



PHOTO: AFP
Turkish Foreign Minister and Justice and Development Party's (AKP) candidate for president Abdullah Gul (2nd L) applauds yesterday during a party meeting at the parliament in Ankara. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan denounced a ruling by the Constitutional Court to annul the first-round vote in the presidential election as "a bullet fired at democracy."

MOVE TO EASE TENSION Turkey ruling party calls for early polls

AP, Ankara

Turkey's Islamic-rooted ruling party appealed to parliament yesterday to declare early general elections to be held June 24, opening the way for an easing of tensions with the secular establishment.

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the decision in response to secularists' fears that his administration, by proposing a candidate for president with a background in the Islamic political movement, was moving the country toward Islamic rule that would undermine their Western way of life.

By holding early elections for a government with a fresh mandate, Erdogan hopes to resolve a crisis that sent the stock market tumbling and prompted the pro-secular military to threaten to intervene.

"God willing, Turkey will get back on track," Erdogan told reporters late Tuesday, referring to the economic and political stability that Turkey had enjoyed in recent years.

In a setback for his government, the country's highest court on Tuesday halted the parliamentary vote for president that looked set to elect the ruling party's candidate, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul.

Acting on a protest from the opposition, the Constitutional Court ruled that there were not enough legislators present during the first round of voting on Friday, and cancelled the round. The opposition had boycotted the vote, depriving the ruling party of a quorum of two-thirds of lawmakers in the 550-seat Parliament.

Gul said he would not withdraw his candidacy despite the ruling and urged parliamentary elections to be held "as soon as possible."

At the heart of the conflict is a fear that Gul's party would use its control of both Parliament and the presidency to overcome opposition to moving Turkey toward Islamic rule. More than 700,000 pro-secular Turks demonstrated in Istanbul on Sunday, many of them women who believe political Islam would deprive them of personal freedoms and economic opportunities.

French candidates hold TV debate

AFP, Paris

French presidential rivals, right winger Nicolas Sarkozy and socialist Segolene Royal yesterday held a face-to-face television debate that could seal their fate in Sunday's decisive vote.

More than half the country's adult population was expected to watch the two hour confrontation, which was to be carried live on France's two biggest television channels.

Televised debates have been

held between the finalists in every French election since 1974 -- except in 2002 when Jacques Chirac refused to meet far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Both the Sarkozy and Royal camps know that the head-to-head encounter could be crucial in determining the choice of millions of uncommitted voters.

Nearly seven million people chose defeated centrist Francois Bayrou in the first round of the vote on April 22, and the second round campaign has focussed on capturing his electorate.

Lankan Buddhist celebration marred by killings of 15

AFP, Colombo

Two Tamil civilians and 13 Tamil Tiger rebels were killed in northern Sri Lanka as the country marked the holiest Buddhist anniversary, military officials said yesterday.

Unidentified gunmen short dead the two civilians on Tuesday night, the start of the Wesak festival marking the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha more than 2,500 years ago, officials said.

Their bullet-riddled bodies were found on Wednesday in Vavuniya, a town in the north and close to the frontline with Tamil Tiger rebel-controlled territory.

The defence ministry said 10 Tiger rebels were killed in skirmishes with security forces in Mannar while another three were killed in Welioa on Tuesday. The ministry did not say if troops suffered any casualties.

US, India eye nuclear breakthrough

AFP, Washington

The United States and India say they are inching closer to a breakthrough on nuclear cooperation to seal a new era in relations that, during the Cold War, were chilly for decades.

Both sides sounded upbeat after two days of talks here between top US State Department official Nicholas Burns and Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon, which were aimed at implementing a July 2005 accord on atomic energy.

Burns, the US under secretary of state for political affairs, will travel to India "in the second half of May to reach a final agreement," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said after what he termed "excellent" meetings.

"We look forward to resolving the outstanding issues in the weeks ahead," he said in a statement, arguing that Menon's talks with officials including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had yielded "extensive progress."

Menon would not be tied down on a date to wrap up the landmark nuclear pact but said ahead of Burns' visit: "As far as I'm con-

cerned, this is doable ... and we want to do it as quickly as possible."

The US government had expressed frustration over the pace of the talks to implement the pact, which would give India access to US nuclear energy technology without requiring the Asian country to halt its atomic arms programme.

The deal is the centrepiece of energy-hungry India's new relationship with Washington after decades of Cold War tensions, as it tries to sustain its stunning economic expansion.

"I think it's a measure really of how the relationship has been transformed in the last few years," Menon said.

As India deepens free-market reforms and attracts billions of dollars in investment, the United States sees the emergence of a democratic ally and a bulwark against instability in a restive, nuclear-armed region.

In an opinion piece in Sunday's Washington Post, Burns predicted that "within a generation, Americans may view India as one of our two or three most important strategic partners."

Civilian casualties not acceptable: Karzai

50 civilians killed in Nato-led raids

AFP, AP, Kabul Heart

Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai summoned foreign military chiefs Wednesday after claims of new civilian deaths in anti-Taliban operations, saying afterwards these casualties were unacceptable.

"We can no longer accept civilian casualties, the way they occur. It's becoming heavy for us," Karzai told reporters after talks with the heads of the Nato- and US-led forces and representatives of the UN, US embassy and EU.

Afghan and UN investigations found that about 50 civilians, including many women and children, were killed in weekend fighting in western Afghanistan, officials said Wednesday.

The US-led coalition has said 136 Taliban fighters were killed in the clashes, that included bombing raids, with militants in the western province

of Herat on Friday and Sunday.

A United Nations investigation had so far found that 49 civilians were killed in the fighting in Shindand district, spokesman Adrian Edwards said.

Police found 51 were dead, western Afghanistan spokesman Akramudin Yawar told AFP.

The meeting came as more than 1,000 students in the eastern province of Nangarhar demanded the withdrawal of US troops in a fourth day of angry demonstrations over civilians allegedly killed by coalition troops.

"It is becoming a heavy burden and we are not happy about it," Karzai said.

"I hope the international community will find with us, with our relevant ministries, a mechanism that will bring an end to collateral damage, to damage to civilians," he said.

Olmert battles to stay on after war report

Defence minister to quit

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert battled to retain his post yesterday as his own party urged him to quit over a damning Lebanon war report and amid reports the defence minister was stepping down.

The beleaguered premier remained defiant in the face of the mutiny from his centrist Kadima party, which piled on the enormous public pressure for him to quit after the inquiry blasted his leadership during the 34-day war.

"To all those who are in haste in order to take advantage of the report for political profit, I tell them not to be hasty," Olmert warned at the opening of an extraordinary cabinet meeting.

He spoke after an aide to Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni -- a top Kadima official considered one of the frontrunners to take over the party leadership -- said she would ask Olmert to quit during a meeting later in the day.

"She is expected to ask him to resign," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Should she issue the call, Livni would become the most senior member in Olmert's ruling coalition and within his party to join those clamouring for the weakened premier to step down.

Meanwhile, Israeli media cited aides to Defence Minister Amir Peretz -- the Labour party leader whom the report roasted for failing in his functions during the war -- saying that he would resign within the coming hours.

"Mr Peretz took this decision as he is ratifying the report's conclusions and is aiming to conform to norms of behaviour required of those who exercise public office," the website of the tabloid Maariv quoted an aide as saying.

Peretz's office declined to comment on the reports and an ally, Labour MP Yoram Marciano, said Peretz was weighing the pros and cons, but had not taken a definitive decision.

Olmert thus far has admitted to "extremely serious failures" in leadership during last summer's devastating war against Hezbollah, but has refused to bow to the ever-

increasing pressure to quit.

His Kadima party can not forcibly oust him as its charter does not spell out such a procedure.

Hours before the cabinet meeting, Kadima's parliamentary bloc head Avigdor Itzhaky also called on Olmert to step down, saying it would be "suicidal" for the party, formed a year and a half ago, if the premier remained.

Two of Kadima's 29 deputies in the 120-seat parliament on Tuesday openly called on him to resign and a senior party official told AFP that a majority of Kadima MPs wanted him to quit. The party was to meet later on Wednesday.

A minister from Kadima's main coalition partner Labour, Eitan Cabel, resigned on Tuesday saying he could not longer serve under Olmert.

Polls published on Wednesday showed that between 65 and 68 percent of Israelis want Olmert to quit, and only six percent think he is capable of carrying out the functions of his office.



PHOTO: AFP

A demonstrator shows his support from the sidewalk during a march calling for immigration reform on May 1 in Chicago. According to the Chicago Police Department, about 150,000 people participated in the march, one of many marches held nationwide.