

LEBANON POLLS

Aoun scores stunning win

REUTERS, Beirut

Firebrand former general Michel Aoun scored a stunning win yesterday in Lebanon's parliamentary elections to emerge as the main Christian political force in the country, only weeks after returning from exile.

Aoun, a prominent figure during Lebanon's civil war, dealt a major blow to the existing Christian opposition and its hopes of securing strong representation in the new 126-seat parliament and charting a course away from Syrian influence.

The polls, being held over four weekends ending on June 19, are the first without the presence of Syrian troops for three decades and are set to usher in an assembly with an anti-Syrian majority for the first time since the 1975-1990 civil war.

But Aoun's victory could complicate the new political landscape in already highly factionalized Lebanon as it boosts the chances of pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud staying in power.

Chandrika wins crucial backing to save govt

AFP, Colombo

Lanka's president won crucial support from the main opposition yesterday to save her shaky government after a coalition partner threatened to quit over a proposed aid deal with Tamil Tiger rebels, political sources said.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga held closed-door talks with main opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe after discussions with other political leaders and secured guarantees of support for her administration, a source close to the talks said.

"The message from the talks is that she should go ahead without fearing a collapse of the government," the source said.

"She was encouraged to take a decision soon, possibly tomorrow or the day after."

The one-on-one meeting was held at Kumaratunga's tightly-guarded official residence after police used batons, tear gas and water cannons to prevent saffron-robed monks from barging in.

Despite mounting protests and opposition from within the ruling Freedom Alliance coalition, the president was determined to go ahead with the "joint mechanism" to disburse aid with the Tigers, an official in her office said.

"She met with ruling party legislators and indicated that a deal could be concluded in a day or two," the official said. "The president met with MPs from the (opposition) Tamil

National Alliance separately to discuss the issue."

The government's main coalition ally, the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, has said it will quit on Thursday unless the president withdraws the aid proposal by Wednesday night.

The JVP has 39 seats in the 225-member assembly and any pullout could lead to the collapse of the 14-month-old government, which holds a slim, five-seat majority.

However, political sources said the JVP -- which claims a tsunami aid deal will lead to a separate homeland for Tamil Tiger rebels -- was more likely to quit its four cabinet positions and remain on the back bench rather than defect to the opposition and topple the administration.

"Even if the JVP quits, there are enough legislators in the opposition who support the idea of a joint mechanism and they can ensure that the government remains in office," a senior government official said.

Protestors from the National Monks' Front were halted by anti-riot squads while marching toward Kumaratunga's official residence. It was the second time in three days that police had clashed with Buddhist monks.

Police Monday also evicted protestors at the Colombo Fort railway station where a monk, Dhambara Amila, has been on a "death fast" since Saturday protesting the joint aid deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

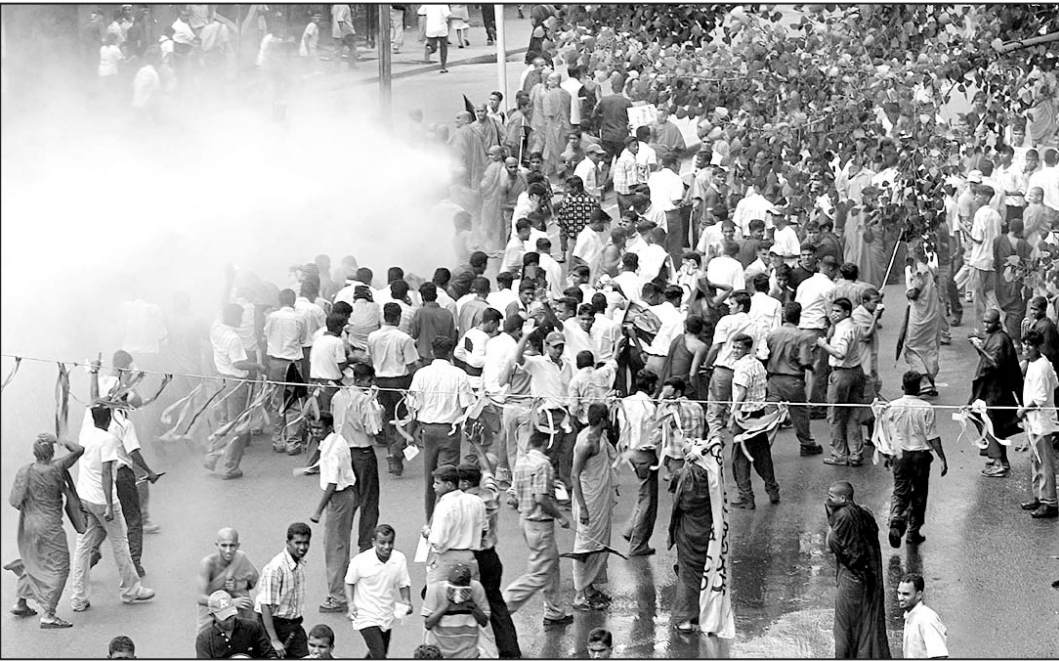


PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Buddhist monks try to escape water cannons and tear gas shells yesterday in Colombo as anti-riot squads moved to break up a protest and a march to President Chandrika Kumaratunga's tightly-guarded official residence by nationalist Buddhist monks.

Suicide bomber kills 5 GIs in Afghanistan

One die in Afghan scrap shop blast

REUTERS, AP, AFP, Kandahar

A suicide bomber drove a car packed with explosives into a US military convoy in southern Afghanistan yesterday, killing at least five American soldiers, police said.

The blast came from a taxi as a US military convoy was heading down a main road to the west of Kandahar city, said a senior police officer, who did no want to be identified.

"The latest report I have is that five people in the vehicle that was hit by the suicide car have been killed," he said. "This was a suicide attack. The person in the car that carried out the act has been torn into pieces."

An Associated Press reporter at the scene said he saw three American soldiers being carried on stretchers into a US military helicopter. Two other US helicopters were hovering overhead and several US military vehicles also had arrived at the site.

The US military could not be

immediately reached for comment on the police report of fatalities. Earlier, a US military spokesman in Kabul, Lt. Col. Jerry O'Hara, said he had not heard of the attack.

Taliban-led rebels have stepped up attacks in recent weeks, which the government claims marks an effort to sabotage legislative elections due in September.

On June 1, a suspected al-Qaeda suicide bomber killed 20 people at the funeral of an anti-Taliban cleric in Kandahar, one of the worst terror attacks here since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001.

Five American troops have also died in attacks earlier this month.

Meanwhile, a blast caused by an old explosive device ripped through a scrap metal store in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, killing a shopkeeper and injuring seven people, police said in Jalalabad.

"It was an accident, not a planned or terror explosion," General Akram Khan, police chief of the eastern province of Nangarhar, said of the blast in the city of Jalalabad.

Iraqi tribunal quizzes Saddam on Shia killings

REUTERS, Baghdad

An Iraqi judge has questioned Saddam Hussein about the killings of dozens of men from a Shia village where he survived an assassination attempt in 1982, the Iraqi special tribunal said yesterday.

It also released film of Saddam and other members of his administration being questioned by presiding judge Raad Jouhi, which a spokesman said had taken place on Sunday.

The killings at Dujail are a relatively minor incident among the crimes of which the former president is accused but there has been speculation that they might be used as a test case in an early trial.

Iraqi government officials have said they would like to put Saddam on trial in the next few months, before an election, although tribunal officials have said the timetable is not set.

A spokesman for the elected government, dominated by Shias and Kurds, said this month that it was interested in a swift trial and death sentence for Saddam, and that therefore it was not necessary to prepare cases on all the many charges of genocide and crimes against humanity he faces.

MUSHARRAF SAYS

Kashmir row can be resolved in 2 weeks if leaders want

PTI, Kuala Lumpur

The Kashmir issue can be solved in two weeks if leaders of both India and Pakistan display the political will, President Pervez Musharraf said yesterday.

Asked if he shared the optimism of some that the Kashmir issue could be settled in a couple of years, Musharraf quipped "why two years I think it can be resolved within two weeks if we have the will."

Commenting that "two weeks" was just a way of saying, he said the most important thing was for the leadership of both the nations to have the will to reach a conclusion.

"At this moment, the leadership has the will and I am very hopeful," he said on Monday during a refueling stopover on his way to Australia for a bilateral visit.

He said talks were being held on

issues such as withdrawing troops from Siachen, adding the parleys to re-deploy the troops were meant to end the "eyeball to eyeball confrontation" and "I am sure we'll reach a conclusion."

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said on Sunday that the two countries were exploring the possibility of pulling their troops out of Siachen Glacier, the world highest battlefield and turn it into a "mountain of peace".

Musharraf said he would love to visit Kashmir. "I would love to go there" but added that he would not make a formal proposal to visit the region as "the time was not ripe yet."

He also refused to affirm whether he would step down in 2007 and hand over power to a civilian leader, saying "we will cross the bridge when we come to it."

Nepal detains 50 journalists

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 50 Nepalese journalists protesting at media restrictions were arrested yesterday after a scuffle with police in the capital, witnesses said.

Members of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists, which organised the protest, were prevented by police from marching toward a restricted area near the royal palace in the city centre.

The journalists, who had shouted slogans and carried banners, briefly scuffled with police before being bundled into buses and taken away.

"This fight against press oppression will continue until press freedom is reinstated," said Tara Nath Dahal, a former president of the federation and one of the protestors.

The federation wants King Gyanendra to lift media restrictions imposed when he sacked the government and seized absolute power on February 1.

It has organised several protests

since the takeover calling for press freedom and an end to harassment and arrests.

Last week 48 journalists from the federation were arrested near the same location for protesting a continued ban on FM radio news broadcasts.

The federation said more than 2,000 reporters had lost their jobs since the takeover because several news outlets had been shut down or because of financial problems under a state of emergency that included press censorship.

Gyanendra lifted the state of emergency at the end of April but has continued to restrict press freedom and the right to protest.

The Vienna-based International Press Institute in late May placed Nepal on an international watchlist of countries where press freedom is in danger and urged Gyanendra to lift restrictions on news outlets.

The king said his takeover was necessary to end an increasingly bloody Maoist revolt.



PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiris flee after police opened fire and threw teargas shells to disperse a crowd in Pulwama, some 30km south of Srinagar yesterday. At least 15 people were killed and 70 injured yesterday by a powerful car bomb explosion near a school in the busy southern Kashmiri town.

Sonia Gandhi in Russia to meet Putin

AFP, Moscow

Sonia Gandhi, president of India's ruling Congress party, arrived in Moscow yesterday for a four-day visit to include talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in his hometown of Saint Petersburg later this week, local organisers of her visit said.

The Italian-born Gandhi, accompanied by Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh, was greeted on her arrival in Moscow by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Saltanov, according to Dialogue of Civilisations, a non-governmental group that organised Gandhi's visit.

In a statement, the group said Gandhi would privately tour sites in and around Moscow and Saint Petersburg, noting that she was travelling to Russia with the official status of "guest of the president of the Russian Federation."

Indian officials in Moscow have described the invitation as "an exceptional gesture of friendship made by the Russian president" and said Gandhi's meeting with Putin in Saint Petersburg on Thursday would be the "centrepiece" of her trip.

They also noted that it was Gandhi's first visit to a country that holds a permanent seat on the UN Security Council since she assumed the leadership of the governing, Congress-led United Programme Alliance coalition in India in May last year.

Anti-terror pact on the cards

Musharraf starts Australia tour

AFP, Canberra

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf arrived yesterday for a ground-breaking visit to Australia due to focus on counter-terrorism cooperation and links between Australian militants and guerrilla training camps in Pakistan.

General Musharraf, the first Pakistani head of state to visit Australia, will hold extensive talks with Prime Minister John Howard and other cabinet officials in Canberra on Tuesday before wrapping up his tour in Sydney Wednesday and Thursday.

He arrived at the head of a large delegation in Canberra just as a downpour began.

The focal point of the visit will be the signing of an agreement on information-sharing and other cooperation in the fight against international terrorism, Australian officials said. Trade issues are also expected to figure prominently.

Before Musharraf's arrival, Howard praised his "courageous and resolute" role in fighting terror networks such as al-Qaeda, as well as his strong personal commitment to improving relations between Pakistan and India.

"Pakistan is a key ally for Australia in the war on terror and has played a pivotal role in efforts to dismantle global terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda," he said.

Pakistan has lost scores of soldiers in military operations aimed at crushing al-Qaeda-linked insurgents who operate in the tribal areas separating Pakistan and Afghanistan.

al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden is believed hiding in the tribal areas and last month Pakistan captured Abu Farraj al-Libbi, believed to be the number three leader of the group.

But Canberra remains concerned about the links between al-Qaeda or other Pakistan-based militant movements and Islamic radicals in Southeast Asia, including Australia.

Three out of four suspects currently charged with or facing trial in Australia for terrorism offences are alleged to have obtained terrorist training in Pakistan.

The counter-terrorism accord due to be signed Tuesday is expected to include stepped up communications on other Australians suspected of involvement in the training camps.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf (L) is escorted from his plane by Frank Leverett (R), head of the Australian protocol office, as drought-breaking rain greets his arrival in Canberra yesterday at the start of his historic three-day official visit to Australia.