

US House again rejects quick Iraq withdrawal

Sunni alliance hails Iraqi polls as success

REUTERS, Washington/Baghdad

Republicans pushed a resolution through the House of Representatives on Friday rejecting a timetable to pull US troops from Iraq, the second time in recent weeks they have forced a vote on the issue.

Democrats said Republicans had used a resolution meant to congratulate Iraq for this week's elections as a means to try to divide Democrats and lash out at critics of President George W. Bush's war policies.

The House passed the measure 279-109, with 59 Democrats joining Republicans to vote for it. Two Republicans and 32 Democrats voted present.

Republicans have sought to highlight divisions among Democrats over

the war since Rep. John Murtha of Pennsylvania, a leading Democrat hawk, stunned his colleagues by calling for the withdrawal of US troops within six months.

Murtha said US forces had become targets of the insurgency in a conflict bungled by the Bush administration.

Most Democrats, particularly in the Senate, are calling on Bush to set out benchmarks for withdrawing troops, but not for a quick withdrawal or a definite timetable.

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California said the resolution used "what should be a cause for celebration as instead a means to denounce those who disagree ... and also to insist that if you want to congratulate the people of Iraq, you must support the status quo."

Tom DeLay of Texas, who stepped down as Republican leader after being charged in September with conspiracy and money laundering, condemned war critics who "point to the war's costs, its difficulties and our setbacks and despite the catastrophic consequences of failure, call for an immediate retreat and surrender."

The resolution called this week's parliamentary elections "a crucial victory for the Iraqi people," and expressed "unshaking confidence" that US and Iraqi forces "shall achieve victory."

It said "setting an artificial timetable" to withdraw US forces "or immediately terminating their deployment in Iraq and redeploying them elsewhere in the region, is fundamentally inconsistent with

achieving victory in Iraq."

Democrats had tried to substitute a resolution just to congratulate Iraqis on their election and commend US and Iraqi forces, but Republican leaders rejected that.

Meanwhile, the main Arab Sunni alliance that contested Iraq's election said on Saturday it was a success despite some violations, fuelling US hopes that peaceful politics will help pave the way for a troop withdrawal.

"The election process succeeded ... Thank God there were only a few cases in a huge country where there is death and violence," Adnan al-Dulaimi, leader of one of the parties in the Iraqi Accordance Front, told a news conference.



PHOTO: AFP

Sunni Arab supporters of the Iraqi National Concord Front parade brandishing posters of list of candidates on the streets of Baquba, north of Baghdad, yesterday. Leader of the National Concord Front, Adnan al-Dulaimi, called for a coalition to protect national unity in a new parliament as he thanked insurgents for not attacking polling stations during the landmark election.

India okays fourth bus link with Pakistan

AFP, PTI, Wagah

India's cabinet has authorised the signing of an agreement with Pakistan to launch a fourth bus service between the two nuclear-armed rivals.

The agreement will expand economic cooperation and people-to-people contact between India and Pakistan, Parliamentary Affairs Minister P. R. Dasmuni told reporters after a cabinet meeting late Thursday, according to PTI on Friday.

The bus links are part of a slow-moving peace process between the two South Asian neighbours.

The new bus route would link the Indian city of Amritsar in the state of Punjab with the Pakistani city of Nankana Sahib -- the birthplace of Guru Nanak Dev, who founded the Sikh religion.

Most of the residents of Indian Punjab are Sikhs.

The agreement will also officially launch a bus service connecting Amritsar with the Pakistani city of Lahore, scheduled to start operating in the last week of December.



PHOTO: AFP

Masked Palestinian militants of Fatah Hawks, the armed wing of the ruling Fatah party, rally in the Khan Yunes refugee camp in southern Gaza Strip Friday. The result of the final round of municipal elections in which Hamas scored a resounding victory was a bitter blow for Fatah, which has experienced a week of bitter divisions and violence over its list of candidates for the upcoming January 25 parliamentary election.

Afghans riot after cops detain 6 mullahs

Gunmen open fire on school

AFP, Kabul/Kandahar

Hundreds of villagers clashed with police near Afghanistan's capital to demand the release of six men they said were ordinary mullahs but whom police suspected were Taliban fighters, authorities said yesterday.

The villagers rioted in Logar province just south of Kabul on Friday, breaking windows and throwing stones, deputy police chief Abdul Rasoul said. Gunfire was also heard coming from the mob, he said.

The crowd claimed police had shot dead two of the protesters, Rasoul said, adding though that officers had only fired into the air and that no bodies had been found after the clash.

"We've seen some blood at the scene of the riot but not any bodies to back up their claims. We are investigating everything," he told AFP.

The protest erupted in the province's Charkh district after police arrested the men, alleging they had been preparing to ambush a police convoy.

"Four men were arrested on Thursday and two others on Friday. We suspect that they have links to Taliban," Rasoul said. The men were being questioned, he said.

"An investigation will reveal whether they're Taliban or not."

Earlier men on a motorcycle opened fire Saturday on students leaving school in volatile southern Afghanistan, killing a pupil and a janitor, a provincial official said.

The attack in Lashkargah, capital of insurgency-hit Helmand province, comes two days after a school-teacher was shot dead in the province in what President Hamid Karzai condemned as an act of terrorism.

No one claimed responsibility for either attack.

US okays bill to tighten immigration laws

AP, Washington

The House acted Friday to stem the tide of illegal immigration by taking steps to tighten border controls and stop unlawful immigrants from getting jobs.

But lawmakers left for next year the tougher issue of what to do with the 11 million undocumented people already in the country.

The House legislation, billed as a border protection, anti-terrorism and illegal immigration control act, includes such measures as enlisting military and local law enforcement help in stopping illegal entrants and requiring employers to verify the legal status of their workers. It authorises the building of a fence along parts of the US-Mexico border.

But it put off consideration of a guest worker program, which President Bush and many in Congress say must be part of a lasting solution to the illegal immigrant crisis.

The vote was 239-182, with opposition coming from Democrats and some Republicans upset by the exclusion of the guest worker issue

and other Republicans wanting tougher border control measures.

Bush praised the House for approving the bill. "America is a nation built on the rule of law, and this bill will help us protect our borders and crack down on illegal entry into the United States," he said in a statement. "I urge the Senate to take action on immigration reform so that I can sign a good bill into law."

One measure that Republican leaders wouldn't allow a vote on was a volatile proposal to deny citizenship to babies born in this country to illegal immigrants.

The issue next moves to the Senate, where Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., says he will bring up immigration legislation in February that will provide a framework for guest worker ideas.

Nobody is advocating the deportation of 11 million illegal immigrants, said Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., sponsor of a guest worker measure. Without a temporary worker program, he said, "We simply won't enforce the law, and that's the dirty little secret here."

US to sell howitzers to Pakistan

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration said on Friday it tentatively planned to let Pakistan buy 115 155mm self-propelled howitzer artillery pieces as well as related gear and services valued at up to \$56 million.

The sale of M109A5 howitzers would not affect the basic military balance in the region, the Pentagon's Defence Security Cooperation Agency said in a notice to Congress.

The big guns at issue are in the US Army's current inventory, said Jose Ibarra, an agency spokesman. The total value of the deal, if all options are exercised, could be as high as \$56 million, the notice to Congress said.

Such notice is required by law. Congress has the power to block such a government-to-government arms sale but has never done so. No contractor would be involved in the deal.

Pakistan currently operates an earlier-generation self-propelled howitzer, the M109A2. It would use the newer model to re-equip existing units and retire older artillery pieces, the Pentagon said.

Tigers reject Asian venue for talks

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday rejected a Sri Lankan offer to hold peace talks at an Asian venue and insisted that any negotiations must be in the capital of the peacemaker Norway.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said any discussions with the Sri Lankan government must be in Oslo as originally proposed by Norway but rejected by Colombo.

However, as a compromise, the Colombo government last week said it was ready to hold talks at an Asian venue and Japan's peace envoy Yasushi Akashi six days ago offered Tokyo as a venue.

"There is no change in our position with regard to the venue for talks and we stand by the Norwegian facilitator's original suggestion that the talks on effective implementation of the ceasefire takes place in Oslo," said LTTE's political leader S. P. Thamilselvan.

Thamilselvan, in a statement on his political wing's website, said fresh talks must ensure "effective

implementation of the ceasefire" especially ending recent escalated violence in the country.

At least 35 people, including 18 government soldiers and two policemen, have been killed this month alone in bloodshed linked to the conflict.

The Sri Lankan government called for talks with the Tigers to review their truce after the August 12 assassination of foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar. Colombo blamed the Tigers, a claim rejected by the guerrillas.

Peace talks between the two sides have remained deadlocked since April 2003 and diplomatic efforts to resume a dialogue remain inconclusive.

Earlier the Scandinavian ceasefire monitors in Sri Lanka blamed Tamil Tigers for shooting at an unarmed military helicopter earlier this week and said the attack seriously undermined the fragile truce.

Syria behind Hariri killing, says Mehlis

AFP, Beirut

The head of the UN probe into the slaying of Lebanon's ex-premier Rafiq Hariri for the first time unequivocally accused Syria of being behind the assassination, in an interview published yesterday.

Despite repeated Syrian denials of involvement, outgoing German magistrate Detlev Mehlis who has been heading the investigation since June, showed not a flicker of doubt that its "authorities" were responsible.

Asked by the Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat if he was "perfectly convinced of Syria's responsibility in the murder of Hariri," Mehlis said: "Yes. The Syrian authorities are responsible," without giving further details.

His comments are set to further ratchet up the pressure on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, coming just after the latest in a slew of killings of anti-Syrian critics that have hit Lebanon following the Hariri murder.

Mehlis insisted that "there is a link between the attacks that hit Lebanon" since Hariri's murder in February and the killing Monday in a massive car bomb of anti-Syrian MP and press magnate Gibran Tuani.

Iran may face sanction for riling Israel

AP, Brussels

Iran could face sanctions if it keeps provoking Israel and the West, European leaders warned Saturday, even as the Tehran regime's interior minister said the Iranian president's remarks had been "misunderstood."

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad aggravated tensions with the West this week by calling the Holocaust a "myth," a statement that came two months after he called for Israel to be "wiped off the map."

European leaders said Ahmadinejad's remarks were the latest "provocative political moves" from Tehran since May.

"These comments are wholly unacceptable and have no place in civilized political debate," the leaders said in a summit statement Saturday.

EU leaders warned Tehran they would review diplomatic options for possible sanctions against Iran.

The condemnation came as Iran

prepares to resume talks Wednesday with European envoys over its nuclear program, which the EU and United States fear is intended to build atomic weapons. Envoys from Britain, Germany and France are trying to get Tehran to halt uranium enrichment.

"I haven't seen any evidence that Iran is interested in a deal that is going to be acceptable to an international community that is extremely sceptical of what the Iranians are up to," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told The Associated Press in Washington.

Rice predicted the United States would have enough votes at the UN Security Council to impose international sanctions against Iran but hinted she was waiting for other nations to join such an effort.

"We also recognize that it is important for others to also come to the conclusion that we've exhausted the diplomatic possibilities," she said.



PHOTO: AFP

Bollywood movie legend Amitabh Bachchan (R) accompanied by his actor son Abhishek Bachchan (L) waves to his fans as he leaves the Lilavati hospital in Mumbai yesterday. Bollywood movie legend Amitabh Bachchan was released from a Mumbai hospital after doctors said he made a good recovery from bowel surgery.

Nuclear waste found in ruined Chechen factory

REUTERS, Grozny

Investigators have found nuclear contamination tens of thousands of times above safe levels on the premises of a ruined factory in Russia's Chechnya, officials said yesterday.

It was not clear why the radioactive source had been kept in the factory, but prosecutors said it posed a severe threat to anyone who came near to it.

"This is above all now a threat to the population, because the leadership and officials of the firm did not take the necessary steps to isolate the isotope," said Chechen prosecutor Valery Kuznetsov on NTV television.

Almost all of Grozny was destroyed by Russian bombing in 1999-2000 when Russian troops poured back into the region to reassert central control over separatist rebels, who still attack troops and police daily.