



PHOTO: AFP

People carrying posters of assassinated former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri pass burning tyres during an anti-government protest in Sidon, the hometown of Hariri yesterday. Leaders of Lebanon's anti-Syrian opposition accused the Syrian and Lebanese regimes of responsibility for Monday's assassination of Hariri in Beirut.

## Lebanon on alert after Hariri killing

### Syria's hand suspected

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon was on high alert yesterday after former minister Rafiq Hariri, architect of the country's post-war reconstruction, was killed in an attack that has triggered fears of a return to civil chaos.

Several fingers of blame were pointed at the regime in neighbouring Damascus, whose dominant role in Lebanon's affairs was opposed by Hariri, a billionaire businessman and five-time prime minister.

Soldiers were patrolling the streets as Lebanon's army command ordered a mobilisation of all its units to "safeguard stability," raising its state of alert to the maximum and suspending all leave.

The country also began a three-day mourning period for the 60-

year-old Hariri who was killed along with at least nine others when a massive explosion ripped through his motorcade on Monday in an attack condemned across the globe.

Some media reports spoke of as many as 15 dead. About 100 people were also wounded in the blast that left a trail of burnt and bloodied bodies, blazing cars and rubble strewn across a busy seaford area in central Beirut in scenes reminiscent of the 1975-1990 war.

Hariri was "assassinated in a way that brings the ghosts of the not-so distant past howling into present-day reality", Lebanon's English-language Daily Star said.

"The pressing concern of the moment is how to prevent Lebanon from tottering over the brink of an abyss."

## Israel, PA reach deal on Jericho handover

AP, Jerusalem

A Palestinian negotiator said yesterday that he has reached agreement with Israel on the handover of the West Bank town of Jericho to Palestinian control, after resolving a last-minute dispute over the size of the pullback and the removal of roadblocks. Israel said negotiations are continuing.

Israel has agreed in principle to hand Jericho to Palestinian control, but the two sides have been at odds over the size of the area from which troops would withdraw.

The Palestinians want Israel to hand over Jericho as well as the adjacent Bedouin village of Al Awja, and to remove the main army checkpoint at the entrance to Jericho.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who met with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's aide Dov Weisglass late Monday, told The Associated

Press on Tuesday that Israel agreed to hand over Al Awja and remove the main checkpoint. He said security commanders were meeting Tuesday to work out the details.

However, Weisglass said the issue was not raised in his talks with Erekat.

Israeli military officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they were unaware of an agreement, but that commanders from both sides were holding more talks Tuesday.

Jericho will serve as an important model for the upcoming handover of four more West Bank towns. The Palestinians want to establish the precedent of troops withdrawing from areas, not only cities. In the past, Israel has withdrawn from Palestinian towns, but ringed them with checkpoints, severely restricting Palestinian travel.

Meanwhile, Israel's leaders grappled with opposition to a plan to

evacuate the Gaza Strip and part of the West Bank in the summer.

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, returning to the West Bank after talks with militant groups in Gaza, said he hoped to present a new Cabinet in a day or two.

According to terms of the truce announced at a summit at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheik, Israel is to hand over five towns, starting with Jericho and continuing with Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Bethlehem and finally Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian government.

Unlike previous withdrawals, Israel is also supposed to remove roadblocks around the towns, allowing for more freedom of movement. During the four years of violence, Israel has erected dozens of roadblocks in the West Bank, explaining that they are necessary for security, but crippling Palestinian society and economic life as well.

## Produce prices soar as rebel blockade bites

### Nepali king remains defiant

AFP, Kathmandu

A road blockade by Maoist rebels ground traffic in Nepal to a near-halt for a fourth consecutive day Tuesday, sending produce prices soaring in Kathmandu, as two royalist deputies appointed by King Gyanendra defended his seizure of power.

Officials at Nagdhunga checkpoint four km south of the capital, the main entry and exit point into the Kathmandu valley, said that while some vehicles were leaving under security escort, far fewer were arriving.

They said 10 buses, four fuel tankers, four trucks and 20 light

vehicles had arrived in an eight-hour period in the valley Tuesday.

In the same period, 49 buses, 24 petrol tankers, 23 trucks and 65 light vehicles had left the capital.

On a normal day, 500 buses, 500 to 600 trucks and around 170 other vehicles enter Kathmandu, with similar numbers leaving, officials said.

The Maoists declared the blockade at the weekend in protest at the king's power grab on February 1 when he sacked the government, appointed a pro-royalist cabinet headed by himself, declared a state of emergency and arrested activists.

## Natwar meets top Afghan leaders

PTI, Kabul

In the first high-level visit from India to Afghanistan after the recent elections, External Affairs Minister K Natwar Singh yesterday met top Afghan leaders to reinforce India's commitment to assist in rebuilding of the war-ravaged country.

Natwar, who arrived by a special Indian Air Force plane after initially cancelling his visit due to bad weather, straightaway drove to Arg Palace for a meeting with President Hamid Karzai.

He will be having a working lunch with his Afghan counterpart Abdullah Abdullah.

Due to his truncated schedule, Singh has cancelled some of his engagements including his meeting with former Afghan King Zahir Shah.

## Kyoto Protocol takes effect today

AFP, Tokyo

The landmark Kyoto Protocol, which hopes to slow down global warming, goes into effect today with most of the industrialised world committed to slash gas emissions but the United States and Australia holding out.

The treaty, which comes into force at 0500 GMT, seeks for the industrial world as a whole to slash its greenhouse gas emission by 5.2 percent by 2012, with targets set according to each country's pollution level.

A total of 141 countries have signed the treaty including 30 industrialized countries but not the United States or Australia, which say that

Kyoto's burden to their economies would be too great.

Growing developing countries China and India are also outside the framework, a fact pointed out by US President George W. Bush when he abandoned Kyoto as one of his first acts when taking office in 2001. The treaty came into effect after the ratification of Russia.

"The countries (outside the treaty) say they will take measures on their own but I wonder if they can work," said Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura of Japan, a close US ally.

"We want to continue urging them to join the protocol," Machimura said.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists hold a huge "Valentine to humanity" during a protest of US President George W. Bush's withdrawal of support for the Kyoto Protocol Monday near the White House on the Ellipse in Washington, DC. The US had withdrawn from the treaty citing a lack of scientific evidence on global warming.

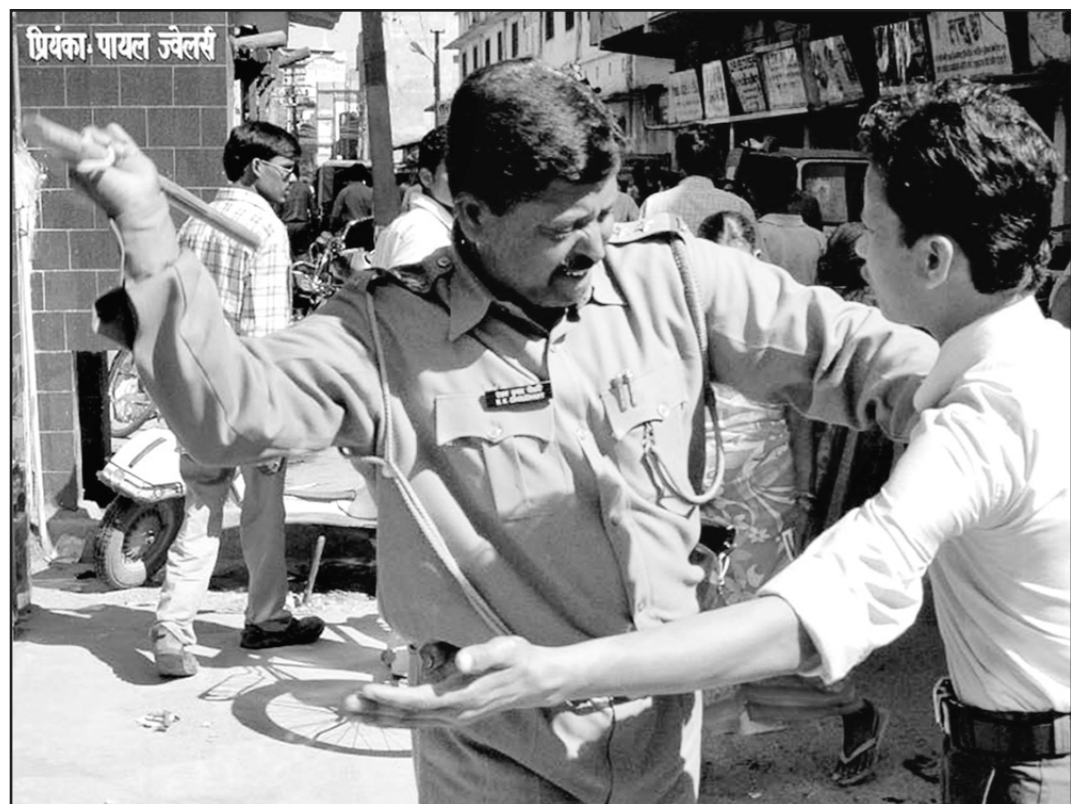


PHOTO: AFP

An Indian policeman (C) thrashes an alleged false voter with his stick as the voter asserts his innocence in Ranchi yesterday during the second stages of state elections. Voting was brisk in seven Jharkhand districts where 456 candidates including Chief Minister Arjun Munda are in the fray for 29 legislative seats in the second phase of elections in the insurgency-prone mountainous state.

## Fair turnout in Bihar, Jharkhand polls

PTI, AFP, ZPatna/Ranchi

An estimated 30 to 33 per cent of the electorate cast their votes in the second phase of the assembly polls in Bihar and Jharkhand till Tuesday afternoon with several persons, including two security personnel, injured in election-related violence, mostly in Bihar.

According to election department sources, 30 to 33 per cent votes were cast in the 82 seats in Bihar till 2 pm while in Jharkhand where elections were being held in 29 seats, the percentage was 30 per cent till 1 pm.

In Bihar 18 persons, including two security personnel, were injured in attacks and bomb blasts while an LJP candidate's house was attacked. Smashing of EVMs and clashes were also reported from some of the constituencies, spread over 15 districts.

A series of bombs exploded close to booths near the main market area in Munger town in which six persons were injured, police and official sources said.

Another six persons were injured

in a clash between supporters of two rival parties at a place in Kasba constituency in Purnea district, the sources said.

In Madhubani, anti-socials exploded bombs at a booth near Mominpur in which three persons were injured.

Two securitymen were injured following an altercation with voters at Bhagalpur Chowk in Munger town where police opened fire to foil a bid by criminals to grab a booth, the sources said.

Police commandos patrolled in helicopters during voting in crime-ridden Bihar, where 1,000 politicians were contesting 82 seats in the staggered state assembly polls.

Police opened fire to chase away suspected Maoist guerrillas in Munger but no one was injured, the spokesman said.

Police in Bihar have been authorised to open fire if mobs try to grab ballot boxes or destroy voting machines. The 114-kilometre (70-mile) border with Nepal has been sealed to prevent the entry of Maoist guerrillas from the Himalayan kingdom.

## US-led Iraq agency blamed for wasting millions

### Democrats term Iraq reconstruction scandalous

BBC ONLINE, AFP, Washington

The Coalition Provisional Authority, the US-led agency that ran Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, has been accused of wasting millions of dollars.

Speaking to a Senate panel, former CPA official Franklin Willis said the processes for handling contractors were as chaotic as the Wild West.

Almost two years after the war, 80 percent of the \$18bn set aside by the US Congress for rebuilding Iraq remains unspent.

A Pentagon spokesman said the CPA had worked under very difficult conditions.

Democratic senators called the hearing into the management of the reconstruction funds, saying the Republicans who run Congress have declined to investigate fraud in Iraq.

What they heard did not please them.

Willis told the US Senate Democratic Policy Committee there was widespread abuse and waste of money at the authority.

He showed pictures of himself and other US officials holding up plastic-wrapped bundles of \$100 notes, worth \$2m. They were used

to pay a security contractor.

Willis said a combination of inexperienced officials, fear of decision-making, lack of communications, minimal security, no banks and lots of money to spend led to a Wild West type of chaos.

These allegations of incompetence come just weeks after an audit of the CPA's handling of more than \$20bn of Iraq's own money found that a lack of oversight had left the funds open to corruption.

A Pentagon spokesman said the CPA had striven for sound management and transparency under extremely difficult conditions.

AFP adds: The Bush administration was accused Monday of allowing the US rebuilding of Iraq to become as chaotic as the Wild West, of protecting a US contractor accused of fraud and of censorship.

Senator Harry Reid, head of the opposition Democrats in the US Senate, was visibly angry over accounts of incompetence and corruption from former staff of the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq.

"This is a scandal," said a visibly angry Reid. "We are close to 24 months into this conflict with Iraq, and the administration (of US President George W. Bush) still can't seem to get it right," he said.

Reid spoke during hearings in Congress into the management of the CPA's multi-billion dollar reconstruction program.

In the hearings, civilians compared CPA operations to the Wild West, saying bags full of cash were tossed freely about, at times as footballs.

Franklin Willis, who supervised aviation for the CPA in late 2003, accused the organisation of "poor execution" and called it "naive."

He said that millions of dollars in 100-dollar bills stored in the basement of the CPA offices were casually distributed to favored contractors with little accounting discipline.

Another witness accused the government of hampering an investigation into alleged fraud US-based by Custer Battles, which had contracts worth as much as 100 million dollars in Iraq for airport security and other jobs.

Custer Battles was accused of repainting old airport equipment and billing the CPA for new equipment, among other schemes.

"We estimate that the government's total losses are tens of millions of dollars," said lawyer Alan Grayson, who represents former employees of the company.

## Talabani, Jaafari emerge front-runner to become Iraqi president, PM

REUTERS, Baghdad/Arbil

Shia politician and former exile Ibrahim al-Jaafari emerged as the front-runner yesterday to become Iraq's new prime minister while Jalal Talabani, the Iraqi Kurdish leader positioned to become the country's next president as horse-trading to decide the line-up of the next government entered the final stages.

Jaafari, a physician and father of five, is head of the Dawa Party, one of two leading religious parties in the United Iraqi Alliance, an Islamist Shia-led group which won 48 percent of the vote in elections on Jan. 30.

"The competition is still fierce but it appears so far that Jaafari will be the United Iraqi Alliance candidate because Dawa is insisting on him," a senior Shia source told Reuters.

While the alliance did not win the 60 percent it hoped for, the vote puts the coalition in a commanding position to take the top job in the next government. A two-thirds majority is needed in the newly elected National Assembly to form a government.

The alliance, formed with the backing of top Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, is headed by Dawa and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), both of which opposed Saddam Hussein from exile in Iran.

The source said SCIRI, led by

Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim, had agreed to support Jaafari and withdraw its candidate, Finance Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, "to preserve the unity of the alliance," which some had feared could collapse after the vote.

He said a final deal was unlikely Tuesday, with many more details on who gets which jobs still to be worked out.

On the other hand Jalal Talabani, the Iraqi Kurdish leader positioned to become the country's next president, crowned a lifelong struggle for Kurdish rights with huge success in the country's historic Jan. 30 election.

Polling 25 percent of the national vote, his Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and its election partner, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), are Iraq's new power brokers and Talabani is confident his wish to be president will be granted.

"We are not playing a role of siding with one bloc against another," he told Reuters after the final tally Sunday, in an assurance the Kurds will seek a constructive post-ballot role.

"But without reaching agreement there is some kind of understanding, yes. The Shias are insisting on having the post of prime minister and they are supporting Kurds to have the post of president."