

One-fourth in US think ill of Muslims: Poll

AFP, Washington

One in four Americans have a negative image of Muslims, according to a poll released Monday by a US Muslim group.

"This is an outrageous number, the number of people who (have) these thoughts or stereotypes or misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims in this country," said Omar Ahmad, chairman of the Council on American Islam Relations (CAIR).

Twenty-six percent of respondents said Muslim taught violence and hatred and 27 percent said Muslims valued human life less than other people, according to the poll for CAIR by Genesis Research.

Two-thirds of Americans had a neutral view of Muslims, and one-half of Americans hold one or more positive views of Muslims when asked about "family values" and Muslim "contributions to civilization."

"We know that there is hate speech on the rise against Muslims and Islam in the society, especially after 9/11, but we did not know it was that deep," CAIR executive director Nihad Awad said.

Israel, Palestinians seek deal to end fighting

UN set to vote on Gaza resolution

REUTERS, AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the Palestinian Authority are trying to work out a deal to end the army's Gaza offensive in return for stopping militants firing rockets into the Jewish state, Israeli security sources said yesterday.

Security officials on both sides have begun initial contacts expected to accelerate in coming days, the sources said.

The new bid to halt the fighting comes after Secretary of State Colin Powell said Washington hoped Israeli would quickly end its massive military campaign in the northern Gaza Strip without expanding the operation. The sources said the aim of the discussions is for the army to pull back its forces while the Palestinian Authority takes steps to stop Hamas rocket fire that triggered Israel's biggest offensive in the territory in four years of conflict.

A senior security source said Israeli officials remained skeptical of the ability and willingness of Palestinian security services to confront Hamas militants. "Their record in this area is not good," the source said.

Israel launched its Gaza campaign after a Hamas rocket attack killed two Israeli toddlers in a border town on Wednesday. Since then, 67 Palestinians and three Israelis have been killed in and around northern Gaza.

Official contacts between the two sides to end the fighting appears to go against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's strategy of avoiding talks with Palestinian Authority officials and taking a go-it-alone approach.

Palestinian cabinet minister Saeb Erekat said: "I have no knowledge of such contacts but the position of the Palestinian Authority has been consistent in calling upon Israel to resume peace negotiations immediately and speak to the Palestinian Authority instead of destroying it."

But US Secretary of State Colin Powell said he hoped that Israel's offensive in the northern Gaza Strip, one of the deadliest operations against Palestinians since the start of the Intifada four years ago, would end soon.

Powell repeated the US position that Israel had a right to defend itself, but called on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to use a proportionate response to Palestinian rocket attacks.

India, South Korea sign extradition treaty

AFP, New Delhi

India and South Korea yesterday signed two agreements to bolster relations after talks between visiting President Roh Moo-Hyun and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The accords -- an extradition treaty and another on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters -- were signed by Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and his South Korean counterpart Ban Ki-Moon.

The extradition pact "would work as a deterrent for criminals and help reduce criminal activities with international ramifications", an Indian government statement said.

Roh, on a three-day visit to India, and premier Singh had earlier met for private talks before being joined by their delegations.

Roh, who arrived in New Delhi on Monday, began his engagements with a ceremonial welcome Tuesday at the presidential palace attended by President Abdul Kalam, premier Singh and his cabinet colleagues.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) shake hands with South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun (2-R) as Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (C) looks on during a welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace in New Delhi yesterday. President Roh Moo-Hyun is in India for a two-day visit to sign a series of accords and treaties.

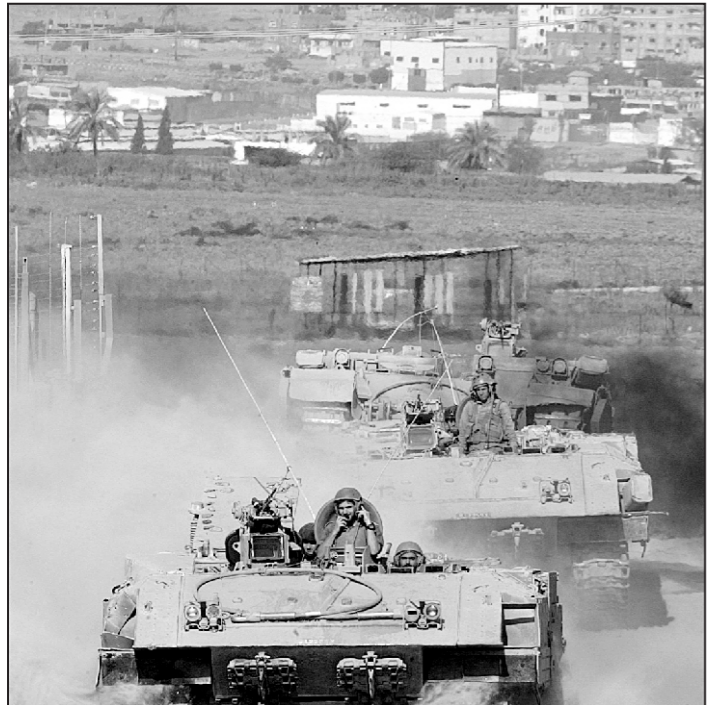


PHOTO: AFP
Israeli Armored Personnel Carriers (APC) convoy returns to Kibbutz Mefalim yesterday after a night of fighting at the Jabalia refugee camp (background) in the northern Gaza strip.

Tigers reject Lanka's latest peace initiative

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday rejected Sri Lanka's latest peace initiative as a "time wasting tactic" as Norway warned the insurgents to stop killing political opponents.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the National Advisory Council for Peace and Reconciliation, launched by President Chandrika Kumaratunga on Monday to try to broaden the peace process, did not address their demands.

Tiger political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan told the BBC's Tamil-language service that many committees had been formed by successive governments but none had tackled their demands.

Thamilselvan, speaking from Geneva, described the council as a "time-wasting tactic" and said stalled peace negotiations could resume on the basis of the

LTTE's proposal for an "Interim Self-Governing Authority," or self-rule.

"There is also a widespread campaign against us saying we are creating hurdles for the revival of the peace process, which is totally untrue," Thamilselvan said.

Peace broker Norway urged the Tigers to stop killing their rivals and warned that the spate of attacks undermined a fragile truce arranged by Oslo and put in place since February 2002.

Norway's deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen expressed "growing concern" over political assassinations blamed on the LTTE, the Norwegian embassy said in a statement.

Helgesen, a key figure in brokering peace on the island, conveyed Oslo's concerns to Thamilselvan who is leading a Tiger delegation to Europe to drum up support for the self-rule plan.

Iran says it now has missile with 2,000 km range

AFP, Tehran

Iran now has ballistic missiles with a range of 2,000 kilometres (1,240 miles), powerful former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was quoted as saying yesterday by the state news agency Ima.

"Today, we have the power to send our missiles up to 2,000 kilometres, and experts know that once a country has made such a step, all further steps are accessible," Rafsanjani said at a conference on "Space and National Security".

Steady progress made by Iran's ballistic missile programme is a source of concern to the international community, adding to worries about the country's nuclear activities, which Tehran insists are peaceful.

On August 11, Iran tested an upgraded version of its Shahab-3 missile. Previous figures had put the missile's range at between 1,300 and 1,700 kilometres, already bringing arch-enemy Israel well within range.

Rebels offer talks to Delhi as strike cripples northeast

AFP, Guwahati

Rebels blamed for a fresh wave of violence in India's restive northeast offered yesterday to hold talks with New Delhi, as a general strike to protest the bloodletting brought the region to a shuddering halt.

"We are ready to hold talks with New Delhi and shall soon convey our decision with respect to the Assam chief minister's truce offer within a few days," the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) said in a statement.

The outlawed NDFB, founded in October 1986 to fight for an independent homeland for the Bodo tribe in Assam, claimed responsibility for killing 14 shoppers in western Assam Saturday, when a string of bomb blasts and gunfire left 50 people dead in Assam and neighbouring Nagaland states.

Another 19 people, mostly civilians but including three militants

blown up by their own bomb, died in further attacks in the two states Sunday and Monday, prompting the Indian government to deploy extra troops in the insurgency-hit region.

"We have asked our cadres to prepare themselves for a dialogue to secure our goal of freedom either through peaceful and democratic means or through prolonged fight with India," the rebel statement said.

Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi Thursday offered a ceasefire with the NDFB and another rebel army, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), asking the two outfits to respond to the truce offer by October 15.

"We welcome the NDFB's offer for talks. If they are sincere we have no problems, but they should refrain from creating any violence," the chief minister said in his response Tuesday.

The ULFA has rejected the ceasefire offer saying it had triggered

at least five bomb explosions in Assam over the weekend.

"The explosions are an answer to chief minister Tarun Gogoi's offer for a ceasefire," ULFA commander-in-chief Pargash Baruah told local newspapers Monday.

Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil Monday said New Delhi was open to talks with rebel groups "although we are committed to taking very strong measures to deal with the spurt in violence".

"Let the militant groups come and talk to us, we are prepared to discuss all issues," he said.

Meanwhile, police officials in the seven northeastern states -- Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura and Manipur -- said shops, businesses and educational institutions were closed due to the strike, while there was no traffic on the roads.

3 Iraqis die in attack on US convoy

3 headless bodies found, 4 others killed in drive-by shooting

AFP, Mosul

Three Iraqis were killed and three wounded yesterday after a car bomb attack on a US military convoy in the main northern city of Mosul as police said they found three headless bodies of Iraqis.

The attack on the US military convoy occurred at about 12:45 pm (0945 GMT) near a roundabout in the southern Yarmuk district of the city, police said.

The US military confirmed the attack without providing details or saying if there were casualties.

But police First Lieutenant Talal Abdullah said three Iraqis travelling behind the military convoy were killed in the attack while three other bystanders were wounded in the ensuing gunfire by US troops.

An AFP correspondent at the scene saw three badly burnt bodies inside the damaged vehicle, while doctors at the Medical City Hospital confirmed receiving three people suffering from gunshot wounds.

Separately, police in the city said they discovered three headless bodies of Iraqis over the past 72 hours.

Two of the corpses were found

yesterday abandoned in a cemetery and covered with blankets, while the third one was found Sunday in a plastic bag at the city's My Fair Lady roundabout, said Major Iyad Qassim.

"We have already identified two of the bodies and they were handed over to their families," he said.

Earlier four Iraqis were killed Monday in a drive-by shooting attack in the lawless town of Latifiyah, south of Baghdad, police said yesterday.

"The attackers were in plain clothes and masked. They opened fire on the car with Kalashnikovs," said Raed Maamuri, a police officer from the nearby city of Hilla.

"All the victims are Iraqis and their bodies have been taken to Latifiyah hospital," he said without elaborating on their identities.

One US soldier was killed and two others injured when a roadside bomb targeted their convoy as it was driving near Baghdad overnight, the military said in a statement yesterday.

"One... soldier is dead and two are injured as the result of an improvised explosive device attack on their convoy near Baghdad around 11:30 pm (2030 GMT) October 4," the army statement said.

CBI to probe Tehelka tapes

THE STATESMAN/ANN, New Delhi

The UPA government today scrapped the three-year-old Phukan Commission probing the Tehelka expose into alleged corruption in defence deals and asked the CBI to take over investigation into the tapes.

"The Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA) has decided not to extend the term of the commission headed by Justice SN Phukan," law minister HR Bhardwaj told a press conference.

Defending the government move, he said that the "contents of the tapes are such that only investigations can reveal the truth. The commission did not enjoy any investigative powers to probe the corruption charges. It only enjoyed certain quasi-judicial powers".

"The government will hand over evidence, including the tapes available with the commission, to the CBI. The CBI will investigate the matter and decide whether a case exists against anybody or not. It will report to the government which will act on it."

Though "no time limit" has been set, the government would like the investigating agency to deal with it "speedily".

"The CBI will decide its own course. It will also go in for a forensic examination of the tapes though the commission has certified them as genuine," he said.

US states race to register voters

BBC ONLINE

US election officials in four swing states are reporting record numbers of new voters for next month's presidential election.

Monday was the deadline for voter registration in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan and Florida, and extra staff have been used to process applications.

Twelve other states also have a deadline on Monday. Others fall closer to election day itself.

The two candidates are running neck and neck and urging supporters to turn out.

In the largest marginal state, Florida, registration is said to be up 20 percent.

In Ohio - which polls suggest is one of the closest states - nearly 250,000 people have signed up.

The BBC's Daniela Relph in Washington says that although registration campaigns generally begin a few months before an election, this time round they were up and running more than a year ago.

Independent groups have run high-profile projects stressing the importance of registering.

Both the Republican and Democratic Parties have organised vote drives in areas where they expect most support.

However, our correspondent adds, election history shows that high registration does not always translate into high turnout.



PHOTO: AFP
Afghan supporters of leading presidential candidate Yunus Qanooni climb a lamppost to watch him deliver a speech at an election rally at Kabul stadium yesterday. Qanooni, the man considered to be Afghan President Hamid Karzai's only serious challenger among a total of 18 presidential candidates, addressed a rally ahead of the October 9 presidential election.