

Polls violence kills 19 in 3 Indian states

AFP, Patna

At least 19 people were killed in Maoist attacks and electoral violence as voting for provincial legislatures was held yesterday in a region that gives crucial support to India's Congress-led government.

In the biggest attack, six policemen and their civilian driver were killed in Jharkhand, one of three states where voting was underway.

The victims were killed by a landmine after escorting election staff to Palamau district, one of the many areas where Maoist rebels hold sway, senior police official M.P. Rao told the NDTV news channel.

"There is no doubt about it. It is violence unleashed by the Maoists," Rao said.

In the same area, four Maoists were killed when they tried to disrupt polling at Dandila village in Palamu district, police said. Their bodies were taken away by rebel colleagues.

Palamau, known to be a hotbed of insurgency, is among 24 seats in the 81-member Jharkhand legislature going to the polls in the first

phase Thursday.

Polling has been divided into three phases in Jharkhand and neighbouring Bihar for security reasons.

Both states are affected by Maoist insurgency and poll officials said about 100,000 security personnel were on duty to ensure a smooth ballot.

But two policemen and a woman were killed by Maoists outside a polling station in Bihar's Gaya district, 125 kilometres (78 miles) south of state capital Patna.

Elsewhere, two women were killed in the cross-fire between two rival political groups in Sasaram district, 200 kilometres (124 miles) southwest of Patna, police said.

Three other people were killed in the state, which witnessed a series of attacks by Maoists, clashes and crude bomb explosions during Thursday's vote, police told the Press Trust of India news agency.

About 32.4 million voters across Maoist-affected Jharkhand and Bihar provinces and the northern state of Haryana adjoining the Indian capital New Delhi are eligible

to vote in 178 constituencies.

PTI, quoting electoral officials, said nearly 55 percent of the electorate cast their ballots in the three states.

The rebels last week called for a boycott of the polls saying elections were no solution to the problems of the rural poor whom they claim to represent.

Thousands have died since the 1960s in rural India in uprisings by Maoist militants.

Bihar, where caste wars are frequent, has millions of unemployed youth and is considered to be India's poorest and most lawless state.

The state averages about 2,000 murders, 1,200 robberies, 14,000 assaults and thousands of cases of rioting every year.

Orders to shoot on sight unruly supporters of candidates trying to rig votes or seize ballot boxes and overrun polling stations had been given to security personnel, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

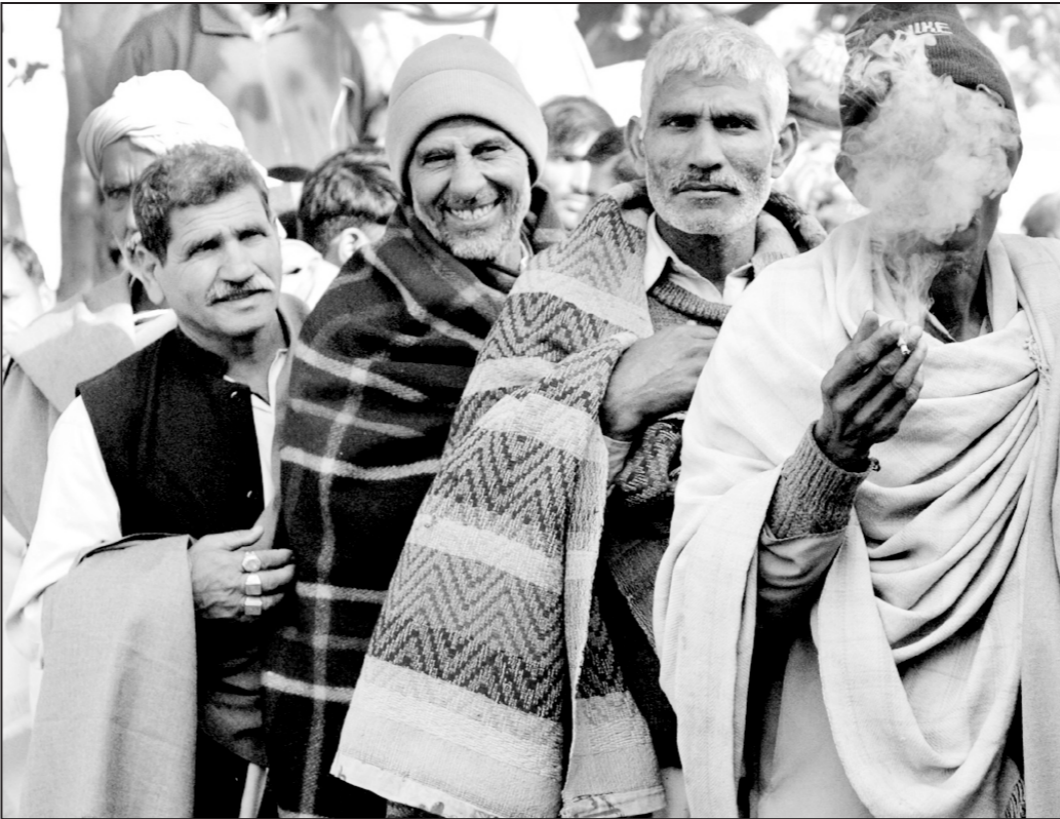


PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers line up in a cold morning outside a polling station as they wait to cast their vote for the state assembly election, in the village of Ismaila, in India's northern state of Haryana yesterday. According to opinion polls, India's ruling Congress is expected to win both Jharkhand, in India's northeast and Haryana.

Palestinians to announce truce at summit: Abbas

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinians will announce a formal ceasefire at next week's landmark Middle East summit in Egypt, new Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas said yesterday.

"We will announce a ceasefire and the Israeli side must announce the same thing," Abbas told reporters in Ramallah.

Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will meet in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh on Tuesday in what will be the first summit between the top leaders of both sides in more than four years.

The Palestinian Authority president said he had decided to accept an invitation from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as there had been "positive signals" in the peace process.

"I hope that the summit will be successful," he said. "There are many positive signals. We must go."

Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres had earlier expressed hope that there would be

a joint declaration by Abbas and Sharon for a total end to violence which has claimed some 4,700 lives since the eruption of the Palestinian Intifada in September 2000.

"I hope that during the course of this summit there will be a declaration of a total end to violence and combat," Peres told military radio.

The meeting could represent a "new chapter that will allow us to move away from the Intifada," Peres added.

A senior aide to Sharon said the meeting would not focus on negotiations over the Middle East roadmap peace plan.

"This summit will be an occasion for declarations, which will be of great significance, but it is still too early to have political negotiations on the roadmap," the official said.

Earlier report said the landmark Middle East summit in Egypt next week will not involve political negotiations on the troubled roadmap peace plan, a source close to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told AFP yesterday.

Nepali journalist group slams king's power grab defying ban on criticism

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's journalist federation yesterday condemned King Gyanendra's seizure of power as a "coup against democracy", defying a ban on criticism of the monarch's move.

The Federation of Nepalese Journalists said in the statement hand-delivered to news agencies that Tuesday's sacking of the government and its replacement by a cabinet of loyalists "has destroyed all the remaining structures of democracy."

Landline and mobile phone links and the Internet remained cut for a third day, a move seen as aimed at stifling dissent following the imposition of emergency rule which suspended free speech, assembly and other rights.

Gyanendra has said he dismissed the government of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba for failing to hold elections or to bring peace to the Himalayan nation racked by an increasingly deadly Maoist revolt.

The journalists' statement came as state-run Nepali-language daily Gorkhapatra warned in a front-page notice that any "writing or opposition to the royal proclamation" has been prohibited for six months."

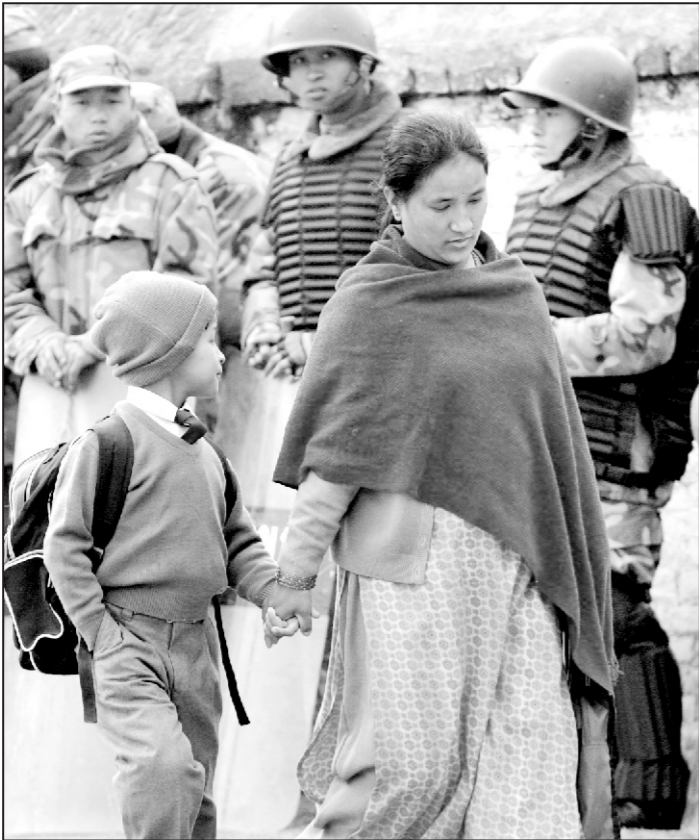


PHOTO: AFP

A Nepalese woman leads her child past riot police on stand-by in a Kathmandu street yesterday. Security was tight on the streets of Kathmandu two days after Nepal's King Gyanendra fired the government and seized power in a move that sparked international condemnation.

US warns of civil unrest in Nepal

Americans asked to defer trip, EU slams king's dismissal of govt

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday advised American citizens to defer non-essential travel to Nepal, warning of the possibility of civil unrest after King Gyanendra fired the government and seized power.

The US embassy in Nepal's capital Kathmandu may close to the public for security reasons, the State Department said in an advisory to citizens.

The department's fresh "public announcement" alerted citizens to the "possibility of civil unrest in and around Kathmandu and other urban centers in Nepal in reaction" to the king's actions on Tuesday which had led to strong international condemnation.

"US citizens in Nepal are urged to maintain a low profile, to avoid all road travel in and around Kathmandu Valley, and to exercise extra caution until the situation stabilises," the advisory said.

It said however that there was no indication of any direct threat to

private or official American citizens in the Himalayan kingdom.

Although Kathmandu's international airport has reopened, the advisory said Nepali authorities might impose curfews with little if any notice. It added that land and mobile telecommunications may not work at times.

"From time to time, the US embassy may close to the public for security reasons," it said.

Meanwhile, the European Union on Wednesday joined international condemnation of Nepalese King Gyanendra's dismissal of his government and swearing in of a new cabinet dominated by royalists.

The EU's Luxembourg presidency called for a "speedy" return to multi-party democracy.

"The EU is deeply concerned about the dissolution of the multi-party government in Nepal and the decision by the king to assume executive powers," it said in a statement in Brussels.

Nepali parties paralysed by emergency

Residents indifferent

AFP, Kathmandu

With their leaders in detention and their rights removed, Nepal's political parties have been left powerless after the king seized control of the country, while the long-suffering people of Kathmandu go about their business with apparent indifference.

The state of emergency declared on Tuesday when King Gyanendra seized power, the suspension of basic rights, notably that of assembly, and the isolation imposed on the Himalayan country, none of this is immediately apparent in the capital.

Soldiers patrol the streets, telephone lines have been cut, political activists are in detention or under house arrest. But the rhythm of life in the city does not seem to have been disrupted.

Shops are open and schools are in class. Taxi drivers are stuck in traffic jams, women shop in markets and tourists browse the boutiques.

Since the king's dramatic sacking of the government for failing to

hold elections or end an increasingly deadly Maoist revolt, there has not been one protest march or riot.

At the "democracy wall", the usual site of demonstrations in Kathmandu, all is calm.

The main parties in the sacked government -- the Nepali Congress Democratic Party and its main ally the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist -- say they have not been able to organise a response because their hands have been tied by the king's decrees.

"Because there is a gap of communication, no (telephone) landline, no mobile line, nothing has been organised yet," said a member of ousted Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's Nepali Congress Democratic Party.

About 100 political activists were arrested while their leaders were put under house arrest, which bars them from any outside contact, he said.

"We are waiting the orders of the senior leaders but they are under house arrest," he said.

Political parties are further stymied by the ban on public assembly. "Even four or five cannot gather because it has been banned," said Batshraj Pokharel, a member of the communist party.

At the heavily guarded university campuses, normally a hotbed of agitation and protest, there is simply confusion. In the absence of orders from above the usually militant student unions are floundering.

At the Padmakanya campus an activist of the Free Student's Union - close to the ousted prime minister Deuba -- acknowledges, "We are all confused about what to do."

At the Shankardeb campus, students have symbolically stopped the holding of exams while waiting to be called to action.

However, the mobilisation of a response seems only to concern activists.

It is not a concern for the man on the street occupied by daily life in the destitute country that has been gripped by a brutal Maoist insurrection since 1996.

Sunni clerics term Iraqi polls illegitimate

REUTERS, Baghdad

Leading Sunni clerics declared on Wednesday that any government emerging from Iraq's historic election would lack legitimacy because many people had boycotted a poll they said was tainted by a US-led occupation.

But President Bush said in remarks prepared for his State of the Union speech that the United States will open a "new phase" in post-election Iraq increasingly focused on training Iraqi security forces.

Emboldened by Sunday's election, the police chief in Mosul demanded that insurgents hand over their weapons in two weeks or face a police onslaught. al-Qaeda's wing in Iraq threatened to assassinate the governor of the restive northern Sunni city.

Iraqis defied militants' threats and flocked to the polls on election

day in the Shia south and Kurdish north, but many in the central Sunni Arab heartland -- where the 22-month-old anti-American insurgency is strongest -- stayed home.

While Bush's administration insisted the election was conducted fairly and world leaders heaped praise on Iraqi voters, Iraq's Muslim Clerics' Association rallied against the country's first multi-party ballot in half a century.

"These elections lack legitimacy because a large segment of different sects, parties and currents ... boycotted," the Sunni religious group said in a statement as the vote count proceeded.

"This means the coming national assembly and government that will emerge will not possess the legitimacy to enable them to draft the constitution or sign security or economic agreements."

A sense of alienation among minority Sunni Arabs, who formed

the backbone of Saddam Hussein's ruling class, poses a major challenge to Iraq's new leadership, which is certain to be dominated by members of the long-oppressed Shia majority.

Many Iraqis fear the election results, which are expected to be finalized early next week, could fuel the Sunni-led insurgency and foment sectarian strife. al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, has vowed to pursue "holy war."

"We warn the United Nations and the international community of the danger of granting these elections legitimacy because this will open a door of evil," the clerics' group said.

Bush's remarks appeared to signal a coming shift in US policy in Iraq, where the US troop role in Iraq until Sunday's elections has been both to fight insurgents and train Iraqi security forces.

7 British troops to face Iraqi murder charge

AFP, London

Seven British soldiers are to be charged with the murder of an Iraqi civilian in a further blow to the reputation of the country's armed forces, a report said yesterday.

The troops would be tried in connection with an incident shortly after the March 2003 US-led war in Iraq in which witnesses allegedly saw soldiers punching an Iraqi man and hitting him with rifle butts, the Daily Mail said.

They will be court martialled in Germany, the paper said, citing unnamed senior legal sources with British forces in the country.

Three other British troops are currently facing a court martial in Osnabrueck, Germany, for allegedly abusing Iraqi civilians at a base in the southern city of Basra.

In September last year, another British soldier was charged by civilian prosecutors with murdering an Iraqi civilian, and is to face trial in a non-military court.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (L) is accompanied by the Secretary General of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Turkish Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, as they arrive to give a press briefing at the end of their meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan and OIC, the largest grouping of Muslim countries, supported the European Union's efforts for a peaceful solution to a nuclear row between Iran and the United States.

Governor sacks BJP-ruled Goa state govt

AFP, New Delhi

The federal governor of India's western state of Goa dismissed the state's Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled government Wednesday, sparking protests from the party, report said.

The two-and-a-half-year-old BJP government was sacked despite winning a confidence vote, the Press Trust of India said.

The Congress Party, which is in power nationally, had complained about the manner in which the vote was held. The Speaker had not allowed an independent member to vote and had him removed from the legislative assembly.

The federally appointed governor, S.C. Jamir, overturned the result saying the BJP did not have the required numbers for the vote.

The BJP was furious and threatened nationwide protests.

The BJP-ruled state government had to face the trust vote after two of its regional allies withdrew their support.

Democrats bash Bush on Iraq, social security

AP, Washington

Congressional Democrats hit President Bush on Wednesday for his Iraq policies and planned Social Security overhaul, hoping a vigorous response to his State of the Union speech will fuel a turnaround from their election setbacks last fall.

The prime-time address offered center stage to the president. Democrats, though, were hoping their retorts would cast them as a moderate but energetic alternative to Bush and the Republicans who control Congress.

"We all know that the United States cannot stay in Iraq indefinitely and continue to be viewed as an occupying force," said House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi in the televised response she delivered after Bush's remarks.

"Neither should we slip out the back door, falsely declaring victory but leaving chaos," said Pelosi, D-Calif. "We have never heard a clear plan from this administration for ending our presence in Iraq."

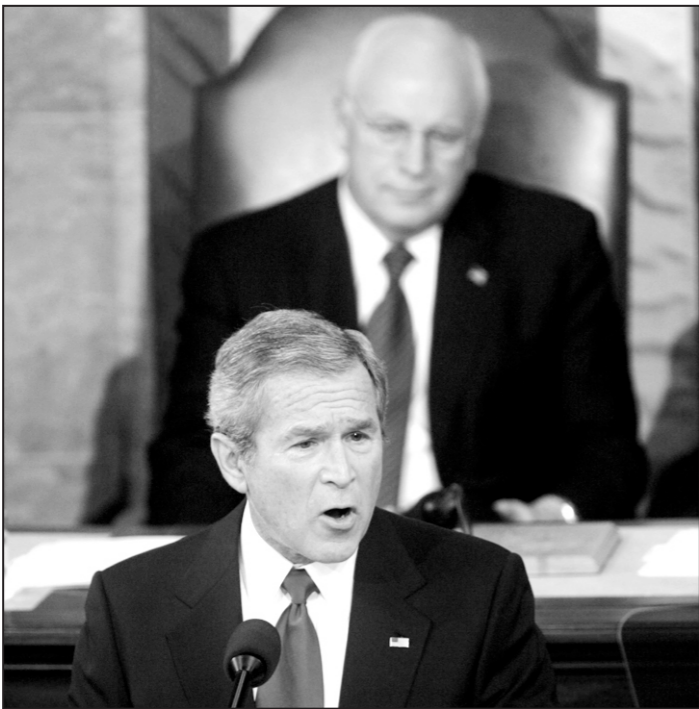


PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush delivers his State of the Union address Wednesday before a joint session of Congress on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC while Vice President Dick Cheney looks on. Bush outlined his second term agenda including Social Security, the war in Iraq and domestic issues.

'Bush laid out big ideas, but left big gaps in speech'

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush deserves praise for setting ambitious foreign and domestic goals in his second term, but his State of the Union speech did not fully address some issues and omitted other more important ones, leading US dailies said yesterday.

While the speech will be remembered for Bush's "call to stay the course in Iraq and change the course of Social Security," wrote The New York Times, "on both counts, Mr. Bush fudged the most critical points."

Hinging US withdrawal from Iraq on training better Iraqi security forces "is absolutely not enough" without demanding maximum effort from the new government in creating a state "that recognizes the rights and needs of all its citizens," the daily said.

Bush's insistence that it is inappropriate to set a timetable for with-

drawal "obscures the very immediate need to set goals, and to make it clear to the Iraqis that the continued presence of American forces depends on their meeting those goals."

The Times branded Bush's speech as "yet another feel-good paean to freedom and democracy that did little to show the American people an exit strategy for United States troops, or to show the Iraqis what we expect from them next."

The daily was also "disheartened" by Bush's "failure to mention development aid to Africa and virtually any other country that is not identified as a prime source of terrorism."

The Washington Post welcomed what it saw as a push for a two-track regional transformation: "confrontation with such hostile authoritarian regimes as Syria and Iran, and gentle prodding of allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia."

Syria calls for talks with US rejecting pressure

AFP, Damascus

Syria called yesterday for dialogue with the United States, rejecting as "futile" the mounting pressure on the regime from the administration of President George W. Bush.

In his State of the Union policy speech largely focused on the Middle East, Bush admonished Syria, saying it should end its support for "terror" and open the door to freedom.

But Syrian Information Minister Mahdi Dakhlallah told AFP: "American officials need to be convinced that the pressure on Syria is futile and that a strengthening of dialogue is the only path."

Washington has slapped sanctions on Damascus, accusing it of sponsoring international terrorism and turning a blind eye to anti-American insurgents crossing the border into neighbouring Iraq.

Dakhlallah, whose government has about 14,000 troops stationed in neighbouring Lebanon, lashed out at the Americans' use of their military might to bring about change in the region.

OIL-FOR-FOOD PROGRAMME Probe sharply raps UN staff

REUTERS, United Nations

A key probe into the UN oil-for-food programme in Iraq was sharply critical of UN management and found that the UN official running the operation had steered oil contracts to a particular firm.

"We have found in each case that the procurement process was tainted, failing to follow the established rules of the organisation designed to assure fairness and accountability," former US Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker wrote in Thursday's Wall Street Journal editorial page.

But Volcker said the administration of the programme appeared to be "free of systematic or widespread abuse."

Volcker was appointed by the United Nations to head an independent inquiry into the now-defunct \$67 billion program that was intended to ease the hardship of ordinary Iraqis under 1990 UN

sanctions.

Volcker intends to release a preliminary report on the programme last afternoon and a final one in June.

"The findings do not make for pleasant reading," he said.

But he said that allegations of conflict of interest by Secretary General Kofi Annan, whose son Kojo had worked in West Africa for a firm under contract to the United Nations in Iraq, would not be part of a preliminary report.

Most damning for the world body is Volcker's description of Benon Sevan, the UN undersecretary-general in charge of the UN programme, who is accused of steering oil contracts to a firm in the Middle East.

In documents Iraq released after the fall of Saddam Hussein, Sevan is accused of asking Iraq to give an oil contract to Africa Middle East Petroleum, a Swiss-based oil trading company.