# INTERNATIONAL

#### 3 in 4 Iraqi Sunnis won't vote today

AFP, Washington

Three out of four Sunni Arabs will not vote in Iraq's weekend elections, while a majority of Sunnis and Shias want US troops to leave the country immediately or as soon as an elected government is in place, according to a poll released Friday.

About 76 percent of Sunnis say they "definitely will not vote" in Sunday's elections, according to the poll conducted by US-based Zogby International for Abu Dhabi television. Only nine percent of Sunnis say they will cast ballots.

Conversely, 80 percent of Shias, Iraq's majority group, and 57 percent of Kurds say they will "likely" or "definitely" vote

Zogby polled 805 Iraqi adults from January 19-23 throughout Iraq, including the cities of Baghdad, Hilla, Karbala and Kirkuk, as well as the provinces of Diala and Anbar. The survey has a 3.6 plus or minus percentage-point margin of error.



Independent Electoral Commission workers prepare ballot boxes at a polling station in central Baghdad yesterday. Security was heightened across Iraq on the eve of today's landmark elections in a bid to stifle insurgent attacks in the final hours before the voting starts.

US, UK OFFICIALS SAY

### Iraqi polls won't end violence

REUTERS, Baghdad

Violence in Iraq is unlikely to subside after today's election and may well get worse before it gets better, US and British officials say, a senti-ment seconded by many Iraqis. But the officials maintain the mainly Sunni Muslim insurgency against American and British troops

and their Iraqi government allies is cracking and will be defeated in time.

In the run-up to Sunday's poll, expectations have been widespread for a spike in Iraq's regular fare of suicide bombs, mortar attacks and

Activity has indeed risen from 29 attacks on US and Iraqi forces countrywide last Saturday, to 45 Monday and 98 on Thursday. But the violence has been less dramatic than feared.

That may be due to extraordinary security measures put in place by US and Iraqi forces in the past few days, limiting the ability of insurgents to operate. Or it could be because militants are biding their time, waiting for their moment.

Either way, it may not be long before those opposed to Sunday's vote launch an onslaught to make their hostility clear. al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq, Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, has vowed to do all he can to disrupt the poll.

"This insurgency's going to continue and it could very well get worse in the short term," a senior US diplomat said this week, adding that he wouldn't be surprised if there was an increase in political assassinations in the weeks ahead.

"People need to know that this is a long-term process. There is not a quick fix, it's not going to get better overnight.

Iraqis also expect a surge in violence after Sunday, reckoning insurgents will seek revenge, targeting local security forces and voters, whose fingers will be marked with hard-to-remove ink after they cast their ballots.

insurgents are going to be angry, they're going to want to get their own back," Zayed Ahmed, a security

guard in Baghdad, said Saturday.

"They will attack us, and denounce the Shias, but then I think this thing will begin to go away," he said. Other Iraqis voice similar views, although they remain fearful and expect it to be a some time before the military terrange. before the militant war wanes.

Some US and British officials are casting Sunday's vote as a referendum, seeing participation as a thumbs-down to the violence gripping Iraq for nearly two years.

Every vote Sunday is a vote against the insurgency," a senior British military officer said this week, although he added that he didn't expect attacks to decline any time soon.

He said that while militants are still capable of carrying out attacks almost at will, they are becoming less effective, and Iraqi security

forces are more adept at outwitting

There are signs suicide car bombers are losing their edge.

Wednesday, seven car bomb blasts killed just 13 people, not includ-ing the bombers. Thursday six bombings took three lives. A few months ago, such suicide attacks frequently

killed20or30peopleatatime.
"That's an indicator," said the British officer.

He puts the improvement down to the Iraqi security forces. They are being rapidly beefed up, have a more aggressive approach and are developing better intelligence, he said.

"People in the insurgency are beginning to see that time is running out. When they see the step up in quantity and quality of the Iraqi forces

in the coming months, it's really going to have an impact," he said.

"They know the insurgency is taking them nowhere. It's weakening and it's going to be defeated, sooner or later."

### Zarqawi fear haunts Iraqi voters

The shadow of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's deadly acts and threats overshadow memories of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship as Iraqis go to vote in a historic election today.

Zarqawi, the frontman of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network in Iraq, has become the public face of the insurgency against the US-led moves to bring democracy to the

US President George W. Bush has made fighting Zarqawi the central theme of his 'war on terror'. There is a 25 million dollar US reward on the Jordanian militant's head.

Zarqawi has used tactics in his own war against the United States that even battle-hardened coalition generals have called "horrific".

Zarqawi is accused of introduc-ing the Islamic extremist flavour to Iraq's insurgency and of pioneering some of the most gruesome tactics like hostage beheadings and suicide

bombings to the country.
Through his "al-Qaeda Group

of Jihad in the Land of Two Rivers", the militant leader has brought the horror of slow, grisly, beheadings to world attention through video recordings posted on the Internet.

Among a host of outrages, the group murdered British hostage Kenneth Bigley in October and two of his US colleagues in September.

The bin Laden alliance was sealed in December. An audio message purportedly made by the mastermind of the September 11, 2001 attacks named Zarqawi the head of

al-Qaeda in Iraq.
In recent weeks, Zarqawi has been accused of preparing or inspiring much of the intimidation of Iraqi election candidates, campaign workers and voters that has created an intense climate of fear.

His group has been numbered anywhere from 500 to 1,000 men and, while considered to be a small part of the Iraqi Sunni Muslim insurgency, his brutal tactics and access to cash, weapons and fighters have made him a force to be reckoned

Zarqawi supporters on Sunday released a video of the killing of an election candidate from the party of Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. The group claimed responsibility for a suicide car bombing near Allawi's headquarters.

"We have declared all-out war on this wicked course," said a purported Zarqawi message about the Iraq election released this month.

Iraqi authorities said Friday that the arrest of three Zarqawi lieutenants had led them closer to the country's most wanted man. Authorities named one of the

three as Anat Mohammed Hamat al-Kays, a 31-year-old Iraqi who served as a military adviser to the Zarqawi network and helped finance its operations in Baghdad.

The other two were Salah Salam Dubaig al-Ubaidi, also known as Abu Saif, who was believed to be Zargawi's main commander in Baghdad, and Ali Mohamed Yassin Al-Issawi, another close aide who is also known as Abu Hassan.

#### **BUSH WARNS AHEAD OF TODAY'S POLLS** Terrors to do everything

to thwart Iraqi polls

US President George W. Bush said yesterday terrorists will do everything in their power to thwart Sunday's elections in Iraq, but the

AFP, Washington

"courage of the Iraqi people will allow the vote to take place. "The terrorists and those who benefitted from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein know that free elections will expose the emptiness of their vision for Iraq," Bush said in his weekly radio address. "That is why they will stop at nothing to prevent or disrupt this election.

"Yet in the face of this intimida-

tion, the Iraqi people are standing firm," the president continued. "Tomorrow's elections will happen because of their courage and determination. All throughout Iraq, these friends of freedom understand the

Bush said that terrorist violence will not end with the election. But he insisted that terrorists will fail, because the Iraqi people reject their ideology of murder.

"This election is also important for America," said the president.

Our nation has always been more secure when freedom is on the march. As hope and freedom spread, the appeal of terror and hate will fade. And there is not a democratic nation in our world that threatens the security of the United

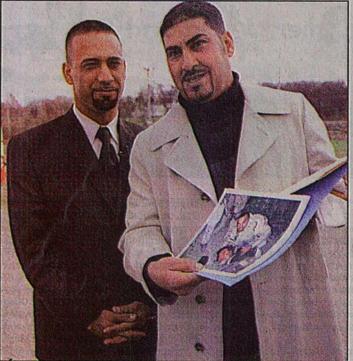
States. The best way to ensure the success of democracy is through the advance of democracy.

"As democracy takes hold in Iraq, America's mission there will continue," Bush pointed out. "Our military forces, diplomats and civilian personnel will help the newly elected government of Iraq. newly-elected government of Iraq establish security and train Iraqi

military police and other forces."

He did not mention any possible
US withdrawal date from Iraq.
"Over the past year, the world has
seen successful elections in

Afghanistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Georgia, Ukraine, and the Palestinlan territories," the presi-dent pointed out. "In countries across the broader Middle East, from Morocco to Bahrain, governments are enacting new reforms and increasing participation for their



(L-R) Iraqi expatriates Samir and Muhammed show reporters a photo of Samir subduing Saddam Hussein as they prepare to leave an Iraqi polling place Friday in Nashville, Tennessee. As a translator assigned to US Special Forces in Iraq, Samir, a Shia Muslim, was directly involved in locating and arresting the ousted Iraqi president. Today he enjoys celebrity among Iraqis as "The man who found Saddam." Samir now lives in St. Louis, Missouri and traveled twice this week to Nashville: Once to register and once to vote.

#### Bombs, bullets turn Baghdad a city on the edge

AFP, Baghdad

A gunbattle yesterday in one of the best-protected parts of Baghdad heightened the tension for the nervous population of the capital on the eve of the landmark election.

Heavy bursts of gunfire erupted at the Sanak bridge, which is near the Green Zone, the high security area that houses the US and British embassies and Iraqi government

The origin of the shooting was unclear. But Iraqi soldiers responded with a sustained flurry in several directions. US soldiers at a roadblock on the bridge leapt behind their vehicles.

The shooting broke a tense silence in central Baghdad, which has been transformed into a virtual ghost town because of the stringent security measures on the capital for

The thick grey haze hanging over the metropolis of seven million people and the absence of dieselspewing taxis and honking minibuses gave an eery atmosphere to

#### Zhao Ziyang cremated in tightly controlled funeral

REUTERS, Beijing

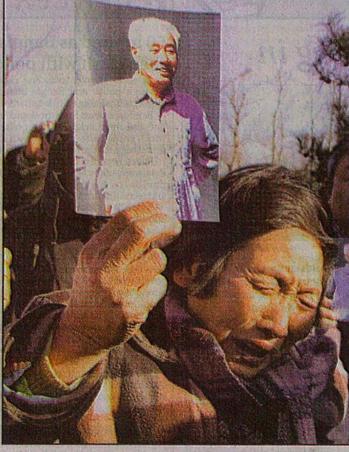
Hundreds of mourners braved police checks on Saturday to attend a low-key invitation-only funeral for Zhao Ziyang, the Chinese Communist Party chief purged for opposing the army crackdown on the 1989 Tiananmen protests.

Nervous the ceremony might spark protest, China's leaders had wanted to permit only a quick funeral for Zhao who, as premier in the 1980s, launched market reforms that turned the country into a fledgling economic powerhouse from a centrally planned backwater.

However, in a nod to the seniority of a man whom the party had effectively made a non-person by keeping him under house arrest for the past 15 years, China's number four leader, Jia Qinglin, joined mourners filing past his body at the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery.

A dozen police checked identity documents and invitations of mourners and turned away nonmainland Chinese from the funeral for Zhao, who died in a Beijing hospital on Jan. 17 aged 85.

"My heart is heavy. I did not expect so many people to show up," said mourner Shi Yijun, an author on



A Chinese woman cries as she mourns deposed leader Zhao Ziyang outside the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery in western Beijing yesterday. Former Chinese premier Zhao Ziyang was cremated during a tightly controlled funeral as Beijing signalled it had no intention of changing its stance on the reformist leader purged for opposing the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

## rebel threats

Defying rebel threats, voters turned out in big numbers yesterday to cast ballots in the first leg of municipal polls to be held in over a quarter of a century in insurgency-hit Indian Kashmir, officials said.

Islamic separatist rebels had staged a spate of deadly attacks on candidates, party workers and rallies in the lead-up to the civic elections that are being held in stages in the restive region to protect

"Nearly 60 percent (of eligible) voters cast their ballot in the first phase today (Saturday)," a state election department spokesman told AFP, quoting preliminary turn-

"Due to freezing temperatures voting was slow at first but picked up when the sun came out," he said after closure of the polls that were violence free.

The turnout in the districts of Baramulla and Kupwara that Indian security officials say have a heavy militant presence were a big rebuff to separatists and rebels who had called for a boycott, the Indian Kashmir government said. Rebeis had staged a series of

bloody attacks on election rallies, candidates and party workers in the lead up to voting which was held under tight security.

"The high turnout is a big victory

Mir, a senior leader of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party. "It proves people are fed up with violence They're more interested in develop-

The turnout beat the 46 percent who cast ballots in 2002 state polls in Indian Kashmir where a deadly revolt has raged against New Delhi's rule for 15 years. The average turn-out in Indian general elections is 55 The voting Saturday was in Kupwara and Baramulla districts

Kashmir, both well-known rebel crossing points into the territory according to Indian security offi-India accuses Pakistan of arming

adjoining Pakistan-administered

rebels and pushing them into Indian Kashmir to fight New Delhi's rule, a charge Islamabad denies. The strong turnout came against

the backdrop of a nascent peace process between India and Pakistan, who share divided Kashmir but claimit in full. Heavily armed police and para-

military forces ringed polling booths to provide security to voters who were choosing councillors to represent them. Srinagar, considered an urban

centre for militant elements, and winter capital Jammu are set to vote

### Kashmiris vote defying Abbas-Sharon summit for democracy in Kashmir," said Tourism Minister Ghulam Hassan in 2nd week of Feb

Security talks continue

AFP, AP, Ramallah

Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will meet new Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas in two weeks, a Palestinian official said yesterday, as the two sides prepared to discuss the transfer of security control in parts of the West Bank, fueling real optimism about progress towards peace.

The power transfer is due to take

place following a first meeting Abbas and Sharon, the latest in a series of peace gestures between Israeli and the Palestinians amid a lull in violence. "This meeting should take place

a fortnight from now," said prime minister Ahmed Qorei's top aide Hassan Abu Libdeh.

Abbas met Sharon when he was prime minister in 2003 but the proposed summit would be the first between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in over four years.

Backed by his top allies in Washington, Sharon refused to have anything to do with Abbas's late predecessor, Yasser Arafat.

But in a major policy shift, Israel has called off offensive operations in the Gaza Strip after 2,000 Palestinian

troops were deployed in the south and centre of the territory with orders to halt rocket attacks.

"This is a far-reaching step on our part, the biggest gesture since the start of the Intifada, in the hope we might be able to turn a new page with the Palestinians," Israeli government spokesman Avi Pazner said

Abbas, on his first foreign trip as leader, briefed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on Saturday on efforts to secure a formal truce from militant groups to cement a recent informal lull in anti-Israeli attacks. His order that Palestinian forces

stop militant attacks across Gaza led even Sharon to hail a possible "historic breakthrough" in relations.

security minister Mohammed Dahlan was due to hold talks in Tel Aviv with Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz on West Bank security, Palestinian sources said.

to Israeli military operations in the

West Bank and the release of some of

the 8,000 Palestinians jailed in Israel,

amid reports that officials are ready

to free a first tranche of 900.

Late Saturday, former Palestinian On the agenda was a possible halt

Sharon is also now prepared to coordinate with the Palestinians his plan to pull all troops and 8,000 settlers out of the Gaza Strip this

The United States sent special envoy William Burns to prepare the ground for a visit by new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the end of next week.

Burns also detected "the best chance in years" for the peace pro-

Despite the overall calm in the occupied territories, a mentally handicapped Palestinian man died after being shot by Israeli soldiers in southern Gaza on Friday, hospital sources said.

Washington also still regards the Islamic militant group Hamas as a terror organisation, despite its victory in local Gaza elections on Thursday, winning 77 out of 1180 seats, against just 26 for Abbas's Fatah faction.

Since the 1991 launch of the peace process, the most taxing questions have remained on hold: permanent borders, Jewish settlements, Palestinian refugees, water resources and the fate of Jerusalem.

### UN to coordinate Asia's tsunami warning centers

REUTERS, Phuket

The United Nations emerged yesterday as a coordinator for a regional tsunami warning center after officials from 43 nations including India, Indonesia and Thailand failed

to agree who should run it. The compromise dealt a blow to Thailand, host of the two-day tsunami ministerial meeting on the resort island of Phuket which was itself hit by the Dec. 26 killer waves that devastated Indian Ocean coastal regions. It had wanted to run the center itself. Bangkok's proposal to set up a regional tsunami trust fund, to which it pledged an initial \$10 million contribution, was not welcome at the conference, where cabinet ministers

of only six countries took part. "It will be premature to ask them to make a financial commitment after they received the proposal Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai told reporters when asked how delegates had responded to the proposed fund.

"All of these arrangements should be under the umbrella of the United Nations' specialized agencies that should be able to provide expertise and technological input into the arrangement."

Sri Lankan Minister of Enviro-

nment and Natural Resources

A.H.M.Fowzie told Reuters on the

sidelines of the conference that Bangkok would be "one of the focal points" under the UN As with a similar meeting in Kobe. Japan, a week ago, where numerous tsunami warning proposals were put before panels of politicians, national

egos appear to be getting in the way of international cooperation.

Thailand wanted the system to be built on the existing structure of the UN-backed Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC), which has around 30 member countries in Asia and is located in Bangkok. India and Indonesia also wanted

to host the regional center. The compromise came after UN Secretary General Kofi Annan sent a written statement to the conference urging all nations to coordinate their regional efforts.

"Our challenge now is to ensure that all the elements of effective early warning systems are integrated, cohesive, and cover not only tsunamis but also other hazards such as cyclones and floods," Annan

#### Italian Mafia trains up kids as killers

AFP, Rome

The Mafia in southeastern Italy is busy training up recruits as young as 10 years of age in how to use firearms to intimidate the public and even kill, according to reports here yesterday.

Riccardo Dibitonto, attorneygeneral of Bari, main town of Apulia region, was quoted as saying: "The chief characteristic of organised crime in Bari is the regular professional use of adolescents trained in firearms and used as killers as soon as they display proper talent."

Newspaper reports quoted him as speaking at a special seminar in Bari to address the problem. Desire Digeronimo, deputy attorney-general in Bari, quoted the conons of a turncoat malioso, who had described to police how he had grown up surrounded by armed men andhad begun selling drugs at age 10.



A group of activists pull down a wall symbolising Israel's separation barrier Friday in Porto Alegre, southern Brazil, during a pro-Palestine demonstration within the framework of the V World Social Forum.

#### Portugal clears deportation of Mumbai blast suspect

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police said Portugal's Supreme Court has cleared the extradition of one of India's most wanted men, Abu Salem, sought for a string of blasts that killed more than 250 people in 1993, Indian media reported yesterday. "We were informed by the Indian

Court has granted India's request for extradition of Abu Salem for all the offences," G. Mohanty, a spokesman for India's Central Bureau of Investigation, was quoted by the Press Trust of India as saying. There was no immediate com-ment available from Portuguese

mission in Portugal that the Supreme

Salem and his girlfriend, littleknown Indian actress Monica Bedi, were

arrested in Lisbon in September 2002 on charges of document falsification.