

Iraq delays security law announcement

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's interim government yesterday again postponed an announcement on a security law to curb insurgents but gave no explanation for the latest delay.

Prime Minister Iyad Allawi cancelled a scheduled news conference on the law at short notice and an official at his office said no new time for the announcement had been set.

The government had earlier planned to unveil the measures at a news conference on Saturday, but cancelled it at the last minute.

Since Allawi's government formally regained sovereign powers from the US-led occupation a week ago, senior officials have said it would impose tough security measures, reinstate the death penalty and offer a partial amnesty in a carrot-and-stick strategy to take the sting out of a bloody insurgency.

President Ghazi al-Yawar was quoted as saying the interim government had agreed to bring back a 1960s national safety law, which includes provisions against terrorism and breaches of public order,

but stops short of full-scale emergency law.

Yawar and other officials also pledged to restore capital punishment, suspended during the 14-month US-British occupation. The penalty could apply to Saddam Hussein and 11 of his top lieutenants if they are convicted by a special tribunal.

The 12 men appeared before an Iraqi judge on Thursday to hear they would be charged over the invasion of Kuwait, ethnic cleansing of Kurds, suppression of Kurdish and Shia revolts, and murders of political and religious foes over three decades.

While vowing to punish Baathists with "blood on their hands," criminals and foreign militants pursuing their own anti-American jihad in Iraq, Allawi also spoke of an amnesty for Iraqis who fought the occupation out of nationalism.

Violence has racked Iraq since the US-led invasion to topple Saddam last year. Insurgents have attacked US forces, Iraqi policemen and oil industry targets across the country.

In the latest attacks, a roadside bomb wounded five civilians in the

northern city of Mosul on Monday, police said.

An Iraqi civilian was killed and four were wounded in the southern city of Basra when mortar rounds fired by guerrillas at the main government building hit nearby homes instead.

Iraqi technicians were trying to repair oil pipelines damaged by weekend sabotage attacks that halted crude exports, the mainstay of Iraq's economy, oil officials said.

There was no word on the fate of a Lebanese-born US marine after conflicting statements from kidnappers which first said they had beheaded him and then denied it.

Allawi said his government's first week in office since the handover had been successful.

"We have witnessed a drop in insurgency activities so far. We hope this drop will continue," he told ABC television.

"I am sure that we will win," said Allawi, whose government shares Washington's view that Saddam supporters and foreign Islamic militants are behind guerrilla attacks.

Ex-general frontrunner as Indonesia votes in presidential polls

AFP, Jakarta

Millions of Indonesians across the world's largest archipelago voted yesterday in their first direct presidential election, with ex-general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono confident of winning most votes but not enough to avoid a second-round runoff.

"Three cheers for democracy," enthused a Jakarta post editorial as electors ranging from illiterate tribesmen in Papua province to Javanese rice farmers and Jakarta yuppies seized their historic opportunity.

"God willing, I am confident I can go into the second round," said Yudhoyono, a former security minister who led the fight against terrorism after the Bali bombings and other attacks by al-Qaeda-linked Islamic militants.

A survey last week gave him 43.5 percent support, more than his four rivals combined. He needs more than 50 percent to avoid a runoff between the top two candidates on September 20.

After three years at the head of

the world's largest Muslim-populated nation, incumbent Megawati Sukarnoputri is struggling to make it to the likely runoff.

The survey by the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) gave another ex-general, Wiranto, 14.2 percent support and Megawati 11.7 percent.

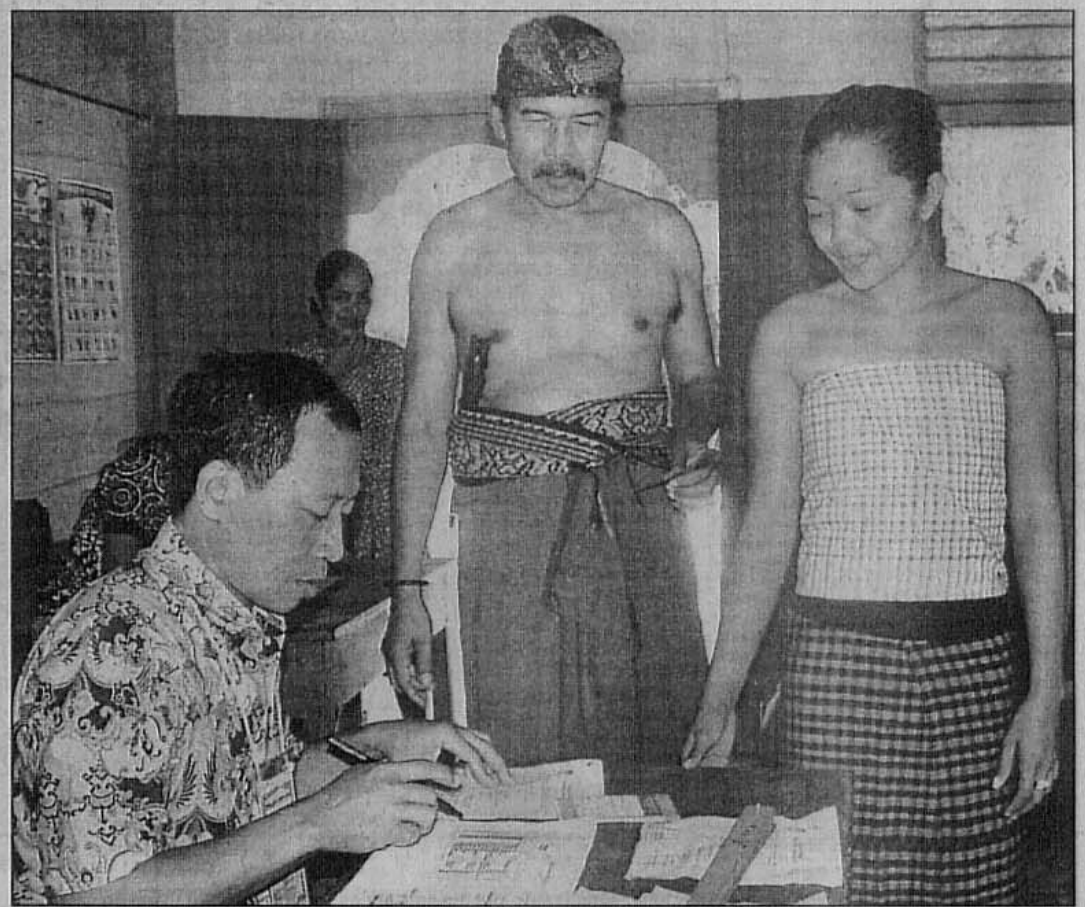
Wiranto predicted that, "God willing," he would make the second round.

National assembly speaker Amien Rais came fourth in the survey with 10.9 percent while current Vice President Hamzah Haz had just 2.4.

Polls closed at 1 pm (0600 GMT). Hank Valentino of IFES, speaking around one hour earlier, estimated turnout in Jakarta at over 80 percent.

Official results are expected over the next two weeks. Results of an unofficial "quick count" were to be released late Monday or Tuesday.

Results from 17 polling stations in Bali and nine in the Jakarta area showed Yudhoyono top at all but one. Rais was performing unexpectedly well in several regions.



An Indonesian couple register with an official before they vote in the country's presidential election in a village in Karang Asem on Bali island yesterday. Millions of Indonesians cast votes across the world's largest archipelago yesterday for the country's first direct presidential election after decades of authoritarian rule.

Pak opposition mulls joint candidate to challenge future PM

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's opposition parties met yesterday to choose a candidate for two by-elections against the man anointed by President Pervez Musharraf as future prime minister.

Cricket hero-turned-politician Imran Khan, fresh from a high-profile divorce from British heiress Jemima Khan, is considering running against ex-Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz, if he can win the backing of other opposition parties.

"His preference would be as a joint opposition candidate," Imran's spokesman Akbar Babar told AFP. "There's no final decision yet. We are having meetings today, he's also in touch with other opposition parties, so it's still open."

The main opposition parties, exiled ex-premier Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif were meeting in the eastern city of Lahore.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Indian film actress Jaya Bachchan gestures as she arrives at Parliament House to take oath as a member of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) in New Delhi yesterday. The budget session of India's new parliament opened but was immediately adjourned as angry opposition MPs demanded the left-leaning government fire ministers facing criminal charges.

Ill-health dogs Milosevic's trial again

AFP, The Hague

The war crimes trial of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was delayed against yesterday on the day he was to launch his defence, after judges said the hearings had to be reviewed due to his failing health.

"The time has come for a radical review of the trial process ... in light of the health of the accused," presiding judge Patrick Robinson said before adjourning the hearing which has already dragged on for over two years.

Milosevic had been due Monday to launch his defence to more than 60 charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and a single charge of genocide arising out of the bloody Balkan conflicts in the 1990s.

But a doctor's report read out by Robinson said the former Serbian strongman, 62, was at risk due to his medical condition.

"It is absolutely essential that Milosevic rests," the judge said, quoting from the report.

Israeli helicopters strike Gaza targets Talks on pullout go on in Cairo

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli helicopter gunships staged late night air strikes against targets in the Gaza Strip amid high-level talks with Egypt about the pullout from the Palestinian territory next year.

Palestinian medical sources said Monday that three Palestinians had been wounded by shrapnel in the air raids and a 28-year-old man shot dead by Israeli troops overnight in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip.

The first strike targeted a metal workshop in the northern part of Gaza City, while the second missile hit another workshop in the south-eastern Zeitun district, they said.

A third missile was fired at a workshop in the Nuseirat refugee camp south of Gaza City.

It was the second time within

several weeks that the workshops in Zeitun and Nuseirat had been targeted.

A spokesman for the Israeli army said the air force had targeted weapons workshops in Zeitun and in the Jabalya refugee camp just north of the city, but he had no information about the strike on Nuseirat camp.

Meanwhile, Israel's attorney general called on rabbis Monday to temper their vocal opposition to the uprooting of settlers over fears that they are inciting violence.

"The rabbis and representatives of all tendencies must act with prudence and moderate their words which are in danger of misinterpretation and exacerbating tensions," Menachem Mazuz said, according to a justice ministry statement.

Maoist rebels kill 12 policemen in Nepal Communists formally join govt

AFP, Kathmandu

Twelve policemen and a civilian were killed when a police vehicle tripped a landmine planted by Maoist rebels in southern Nepal early yesterday, police said.

The ambush took place in Birgunj district near Bindhibasini village, south of Kathmandu, when police mounted an operation to rescue a businessman kidnapped for ransom by the rebels last week, a police spokesman said.

"The incident occurred when the police van tripped the ambush (landmine) set up by the rebels," home ministry spokesman Gopendra Bahadur Pandey told AFP.

"A hectic search has been launched to locate the rebels involved in the incident," he added. Police superintendent Madan

Khadka told reporters the policemen were killed before they could take any action against the rebels.

In another incident, two Maoists were killed in a clash with the security forces Sunday night at Rupendahi, southwest of Kathmandu, police said, without giving details.

Meanwhile, Nepal's communists Sunday formally joined the government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba after last week agreeing to a common agenda to seek peace with Maoist rebels and fully restore democracy.

The Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) said in a statement it had submitted a list to Deuba of 10 members, headed by politburo member Bharat Mohan Adhikari, for nomination to his government.



PHOTO: AFP

A US soldier stands in front of a small group of Iraqi men protesting for jobs close to the new American Embassy in Baghdad yesterday. Thousands of Iraqi men of all ages found themselves jobless after the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority disbanded all Iraqi Armed Forces after the war. The Coalition has estimated the unemployment rate in Iraq to range between twenty to twenty five percent while the United Nations has rated it to be close to fifty percent.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian dissident Hashem Aghajari (L) is led by an Iranian security guard into Tehran's court for his last hearing as his wife Zahra Behnudi watches. After nearly two years locked away from public view, the Tehran University history professor, who lost his leg during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), appeared weak while defending himself in the public hearing allowed by the headline judiciary yesterday. He complained of being held for months in solitary confinement with the shadow of execution hanging over him.

China, India become focus of AIDS battle

AFP, Hong Kong

Three Asian countries that are alone home to 40 percent of humanity are at risk of seeing the HIV/AIDS epidemic jumping from narrow risk groups into the broader population, experts warn.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) have warned that India, China and Indonesia are in danger of seeing serious HIV outbreaks among their more than 2.5 billion people.

The warning will be among the issues to be discussed when some 20,000 top researchers, policymakers and activists gather in Bangkok this week.

They will be taking part in one of the biggest conferences in the 23-year history of AIDS, to assess the pandemic that is poised to ravage Eastern Europe as well as Asia's

most populous countries.

"There are increasing warning signals that serious HIV outbreaks threaten in several countries (in Asia)," the two UN agencies said in their annual report, "AIDS Epidemic Update", released in November.

"Injecting drug use and sex work are so pervasive in some areas that even countries with currently low infection levels could see epidemics surge suddenly," the report said.

HIV prevalence in the region remains under one percent of the adult population, which may seem small compared to the AIDS-ravaged countries of southern Africa, where more than a quarter of adults aged 15-49 have the virus.

"That figure... can be deceptive," the report said. "Several countries in the (Asian) region are so large and populous that national aggregations can obscure serious epidemics in some provinces and states."

Vajpayee moves to new home

THE STATESMAN/ ANIN, New Delhi

After spending nearly six years at 7, Race Course Road, former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee moved to his new residence at 6-A Krishna Menon Marg Sunday.

Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, however, did not move to 7, Race Course Road immediately as expected. The Central Public Works Department will carry out renovations after consulting Dr Singh and his family.

Vajpayee moved to the new residence soon after returning from his two-day visit to his parliamentary constituency, Lucknow. His belongings and other paraphernalia were shifted from 7 RCR, late last evening. Eight trucks were hired to shift his belongings, which include a large collection of books.

Delhi Police has already put in place elaborate security arrangements. Five PCR vans and commandos have been deployed on Krishna Menon Marg.

BUSH'S INDEPENDENCE DAY MESSAGE

US spirit of freedom can change world

REUTERS, Charleston

President Bush, buffeted by slumping approval ratings over Iraq, visited the campaign battleground of West Virginia Sunday to deliver an Independence Day message brimming with confidence and optimism about the US role on the world stage.

Speaking from the steps of the West Virginia state capitol, the Republican president told hundreds of cheering, flag-waving supporters that the spirit of freedom wrought by America's declaration of independence from Britain on July 4, 1776, could transform troubled places -- including Iraq and Afghanistan.

"We still believe, on America's 228th birthday, that freedom has the

power to change the world," Bush said in remarks laced with references to God and the courageous character of the US military.

"We are proud of our founders, but I know that the founders would be proud of America today," Bush said. "They would see a nation that is the world's foremost champion of liberty. They would see a nation which stands strong in the face of violent men."

Bush's Fourth of July appearance followed a momentous week in Iraq, where US authorities handed over power to an interim government and former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein made a defiant court appearance that was televised worldwide.