



US ELECTION 2004

Americans urged to vote without fear

No specific attack threat: Ridge

BBC ONLINE

The US homeland security secretary says there is no intelligence pointing to attacks on election day and has urged Americans to vote in confidence.

Tom Ridge said there was no need to raise the alert level, despite Osama Bin Laden's threat of more attacks.

But the threat has pushed national security back to the fore on the presidential election trail.

The main candidates, who are chasing votes in several key states, have traded pledges to keep America safe.

Between them, President George W Bush and his Democrat challenger John Kerry visited Michigan, Florida, Ohio, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota on Saturday.

Both are trying to court every last voter they can in these states, which are among eight to 10 that are so close it makes the outcome on Tuesday difficult to predict.

The appearance on al-Jazeera television station of a video statement from Bin Laden on Friday has thrust the safety of the US from attack back to the top of the agenda.

In the video, a calm, measured Bin Laden addressed Americans directly, telling them the reasons behind the September 11 attacks still remained.

He implied the US could be targeted again, but most of the broadcast was spent trying to explain previous attacks.

In an informal meeting with reporters outside his office, Ridge said there was no known threat of attack during the elections.

"It's important to know... there is no specific intelligence that targets election day, polling places and the like," he said, according to the Associated Press news agency.

"First of all we want to make sure that people feel safe and comfortable about going to vote," he added.

Ridge said security measures had been bolstered in the run-up to the election, but there were no plans to raise the terror threat level from yellow or "elevated".

"Our effort nationwide, down to the local level, to enhance security is ongoing. We are far safer today than we've ever been before," Ridge said.

Nonetheless, both candidates spent much of their time on the podium on Saturday responding to the Bin Laden threat.

US voters say Laden won't sway them

AFP, New York

American voters say Osama bin Laden's sudden re-appearance has not changed their minds about the upcoming election, according to a report yesterday by the New York Times, which said it conducted dozens of interviews in five key states after the broadcast of a new message by the al-Qaeda chief.

Some thought bin Laden, whose group was blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks, was trying to tip Tuesday's election toward Democrat John Kerry; others said he was angling for four more years for President George W. Bush.

Some said his message, broadcast Friday by al-Jazeera television, would remind voters of Bush's failure to capture him. Others said it would scare up more votes for the incumbent.

Many theorised that the tape could influence voters, but said that their own convictions remained unshaken.

The bin Laden message was just one more item in a flood of campaign news and advertising in the countdown to the campaign,

according to David Hill, a musician of Denver, Colorado.

"I don't think people are really responding anymore," he said. "We're shell-shocked."

"People I know are so polarised, it doesn't make any difference," said his wife, Jan Hill.

"Wow, it's perfect timing for him to come out of the woodwork," said warehouse worker McKinley Olds of Cleveland, Ohio. "It doesn't make any difference to me, I'm still voting for Kerry."

"It's more of the same, basically, about what you'd expect from this group," said Rex Reeve of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. "I'll definitely be voting for Bush."

Tyler Lisenbee, a property manager in Denver who was leaning toward Kerry, said bin Laden was unlikely to affect the election at all unless he was captured before Tuesday.

"Then I'd probably vote for Bush," he said.

Seeing how voters appeared to have shrugged off bin Laden's latest salvo, the article's author went on to assert that the terror kingpin may have made himself "irrelevant."



PHOTO: AFP

Former US President Bill Clinton speaks to a crowd during a political rally supporting Democratic party candidate John Kerry for president in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Teresa Heinz Kerry and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson also spoke at the rally only four days before the country's election.



PHOTO: AFP

Doreen Rita (C), the wife of Sri Lankan hostage in Iraq, Dinesh Dharmendran Rajaratnam, with her three boys shows a picture of her husband yesterday while appealing for his release. The 36-year-old Sri Lankan truck driver Rajaratnam was seized on October 28 by the Islamic Army in Iraq together with a Bangladeshi colleague.

23 Iraqis killed in fighting

AFP, AP, Ramadi

Eight Iraqis were killed and 13 people wounded, including three US marines, in clashes and explosions between rebels and US troops in the flashpoint Iraqi city of Ramadi while 15 others killed in Hilla, medical sources said yesterday.

Doctor Hamdi al-Raoui said that the general hospital in the Sunni Muslim bastion, 100 km west of Baghdad, admitted eight dead Iraqis and 10 wounded in the skirmishes that flared from early in the morning.

A police captain said that the violence flared from about 6:00 am (0300 GMT), while an AFP reporter in the city heard explosions ringing out sporadically.

A US military official confirmed that clashes were ongoing, involving the "usual suspects" namely rebel small arms and rocket propelled grenade fire, mortars and roadside bombs.

A second AFP correspondent embedded with the military said that three US marines were injured when a roadside bomb exploded as a convoy was passed through the

Sunni Muslim bastion.

The blast happened shortly before 7:30 am (0430 GMT) in the capital city of the restive al-Anbar province.

Ramadi and nearby Fallujah are the two main bastions of rebel fighters in the Sunni province. Nine Marines were killed and a further nine injured during a security operation in the area on Saturday, the US military said.

A high level of military movement is taking place in Ramadi as US troops double their ranks to about 2,000 with the arrival of a new army battalion to join a marines battalion already based in the city.

In Hilla fifteen Iraqis died and another 20 were wounded in an exchange of gunfire south of Baghdad, hospital sources said, while the US military reported killing five suspected rebels during clashes.

"The hospital admitted 15 dead and 20 injured," said Abdel Razzak al-Janabi, the head of Iskandariyah hospital, 45km south of the Iraqi capital.

Kashmiri separatists want to visit Pakistan

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmiri separatists want to visit Pakistan before holding the third round of peace talks with New Delhi, their leader said overnight.

"Before holding third round of talks with India we should be allowed to go to Pakistan for talks there," Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, the head of moderate faction of Indian Kashmir's main separatist alliance -- the All Parties Hurriyat Conference -- told the state-owned television Doordarshan overnight.

He said the visit to Pakistan would "enhance the possibility of having a fruitful dialogue (with India)".

India has been resisting pleas by Kashmiri separatists to visit Pakistan, insisting that Pakistan cannot be involved in domestic problems of Kashmiris.

The scenic Himalayan region is in the throes of a 15-year-old insurgency against Indian rule that has so far left thousands dead.



US ELECTION 2004

What if the election ends in a tie?

AFP, Washington

The US presidential election, which is decided by the 538-member Electoral College, has the potential of ending in a 269-269 tie, which could throw the race into the US House of Representatives.

The 538 electors are divided among the 50 US states and the nation's capital, Washington.

In 48 of the 50 US states, the candidate who wins the state's popular vote wins all of the electoral votes from the state. In most states, electors are bound to vote for the candidate who wins the popular vote but in 21 states they are not obliged to do so.

After Tuesday's election, there will be six weeks during which the parties can attempt to convince an unbound elector to switch sides. There have been only 10 such "faithless" electors over the past 200 years, however.

The Electoral College members will convene in each state's capital on December 13 and, if they emerge still tied 269-269, the election will go to the House of Representatives.

Each state delegation in the House will be given one vote.

President George W. Bush's Republican Party is favored to retain its majority in the House following Tuesday's election and the incumbent would defeat Democratic rival John Kerry if the election ended up in the chamber.

Republicans presently outnumber Democrats in 30 state congressional delegations. The Democrats control 15 while the others are split evenly and would abstain from the vote.

A candidate must win 26 votes to become president.

The Senate, where the Republicans currently have a slim majority, picks the new vice president.

BJP reels after top cop points finger to leaders for fanning riots

AFP, Ahmedabad

India's Hindu nationalist BJP was reeling Sunday after a top policeman claimed party leaders fanned the flames during rioting in Gujarat state two years ago which left 2,000 people dead.

Deputy police superintendent Rahul Sharma told an inquiry panel Saturday that at the height of the rioting he was phoned by then-state home minister Gordhan Jhadafiya, who had told him "the ratio of death figures in police firing is not good".

Sharma said he believed the former minister was referring to the fact that five Hindus and one Muslim had been killed in a police firing incident.

He said he had replied to Jhadafiya, "A bullet does not see who it is hitting. If 90 percent of the mob is Hindu, then obviously 90 percent of the casualties will be Hindus."

Jhadafiya was a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government headed by hardline Hindu leader Narendra Modi, who has been accused by human rights groups of abetting anti-Muslim violence in the western state.

The inquiry into the riots, in which mostly Muslims were killed, has been hearing testimony for the past few months from policemen and bureaucrats who were tasked with containing the bloodletting.

The rioting was sparked by the torching of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims and activists on February 27, 2002 in Gujarat's Godhra town allegedly by a Muslim mob. Some 59 people died.

Sharma said he had been removed as deputy superintendent of police in the flashpoint town of Bhavnagar after he refused to release 21 people who had been arrested in connection with the riots -- all of them Hindus.

'Britons view Kerry a safer bet than Bush'

AFP, London

A majority in Britain believe the world will be safer if Democrat challenger John Kerry wins this week's US presidential election, suggests an opinion poll to be published yesterday.

Asked whether the world will be a safer place if US President George W. Bush rather than Kerry won Tuesday's poll, 24 percent said it will be, 56 percent disagreed and 20 percent did not know.

The Communicate Research poll for the Independent on Sunday newspaper also suggests that Prime Minister Tony Blair's staunch support for Bush over the Iraq conflict has been bad for Britain.

Asked whether Blair's support for Bush in Iraq has been good for Britain, 19 percent agreed, 74 percent did not agree, and seven percent said they did not know.

There was also scepticism about the government's decision to agree to move over 800 troops from southern Iraq to a more dangerous area in the US-controlled zone near Baghdad.

Thousands of lawyers pour into Florida

AFP, Miami

A pivotal battleground state, Florida is braced for a tight race and praying that tomorrow's election will not see a repeat of the 2000 chaos that delayed the outcome of the presidential race by 36 days.

Thousands of lawyers are pouring into the state, deployed by the two campaigns and ready to pounce on any perceived irregularity.

They have already filed a dozen lawsuits as partisan claims of intimidation, illegal voting and missing ballots raised the specter of the 2000 debacle.

The controversy has caused renewed embarrassment to Florida at a time when it is in the national spotlight because of the key role it is likely to play again in determining who will be the next US president.

"Florida is absolutely necessary to win the election," said former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, who canvassed for Kerry in Miami over the weekend.

President George W. Bush and his Democratic rival John Kerry have focused much of their energy

on Florida in recent days, actively courting minorities and undecided voters.

With polls putting them in a deadlock, the candidates are going after every possible vote in the southeastern state where a 537-vote lead sent Bush to the White House and which has 27 of the 270 Electoral College votes needed to win the presidency. The heaviest campaigning has been targeted at central Florida, home to a large and politically flexible Hispanic community, and thought to have the state's largest number of undecided voters.

An influx of immigrants, many of them from Puerto Rico, has brought the state's Hispanic population to 3.2 million, and has weakened the impact of the 500,000 Cuban-American voters, a staunchly Republican bloc.

The Kerry campaign hopes that anger over recent travel restrictions to Cuba will win them some of the Cuban votes, though they are focusing more closely on other Hispanic groups.

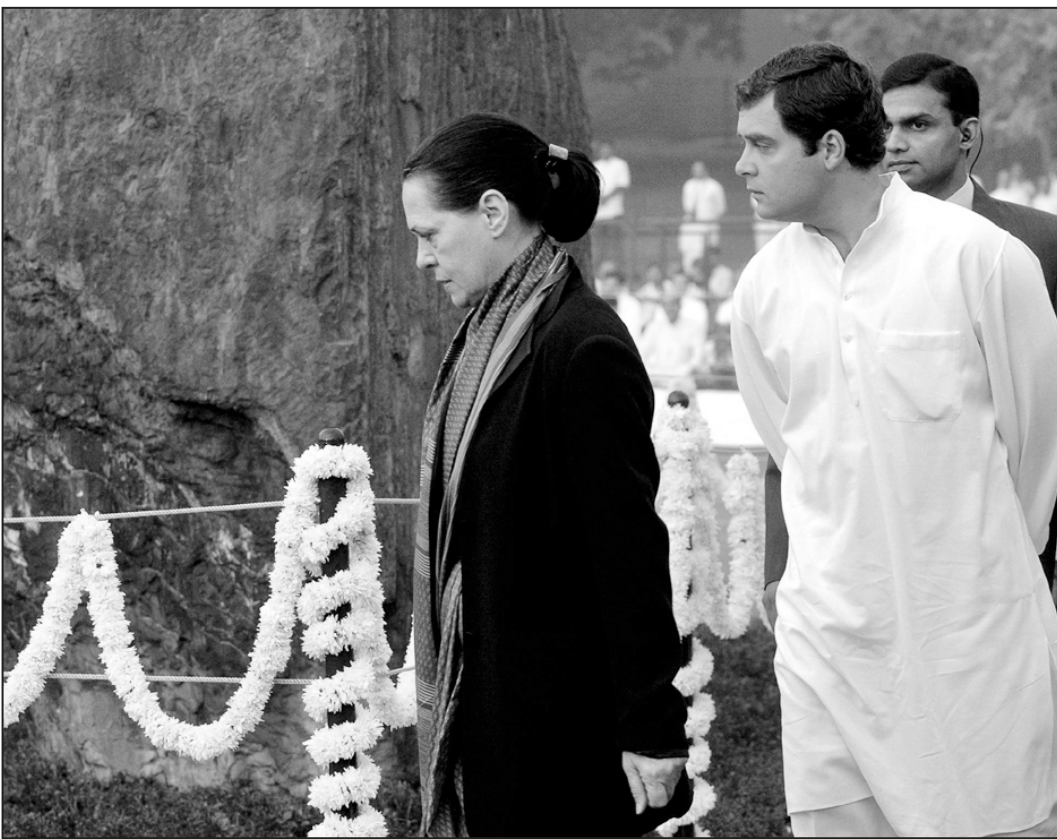


PHOTO: AFP

India's Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi (L) and her son Rahul Gandhi (R) pay their respects at Shakti Stahl, the memorial for former Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi on the 20th anniversary of her death in New Delhi yesterday.

Sharon ready to talk with new leadership

Palestinians meet to absorb Arafat departure fall-out

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said yesterday that he was prepared to open negotiations with a new Palestinian leadership after Yasser Arafat's departure, public radio reported.

"If a new Palestinian leadership which is both serious and responsible emerges, it is possible that there can be a resumption on negotiations on the roadmap" peace plan, Sharon was quoted as saying at the weekly cabinet meeting.

"I am not sure that that will happen," he added.

High level Israeli-Palestinian talks have been frozen for more than a year and Israel has had no contact with Palestinian Authority leader Arafat since Sharon came to power in 2001.

Meanwhile, emergency sessions of the Palestinian parliament and

national security council were being held yesterday to absorb the shockwaves triggered by Yasser Arafat's departure from the West Bank.

Amid speculation that the Palestinian leadership could fall into chaos should the veteran leader not recover from a serious blood disease, officials have sought to present a united and firm business-as-usual picture to the world.

Foreign minister Nabil Shaath told journalists ahead of the security council meeting that the body was determined to streamline the myriad security apparatus -- which Arafat had been under consistent pressure to reform.

While the 75-year-old iconic leader had given assurances that he would cut down the number of services, he never turned his words into action.

"Its aim is to ensure the security

agencies, or organisations will be revamped and given all the support (they need) to fulfill their duties," Shaath said of the meeting.

"Whether during the presence of Mr Arafat or his absence, security has to be maintained. These are his instructions and the assistant chairman of the NSC, which is the prime minister, will lead the meeting."

Prime minister Ahmed Qorei was to chair the security council meeting, grouping together the maze of Palestinian security services. His predecessor Mahmud Abbas was also to head a meeting Sunday of Arafat's Fatah faction.

Abbas has become acting Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) chairman since Arafat was dramatically air-lifted out of the West Bank for treatment in Paris, with Qorei handling day-to-day Palestinian Authority affairs.



PHOTO: AFP

A Thai Muslim detainee sits on the back of a car with his mother and sister after being released in Tak Bai Province, southern Thailand yesterday. Thailand's human rights commission ended a fact-finding trip to examine last week's custody deaths of 78 Muslims as more testimony emerged about the detainees' suffocating journey into detention.