

French urban violence on the wane

AFP, Paris

The violence that has wracked France's city suburbs for two weeks showed clear signs of being on the wane yesterday, as police reported another decrease in the number of overnight incidents.

According to national police chief Michel Gaudin, there were 482 cars burned across the country and 203 people arrested, compared to 617 cars torched and 330 arrests the night before. This was a "significant decline," he said.

The fall was especially marked in the Paris region, where the riots began on October 27 but which saw only 95 cars burned overnight. The figures confirmed a pattern established since the weekend, which has seen the provinces overtake

the capital as the prime focus of the unrest.

At the peak of the trouble on Sunday night some 1,400 vehicles were burned 395 people arrested across the country.

The easing-off of the unrest came after the government decreed a state of emergency in much of the country on Tuesday -- triggering overnight curfews Wednesday night in some 30 towns and cities.

Meanwhile controversy surrounded a call by the tough-talking Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy for foreigners convicted of acts of violence during the troubles to be deported -- a measure denounced by left-wing parties and campaigning groups as a breach of human rights.

In the worst outbreak of urban

violence since May 1968, France has been struggling to contain a surge of car-burnings, arson attacks and rioting carried out in the main by young Arab and black residents of the country's poor out-of-town estates.

Thousands of vehicles have been destroyed, schools and other public buildings wrecked, dozens of police officers injured, one civilian killed and more than 2,000 people arrested.

In addition, immense damage has been done to France's international image, as the failures of its vaunted model of integration -- based on the unfulfilled theory of colour-blind equality -- have been cruelly exposed.

On Tuesday the government of Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin outlined a twin-track initiative to defuse the unrest -- invoking a 50

year-old law that authorises curfews and house-to-house searches and at the same unveiling a classic package of social assistance to help the stricken areas.

Most regional governors -- or prefects -- chose not to use their new emergency powers to order curfews overnight Wednesday, sensing that the violence was already on the decline and that the new measure could be interpreted as a provocation.

However in several towns on the Riviera such as Nice, Cannes and Antibes, as well as at Orleans in the centre and Rouen, Le Havre and Amiens in the north, unaccompanied children under the age of 16 were ordered to stay at home.



PHOTO: AFP

A picture made available by the Jordanian Royal Palace shows destruction at the Radisson Hotel in Amman yesterday, a day after a deadly attack. Jordan said yesterday it had arrested several suspects over hotel bombings that killed 56 people in the worst attacks in the kingdom's history, claimed by homegrown extremist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's militants.

Jordan's wedding joy turns into tragedy

AFP, Amman

Minutes before a suicide bomber blew himself up in the grand ballroom of the luxury Radisson SAS in Amman a joyous wedding reception was in full swing.

The bride and groom were making their grand entrance surrounded by women ululating the traditional shrill calls of celebrations while the elegant guests swayed to the sounds of tambourines.

The unsuspecting group failed to notice one man who managed to elude the parked police car outside the hotel, making his way into the ballroom wearing an explosives belt under his clothes.

Within seconds the festive wedding turned into a massacre.

"I lost my father and my father-in-law on my wedding night" the groom Ashraf Mohammad said.

Blair authority in doubt

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair's authority was thrown into doubt Wednesday after his attempt to toughen up Britain's anti-terror laws in the wake of the London bombings was roundly defeated in parliament.

It was the first time in his eight years in power that Blair had been humiliated in the House of Commons, with no less than 49 members of his own Labour Party joining the opposition to water down the Terrorism Bill.

Speculation immediately swirled over how long Blair will be able to act effectively, or even how long he can stay in office, particularly with controversial health and education reforms in the pipeline.

Democrat wins signal trouble for Bush

REUTERS, Washington

Democrats on Wednesday celebrated hard-fought wins in governors' races in Virginia and New Jersey that underlined the political troubles of President George W. Bush and Republicans heading into next year's congressional elections.

Democrats retained governor's offices in conservative Virginia and Democratic-leaning New Jersey on Tuesday after sometimes nasty campaigns. They also dealt California's Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger an across-the-board

defeat on four ballot initiatives he had championed.

The loss in Virginia was a personal setback for Bush, who put his declining political capital on the line with an election-eve visit on behalf of Republican former attorney general Jerry Kilgore -- only to see him soundly defeated by Democratic Lt. Gov. Tim Kaine.

With Bush's popularity at the lowest level of his presidency, the results helped giddy Democrats claim momentum one year before elections to decide control of both chambers of the US Congress and 36 governorships.

"Yesterday the election was a shot across the bow to George Bush," said New York Sen. Chuck Schumer, head of the Democratic Senate campaign committee, who called the results "a clear repudiation of Bush" and the Republican agenda.

Republicans cautioned against reading too much into the results, saying the elections produced no signs of widespread anti-incumbent sentiment. Redistricting initiatives that could have hurt incumbents in Ohio and California went down to defeat and no governors' offices changed parties.

Few surprises in Egypt polls results

AFP, Cairo

Partial results in the first round of Egypt's parliamentary elections produced few surprises yesterday, with Hosni Mubarak's ruling party firmly in control and opposition parties crying foul.

Ayman Nur, who had emerged as the veteran leader's main rival in September presidential election, lost his seat in his own Cairo stronghold to a member of the ruling National Democratic Party.

Runoffs are due to be held on November 15, but with the election spread out over three phases in a month, it was not clear yet what the balance of power would be in the next parliament.

World slams Jordan blasts

AFP, Washington

The deadly hotel blasts that rocked the Jordanian capital Wednesday drew international condemnation for being acts of "terror" that targeted innocent people, mostly Jordanians.

At least 57 people were killed and up to 300 wounded in the suicide attacks.

The White House condemned the strikes as "a heinous act of terror" against innocent civilians.

The United States on Wednesday strongly condemned the "cowardly" hotel blasts in Jordan's capital and offered to help its key Middle East ally bring to justice the "terrorists" responsible for the attacks.

"Today's terrorist bombings in Amman were cowardly attacks on innocent Jordanians and their guests," President George W. Bush said.

Jordan's King Abdullah II described the deadly blasts as "terrorist" and "criminal" acts and pledged that "justice will pursue the criminals."

The late evening attacks on one of the closest US allies in the Middle East targeted the luxury Radisson SAS, Grand Hyatt and Days Inn hotels, which are usually packed with foreigners.

France and Ireland expressed shock and sympathy.

"While the facts are not yet clear, I am appalled by these reports. It seems all too likely that this was a terrorist

attack aimed at killing and maiming entirely innocent people," said Irish Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern.

French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin offered his "deep sympathy... to the families and all the Jordanian people," and said France condemned the attacks.

Syria also condemned the attacks and reminded Jordan of its solidarity.

Palestinian flags were lowered to half-mast on official buildings Thursday as leader Mahmud Abbas denounced the blasts as a "crime against humanity and Arab security."

Prince Hashem, a half-brother of King Abdullah II, meanwhile toured hospitals to see the wounded.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi woman weeps as she inspects the site where a suicide bomber blew himself up at a Baghdad restaurant killing 35 people and wounding 28 others yesterday.

British ME policy 'key factor' in Muslim extremism

AFP, London

British foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, is a "key contributory factor" in pushing some members of the country's Muslim population towards extremism, an official report concluded yesterday.

The Home Office set up a series of working groups in the wake of the July 7 attacks in London that killed 56 people, including the four apparent suicide bombers, all of whom were British citizens.

The groups' final report stated that "radical impulses" among the Muslim community were often triggered by "perceptions of injustice in western foreign policy".

"British foreign policy -- especially in the Middle East -- cannot be left uncon-

sidered as a factor in the motivations of criminal radical extremists," the document said.

"We believe it is a key contributory factor. The (British) government should learn from the impact of its foreign policies on its electors."

The working groups -- who also expressed concerns about some of the government's proposed anti-terrorism legislation -- stressed that despite the criticism "we are absolutely clear that there is no foreign policy issue which can justify acts of terror".

Prime Minister Tony Blair and his government have vehemently rejected any links between British foreign policy, notably London's backing for the Iraq war, and the July 7 attacks or any rise in extremism.

Peres ousted as Israeli Labour Party chief

REUTERS, Tel Aviv

Shimon Peres was ousted as leader of Israel's Labour Party yesterday in an upset victory for a trade union chief whose vow to end a ruling alliance with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon could trigger early elections.

Amir Peretz, 53, largely unknown on the international stage, was declared the winner of a rank-and-file ballot by a 42 to 40 percent margin over Peres, Israel's deputy prime minister, who has won a Nobel Peace Prize but never a general election.

Peres, 82, immediately appealed to party officials alleging voting irregularities, his legal adviser said. Secretary-General Eitan Cabel had earlier said a party commission had rejected Peres' accusations of fraud at several polling stations.

Critics assail US policy on terror torture

AFP, Washington

Despite President George W. Bush's staunch defence of US interrogation methods as "within the law," the White House remained under attack for not distancing itself from practices some critics repudiate as torture.

The president on Monday seemed to take a firm stance against the abusive treatment of terror suspects, telling a press conference in Panama City "We do not torture," as he wrapped up a five-day swing through Latin America.

But Bush's assertion has been met with scepticism from some critics, who point to a Washington Post report this week that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is interrogating captured al-Qaeda operatives at secret prisons in Eastern Europe, Afghanistan, Thailand and elsewhere.

The White House would neither confirm or deny the existence of the facilities, which have been dubbed "black sites," but the CIA has asked the Justice Department to investigate the leak of the classified information to the Post.

The disclosure has once again put the White House on the defensive in the heated national debate over torture, which comes some 19 months after the publication of explosive pictures showing the mistreatment of detainees at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison.

On Wednesday, US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales insisted again that US laws on torture are sufficient, telling AFP: "There already exist domestic and international legal prohibitions binding upon the United States in regards to torture."