

OPPOSITION SAYS

Pak local polls rigged

12 killed in election-related violence, pro-Musharraf parties claim victory

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani opposition parties accused President Pervez Musharraf's government yesterday of rigging the first round of local elections, while at least 12 people died in poll-related violence.

Pro-Musharraf parties were claiming victory in Pakistan's first polls for three years, which opened on Thursday and were seen as a test of the military ruler's fight against Islamic hardliners.

Around half of Pakistan's 63-million-strong electorate was eligible to vote on Thursday. The other half will cast their ballots in the second phase of voting on August 25.

"Our fears that the elections would not be transparent came true, and the government broke all previous records for rigging," said Ghafoor

Ahmed, deputy chief of the Jamaat-i-Islami fundamentalist party.

The Pakistan People's Party of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto said the elections for district councillors and mayors were a "farce" and rigging was widespread.

It had filed complaints with Pakistan's election commission but had little hope of justice because it was picked by the government, party spokesman Taj Haider told AFP.

"Our election agents were not allowed entry while bogus votes were polled at a number of women's polling stations," said Naveed Chaudhry, the party's spokesman in Pakistan's most populous province, Punjab.

But election commission chief Abdul Hameed Dogar denied there had been any fraud in the polls, likely to be the country's last before presi-

dential elections expected in 2007.

"People took keen interest in polling and there was no complaint of rigging," Dogar was quoted as saying by the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan.

He put turnout at 50 percent but the opposition parties said it was much lower.

The ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid and the ethnic-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which both back Musharraf, said they were ahead as votes continued to be tallied.

"Moderates have defeated the forces of darkness," senior MQM official Farooq Sattar told AFP, referring to the secular parties' performance against religious parties.

Officially, the elections are being held on a non-party basis to avoid

political violence but in practice groups have openly backed candidates.

At least seven people were killed and 35 injured in election-related violence in North West Frontier Province, an Islamist-ruled region bordering Afghanistan, local officials said.

Three people were killed and 17 wounded in Bannu district while four people died and seven were hurt in a shootout at a winning candidate's rally in Nowshera town.

Some 500 protesters demanding the arrest of the attackers blocked the main road linking Nowshera with the rest of the country on Friday.

In Punjab, five people were killed in Multan, Gujranwala, Sialkot and Faisalabad districts. "By and large polling was peaceful. Violence was not widespread," Punjab home secretary Hassan Wasim Afzal told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli security forces inspect the crater caused by a rocket explosion fired from Jordan yesterday near the airport of the southern Israeli city of Eilat. One Jordanian soldier was killed when unidentified attackers Friday fired rockets from Jordan near a US warship in the port of Aqaba and to the Israeli city of Eilat in apparently coordinated strikes, security sources said.

Maldives appoints key dissident as minister

AFP, Colombo

The Maldives has named one of its top dissidents as the country's new finance minister amid sweeping political reforms in the South Asian archipelago, an official said Friday.

Ghasim Ibrahim was named finance minister on Thursday by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, said a government official in the capital island Male.

Ibrahim, a top businessman and a former member of the dissident Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), was among dozens arrested after anti-government riots in Male a year ago, government spokesman Mohamed H. Shareef said.

"He has completely renounced the MDP and is concentrating on his business and philanthropic work," Shareef told AFP by telephone.

"This is a very significant appointment at a time when the country is rebuilding after the tsunami."

Diplomatic sources said Ibrahim's defection to the government could be a blow to the dissidents, who for the first time were allowed to register themselves as a political party in the tiny archipelago in June.

UN envoy meets with Myanmar junta chief

AFP, Yangon

A UN envoy held a rare meeting with the reclusive leader of Myanmar's military government yesterday, but he said domestic politics and the release of democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi were not discussed.

Senior General Than Shwe and former Indonesian foreign minister Ali Alatas met for about 90 minutes at the office of Prime Minister Soe Win in Yangon and discussed reforms at the United Nations, Alatas told reporters.

Alatas said his latest trip was different to a 2003 visit when he was sent to discuss securing the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest since May of that year.

"I come here this time as the special envoy of the secretary general on UN reform only, not as someone who is entrusted with the task of talking about the situation in Myanmar," Alatas said.

He said had an "intensive discussion" with Than Shwe, having met Foreign Minister Nyan Win on Thursday.



PHOTO: AFP

A group of young Israeli settlers are carried away by policemen from the roof of a house in the Southern Gaza Strip Gush Katif settlement of Gadid yesterday during the Israeli uproot operation of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip.

80pc settlers evacuated

Israeli cops storm last pockets of settler resistance

REUTERS, Gadid

Israeli troops stormed one of the last pockets of resistance to withdrawal from Gaza yesterday, dragging settlers and their supporters screaming and sobbing from a settlement synagogue.

Settlers took to rooftops in the tiny Gadid enclave shouting "Nazis" as security forces swept in, hours after clearing Gaza's main anti-pullout strongholds, all but breaking the back of opposition to ending 38 years of occupation.

More than 80 percent of Gaza's 8,500 settlers have been evacuated under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's "disengagement plan," and officials said the operation could be completed by Tuesday, far ahead of schedule.

With the latest poll confirming solid support among the Israeli public for the first removal of settlements from land Palestinians want for a state, troops rushed to wrap up their toughest tasks before the start of the Jewish Sabbath at sunset.

Pushing past burning barri-

acades, security forces in riot gear surrounded Gadid's synagogue and forced their way in as 90 protesters who had barricaded themselves inside lay on the floor, crying and shouting.

Police wrestled them out one by one, as they had in assaults on Thursday on two other synagogues in headline settlements.

"This is a desecration of everything that is sacred to Jews," said Boaz Puterel, 30, echoing the belief of ultranationalist Israelis that the Gaza Strip is part of God's gift to the Jewish people and should never be relinquished.

Many of Gadid's 350 residents had already left before troops moved in, but a few families and dozens of protesters defiantly remained. Columns of smoke rose from piles of burning tires and debris as soldiers went door to door ordering people out.

After negotiations failed on Thursday, troops stormed synagogues in Neve Dekalim, the biggest Gaza enclave, and in the religious community of Kfar Darom, scene of the most frenzied clashes.

Police used cranes and water cannon to battle protesters on the roof of Kfar Darom's house of worship, who fought back with rocks, paint-filled light bulbs and chemical irritants. The army said 31 security personnel were hurt.

Opponents of the pullout were also dragged kicking and screaming from Neve Dekalim's synagogue after troops moved in.

"I am totally exhausted, but it has not been for nothing," said protester Shlomit Binyamin, 17, in Neve Dekalim. "I hope the people of Israel will ensure there will be no more disengagement. We must continue the fight."

Dramatic television footage beamed around the world showed Israeli forces forcibly evicting settlers, and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Sharon had shown courage.

Along with a hard core of settlers, hundreds of rightists who had infiltrated settlements in the past few weeks have also been expelled or detained.

Israeli opponents of the pullout call it a victory for Palestinian mili-

itants -- a view echoed by the gunmen themselves -- and a betrayal of a biblical claim that could set a precedent elsewhere.

Sharon says the process will reduce conflict with the Palestinians and improve Israeli security. A new poll for the daily Yedioth Ahronoth showed 59 percent support it.

Political analysts say the Gaza evacuation could also reduce foreign pressure to give up bigger settlements in the West Bank, land the Palestinians also want.

Some mainstream Israelis believe anti-pullout forces are trying to make the process as traumatic as possible so the government will not attempt future withdrawals.

Palestinians welcome the removal of the Gaza settlers and another 500 from the West Bank, but fear Israel aims to keep most of the other communities housing 230,000 settlers forever. Some 3.8 million Palestinians live in Gaza and the West Bank.

MOVE TO SALVAGE TROUBLED TRUCE

Govt, Tigers to hold talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels have agreed to hold their first high-level talks in 30 months in a bid to salvage their troubled truce after the killing of the foreign minister, peace broker Norway said yesterday.

Norwegian chief mediator Vidar Helgesen said no decision had been made on the exact date or location of the talks although the rebels said they would be held in Oslo "in a couple of weeks."

"We reached an agreement to hold talks on the ceasefire. The location and the date have not been decided," Helgesen told AFP in Oslo.

The Norwegian Foreign Ministry later said the meeting "will take place shortly," but it did not give a venue.

Scandinavian truce monitors had warned that the assassination of foreign minister Lakshman

Kadirgamar last Friday was a major setback for the truce and could jeopardise the entire peace process.

The government has blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the assassination but the rebels have denied responsibility. Kadirgamar had been a vociferous critic of the Tigers.

The Tigers and the Colombo government had their last high-level contact in March 2003 in Hakone, Japan when they had their sixth round of peace talks since starting negotiations in September 2002 after 60,000 deaths in three decades of war.

In April 2003, the Tigers refused to attend the seventh round of talks after accusing Colombo of trying to sideline them in efforts to raise money abroad in support of the island's peace bid aimed at ending three decades of fighting.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet website quoted the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

Eelam's London-based chief negotiator Anton Balasingham as saying that they wanted to discuss the implementation of the truce that went into effect from February 23, 2002.

"The LTTE's theoretician (Anton Balasingham) revealed that the talks, facilitated by the Norwegians, would be held in Oslo within the next couple of weeks," the Tamilnet website said.

Norwegian Foreign Minister Jan Petersen had proposed the face-to-face talks with the Sri Lankan government during a meeting with Balasingham at his home in London on Wednesday on his way back from attending the funeral of Kadirgamar in Colombo.

"The LTTE leader has positively considered the Norwegian proposals and agreed to send a high-level delegation to participate in the talks with the Sri Lanka government," the website quoted Balasingham as saying.

Unilever Nepal closed after Maoist threats

Six rebels killed

AFP, Kathmandu

Threats by a pro-Maoist union in Nepal forced the shutdown Thursday of a unit of Indian consumer products giant Hindustan Lever, the company said.

The closure of Unilever Nepal in Hetaunda, 90km south of the capital Kathmandu, was the latest blow to impoverished Nepal's economy, reeling from a Maoist revolt which has claimed over 12,000 lives since 1996.

The closure came after the All Nepal Trade Union warned Unilever Nepal in a letter that if it failed to meet a 15-point set of demands by August 16 "the factory would not be permitted to operate and further actions would be taken," a company statement said.

The letter did not specify what steps might be taken. But companies which ignore Maoist demands

are often torched or bombed by rebels and their employees warned they face physical harm if they report for work, police say.

Unilever Nepal, employing around 2,000 workers directly and indirectly, is 80 percent owned by Hindustan Lever Ltd, the Indian subsidiary of Anglo-Dutch giant Unilever Plc, a senior company official said.

Meanwhile, six Maoist rebels were killed and a government soldier wounded during a clash in western Nepal, a security force official said yesterday.

"The Maoists suddenly attacked a security patrol team at Pipaldanda village in Dallekh district and when the security personnel retaliated, six terrorists were killed while a soldier was injured," the official said.



PHOTO: AFP

Members of Free Aceh Movement (GAM) arrive at Banda Aceh's airport after their release from a Central Java jail Thursday. The government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) signed a peace accord in Helsinki on August 15 after six months of negotiations, paving the way for an end to almost three decades of bloodshed that has claimed about 15,000 lives.

Moroccan gets 7-yr sentence in Hamburg 9/11 trial

REUTERS, Hamburg

Moroccan Mounir El Motassadeq received a seven-year jail sentence on Friday after being found guilty in a German court of belonging to a terrorist group.

It was still unclear how the court had ruled on a separate charge of Motassadeq being an accessory to the September 11 attacks on the United States.

The verdict came after a year-long retrial at which prosecutors had tried to prove Motassadeq helped plot the suicide hijack attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people in 2001. He had been convicted on both charges at a first trial in 2003, but that ruling was quashed on appeal.

The outcome hinged largely on evidence from captured al-Qaeda prisoners, which the United States withheld from Motassadeq's first trial and made available only in limited form at the retrial.

Washington declined, on security grounds, to let the court question the prisoners, including two senior figures being interrogated at secret locations on suspicion of masterminding the attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranians demonstrate in support of resuming operations at the Isfahan's uranium conversion plant after Juma prayers at the Enqelab (Revolution) Square in Tehran. Iran's Islamic regime is as "solid as a mountain" and can easily stand up to international pressure for it to abandon sensitive nuclear activities, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said yesterday.

IRAN'S SUPREME LEADER SAYS

Blame it on US for Iraq bombings

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday denied fresh US allegations that the Islamic republic was linked to bombings in Iraq, and instead pointed the finger at US occupying forces.

"We support the government of Iraq. We are very disturbed by the lack of security in Iraq, especially the daily killings of the Iraqi people," Khamenei said in a sermon at Tehran University.

"American machine-guns are criminal, but those elements who plant bombs are also criminals," he added.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Tuesday that US forces had found Iranian weapons inside Iraq on more than one occasion over the past couple of months, accusing Tehran of seeking to replicate its own Islamic regime in Iraq by backing insurgents.

The previous week a US intelligence official told AFP last week that Washington believes at least one

cache of newly manufactured bombs came from Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

But Khamenei said the United States was behind the regular bombings, arguing that Washington needed a "pretext" to stay put in Iraq.

"For us, the prime suspect in these incidents is America, because terrorism in Iraq functions under the eyes of the US. Thousands of Americans forces are spread across Iraq and if they wanted to eradicate insecurity they could have," he said.

"There are some signs which point to the spy services of the US and Zionist regime (Israel). They do not want this (Iraqi) government to be successful, because insecurity is their pretext to stay," he added.

"Accusing Iraq and Syria," he said, "cannot clear themselves."

Iran was also "firm in letting no one infiltrate" Iraq even though the two country share a 1,300-kilometre (810 mile) border, but explained that "even the Americans cannot stop the Mexicans cross their border".

BAGHDAD SAYS

Bombers seek civil war

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq said the deadly rush-hour Baghdad bombings sought to create a sectarian crisis in the country as the United States rejected Russian President Vladimir Putin's call for a timetable on foreign troop withdrawal from Iraq.

Insurgents killed four US soldiers and eight other Iraqis, including a child, in separate attacks Thursday across the country.

The US soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb in the northern town of Samarra, the military said, taking to around 50 the US military deaths across Iraq in August, according to an AFP tally based on Pentagon figures.

The total US military deaths in Iraq since the March 2003 invasion reached 1,856 Thursday, according to Pentagon figures.

Shattering the capital's relative calm of recent weeks, at least 43 people were killed Wednesday when three car bombs ripped through a central Baghdad bus station and a nearby hospital.

Baghdad said the bombings were aimed at triggering a civil war.

"The bombs exploded in a Shia dominated area of Baghdad, and the message that they (rebels) wanted to send was that the government is incapable of protecting you (Shias) from them," government spokesman Leith Kubba said.

"Such a criminal act will definitely arouse passion among Shias -- they (insurgents) want the Shias to attack the Sunnis and that will serve the insurgents' purpose. They want to trigger sectarian crisis."

Iraq's ousted Sunni Arab elite is believed to form the backbone of the raging insurgency that has ravaged Iraq since the ousting of Saddam Hussein.

Wednesday's bombings came two days after Iraqi leaders failed to draft a new constitution, due to be put to a referendum in October, and a key phase in Iraq's political transition which the United States and its allies hope could pave the way to a pullout of foreign troops.

Meanwhile, Putin called for an international conference on Iraq by year's end and a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country, saying they were considered "occupying forces" by many

Iraqis.

"We consider that holding an international conference this year would give a new impulse to the normalisation of the situation" in Iraq, Putin said.

Russia has a long history of close ties with Iraq and was among the leading critics of the US-led war that ousted Saddam Hussein.

In Washington, a State Department spokesman rejected Putin's call for a timetable on withdrawal and withheld comment on his proposal for an international conference.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack echoed President George W. Bush's refusal to lay out a calendar for withdrawing the 138,000 American troops in Iraq.

The spokesman added that a Russian delegation already attended an international conference on Iraqi reconstruction June 22 in Brussels.

A top Western diplomat closely involved with the constitution drafting process said the deadline could be extended again.