

Karzai takes early lead in vote count

AP, Kabul

Interim leader Hamid Karzai took an early lead as vote counting began in Afghanistan's landmark presidential election, after allegations of ballot-box stuffing, voter intimidation and multiple voting forced five days of delay.

The tally was halted Friday so the 1,000 Afghans on the counting staff could have the day off to celebrate the start of Ramadan, the Islamic fasting month. Counting was to resume in all eight regional counting centers today.

Final results are not due until the end of the month. Still, the first official returns gave encouragement to Karzai.

Of 35,986 valid votes counted in six northern and central provinces, the U.S.-backed incumbent won 20,213, or 56.2 percent of the total, according to the official election Web site.

Former Education Minister Yunus Qanooni, who was expected to be Karzai's closest challenger, was running at 17.2 percent, ahead of ethnic Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum with 15 percent. There were 16 candidates in all.

Turnout in the historic Oct. 9 election was about 75 percent, a senior official estimated, a figure underlining Afghan enthusiasm for democracy.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli border policemen arrest a Palestinian man who was trying to cross from the West Bank town of Bethlehem to Jerusalem to pray at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem yesterday on the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Three more Palestinians were killed yesterday even as Israel scaled down its massive offensive in northern Gaza and deployed hundreds of police reinforcements in Jerusalem for fear of violence there at the start of Ramadan.

Israel winds down long Gaza offensive

3 more Palestinians killed in airstrikes

AP, AFP, Jebaliya Refugee Camp

Israel scaled back its 17-day offensive in the Gaza Strip yesterday, after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon heeded the army's warning that a long stay in crowded Palestinian areas is too risky and the United States called for a quick Israeli pullout.

Sharon's decision came just hours after he told legislators Thursday that "Operation Days of Penitence," meant to stop Palestinian rocket fire on Israeli communities, would continue and even be expanded.

The prime minister's apparent zigzag reflected his dilemma. Continued Palestinian rocket attacks have undermined support for his planned withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, while a major military offensive invites international criticism because of heavy Palestinian casualties and isn't entirely effective.

Since the Sept. 29 start of the Israeli campaign, triggered by a deadly rocket attack on the Israeli border town of Sheroot, 108

Palestinians have been killed and hundreds wounded. Among the dead were dozens of civilians, including 18 children.

Israeli tanks and bulldozers have left behind a wide swath of destruction in northern Gaza, damaging houses, tearing up water pipes and knocking down electricity poles as they charge through narrow alleys of densely populated areas.

In an 18-page report obtained by The Associated Press on Thursday, the United Nations wrote that Israel has engaged in "massive and wanton destruction of property" in Gaza. The report, written before the current Gaza operation, said that while some of Israel's actions can be explained by security concerns, many cannot.

The Israeli government said the report, to be presented to the UN General Assembly later this month, does not address the actions of Palestinian militants, including smuggling weapons into Gaza and sending suicide bombers into Israel.

In Washington, US State Department spokesman Richard

Boucher said Thursday that the United States hopes that Israel can end the Gaza operation "as soon as possible." He said that while the United States recognises Israel's right to self-defence, "they should do it in a manner that concludes as quickly as possible and that minimises any loss of civilian life or humanitarian consequences."

Yesterday two more Palestinian militants who were wounded in an Israeli air strike in the northern Gaza Strip have died of their wounds, medical sources said.

Raed Abu Seif, from the radical Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and Wael Saleh, a fighter from the Islamist movement Hamas, both sustained the fatal injuries when an Israeli helicopter opened fire at the Jebaliya refugee camp, the main focus of a massive operation in the area which has left 127 Palestinians dead.

Amin Massud, who was also an Al-Aqsa Brigades activist, was also killed immediately in the pre-dawn strike.

Cheneys go mad after Kerry mentions daughter

AP, Washington

Mary Cheney typically works quietly behind the scenes on her father's vice presidential campaign, but she was dragged front-and-center after John Kerry noted that she is a lesbian during his debate with President Bush.

Her parents were furious at Kerry. But others who have publicly navigated the waters of politics and homosexuality say Vice President Dick Cheney and his wife may have overreacted to what Kerry called an attempt to compliment them on how they have dealt with having a lesbian daughter.

The Cheneys went on the attack immediately after the debate, where Kerry had suggested their daughter's sexual identity was formed at birth.

"I'm a pretty angry father," said the vice president. "Cheap and tawdry political trick," charged his wife.

A campaign spokeswoman said Mary Cheney, who runs operations in the vice president's campaign office, declined to comment as is typically the case.

Nepali Maoists declare 9-day truce for Dasain

10 rebels killed in clashes with troops

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels announced yesterday a nine-day ceasefire, to go into effect next week, for the country's biggest Hindu festival, Dasain.

"The Maoist party has decided to suspend all military actions from October 20 to October 28 to allow the Nepalese to celebrate the Dasain festival," Maoist chairman Pushpa Kamal Dahal said in a media statement.

Dasain celebrates the worship of the Hindu goddess Durga who vanquished demons and saved humanity. It is the scenic Himalayan kingdom's most popular festival, bringing together family and friends.

The Maoists have been fighting since 1996 to topple the monarchy and replace it with communist rule in an increasingly bloody battle that has claimed more than 10,000 lives.

It was unclear whether the ceasefire announcement could pave the way for a renewal of peace talks between the government and

the rebels.

A group of prominent Nepali civilians headed by retired Supreme Court judge Krishna Jung Rayamajhi set up a peace commission this week and called for a truce for the festival.

Violence has surged here since a peace dialogue collapsed in 2003, with around eight people dying on average daily in insurgency-related incidents.

Meanwhile, at least ten Maoists were killed in separate clashes with security forces in three western districts of the kingdom, a security official said Thursday.

"At least ten Maoists were killed in separate clashes with security forces in three western districts of the kingdom on Wednesday," the official said.

"Seven Maoists including three female rebels were killed in clashes with the security forces at Chapdanda area of Baglung district (far west) on Wednesday," the official said.

US reminds Musharraf of democracy pledge

Pak opposition up in arms over uniform

AFP, Washington

The United States Thursday reminded Pakistan's leader General Pervez Musharraf of his pledge to embrace democracy, but declined to criticise the adoption of a law by parliament prolonging his dual role as president and army chief.

Pakistani opposition deputies burst into an uproar in parliament Thursday when the speaker cut short debate on a bill allowing Musharraf to remain army chief, which was eventually passed by a thumping majority.

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in October 1999, pledged 10 months ago to shed his uniform by December 31.

Asked whether he should step down as military chief, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said: "Our view is that Pakistan needs to continue to make progress towards democracy."

"Whether he takes the specific step is something that's going to have to be decided in Pakistan," he told reporters.

Boucher said while it would be "good" for Musharraf to give up his military role, "progress toward democracy in Pakistan doesn't rest solely on this step."

Musharraf's staying on as army chief of staff could prove awkward for the United States, which has embraced him as a key ally in the war on terrorism while calling for greater democracy in the Muslim world.

Democracy activists in Pakistan have been fighting to end rule by generals, who have held political power for 29 years of the country's 57 year existence.

Boucher believed Musharraf was keen to lead Pakistan to full democracy, adding "that's a vision that we share and we'll continue to encourage him to move in that direction."

Musharraf pledged in a deal with powerful Islamist parties last year to quit the army in return for their support of powers he granted himself to sack the parliament, and their agreement not to oppose a confidence vote.

A deadline of December 31 this year was set and enshrined in the constitution.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's opposition parties vowed yesterday to work to force out Pakistan Pervez Musharraf in a "do-or-die" battle for democracy after he backtracked on a pledge to give up his role as army chief.

"The time has come for a do-or-die struggle for restoration of real democracy in Pakistan," prominent opposition leader Siddiqui Farooq said.

"Musharraf has closed all doors for democratic change and is prolonging his military dictatorship," he told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani opposition parliamentarians stage a sit-in demonstration in front of Parliament House in Islamabad yesterday to protest against the decision of parliament that President Pervez Musharraf will remain as the country's army chief. Pakistani opposition parties are planning a protest campaign after Musharraf consolidated his firm grip on power with a new law prolonging his dual role as president and army chief.

Indonesian cleric Bashir charged over Marriott blast

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian prosecutors on Friday formally charged militant Islamic cleric Abu Bakar Bashir with involvement in a suicide bombing at Jakarta's JW Marriott hotel.

His trial is expected to begin in about two weeks, Yunda Hasbi, an official at the South Jakarta district court told reporters.

If found guilty, Bashir could face the death penalty under Indonesia's anti-terrorism law.

Prosecutors are expected to focus on his alleged leadership of Jemaah Islamiyah, an extremist group authorities say has ties to al-Qaeda.

The 65-page indictment accuses the white-bearded Bashir, 66, of planning or inciting others to terrorism or helping them carry out an "explosion which endangered or cost the lives of others."

Prosecutors accuse him of providing assistance to terrorists and withholding information about terrorist acts.

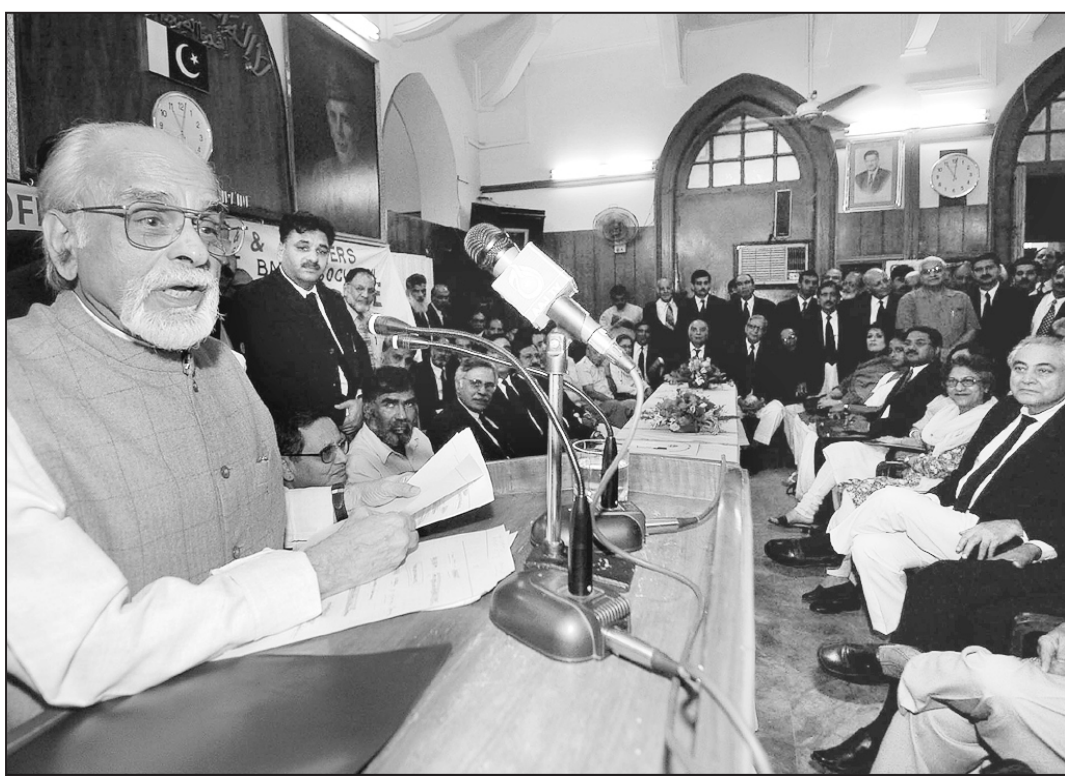


PHOTO: AFP

Former Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral (L) addresses a gathering of lawyers during his visit to the Lahore High Court in Lahore yesterday. Gujral, the 12th Prime Minister of India from April 1997-March 1998, who was born in the town of Jhelum which is now in Pakistan, visited the Punjab University old campus and saw the hostel room where he had lived during his student life.

Arab world kicks off Ramadan under shadow of violence

AFP, Cairo

Arabs began the Muslim holy month of Ramadan yesterday in reflective mood, as violence across much of their world brought reminders from their leaders of true Islam's tolerant nature -- backed by increases in security.

Across the Middle East, most were getting into Ramadan mode for a month of fasting and prayer as well as lavish banquets in Bedouin-style tents and late-night social gatherings.

Just a few countries were still waiting to sight the crescent moon and begin Ramadan today, while in Iraq the Sunnis saw violence usher in the start of the month as their Shia compatriots waited a further 24 hours.

Palestinians too saw Ramadan greeted with continued violence, despite an announcement by the Israelis that their lethal offensive in the northern Gaza Strip was being scaled back, but not ended.

In Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest sites in Makkah and Medina,

authorities geared up to receive pilgrims from abroad during the holy month when Muslims fast and abstain from smoking and sexual intercourse from dawn to dusk.

An official at the pilgrimage ministry said three million pilgrims were expected for the Umra (small pilgrimage), in addition to an anticipated 1.5 million from within the kingdom.

The kingdom's leaders, King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, said in a joint statement: "Muslims must act ... in keeping with the tolerant Islamic creed, which rejects violence, extremism, terrorism and the intimidation of peaceable people, while advocating... moderation and centrism."

Saudi Arabia has been hit by a wave of attacks by suspected Islamist extremists, and the authorities are taking no chances during Ramadan. The government is deploying an estimated 3,000 policemen to provide security in Makkah.

Iraqi leaders send mixed signals on election date

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders are sending mixed signals on the exact date of the upcoming national elections, a vote considered crucial for the emergence of a legitimate government in the war-torn country.

The interim government has been adamant about respecting the calendar of the transitional political process, drawn with the help of the United Nations and which gave January 31, 2005 as the deadline for the elections.

In a move to pacify the country before the polls, Prime Minister Iyad Allawi gave an ultimatum on Wednesday to the Sunni Muslim militant bastion of Fallujah to hand over Islamist Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi or face a large-scale attack.

But Iraqi President Ghazi al-Yawar said in an interview published Thursday that the much-anticipated elections could be delayed if the security situation had not sufficiently improved.

The contradictions in the declarations stem from a different view on the way to hold the elections.

Some Iraqi officials seem to be ready to exclude rebel-held regions from the electoral process while others, including the Sunni president, insist that the polls should be held across the country.

"Yes, the date is January 31, but this date is not sacred," Yawar told the London-based Arab daily AsharqAl-Awsat.

"We are deploying all our efforts to meet this deadline. But if we judge that a ballot at this date -- without

security and conditions allowing free elections for all -- will have a negative fallout on our country, then we will not hesitate to change the date," he said.

"We are not giving up on holding elections in all of Iraq's cities. The inhabitants of Sadr City, Fallujah, Samarra and all cities in Iraq, as well as any Iraqi who has the opportunity to vote, should take part in the elections."

The diverging views were appearing at a time the debate on the possibility of holding the legislative elections seemed to be calming down.

The independent electoral commission has just confirmed its intention to launch the registration process for the voters and the candidates on time on November 1.