

Iraqis start early voting for new parliament

‘750 insurgents killed in operation’

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Voting began yesterday in hospitals, military camps and even prisons across Iraq, launching the process to choose a new parliament that the United States hopes can help quell the insurgency so US forces can begin heading home.

Iraq's government announced it will close its borders, extend the nighttime curfew and restrict domestic travel starting Tuesday two days before the main election day to prevent insurgents from disrupting the vote.

"We are very prepared for the elections, and we are highly determined," Interior Minister Bayan Jabr said. "We hope that everyone participates and that it will be a safe day. ...

We are at a historic juncture."

Voters will be choosing their first fully constitutional parliament since the 2003 collapse of Saddam Hussein. The 275-member assembly, which will serve for four years, will then choose a new government that US officials hope can win the confidence of the disaffected Sunni Arab minority the foundation of the insurgency.

In a statement Sunday, Iraq's election commission said it was investigating a fivefold increase in the number of new voters in Kirkuk "that is difficult to explain." Kurds want to incorporate the oil-rich northern city into their self-ruled region, an idea strongly rejected by the two other ethnic groups in the city, the Arabs and the Turkomen.

Although most of the 15 million eligible voters will cast ballots Thursday, soldiers, police, hospital patients and prisoners not yet convicted of crimes can vote Monday.

On Tuesday, the estimated 1.5 million Iraqi voters living outside the country can begin casting their ballots over a two-day period at polling centres in 15 countries, including the United States, Canada and Australia.

In violence security operations in western Iraq have killed more than 750 insurgents and captured almost 2,000 in the past few weeks, a senior defence ministry official said yesterday.

"Enemy casualties in the Euphrates Valley have reached 753

killed and 58 wounded," General Abdel Aziz Mohammed told a press conference in Baghdad.

"The number of detained is 1,978 and includes an emir (insurgent cell chief) named Khalaf Fanus who was turned in to police forces by his family.

"All zones along the valley have been cleared and we are maintaining an Iraqi and multinational military presence there until police forces arrive to secure the area."

On Monday seven people were killed and more than 30 wounded in attacks in Baghdad, including a blast near a hospital where special voting was taking place for Iraq's general election, a security source said.



PHOTO: AFP

An employee of the Independent Iraqi Electoral Commission in Iraq (IECI) helps a wounded Kurdish in casting his vote in a ballot box at his hospital room in the northern Iraqi city Suleimaniya yesterday. Hospital patients, prison detainees and security forces started voting to elect a new parliament which will restore full sovereignty of the war-torn Iraq nearly three years after the US-led invasion.

Woman rescued from rubble after 2 months of Pak quake

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani woman in her 40s was rescued from the rubble of her Kashmir home yesterday two months after being buried there in a devastating earthquake, a television report said.

"A woman has been brought to hospital in Muzaffarabad today who remained buried under the rubble of her home since the October 8 earthquake," doctor Hafeez, who only gave his first name, told the private GEO television.

"She is unconscious and kept in the intensive care unit and we hope that she will survive, Inshallah," Hafeez said.

"She had been fighting with death in a dark cavity under the rubble. It is a miracle," the doctor said.



PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese security forces inspect the scene of a car bomb explosion in Beirut's Mkalles Christian suburb, which targeted and killed leading anti-Syrian journalist and MP Gibran Tuani. Firemen recovered the body of the Christian MP, 48, from his car, which was set ablaze by the blast. Three other people were also killed and 10 were wounded in the attack.

CASH FOR RAISING QUESTIONS Indian MPs caught on camera

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Eleven members of Indian Parliament, six of them belonging to main opposition BJP, have been caught in a sting operation while accepting cash purportedly to raise questions in the parliament.

The sting operation, conducted by a website Cobrapost, in collaboration with the popular Hindi television news channel Aaj Tak, also showed one member each from ruling Congress, Rashtriya Janata Dal and two from Bahujan Samaj Party accepting 'bribe' for raising questions in Parliament.

The television news channel showed video clips on the 11 members of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha accepting money from those who conducted the sting operation to raise questions in both Houses of Parliament.

The BJP suspended its six members from its parliamentary party while Congress also suspended the party's

MP from Gwalior, Ramsewak Singh, after he too was caught on camera.

Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman Bhairon Singh Shekhawat said the incident has undermined the dignity of the House and he has referred the matter to the Ethics Committee. "I have decided to send it to the Ethics Committee for necessary action and give its recommendations for due consideration of the House," Shekhawat said.

After a meeting with former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and other party leaders, BJP president LK Advani announced the formation of an internal inquiry into the television expose.

"Strict action would be taken against all those MPs of our party who have been named," he told reporters here adding the party would first carry out an internal probe, and then, if needed, would hand over the matter to the parliament privilege committee," he added.

Asean demands action from Myanmar

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Southeast Asian leaders took aim at Myanmar in their annual summit yesterday, demanding real steps towards democracy and the release of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) bloc is grappling with a host of issues at the two-day talks including bird flu, high oil prices and the rising economic power of China and India.

But Myanmar's refusal to embrace reforms or free Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest has dominated discussions among the group, which won agreement to send an envoy to the isolated military-run state.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar, who will represent the bloc on a mission to Myanmar "to learn first-hand" whether it is making steps towards democracy, said the region demanded action from the ruling generals.

Anti-Syrian MP killed in Beirut blast

AFP, REUTERS, Beirut

A prominent anti-Syrian journalist and MP and three other people were killed in a car bombing in a Beirut suburb yesterday, the latest in a string of similar attacks in Lebanon.

Three other people also died and 10 were wounded in the explosion that blew up Tuani's armoured SUV car as it was driving in the Mkalles area of mainly Christian east Beirut.

At least three people inside the car were killed, their bodies charred beyond recognition, witnesses said.

One witness said the bomb blew up inside Christian MP Gibran Tuani's vehicle, blasting it off the road and setting it ablaze.

Firemen recovered the body of Tuani, 48, that of his driver Nicolas Flouti and two other people, the sources said. Ten other people were wounded, two of them seriously, in the attack at around 9 am (0700 GMT) in the Christian suburb of Mkalles.

The attack came just a day after UN chief investigator Detlev Mehlis delivered a report to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Syria's cooperation with the probe into the February murder of Lebanese ex-premier Rafiq Hariri.

And Druze leader and fellow MP Walid Jumblatt immediately pointed the finger at Syria over the bombing.

"The terrorist message has come to us... the person who threatened on television to make the whole world pay the price," he said, alluding to remarks made by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Russian television on Sunday.

Bashar, referring to possible UN sanctions against Damascus, said that if the situation in Syria and Iraq was not good, the Middle East would be unstable and the whole world would pay.

But Syria denied any role in the bombing, at least the 13th in Lebanon since Hariri was killed in a

massive bomb blast on the Beirut seafont on February 14.

Syrian Information Minister Mehdi Dakhilallah told Lebanese television LBC that "foreign interference is at the root of the current chaos."

Many Lebanese blame Damascus for Hariri's death, a charge Syria denies, although it has been implicated in a report into the killing by the Mehlis commission.

Later on Monday, the UN Security Council was due to receive the sensitive Mehlis report.

There was no word on the content of Mehlis's latest report, which follows one in October that concluded that senior Syrian and Lebanese security officials were implicated in the killing and chided Damascus for failing to cooperate fully with the probe.

Pak wedding turns tragedy: 40 killed

REUTERS, AFP, Lahore

At least 40 people have been confirmed killed by a fire aboard a bus in Pakistan sparked when a firecracker let off to celebrate a wedding set the vehicle's fuel tank alight, police said yesterday.

The toll from Sunday's tragedy in the eastern city of Lahore could be higher as several bodies were completely burned and shocked relatives had not yet given a full count of those aboard the bus, the police said.

"We have identified as many as 22 bodies -- 11 women and 10 males and one child about nine years of age," police investigator Rana Shabbir Ahmad told AFP.

About five to seven bodies were so badly burnt that they could not be identified, doctors said, adding that the women's bodies were identified by the necklaces and earrings they

were wearing.

"There are three serious and critical burn patients admitted to Lahore Mayo hospital," doctor Irfan Ali told AFP.

"They are more than 50 percent burnt. The government and the hospital administration are trying their level best to provide them with all kinds of medical treatment and facilities."

They said the bus may have been carrying as many as 70 passengers, including women and children. Police said five people were rescued from the blaze and others may have escaped themselves.

Friends of the groom were celebrating the marriage by letting off firecrackers in front of his house when one of the firecrackers fell under the bus carrying relatives and friends of the couple, setting alight its fuel tank.

MANMOHAN SAYS N-facility separation at 'advanced stage'

AFP, New Delhi

The separation of India's civilian and military nuclear plants, key to a July deal with the United States on nuclear technology sales, is at an "advanced stage," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said.

Singh was quoted Monday in the Indian press as saying that New Delhi has made rapid progress on identifying those plants to be considered civilian and hence subject to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The exercise of designating nuclear plants as military or civilian is at "a fairly advanced stage," Singh told reporters flying with him Sunday as he headed to Malaysia to attend three days of meetings with Asian leaders.

US President George W. Bush agreed to give India, which is not a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), access to civilian nuclear energy technology under a deal he signed with Singh in July.

But India has to first separate its civilian and military nuclear programmes, which could mean an effective cap on nuclear weapons production.

India tested nuclear weapons in May 1998 -- tests which were matched by rival Pakistan the same

month, which sparked concerns of a nuclear arms race in South Asia.

Under the US-Indian deal, the US Congress would amend proliferation laws that would allow India to buy advanced nuclear technology once the facilities are separated.

"The separation plan must ensure, and the safeguards must confirm, that US-India civil nuclear cooperation does not in any way assist India in manufacturing nuclear weapons," Republican Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said last week.

"This is consistent with US obligations under the NPT and with US law."

But some Indian security analysts have expressed unease over the move.

"What is not clear is how and why the Manmohan Singh regime got into a position wherein New Delhi is ready to be hustled into delivering a plan to separate the civilian and military parts of a wholly integrated Indian nuclear programme that will permanently undercut India's military nuclear options in the future," Bharat Karnad, an analyst at the Centre for Policy Research think tank, wrote in the Asian Age newspaper on Monday.



PHOTO: AFP

Women activists of 7 political parties shout slogans at a rally at Nayan Baneswor near Kathmandu yesterday. Hundreds of women activists took part in the anti-rally expressing solidarity with the ongoing movement for democracy.