



A woman casts her ballot at a polling station in Saint-Pierre et Miquelon yesterday for the second and final round of the French presidential elections as polling booths opened in this tiny French island territory off the Canadian coast, a day ahead of the French mainland.

French voters last to know president's name

AFP, AP, Paris

Millions of French voters casting their ballots for the right-winger Nicolas Sarkozy or the socialist Segolene Royal may be the last to discover the name of their new president tonight.

French electoral laws, among the strictest in Europe, ban the publication of any opinion polls, estimates of results or angled news reports from the day before a vote until the close of polls, to avoid influencing voters' choice.

For Sunday's presidential vote, in which France chooses a successor to the 74-year-old Jacques Chirac, the ban runs from midnight (2200 GMT) Friday to the close of the last polling stations at 8:00 pm (1800 GMT).

In France's overseas territories in the Caribbean and north Atlantic, which vote a day early,

television screens went blank Thursday at midnight, with all cable and satellite news broadcasts suspended for 24 hours.

National news programmes were carried with a delay, to allow editors to slice out any reference to the electoral campaign on the mainland.

But though strictly applied in France, with fines of 75,000 euros (100,000 dollars) for offenders -- the rules are not enforced in neighbouring countries or for websites based outside the country.

In practice, any French person with an Internet connection, or who can pick up Swiss or Belgian radio from across the border, can easily circumvent the law.

From 1630 GMT on Sunday, the first projections of the results, conducted by polling firms based on a sample of votes cast but not

designed for publication, will be sent out to political parties and the media.

In the April 22 first round, these secret figures were leaked and released by foreign media almost two hours before official projections were published in France at 1800 GMT -- and the same scenario is likely this weekend.

With French bloggers also threatening to post leaked estimates on their sites from 1630 GMT, the French media stand to be among the last to publish the estimated results of the country's own election.

Critics in France, including AFP, argue that the law puts French-based news organisations at a competitive disadvantage in a globalised media environment.

"We're in an awful situation," said Denis Hault, global news director at AFP.

AFP coverage of the first round was a success overall, Hault said. "We're confident that our strength on the ground will make a difference at the end of the day," he added.

Earlier final polls showed that Nicolas Sarkozy, who would warm up relations with the United States and prod the French to work more, was favoured to win today's presidential elections and to dash Socialist Segolene Royal's hopes at becoming France's first woman president.

Despite Royal's fierce final blows Friday, all final polls suggested that Sarkozy will win Sunday's runoff and take over this restless, troubled nuclear power from the aging Jacques Chirac.



Paris Hilton

Paris Hilton going to jail for 45 days

AP, Los Angeles

A judge sentenced Paris Hilton to 45 days in county jail Friday for violating her probation, putting the brakes on the hotel heiress' famous high life.

Hilton, who parlayed her name and relentless partying into worldwide notoriety, must go to jail by June 5 and she will not be allowed any work release, furloughs, use of an alternative jail or electronic monitoring in lieu of jail, Superior Court Judge Michael T Sauer ruled after a hearing.

The judge, saying "there's no doubt she knew her license had been suspended," ruled that she was in violation of the terms of her probation in an alcohol-related reckless driving case.

"I'm very sorry and from now on I'm going to pay complete attention to everything. I'm sorry and I did not do it on purpose at all," she told the judge before he announced the sentence.

Iran a sticking point in Indo-US N-deal

AFP, New Delhi

The passage of a landmark nuclear deal between India and the United States has hit a fresh snag with senators in Washington piling the pressure on New Delhi to keep its distance from Iran, officials said.

Although the US Congress agreed in December to let talks on the energy deal move forward, Indian and US officials are still at odds over the fine print of an accord seen as the centrepiece of a new post-Cold War relationship.

There was some cause for opti-

mism after talks in Washington earlier this week, with Indian diplomats saying problem issues like the treatment of spent fuel and India's right to test nuclear weapons could be overcome.

But in the aftermath of the talks on how India should get previously forbidden nuclear technology, seven US senators wrote to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh telling him not to cosy up too much with Iran.

Washington is trying to isolate Tehran over its disputed nuclear programme and alleged support for terrorism.

"We are deeply concerned by India's increasing co-operation

with that country," said the letter, which was widely published in the Indian media.

The senators -- who still have a say over whether the nuclear accord can go through -- objected to "the exchange of visits between high-level officials, enhanced military ties, and negotiations of agreements to establish closer economic relations." The text also singled out India's hopes to buy Iranian gas via a multi-billion dollar pipeline -- a project which, like the nuclear energy deal with the US, is seen as crucial for energy-hungry India to fuel long-term economic growth.

Blair counts cost of polls rout

AFP, London

Britain's governing Labour Party was licking its wounds yesterday after voters sent outgoing Prime Minister Tony Blair on his way with a string of stinging poll losses.

Voters delivered their final verdict on Blair ahead of his expected departure after 10 years in power -- and Labour were ousted as the biggest party in the

Scottish Parliament, left looking for a coalition partner to stay in power in the Welsh Assembly and pounded in English local councils.

Though Labour avoided the meltdown some pollsters predicted, Blair's likely successor, finance minister Gordon Brown, is set to take over the reins amid widespread voter discontent about the war in Iraq and a series of recent scandals -- as evidenced in

Thursday's vote.

Brown insisted that Labour had put up a good fight but said it was prepared to take stock of voters' views.

"To all those who came back to Labour -- and to everyone throughout Britain -- my resolve is that we, the Labour Party, will listen and we will learn as we continue to work for and serve the people of Britain," he said.

Newspapers said Saturday that Labour's mid-term setbacks finally lived up to British politics and set the stage for a new epic duel between Brown and main opposition Conservative leader David Cameron.

"The verdict on 10 years of New Labour is now in. The story is one of under-achievement," said The Sun newspaper of Blair's decade in power.



King biggest electricity bills defaulter

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's embattled King Gyanendra owes more than 460,000 dollars in unpaid electricity bills, making him the Himalayan nation's biggest power defaulter, a report said yesterday.

The king, who faces an uncertain future with former Maoist rebels calling for the monarchy's abolition, owes the money for electricity supplied to four royal palaces and bungalows since early 2005.



PHOTO: AFP

Young people attend a rally in support of secularism in the Egean city of Manisa yesterday. Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul insisted in an interview that he would secure a majority if a popular vote was held to decide who should be the country's president. He was speaking after his Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) moved on May 4 to push through a package of reforms, which would allow for the president to be elected by the nation, not parliament.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents of a low-lying area make their way through the flooded streets of the Yangon city yesterday. Many low-lying areas of Myanmar's biggest city of Yangon flooded in two days of heavy rain.

Jihad militants fire rockets on Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Gaza militants fired three rockets at southern Israel on Saturday causing no casualties but damaging a building in the town of Sderot, an army spokesman said.

The hardline Islamic Jihad group said it carried out the attack in retaliation for the killing of three of its militants by the Israeli army near the northern West Bank town of Jenin on Friday.

"This is our first riposte to the crimes of the Zionist enemy which assassinated three heroes of the Al-Quds Brigades (Islamic Jihad's military wing)," the group said in a statement.

Islamic Jihad was not party to a November truce under which Israeli troops pulled out of Gaza in return for a commitment from militant groups to end rocket fire from the territory.

Science triumphs over politics at climate meet

AFP, Bangkok

Science had a rare victory over politics at this week's UN climate change conference, after a united call for action emerged despite fierce debate over how to best tackle global warming.

The UN's top body on climate change on Friday released a report approved by delegates from 120 nations, laying out how the world could avoid the worst impacts of global warming with minimal economic damage.

As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change meeting began in Bangkok on Monday, delegates warned that it was fanciful to believe all the players had the interests of the planet at the top of

their agenda.

They said nations would inevitably fight to protect their own economic and political interests, and as the meeting got underway, reports crept out from behind the closed doors that some delegations were indeed playing politics.

But after all the battles, wrangling and interventions, most agreed that science had triumphed, with politics sometimes even playing a helping hand.

"You could argue that some of the delegates that are most critical and difficult towards the text are the most important to the text," said Michael Williams, spokesman for the UN's Environment Programme.

"By challenging and nitpicking and asking questions, that just

increases the chances of us getting a better text rather than just being polite about it."

The United States, usually fingered as a key culprit in protecting economic interests over climate change concerns, escaped largely unscathed from the conference, with most delegates pleasantly surprised by its performance.

"I was relieved to see the Americans behaving, that makes such a difference," said Stephan Singer, of the conservation group WWF.

Gavin Edwards from Greenpeace also said the United States delegation had kept a low profile, but "they burst into life when it came to nuclear power."

Throughout the week, news emerged from various camps that

India, China and Brazil were pushing their positions with vigour, trying to get rich countries to recognise their historical burden for global warming.

Shouldering most of the blame for trying to stick a political oar in the proceedings was China, who were said to be trying to play up the costs of taking immediate action to battle global warming.

Michael Mueller, a German environment ministry official who attended the talks, accused China of impeding progress towards cutting greenhouse gases, and said its delegates had been "masters of deception and the art of interpretation."

But even the green groups eventually gave China a pat on the back.