



PHOTO: AFP
The conservative Popular Party leader Mariano Rajoy votes for general elections yesterday in Madrid, three days after a series of bomb blasts killed 200 people in Madrid.

Spain votes after trauma of train bombings

REUTERS, Madrid

Spain went to polls yesterday with political certainties shattered by deadly train bombings and a purported al-Qaeda claim of responsibility.

Opinion polls up until the last six days of the campaign showed the ruling Popular Party (PP) winning the general election, but nobody knows how the worst guerrilla attacks in Spain's history would affect the outcome.

Two hundred people were killed and nearly 1,500 wounded by 10 simultaneous bombs that exploded on four packed commuter trains in the Thursday morning rush-hour, drawing more than 11 million people onto the streets in protest on Friday.

Voting started with more than 250 people still in hospital, at least a

dozen of them fighting for their lives. Officials ruled out delaying the vote.

Most voters are choosing between the PP's Mariano Rajoy -- the hand-picked candidate of departing Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar -- and Socialist candidate Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, who opposed Aznar on supporting the Iraq war but has backed him in the fight against armed Basque separatists ETA.

Until the tape was found, Spanish authorities had insisted ETA was the prime suspect for the bombings, drawing thousands to protest at Popular Party offices across Spain.

"Your war, our dead!" protesters chanted at the Madrid headquarters, many convinced the bombs were revenge for Spain's support of the war in Iraq even before the purported al-Qaeda claim.

In Madrid, demonstrators took their protest to several monuments throughout the night. In their neighborhoods, people banged on pots and pans in a traditional form of protest.

An editorial cartoon in left-leaning El Pais showed a voter at the polls wondering whether to choose between ETA and al-Qaeda.

"We don't want it to be al-Qaeda, just as the Basques don't want it to be ETA. But what difference does it make, knowing who it was? We're all affected," said Ahmed, a 38-year-old Muslim living in Madrid.

At an after-midnight news conference Interior Minister Angel Acebes said a purported spokesman for al-Qaeda had claimed responsibility in a videotaped statement for the bombings.

Pressure mounts for interim Iraq govt

AFP, Baghdad

Pressure to finalise plans for a caretaker government to run Iraq from July mounted yesterday as a senior White House official visited Baghdad and protests by disgruntled Iraqis continued.

The question of border security was also paramount with an Iraqi delegation on a five-day trip to neighbouring Iran and the US-led coalition rolling out a new plan to secure Iraq's porous edges.

Iraqi politicians and the US-led coalition have three months to agree on the make-up of a new body to lead the country until direct elections by the end of January 2005 -- a thorny issue that has already triggered much dispute.

"That is one of the main things that must be decided before June 30. We have to write an annex to explain how the caretaker govern-

ment will be formed," said Hamid al-Kifaey, a spokesman for the US-picked interim Governing Council.

Talks with the United Nations on how to proceed appear to be on the cards.

"It is always good to consult with the United Nations and we want them to be involved," Kifaey told AFP on Sunday.

But he underlined that despite involving the international community, the question of how Iraq would function once it regains sovereignty from the occupying forces remained "an Iraqi affair."

Senior White House official Robert Blackwill touched down in Baghdad Saturday on a reported mission to help settle political rifts within the 25-member council, which set aside ethnic and religious differences to sign a temporary constitution last Monday but continues to bicker over the content.

DPRK got N-tech from Pak scientist: CIA

PTI, New York

A new US classified intelligence report details for the first time the extent to which Pakistan's Khan Research Laboratories provided North Korea with all the equipment and technology it needed to produce uranium-based nuclear weapons.

The assessment, by the Central Intelligence Agency, confirms the Bush administration's fears about the accelerated nature of North Korea's secret uranium weapons programme, which some intelligence officials believe could produce a weapon as early as sometime next year, the New York Times quoted American and Asian officials as saying.

The report was presented to the White House last week.

The assessment, the paper says, is based in part on Pakistan's accounts of its interrogations of Abdul Qadeer Khan, the developer of Pakistan's bomb, who was pardoned by President Pervez Musharraf in January.

The report concluded that North Korea probably received a package very similar to the kind the Khan network sold to Libya for more than \$ 60 million, including nuclear fuel, centrifuges and one or more warhead designs.

A senior American official described it as "the complete package," from raw uranium hexafluoride to the centrifuges to enrich it into nuclear fuel, all of which could be more easily hidden from weapons inspectors than were North Korea's older facilities to produce plutonium bombs.

Kerry locks up nomination

AFP, Quincy

Democratic Senator John Kerry locked up the delegates needed to secure his party's nomination, US media reported yesterday, a day after Kerry challenged President George W. Bush to a series of debates.

"I'm asking George Bush to agree to a series of monthly debates, starting this spring, to talk about the real issues of our country," Kerry, campaigning Saturday in the midwestern state of Illinois, told about 1,000 supporters.

"Candidates find it easier to exchange insults than to face issues. Six-second sound bites on the evening news and 30-second attack ads all day long dominate the airwaves of a great nation," said Kerry, who has not pulled any punches when criticizing Bush, a Republican.

Early turnout favors Putin in election

REUTERS, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin looked on track to win reelection yesterday, with early turnout reported high enough for a valid vote and his only real threat of voter apathy apparently evaporating in the spring sunshine.

With voting under way across the country's eleven time zones, Russian media reported turnout in the sparsely populated east of the country had hit the 50 percent hurdle needed for the election to be valid. Putin cast his vote in Moscow on Sunday morning. "Voter turnout is a little higher than on December 7, 2003, when the country elected deputies to the State Duma (lower house of parliament)," Interfax news agency quoted Alexander Veshnyakov, head of the Central Election Commission, as saying.

BJP names its first list of polls candidates

Vajpayee govt truly national in character: Advani

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani and former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Kalyan Singh are among the candidates for Lok Sabha announced by BJP in its first list released in New Delhi yesterday.

While Vajpayee would be contesting from Lucknow, Advani from Gandhinagar, Singh would be fielded from Bulandshahr in western UP, party sources said.

The two-day meeting of the BJP Central Election Committee which began in New Delhi, also decided to field all senior ministers, including Ram Naik from Mumbai, the sources said.

However, the meeting after hectic parleys decided not to field Law and Commerce Minister Arun

Jaitley, Agriculture Minister Rajnath Singh, party general secretaries Pramod Mahajan and Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi besides party in-charge for UP Kalraj Mishra, all Rajya Sabha members, the sources added.

Vinay Katiyar will be the BJP candidate from Lakhimpur Kheri Lok Sabha constituency while Satyadev Singh will contest from Shahabad and Veena Pandey from Sultanpur in UP, the sources added.

Meanwhile, asserting that the Vajpayee government is truly national in character, Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani yesterday said it had given representation to all sections of political ideology similar to the 1947-51 ministry of Jawaharlal Nehru.

"The NDA government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee is inclusive

and truly national in character," Advani said.

"At the same time, the NDA is united by a common objective to make India a developed country by 2020," he told a press conference here on the fifth day of his Bharat Uday Yatra which takes him through Karnataka.

Advani sought to allay fears among Muslims about BJP which, he said, had been created by opponents of the party.

Iran rules out quitting nuclear treaty

AFP, Tehran

Iran could revise the level of its cooperation with the international nuclear watchdog but does not envisage pulling out the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said yesterday.

"The method of cooperation could change if the realities are ignored," Asefi told a press conference, while adding, "the question of cooperation is not at issue."

Asefi was speaking after a US-backed resolution by the International Atomic Energy Agency condemning Iran for hiding possibly weapons-related nuclear activities prompted

Tehran to suspend the return of IAEA inspectors scheduled for Saturday.

"We have cooperated with the IAEA and we are still interested in this cooperation because we are clear on our objectives and intentions", he said.

Asefi said remarks Wednesday by Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi indicating that Tehran could break ties with the IAEA had been misinterpreted.

Kharazi had said, "We are engaged in cooperation (with the IAEA), and for this to continue the cooperation has to be bilateral. If one side does not respect its obligations, the cooperation will end."

Iraq war gave boost to terrorism: Blix

AFP, Rome

The US-led war on Iraq has spurred terrorism instead of combatting it as intended, the former UN weapons inspector Hans Blix said in remarks published yesterday.

"The fact is that the war on Iraq, sought by the United States following (the) September 11 (2001 attacks), has not put an end to terrorism in the world," he told Italy's La Stampa newspaper.

"On the contrary, the result of this iron-fisted approach has been to give it a boost."

"It is now clear that terrorism must not be tackled through repression alone, but also through

an understanding of its root causes," Blix told the daily, which is owned by Fiat industries.

"By waging unilateral preemptive war, the United States violated international principles to show its strength to the Islamic world after September 11, and by doing so has weakened the United Nations."

Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction -- the threat which formed the basis for the US decision to invade Iraq -- have yet to materialise despite intensive searches on the ground.

The United States had repeatedly argued that the alleged banned weapons risked finding their way into terrorist hands.

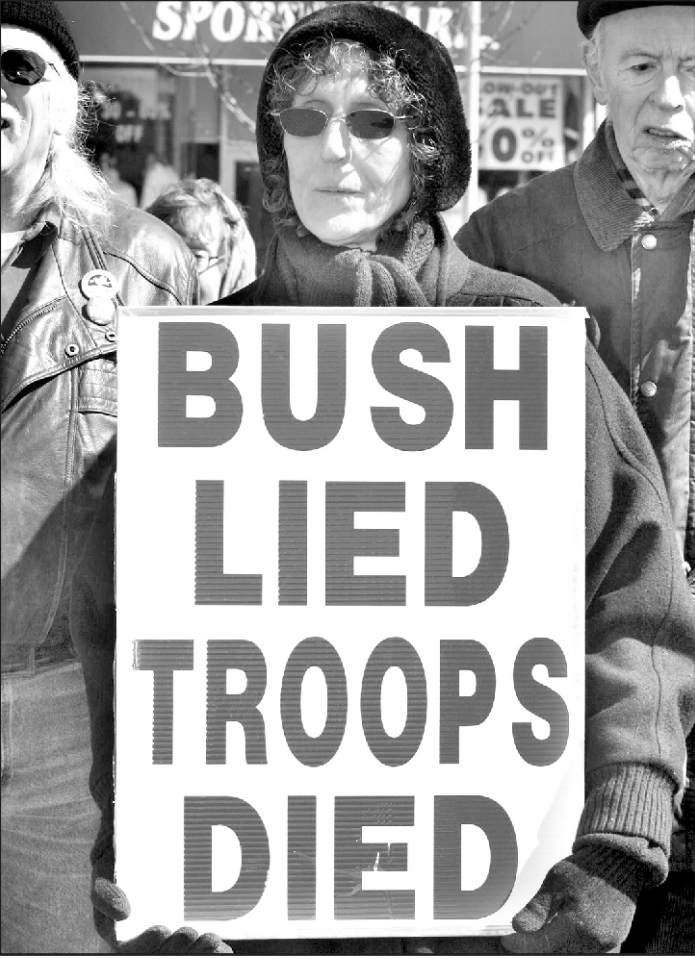


PHOTO: AFP

Anti-war protester Charmaine Guerriero of South Rockwood, Michigan holds a sign stating "Bush Lied Troops Died" during a rally following a silent march on Saturday in Hamtramck, Michigan. The protest was sponsored by the Women In Black, a group that is sympathetic to the Women In Black of Israel and Palestine, and is opposed to the use of violence and terror as a means to political ends.