

11 killed in 2nd round of Pak local polls

AFP, Islamabad

Clashes between rival political gangs in Pakistan left 11 people dead and dozens more injured yesterday as voters cast their ballots in the second round of key local elections.

Tens of thousands of troops and police were deployed in "sensitive" areas across the Islamic republic of 150 million people after the first phase of the polls a week ago were marred by violence and claims of rigging.

"We will ensure law and order during polling," Information Minister Sheikh Rashid told AFP earlier. "Large scale security deployments and adequate measures have been put in place."

Although the polls are officially being held on a non-party basis to prevent violent incidents, in practice political groups have been open in their support for candidates.

"So far we have reports of 11 people killed in election-related violence," a senior security official in Islamabad told AFP.

Eight died in Punjab, the most populous of Pakistan's four provinces -- two in the central city of Jhang, three in the town of Jaranwala and one each in the provincial capital Lahore and in the towns of Muridke and Jhelum.

Another two people died in Kohistan, a remote mountainous district in

North West Frontier Province, he added.

At least 20 people were killed and more than 700 injured in the first round of the polls on August 18.

The elections are being seen not only as a test of President Pervez Musharraf's bid to sideline hardline Islamic parties, but also as a yardstick of his popularity ahead of national polls due in October 2007.

Parties loyal to military ruler Musharraf have claimed victory in last week's round of voting but opposition groups, including the party of exiled former premier Benazir Bhutto, have alleged widespread electoral fraud.

The interior ministry, which is responsible for security, said tens of thousands of army and paramilitary soldiers would patrol the streets alongside police to prevent violence and attempts to rig the polls.

"Security will be particularly enhanced and intensified in areas which are declared sensitive because of previous violence," a top official at the ministry said on condition of anonymity.

Some 60,000 security personnel had been deployed to protect the southern province of Sindh alone, officials said.

"We will not allow anyone to take the law into their own hands and there are clear orders to arrest and punish those who try," said the provincial interior secretary Brigadier Ghulam Mohammad Mohatram.



Pakistani women display their national identification cards whilst waiting to cast their vote at a polling station in Lahore yesterday. At least 11 people were killed in violence between rival political groups as Pakistanis voted in the second phase of municipal elections.

THAI PM SAYS Myanmar coup rumours untrue

AFP, Bangkok

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said yesterday that Thailand has discounted rumours of a coup in Myanmar which have circulated in the military-run country this week, causing the kyat currency to fall.

"The coup d'etat in Myanmar is not true. It is a rumour that has been released. We have checked the information with all of our sources," he said at a regular press conference.

The rumours emerged on Tuesday, apparently triggered by an interview on BBC's Burmese-language radio that said Myanmar's military ruler Senior General Than Shwe had been forced to retire by number-two General Maung Aye.

Diplomats in the Myanmar capital Yangon said the city was quiet, that the government was giving every sign of being in business as usual, and that they were extremely sceptical a coup had taken place.



Chief ministers of the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh Mulayam Singh Yadav (L) and Madhya Pradesh Babulal Gaur (R) sign a MoU to link two key central Indian rivers as Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) looks on in New Delhi yesterday. The pact is part of the national project "Inter-Linking of Rivers" which aims at shoring up surplus water resources to combat droughts and floods.

Trio talk security ahead of Afghan election

AFP, Islamabad

Top Afghan and Pakistani military commanders met Wednesday amid increasingly deadly militant attacks and concerns over border security ahead of next month's parliamentary polls in Afghanistan, Pakistan's foreign office said.

The talks between the generals were part of a regular meeting of a tripartite commission established with the United States in 2003, and the participants "examined ways to deepen their military-to-military relationship in the interest of long-term regional stability", it said.

The meeting, the 12th between the United States and its key allies in the "war on terror", came as Islamic militants in Afghanistan vowed to disrupt the country's first legislative polls.

Lanka wants talks with Tigers at home

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka ruled out Norway or any location outside the country for talks with Tamil Tiger rebels to salvage a fragile ceasefire, a spokesman said.

"The government stand is that it is more practical to hold it here," spokesman Nimal Siripala de Silva told reporters on Thursday, adding the talks would only focus on securing the February 2002 ceasefire.

Norway is still trying to get agreement between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil rebels on the timing and venue for talks aimed at bolstering their truce, a Norwegian spokesman said Wednesday.

But the parties have not yet agreed on the timing or a location, Norwegian embassy spokesman Tom Knappskog said.

"There's no agreement on that," Knappskog told AFP. "That's what we're working on at the moment -- to finalise a date and a venue."

The deputy director general of the government's Peace Secretariat, John Gunaratne, said the whole question of the timing and venue was being discussed. He was responding to a media report that the Colombo government opposed Oslo as the venue.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) agreed last week to the government call for talks on the ceasefire after the assassination of the island's foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar on August 12.

The government has accused the LTTE of the murder, a charge the Tamil separatist group denies.

De Silva, who is also the health minister, said they were yet to receive a response from the LTTE on the suggestion of talks in Sri Lanka. The LTTE has called for talks in Norway, which brokered the truce.

Landslides kill 12 in India

AFP, Guwahati

Twelve people were killed and 20 injured in landslides triggered by monsoon rains in India's northeastern Assam state as the main Brahmaputra River swelled to danger levels, officials said yesterday.

Several landslides occurred from Wednesday to Thursday as heavy monsoon rains that sweep India from June to September caused flooding along the banks of the Brahmaputra near the state capital, a city district magistrate said.

"There were at least five major incidents since Wednesday when mounds of earth trapped people residing near hills in and around the city," Guwahati district magistrate Samir Sinha said.

Indian govt, judiciary at loggerheads

AFP, New Delhi

India's government and its courts are at loggerheads again, this time over an affirmative action policy, which reserves places in private colleges for students from disadvantaged communities.

Each side has accused the other of crossing the constitutional divide between the legislature, executive and judiciary.

New Delhi stirred the standoff by criticising an August 12 court ruling overturning government policy that private, unaided professional colleges reserve a quota of places for students from disadvantaged communities.

Chief Justice R.C. Lahoti hit back Tuesday, accusing the Congress party government of attacking a judgement without understanding it and declaring the Supreme Court's strong exception to "unwanted criticism".

"If this is the attitude of the government to go after a judgement of the court without understanding it, then wind up the courts and do whatever you want," court officials quoted the judge as saying.

"Why are we told time and again by the government that it is not taking a confrontationalist attitude?" Lahoti told Attorney General Milon Bannerjee.

"You must advise the government to exercise self-restraint. If that is your attitude then let us do our duty and you continue doing yours."

16 militants killed in Afghan fighting

REUTERS, AFP, Kabul

US and Afghan forces backed by a giant B-52 bomber, A-10 attack aircraft and helicopters killed an estimated 16 militants in southern Afghanistan in the past two days, the US military said yesterday.

The militants were killed on Tuesday and Wednesday during an operation codenamed Vigilant Sentinel aimed at ensuring security for September 18 parliamentary and provincial council elections.

The US military said six militants were killed on Tuesday after Afghan and US forces saw them planting

improvised explosive devices in Shinkay district of Zabul province.

An Afghan and US patrol also pinned down another group of militants southeast of the town of Tarin Kot and called in a B-52 bomber, A-10 attack aircraft and attack helicopters, it said, adding that casualties there were being assessed.

In other incidents on Wednesday, five militants were killed by aircraft and ground fire northeast of Tarin Kot five more in Kandahar province, the statement said, adding that there were no US casualties or damage in any of the incidents.



Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh Hemayet Uddin called on Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf at Rawalpindi during his recent visit to Pakistan.