

US troops kill 4 in Iraq prison

AFP, Baghdad

US troops opened fire to quell a riot at a military run prison in southern Iraq, killing four inmates and wounding six, US military authorities said yesterday.

The disturbances erupted Monday during a routine search of part of the inmate area at Camp Bucca prison near the border with Kuwait, a statement said.

An investigation into the riot was under way but Lieutenant Colonel Barry Johnson, a spokesman for US military prison operations, said there was "no direct" link to the country's election on Sunday.

All of the dead and injured were Iraqi, Johnson told AFP. "Some third country nationals are held at Camp Bucca but they were not involved in the disturbances."

The troubles lasted about 45 minutes before US troops opened fire, according to the military.

"The violence erupted after a routine search for contraband in one of the camp's 10 compounds," said the statement.

"The riot quickly spread to three additional compounds, with detainees throwing rocks and fashioning weapons from materials inside their living areas."



A TV grab taken Monday from Al-Jazeera television shows the wreckage of what was alleged to be a British military transport plane in Iraq. Al-Jazeera aired a video purporting to show the downing of the plane in Iraq, saying the footage was filmed by the "Islamic National Resistance in Iraq".

Iraqi president calls for reconciliation

Final vote count starts, but results still a week away

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's interim President Ghazi al-Yawar yesterday sought reconciliation with radical Sunni parties, which boycotted the country's watershed election as the final vote count got underway.

Iraq saw a second day free of major attacks after Sunday's vote, the first free election in the country in more than 50 years.

But al-Qaeda frontman Abu Musab al-Zarqawi vowed to pursue his "holy war" against the Iraqi government and the United States said it was too early to consider a timetable for withdrawing its 150,000 troops.

Yawar, a Sunni Arab, said all parties -- except those tainted by the deadly insurgency that has gripped Iraq since Saddam Hussein's overthrow in April 2003 -- should take

part in negotiations after the election.

"We must all become involved in a dialogue and reconciliation... with everyone. All those who were not involved in violence must be part of the political process," Yawar told a press conference.

"There were no winners or losers," he said, calling the event "a victory for Iraq."

The election is likely to see Shias take power in Iraq for the first time in history after decades of oppression under Saddam's Sunni regime.

The final count of ballots started amid stringent security in Baghdad although no announcement of the final result is expected for at least five days.

But party officials said negotiations between rival parties over the makeup of the new government had already started.

The president called on the Iraqi Islamic Party, a mainstream Sunni religious faction which ordered supporters to boycott the poll, to join the drawing up of a new constitution.

Yawar also predicted that a member of the Shia majority community would have the key post of prime minister, with a Sunni president and a Kurdish head of the national assembly.

A senior Shia leader, Vice President Ibrahim Jaafari, has already indicated a similar shareout of the posts. Yawar insisted however that the arrangement should not become permanent in Iraq, saying it would be "shameful".

The president's message to Sunni groups reinforced the message of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi who on Monday urged Iraqis to unite after the election which has been praised around the world.

"All Iraqis should work together to build the future of our nation -- whether you voted or not," said Allawi, who also vowed to include the Sunnis in the next phase of the political transition.

Although turnout was higher than expected, there was still a widespread rejection in Sunni-populated regions following the boycott calls and bomb attacks during the campaign.

Iraq's most important Sunni religious organisation said it still regarded the election as illegitimate.

The Committee of Muslim Scholars, which had urged followers to boycott the poll, said it had been a "bogus" election organised to suit the United States.

The rival groups that took part are still waiting for the final results which are not expected before Sunday.

Israel puts West Bank security transfer on hold after Hamas shelling

AFP, Ramallah

Israel put the transfer of security control in parts of the West Bank on hold yesterday after Palestinian forces in the Gaza Strip failed to prevent a volley of mortar attacks by Hamas.

Palestinians had been preparing to take control in the city of Ramallah, as well as Qalqilya, Jericho and Tulkerem on Tuesday but talks between Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz and former Palestinian security minister Mohammed Dahlan on the issue on Monday night broke up without agreement.

Mofaz and Dahlan did not arrive at an agreement but they decided to transfer all the issues for more negotiations after Weisglass gets back from Washington," said Palestinian negotiator minister Saeb Erakat told AFP.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's chief advisor Dov Weisglass is currently in Washington where he has held talks

with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Weisglass has been heading the Israeli delegation at negotiations with Erakat, whose main task has been to arrange a summit between Sharon and new Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas.

Israel had appeared ready to hand over responsibility to the Palestinians in parts of the West Bank after they had managed to put a halt to attacks by militant groups in the Gaza Strip.

However a spate of mortar shelling by the radical Islamist group Hamas on Monday, in response to the killing of a Palestinian schoolgirl, has underlined the limitations of the Palestinian forces.

Israeli sources said Mofaz had told Dahlan there would be no transfers in the West Bank until there was a complete halt to the mortar attacks in Gaza.

STATE OF UNION ADDRESS

Bush for loosening of immigration laws

AP, Washington

President Bush is ready to challenge Congress to approve a stack of politically divisive measures he has proposed before without success, from major changes in Social Security to a loosening of the nation's immigration laws.

Bush will go before Congress and the nation with his annual State of the Union message tonight with the lowest approval rating of any second-term president since Richard Nixon. Yet he is in a feisty mood, insisting that his re-election has given him a mandate for change and political capital to spend in pursuing his agenda.

Even though Republicans control both houses of Congress, Bush's proposals face major obstacles. Democrats are deeply suspicious of the president, feeling he has ignored them and refused to compromise.

Kashmiri local polls end peacefully

AFP, Srinagar

The first civic elections in decades passed off peacefully yesterday in Indian Kashmir's two biggest cities despite a protest strike on the day and killings in the lead-up to the vote, officials and witnesses said.

Police and paramilitary forces imposed tight security after Muslim rebels staged a spate of deadly attacks on candidates, party workers and rallies before the elections.

Muslim separatist politicians called for a boycott of the vote. A separatist-sponsored strike took traffic off the streets and all businesses remained shut for the day, residents said.

Civic elections have not been held in Indian Kashmir for the past 27 years, partly because of an insurgency against Indian rule but also due to fears by the previous ruling National Conference party of creating a rival power base.

The elections started on January 29 in the two northern districts of

Kupwara and Baramulla with 49 percent voter turnout. On Tuesday residents of the summer capital of Srinagar and the winter capital of Jammu voted to elect mayors.

In Srinagar officials said before polling booths closed that more than 20 percent of voters had cast their ballots.

"The turnout proves people want peace and development," the region's urban development minister Ghulam Hassan Mir told reporters.

In Jammu the turnout was 40 to 45 percent, officials said. The mainly Hindu city has seen much less violence than other areas during the revolt which began in 1989 and has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

No major violence was reported. But in the Miasuma district of Srinagar, dozens of youths pelted riot police with stones and burnt car tyres.

Overnight, an election officer and a policeman were injured in a grenade attack on a polling station in Srinagar's Batamalo area, police said.



Kashmiri Muslim women walk past an Indian Border Security Force (BSF) soldier after casting their votes in local elections in Srinagar yesterday. Civic elections have not been held in Indian Kashmir for the past 27 years, partly because of the insurgency but also due to fears by the previous ruling National Conference party of the creation of a rival power base.

US JUDGE RULES Guantanamo tribunals unconstitutional

AFP, Washington

A US federal judge Monday ruled that military tribunals for international terror suspects at the Guantanamo Bay Naval base are unconstitutional, leaving in doubt the fate of hundreds of detainees at the US-run detention center in Cuba.

The administration of President George W. Bush, which created the tribunals, contested the ruling, noting that an earlier Federal Court ruling had supported US policy toward Guantanamo detainees.

"We respectfully disagree with the decision," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan.

After considering court appeals filed by 11 "enemy combatants" held at the facility, "the court concludes that the petitioners have

stated valid claims under the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution," Judge Joyce Hens Green wrote in her ruling, adding that the detentions "violate the petitioners rights to due process of law."

The Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution states that no one under US jurisdiction can be "deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law."

The court also found that some of the detainees, are in fact, covered by the Geneva Conventions.

"The court holds that at least some of the petitioners have stated valid claims under the third Geneva Convention," according to a declassified version of the federal ruling which was posted Monday on the court's website.

Sudan guilty of gross abuses in Darfur, not genocide: UN

AFP, United Nations

A UN-appointed commission accused the Sudanese government on Monday of gross, systematic human rights violations in Darfur, but stopped short of labelling the violence in the region as genocide.

The "crucial element of genocidal intent appears to be missing," said the commission's report, which recommended that the rights abuses be dealt with by the International Criminal Court (ICC) based in The Hague -- a move opposed by the United States.

The five-member commission, appointed by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in October, stressed that the absence of a genocidal policy "should not be taken in any way as detracting from the gravity of the crimes perpetrated."

Bush talks Iraq's future with world leaders

Democrats' call to lay out pullout timetable rejected

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush on Monday pushed Iraqi leaders to make sure that all Iraqis -- "whether or not they voted" in historic weekend elections -- have a voice in their new political system.

On the home front, the White House rejected calls from some opposition Democrats to lay out a timetable for withdrawing the roughly 150,000 US troops now in Iraq, saying that Iraqi security forces were not ready to replace them.

"We are committed to accelerating the process for training and equipping Iraqi security forces and making sure that they're ready to defend the country," said spokesman Scott McClellan. "There's still much work to do."

Bush discussed Iraq's future with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, as well as two of his toughest critics on the war, French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, said McClellan.

"All agreed that the election is a victory for the Iraqi people," he said. "All agreed that democracy in the

region had taken significant steps forward with the Afghan, Palestinian, and now Iraqi elections."

Bush also spoke to Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and President Ghazi al-Yawar, and all three agreed on the need to include leaders of the Sunni minority to help shape Iraq's future government, said McClellan.

They agreed that Sunday's vote was "a great success," and a blow against terrorism, and that they must "make sure that the political process is inclusive of all Iraqis, whether or not they voted," said McClellan.

"They talked about how they want to make sure that Sunni leaders, for instance, are included in drafting a constitution and they want to make sure that the government is representative of the Iraqi people," he said.

Bush, who is expected to herald Iraq's elections when he gives his annual State of the Union address on Wednesday, is scheduled to meet with Blair, Chirac and Schroeder on a fence-mending trip to Europe in late February.

McClellan declined to say whether Bush had secured fresh pledges of support for Iraq from the European leaders, declaring: "That wasn't the purpose of the calls."

Chirac spokesman Jerome Bonafont said that France was ready to "cooperate with Iraq, especially by training security forces and senior civil servants." Paris has resisted US pressure to carry out such efforts inside Iraq, however.

With the European leaders, Bush also discussed easing tensions in the Middle East, and "all agreed to support the positive steps now underway between the Israeli and Palestinian leaders."

The president also spoke to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, who "emphasized that the United Nations was prepared to continue its support to the Iraqi people," said McClellan.

Annan specifically offered UN assistance as the Iraqi national assembly set to emerge from the elections works to draft a new constitution and for "efforts to reach out to all parties to participate in the political process."



South African President Thabo Mbeki (L) and his Somali counterpart Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed listen Monday as fellow African leaders make their presentations during the last session of the two-day mid-term summit of the African Union in Abuja.