

White House has high stake in Iraqi polls

AP, Washington

The White House is keenly watching the Iraqi election because it could affect US military action there and sap President Bush's political strength here and abroad if the balloting doesn't lead to stability.

Bush had sought to declare victory before the polls even opened in Iraq yesterday by arguing that just the fact that Iraqis are voting means success. The election "will add to the momentum of democracy," Bush said Saturday in his weekly radio address.

Hours after it aired, however, National Security Adviser Steve Hadley informed the president that a rocket had hit the US Embassy in Baghdad, killing at least two Americans who worked there and wounding four others. The White House reaction to the attack echoed Bush's insistence that violence will not dissuade Iraqis from voting.

Two-thirds of civilians killed in Iraqi 'military operations'

AFP, London

Nearly two-thirds of people killed in Iraq in the past six months died in "military operations", the BBC will say in a report yesterday which has been contested by the Iraqi interim government.

The British broadcaster, in its "Panorama" television show, will cite figures it said were from the Iraqi health ministry for casualties from July 1 to January 1, the BBC said in a statement.

Of 3,274 people killed in Iraq during that time, 2,041 were stated to be the result of "military operations", while 1,233 deaths were the result of "terrorist operations", according to figures from the ministry obtained by the BBC.

A total of 8,542 people were also listed as injured in the combined operations.



Women queue in front of a sign that reads, "Your voice is the future" as they wait to cast their ballot at a polling station yesterday in the southern holy city of Najaf, 160kms from Baghdad. Iraqi voters are to choose a transitional 275-seat National Assembly, a parliament for the semi-autonomous Kurdish region and 18 provincial councils in the national elections.

Iraqi polls no quick fix for mounting problems

AFP, Baghdad

The Iraqi election -- whatever the result -- is just the start of a long haul to stability which will have to overcome more violence and political turmoil.

Interim Iraqi prime minister Iyad Allawi hailed the election as "the start of a new era" as he cast his vote yesterday.

But with insurgents threatening a long term war, the United States and Allawi's government have refused to set a timetable to withdraw the invasion force which deposed Saddam Hussein two years ago.

Shia and Sunni Muslim political parties -- who have largely boycotted the election -- face much wrangling with Kurdish and secular rivals over the makeup of the new government and the writing of a constitution.

US President George W. Bush hailed the courage of Iraqis, saying "the advent of democracy in Iraq will serve as a powerful example to reformers throughout the entire Middle East."

The US-led coalition hopes the building up of a strong Iraqi force will blunt the threat of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and other extremists. But many US military leaders are cautious.

"We should not delude ourselves here," said Brigadier General Doug Lute, director of operations for US Central Command which runs the US military operation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"When we wake up on January 31, Iraq is still going to be a violent place, and it's still going to have an emerging government, and it's still going to have relatively immature security forces."

"The elections themselves are not going to prove to be a panacea."

The new leaders that come out of the election will have to face their lives and they also face tight political deadlines.

The 275-member national assembly has to elect a president and two deputies by a two-thirds majority.

The three-man presidency council will then have two weeks to choose a prime minister and cabinet, which must get a national assembly vote of confidence.

The assembly has until August 15 to write a draft constitution that will have to be put to a referendum by October 15.

If the referendum succeeds with a two thirds majority then an election for a permanent government will be held in December. If it fails, the whole process starts again.

If opinion polls are right, the United Iraqi Alliance, which has the blessing of the leader of the majority Shia community, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, should emerge as the biggest single force in the assembly.

But it is not certain to get a majority if the Kurdish, Sunni and other secular parties do well. There is also doubt that the alliances on Sistani's list will hold once the votes are over.

Coalition officials admit that leaves open the possibility of weeks of tense talks over the makeup of the government.

"There is a lot of horse-trading to come," one senior US official said.

The United States has sought to persuade Shia leaders to find a way to bring Sunni officials who have boycotted the election into the constitutional process.

EU eyes positive news from Iraqi polls

AFP, Brussels

European Union foreign ministers will today make an initial assessment of Iraq's landmark elections, seeking to stress the positive after polls which many hope could help turn the tide in the violence-scarred country.

Although it will be too early for results, turnout in Sunday's polls will likely be closely looked at -- notably that of Sunni Muslims -- as will the level of unrest which escalated alarmingly ahead of the polls.

On other issues, the regular Brussels talks are expected to approve proposals to strengthen ties with Ukraine after Viktor Yushchenko was finally confirmed as president of the former Soviet nation.

The EU will also suspend diplomatic sanctions against Cuba, diplomats say, but Iraq will likely dominate discussion.

Iraqi leaders hail vote as historic turning-point

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's political leaders hailed the country's first free election in half a century as the start of a new era as they cast their votes against a background of violence and fears of a low turnout.

Voting amid high-security in the heavily-fortified Green Zone, home to the government and US embassy, officials put on a brave face over the election, which was marred by a spate of rocket and mortar attacks within its first hours.

"Voting bureaux have opened all over Iraq and until now we have not been informed of any problems," Abdul Hussein al-Hindawi, the chairman of Iraq's Independent Electoral Commission, told AFP

early in the morning.

Interim President Ghazi al-Yawar was the first official to vote.

"Thank God, Thank God. Blessed are the Iraqi elections. We greet all Iraqi people and urge them not to give up their rights, to vote for Iraq, elect Iraq and not to give up on Iraq," Yawar said seconds after casting his ballot.

"I am your brother and the father of the younger generations. I tell you don't give up your rights and it is your duty to elect Iraq."

Sheikh Yawar, draped in white and yellow robes, plunked his vote in a clear plastic ballot box at 7:05 am (0405 GMT).

Iraq's interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi cast his ballot Sunday, touting it as the culmination of his eight-

month turbulent tenure in office.

"The most obvious aspect of the success of this election today is that they are being held at the scheduled date. This is an accomplishment the government and myself are very proud of," he told reporters after casting his vote.

"This is the start of a new era, for the first time, Iraqis are deciding on their own future and defying the terrorist forces," he added.

Shia political frontrunner Abdel Aziz Hakim, who tops the candidate list of Grand Ayatollah Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, also voted and hailed the day's significance.

"Today's elections are very important because they will decide the country's future," Hakim told reporters.

Hope & fear as Arabs await outcome

AFP, Cairo

Arab nations anxiously awaited the results of the first post-Saddam Hussein election in Iraq yesterday to see whether it will mark the first step on the road to democracy ... or the start of civil war.

A commentary headlined "An eye filled with fear, the other with hope" in the London-based Saudi daily Al-Sharq Al-Awsat set the mood.

The author Jabr Habib Jabr summarised Arab perplexity in the face of the ambiguous election by saying that Iraq's first democratic vote in 50 years "is a beginning ... and no beginning is ever perfect".

The vote in Iraq is a rarity in the world of strictly-controlled politics in the Middle East where there is often only one election candidate or the result is a foregone conclusion.

In neighbouring Jordan, where King Abdullah II warned in an interview with AFP last week against the risks of Iraq being partitioned, a

US must stay in Iraq after polls: Bush

UK envoy warns against premature troop pullout

REUTERS, AFP, Washington/London

White House spokeswoman Claire Buchan said Bush was told about the attack right after it happened and she reiterated his message that the US mission in Iraq would continue.

While calling Sunday's election a "turning point" in Iraq's history and a milestone in the war on terror, Bush warned it would not bring a halt to violence there.

"Terrorist violence will not end with the election," he said.

The president is under growing pressure at home to show signs of progress in Iraq, with the US death toll having surpassed 1,400 and members of Congress increasingly uneasy about the costs in blood and money.

Massachusetts Democratic Sen. Edward Kennedy, a critic of Bush's Iraq policy, said on Thursday that the United States should start to withdraw militarily and politically from Iraq and aim to pull out all troops as early as possible next year.

At least 12,000 US troops should leave at once to send a signal about US intentions to "ease the pervasive sense of occupation," Kennedy said.

Meanwhile, Britain's ambassador in Baghdad, Edward Chaplin, warned Sunday against a premature withdrawal of US, British and other foreign troops from Iraq.

The coalition-backed interim prime minister Iyad Allawi is very against setting any artificial deadline or timetable for pulling out troops, Chaplin told BBC television.

"We want as soon as possible security of the country entirely in the hands of the Iraqi security forces. We also recognize that can't be done too quickly," Chaplin added.



Security is tight and forces kept on red alert at a polling station in the Sheikh Maaruf area in the notorious Haifa Street district in Baghdad yesterday. Iraqis nervously cast ballots in their country's first election in more than 50 years yesterday as insurgents rocked the vote with string of suicide bombings and mortar attacks.

BJP leader escapes Maoist attack

AFP, PTI, New Delhi

A top Hindu nationalist leader Saturday escaped an attack by Maoist rebels who bombed his helicopter during election campaigning in east Indian state of Bihar, a report said.

M. Venkaiah Naidu, former president of the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party, was flying over Maoist-infested Gaya district when his helicopter ran out of fuel and had to make an emergency landing, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

After the aircraft landed safely and Naidu and the other occupants left the spot, Maoist rebels set the helicopter ablaze with a petrol bomb, the report said.

Elections are due in Bihar on February 3, 15 and 23.

Most parts of southern Bihar, where Gaya is located, have for decades been hotbeds of a raging Maoist insurgency.

The two main groups active in the region -- the Maoist Communist Centre and the People's War Group -- have called on voters to boycott the polls, saying elections are no solution to the problems of the rural poor whom they say they represent.

The Maoists, who have in the past killed hundreds of people, especially police personnel, often step up violence before elections in Bihar.

Meanwhile, five Maoist rebels were killed in a clash with police in southern Andhra Pradesh state, a PTI report said.

Police chief Swaranjit Sen told reporters that the five died in a gunbattle on Saturday in the jungle some 240km north of the state capital Hyderabad.



Bullet shells litter the street as onlookers watch Kuwaiti security forces surrounding a building where suspected militants were allegedly hiding in the Salmiya district, some 20km east of the capital Kuwait City yesterday. A policeman, three suspected militants and a Bahraini civilian were killed in a gunbattle, the third such heavy clash in the emirate this month, state television announced.

INDO-PAK PEACE MOVE Kasuri laments lack of progress in talks

AFP, Davos

Sensitive talks between regional rivals India and Pakistan are not making enough progress and need to be tackled "with greater seriousness," Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri said.

In an interview with AFP, he called for a "confidence-building measure" on the disputed province of Kashmir and highlighted increasing business contacts between the two countries.

"The fact that we're talking is progress, but in concrete terms we are not making much progress, not just on Kashmir but even on other issues," he added on the margins of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

"The leadership in both countries should be mindful of this fact," and must not disappoint strong peace lobbies.

"Businessmen on both sides have shown a marked inclination for improvement of relations and also there have been sporting contacts, which have helped the atmosphere," he went on.

"The people to people contact has been there. We should approach this issue with greater seriousness."

BHUTAN'S KING WARNS Maoist revolt in Nepal is escalating out of control

AFP, New Delhi

Bhutan's king has warned there is a "real threat" of the Maoist revolt in Nepal escalating out of control, adding it could have "negative implications" for both India and his country, reports Saturday said.

"We sincerely hope ... some initiatives will be taken by the political parties in Nepal to resolve the Maoist problem," said King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, the Press Trust of India quoted him as saying.

The king, who left Saturday for home after a six-day official visit to India, said the situation in Nepal was "deteriorating day-by-day," adding, "Today the Maoists have total control more or less of the whole country."

Political analysts in Nepal estimate the Maoists control over two-thirds of the impoverished landlocked nation wedged between India and China.

The Bhutanese ruler was speaking to Indian journalists in New Delhi at the close of his visit.

The Maoist rebels have been battling since 1996 to overthrow the constitutional monarchy in Nepal.

Israel to quit West Bank towns within days

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel said yesterday it was ready to hand over control of several West Bank towns to the Palestinians within days, further fuelling optimism of a genuine breakthrough in the Middle East peace process.

The announcement came ahead of a breakthrough summit between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and new Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas which Israel's public radio said had been lined up for February 8.

"The transfer of control of some towns in the West Bank should take place in the next few days," Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz told Israeli radio after meeting with former Palestinian security minister Mohammad Dahlan on the issue.

"We are finalising the details on the choice of towns and an exact date for their transfer," he added.

Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei, whose bureau chief was also present at the talks, described the meeting as "very positive" and said that the talks had also focused on the lifting of roadblocks in the West Bank.

The towns involved in the transfer agreement are said to be Ramallah, Qalqilya, Tulkarem, Jericho and possibly Bethlehem in the south.

The transfer of control in Ramallah would be of a major symbolic importance, as it now serves as the political capital of the Palestinian Authority.

Israel's willingness to hand over control in important swathes of the occupied West Bank comes after more than 4,000 Palestinian security forces took up positions across the Gaza Strip with orders to prevent rocket attacks by militant groups.

Abbas has already secured an unofficial agreement with armed factions such as Hamas for a "cooling down" period but wants Israel to reciprocate by ending its military operations in the occupied territories and starting to release Palestinian security prisoners.

Israel's official position is that any truce is an internal Palestinian issue but is clearly moving towards meeting some of Abbas's demands.

In the last few days, officials have ordered an end to offensive operations in Gaza and a severe curtailment of lethal operations against militants as well as making positive noises about releasing significant numbers of prisoners.

An announcement on the prisoners is expected to follow an upcoming summit between Sharon and Abbas which Israel's public radio said had been lined up for February 8.

An official from Sharon's office said the meeting would take place during the week starting February 6, but said no specific date had been set.

Abbas met Sharon when he was prime minister under the leadership of the late Yasser Arafat in 2003 but the proposed summit would be the first encounter between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in more than four years.

Like Sharon's government, the US boycotted all contacts with Arafat but Abbas has already received an invitation to the White House from US President George W. Bush.

While no date has been set for their meeting, the summit could well coincide with a visit by the new US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who is due in the region from around February 6.

Abbas is currently in Moscow for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin whose government is one of the four sponsors of the roadmap peace plan.

The blueprint has made next to no progress since its launch in June 2003 with Israel accusing the Palestinians of failing to meet its obligations to stop violence. The Palestinians in turn point to Israel's continued settlement activity as proof that it is violating the agreement's terms.

Abbas however has repeatedly made it clear since his election on January 9 that he is committed to the project and meeting the Palestinians' commitments.

While attacks by Palestinian militants and Israeli military activity have not completely ceased, the reduction in the last 10 days has been so dramatic to prompt hope among Israelis that the four-year Palestinian uprising is in its death throes.