

Million rally in Turkey for secularism, democracy

AFP, Ankara

More than one million people took part in a mass rally here Sunday in support of secularism and democracy amid a tense stand-off between the Islamist-rooted government and the army over presidential elections.

The crowd, carrying red-and-white Turkish flags and portraits of founding father Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, filled Istanbul's sprawling Caglayan square in a demonstration organized by some 600 non-governmental organizations.

"Turkey is secular and will remain secular," "Neither Sharia, nor coup d'etat, democratic Turkey," they chanted.

Police at the scene told AFP that the number of demonstrators was well over one million. Organisers said the rally drew people from all over Turkey and abroad.

The Istanbul demonstration

followed a similar one in Ankara on April 14 that attracted up to 1.5 million people, according to some estimates.

Tensions rose after Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, a former Islamist from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), narrowly missed becoming the country's next president in a first round of voting in parliament on Friday.

The AKP dominates the 550-seat parliament, but does not have the required two-thirds majority to get Gul elected in the first two rounds of voting.

The opposition boycotted the vote because of Gul's Islamist past and because they were not consulted on his candidacy for the non-partisan post.

The army, which has carried out three coups in the past, issued a statement saying it was determined to protect Turkey's secular system and was ready to take action if the

need arose, making it clear, according to many analysts, that Gul's candidacy was not welcome.

The government responded by calling the army to order and Gul on Sunday ruled out withdrawing his presidential bid.

"It is out of the question for me to withdraw my candidacy in any way," he told reporters in Ankara.

The prospect of Gul becoming head of state has alarmed secularists who fear the strict separation of state and religion will be eroded and Islam will creep into all fields of life if he is elected.

The main opposition Republican People's Party has asked the Constitutional Court to cancel Friday's presidential vote in parliament, arguing that the assembly did not have the necessary quorum to open the voting session.

Hamas leader justifies rocket attacks

AP, Cairo

A leader of the militant Hamas justified recent rockets attacks on Israel as "self defence," while the camp of moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday urged the preservation of a 5-month-old truce with the Israelis. The comments came during a second day of meetings between exiled Hamas political chief Khaled Mashaal and Abbas in the Cairo. The talks were the first since their factions formed a Palestinian coalition government in March.

The meetings followed an escalation in Palestinian-Israeli tensions, with a barrage of rockets fired by Hamas over the past week that threatened the cease-fire.

"It's the Palestinians' right to defend themselves," Mashaal said, adding the attacks came in revenge for the killings of nine Hamas supporters by Israel. "These are violations that need a retaliation."

But Abbas' aide Nabil Abu Rudeina, who was also in Cairo, said

everyone should abide by the truce because it is for "the sake of the Palestinian people."

Mashaal also blamed Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for allegedly hindering Egyptian mediations to secure the release of the abducted Israeli soldier Cpl Gilad Shalit in exchange for Palestinian prisoners. Shalit was seized last June by Hamas-affiliated militants from an Israeli military camp on the border with the Gaza Strip.

The kidnapping provoked an Israeli military offensive that killed more than 200 Palestinians. Hamas has said Shalit would be released only in return for Palestinians jailed in Israeli prisons.

Egypt has tried to negotiate Shalit's release for months and has blamed Hamas for failing to conclude the deal. Israeli Infrastructure Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who visited Cairo in October, said his government had accepted Egypt's conditions for a prisoner swap and blamed Mashaal for blocking the release.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan President Hamid Karzai (3L) speaks to delegates at a conference of donors meeting for the Afghanistan Development Forum (ADF) at the Foreign Ministry in Kabul yesterday.

US forces net 72 al-Qaeda suspects

AFP, Baghdad

US forces captured at least 72 suspects linked to al-Qaeda and seized bomb-making materials in a series of raids in two Iraqi provinces yesterday, the military said.

The raids were carried out in the restive Anbar and Salaheddin provinces of Iraq in an attempt to "disrupt the al-Qaeda network," it said in a statement.

In the biggest raid, the military netted 36 suspects with links to al-Qaeda in the town of Samarra in Salaheddin province, north of Baghdad, the military said.

Troops also found 20 five-gallon drums of nitric acid and other bomb-making materials near Garmah, close to the former rebel bastion of Fallujah in Anbar province of western Iraq.

US and Iraqi troops carry out raids almost daily in flashpoint regions in a bid to quell the daily bloodshed in the war-torn country.

Insurgents have continued to attack both security forces and civilians. On Saturday, a suicide car bombing in the Shia shrine city of Karbala, central Iraq, killed 71 people.



PHOTO: AFP

President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf (R) lays flowers at the Srebrenica's memorial centre in Potocari, near Eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica on Saturday. Musharraf paid his respects to victims of the 1995 massacre at Srebrenica, the worst mass slaughter in Europe since World War II.

US high-fliers in dock over sex racket

AFP, Washington

The resignation of a senior US State Department official has put the spotlight on an alleged Washington call-girl ring and pending trial of its madam who claims powerful men were among thousands of clients.

The capital has been riveted by the chance influential men may now be caught with their trousers down since Deborah Jeane Palfrey, 50, dubbed the DC Madam in local media, was arraigned in federal court on charges of operating a Washington prostitution service for 13 years until her retirement in 2006.

Palfrey has denied she ran a prostitution ring. Her company,

Pamela Martin and Associates, was simply a high-end adult fantasy firm, which offered legal sexual and erotic services across the spectrum of adult sexual behaviour, she said.

Palfrey contends her escort service provided university-educated women to engage in legal game-playing of a sexual nature at 275 dollars an hour for a 90-minute session. The Washington Post reported Saturday.

But Palfrey has also hinted that she has a record of the phone numbers of thousands of the more than 10,000 customers her company served which could embarrass more than a few of the US capital's high-fliers.

Larijani meets Maliki in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Iran's top national security official Ali Larijani arrived in Baghdad yesterday on a previously unannounced three-day visit and opened talks with senior officials, state television reported. The three-day visit came as the neighbours announced that Iran would send its foreign minister to a conference of world and regional powers this week to find ways to help Iraq build peace and overcome its current security crisis.

"The visit of Mr Larijani is in the framework of bilateral relations. He will probably talk about security questions and the international conference" in Egypt, Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad

Ali Hosseini said in Tehran.

An Iraqi government official confirmed Larijani's arrival and Iraqi state television later announced that he met with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Iran maintains close ties with many figures in Maliki's Shia-led government, despite the suspicions of his embattled coalition's other main ally, the United States.

US commanders allege that Iranian agents fund, train and equip many of the extremist factions involved in Iraq's insurgency and sectarian war, including those, which target Iraqi and American forces.

Five Iranian officials have been in US custody in Iraq since December, when they were seized in a raid in the northern city of Arbil.

Pak-Afghan leaders in fence-mending talks

AFP, Ankara

A summit between Pakistan and Afghanistan aiming to cool bilateral tensions in the fight against the Taliban insurgency is going ahead as planned, officials here said yesterday.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and his Afghan counterpart Hamid Karzai arrived here on Sunday for talks on tackling the Taliban-led insurgency, news agency Anatolia reported.

The two men were due to attend a dinner later on Sunday hosted by Turkish President Ahmet Necdet

Sezer followed by a formal round of talks on Monday.

The summit is meant to ease tensions between the two leaders amid mutual allegations over the growing extremist violence on both sides of their shared 2,400 kilometre (1,500-mile) border.

The Taliban movement was toppled from government in Afghanistan more than five years ago but is waging an insurgency that is supported by other Islamic extremists.

Karzai has been joined by some Western figures in accusing

Islamabad of not doing enough to round up Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders living in Pakistan and crack down on extremist groups training and funding militants.

Islamabad meanwhile says it has taken effective measures and accuses Afghanistan of shifting the blame onto Pakistan for its own failures.

Some reports had earlier suggested Musharraf could return home after a suicide bomber killed 28 people and wounded Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao at a political rally in northwest Pakistan on Saturday.

Democrats woo voters with Bush bashing

AP, San Diego

Wooing influential California Democrats, presidential contender Barack Obama vowed to "turn the page on this Iraq disaster" while Hillary Rodham Clinton denounced President Bush's conduct of the war as "one of the darkest blots on leadership we've ever had."

California, long a major cash source for candidates of both parties, is poised to become more influential in the electoral process as well, having moved its primary to next Feb 5. As a result, the state Democratic weekend convention

was expected to attract all the party's major presidential contenders except Delaware Sen Joe Biden, who was campaigning in South Carolina.

Saturday's programme featured appearances by front-runners Clinton and Obama, as well as Connecticut Sen Chris Dodd and Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich.

Clinton unleashed an unusually personal critique of Bush, accusing his administration of ignoring scientific evidence about global warming and stem cell research and lying about the effects of toxic dust at the World Trade Centre site.

Her voice hoarse from days of campaigning, Clinton brought the 2,000 delegates to their feet when she said she wished she could turn the clock back to a different time.

"Somebody said to me that he wished we could just rewind the 21st century and just eliminate the Bush-Cheney administration, with all their mistakes and misjudgments," she said to cheers. "People are ready for leaders who understand it is our votes who put them in power, our tax dollars that pay the bills."