

Ruling candidate wins Nigerian election

EU monitors, US slam polls

AFP, Abuja

Ruling party candidate Umaru Yar'Adua won Nigeria's presidential election yesterday, even as foreign observers slammed the credibility of the disputed poll that claimed at least 200 lives.

The national election commission declared Yar'Adua the winner with 24.6 million votes, far ahead of his two main opposition rivals.

Just minutes after the announcement, the United States voiced deep concern at the violence and voting irregularities that accompanied the state elections on April 14 and the presidential and parliamentary ballot on Saturday.

"We are deeply troubled by what we saw," US national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe said.

Yar'Adua, 55 and the governor of one Nigeria's northern states, was backed by President Olusegun Obasanjo and was the pre-poll favourite.

He has a track record of financial prudence, public service and accountability and is among the few governors recently absolved of corruption by the country's anti-graft agency. On being elected governor of Katsina in 1999, Yar'Adua immediately made public his assets.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi residents of Baghdad's Adhamiyah district demonstrate yesterday on the streets against the building of a three-mile long concrete wall that the US military announced last week to separate Baghdad. The US military said Monday it will review measures to secure Baghdad after Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki ordered to stop building a tall concrete wall around the dangerous Sunni enclave of Adhamiyah.

Baghdad barrier to go on despite Maliki opposition

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi and US officials on Monday defended a decision to build a three-mile (five-kilometre) wall around a flashpoint Sunni district of Baghdad, as street demonstrations erupted to condemn it. Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has been drawn into the row, telling reporters in Egypt he is opposed to the enclosure of Adhamiyah, but in Baghdad the Iraqi military said the construction of barriers would continue.

The new US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, used his first press conference since arriving in Baghdad last month to insist that the wall was not intended to segregate the city's warring Sunni and Shiite communities.

"I think it's important ... that one not lose sight of the threat that is motivating some of the decisions that have been made," Crocker said.

"The intention in Adhamiyah is clearly not to segregate communities nor to engage in a form of political or social engineering," he continued.

"It's to try to identify where the faultlines are, where avenues of attack lie and to set up the barriers

literally to prevent those attacks."

The spokesman for the Iraqi forces engaged alongside US troops in enforcing the Baghdad security plan, Brigadier General Qassim Atta, said that many other districts already had or would have some form of barrier.

Some of these might be walls, but others ditches, sand-bags or fences, he said, and accused the news media of inflating the size of the five metre (16 feet) tall concrete barricade that US troops are erecting around Adhamiyah.

"In fact the Adhamiyah security barrier has been exaggerated by the media, and we anticipated there would be some reactions by weak-minded people," he said, referring to criticism of the plan by many Iraqi politicians.

Atta said Iraqi units involved in planning and building walls are under Maliki's command and implied the prime minister had reacted to false reports, saying: "He said he would not accept a 12 metre high security barrier."

Asked about the wall on Sunday, Maliki said: "I am opposed to the building of the wall and its construction is going to stop."

Sri Lanka halts Norway envoy's peace mission

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka stopped Nordic peace brokers from visiting Tamil Tiger rebel-held territory on Monday as warplanes bombed suspected guerrilla positions in the island's north.

Colombo told Norway's top envoy here, Hans Brattskar, not to proceed with his planned visit to the town of Kilinochchi, 330 kilometres (206 miles) north of here, for "security reasons."

"Citing security reasons, the government last night asked the Norwegian diplomat not to go ahead with the visit," a diplomatic source close to the peace process said. "They have not said when the visit can take place again."

Brattskar had met with Sri Lanka's peace negotiator Nimal Siripala de Silva, who is also the health minister, as part of routine consultations with the warring

parties in the island.

Norwegian-brokered talks between the two sides ended in failure in October and led to more fighting in the island's embattled north and east despite an Oslo-arranged truce agreed in February 2002.

The government directive came as airforce fighter jets pounded a suspected Sea Tiger base in the island's northern district of Jaffna around noon on Monday, the defence ministry said.

Nordic truce monitors say the ceasefire is holding only on paper.

Tamil Tiger rebels and government forces fought two gunbattles in Sri Lanka's restive north and east leaving at least six rebels killed, the defence ministry said Sunday.

Gunmen of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) clashed with troops at Vavuniya, 260 kilometres (160 miles) north of

Colombo, on Saturday drawing fire from security forces, the ministry said.

It said five Tiger rebels were killed in the confrontation but did not say if troops suffered any casualties.

In a similar clash in the eastern district of Ampara, a Tiger rebel was shot dead by Special Task Force police commandos on Saturday, the ministry said.

There was no immediate reaction from the Tigers, who have been fighting for an independent homeland for minority Tamils from the majority Sinhalese island.

More than 4,000 people have been killed in a new wave of fighting since December 2005.

Tamil Tiger rebels are leading a drawn-out campaign for independence. More than 60,000 people have been killed in the conflict since the launch of the Tiger rebel movement in 1972.

Sarkozy, Royal in duel for French presidency

AP, Paris

Conservative Nicolas Sarkozy holds an advantage over his Socialist rival Segolene Royal after the two advanced to the second round of France's presidential election, narrowing the vote to a choice between the tough-talking former interior minister or the first woman with a chance of becoming the country's leader.

The race is now on for voters in the middle ground and others who deserted the left and right in favour of farmer's son and lawmaker Francois Bayrou, who placed third on Sunday in one of the big surprises of the campaign. Both Sarkozy and Royal planned rallies Monday night.

It won't be a "walk in the park" for Sarkozy even though he is in a strong position heading into the runoff, said Bruno Cautres, researcher at the prestigious Institute for Political Sciences.

With nearly all votes counted, Sarkozy had 31.1 percent, followed by Royal with 25.8 percent and

Bayrou with 18.5 percent. Turnout was 84.6 percent the highest in more than 40 years and just shy of the record set in 1965.

Royal is the first woman to get this close to the helm of this major European economic, military and diplomatic power. Sarkozy would be likely to push his anxious nation toward painful change.

Either way, France will get its first president with no memory of World War II to replace the 74-year-old Jacques Chirac, who is stepping down after 12 years.

Sunday's first round of voting shut out 10 other hopefuls, from Trotskyists to far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen. Le Pen had hoped to repeat his shockingly strong showing of 2002 but instead finished a weak fourth with 10.5 percent.

Both Sarkozy, a Hungarian immigrant's son, and Royal, a military officer's daughter who beat Socialist heavyweights to win her party's nomination, are in their 50s and have travelled long, arduous roads to get to this point.



PHOTO: AFP

French right-wing UMP presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy (C) arrives at a shelter for women yesterday in Paris, a day after the first round of the presidential elections. Nicolas Sarkozy won 31.18 percent of the vote and the Socialist Segolene Royal 25.87 percent, according to the definitive results released Monday for round one of France's presidential election.

6 killed at pro-Taliban protest in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

Security forces opened fire on pro-Taliban extremists who tried to storm the house of a rival Islamist leader in a Pakistani tribal region yesterday, killing six people, officials said.

More than 1,000 members of the hardline Lashkar-i-Islami (Army of Islam) organisation gathered in Bara, a town bordering Afghanistan, to demonstrate against the rival Ansar-ul-Islam (Companions of Islam) group, they said.

Some armed members of the mob then marched towards a nearby village to attack the house of Ansar-ul-Islam's leader, Pir Saifur Rehman, a security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"In a bid to disperse the crowd, local tribal police and paramilitary units opened fire and six people were killed and 10 injured," the official said requesting anonymity.

Bombs kill 8 Afghan intelligence agents

AFP, Kabul

Bomb blasts killed six Afghan intelligence agents and two policemen yesterday, while the decapitated body another agent was discovered in an attack claimed by the Taliban.

The six agents died in the eastern province of Laghman where a similar blast on Sunday killed two other intelligence operatives, a bodyguard and a driver. The province is about 120 kilometres (75 miles) from Kabul.

"Six intelligence officers were killed in the blast and another four were wounded," provincial police chief General Asil Totakhail told AFP.

Totakhail blamed the attack on the "enemies of Afghanistan," a term used by Afghan authorities to refer to fighters for the Taliban, driven from government in 2001 in an invasion by a US-led coalition.