

Greek, Turkish Cypriots vote on UN peace plan

AFP, Nicosia

Greek and Turkish Cypriots went to the polls Saturday in separate referenda on a UN plan to reunify their island divided for 30 years before it joins the European Union on May 1.

A total of 623,801 voters -- 480,165 Greek Cypriots and 143,636 Turkish Cypriots -- are registered to vote on the plan drawn up by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to try to end one of the world's most intractable disputes.

However, opinion polls strongly suggest Greek Cypriots in the south will vote against the UN plan for a loose confederation.

If they vote "no," they will deny the Turkish Cypriots in the north -- who are expected to vote overwhelmingly in favour of the peace blueprint -- the right to join the European Union alongside them.

There were 1,077 polling stations operating in the Greek Cypriot side with polls opening at 7:00 am (0400 GMT) and closing at 6:00 pm (1500 GMT), with an hour's break between midday and 1:00 pm (1000 GMT).

The Greek Cypriot parliament has approved an amendment to the law to extend the normal end of voting by one hour so that it is the same on both sides of the UN-manned Green Line. Voting is obligatory in the south.



Rescuers sift through rubbles after a catastrophic explosion at the railway station in Ryongchon, North Korea yesterday. At least 154 people, including 76 students, were killed and more than 1,300 people had been injured in the blast at the railway station in the town of Ryongchon near the Chinese border on April 22.

AID WORKERS SAY

N Korea train station 'obliterated' by blast

AFP, Beijing

Foreign aid workers reaching the site of the North Korean train explosion yesterday reported a scene of utter devastation and confirmed about half of the 154 victims were children.

"The railway station and its vicinity were obliterated," said John Sparrow, the Red Cross' representative in Beijing, after talking to colleagues who visited the scene.

The massive explosion, at Ryongchon train station near the Chinese border, was caused by an accident involving two train carriages packed with dynamite on Thursday.

World Health Organisation aid worker Eigil Sorensen said buildings had been destroyed up to 500 metres (1,700 feet) from the blast site and windows had been blown out over a 10-kilometre (six-mile) radius.

"There was substantial damage, no doubt about it," he said by telephone from Pyongyang. "Within 400 to 500 meters (1,300 to 1,700 feet) from the blast site, we saw buildings either totally destroyed or seriously damaged."

About 300 of the 1,300 injured had been hospitalised, mostly in the nearby city of Sinuiju.

But Sorensen said only five people were still missing, easing fears that hundreds of people may have died.

"All the people are accounted for, except five," he said. "We were told about 150 people had died, 50 per cent of them children."

A three-storey agricultural school was located 100 meters (330 feet) from the blast site, while a primary school, also three storeys high, was 300 meters (1,000 feet) away, he said.

"The primary school had just ended when the explosion happened," he said. "Some children were on their way home, while others were trapped in the building."

The aid workers were invited to assess the devastation after North Korea made a rare appeal for international help.

North Korean officials acknowledged the explosion for the first time on Saturday, saying at least 154 people were killed -- including 76

children -- and 1,300 were injured in the blast.

Jang Song Gun, an official leading rescue efforts, told the Chinese news agency Xinhua that an oil tanker collided with wagons of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, knocking down an electricity pole which triggered the blast.

Xinhua said two huge holes eight meters (26 feet) deep and 10 meters (33 feet) wide punctuated the spot where the blast occurred.

South Korean experts said North Korea went out of its way to admit to the disaster and accept offers of aid, indicating the gravity of the tragedy.

"It seems that the extent of damage must be so great as for the North to reach out to international community for help," Professor Kang Seung-Yoon of the North Korean department of Dongguk University said.

"Pyongyang must also have felt it necessary to calm the rumor that the explosion might be related to some plot to assassinate Kim Jong-Il," he said.

US troops bar civilians from entering Fallujah

Force can't calm Iraq flashpoints: UN envoy

AFP, Fallujah

US marines besieging Fallujah were ordered not to allow residents yesterday who fled the fighting to return to their homes in the Sunni Muslim bastion, a marine officer said.

"These are the orders," said US Marine Lieutenant Joe Cotterino who was manning a checkpoint at an expressway east of Fallujah, located 50km west of Baghdad.

He said that between 50 and 60 families were allowed to enter the city Friday, but on Saturday only Iraqi police and troops of the paramilitary Iraqi Civil Defense Corps were being allowed to do so.

Cotterino gave no explanation for the ban despite a relative calm in

the city which has been under a marine siege since April 5. Sporadic firing has been heard over the past 24 hours.

Few people were present at the checkpoint Saturday as many families decided to leave after being informed of the marines' decision.

Since a deal consolidating an uneasy truce between the marines and insurgents opposed to the US-led occupation of Iraq was announced Monday, the marines had authorized 50 families to return to the city every day, but the return was suspended several times.

At least 50 families returned Tuesday but only about seven on Wednesday.

Reuters adds: With US troops

threatening Sunni insurgents in Falluja and Shia rebels in Najaf, a UN envoy said force could not solve Iraq's problems.

"I think that there is always a better solution than shooting your way into anywhere," Lakhdar Brahimi said of the standoffs in Iraq's flashpoint cities.

A few families who had fled fierce fighting in Falluja earlier this month walked back into the battle-scarred city on Saturday, hours after Iraq's US administrator warned that "major hostilities could resume at short notice."

Paul Bremer said "armed bands" in Falluja must give up their weapons and "submit to national authority" if a shaky cease-fire negotiated with civic leaders was to last.

Vajpayee hopes Pakistan won't let terrorists operate on its soil

AFP, Mumbai

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Friday that he was confident that Pakistan would not allow terrorist groups to operate from its territory.

Vajpayee told an election rally in India's commercial capital Mumbai that the two South Asian neighbours had pledged themselves to warming ties.

"Our neighbour is bound by the promise of friendship that it has with us now and that promise binds it to not supporting terrorism or terrorist groups on its soil," Vajpayee told the meeting.

"This is a decision taken with Islamabad when the friendship initiative started and it is an important decision," he added.

"We have succeeded in friendship with our neighbour and it is not

based on any conditions, neither is it based on any deals. Even our neighbour felt we should be friends which is why the peace process is progressing."

India and Pakistan decided to resume talks after a ground breaking meeting between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf on January 6 in Islamabad on the sidelines of a regional summit.

Following Vajpayee's meeting with Musharraf, senior officials of both sides met in mid-February for talks, which they said would continue in June.

The often-hostile neighbours' possession of nuclear arsenals has made South Asia one of the world's most feared potential nuclear flashpoints.



Former Bollywood star, Poonam Dhillon (L) and former Indian hockey team captain, Dhanraj Pillai (R) along with Hindu hardline party Shiv Sena candidate, Sanjay Nirupam (C) flash a victory sign during a campaign rally held for Nirupam in Mumbai yesterday. Political parties launched aggressive campaign on the last day in the politically-crucial state of Maharashtra which goes to polls tomorrow.

KELLY AFFAIR

Hoon admits errors

AFP, London

British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon admitted in a newspaper interview yesterday that he and his officials were guilty of errors in the way they treated a respected expert on Iraqi weapons who committed suicide.

Hoon told the Daily Telegraph that government scientist David Kelly should have been informed earlier that his name was to be made public in the press.

Kelly, a former UN arms expert, killed himself last July after being named as the source of a hugely

controversial BBC report which accused Prime Minister Tony Blair's government of exaggerating the case for war on Iraq.

The BBC allegation was dismissed by a high-profile inquiry led by senior judge Lord Hutton which reported in January. The probe also cleared Blair's government of serious wrongdoing in Kelly's death.

Hoon told the Telegraph: "I accept with the benefit of hindsight that we should have done more to tell David Kelly about what was happening in the department ... that his name was to be confirmed" to journalists.

Myanmar road-map meet postponed

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

The Myanmar foreign minister's pull-out from next week's second international forum on that country's "road map" for national reconciliation has dealt a setback to the government's Bangkok Process.

"The meeting will be postponed indefinitely," Foreign Ministry spokesman Sihasaak Phuangketkeow said Friday.

Representatives from 16 countries and a United Nations envoy had been scheduled to gather in Bangkok from April 29-30 for the meeting.

"Myanmar has told us that they are currently preoccupied with the preparation of the National Convention which begins on May 17. Burmese Foreign Minister Win Aung will be a key person at the convention and he is therefore unable to come," Sihasaak said.

Kraisak Choonhavan, chairman of the Senate foreign affairs committee, said the Bangkok Process should play a "neutral" role and listen to all sides.

Thai commander gets power to pull out of Iraq in case of emergency

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

The government has given full authority to the chief of non-combatant troops in Iraq to order their evacuation if the security situation gets out of control, Defence Minister Chetta Thanajaro said Friday.

Colonel Montri Umaporn, the commander of the Thai-Iraq Special Force 976, will coordinate with the Polish-led multinational force and could order the troops evacuated immediately in the event of an emergency, Chetta said.

Bangkok Senator Kraisak Choonhavan said that it was wrong for the government to let the chief of the Special Force in Iraq alone make the decision about any evacuation.

"The Prime Minister and security heads should go to Iraq and assess the situation first hand," he said.

Thailand dispatched a contingent of 443 soldiers in September com-

prising medics, surveillance platoons and engineers to provide humanitarian assistance for Iraqis at the request of the US. Their commitment will end in September.

Two Thai soldiers were killed in December in a car explosion in front of the Lima camp in Karbala, 110 kilometres south of Baghdad, where the Thai troops are based.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell telephoned Foreign Minister Surakiart on Tuesday seeking to shore up Thai support for the US-led operation in Iraq, which has received a blow with the recent announcements by Spain, Honduras and the Dominican Republic of troop withdrawals.

Chetta said that if the situation deteriorated so that the Thai troops could no longer perform their humanitarian task they could leave for Kuwait along a prepared route.

Indian Elections

New Gandhi's test tomorrow

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Curtains came down on electioneering in the two most important constituencies - Rae Bareilly and Amethi along with 135 others where elections will be held tomorrow.

Top opposition leader and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi are in the fray from the two constituencies as Rahul is making his electoral debut.

Located next to each other, Amethi and Rae Bareilly are predominantly rural constituencies in the dusty and backward plains of Uttar Pradesh. They have almost always remained the pocket-borough of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.

Following is a study of the profile of the two star constituencies and the candidates in the fray:

Amethi (Number of voters: 1.3 million): When 34-year-old Rahul, accompanied by her Italy-born mother Sonia and sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, filed nominations for this constituency on April 5, he became the member of the fifth generation of Nehru-Gandhi dynasty to take the plunge into politics.

Only the most foolhardy would think that Rahul would lose from a constituency which has never come out of the magic of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Way back in 1977, Rahul's late uncle Sanjay Gandhi, who had made debut in politics in 1973, was defeated from Amethi in 1977 by

Bharatiya Lok Dal's Ravindra Pratap Singh riding a tremendous anti-Congress wave after the emergency.

Three years later, Sanjay avenged his defeat and after his death it was his brother Rajiv who won from here in 1984, 1989 and 1991 defeating Sharad Yadav, at present Indian Food Minister, Sanjay's wife Maneka Gandhi and Mahatma Gandhi's grandson Rajmohan Gandhi.

Rajiv was again elected in 1991 but he did not live to see that as he was assassinated in May that year.

However, in 1998 parliamentary polls, Sharma tasted defeat at the hands of BJP candidate Sanjay Singh, a scion of the area's royal family. Interestingly, Sanjay Singh is now in Congress and so is his wife and former national badminton champion Amita.

The return of Sanjay Singh and Amita to Congress recently has undoubtedly given boost to the party in Amethi.

Rahul's main rival in Amethi is BJP's Ramvilas Vedanti, a local leader of Vishwa Hindu Parishad who is at the forefront of Ram temple movement in Ayodhya. He had threatened to go on fast if he was not given nomination by BJP.

Rae Bareilly (No of voters 1.30 million): Sonia Gandhi chose this constituency, from where Indira Gandhi, her husband Feroze Gandhi had contested, only to accommodate Rahul in Amethi. Feroze Gandhi won from here in 1952 and 1957 elections

before he died in 1960.

Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister and won from Rae Bareilly in 1966. In 1971, riding on her massive popularity immediately after Bangladesh's Liberation War, she once again won from here. But six years later, she lost to socialist leader Raj Narain.

Indira roared back to power and won from Rae Bareilly in 1980 against BJP's late leader Vijayraje Scindia.

The three general elections in 1984, 1989 and 1991 saw Rae Bareilly being represented by Arun Nehru, a close associate of Gandhi family, and relative Sheila Kaul.

However, the seat fell to BJP in 1996 and 1998 polls when its candidate Ashok Singh defeated Rajiv Gandhi's kin Vikram Kaul and Deepa Kaul, son and daughter respectively of Sheila Kaul.

In 1999, Satish Sharma regains the seat for Congress after shifting from Amethi from where Sonia had contested successfully.

Sonia Gandhi's nearest rival in Rae Bareilly this time is Samajwadi Party nominee Ashok Singh who has changed political loyalties a number of times.

While the victory of Sonia is never in doubt, what is worrying Congress is the muscle power allegedly displayed by expelled Congressman and present Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Singh, a relative of Ashok Singh, to help the latter in the poll.



A Nepalese female protester (2L) try to resists arrest by riot policewomen during an anti-monarchy demonstration in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's five main opposition leaders listed the dismissal of Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa as a pre-condition to holding talks with King Gyanendra aimed at ending their anti-monarchy protests.