

US won't allow Iraqi Kurds to form separate state

Washington wants Iraq to remain whole: Rice

AP, Ankara

The United States wants Iraq to remain whole now that the first round of elections is over, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in an attempt to reassure nervous Turkish leaders that Washington won't allow Iraqi Kurds to form a breakaway state.

Anti-US sentiments have been strong in Turkey since the start of the war in neighboring Iraq.

She also said Israel and the Palestinians should control their own path to peace, with help from Middle East nations and others. The United States does not need to take a leading role now, Rice said Saturday.

"When our involvement needs to take on a different character, we will do precisely that," Rice said en

route to Ankara, last stop on this leg of her European and Middle East trip. She goes to Jerusalem on Sunday, and the West Bank the following day for talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and newly elected Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas.

Later in her first trip abroad as President Bush's new chief diplomat, Rice returns to Europe for stops in Italy, France, Belgium and Luxembourg. Some of the European stops pave the way for Bush's own European trip later this month.

Rice was to meet Sunday with President Ahmet Necdet Sezer and Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul. She saw Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday.

Turks worry the war in Iraq could lead to the disintegration of the

neighboring country and the creation of a Kurdish state in the northern areas. That could embolden Kurds in southeastern Turkey, where the Turkish army has been battling Kurdish rebels since 1984. The fight has left 37,000 dead.

"I'm here really in part to say to the Turks that we are fully committed, fully committed, to a unified Iraq," Rice said aboard the plane to Turkey. "We are making that message clear through all channels that we have in Iraq."

Relations between the United States and Turkey have been strained since Turkey's parliament in 2003 refused to host US soldiers for the Iraq invasion, which most Turks strongly opposed.

The Middle East portion of Rice's trip gives her a chance to see each of the main players in what could be

renewed negotiations for a Palestinian state.

Rice will not attend a Sharon-Abbas summit in Egypt next week.

"The United States wants very much for this to be a process that is the parties' process, that is owned by the parties," and their neighbors, Rice said.

The United States will offer assistance in a variety of ways, including trying "help the parties to develop the means by which they can talk and solve the kind of crises that are inevitably going to come up as we go along," she said.

Violence is a continuing problem. "We know the rejectionists and the terrorists are going to continue to try to make statements, sometime violent statements, that they are unreconciled," to peace, she said.



PHOTO: AFP

Thailand's incumbent prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra gestures as he leaves a polling station close to his home after casting his vote with his children yesterday in Bangkok. Behind Thaksin is his son Pantongtae (2/R) and daughter Paetongtan (R). Thai Rak Thai were projected to win 399 of the 500 seats up for grabs according to exit polls carried out by Thai television networks.

3rd round of polls pass off peacefully in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The third round of voting in two sensitive districts of revolt-hit Indian Kashmir passed off peacefully Sunday amid tight security to prevent attacks by Islamic militants, officials said.

Separatist politicians and rebel groups have called on voters to shun the elections, the first in more than a quarter century, saying the polls are no substitute for the right to self-determination.

On Sunday two districts in southern Kashmir, Anantnag and Pulwama, voted to elect municipal councilors.

Both districts are strongholds of militants opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir. They want to join Kashmir with Pakistan or make it independent.

"The voting has ended and there has not been a single incidence of violence," an election official in the state summer capital Srinagar told AFP.

He said the turnout was more than 40 percent according to preliminary figures at the end of the six hours of voting.

Voting picked up in the afternoon after a slow start.



PHOTO: AFP

Two Kashmiri Muslim women cast their vote for the third round of municipal elections, in Anantnag some 55km south of Srinagar yesterday. Indian troops have ringed voting stations to prevent attacks by militants as balloting for the third round of municipal elections in Kashmir began yesterday, officials said.

Military strike on Iran will be 'mistake': EU

US main supporter of terrorism: Tehran

AFP, London

A shock military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities would be a "mistake", the European Union's foreign policy chief Javier Solana said Sunday in a British television interview.

Speaking on ITV's Jonathan Dimbleby programme, the EU's high representative for foreign and security policy said that such unilateral action would be counter-productive.

Asked about US Vice President Dick Cheney's warning last month that Israel might attack Iran's nuclear facilities without warning, Solana said: "I think that would be something I would not like to see taking place. That would be a mistake. That will complicate enormously the situation."

"Unilateral action of that nature I don't think will contribute to what is the aim of everybody," he added. "I don't think at this point in time that it is worth thinking about that."

Asked if he agreed with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw that

US military action against Iran is "inconceivable", Solana replied: "I think at this point in time military action... is very difficult to conceive."

"I don't think that the United States has at this point of time the wish or the will or the capability to do that."

Last week in London, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice insisted that a military strike against Tehran was "simply not on the agenda".

Britain, France and Germany have been involved in diplomatic efforts to get Iran to abandon any military nuclear programme in return for co-operation with civilian projects.

Asked whether he agreed with US President George W. Bush's description of Iran as "the world's primary state sponsor of terror", Solana said: "Well it's very difficult to say who is the first, or the second, or the third."

"But there is no doubt that Iran has... in its territory and financially it helps organisations which are terrorist inclined," he said, adding: "I

don't know that is being done directly by the most important people in the country."

Meanwhile, Iran accused the United States Sunday of being the world's main supporter of terrorism through its backing of Israel, and shrugged off fresh criticism from Washington as mere sour grapes.

Responding to President George W. Bush's description of Iran as "the world's primary state sponsor of terror" and his pledge to stand by supporters of democracy in the Islamic republic, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said Bush "doesn't have very good advisors".

"America is the biggest supporter of a terrorist regime: Israel. And the one who supports terrorism cannot talk about human rights," he said, also reacting US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's comment that the clerical regime was "something to be loathed".

Tigers accuse govt of dragging feet on forming aid panel

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday accused the government of dragging its feet on forming a joint panel to distribute tsunami aid, a move backed by peacebroker Norway.

The accusation came just hours after Norway made a fresh bid to set up such a mechanism to distribute aid in rebel-held areas.

"The government is dragging its feet over the establishment of a joint mechanism to take forward the rehabilitation of tsunami destroyed northeast province," S.P. Tamilselvan, political head of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), said in a statement on the Tamilnet.com website.

"The government is increasingly demonstrating its unwillingness to work with the LTTE in rebuilding the devastated areas."

Nearly 31,000 people were killed and more than 5,600 missing in Sri Lanka after the December 26 tsunami which also caused severe destruction in northeast coastal areas controlled by the Tigers.

Tamilselvan said the rebels had submitted several proposals through Norwegian officials to the government "but the government is not sincere in creating a situation that would enable us to move forward."

One such proposal was that rebels would hold majority control in distribution of aid in the Tamil-dominated east and northeast regions, which was believed to be unacceptable to Colombo.

On Saturday Norwegian ambassador Hans Bratskar held talks with the rebels in the northeastern town of Killinochchi, the rebel capital, on the issue of the aid distribution mechanism.

A high-level Norwegian delegation led by Foreign Minister Jan Petersen last month held talks with the government and the rebels on the need to cooperate in distributing foreign tsunami aid.

The ongoing battle for control of tsunami relief aid has dimmed prospects of reviving Norwegian-backed peace talks between the rebels and the Colombo government.

Spain to legalise over 5 lakh immigrants

AFP, Madrid

The Spanish government will offer legal status to an estimated 500,000 illegal immigrants who have work contracts and have been in the country for at least six months, under a major "normalisation" programme which starts today.

The aim of the process of "normalisation" is to end illegal employment and its social costs and to reduce the black economy, according to Minister for Immigration, Consuelo Rumi.

Immigrants must provide proof of their registration with a local council from before August 8 last year, proof they have no criminal record and a work contract of six months.

The length of contract can vary depending on the industry with three months for agricultural workers and for domestic workers weekly contracts of 30 hours.

Operate normally

Nepali govt asks businesses, schools

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's new government yesterday told schools and businesses to stay open despite the state of emergency declared after King Gyanendra seized power, and threatened action against anyone attempting to stage protest strikes.

"The government has imposed no prohibition on the operation of educational institutions, businesses, factories, industries, transport services and the like at present where a state of emergency has been ordered," said a statement on state radio.

Maoist rebels have threatened to bring the country to a halt unless Gyanendra reverses his power grab. Mainstream political parties have called separately for a popular movement to restore democracy.

The government said it would

take action against any opposition party or against the Maoist rebels if they call strikes aimed at disrupting life.

"The emergency was ordered in the interests of the public to consolidate the state of law and order in the country," the radio said.

Gyanendra last Tuesday fired the government of prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba for failing to organise elections or to quell a Maoist insurgency aimed at toppling the monarchy and installing a communist republic.

He named a loyalist cabinet under his chairmanship, declared a state of emergency and pledged to restore multi-party democracy in three years.

The insurgency has claimed more than 11,000 lives since 1996.

In December Maoist rebels enforced a week-long transport blockade that virtually cut off routes

into the capital for a week, severely disrupting food and fuel supplies to the Kathmandu valley.

All public phone lines, mobile services and the Internet have been cut since last week in a bid by the king to stifle dissent and prevent protests.

Scores of politicians and others have been detained and the media is operating under strict censorship.

A spokesman for the Nepali Congress party quoted by the British Broadcasting Corporation said 500 people have been detained. The Nepalese Journalist's Association said its general secretary, Bishnu Nisthuri, was among those arrested.

The takeover has stirred international condemnation from rights groups and foreign governments including neighbouring India.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese people catch up with the latest news in Kathmandu yesterday. All public phone lines, mobile services and the Internet have been cut since last week in a bid by King Gyanendra to stifle dissent and prevent protests. The media is also operating under strict censorship.

Kashmir bus plunges into gorge: 28 die

AFP, Srinagar

Twenty-eight people were killed and 34 injured when a bus plunged into a deep gorge in Indian Kashmir yesterday, police said.

The bus rolled into the 300-foot-deep (90-metre) gorge in the district of Udhampur, 200km south of Srinagar, when the driver lost control while negotiating a sharp mountain bend at the village of Barmeen Ghoudi, a police spokesman said.

"Many of the injured are in critical condition," the spokesman said, adding they were being shifted to Udhampur district hospital.

The bus was travelling to Udhampur from Chenani village on a mountain road that had been recently covered by snow, police said.

Army and paramilitary forces, backed by local police and residents, were also helping transport the injured to hospital.

Washington won a battle, but not 'war' on al-Qaeda

AFP, Washington

The United States has won a battle in Iraq with last Sunday's successful elections despite violence and threats from Islamic extremists, but, analysts concur, the war on al-Qaeda is far from over.

"It would be premature to call it a major victory," said David Rothkopf of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, who added: "It is certainly a step in the right direction. Even President Bush's critics need to acknowledge the courage of the Iraqi people."

Bush on Sunday called Iraq's first free elections in half a century "a resounding success" and said that by participating in them, "the Iraqi people have firmly rejected the anti-democratic ideology of the terrorists."

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said the election was "a blow right to

the heart of the global terrorism that threatens destruction not just in Iraq" and around the world.

Peter Singer of the Brookings Institution said: "It seems a victory. But a victory in one battle does not mean you won the war. It certainly helps."

"It does not mean it is over," he said, noting that Jordanian Islamic extremist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, with links to the al-Qaeda terror network, "is still out there."

Zarqawi pledged bloodshed in Sunday's vote to stop Iraqis from going to the polls.

But, his group's end goal -- to try and prevent people turning out -- "seems to have failed."

With violence in Iraq somewhat contained Sunday, amid Iraqis' massive turnout, "it shows they (terrorists) are even disconnected from any kind of political cause,"

said Singer.

"It seems that from at least what we have seen from the voters in Iraq, they want some kind of return in normalcy."

"... Basically these people want a functioning government and they want the violence to end. Zarqawi is not really able to offer anything other than the opposite of that."

US media on Monday applauded the elections in Iraq. The New York Times hailed it as "remarkably successful." For The Wall Street Journal the Iraqi election delivered an "eloquent rebuttal" to US critics of President Bush's Iraq policy.

A less positive Democratic opposition in the United States called for an exit strategy for US troops in Iraq. Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid said Iraq was now "a breeding ground for terrorists."

Mubarak may visit Israel after ME summit

AFP, Jerusalem

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak could agree to visit Israel for the first time in nearly a decade after hosting this week's landmark Middle East summit, Israeli military radio reported yesterday.

Mubarak has indicated to Egyptian sources that he would accept any invitation if it is made by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon during Tuesday's summit in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

Sharon's trip to Sharm el-Sheikh, where he will attend talks with new Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas, will be the first time that the Israeli leader has visited Egypt since coming to office.

Mubarak's only previous visit to Israel came when he attended the funeral of the late Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin who was assassinated by a Jewish extremist in November 1995.



PHOTO: AFP

Pope John Paul II blesses behind the window of his room at Policlinico Gemelli hospital in Rome yesterday during his first public appearance since being hospitalised with an acute respiratory infection. Deputy Secretary of State Archbishop Leonardo Sandri read the address and recited the Angelus prayer.