

Musharraf allies sweep Pakistani local polls

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's government parties celebrated yesterday after scoring convincing wins in nationwide mayoral elections in which Islamist parties were the main losers.

While political parties were barred from taking part, candidates did little to hide their loyalties. The outcome reinforces expectations that President Pervez Musharraf, a strong ally of the West's war on terrorism, will be re-elected in 2007.

"What we are seeing is that enlightened, progressive and moderate candidates are winning. This is a welcome development and it will spur a new wave of progress in the country," Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz told state-run Pakistan Television.

Opposition parties cried foul after Thursday's third and final phase of the local polls to elect councils and

mayors, known as Nazims, for Pakistan's 110 districts.

There were accusations of ballot rigging and money politics, but few reports of violence, in contrast to earlier rounds when media reported scores killed and hundreds hurt.

Kanwar Mohammad Dilshad, permanent secretary at the Election Commission, said the number of complaints was slight, and the final round had been conducted smoothly.

The Pakistan Muslim League (PML) won all but a handful of the 35 districts in the central province of Punjab, while it swept interior Sindh and its government ally, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), captured the southern province's two main cities, Karachi and Hyderabad.

Having lost Karachi, the Islamist alliance of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) also suffered major setbacks

in Pakistan's two other provinces, Baluchistan and North West Frontier.

The MMA, the largest opposition block in the National Assembly, controls the provincial governments in both tribal-dominated provinces, but its grip appears to be slipping two years ahead of provincial and national polls.

Although in opposition, the Islamists backed General Musharraf until he reneged on a pledge to give up the post of army chief in 2004.

Relations deteriorated further following raids on mosques, the imposition of new rules governing Islamic schools or madrasas, and the army's campaign to root out militants in MMA-dominated tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

The Nation newspaper's editorial on Friday said the outcome had been a "foregone conclusion" as the opposition appeared to have given up the

fight after government parties' strong showing in the two rounds in August to elect district councillors.

The mainstream opposition remains in disarray with Pakistan's foremost civilian political leaders, former premiers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, languishing in exile, self-imposed in Bhutto's case.

Critics accuse Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, of trying to re-engineer Pakistan's polity so that all roads to democracy lead to him.

But analysts say the army chief's strategy could come unstuck because of fault lines between the factions of the Muslim League he cobbled together after ousting the party's leader, Sharif, six years ago and sending him into exile.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse (R) shake hands with his main opponent Ranil Wickremesinghe as they await their turn to hand in nomination papers yesterday to elections commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake (C, background) to contest next month's presidential elections. A total of 13 candidates are in the race, but the two men are expected to be in a straight face off for the top job.



PHOTO: AFP

New York City Police Department officer Melissa Brice (C) checks the contents of a woman's bag at the 96th Street subway station Thursday. New York ramped up security on its subway system Thursday after receiving a specific threat of a terrorist attack in the coming days, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and police officials said.

Norway rules out early talks on Lankan truce

AFP, Colombo

Peace broker Norway yesterday ruled out early direct talks between Tamil Tigers and Sri Lanka to save their truce although the rebels said they were ready for discussions before next month's presidential vote.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they were prepared for urgent talks on the ceasefire, which has been in force since 2002 but came under severe strain after the foreign minister was assassinated in August.

"The LTTE is even prepared to start talks on the implementation of the ceasefire agreement in a location neutral and satisfactory to both the parties without waiting for the outcome of the presidential polls," the LTTE said.

In a statement posted on their website, the group said they told Norway's ambassador to Sri Lanka Hans Brattskar on Thursday that they

need not await the outcome of the November 17 presidential election to start talks.

However, the Norwegian embassy issued a statement Friday saying such a meeting was unlikely in the "near future" and Oslo was sending another envoy to hold talks separately with the two sides next week.

Retired army general Trond Furuhoed was to arrive in Colombo on Monday on an eight-day visit to hold the talks, the embassy said.

"As a meeting between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to discuss the implementation of the ceasefire agreement is not likely to occur in the near future, the visit is an opportunity for both parties to propose measures for strengthening the implementation of the agreement," the statement said.

Furuhoed was to consult with representatives of both the government and the LTTE seeking their views on the status of

these security situation.

Ambassador Brattskar met with Tiger leaders Thursday ahead of a review of Oslo's peace initiative.

He travelled to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi for talks with Tamil Tiger political wing chief S. P. Thamilselvan.

"The ambassador wanted to touch base with the LTTE before he goes to Oslo next week for a review of the peace process by the new (Norwegian government) team involved in Sri Lanka," Norwegian embassy spokeswoman Kjersti Tromsdal said.

Top peace broker Erik Solheim told AFP last month after he was elected as part of Oslo's new government that he would remain engaged in Sri Lanka.

"After the new government is formed ... it will formally contact the (Colombo) government and the Tamil Tigers offering to continue its services in whatever manner the parties want," Solheim said after his election.

'Bush claimed God told him to invade Iraq, Afghanistan'

AFP, London

US President George W. Bush allegedly said God told him to invade Iraq and Afghanistan, a new BBC documentary will reveal, according to details released on Thursday.

Bush made the claim when he met Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas and then foreign minister Nabil Shaath in June 2003, the ministers told the documentary series to be broadcast in Britain later this month.

The US leader also told them he had been ordered by God to create a Palestinian state, the ministers said.

Shaath, now the Palestinian information minister, said: "President Bush said to all of us: 'I'm driven with a mission from God.'

'God would tell me, 'George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan.' "And I did, and then God would tell me, 'George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq...' And I did.

US troops kill 4 Afghan cops with 'friendly fire'

REUTERS, Kabul

US troops killed four Afghan policemen and wounded another after mistaking them for militants during an operation in southern Afghanistan in which two Afghan soldiers died, officials said yesterday.

The incident happened on Thursday in Helmand province's Girisht district when US troops spotted a vehicle carrying five armed men approaching an area where they were in contact with militants, said US spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jerry O'Hara.

He said the police officers had not been in the uniform of the Afghan National Police and the vehicle had tried to drive away quickly.

"Coalition forces shot at the vehicle, killing four and wounding one," he said. "We are conducting an investigation. Of course we regret this incident."



PHOTO: AFP

Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Mohamed ElBaradei (R) talks to journalists during a press conference yesterday in Vienna. The 2005 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the UN nuclear watchdog IAEA and its Egyptian director general ElBaradei for their efforts against nuclear weapons proliferation, the Nobel committee said.

ANTI-NUCLEAR CRITICS SAY

Nobel Peace Prize for IAEA is a bad joke

AFP, Paris

Green activists voiced outrage after the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize yesterday, saying the UN watchdog had unwittingly helped the spread of atomic arms by promoting civilian nuclear power.

A French group, Sortir du Nucleaire (Get Out of Nuclear) said the IAEA should be scrapped because, by "promoting" civilian nuclear power, it had given countries the means to build atomic bombs.

"The IAEA is hoodwinking the public by claiming that its inspections are preventing access to nuclear weapons by countries that have signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty," Sortir du Nucleaire said in a press statement.

"India, Pakistan and Israel have

joined the five 'great powers' (the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain) in having an unjustifiable right to possessing nuclear weapons and in not meeting their pledges on nuclear disarmament.

"Recent developments (Iran, North Korea etc.) have confirmed the IAEA's patent failure," it said.

In Amsterdam, Greenpeace International spokesman Mike Townsley acknowledged that IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei had been "a voice of sanity" in his advocacy of a nuclear-free Middle East.

But, Townsley told AFP, ElBaradei was trapped by the IAEA's "contradictory role, as nuclear policeman and nuclear salesman."

The agency promoted nuclear energy and at the same sought to prevent countries that use this technology from making nuclear bombs,

he said.

The Nobel Committee said the IAEA's work was "of incalculable importance" at a time when disarmament efforts "appear deadlocked, when there is a danger that nuclear arms will spread both to states and to terrorist groups, and when nuclear power again appears to be playing an increasingly significant role."

The Nobel jury has rewarded nuclear non-proliferation twice before in the past two decades, also on major anniversaries of the nuclear bombing of Japanese targets by the United States in World War II.

In 1995, the coveted award was given to the Pugwash group and its founder Joseph Rotblat, and in 1985, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War received the prize.

Lankan presidential election a 2-horse race

REUTERS, Colombo

Thirteen men registered yesterday to run for Sri Lanka's presidency, but the election is seen as a race between Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and his predecessor that is too close to call.

Rajapakse was among the first to formalise his nomination at the Elections Secretariat in suburban Colombo, speeding through emptied streets under the guard of armed soldiers on motorbikes.

The government has increased security around the capital in the run up to the Nov. 17 election as the August assassination of the foreign minister by suspected Tamil Tiger rebels looms large over a 2002 ceasefire that halted two decades of civil war.

"I will bring peace and prosperity to the country, so people can live without fear and suspicion," Rajapakse told reporters on arrival. "I want to alleviate poverty."

Bombs hit US interests in Argentina

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Four homemade bombs exploded on Thursday at US-owned banks and a Blockbuster video store in Argentina in what appeared to be a protest against US President George W. Bush's visit next month, police said.

No one was hurt in the early-morning blasts targeting two Citibank branches and another belonging to BankBoston outside the capital, Buenos Aires. But damage at the Blockbuster store was considerable.

Pamphlets that read "No to Bush in Argentina" were found in the debris, signed by unknown groups including the "Che Guevara Anti-Imperialist Commando," said Oscar Rodriguez, police chief in the suburb of San Miguel.

US offers \$10m reward for Bali bomb suspect

REUTERS, Washington

The United States offered a \$10 million reward on Thursday for a key suspect in the 2002 Bali bombings, the second-highest bounty Washington is promising in its war on terrorism.

The reward for a tip that could help kill or capture Dulmatin, an Indonesian militant believed to be hiding in the Philippines, is exceeded only by the \$25 million price tags on al-Qaeda head Osama bin Laden and the Iraq insurgency leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Dulmatin is suspected of involvement in the nightclub bombings three years ago that killed 202 people on the Indonesian vacation island, most of them foreign tourists.

Americans losing confidence on storm spending

AP, Washington

Americans are losing confidence that the federal government will wisely spend billions of dollars set aside for recovery from Hurricane Katrina, an AP-Ipsos poll found.

Just three weeks ago, the public was evenly split on whether the money would be spent wisely, according to the poll. Now, six in 10 say they are not confident the money will be well spent.

Federal officials were left red-faced after scuttling a debit-card plan almost as soon as they announced it, few hurricane victims moved into cruise ships leased off the Gulf Coast at considerable cost and Congress pushed to reverse many no-bid government contracts.

HARIRI KILLING

Syria gets isolated as deadline looms

AP, Damascus

Syria is growing increasingly isolated as an Oct. 25 deadline looms for the findings of a UN investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, raising concerns at home about possible sanctions against Damascus or even a change of regime.

The uncertainty has been building since Hariri was killed by a bomb in February as his convoy drove through Beirut. Many Lebanese blamed Syria for the attack, which also killed 20 others in Hariri's entourage.

Many Sunnis to vote no in Iraq referendum

UK troops arrest Iraq police after attacks

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Like many Sunni Arabs in Iraq, Faleh Hassan opposed the US-led invasion, boycotted the election that brought the interim government to power and plans to vote "no" in the Oct. 15 referendum on the country's draft constitution.

As far as he's concerned, ever since US forces drove Saddam Hussein, a fellow Sunni, from power, Iraq's Kurds and majority Shias have used democracy to grab an unfair share of power and to penalize the Sunni minority for the many abuses Shias suffered under Saddam.

But Hassan, a 55-year-old engineer, still shudders when he remembers an earlier Iraq referendum a vote held 10 years ago in which Saddam won another seven years in office as a ruler with absolute power.

Saddam was the only candidate on the ballot, Iraqis could only vote "yes" or "no," and they knew that casting a "no" vote meant being imprisoned or killed if the Iraq's ever-present secret service found out.

"During Saddam's time, we were forced to participate in that referendum," Hassan said in an interview after attending prayers last Friday at a Sunni mosque in central Baghdad. "People who didn't want to participate were threatened by Saddam's security forces. Now, nobody in the government can force us to go to polling stations, or order us which way to vote."

Fellow worshipper Khalid Ibrahim, a 45-year-old merchant, agreed.

"Now I am free to decide what I think is right without fear," he said. "I

just hope I can trust the vote count on Oct. 15, given how much the US wants the 'yes' side to win."

Meanwhile, British troops in southern Iraq have arrested 12 people, including policemen and militiamen, on terrorist charges following recent attacks on their forces, a British commander said yesterday. "Some of the individuals we have arrested are linked to militia groups in Basra ... some of the individuals are members of the Basra police service," Brigadier John Lorimer said in a statement following the Thursday evening arrests.

A leader of the Mehdi Army militia, loyal to firebrand Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, said all those detained belonged to his organisation.

"They all belong to the Medhi Army," Fatah al-Sheikh told AFP.