Council resolutions" calling on Israel to quit Palestinian land, Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP.

"We call on the Security Council and the Middle East quartet to act to stop this aggression," he said, referring to the so-called quartet of diplomatic powers, the United States, United Nations, the

European Union and Russia.

He said the United Nations should decide "immediately" to send international observers to try to calm the situation.

Earlier Sharon said he would press ahead with raids on the Gaza Strip, despite US pressure to calm tensions as it tries to gather an international consensus against Iraq.

"The complicated operation we carried out (Monday) was a success. It was an important one and there will be other anti-terrorist operations of this sort in the Gaza Strip," Sharon told army radio.

Tanks, backed by helicopters and bulldozers, stormed the southern Gaza Strip town of Khan Yunis Monday, killing 14 Palestinians and wounding scores.



A Palestinian carries one of two Palestinian high school students injured by Israeli gunfire as the army staged an incursion into the northern West Bank town of Jenin on Tuesday. The army also arrested another 12 Palestinians in ongoing sweeps across the West Bank on Monday night which have netted thousands of people in the three months since Israeli reoccupied most of the territory.

Pakistan test fires missile

Delhi shrugs off Pak test

REUTERS, AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan, locked in a military stand-off with India, successfully test-fired a medium-range ballistic missile on Tuesday, concluding a series of two tests in less than a week, state media reported.

The second test came two days before parliamentary elections in Pakistan and on the day India held the last phase of a disputed state poll in Kashmir, the Himalayan region that was the trigger for two of the three wars the two nations have fought.

Last Friday Pakistan said it had successfully test-fired a medium-range Hatf-IV (Shaheen-1) surface-to-surface missile. Hours later India test-fired a short-range surface-to-air missile of its own.

Tuesday's Pakistani test involved the same type of missile as the first, state media said.

"It is a continuation of the test that was carried out on October 4, to validate certain additional parameters," Pakistan Television news reported. "These parameters stand completely validated in the light of the data collected from the test."

"The test concludes for now the series of planned tests," PTV added. Jane's Defence Weekly says the Shaheen-1 has a range of around



A hand out photo released on Tuesday shows Pakistan's medium-range ballistic Shaheen surface-to-surface missile is successfully test-fired from Sonmiani on the country's south coast.

700 km (430 miles).

The United States criticised both countries for last week's tests, saying they could encourage a

nuclear missile and arms race in the region.

Border tensions remain high between the two countries, which almost came to war in June over disputed Kashmir.

Meanwhile, India shrugged off Pakistan's second ballistic missile test in five days Tuesday as an exercise aimed at its domestic constituency.

A senior Indian official said the timing of the two tests was significant, "just days before general elections in that country". Pakistan goes to the polls on Thursday.

"The tests are aimed at Pakistan's domestic audience and has more to do with their internal politics than anything else," he told AFP.

A defence ministry spokesman said India was not planning any tit-for-tat missile test in response to Pakistan's latest launch.

In Islamabad, a defence ministry statement said Pakistan had successfully test-fired a medium-range nuclear-capable ballistic missile, named Shaheen.

"This test was in continuation of the one conducted on October 4, 2002 to validate certain additional parameters," a defence ministry statement said.

Asia top transgressor of religious repression: US

AFP, Washington

Asia is the epicentre of the world's most grievous religious repression, according to an annual US report, which links one-party states with crackdowns and harassment of people of faith.

Five of the six states singled out as worst offenders in the State Department's annual report in international religious freedom are located in the region -- and many other governments are listed as second-tier offenders.

China, Myanmar, Vietnam, North Korea and Laos, all of which are frequently the target of US criticism earn the dubious distinction of a place on the list of nations accused of repressing religion to safeguard a dominant state ideology.

The conclusions are likely to further fray US ties with the five, all of which have uneasy relations with Washington.

Beijing's "respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience remained poor, especially for many unregistered religious groups and spiritual movements such as the Falungong," the report said.

"The Government continued its crackdown on unregistered churches, temples, and mosques," it said, adding that unregistered religious groups of all creeds experi-

ence varying degrees of official interference.

President George W. Bush regularly brings up religious freedom in his talks with President Jiang Zemin -- and the topic will be on the US agenda at the next summit, in Texas at the end of the month.

North Korea, under Stalinist patriarch Kim Jong-Il has "an extremely poor" level of respect for religious freedom" the report says, while Myanmar's military regime is accused of forcibly converting minorities to state-sanctioned Buddhism.

Vietnam is likely to take exception to the findings, less than a week after it hit out at the congressionally mandated US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which advises the administration on policy.

The commission asked officials to add Vietnam to a list of states regarded as causing "particular concern" on religious freedom which currently includes China, Myanmar, Iran, Iraq, North Korea and Sudan.

The decision on this year's list will be made in the coming weeks, officials said, but the report was clear on allegations of religious repression allegedly mandated by Hanoi.

Nepalese leaders wait for meeting with king

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese political leaders waited Tuesday for an answer to their request for a joint meeting with the king to discuss forming a new government after he sacked the prime minister and took power temporarily.

"We are waiting for an appointment with the king. We are hoping this will happen today (Tuesday)," said Bharat Mohan Adhikari, leader of the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML), the main opposition party in the outgoing parliament.

Leaders of six of the main parties in Nepal met Monday and decided to see King Gyanendra collectively, after holding talks with him separately over the weekend.

The king on Friday sacked prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and the cabinet and said he would assume power until he appointed a new government, which was supposed to happen by midnight Wednesday (1815 GMT Tuesday). He also suspended elections set for November.

Gyanendra said the new government would be a non-political, all-party interim administration and would be in place until elections could be held, although he did not give a time frame for the polls.

"We are going to confer with King Gyanendra and tell him that he should not appoint a non-political man as the new prime minister," Adhikari said.

"We have decided we will not accept a new interim government if the king does not consult us over it."

"We, the six political parties have been given the public mandate through general elections and we want only representatives of the six parties to be included in the new government," he added.

The Nepali Congress (Democratic) party of Deuba, who met the king Monday to discuss the situation and reportedly told the king his removal was unconstitutional and undemocratic, is not among the six parties.

"The king asked Deuba to nominate people from his party to be part of the all-party government, but he said no one from his party would be participating in the new government," a party source said.

Meanwhile, the NCP-UML was

to hold a rally in Kathmandu later Tuesday to protest the removal of the prime minister.

Gyanendra, a constitutional monarch whose role is meant to be largely ceremonial, said Deuba was "incompetent" and not qualified to preside over the elections.

The constitutional crisis began in May when Gyanendra, on Deuba's advice, dissolved the 205-member parliament and called elections for November 13, two years ahead of schedule.

The decision backfired with strong resistance from opposition parties, which said elections could not be held freely and fairly because of a violent Maoist rebellion that has claimed some 5,000 lives in six years.

Deuba then had second thoughts and asked for the election to be delayed until November 19, 2003.

On Tuesday, a bomb believed to have been planted by the Maoists, went off in an office in Kathmandu, but no one was injured, witnesses said. It was the second bomb attack in two days.

'Anti-terror role to save Pak govt from polls criticism'

AFP, Islamabad

The international community is likely to look the other way if Pakistan's elections on Thursday are less than free and fair because President Pervez Musharraf's role is pivotal to the war on terrorism, according to analysts.

"Musharraf is the safest tin-pot dictator in the whole Third World," said Islamabad-based political analyst Aqil Shah.

"The primary concern of the US and most of its allies including the UK is a stable Pakistan, and they see Musharraf as essential to a stable political order."

General Musharraf, who has unilaterally declared himself president until 2007, is not contesting the elections. Pakistanis will on Thursday vote for a national assembly and four provincial assemblies, three years after he suspended and later sacked them in the wake of his 1999 coup.

Opposition parties have levelled a barrage of "pre-poll rigging" allegations against Musharraf's military administration, citing alleged harassment and intimidation of candidates, the elimination of former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif and the backing of pro-government candidates.

They say tough electoral laws ruling out non-graduates, absconders, money launders, loan defaulters and people who have failed to pay their electricity bills are being applied arbitrarily.

The head of more than 80 European Union observers monitoring the polls has already described some of the conditions as not matching international standards and interfering with judicial independence.

But Pakistan-watchers say Musharraf's fabled "tightness" with Washington in pursuing the Taliban and al-Qaida will protect him from criticism.

"There is a fear in the West that if a weak and corrupt government comes in, the fight on terror will fall by the wayside, and Pakistan will not be able to survive the onslaught of the mullahs," said Shah.

"That fear is highly exaggerated."

A senior Western diplomat said the more than 300 foreign observers monitoring the poll were likely to "give a green, maybe orange light" to the election.

"They may say there are problems, but nothing which fundamentally challenges the results."

Shah said observers were unlikely to witness rigging on voting day.

"The level of rigging required is already in place. The regime is relying on manipulating the elections way before polling day."

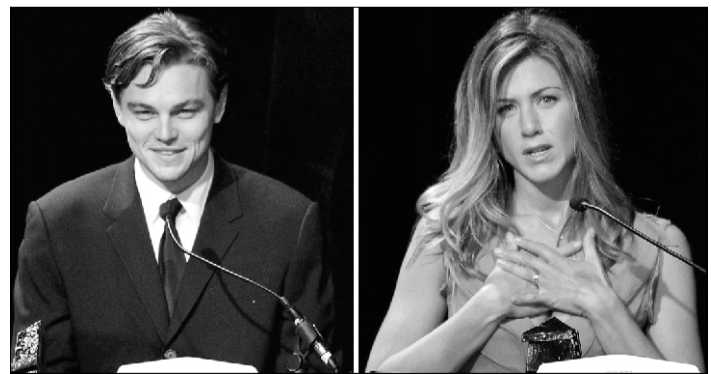
Few expect a tough response from the United States. "For the US the top priority is the war on terrorism," said Shah.

"As for elections and democracy, lots of lip service is paid but I don't think the world will fall on Musharraf if they're deemed not free and fair."

The United States was "being watchful but definitely their long-term interest is to accept Musharraf's mandate," said the diplomat.

Another diplomat cited the "Iraq factor."

"The US with their Iraq intentions want to keep Musharraf on side, and this would also apply to the UK. Iraq is the most important factor in their thinking," he told AFP.



Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio accepts the Outstanding Directing Award on behalf of director Martin Scorsese while US actress Jennifer Aniston accepts the Hollywood Actress of the Year Award at the Hollywood Film Festival's Gala Ceremony and Hollywood Movie Awards in Beverly Hills on Monday.

Planet beyond Pluto

AFP, Washington

The Hubble Space Telescope has sighted a large ball of ice and rock half the size of Pluto and far beyond the remote planet's orbit, making it the most important discovery in our solar system in 72 years.

Named Quaoar after a god of an Indian nation that lived in the area of Los Angeles, California, the frozen mass of some 1,280 kilometres (800 miles) in diameter was first detected

by a land-based telescope, prompting astronomers to point the Hubble in its direction, NASA said here Monday.

Quaoar's orbit lies 1.6 billion kilometres (one billion miles) further out than Pluto's and 10.8 billion kilometres (six billion miles) from Earth, in what is known as the Kuiper Belt, an elliptical area beyond Neptune home to untold numbers of asteroids and comets.