

New poll finds Bush ratings down

REUTERS, Washington

President George W. Bush's approval rating slipped to a career low of 45 percent on concerns over the Iraq war and spiraling US fuel prices, according to an ABC News/Washington Post poll published on Tuesday.

The poll of more than 1,000 people found that 57 percent disapprove of Bush's handling of the war and 68 percent regard the level of American casualties as unacceptable.

But a majority of respondents, 54 percent, said the United States should keep its forces in Iraq until civil order is restored. Fifty-nine percent said they do not think a deadline should be set for the withdrawal of US troops.

Bush has rejected anti-war protesters' calls for a troop withdrawal and appealed to Americans not to waver because of the rising death toll, now nearly 1,900.

Bush's overall rating was two percentage points down from the previous low of 47 percent, according to the poll.

Death, damage, chaos in Katrina's path

REUTERS, New Orleans

Hellish scenes of death, damage, and chaos wracked the US Gulf Coast on Wednesday as overwhelmed authorities tried to rescue the living and count the dead amid the destruction left by powerful Hurricane Katrina.

New Orleans was filling with water after an initial attempt to stop a leaking levee failed, while police fought a losing battle to stop widespread looting in the stricken city.

In Mississippi, officials confirmed that at least 100 people had died in the killer storm and said the death toll was almost certain to go much higher.

"We're just estimating, but the number could go double or triple from what we're talking about now," a civil defense director told the Jackson, Mississippi Clarion Ledger.

Biloxi, Mississippi spokesman Vincent Creel earlier told Reuters of the death toll: "It's going to be in the

hundreds."

US Sen. Mary Landrieu told reporters she had heard at least 50 to 100 people were dead in New Orleans, where rescue teams were so busy saving people stranded in flooded homes they had to leave bodies floating in the high waters.

Louisiana officials said 3,000 people had been rescued, but many more were waiting to be picked up by rescuers in boats who cruised up and down flooded streets or helicopters buzzing overhead.

"I'm alive. I'm alive," shouted one joyous woman as she was ferried from a home nearly swallowed by the rising waters.

Katrina struck Louisiana on Monday with 140 mile per hour winds, while slamming into the coasts of neighboring Mississippi, Alabama and western Florida.

A 30-foot (10-meter) storm surge in Mississippi wiped away 90 percent of the buildings along the coast at Biloxi and Gulfport, leaving a

scene of destruction that Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour said was "like there'd been a nuclear weapon set off."

New Orleans at first appeared to have received a glancing blow from the storm, but the raging waters of Lake Pontchartrain tore holes in the levee system that protects the low-lying city, then slowly filled it up.

Mayor Ray Nagin said 80 percent of the city, much of it below sea level, was covered with water that was in places 20 feet deep.

The US Army Corps of Engineers and local levee workers tried, but failed on Tuesday to stem the flow from a 60 meter long breach near the city center with 1,360 kg sandbags brought in by helicopter.

Corps senior project engineer Al Naomi said they would bring in more sandbags on Wednesday and perhaps build a temporary dam around the breach.

But the biggest ally in the fight to save the city may be nature itself, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Jesus Diaz looks over the concrete slab that used to be his apartment in Biloxi, Mississippi. Approximately 100 people are feared dead and estimates put the property loss at nearly \$30 billion as Hurricane Katrina could become the costliest storm in US history.

Indonesia frees hundreds of Aceh rebel prisoners

AFP, Aceh

Tears of joy and hope flowed in Indonesia Wednesday as authorities freed more than 1,400 rebel Acehese prisoners detained around the country, meeting a key condition of an historic peace pact.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono signed a decree late Tuesday granting the amnesty to members of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), as required under the August 15 peace accord between the government and the separatist guerrillas.

Teuku Darwin, head of the provincial justice ministry in Aceh, told AFP that 1,424 GAM prisoners across Indonesia were released, including 958 in Aceh.

At a state prison in Jantho near the provincial capital Banda Aceh, 58 rebels were released to waiting

families, who hugged them fiercely amid tears.

Others had no families to greet them, such as 40-year-old Kardiman, who lost his relatives to last December's horrific tsunami that ravaged the coast of Aceh. He also had no home to return to.

"Now I'm alone. My house is gone and my two children and wife died in the tsunami," he told AFP, adding however that he was looking ahead to starting a small business.

District secretary Muhammad Dahlan presided over a ceremony marking the release at the prison.

"From today on, there is no more GAM. We are all only peace-loving Acehese," Dahlan told the detainees.

The peace deal, spurred on due to the devastation wreaked by the tsunami, aims to end almost three decades of separatist conflict in

resource-rich and staunchly Muslim Aceh which has claimed some 15,000 lives, mostly civilians.

Families at Banda Aceh airport waited anxiously for news of relatives.

A sobbing Yunidar Arabia told Metro TV that she was looking for her father, a wood trader who was taken away by Indonesia's paramilitary force in 2003 and presumed dead.

"I was just told this morning that he may return today," she said.

"I am glad, I am happy, but at the same time I am sad because mother is no longer there," she said, adding she lost her mother, grandfather and a younger sibling in the tsunami which killed 131,000 people in the province.

One killed in southwest Pakistan bomb blast

AFP, Quetta

A man was killed and two others were wounded by a bomb blast near a paramilitary facility in a remote southwestern Pakistan town Wednesday, police said.

The victim died when a remote-controlled device exploded in the town of Mastung, some 45 kilometres southeast of Quetta, the capital of restive Baluchistan province.

The bomb was hidden in a vendor's push cart near a paramilitary barracks but it caused no damage to the facility, local police official Rehmat Ullah told AFP.

Police arrested one of the two people hurt in the blast, suspecting him of planting the bomb, the official added.

Four others have also been taken into custody for questioning.

Netanyahu urges Israel to build more settlements

REUTERS, Maale Adumim

Benjamin Netanyahu launched his campaign to oust bitter rival Ariel Sharon as Israel's prime minister with a call on Wednesday for massive new West Bank settlement construction.

Staking out the battleground for the right-wing power struggle triggered by Sharon's removal of settlers from Gaza, Netanyahu urged immediate building -- in defiance of Washington -- on a particularly sensitive area outside East Jerusalem.

"The time has come to build here and I will build here," Netanyahu told reporters on the rocky hillside between Jerusalem and the biggest West Bank settlement of Maale Adumim.

Sharon says Israel plans to build in the E1-block despite U.S. criticism and the fury of the Palestinians, who fear it would further cut them off from the holy city they seek as the capital of a state under an eventual peace deal.

A police station is to be built in the block, but no housing is planned there immediately.

Netanyahu declared his challenge to Sharon for leadership of their ruling Likud party on Tuesday, a step that could lead to elections earlier than the due date of November 2006 and is likely to keep any peacemaking with the Palestinians on hold.

Manmohan invites Hurriyat for talks

PTI, New Delhi

Carrying forward his peace initiative in Jammu and Kashmir, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Wednesday invited the moderate Hurriyat Conference leaders for talks on September 5, marking the separatist group's first highest-level interaction with the Centre.

Hurriyat Chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, who will lead the delegation, immediately accepted the invitation for the talks that will take place nine days ahead of Manmohan's meeting with Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in New York.

"The Prime Minister has invited Hurriyat Chairman and other leaders for talks," the Prime Minister's Media Adviser Sanjaya Baru said.

The Hurriyat has been insisting

on holding talks with the Prime Minister only although the Government had proposed meetings with Home Minister Shivraj Patil. The separatist leaders had held two rounds of talks with the then Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani in January and March last year in previous NDA government.

Declaring that communalism, insurgency and violence would be dealt with firmly, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Wednesday told political groups to test and demonstrate their popularity through polls saying there is no grievance that cannot be redressed through democratic means and dialogue.

"Every political group that claims to represent the interests of any section of our people must test and

demonstrate its popularity through the institutions of our democracy", Singh said at the National Integration Council (NIC), which is meeting after a gap of almost 13 years.

At the same time, the Prime Minister said that while promoting national integration and core value of tolerance, any overt challenges in the form of communalism, extremism, separatism and insurgency and violence would be "dealt with firmly".

"There is no grievance, howsoever, extreme and desperate, that cannot be redressed through democratic means. Our democracy allows us the freedom to espouse our cause and win people over to our point of view", he said inaugurating the day-long Conference.

Russain leader to face Beslan mothers

Meeting will set 'precedent' for Russia

AFP, Moscow

The mothers of children killed in the Beslan school hostage crisis one year ago have become a serious political force in Russia and President Vladimir Putin's meeting with them this week sets a crucial precedent for the country, commentators said Wednesday.

"The women of Beslan who lost their children have become a real force that the authorities must reckon with," an independent journalist based in the volatile Caucasus region wrote in the opposition daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta.

"The meeting with the president has set a precedent for all of Russia," the column said.

That meeting, an encounter the mothers of the Beslan massacre victims have been demanding for the past year, is scheduled to take place on Friday at the Kremlin. The Kremlin press service has asked journalists for accreditation, but has yet to confirm formally the date and time.

In an article published on its website, the respected centrist

daily Izvestia said that "the mothers of Beslan have become a unique social-political phenomenon" in Russia because "they cannot be bought and they cannot be made to keep quiet."

The mothers, united and organized in the group "Beslan Mother's Committee," have asserted that there are significant discrepancies between official accounts made public so far of how the Beslan tragedy occurred and what they say are the real facts about the disaster.

Most importantly, the mothers insist that both local and federal public officials -- including Nikolai Patrushev, head of the FSB security service, and Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev -- bear some responsibility for the Beslan massacre and should be held accountable.

"The mothers of Beslan have asked for little: They just want to lay out their complaints over the official investigation into the terrorist attack for Vladimir Putin," Izvestia said.

After turning a deaf ear to the mothers for the past year, Putin

said on Monday that he was prepared to meet with representatives of the Beslan Mother's Committee and listen to their complaints.

Putin may have had no choice: As Russia on Thursday marks the first anniversary of the start of the three-day Beslan tragedy, public attention to, and sympathy for, the mothers of the slain children has been sharply on the rise in recent weeks.

Commentators noted however that Putin's assent to the delicate meeting was a notable departure from deeply-engrained political traditions in Russia which shield Kremlin leaders not just from public accountability for security disasters but from facing angry accusers victimized by them.

"Nothing can happen to us more horrible than what has already happened," Izvestia quoted the leader of the Beslan Mother's Committee, Susanna Dudiyeva, as saying.

"We no longer fear anyone or anything. And the authorities know this."

'Our tsunami,'

Mississippi hurricane survivors say

REUTERS, BILOXI, Mississippi

"It was like our tsunami," Vincent Creel, a spokesman for the Mississippi Gulf Coast city of Biloxi, said on Tuesday.

Many people were probably trapped in their homes by the ferocious wall of water.

"From the destruction I've seen, I think there'll be some people we never find," Biloxi Mayor A.J. Holloway said after viewing the destruction by helicopter.

Biloxi, a waterfront city of about 50,000 people, was a seafood-industry hub and sleepy summer resort for southerners early last century.

A casino as big as a football field had floated offshore before the storm. Katrina dragged it 100 yards over a seafloor street and set it to rest in a parking lot.

Mary Mahoney's restaurant building on the seafloor dates back to 1737. Bob Mahoney stayed inside until his faced was lashed with flying glass, forcing him to a hospital.

"I was up in the window when it hit and it was like being popped by five linebackers at the same time," Mahoney said.

Clarke 'will get Tories in power'

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Ex-chancellor Ken Clarke has launched his bid to be the next Conservative leader saying he is "popular" enough to get the party back into power. Clarke, 65, posed on Wednesday for photos with backers including MPs Tim Yeo, Ann Widdecombe and John Bercow.

He is due to set out his plans for the party during a speech on Thursday.

It is the Rushcliffe MP's third attempt to win the Tory leadership - his pro-euro views were blamed for his defeats in 1997 and 2001.

He now says his enthusiasm for UK euro membership has cooled.

He told the Daily Mail the issue was not a barrier to him leading the party.

"I said that the question of Britain's admission wouldn't arise for at least 10 years.

"That's not controversial, it's pure blind obvious. I don't think we're going to have any more silly arguments about treaties and constitutions. The constitution is dead."

Clarke's potential rivals include shadow cabinet ministers David Davis, David Cameron, Liam Fox, Andrew Lansley, Theresa May and David Willetts.

World's oldest person dies in Netherlands

REUTERS, Amsterdam

A woman listed as the world's oldest person died Tuesday at age 115, according to the director of the home for the elderly where she lived.

Hendrikje van Andel-Schipper died peacefully in her sleep, according to the home's director, Johan Beijering.

"She was very clear mentally right up to the end, but the physical ailments were increasing," Beijering said. "She said, 'It's been nice, but the man upstairs says it's time to go.'"

Known as "Henny," she lived in Hoogeveen since World War II, moving to the Westerkim elderly home when she was 106.

A fan of the soccer club Ajax, she was born in 1890 and celebrated her 115th birthday on June 29. Her status as "oldest person" was recognized by Guinness Book of World Records last year.

She advised others who wanted a long life to "keep breathing" and eat pickled herring, a favorite Dutch snack.



PHOTO: AFP

Free Aceh movement (GAM) negotiator, Tengku Kamaruzaman hugs his wife, Cut Maidar (R), after being released from the jail in Banda Aceh yesterday. Tears of joy and hope flowed in Indonesia 31 August as authorities freed more than 1,400 rebel Acehese prisoners, meeting a key condition of an historic peace pact.

Tony Blair back to work after 'secret' Barbados holiday

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair returned to work at his official London residence on Wednesday after what was supposed to have been a secret 25-day summer break in Barbados.

"The prime minister is back and is in Downing Street. He got back this morning. He has got meetings in Downing Street but no public engagements today," a spokesman said.

Later this week Blair goes to Scotland for a courtesy visit with Queen Elizabeth II before setting off for EU-China and EU-India summits in Beijing and New Delhi, followed a week later by the UN World Summit in New York.

Britain currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union.

Blair's holiday whereabouts

were kept secret by the British news media at the behest of his senior advisers, ostensibly for security reasons in the wake of the London bombings last month.

But he broke the silence himself when he publicly attended a World War II memorial event on August 21 at the invitation of the Barbados Legion, a local veterans group.

Blair's agenda in the coming weeks will be dominated by his response to the July 7 attacks on three London subway trains and a double-decker bus that left 56 people dead, including four apparent Islamist suicide bombers.

He will also be preoccupied with EU matters, including a row with France over EU farm subsidies and the future direction of the 25-nation bloc after the defeat of the EU constitution in French and Dutch referendums.



PHOTO: AFP

Pedestrians walk within the "Botawala Chawl", one of Mumbai's "most dangerous" dilapidated structures yesterday. The nearly 90 year old "Botawala Chawl", a bamboo-propped corridor housing structure accommodating 356 families, is one of the two buildings where the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA) gave tenants a week's notice to move out after it was declared unsafe and required immediate repairs. But residents of the tenement, with common toilet and water facilities, refuse to move out.