

Europeans rebuke ruling parties in EU vote upset

AFP, Brussels

Voters across Europe delivered a string of stunning defeats to their governments yesterday in the first elections for a newly-enlarged European parliament marked by record low turnout.

From Prague to London, eurosceptic parties opposed to the entire European project made considerable gains in the first EU-wide polls since the bloc's historic eastwards expansion barely a month ago.

Voters punished governments who supported the US-led war on Iraq and painful economic reforms and in the former communist eastern Europe they showed no sympathy for leaders who had guided them into the EU on May 1.

Turnout was estimated to have slumped to less than 45 percent of the 350 million voters in the bloc's 25 member states -- the lowest since the first elections to the assembly in 1979.

In a bitter disappointment for the EU's executive arm, projections showed barely one-in-four voters in the 10 new states cast their

ballots, a worrying sign that the idealism of the historic enlargement is fast evaporating.

European Parliament head Pat Cox said the eurosceptic surge was a wake up call for pro-EU political leaders across Europe.

"This is especially important as a wake up call for those leaders in those states who propose to hold referendum on the constitutional treaty," he said, referring to a historic blueprint for governing the 25-member bloc which EU leaders want to agree this week.

The world's only pan-national polls climaxed on the fourth and final day Sunday with voting in 19 states after elections over the three previous days in other EU nations.

In Britain, the anti-EU UK Independence Party made a dramatic breakthrough by taking 12 seats, according to partial results, marking its arrival as a serious political force and a new headache for beleaguered Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Combined with the 25 seats won by the opposition Conservatives, Britain is likely to send to Strasbourg a delegation domi-

nated by eurosceptics.

German voters handed Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder's Social Democrats its worst-ever defeat in nationwide polls since its creation after World War II, in a stinging rebuke for his painful reform agenda that the party's own chairman admitted was a "bitter result".

In France, the opposition Socialist party emerged as clear winners over centre-right supporters of President Jacques Chirac, while Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party suffered one of its worst-ever performances with less than 21 percent of the vote.

"It is clear that the European elections are used as a balance-sheet election," said Martin Schulz, head of the German Social Democrats' list competing for his country's 99 seats, the biggest chunk in the parliament.

Spain's new Socialist government was one of the few ruling parties to outscore its rivals, along with Greece's conservatives who repeated their recent general election success over the Socialists.

Militants kidnap 42 people in Tripura
Red alert in Assam tea gardens as Ulfa serves extortion notices

PTI, AFP, Agartala/ Guwahati

Forty-two people, mostly traders, were kidnapped by militants in two separate incidents in Tripura, police said yesterday.

Militants of banned National Liberation Front of Tripura (Biswamohan group) kidnapped 37 people, mostly traders, from Kampui-Bhandarima road in North Tripura district early on Monday morning, they said.

About 30 militants, armed with sophisticated weapons, stopped two trucks and kidnapped the traders, who were going to a market at Kampui, at gun point, police said.

Senior officials rushed to the spot with heavy contingent of police and paramilitary forces to rescue the kidnapped persons.

The kidnapping incident is the second biggest one in Tripura after the 1998's abduction of 48 persons from Longterai valley in Dhalai district.

In a separate incident, five

traders were kidnapped by the militants of outlawed All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) from Kachubari market near the Indo-Bangla border in Khowal sub-division of West Tripura district on Sunday.

Police said a group of armed ATTF militants crossed the border and kidnapped the traders.

The militants managed to sneak into the Bangladesh territory with the kidnapped persons before the BSF personnel reached the scene, police said.

AFP adds: Federal troops are on high alert in tea plantations in India's northeastern state of Assam after separatists served extortion notices on a number of companies, police said in Guwahati yesterday.

A police spokesman said the outlawed National Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) had demanded extortion money from at least 20 medium to big tea companies owning plantations in eastern Assam's Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts.

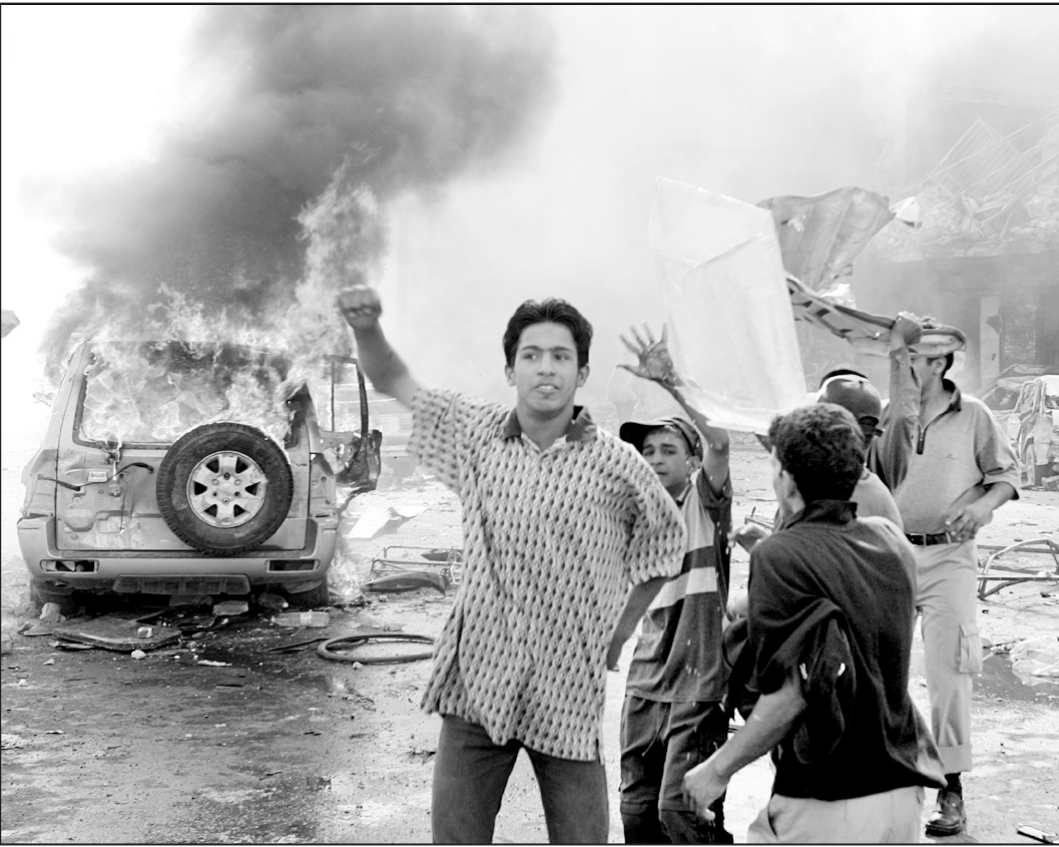


PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi youth cheer and shout slogans close to a burning vehicle they believe belonged to foreigners following a car bomb in a main shopping area of Baghdad yesterday. At least 13 people were killed and 17 others injured when a car bomb exploded as two Western-style all-terrain vehicles passed by in a busy Baghdad street, with the blast knocking part of the front off a building and totally destroying the cars.



PHOTO: AFP

Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) candidate Josep Borrell (C), Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero (R) and Socialist Party speaker Jose Blanco (L) pose at PSOE headquarters after his victory in the European elections in Madrid Sunday.

BJP won't dump Modi, says Venkaiah

PTI, New Delhi

BJP president M Venkaiah Naidu said yesterday that there is no proposal to change leadership in Gujarat.

"There is no proposal to make any change in leadership in Gujarat," Naidu told a press conference in New Delhi after speaking over phone to former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has been critical of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi since last two days and has stated that the post-Godhra violence was one of the major reasons for the party's electoral debacle.

Naidu also announced that the Modi issue would not be discussed in the BJP National Executive meeting in Mumbai on June 23-24, but would review the political situation and prepare a strategy for the coming assembly elections in Maharashtra, Bihar, Jharkhand, Haryana and Arunachal Pradesh.

Speaking to newsmen after a meeting of BJP leaders at his residence, Naidu said Vajpayee had told him that he had not stated that the Gujarat violence was the reason for the party's defeat.

"He and we are of the view that BJP was not defeated because of Gujarat violence."

At the outset he said he had spoken to Vajpayee and told him of the various interpretations being made of his remarks in the last two days in Manali, which have created a controversy. A wrong impression has been created, he told Vajpayee.

"To set at rest any controversy" he said, "I want to make it clear that there is no proposal to change the leadership in Gujarat and there will be no discussions on this issue in the National Executive of the party in Mumbai."

He quoted Vajpayee as saying that the vicious campaign carried out by Congress and pseudo-secular parties who had distributed inflammatory material and CDs had affected BJP to some extent.

OIC conference opens with call for end to ME crisis

AFP, Istanbul

A meeting of foreign ministers from Islamic countries opened here yesterday with a call by the Turkish president for reforms in Muslim countries coupled with a resolution to the Middle East crisis.

Speaking at the start of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Ahmet Necdet Sezer told delegates that unless there was a solution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, a US plan for a "Greater Middle East" would fail.

"We are experiencing a moment when the winds of change are strong... No country can disassociate itself from this atmosphere of change," said Sezer during his opening speech to the conference.

He underlined the need to reinforce human rights, individual liberties, equality between the sexes and religious tolerance.

He also said that it was up to each country to determine the speed of the reforms "which must be realistic."

"But it is clear that we must make progress towards a common identity on the indispensable need for reforms... without sacrificing our traditions and without remaining behind the times," he said.

But without mentioning the US plan for a "Greater Middle East" by name, Sezer said that modernisation plans in Muslim countries in the region will be in vain unless a solution is found to the Middle East crisis.

"The occupation which is continuing in Palestinian territories, the excessive and disproportionate use of force... have lifted the conflict to a higher level," he said.

The "Greater Middle East Initiative" is Washington's project for economic and political reform in the largely autocratic region.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who recently took part in the G8 summit in the United States, also said he had reservations about Washington's plan.

"Change must not be imposed from the outside. Turkey believes that the Muslim world, including Turkey, needs to implement reforms, but at its own pace," he said.

"Differences between each countries must be taken into account... all the differences must be evaluated," he added.

Washington is likely to come in for sharp criticism at the conference for both its unpopular war on Iraq and its staunch support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The handover of power in Iraq was also high on the agenda at the conference attended by ministers from 57 countries and about 2,300 delegates.

The UN envoy for Iraq Lakhdar Brahimi urged Islamic countries to help the transitional government in Baghdad, which is to take power at the end of the month.

Brahimi said it was in the interest of OIC members to help Iraq, and in particular the election process and the organisation of a national conference.

Iran must dispel nuclear doubts 'in months': IAEA

REUTERS, Vienna

Iran is not fully cooperating with UN inspectors and must provide full answers within months on the extent of its nuclear programme, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency said yesterday.

Mohamed ElBaradei said the process of clarifying unresolved issues -- particularly over Iran's uranium enrichment activities -- could not be allowed to drag on for ever.

"It is essential for the integrity and credibility of the inspection process that we are able to bring these issues to a close within the next few months, and provide the international community with the assurances it urgently seeks regarding Iran's nuclear activities," he told the IAEA's board of governors.

The United States has long accused Iran of trying to build a nuclear weapon under cover of a civilian atomic energy program. Tehran denies this, insisting it is

'Sonia enjoys cabinet rank, not file access'

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Sonia Gandhi holds the rank of a cabinet minister to the government of India but does not have any special right to peruse official files or documents that are classified. Like others holding the rank of a cabinet minister, she is not at par with members of the union council of ministers.

This, however, is rejected by the Congress which insists that Sonia being the chairperson of the ruling United Progressive Alliance, which is the "body that would implement the common minimum programme of the government" has every right to call for "reports" from different ministries.

However, a senior Congress leader and MP told The Statesman that at the moment it is difficult to determine what constitutes "official reports" and official documents that are not supposed to be passed on to anyone other than members of the Union Council of Ministers.

Ex-US diplomats urge voters to snub Bush

Lawmakers set to issue report slamming CIA

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

A group of former US officials is urging voters to defeat President Bush in the November election, saying his policies have isolated the United States, a spokesman for the group said on Sunday.

The group of 26 former diplomats and military officials, including appointees of former Republican presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush, plan to issue an open statement on Wednesday criticising Bush's foreign policies.

"We just came to agreement that this administration was really endangering the United States," said William Harrop, a former ambassador to Israel under the previous Bush administration.

The signers are a mix of Democrats and Republicans, Harrop said. They include Jack

Matlock and Arthur Hartman, two former ambassadors to the former Soviet Union during the 1980s.

Also in the group are several other former ambassadors and retired military officials, the group said.

Signers of the statement are concerned that the administration has undermined US leadership in the world and alienated US allies, Harrop said.

As an example, Harrop cited the decision to launch the war in Iraq without sufficient international support.

"Our view is that the President Bush administration has chosen American domination of the world as in our best interest," Harrop said.

"We don't think that's going to work."

Harrop said the group was not

aligned with Bush's Democratic challenger in the November election, Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry. "But we want an alternative and that's the alternative," Harrop said.

AFP adds: US lawmakers said they may move to speed up the release of a US Senate report critical of the CIA's performance on Iraq, and accused the intelligence agency of foot-dragging to slow release of the document.

The 400-page classified report, described by officials as presenting a broad indictment of the Central Intelligence Agency's performance on Iraq was written by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

An unclassified version of the report was to be made public this month, but CIA officials vetting the document reportedly said it may take weeks before they complete their review.

al-Qaeda serious threat in Saudi Arabia: US

AFP, Washington

US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said yesterday that al-Qaeda has become a "serious threat" in Saudi Arabia and reaffirmed that it is a dangerous place for foreigners to stay.

After at least three foreigners were killed in the past week, the US administration is increasingly worried about events in Saudi Arabia, Rice and other top officials have indicated.

President George W Bush's security advisor highlighted the threat from the group led by Osama bin Laden, the Saudi-born militant. She linked al-Qaeda to attacks in Saudi Arabia going back to a suicide car bomb in Riyadh on May 12.

"There is no doubt that this is an area in which al-Qaeda is trying to make a mark. And we've known this for some time," Rice told CNN television.

"We're working very, very well with the Saudi security forces to try and to deal with this al-Qaeda threat. But yes, it is a serious threat."

"The Saudi government is aware that it's a serious threat. We're working very well together through both intelligence and law enforcement channels to try to deal with it."

Rice said the Saudi government has actively cooperated in the fight against terrorism, in intelligence gathering and cutting off financing, since the May 12 attack.

Reuters adds: Secretary of State Colin Powell on Sunday said the killing of foreigners in Saudi Arabia was a direct attack on the Saudi regime, and Washington would do all it could to help the kingdom defeat terrorism.

"Clearly this is a dangerous time for Saudi Arabia and we're working with them ... in every way we can to defeat these terrorists," Powell told NBC's "Meet the Press."

Ex-president Bush makes birthday skydive

AP, COLLEGE STATION, Texas

Former President George H.W. Bush celebrated his 80th birthday with a 13,000-foot parachute jump over his presidential library Sunday, and said he felt the same thrill of prior jumps even though his hopes of skydiving solo were dashed.

He made a tandem jump harnessed to a member of an Army's Golden Knights parachute team after officials decided the wind conditions and low clouds made it too dangerous for the 41st president to jump alone, which he did when he turned 75.

"This was a real thrill for me," said Bush, wearing a black-and-gold jumpsuit. "I felt no fear ... for me to get a chance to jump with the Golden Knights is a dream."



PHOTO: AFP

Former US president George H.W. Bush (C, bottom) performs a tandem parachute jump with Army Golden Knight Sgt. Bryan Schnell Sunday over the Bush Presidential Library in College Station, Texas.