

Bulgarian MPs vote to quit Iraq by year end

AFP, Sofia

Bulgaria's outgoing parliament yesterday voted for a withdrawal of all the country's troops from Iraq by the end of the year.

The decision was adopted after heated debate, with 110 votes for and 53 against and 45 MPs abstaining. Coming just days after the country suffered its 10th military fatality in Iraq, it provides for a reduction of Bulgaria's 462-strong contingent to 400 men in June, followed by a full withdrawal by December 31.

Defence Minister Nikolai Svinarov, who drafted the proposal for a withdrawal, on Thursday said Bulgaria was not abandoning its allies in Iraq.

"This decision does not mean that Bulgaria is leaving the coalition. Negotiations about new forms of participation are under way," he said, adding that the country could help to train troops in Iraq and rebuild the country.

The current Bulgarian parliament's mandate expires in two weeks, and the decision could be reviewed by the new legislature following general elections on June 25.

But it seems unlikely it will be reversed as opinion polls show that the Bulgarian Socialist Party enjoys the support of most voters.

The party has vowed to withdraw the troops from Iraq immediately if it were to win the elections.

The deployment in Iraq has been hugely unpopular with the Bulgarian public, and the government of Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg has been under pressure from the opposition and the press for more than a year to withdraw the troops.

In December 2003, seven Bulgarian soldiers were killed in attacks by insurgents, and in March this year another died in a "friendly fire" incident involving US troops, which stirred tension with Washington.

Fate of UK politicians hangs in the balance

Stakes high for Blair too in polls

AFP, London

The stakes are high for Prime Minister Tony Blair in yesterday's election as a loss or narrow win by his Labour Party may end his career, while a triumph will define him as one of Britain's political masters.

Arch-rival Michael Howard also faces a defining moment as a third successive defeat for his main opposition Conservatives -- once the strongest force in British politics -- would trigger the demise of his leadership and prompt a major shake-up of the party itself, the experts predicted.

Similarly, failure by the smaller opposition Liberal Democrats to progress will throw into doubt the

political future of their leader Charles Kennedy.

"There is a lot there at stake for Blair," said Philip Cowley, a political expert at Nottingham University.

"The nature of the campaign has hugely changed his power base in the party. It has been clear over the last four weeks that Blair is no longer the appeal that Blair once was," Cowley told AFP.

The premier's reputation has suffered irreparable damage due to his decision to back the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Hoping to boost his appeal, Blair teamed up with popular finance minister Gordon Brown -- the man most likely to succeed him -- during a month of campaigning. The premier, who turns 52 on Friday, also

took the unusual step of pledging to retire at the end of a third term if Labour is re-elected.

"It is going to be impossible for Blair to move Brown or in any way move against those who regard themselves as Brown-ites," said John Curtice, a political scientist at the University of Strathclyde, in Glasgow.

"To a degree, power and authority have already slipped," he noted.

Most opinion polls predict that Labour will maintain a three-figure majority in parliament, similar to the 161 seats it currently holds, which would enable Blair to remain in the top job until he decides to step down.



PHOTO: AFP
Tony Blair stands with his wife Cherie and sons Ewan (L) and Nicky (R) before voting at their local polling station in Trimdon, England, in the general election Thursday. Blair cast his vote in yesterday's general election in which he hopes to win a historic third stint in power for the governing Labour Party.

Terror link a challenge for Philippines: US

AFP, Manila

Links between Muslim militants and global terror groups are making efforts to end a decades-old insurgency in the Philippines especially difficult, US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick said yesterday.

The southern island of Mindanao, where Muslim insurgents have been waging a separatist rebellion since 1978, was in no immediate danger of becoming a new Afghanistan but "it remains a dangerous situation," Zoellick said here.

His comments were milder than those made last month by US embassy charge d'affaires Joseph Mussomeli who infuriated Manila when he said Mindanao was fast turning into a "mecca" for terrorism and risked "becoming like an Afghanistan situation".

Zoellick praised the government of President Gloria Arroyo for bringing the 12,000-strong Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to the negotiating table and introducing anti-terror legislation, which remains pending in Congress.

Plane crashes in DR Congo: 11 dead

AFP, Kinshasa

Eleven people were killed and one survived when an Antonov 26 plane crashed while preparing to land in the northeast Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) city of Kisangani, UN-sponsored radio reported yesterday.

Twelve people were aboard the aircraft, including six crew members, when the plane crashed Wednesday near Lubutu, some 130km from the DRC's third largest city Kisangani, Okapi radio said. There was only one survivor, it said.

US, Iran nuke row stalling arms treaty work

REUTERS, United Nations

A nuclear dispute between the United States and Iran is threatening progress at a UN conference on ways to strengthen a global treaty against the spread of nuclear arms, diplomats said on Wednesday.

Three days into its month-long run, the conference on the 1970 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty is still wrestling over its agenda -- and this reflects broader fundamental differences, diplomats said.

"Without an agenda, the meeting has no value at all. It is a very serious

business," said Algerian ambassador Abdallah Baali, who presided over a similar conference on the treaty in 2000.

The 35-year-old treaty is the bedrock pact for stemming the spread of nuclear arms.

At the heart of the agenda logjam is whether the participants in the conference will reaffirm support for earlier agreements at conferences on the treaty.

Many countries wanted the agenda to cite those agreements, but the United States opposes that because it rejects some of them -- like support for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which the US Senate failed to ratify.

Fatah, Hamas face off in municipal election

REUTERS, Gaza

Palestinians voted yesterday in municipal elections with the corruption-tinged Fatah movement of President Mahmoud Abbas facing a stiff challenge from the ascendant Islamic militant faction Hamas.

More than 2,500 candidates were vying for seats on 84 municipal councils across the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip in what could be a test of sentiment over the halting pace of political and security reforms pledged by Abbas.

"I think this election is a sort of referendum on Abu Mazen's policies," voter Amal Salahat said in the West Bank town of Bethlehem, referring to Abbas by his popular nickname.

The outcome will also shed light on prospects for Fatah and Hamas,

its main rival, in a July parliamentary election where Abbas will need a solid performance by his party to boost his mandate for peace negotiations with Israel.

Some 400,000 Palestinians were eligible to vote and a brisk 20 percent turnout was reported by mid-morning.

The election had a festive air as party activists identified by their flags -- yellow for Fatah, green for Hamas, black for Islamic Jihad and red for small leftist factions -- erected tents and greeted arriving voters.

Before this year, there had been no municipal elections in teeming Gaza since the end of the British Mandate over Palestine in 1948. All current Gaza town officials are Fatah appointees. Town elections were previously held in the West Bank in 1976.



PHOTO: AFP

Moshar al-Masri, spokesman of Hamas, votes at a polling station in Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip Thursday. Palestinians began voting early as the polls opened in more than 80 municipalities across the occupied territories in what was widely regarded as a final test of the radical Hamas movement's popularity before participating in its first legislative elections.

US can't account for \$100m spent in Iraq

AP, Washington

US government mismanagement of assets in Iraq, from the lack of proper documentation on nearly \$100 million in cash to millions of dollars worth of unaccounted-for equipment, are setting back efforts to fight corruption in the fledgling democracy, auditors and critics say.

Iraq became awash in billions of dollars in cash after the US invasion two years ago, often with few or no controls over how that money was spent and accounted for. From the \$8.8 billion provided to Iraq's interim government to millions provided to US contractors, investigations have detailed a system ripe for abuse.

The latest indication of that came Wednesday when investigators released a report saying \$96.6 million in cash could not be properly accounted for. The total included more than \$7 million that was simply gone, according to the report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction.

It said \$89.4 million in cash payments in south-central Iraq

were made without the necessary supporting documentation, the investigation found. Indications of fraud and other wrongdoing are the subject of separate, continuing probes.

Wednesday's report accused civilian contract managers of "simply washing accounts" to try to make the books balance. Staffing shortages and the quick turnover of those responsible for the cash contributed to the problems, the report said, echoing the findings in previous reports.

Examples of possible misspending in Iraq revealed in recent months include:

"Less than adequate controls" over \$8.8 billion given to the interim Iraqi government between the March 2003 invasion and the hand over of power to Iraqis on June 28, 2004.

Projected totals of nearly \$20 million in missing or unaccounted-for equipment in Baghdad and Kuwait.

A lack of proper rules governing some \$600 million in cash handed

out by US authorities. Critics say the freewheeling post-war spending in Iraq is, at best, providing a poor example for the new Iraqi government to follow.

"A normal citizen couldn't live this way," said Danielle Brian of the Project on Government Oversight, an independent watchdog group. "Until there are serious penalties imposed on agencies that are sloppy with their spending, we're just going to see more of the same."

A congressional critic of US reconstruction spending in Iraq went further.

"The US risks fostering a culture of corruption in Iraq," said Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wisconsin.

Officials of the US civilian and military administrations in Iraq say they're doing the best they can under the circumstances. The organisation now overseeing cash payments in Iraq has clamped down on documentation and is trying to reconcile its past accounts. Col. Thomas Stefanko, the official in charge of that office, told auditors.