



Chief Minister of the violence ridden state of Bihar Rabri Devi (C) casts her vote along with one of her daughters (L) at a polling station in the state capital Patna yesterday. Voting got underway in 13 Indian states and three federal territories, signalling the start of the world's largest election involving 670 million voters, 700,000 voting booths and two million poll officials, in a five-phased parliamentary polls, which will be tallied May 13.

US to lift sanctions on Libya this week

AFP, London

The United States will this week lift economic sanctions on Libya, opening the door for US companies to bid for oil contracts, a British newspaper reported yesterday.

Citing US officials and diplomatic sources, the Financial Times business daily said Washington was to announce as early as Wednesday that it would end the sanctions dating from 1986, which have barred US companies from commerce with Libya.

The United States will also remove Libya from the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act, which allowed Washington to penalise foreign oil companies investing in the oil sector in either country, the newspaper added.

However, the United States will not take the final step sought by Tripoli -- its removal from Washington's list of state sponsors of terrorism. That was likely to be delayed until after the US presidential elections in November, an unnamed official told the Financial Times.

KILLING OF HAMAS LEADER

US, Israel under fire at UN

AFP, United Nations

The United States and Israel came under fire at an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council Monday requested by Arab nations furious over Israel's killing of a Palestinian militant leader.

Dozens of countries condemned the assassination of Hamas official Abdelaziz Rantissi on Saturday, which came just three weeks after Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin was killed in another Israeli attack in the Gaza Strip.

Arab nations presented a strongly worded draft resolution all but certain to draw another veto from the United States, which blocked a similar measure in the council after Yassin was killed.

"I think the draft resolution is quite outspoken," said the Security Council president, German ambassador Gunter Pleuger. He said discussions on the draft would begin Tuesday.

Frustration with US policy on

Israel has intensified since President George W. Bush said last week that Israel should be allowed to keep part of the West Bank in any future peace deal with the Palestinians.

"Israel, the occupying power, continues its reign of terror," Nasser al-Kidwa, the Palestinian representative to the United Nations, told the council during a two-hour public session.

He said Israel's claim that targeting militant Palestinian leaders for assassination constituted part of the fight against terrorism was inappropriate and inaccurate.

"It's about Israel's refusal to end this occupation, seeking all the while to acquire more land by force and to eliminate more of the indigenous population," Kidwa said.

Israeli UN ambassador Dan Gillerman said the killing of Rantissi was "not merely a defensive act" but "part of the global struggle against terrorism that has been thrust upon all of us." He called Rantissi "a

trader in death."

After hosting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon last week, Bush backed his plan for a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip which would at the same time allow Israel to keep some West Bank land it captured in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Diplomats said the announcement effectively tried to dismiss long-standing and legally binding UN resolutions calling for an end to the Israeli occupation, and to pre-determine the borders of any future Palestinian state.

"The legal basis for a settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict has been defined" in those resolutions, said Russia's deputy UN ambassador, Gennady Gatilov.

But his US counterpart James Cunningham said the United States has "no intention of prejudicing" the outcome of any future peace talks between the two sides.

They agree, however, that a 'no' result would virtually guarantee the end of Blair's political career.

UK to hold referendum on proposed EU constitution

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair, in the biggest and riskiest policy U-turn of his premiership, announced that Britain will hold a referendum on the proposed European Union constitution.

Speaking yesterday in the House of Commons, Blair said the constitution -- due to be approved in principle by EU leaders in June -- will first be debated in detail by parliament.

"Then let the people have the final say," said Blair, in a total reversal of his previous position that the European Union's first proper constitution need not be put before the British people.

Blair did not say when the referendum would be held, nor what exactly the question might be.

Political analysts suspect it would be held after the next general election, which is expected to take place in the first half of 2005 -- just before Britain's turn at the rotating EU presidency.

They agree, however, that a 'no' result would virtually guarantee the end of Blair's political career.

Indian Elections

Vajpayee faces friend-turned foe in polls

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

It now appears certain that Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's main challenger from his traditional parliamentary constituency of Lucknow will be none other than his friend-turned-political foe and legal luminary Ram Jethmalani.

After initial uncertainty and flip-flop by Jethmalani, he made it clear on Monday that there was no question of withdrawing from fray following an appeal made by Vajpayee last week.

Vajpayee had in a statement urged his former law minister Jethmalani not to contest against him on the ground that given their age it could be the last time both will be actively taking part in an election.

Jethmalani had promptly indicated willingness to reconsider his decision to challenge the Prime Minister prompting Congress, which has declared to back the lawyer as an independent candidate, to rush its own candidate Akhilesh Das, a member of Rajya Sabha, upper house of parliament, for filing nomination from Lucknow.

Polling in Lucknow constituency will be held on April 26 in the third phase of parliamentary elections.

Apart from the presence of Jethmalani, who quit Vajpayee cabinet two years back, the BJP is facing some embarrassment in the Prime Minister's constituency following the saree distribution programme organised on April 12 to mark the birthday of senior BJP leader Lalji Tandon in Lucknow where a stampede left 22 women dead.

Voters struggle with EVMs even in Andhra

Voting machine lures Asamese

PTI, Hyderabad

Andhra Pradesh voters' tryst with technology had its share of hiccups yesterday with Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) developing technical snag at several polling stations across ten districts delaying the polling process.

For the first time in the state, EVMs have been installed at all the 29,622 polling booths in the areas going to polls in the first phase yesterday covering 21 out of 42 Lok Sabha and 147 out of 294 Assembly constituencies in the State.

Reports of EVMs failing to register the votes poured in from Mahaboobnagar, Kurnool, Karimnagar, Ranga Reddy, Nizamabad, Visakhapatnam, Srikakulam, Khammam, Nalgonda and West Godavari, besides some polling booths in the twin cities.

An official of the State Election Department, however, said that special teams of officials, assisted by technicians from Electronic Corporation of India Limited (ECIL), were being rushed to the problem areas to rectify the snag.

"The special zonal officers, each having jurisdiction over about 100 polling stations, have at their disposal a set of additional EVMs to be dispatched to the problem areas. They are also provided with mobile phones to receive complaints from the field," he said.

Meanwhile, the main Opposition Congress expressed doubts over efficacy of EVMs and

had demanded a random check of the machines by representatives of various political parties before the start of the polling process.

On the other hand, curiosity about the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) being used across the state for the first time was a motivating factor for many voters to exercise their franchise in Assam during the first phase of polling in six Lok Sabha constituencies yesterday.

Binita Barua, a housewife whose household chores usually kept her away from voting, this time however ventured out "to see what is an EVM and how will it work to register my vote".

Her views were echoed by many others who came out to cast their ballot on the machine.

Jordan king puts off Bush, Powell talks

REUTERS, Washington

Jordan's King Abdullah postponed a meeting with President Bush scheduled for today, citing concerns about Washington's position on the Middle East peace process, officials said Monday.

The move, announced by US and Jordanian officials, comes less than one week after Bush outraged Palestinians by saying Israel could keep some of the Arab land it captured in the 1967 Middle East war.

Abdullah's meeting with Bush has tentatively been rescheduled for the first week of May, US and Jordanian officials said.

The Jordanian embassy said in a statement that the delay would allow "Jordanian officials to continue the ongoing talks with US administration officials to clarify the US position regarding final status issues, especially in light of recent statements by US officials."

The embassy said Jordan's Foreign Minister, Marwan al-Muasher, was in Washington to

"resume talks with administration officials and to prepare for (Abdullah's) visit in May."

Last week Jordan criticised Washington for backing Israeli plans to keep parts of the occupied West Bank before a final Arab-Israeli peace accord was reached by the parties to the conflict.

Bush, with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at his side, also dismissed the right of Palestinian refugees to return to what is now Israel.

"We understand that, because of developments in the region, the King has decided he would remain in Jordan this week," said Sean McCormack, a spokesman for the White House National Security Council.

Separately, the State Department said Palestinian Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath postponed plans to meet Secretary of State Colin Powell this week. One US official said this also appeared to be because of displeasure at last week's events.



Spanish women soldiers of the international brigade 'Plus Ultra' arrived yesterday at Talavera la Real Air Base in Badajoz, Spain from their mission in Diwaniya, Iraq, where they were posted since last December.

Displaced Iraqis trudge into Falluja after truce

REUTERS, Baghdad

Civilians who had fled battles between US Marines and Sunni insurgents trickled back into Falluja yesterday after a deal to end fighting in the Iraqi city.

Witnesses said a few displaced civilians trudged into Falluja, but Marine checkpoints turned back vehicles.

Thousands of Iraqis had left the city, west of Baghdad, to escape fierce clashes in which hundreds of civilians and dozens of Marines were killed earlier this month.

The returnees were venturing back a day after the US military said it would only resume offensive operations in Falluja if gunmen failed to turn in their heavy weapons.

US forces also gave Iraqi media-tors more time to resolve a standoff with rebel Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his militia in the holy city of Najaf,

south of the capital.

While violence has eased in Iraq in the past two days, US-funded Iraqiya Television said two of its staff were killed by US forces on Monday while working in Samarra, north of Baghdad. The US military had no immediate information.

Cracks have appeared in the US-led coalition as it grapples with guerrilla attacks and a wave of kidnapping only 10 weeks before a planned handover of power to Iraqis.

Spain, whose troops have clashed with Sadr's Mehdi Army this month, said on Monday it had begun withdrawing its 1,400-strong contingent from Iraq. Honduras said it would pull out its 370 troops as soon as possible.

President Bush told new Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero he regretted the move and warned him against giving "false comfort to terrorists."

Bush, seeking re-election in

November, signaled the importance he attaches to Iraq by naming the top US diplomat at the United Nations, John Negroponte, to be his ambassador to Baghdad when administrator Paul Bremer stands down on June 30.

Spanish and Honduran troops are part of a Polish-led multinational division in mainly Shia south-central Iraq.

Four mortar rounds landed before dawn in the Shia shrine city of Kerbala, near the building where Polish troops are stationed, witnesses said. There were no casualties.

In Falluja, residents said there had been no fighting since Monday's US truce announcement. Negotiators had agreed after three days of talks to work for a lasting cease-fire in Falluja, said Dan Senor, the administration's chief spokesman.