

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 on

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, sometimes 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 Pantongtan (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.

Britain to go tough against migration

AFP, London

Only skilled professionals will be allowed to permanently settle in Britain under measures to be announced Monday by Prime Minister Tony Blair's government, it was reported yesterday.

Only "desirable" professionals, such as doctors and teachers, will be granted leave to remain, and even then only if they pass English tests, The Observer newspaper said.

Others who come to Britain on work permits will not be able to apply to remain indefinitely, and will be forced to leave once their time in the country has run out.

The measures are not expected to affect citizens from other European Union countries who, under EU rules, are free to seek work and remain in Britain -- though under some conditions in the case of those from Eastern Europe.

The Observer said the measures would be announced Monday by Home Secretary Charles Clarke, three months before an expected general election in which immigration will be a major issue.

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.

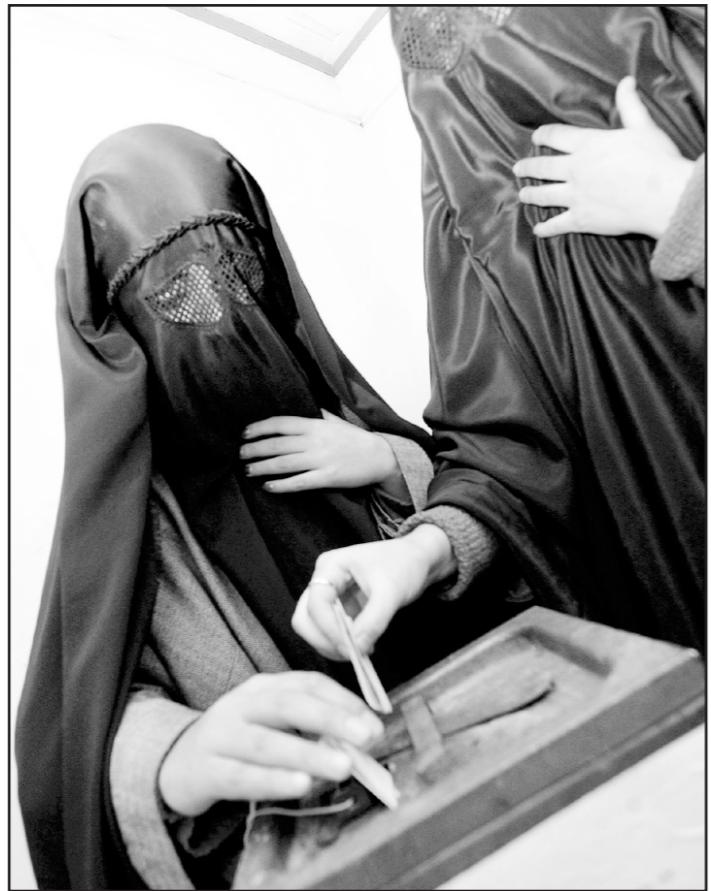


PHOTO: AFP

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.

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.

Oil-for-food probe looks into Annan's documents

AP, New York

Investigators probing alleged corruption at the United Nations oil-for-food programme are scrutinising thousands of pages of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's documents, including e-mail and phone records, to determine whether he exerted influence in securing a contract for a Swiss company that employed his son.

Paul Volcker, the head of the independent investigation, confirmed the document search and told The Associated Press that new information had led investigators to delay publishing their findings about Annan's son Kojo, whose activities have embroiled the UN chief in the growing scandal.

"There were things that came along that threw us back," Volcker said in an AP interview.

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.

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 Barneem Ghouri, 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,"

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.