

Iraqi nat'l conference off to a rocky start

100 delegates walk out protesting Najaf fighting

AFP, Baghdad

A national conference, heralded as a first experiment in Iraqi democracy for decades, got off to a rocky start yesterday when more than 100 delegates walked out to protest against fighting in the holy city of Najaf.

Dozens of people leapt out of their seats as soon as UN special envoy to Iraq Ashraf Jahan Qazi finished his opening speech, shouting "as long as there are airstrikes and shelling we can't have a conference".

Yahya Mussawi, from a grouping of political and religious Shia Iraqis that worked to defuse a spring uprising by militia leader Moqtada Sadr, jumped on to the podium before he was forced down by chief organiser Fuad Maasum.

"Part of democracy is that you listen to the Iraqi people. It is time that you

heard us and we ask that military operations stop in Najaf immediately and dialogue takes place," he shouted.

"Listen to us, prime minister, listen to us," said the protesters, as Maasum announced that there would be a 30-minute break in the proceedings.

The protesters threatened to withdraw from the conference unless military operations in Najaf were not halted immediately.

Gunfire resumed almost simultaneously in Najaf, one day after the government said its offensive against Sadr's Mehdi Army would continue in the wake of failed peace talks.

Delegates also demanded that a national council, which the conference delegates are due to appoint, be allowed to impeach members of the interim government if it is felt they do not serve the interests of the Iraqi people.

They also demanded that groups excluded from the event, among them Sadr's camp, be included.

The conference is scheduled to first hold working sessions to discuss the transition process, human rights, reconstruction and the issue of justice for those who suffered under Saddam Hussein's former dictatorship.

On the last day, delegates will select 81 members of the national council to advise the government as it paves the way for national elections scheduled for January 2005.

The other 19 seats have already been allocated to members of the defunct interim Governing Council that served between Saddam's fall and the creation of the caretaker government in early June.

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Some Republicans drop Bush allegiance to vote for Kerry

AFP, Medford

They are unhappy with the state of the US economy and they disagree with President George W. Bush's handling of the war on terror.

They might sound like members of the White House contender John Kerry's Democratic Party, but these Bush detractors are actually Republicans unhappy with the president who have been spotted at several pro-Kerry rallies.

As Kerry traveled through the US heartland to court undecided voters in the last two weeks, several Republicans disappointed with the Bush administration attended the Democrat's campaign events.

In Las Vegas, Nevada, Marcia Forkos had an embrace from Kerry after voicing her support for his candidacy.

"As a registered Republican, I work very hard to see that you are elected," Forkos told Kerry.

"This administration is polarizing this country. There have been too many secrets," she said, calling Kerry an "honest person" who can "bring us together."

In Colorado, Frank and Dixie Pfeiff drove 150 kilometers (93 miles) to greet Kerry as he arrived by train in the mountain state's town of Lamar.

"We're Republicans, but we could be swayed," said Frank Pfeiff, a truck driver. Bush, he said, is mishandling the war in Iraq.

"I like what I see so far," he said of Kerry, noting that, like him, the candidate served in the Vietnam war.

Kerry has dismissed Republican attacks accusing him of being a liberal, which in the United States is used to describe leftists and can spell political trouble for presidential candidates.



PHOTO: AFP
Plane owners survey damage to an aircraft that was overturned and destroyed on the Charlotte County Airport after Hurricane Charley struck southwest and central Florida Saturday in Punta Gorda, Florida. Officials in Florida said at least 15 people were killed and many more were unaccounted for after Hurricane Charley left a path of destruction across Florida then continued north and struck the Carolinas.

'India to expedite talks with Pakistan'

AFP, New Delhi

India is committed to resolving its long-standing dispute with nuclear rival Pakistan through dialogue, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said yesterday, also pledging to step up the fight against terrorism.

In his first Independence Day address since being elected in May, Singh said the peace talks that began last year between India and Pakistan, which were split in 1947 when they became independent from Britain, should be based on trust.

"We want a solution to all our disputes with Pakistan through dialogue and the ongoing talks will be pursued with determination and honesty," Singh said.

"We must stand on the twin pillars of mutual trust and confidence. But of course, cross-border terrorism and violence make our task more difficult and complex," he said.

"Terrorism is a major threat and we will unitedly combat this. Let there be no doubt on this score because violence

cannot lead to development and progress," he said.

The nuclear-armed neighbours have fought three wars since 1947, two of them over the disputed region of Kashmir.

India has accused Pakistan of backing Islamic militants fighting its forces in the Indian section of Kashmir despite the peace process under way there.

Pakistan denies the allegations, saying it only offers moral and diplomatic support to what it calls the Kashmiris' struggle for self-expression.

Singh, 72, added that the government was willing to hold dialogue with any of the several rebel groups around the country, many of which are behind the 15-year insurgency in Kashmir, that renounced violence.

"But if any group shuns the path of violence and wants to talk, we are ready to hold talks with them," he said.

The five-day forecast issued by the US National Hurricane Centre put Earl on a path similar to Charley's, with the storm approaching the Gulf of Mexico by Thursday. But forecasters cautioned it was too soon to predict where it would

Another hurricane, storm gather strength in Atlantic

Florida counts the cost as rescuers search for victims

REUTERS, AP, Miami/Punta Gorda

While Florida tallied the devastation from Hurricane Charley, another hurricane and a tropical storm gathered strength in the Atlantic Ocean Saturday.

Hurricane Danielle formed way out in the Atlantic, with 75 mph (120 kph) winds, and was around 375 miles west of the Cape Verde Islands by 11 p.m. EDT (0300 GMT). It was not expected to take a course that would bring it near land.

Tropical Storm Earl, meanwhile, took aim at the Windward Islands and was expected to grow into a hurricane as it spun across the Caribbean Sea toward western Cuba and the Gulf of Mexico.

The five-day forecast issued by the US National Hurricane Centre put Earl on a path similar to Charley's, with the storm approaching the Gulf of Mexico by Thursday. But forecasters cautioned it was too soon to predict where it would

go from there.

"The projections out that far can have large errors," said hurricane center meteorologist Dan Brown.

Tropical storm warnings were posted Saturday for the Caribbean islands of Barbados, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada and St. Lucia, alerting residents to expect storm conditions within 24 hours and prepare for up to 5 inches (13 cm) of rain.

"Our worst fears have come true," said Gov. Jeb Bush, who surveyed the devastation by helicopter. The Category 4 storm was expected to cost Florida "at least several billion dollars," said Loretta Winters, spokeswoman for the Insurance Information Institute.

State officials confirmed 13 deaths based on reports from medical examiners. The hardest-hit areas appeared to be Punta Gorda and Port Charlotte in Charlotte County.

As a weakened Charley churned up the East Coast and was downgraded to a tropical storm, newly sunny skies revealed its destruction in Florida, where



Kashmiri Muslim college girls perform a local dance during celebrations for India's 57th anniversary of independence, inside a heavily guarded Bakshi stadium, in Srinagar yesterday. 22 people, mostly school children, were killed in bomb blasts in Assam while another 15 were wounded when militants fired a grenade at the I-Day celebration programme in Kashmir.

Maldives detains hundreds of pro-democracy activists

AFP, Male

Hundreds of people were rounded up in the Maldives, South Asia's most expensive resort paradise, after President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom imposed a state of emergency following protests against his rule, dissidents said yesterday.

State radio said the National Security Service (NSS) and police had arrested 185 people after protests Friday against Gayoom, Asia's longest-serving leader.

But the Moldavian Democratic Party (MDP), which is campaigning for a multi-party democracy in the tiny, one-party Indian Ocean atoll nation, said hundreds more were detained Sunday.

"Our activists are in hiding," MDP spokesman in Colombo, Mohamed Latheef, told AFP. "Security personnel are going from house to house and pulling out suspected dissidents and beating them up in public."

The MDP called on the international community to take action to prevent the country of 270,000 Sunni Muslims from slipping into chaos after a state of emergency was imposed Saturday.

Palestinians stage mass hunger strike in Israeli jails

AFP, Jerusalem

Thousands of Palestinian prisoners were staging a hunger strike yesterday in protest at their conditions in Israeli jails as militants threatened to kidnap Israeli troops to secure the release of inmates.

Prison Service spokesman Ian Domitz said that more than half of the 3,800 Palestinians being held inside Israel had refused breakfast while a similar proportion of inmates in military-run detention facilities inside the West Bank were also thought to be refusing their meals.

A total of some 8,000 Palestinians are currently being held in Israeli prisons.

"We have 1,464 prisoners who have refused their first meal of the day," Domitz told AFP.

The spokesman said that the protest would not be officially classified as a hunger strike until after 48 hours but disciplinary measures had already been taken as any declaration of a fast was deemed contrary to regulations.



A militiaman loyal to radical Shia Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr stands under an Iraqi flag and a picture of his leader and of Imam Hussein (RA), one of the most revered figures of Shia Muslims, in the holy city of Najaf yesterday. Gunfire boomed across the city, one day after the interim government said its offensive against Shia militiamen would continue after negotiations to end the fighting failed.