INTERNATIONAL



People demonstrate in Cibeles square protesting the train bombings which left 199 dead and over 1400 injured on Thursday in Madrid, two days before the general elections in Spain. Nearly 12 million people took part in the demonstration condemning terrorism across Spain.

Turnout only uncertainty as Putin heads for victory

Russian authorities stepped up efforts to ensure a high voter turnout in today's presidential elections, the only factor threatening to tarnish an expected crushing victory for President Vladimir Putin.

On the last day of campaign-ing, political and religious figures close to the Kremlin appealed to voters not to neglect their "duty" to vote, while local administrations across the country were offering inducements to tempt voters to cast their ballots.

Polls indicate that Putin should garner at least 60 percent of the vote, but the sheer ease with which the president is cantering to victory has created fears Russians will lack motivation to make their way to polling stations

A poor turnout would not give Putin the ringing endorsement he wants for a second four-year term, while participation of less than 50 percent would invalidate

IAEA adopts resolution criticising Iran

Tehran blasts US

REUTERS, AFP, Vienna

The United Nations nuclear watchdog yesterday approved a resolution that criticises Iran for withholding sensitive atomic information from the agency but stops short of referring Tehran to the UN Security Council.

An agency official who was inside the closed-door meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) 35-nation Board of Governors said it adopted the resolution without a vote.

In a clear reference to the United States, Iran blasted the UN nuclear watchdog yesterday for letting "a single country" impose a resolution against Tehran's nuclear programme.

The IAEA ended a week-long

deadlock yesterday by adopting a US-backed resolution condemning Iran for hiding nuclear activi-

"A resolution is being imposed, and I think I am using the expres-

sion with true definition of the word, on the (International Atomic Energy Agency) board by a single country," senior foreign ministry official Amir Zamaninia told an IAEA meeting in Vienna, according to a copy of his speech made available to reporters.

A senior Western diplomat said the compromise text worked out after non-aligned states sought to soften the resolution was "still an important signal for the Iranians to continue and intensify cooperation" with the IAEA.

But Zamaninia said the resolution was "a setback, a serious setback" as it portrayed "a rather benign progressive situation as a condition of high alert."

He said IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei has already reported "the positive trend of active cooperation by Iran and also a process of resolving issues that is gaining pace exponentially"

The resolution that was adopted came a day after Iran had until the end of April in what one diplomat close to the IAEA described as "potentially a large problem in the verification pro-

But Iranian ambassador Pirooz Hosseini told AFP Saturday that IAEA inspectors could in fact visit Iran earlier than the end of next

Hosseini said his country had put back the inspection mission, scheduled to start this week, "due to the approach of the Iranian New Year" but that if people were back in their offices soon after the holiday, which starts next week, then IAEA inspectors could come.

The IAEA, which verifies the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), has since February 2003 been working to determine whether Iran's nuclear program is peaceful, or devoted to secretly developing atomic weapons, as the United States has charged.

Millions in Madrid protest terror attacks

AP. Madrid

Millions of Spaniards poured into the streets Friday, chanting "Cowards!" and "Assassins!" in a protest of the bombings that killed 199 people. The Basque separatist group ETA denied government allegations that it staged the attacks.

Many of the estimated 2.3 million marchers in Madrid huddled against a steady rain in a bobbing mass of umbrellas that clogged the capital's squares and the area around the Atocha station, where two of the four trains blew up during Thursday morning's rush hour.

"It is not raining, Madrid is crying," said Jorge Mendez, a 20-year-old telecommunications

In a show of national unity, massive crowds also gathered in Barcelona, Seville, Valencia and information to the effect that it even in Spain's Canary Islands off could have been an Islamic terrorist

Vestern Africa. Nationwide, nearly

12 million marched, state TV said. Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, who was joined by other European leaders as he led one march, pledged to hunt down the terrorists whose bombs sparked new fears about Europe's vulnerability to attack.

The debate over who was responsible for the attacks could affect the outcome of national elections set for

Aznar and his government ministers blamed the armed group ETA, which has fought for decades for an independent Basque homeland. But there was concern that Islamic militants and perhaps even the al-Qaeda terror network had been

services or security forces we have contacted have provided reliable information to the effect that it

He said these steps were ongoing

and unrelated to the current six-

party negotiations -- which include

North and South Korea, Japan, the

United States, China and Russia -- to

ease the nuclear standoff in North

"We are entitled to expect legal behaviour from all countries.

tion agreement, North Korea must

cease its exports of dangerous weap-

ons and the wide scope of its illegal

regime and its agents for their

behaviour," Reiss said. "The

choice, ultimately, is theirs."

activities," Reiss said.

"With or without a denuclearisa-

organization," Interior Minister

Angel Acebes said Friday. If ETA is found responsible, that could boost support for Mariano Rajoy, Aznar's hand-picked candi-date to succeed him as prime minister. Both have supported a crackdown on ETA's campaign for an independent state in northern Spain, ruling out talks and backing a ban on ETA's political wing,

However, if Thursday's bombings are seen by voters as the work of al-Qaeda, that could draw their attention to Aznar's vastly unpopular decision to endorse the US-led invasion of Iraq and deploy Spanish troops there.

Rajoy is 3-5 percentage points ahead of Socialist candidate Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero in polls. Polls close Sunday at 2 p.m. EST and exit poll results will be available

US launches new Afghan operation against Laden

US-led forces have launched a new operation across a broad area of the south and east of Afghanistan aimed at capturing top al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, the US military said yesterday.

The operation, codenamed "Mountain Storm," was launched on March 7 and involved troops from the 13,500-strong US-led force backed by air support, military spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Bryan Hilferty told a news briefing.

"We believe that this will help bring the heads of the terrorist organisations to justice by continuing to place pressure on them," he said.

Asked whether the operation could lead to the arrest of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, Hilferty

"This operation is aimed like the rest at rebuilding and reconstructing and providing enduring security in Afghanistan, so it's certainly

about more than one person. "We do have confidence though and the leaders of al-Qaeda and the leaders of the Taliban need to be brought to justice and they will be."

Hilferty said "Mountain Storm" was a continuation of previous operations which had involved patrols, searches and small-scale air assaults, but declined to provide

"We have air support, close-fire support from the air 24-hours a day, circling overhead ready to assist coalition forces. It is a continuing effort to keep pressure on the terrorist organisations and their infra-

ous defence officials in Washington on Friday described "Mountain Storm" as a broad spring offensive to hunt down al-Qaeda fugitives, including bin Laden.

US to introduce tighter border control for Iraq

Shia clerics renew criticism of constitution

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

The US-led authority in Iraq will introduce a new border policy to try and keep out foreign insurgents, including closing off most of the official crossing points from Iran, a senior US official said yesterday.

The new policy had been formulated in conjunction with the Iraqi Governing Council and Interior Ministry, the official told reporters. Full details would be announced later in the day.

Just three of more than 10 official entry points from Iran would remain along the nearly 1,000-mile frontier.
US officials say there is an

increasing threat from foreign fighters in Iraq, who they believe are behind some of the major bombings of recent months.

After near-simultaneous attacks this month killed more than 180 people in Baghdad and Kerbala, the US administrator in Iraq Paul Bremer made a statement reiterating that Washington had committed

\$60 million to border security. After those attacks, the top Shia cleric in Iraq criticised the United States for not doing enough to police borders and protect the country it is

occupying.

The US authorities in Iraq have

controls would be the Iranian and Syrian borders. Entry points along the country's

porous borders will be reduced as part of the scheme, drawn up by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), Iraq's Governing Council and the interior ministry, the official told reporters.

Some 10 to 20 points of entry along the Iraq-Iran border would be cut to three at Muntheriyah, Zurbatiyah and al-Shalamasha, he We expect these three border

points along the Iraq-Iran border to be fully functioning points of entry within approximately six weeks, the coalition official said. "These are part of our broader

effort to more aggressively regulate and in some cases limit border traffic coming across the borders, he continued.

It marks a "small but important part of our overall strategy to address issues relating to foreign fighters coming into the country."

US officials say extremists and insurgents, backed by foreign fighters, have now replaced former members of the Baath party and Saddam Hussein loyalists as the biggest security threat in Iraq.
Iraqi Shiite religious leaders

blamed US forces for not policing the country's borders tightly enough after the bombings at Shiite shrines in two cities on March 2, in which more than 170 people died and hundreds more were injured.

It was feared that some foreign fighters may have slipped across the border from Iran with thousands of pilgrims who travelled to mark a major Shiite religious holiday in public for the first time in decades.

Meanwhile, Iraq's Shia Muslim clerics criticised the new interim constitution Friday but stopped short of calling for protests, as more US troops died amid warnings that an increase in spectacular attacks was likely. Religious leaders in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, where Iraq's most influential cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, is based, reiterated their concerns over the text, which they fear gives

too much power to the Kurds. In Najaf, 160km from Baghdad, leader Sadreddin Kubanji criticised the "weakness" of the document and said the power it gives Kurds "threatens the unity of the country.

Calls from religious leaders have multiplied for Shia followers, who make up more than 60 percent of the population, to make their voices heard since Monday's controversial signing of the new basic law.

US warns DPRK to stop exporting arms or tace world action

AFP, Washington

The United States warned North Korea Friday that it would face action from the international community if it does not stop exporting dangerous weapons and other illegal activities.

"If North Korea will not act, it will find the United States, its allies and other partners equally prepared to respond with measures that ensure North Korea cannot threaten our countries or international stability," said Mitchell Reiss, the department's director of policy planning.

Speaking at the Heritage Foundation, one of Washington's leading repositories of expertise on East Asia, Reiss said the United States was taking steps to enforce its laws against alleged narcotics trafficking and counterfeiting of US currency by the rogue state.

9 found dead in California, man charged

REUTERS, San Francisco

Police in Fresno found the bodies of nine people in a home in Fresno, California, following a domestic dispute and a police standoff with a suspect in the murders, the Fresno Bee and CNN reported yesterday.

Police in Fresno, located in an agricultural part of central California, told of finding at least four children and three women.

Following a two-hour standoff at the house, police arrested Marcus Wesson, 57, on suspicion of homi-cide. The bodies were found in a bedroom, The Bee reported.
Police Chief Jerry Dyer told the

scene inside was so horrific that several police officers needed psy-

chological counseling.

Washington would also pursue with its so called proliferation security newspaper that the women may be mothers of the young children and Wesson may be the father of all the initiative, a programme to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass Police were still inside home early on Saturday, according to CNN, which also reported that the destruction and missiles, he said. 'We will insist on full accountability by the North Korean

Kuwait scraps visas for 34 nations

AFP, Kuwait City

The Gulf Arab state of Kuwait, looking to open its doors after the fall of Saddam Hussein, yesterday scrapped prior visa requirements for citizens of 34 countries.

The new decision became effective immediately and applies to nationals from North America, most of Western Europe, Southeast Asia, New Zealand and Australia.

"Entry visas will be provided to citizens of these nations upon arrival at various terminals without the need of a Kuwaiti sponsor," Major General Thabet al-Muhanna, interior ministry assistant undersecretary, said in the decision.

The new measure is "consistent is aimed at "promoting the domestic economy," he added. The new facility applies to citizens of the United States, Canada,

with the openness policy," being adopted by the oil-rich emirate, and

France and Britain, in addition to

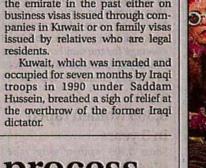
Italy, Germany, Portugal and several other European nations, besides Japan, Malaysia, South Korea and

tries and south Asian nations are excluded from the new measure, which also provides for multiple entry visas upon request. Previously, all visitors to the

emirate were required to obtain visas valid for one month from the immigration department through a sponsor in Kuwait before being allowed to board the plane. A majority of foreigners visited the emirate in the past either on

panies in Kuwait or on family visas issued by relatives who are legal Kuwait, which was invaded and occupied for seven months by Iraqi troops in 1990 under Saddam





Supporters of Lien Chan, presidential candidate for the opposition Kuomintang (KMT), wear glasses decorated with the year 2004 during an election rally in Kaohsiung, southern Taiwan yesterday. Taiwan's opposition called a million supporters on to the streets yesterday to rejuvenate an election campaign knocked by a late surge from President Chen Shui-bian.

An Israeli soldier aims his weapon at Palestinians demonstrating against the construction of Israel's controversial security fence, after they tried to obstruct the Israell bulldozers working in the place close to the West Bank village of Nilin Friday, Washington and Cairo have stepped up their efforts to promote a Middle East dialogue, which could resume next week at a long-awaited meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his Palestinian counterpart, Ahmed Qorei.

ME peace process stalled, says Annan

Israeli troops kill 2 Palestinians

AFP, Gaza City

Two Palestinians were killed by Two Palestinians were killed by Israeli gunfire early yesterday in the Gaza Strip, in continuing violence that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan warned stymied the search for peace in the Middle East.

The pair were shot dead when they attacked an army position near the Karni crossing point into Israel, a joint statement from two Palestinian militant groups said.

The statement from Ezzedine al-

The statement from Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of the radical Islamist movement Hamas, and the Abu Rish group, linked to the Fatah faction of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, identified the dead men as Mohammed Suleiman Abush and Said Mahmud Narish, both 20.

Israeli army sources said troops saw two "suspect silhouettes" in a prohibited area approaching the security fence dividing the two territories and opened fire, hitting

The deaths bring to 3,830 the

number of peopled killed since the September 2000 outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, including 2,876 Palestinians and 886

The latest violence followed blunt words from UN chief Annan on the deteriorating conditions for finding a peace settlement.

"The situation on the ground has once again been shaken by a wave of violence," Annan said Friday, criticising Israeli incursions and house demolitions as well as Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians.

"There has been no discernible progress in peace efforts," he said. "The lack of any tangible progress towards a peaceful settlement has raised the level of hopelessness and despair among ordinary Palestin-

Annan hailed Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's announced plans for a unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in the absence of progress in peace talks, despite fears that the move could play into the hands of Palestinian extremists.



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