

Scattered attacks fail to disrupt Iraq polls

Disgruntled Sunnis join the voting

REUTERS, Baghdad

Only scattered insurgent attacks marred Iraq's election yesterday as disgruntled Sunni Arabs joined the vote, determined to have more say in government.

The largely peaceful election was a sharp contrast to Iraq's previous January 30 election for an interim assembly, when about 40 people died, many of them in nine quick-fire suicide bombings.

With fear in check, and Sunni Arabs ending a boycott of the US-backed electoral process, officials reported high turnout and only scattered complaints about irregularities.

A guard was killed and a policeman wounded by a bomb at a polling station in Mosul, one of several

blasts as polls opened at 7 a.m. (4:00 a.m. British time) in the northern city, where Sunni Arabs and Kurds are at daggers-drawn.

At the same time a mortar blast wounded three people, one of them a US Marine, in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone government and diplomatic compound, the US embassy said.

A nationwide calm, imposed by a three-day traffic ban, sealed borders and heavy security, was also broken by mortars in Samarra and nearby Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's home town.

An explosion rocked Ramadi, another bastion of Sunni revolt.

But in a remarkable turnaround from the January poll, people lined up to vote in the western city, deter-

mined to have a say in the new, fully empowered, four-year parliament. They had boycotted the first post-Saddam election.

"I'm delighted to be voting for the first time because this election will lead to the American occupation forces leaving Ramadi and Iraq," said 21-year-old Jamal Mahmoud.

In nearby Falluja, scene of the biggest battle between US forces and rebels a year ago, the worst problems were a shortage of ballot papers and of vehicles to ferry the infirm to polling stations along roads closed to other traffic.

"We don't have enough cars to cope," said Electoral Commission official Najib Mahmoud. "Huge numbers of voters are waiting at stations but they don't have enough

ballot papers."

Bitter at the power exercised by an interim parliament of Shia Islamists and Kurds, Sunni militants said they would defend polling stations in cities like Ramadi against groups, such as al-Qaeda, who vowed to disrupt the vote.

That truce, combined with the security lockdown and 160,000 Americans keeping discreetly in the background, made for a vote that could scarcely be more different from January.

"Ballot boxes are a victory of democracy over dictatorship," said Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari as he cast his vote. "The real triumph is that people are casting ballots -- whoever they choose -- and that they've chosen voting over bombs."



PHOTO: AFP

A Kurdish Iraqi woman votes at a polling station in the northern Iraqi city of Suleimaniya yesterday. Iraqis voted yesterday in a landmark election to choose a four-year government that many hope will restore security to a nation wracked by violence and sectarian feuding since the toppling of Saddam Hussein.

India, China agree to speed up border dispute talks

AFP, New Delhi

India and China have agreed to speed up the process of resolving their long-standing border dispute, a report quoted Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as saying yesterday.

"I had very good discussions with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao," Singh told reporters travelling with him from an East Asia summit in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur.

"We feel the negotiations should be expedited... We are dealing with difficult issues. Without setting any deadline, I do think it is possible to move forward at a faster pace..." he said according to the Hindunews paper.

Singh, who met Wen during his four day stay in Kuala Lumpur, described it as his "most important meeting."

Giant neighbours India and China fought a brief, bitter border war in 1962.

11 die as Nepali soldier opens fire on crowd

AFP, Kathmandu

A Nepali soldier killed at least 11 people and wounded 19 others when he opened fire on a crowd at a Hindu festival near Kathmandu before taking his own life, the army said yesterday.

"A soldier opened fire randomly, killing 12 people including himself," said a statement from the Royal Nepalese Army headquarters.

At least 19 others were wounded in the shooting Wednesday at a temple in Nagarkot on the outskirts of Kathmandu, the statement said.

State-run Radio Nepal said a three-member committee was formed to probe the killings and the finding will be made public in five days.

Eyewitnesses told AFP that the soldier dressed in a combat jacket and civilian trousers had returned

drunkenly to the gathering of Hindu worshippers at a celebration to the goddess Devi after an earlier spat with a local.

He then fired indiscriminately over a period of between 10 and 15 minutes on the crowd of up to 500, they said.

The killing sparked demonstrations in the capital against the army, which has been accused by rights groups of abuses while fighting a Maoist uprising, which has left more than 12,500 people dead.

Dozens burned tyres to block the main road outside the Bhaktapur Cancer Hospital where the bodies were taken. They demanded the corpses be handed over for cremation as soon as possible in line with Hindu tradition.

A seven-party political alliance has called for a protest strike by

public services and transport operators in the Kathmandu valley on Friday, according to one party spokesman.

"The seven parties decided this morning to organise a general valley strike," said Raneshwor Phuyal, spokesman for the Communist Party of Nepal, United Marxist-Leninist.

Sixteen of the injured were treated at the army hospital while three others were taken to the nearby Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu.

"I was sitting on the wall and watching the festival when the soldier suddenly fired indiscriminately and shot my feet," said Krishna Bir Tamang, 45, at the army hospital.

Kalu Tamang, 30, said the shooting caught him by surprise.

Indian Maoists threaten foreign companies

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's increasingly active Maoist guerrillas said they would attack multinational and large Indian companies, accusing them of colluding with governments to oppress the poor, the Hindustan Times reported yesterday.

Thousands of rebels, who operate across a large swathe of India, have stepped up attacks in the past few months, killing dozens and sparking concern over their growing power.

"MNC (multinational company) interests have triggered state-aided brutal domination exercises to sanitise tribal-held land so that industries can be set (up) there," a member of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) central committee told the Times in a "secure location" in Nepal, which borders India.

"We intend to hit back strongly." Nepal also has a Maoist insurgency, with the rebels controlling much of the country.

The Hindustan Times quoted

rebel leaders saying they were capitalising on fears of tribals worried about losing land and forest rights due to industrial projects.

"The MNC incursion has already brought thousands into our ranks," a Maoist leader was quoted saying. "We aim to turn this fear into a red tornado".

Committee members who met reporters on Tuesday near the India-Nepal border said they intended to hit targets in Andhra Pradesh whose capital Hyderabad is one of India's booming info-tech hubs with many multinationals.

These include Microsoft Corp. and IBM as well as units of Coca-Cola Co and PepsiCo Inc. In 2002, rebels blew up a Coca-Cola bottling plant in the state.

The rebels operate in a corridor stretching from the Nepal border in the north to India's southern tip.

INDIA TELLS BUSH

Use 'full weight' to get nuclear deal passed

AFP, New Delhi

India told the US Bush administration yesterday to use its "full weight" to get Congress to approve a landmark nuclear deal with New Delhi.

At the same time, it said it would permit no changes in the agreement to ensure its passage.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told parliament the deal he struck with President George W. Bush on a visit to Washington in July -- which would give India crucial access to civilian atomic technology -- was a "binding commitment."

Singh was seeking to allay Indian opposition suspicions that Washington has been asking for concessions from India and that New Delhi might grant them.

The agreement has been the target of loud criticism from some US

lawmakers and proliferation experts, who complain it undermines international nuclear non-proliferation efforts and should be stricter.

Singh denied the deal was in trouble, saying there is "no stalemate" in implementing it.

At the same time, he said: "I expect the US Administration to use its full weight to get the necessary approval of the US Congress."

Energy-hungry New Delhi has been denied access to nuclear technology for over two decades since it first tested a nuclear weapon and refused to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

The oil-import dependent nation is seeking to broaden its fuel sources to sustain its booming economy. Nuclear power supplies around three percent of the fuel needs of the nation of more than one

billion but it intends to raise this to 25 percent by mid-century.

The US sees the deal as a key step to improving ties with India, which it regards increasingly as an important counterweight to China.

Singh said the agreement would proceed on the basis of "strict reciprocity."

"If the US does not carry out its obligations, we are also free not to carry out our obligations," he told parliament's upper house.

He was referring to the pact's provisions under which the US said it would seek Congressional agreement to change US laws and would work with other nuclear nations to enable civilian nuclear energy cooperation with India.

Palestinians vote in final round of local elections

Top 'terror' escapes death in Gaza

AFP, Nablus

Palestinians in the main West Bank cities were voting yesterday in elections seen as a final dress rehearsal for next month's parliamentary contest between Hamas and the ruling Fatah faction.

Voting began at 7:00 am (0500 GMT) and polling booths were due to close 12 hours later, according to the local elections commission.

Bashar al-Diq, executive director of the local elections commission, said that the first few hours of voting had passed off peacefully and said turnout was particularly high in the largest West Bank city of Nablus.

Around 148,000 Palestinians were entitled to vote in Thursday's elections for 414 council seats. About one-fifth of the 1,321 candidates are women.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas was among voters expected to cast their ballot in the town of al-Bireh, which adjoins Ramallah.

The election pits Abbas's dominant Fatah party against the radical Islamists of Hamas, which has enjoyed a strong showing in the three earlier rounds of voting.

Its success at municipal level has persuaded the movement to agree to participate in what will be its first-ever parliamentary elections on January 25.

However, Thursday's ballot was expected to provide a much firmer indicator of the Islamists' strength as it will be the first time voting has taken place in the cities.

Earlier ballots were held in towns and villages where local issues and tribal affiliations were the main factors determining how people voted. This round will take place in 40 municipalities including Nablus, Jenin and Ramallah, headquarters of the Palestinian Authority.

Meanwhile, a top Islamic Jihad official escaped assassination by Israel Wednesday in Gaza City after his car was hit by an Israeli missile, just hours after four militants were killed in a strike on another car.

The attacks came as Israel ramped up its targeting of Palestinian militants, a controversial policy renewed after a suicide bombing killed five Israelis in the coastal town of Netanya on December 5.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians gather around the car of a leader of the militant group Islamic Jihad after it was hit by an Israeli missile in Gaza City Wednesday. Jihad's Khader Habib escaped an Israeli assassination attempt when his car was hit, just hours after four militants were killed in a similar strike.

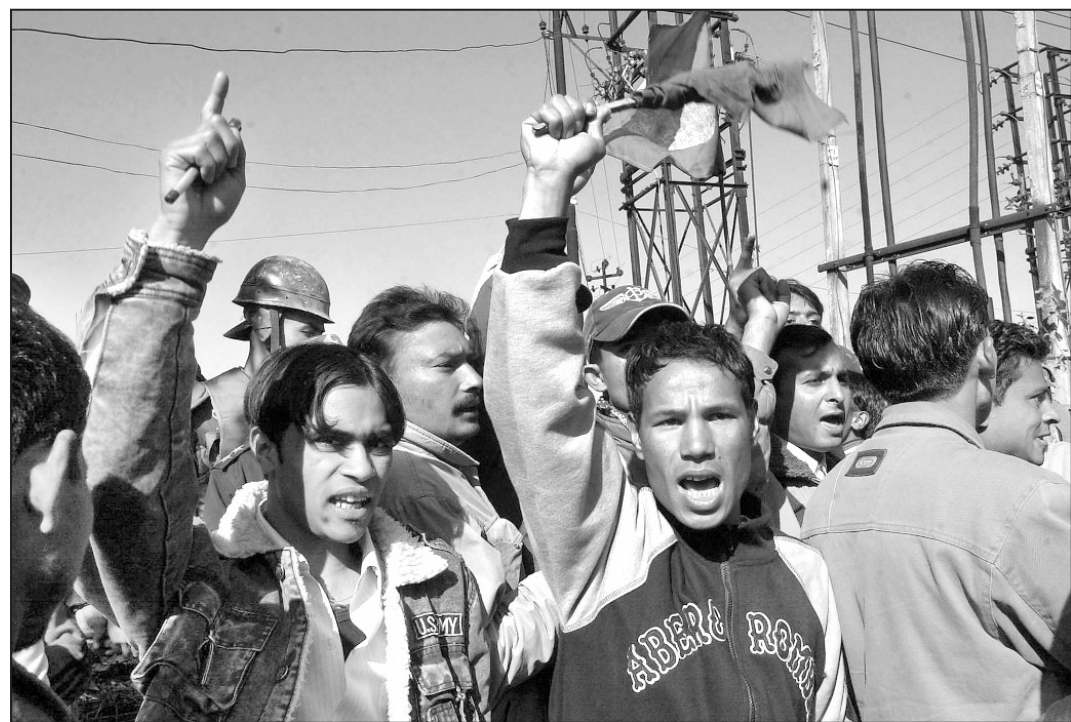


PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese villagers shout slogans and wave flags as they stage a demonstration outside Bhaktapur hospital, some 16km north-east of Kathmandu yesterday, where the dead bodies of victims of a shooting at Nagarkot are being kept.