

Irregularities, low turnout mar polls in Mosul

AFP, Mosul

Iraq's crunch election was marred by irregularities and low turnout in Mosul on Sunday, despite insistence from the US military that voting in the restive northern capital passed off smoothly.

Kurdish and Christian politicians charged that thousands were unable to vote in Nineveh province because of a lack of ballot papers, sparking riots in one town north of Mosul.

As night fell when polling sites closed 10 hours after they opened, US troops transported both ballot boxes and election workers to a US military base for the laborious count.

With the exception of isolated incidents, Mosul did not suffer the violence US commanders had feared in the predominantly Sunni Muslim city of about 1.5 million.

An Iraqi soldier accidentally killed a civilian, a voter was wounded by sniper fire as he left a polling station and four mortar explosions caused no casualties, said the military.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi policemen gather around ballot boxes to transport those for counting outside a polling station in Baghdad's Sadr City neighborhood yesterday. The Iraqi election commission said yesterday that turnout from the country's first free vote in half a century could be between 60 and 75 percent, although no official figure was ready.

War backers, opponents hail Iraq election

AFP, Paris

Both supporters and opponents of the US-led occupation of Iraq yesterday greeted the Iraqi election as a key breakthrough toward the restoration of sovereignty in the country.

Although there was skepticism that the democratic process would halt the tide of violence in Iraq, particularly in China, most of the official and press reaction hailed the bravery of the Iraqi people in defying threats of terror to go to the polling stations.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, paying "tribute to the courage of the Iraqi people," said the election marked "a time for reconciliation on all sides."

The question now was whether the election would lead to the political participation of all communities, including the minority Sunnis, but Annan said he was encouraged by conciliatory statements by a number

of Iraqi leaders.

It was, said the president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, "a great day for democracy and for freedom. It was a great day for the men and women of Iraq."

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, a member of the occupying coalition, said the election would help drag other Arab countries out of the "Middle Ages."

But the China Daily, which is often used by the government to distribute its views, said the vote could "provoke a backlash, deepen sectarian divisions and even push Iraq closer to civil war."

It warned that the Sunni Muslims, many of whom boycotted the vote, could be poorly represented in the new constituent assembly.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the election was "a step in the right direction, a positive event."

Speaking for the country that led

international diplomatic opposition to the invasion, French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier said the election was "a first important step," but must be followed by the withdrawal of US and other foreign troops, and adoption of a constitution that upholds the rights of all Iraq's ethnic communities.

But President George W. Bush has made no mention of withdrawal. He said he fully expected that "terrorists and insurgents will continue to wage their war against democracy," but promised that the United States would continue to support the Iraqi people.

Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn of Luxembourg, the current president of the European Union council of foreign ministers, said it was vital that minority Sunnis participate in the discussions for Iraq's future.

The EU's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, had already warned that there was little hope of stability

in Iraq unless the Sunnis participate in the process of drawing up a new constitution.

The main foreign powers in Iraq, the United States and Britain, drew comfort from the high rate of participation in the vote. The election was "a resounding success," Bush said.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw conceded there was skepticism about the election, particularly since some people had this "terribly condescending idea as to whether Iraqis, as Arabs, were ready for democracy."

However, Straw told the BBC that the election was "extraordinary," and showed "above all that democracy is a value that flows in the veins of every citizen in the world, including those poor people in Iraq who have been denied this opportunity for such a long time."

US lost track of \$9b meant for Iraq's reconstruction

AFP, Washington

The former US-led Coalition Provisional Authority headed by American Paul Bremer lost track of nearly nine billion dollars it transferred to Iraqi government ministries in a black hole of fraud, kickbacks and fund misappropriation, according to Time magazine.

In a report to hit US newsstands Monday, Time reports that the CPA left "large portions of the 8.8 billion Iraqi treasury open to fraud, kickbacks and misappropriation of funds," citing a US inspector general's audit.

The report was written by the inspector general for Iraq reconstruction Stuart Bowen, a high-powered lawyer from Texas, it said.

Time said Bowen's audit cites Bremer's oversight of the CPA with lax accounting and inadequate disclosure.

The report says that on one payroll, for example, only 602 of the 8,206 names could be confirmed, with no paper trail existing for the rest of the cash.

US rebuffs Europe on Iranian nuke talks

REUTERS, Washington

The United States has rebuffed pleas to join a European diplomatic drive to persuade Iran to give up any ambitions to add nuclear bombs to its arsenal. US officials and foreign diplomats say.

For months, Britain, France and Germany have hoped to improve their bargaining power with the Islamic republic by involving Washington in a proposed accord over an end to its uranium enrichment activities.

That effort has intensified since President Bush's re-election in November, culminating last week with ministerial visits to Condoleezza Rice days before she took up her new post as secretary of state, they said.

So far, the Americans show no sign of giving ground.

"It's what they (the Europeans) have always wanted to do," a senior Bush administration official said. "(British Foreign Secretary) Jack (Straw) came over hoping Condi would change our policy and she didn't."

Malacca Strait depth altered after tsunami

THE STAR/ ANN, Kuala Lumpur

The depth in certain stretches of the narrow Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, has changed slightly following the huge earthquake and killer waves, which struck off Indonesia last month, according to the Malaysian navy.

But the busy strait is safe for navigation as the changes were "insignificant", Assistant Chief of Staff (plans and operations) Kamarulzaman Ahmad Badaruddin told yesterday's edition of The Star.

"In certain areas, the change is just 0.2 meters while in the deep areas where the depth is about 100 meters (300 feet), the difference is between one to two meters," he said.

"A ship normally has a draft of six meters and there is normally 30 meters below the draft. So there is no possibility that a ship will run aground," he added.

The narrow waterway, which separates peninsular Malaysia from the Indonesian island of Sumatra and links the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea, is used by some 50,000 ships a year carrying a third of world trade and half its oil supplies.

US faces tough hurdles in post-election Iraq

AFP, Washington

While basking in the apparent success of Iraq's national elections Sunday, US officials still faced some tough hurdles in fashioning an exit strategy from the country America invaded nearly two years ago. Lagging efforts to train local security forces, simmering communal tensions and the daunting reconstruction needs of the war-ravaged country all clouded prospects for any early American pullout from Iraq.

President George W. Bush, while hailing Sunday's vote for a national assembly as a "resounding success" and a "great and historical achievement," made it clear Iraq had a long and bloody road ahead of it.

"Terrorists and insurgents will continue to wage their war against democracy, and we will support the

Iraqi people in their fight against them," Bush said in brief remarks at the White House.

US officials refuse to give a timetable for the withdrawal of their 150,000 troops, with Bush insisting they will stay until Iraq can defend itself against what he calls home-grown or foreign terrorists.

But the administration acknowledges that efforts to train up Iraqi security forces to take on the insurgents have been slow and plagued by problems of leadership, desertion and equipment.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said again Sunday some 120,000 Iraqis had been trained, including 50,000 police. But critics such as Democratic Senator Joseph Biden say the overall number is more like 14,000, only a third of them battle-ready.

Democratic Senator John Kerry, who lost the November presidential

election to Bush, said the administration had to take urgent action to convince Washington's European and Arab allies to help out with training.

"I will say unequivocally today that what the administration does in these next few days will decide the outcome of Iraq," he told NBC television Sunday. "And this is -- not maybe -- this is the last chance for the president to get it right."

But the question remained of how much active support Washington would be able to drum up from countries such as France and Germany that bitterly opposed the March 2003 invasion.

Training for the Iraqis was likely to be on the agenda when Rice travels to Europe later this week on a fence-mending tour ahead of Bush's trip later in February.

11 killed in Kashmir ahead of local polls

AFP, Srinagar

Eleven people, including seven civilians, were killed in fresh violence a day ahead of a crucial phase of municipal polls in restive Indian-administered Kashmir, officials said yesterday.

Police said a mother and three children were killed when suspected rebels lobbed hand grenades into the home of Muslim civilian Abdul Aziz after he refused to open the door to militants in southern Doda district early yesterday.

Aziz and three others were injured in the attack, a police spokesman said.

"The motive for the killings was not known," he said.

People in Doda town later staged a protest against the attack, witnesses said.

About 800 people took part in the demonstration as shops and businesses closed, they said.

In neighbouring Anantnag district, suspected rebels overnight stormed into another Muslim household, wounding the owner and killing his wife.

Washington breathes easier after Iraqi polls

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush and his administration breathed easier Sunday after declaring Iraq's national elections a "resounding success" and passing a risky test of their policies in the battered country.

Although the results of the vote for a national assembly were not due for weeks, Bush went before the television cameras hours after polls closed Sunday to declare the ballot a "great and historic achievement."

The president and his top aides were clearly upbeat after getting past their gamble to stick with the elections amid a murderous campaign of intimidation by insurgents and threats by many Sunni Muslims to boycott.

Bush stood firm despite questions about the polls' credibility and predictions by some analysts that they could intensify bloodshed by driving a wedge deeper between majority Shia Muslims and minority Sunnis.

For weeks, administration offi-

cials had been playing down expectations of the vote and refusing to set a threshold for acceptable turnout. Bush said last week the fact the elections were being held at all made it a success.

But with turnout estimated at nearly 60 percent -- better than in most US elections despite a wave of attacks that killed 37 people -- and even foreign experts declaring that the ballot had generally met international norms, the administration was exultant.

If Bush said that "the Iraqi people themselves made this election a resounding success," his Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was also seeing it as a victory for US staying power.

"This is a great day for an America that has always been associated with the march of freedom and trying to help those who want to aspire to freedom," Rice told Fox News Sunday.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) shakes hands with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas during their meeting in Moscow yesterday. Russia pledged "active" support for the Palestinians amid growing signs of a revival in the long-dormant Middle East peace process.

Russia backs Abbas as ME peace hopes rise

AFP, Moscow

Russia pledged its "active" support yesterday for the Palestinians amid growing signs of a revival in the long-dormant Middle East peace process as visiting Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas voiced "high hopes" Moscow would advance the drive to restart peace talks.

"You are the recognized leader of the Palestinian people and we will actively support you," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Abbas in front of reporters after the two held talks.

Speaking afterwards at the Kremlin where he held a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Abbas said there was now a "historic" opportunity to rekindle the Middle East peace process and said Russia had a decisive role to play in doing so.

"There is a historic chance to bring about peace in the region," Abbas said.

"Russia's support in bilateral relations and in the framework of the

quartet will be of decisive importance in establishing a universal and stable peace in the Middle East," the Palestinian leader said in remarks spoken in Arabic and translated into Russian by an interpreter.

Putin said he hoped Abbas would succeed in implementing measures needed to improve the Palestinian-Israeli relationship and bolster the Palestinian economy.

"We are ready to cooperate with you and the international community in an active way to resolve these issues," Putin said.

Abbas underscored that his decision to travel to Moscow before visiting the United States or the European Union was deliberate and said the Palestinians "have placed high hopes in Russia advancing the peace process."

Abbas' trip to Moscow came as Israeli media reported that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's top advisors were to meet Monday in Washington with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to discuss prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian

ceasefire.

Rice was scheduled to travel to the region February 6 and 7 and an Israeli official said a summit between Sharon and Abbas could take place the week beginning February 6, coinciding with Rice's trip.

Moscow, a member of the Middle East "quartet," enjoyed close relations in Soviet times with the Palestinians and other Arab states but its influence in the region has dwindled since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Analysts said Russia, which has also developed warm relations with Israel since then, was examining various ways to reassert its interests in the Middle East and elsewhere, and Abbas' visit marked Putin's first direct engagement in the peace process in four years.

"The main goal of the Palestinian visitor is to obtain Russia's support in anticipation of difficult negotiations with the Israelis," the respected centrist daily Izvestia said Monday.

Taiwan urges China to call off threats

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's president yesterday reiterated his call for China to renounce its threats of violence against the island, just two days before Beijing was expected to send its highest-level delegation in 10 years to Taipei.

President Chen Shui-bian, in a speech to the Solomon Islands' parliament, complained that China had 706 ballistic missiles targeting the island and was increasing the battery by 120 a year.

He called on China to "join the chorus of the Pacific countries in pursuit of peace and democracy, and to renounce the use of force to threaten the neighbouring countries."

"Taiwan would like to do everything it can to safeguard peace and the status quo in the Taiwan Strait," he added in comments released by the Presidential Office here.

"As Taiwan has long come under China's military threat ... Taiwan has stronger aspiration for peace than any other country in the world."

Beijing has repeatedly threatened to invade Taiwan should the island announce independence. Taiwan and China split in 1949 at the end of a civil war.



PHOTO: AFP

Policemen are seen on the roof of a damaged house, next to a mosque, where militants were hiding during a gunbattle with government forces in al-Qurein, 25 km south of Kuwait City yesterday. Four suspected militants and a civilian were killed in a nine-hour gunfight with security forces which resulted in the arrest of the extremists' spiritual leader.

Save the Children, Powell tipped for 2005 Nobel Peace Prize

AFP, Oslo

Humanitarian aid group Save the Children, Ukraine's new President Viktor Yushchenko and former US secretary of state Colin Powell are seen as likely candidates for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize ahead of today's deadline for nominations.

While Asia copes with the disastrous effects of the December 26 tsunamis, some have argued that humanitarian organisations involved in the largest and fastest relief effort the world has ever seen would be deserving candidates for the prestigious prize.

Former US president Bill Clinton recently said he believed that the aid effort would help to increase "religious reconciliation" and contribute to "reducing the likelihood of terror".

But choosing just one relief organisation would be hard, observers say.

The International Red Cross could be considered an obvious choice, but it has already received the prize three times -- in 1917, 1944 and 1963. The founder of the Red Cross, Henri Dunant, was also awarded the very first Peace Prize in 1901.