

Most Americans don't want Bush reelection: Poll

AFP, Washington

Fifty-two percent of registered US voters don't want President George W. Bush to be re-elected to a second term in office while 43 percent disagree with that view, according to a new opinion poll released Saturday.

But the Newsweek magazine survey showed 38 percent of registered voters said Bush was somewhat likely to be re-elected this year, while 31 percent said this outcome was very likely.

At the same time, only 48 percent of Americans polled approved of the way Bush is handling his job as president, the same as one week ago.

In the wake of the controversy over the president's service in the National Guard at the time of the Vietnam War, 49 percent of those surveyed said they were inclined to believe that Bush fulfilled obligations while 33 percent had serious doubts over it.

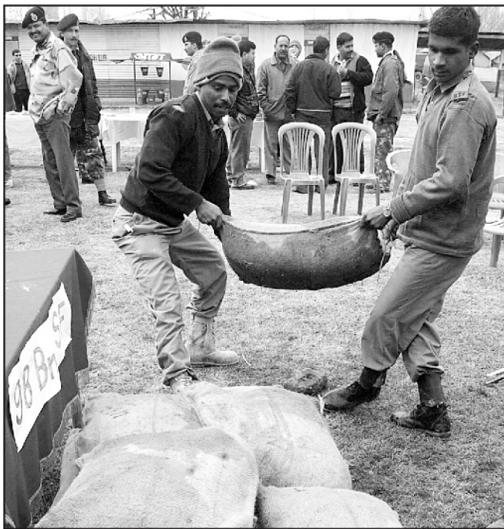


PHOTO: AFP
Two members of the Border Security Force (BSF) carry a bag of explosives at a BSF camp in Srinagar yesterday. The BSF recovered about 600kgs of explosives from a hideout in the outskirts of the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar.

Becoming PM not a priority: Sonia

PTI, New Delhi

The Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi yesterday said becoming a Prime Minister was not a priority before her and accused BJP of raking up the issue of her foreign origin as the party-led government at the Centre had "totally failed".

"For me, that is not a priority. Let us see when the time comes," she said in an interview to NDTV when asked why the Congress was not coming forward on the issue of leadership of anti-BJP Alliance.

To a query whether she felt that her being born in Italy was a liability, the Congress president said it might work adversely with some voters but "I have never felt that I am a foreigner. I am an Indian absolutely."

Israel reroutes barrier ahead of ICJ hearing

REUTERS, Baka Al-Sharqiya

Israel began tearing down a small section of its controversial West Bank barrier yesterday, a day before the World Court opens hearings on the legality of the project.

"There's no connection between the two things," Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom told Israel Radio. But Justice Minister Yosef Lapid said in a television interview that Israel would reap "very positive media spin" from the move. Palestinian cabinet minister Saeb Erekat called it a public relations stunt.

Civilian work crews using wire cutters cut into an eight-km section of electronic fence that separates the Palestinian village of Baka al-

Sharqiya from the rest of the West Bank.

Israel pointed to a suicide bus bombing in Jerusalem that killed at least seven people and wounded dozens on Sunday as proof the barrier was needed even as one part was coming down.

The section being dismantled is only a fraction of the network of razor wire-tipped fences and towering cement walls that is planned to extend for 728km and already snakes into occupied territory. Palestinians want for a state.

The segment was coming down following the completion last week of another part of the barrier dividing Baka al-Sharqiya in the northern West Bank from its sister village of Baka al-Gharbiya, which is just

inside Israel.

"What has happened in Jerusalem today is evidence that we need the fence to keep out terrorist attacks," said Erik Snider, an Israeli army spokesman.

"We want to make a balance between the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian population and the Israeli security needs."

A military source said the section would take less than a week to dismantle. A project manager said some 8,000 Palestinians would be reconnected with the West Bank after the segment was removed.

Israel says the project has already stopped Palestinian suicide bombers from reaching its cities, but its route into the West Bank has drawn international criticism, includ-

ing from the United States, Israel's main ally.

Palestinians call it a land grab and plan a "Day of Rage" at the start of hearings on Monday at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie said on Saturday that the Israeli step did not go far enough, telling reporters: "We will not agree to even one millimeter of the barrier."

The World Court's ruling is non-binding, but Israel fears the United Nations General Assembly -- which asked for the advisory opinion and where pro-Palestinian sentiment is strong -- could use the ruling to lobby for sanctions against it.

Iranian conservatives, hardliners set for win

Reforms to get shelved

AFP, Tehran

Iran's turbulent experiment with reforms was set to be halted yesterday, with conservatives and hardliners all but confirmed as winners of controversial parliamentary elections that most of their reformist rivals were barred from contesting.

Top regime figures trumpeted what they said was a "massive turnout", and supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the "totally free, healthy and legal" elections had dealt a massive blow to those urging a boycott.

He said that it was "the people who had emerged the winner in this election and it was the United States, the Zionists and the enemies of Iran who lost."

But with ballots still being

counted, nationwide turnout appeared to be headed to around the 50 percent mark -- and just 28 percent in the capital -- a sharp drop from the last Majlis elections when two-thirds of the electorate took part.

This would be one of the lowest turnout figures since the 1979 Islamic revolution, but still above some dire predictions that only a tiny minority would rally behind the regime and its often awkward mix of theocracy and "Islamic democracy".

A blend of hardliners, conservatives and independents -- a label under which many other right-wingers have stood -- appeared set to replace a noisy but largely ineffectual reformist-held assembly.

Their win will further isolate embattled President Mohammad

Khatami, whose final term ends in June 2005, and sound a death knoll for his effort to liberalise the country's political and social systems.

The headline Guardians Council, the body behind the controversial mass blacklisting of over 2,000 reformist candidates and 87 sitting MPs, said Friday's vote would transform the Majlis into a body "guided by spirituality".

Those reformists who were approved and did not boycott were struggling to return just a handful of deputies to the 290-seat chamber. They were able to contest just over half of the seats up for grabs.

Definitive results were not expected before Monday.

Kashmiri rebels get \$7m a year to keep revolt alive

AFP, New Delhi

Kashmiri militant groups are getting seven million dollars a year to keep alive a 15-year insurgency there, an Indian media report said yesterday.

The estimate includes salaries, compensation to families of slain rebels, payments to guides and clothing allowances for militants. The Times of India newspaper said, quoting unnamed intelligence sources.

The report said the figure does not include "special incentives" for "fidayeen" or suicide attacks, killing of leaders or top army personnel, or missions of key importance to the groups.

The intelligence sources said most of the funds originated in Pakistan, through its military Inter-Services-Intelligence and various charities.

War of Gandhis in Indian election

AFP, New Delhi

It is being billed as the war of the Gandhis, as India moves into electoral mode.

Varun Gandhi, son of family black sheep Maneka Gandhi and one of the heirs to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that has supplied India with three Congress party prime ministers, declared his support last week for the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

He nailed his colors to the BJP just a month after his cousins, brother-and-sister duo Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi, were mobbed as they campaigned for the main opposition Congress party which dominated India's first half-century of independence. The "Gen Next" family political soap opera looks like providing the main drama in elections due in around two months that appear for the moment as though they will be a walkover for the BJP

and its allies against the secular Congress.

Asked if he would campaign directly against his cousins, seen as more photogenic and politically savvy than himself, the 24-year-old Varun said, "I will try hard not to campaign against Rahul and Priyanka because family and party are separate. But I will follow my party's ideals."

For political watchers, the move raises the tantalising possibility of a BJP Gandhi one day battling a Congress Gandhi for India's leadership.

After months of deriding Congress for seeking to exploit the Gandhis' dynastic appeal, analysts say the BJP may use Varun in pivotal states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where the Gandhi name still has magic.



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi Sunnis carry the coffin of Sheikh Thamer Suleiman al-Zari, who was shot dead late Saturday in the doorway of his Baghdad home, during his funeral procession yesterday in Baghdad. Leaders of Iraq's Sunni Muslim minority gathered to bury the cleric whose murder sent chills through Iraq's religious communities already fearing civil war, with sovereignty four months away.

Bin Laden cornered in Pakistan's northwest

AFP, London

US and British special forces have cornered al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in a mountainous area in northwest Pakistan, near the Afghanistan border, the Sunday Express newspaper reported.

Quoting "a US intelligence source," it said bin Laden and "up to 50 fanatical henchmen" were inside an area 16km wide and deep "north of the town of Khanzai and the city of Quetta".

"He is boxed in," the unidentified source was quoted by the tabloid as saying, adding that US special forces were "absolutely confident"

that he could not escape.

According to the source, bin Laden moved into the area, "in the desolate Toba Kakar mountains," about one month ago from another area 240km to the south, the Sunday Express said.

In Washington, a Defense Department spokesman declined to comment on the report.

Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar is believed to be with bin Laden, according to the report.

The area is under surveillance from a geostationary spy satellite while US and British special forces

await orders to move in, the newspaper said in its early edition, received late Saturday.

Al-Qaeda is held responsible for the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that killed nearly 3,000 people in 2001. More recently, it has been suspected of supporting insurgent attacks on US forces in Iraq.

On Thursday, General Richard Meyers, chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, said US forces were engaged in "intense" efforts to capture bin Laden, but held back from saying where he might be hiding.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) hands over a scroll of the "indigenously produced" surface-to-surface ballistic missile, "Ghaznavi", to the Commander of the Army Strategic Force Command, Lieutenant General Ghulam Mustafa, during a ceremony in an undisclosed location on Saturday. Musharraf reiterated that Pakistan's nuclear programme was here to stay and, being a vital national security interest, will never be compromised.

US blames al-Qaeda for Iraq violence

REUTERS, Shannon Airport

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, flying to Kuwait yesterday on a previously unannounced trip to the Gulf, blamed al-Qaeda guerrillas for violence in Iraq.

"They clearly are involved and active," Rumsfeld told reporters during a refueling stop in Ireland, referring to Osama bin Laden's group which Washington holds responsible for the September 11, 2001, attacks and others since.

Rumsfeld surprised dozens of US soldiers in the terminal building heading for Kuwait on another military aircraft. He declined to say whether he would make his fourth visit to Iraq since the United States invaded Iraq last March.

He said insurgents in Iraq were trying to foment strife among religious and ethnic groups to try to halt the move to democracy.

Asked specifically what type of

guerrillas and insurgents were launching increasingly sophisticated attacks in Iraq, he said it was difficult to tell. "Some of these people have 13 different passports and 20 different aliases," he said.

He voiced confidence Iraqis would eventually hold elections and form a representative democracy but said the timing of elections was "unpredictable."

Iraq's US governor Paul Bremer has said it could take up to 15 months to hold elections in Iraq, making it impossible to hold them before Washington plans to hand over power to Iraqis on June 30.

Rumsfeld praised the thousands of Iraqis joining police and civil defense forces despite attacks on police by insurgents supporting the toppled president, Saddam Hussein.

"Instead of acquiescing they are still in line to join the police, to join the army," he said.

Diplomats leave Haiti without agreement

AP, Port-au-Prince

A diplomatic delegation left Haiti after failing to persuade opponents of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to end a bloody uprising and accept a US-backed peace plan that would require the two sides to share power in the Caribbean nation.

Aristide agreed to the peace plan on Saturday, but his political opponents insisted that the president must step down for there to be peace in Haiti.

The delegation, led by the top US envoy for the Western Hemisphere, ended its one-day trip to Haiti but said they were optimistic that an agreement could be reached.

Aristide, who would remain president under the plan, said he agreed to a new prime minister and government to organize elections.

But he declared he would "not go ahead with any terrorists," meaning he would not negotiate with rebels who have led a two-week-old uprising that has killed more than 60 people and chased police from a score of towns.

One of the gang leaders who began the rebellion asked where the plan left him.

"What about me? When the international community come into Haiti ... they (will) take my gun," Buteur Metayer told Associated Press Television News in Gonaives, the biggest city held by the rebels.

"He (Aristide is) going to kill me."

The opposition politicians are not allied with the rebels, but both want to see Aristide step down. The political opponents met with foreign envoys Saturday and promised to deliver a formal response to the peace proposal by 5 p.m. Monday.

But they indicated that their answer would remain the same.

"We expect the international community to understand our position ... which will not change," said Gerard Pierre-Charles, a leading opposition leader once allied with Aristide.

Foreign Minister Fred Mitchell of the Bahamas remained optimistic that the opposition could be won over, telling reporters, "While we did not get a yes, we did not get a no."

Saturday's mediation efforts came as the United States urged citizens to leave the country amid mounting violence by Aristide militants in government-held areas.

The rebels, meanwhile, threatened to attack Haiti's second-largest city, the northern port of Cap-Haitien, over the Carnival holiday weekend.

Throughout the recent bloodshed, Aristide, who has survived three assassination attempts and a coup d'etat, has said he will not step down before his term ends in 2006.

"Aristide has systematically broken his promises. Why should anyone believe him now?" asked lawyer Bernard Gousse, from a

coalition of 184 civil groups in the Democratic Platform coalition.

He noted that Aristide had not kept pledges to former President Clinton to disarm street gangs.

As Aristide was announcing his agreement, news came that Haitian journalist Elie Sem Pierre was shot and wounded by Aristide loyalists in Cap-Haitien. Militants there have armed themselves against any rebel incursion while frightened police have barricaded themselves in their station.

On Friday, Aristide loyalists attacked unarmed anti-government protesters in Port-au-Prince, injuring 14, including a journalist.

Aristide accuses his political opponents of supporting the rebellion. His government spokesman, Mario Dupuy, said that with the plan "the opposition has a chance to prove it is not in favor of violence and terrorism."

Opposition leaders said the plan does not address how to halt the uprising and disarm rebels and militants.

Aristide indicated it would be done by Haitian police, saying the agreement calls for the Organisation of American States to increase its help in training Haiti's small and ill-equipped force.