



French right-wing party UMP presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy casts his vote flanked by his stepdaughters Jeanne-Marie (L) and Judith (C) yesterday at a polling station in Neuilly-sur-Seine, near Paris, for the second and final round of the French presidential election.

High turnout in vote for French president

Sarkozy the clear favourite

AFP, Paris

French voters turned out in force yesterday to choose a new president with rightwinger Nicolas Sarkozy the clear favourite against Socialist Segolene Royal in their duel to win a mandate for sweeping change.

Extra police were moved into Paris and its high immigrant suburbs in case a Sarkozy victory sparks trouble, but there was more focus on the huge turnout for the deciding second round.

By noon, 34 percent of France's 44.5 million eligible voters had cast ballots for a successor to President Jacques Chirac who is stepping down after 12 years in office.

This was the highest midday turnout since 1974 and under-

scored the strong interest in the left-right battle for the Elysee palace. The midday turnout was also up from 31.21 percent in the April 22 first round, the interior ministry said.

Sarkozy, accompanied by his two step daughters, voted in the chic Paris suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, where he was greeted with cheers of "Nicolas president." His wife Cecilia was not present however.

Royal said the choice for her "had not been difficult" after voting in the town of Melle in western France.

The choice between them is stark. Sarkozy, son of a Hungarian immigrant who has promised a "clean break" with the past, and Royal, the daughter of an army colonel seeking to become

France's first woman president, has vowed to guard France's welfare state.

Sarkozy, 52, who has been leading in public opinion polls, says he wants to get France "back to work" and is proposing tax cuts and incentives to free up the labour market. He also supports tougher controls on immigration.

Royal, 53, proposing to safeguard France's generous social protection, create jobs and carry out institutional reform to bring government closer to the people.

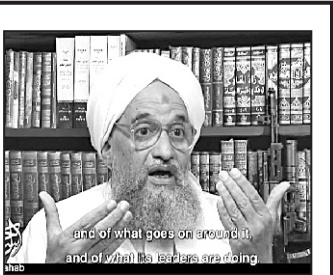
"Today we are making a choice as a society," said Guillaume Belleque, 28, a computer expert who emphasized the radical differences between the two candidates after he voted in the western city of Nantes.

"There is change in the air," said Gaelle Bernard, 30, a psychologist. "And I am mostly hopeful."

The election marks a shift to a younger generation of leaders born after World War II, who are promising to tackle the huge national debt, high unemployment and simmering tensions in the suburbs.

Maria Dallais, a 52-year-old cleaning lady in the suburb of Suresnes, west of Paris, said she voted for Sarkozy "because we need radical change. People need to go back to work."

With the final polls showing Sarkozy on course for victory, Royal warned Friday that his victory could ignite new violence in the high-immigrant suburbs where there were riots in 2005.



Ayman al-Zawahiri

al-Qaeda No 2 mocks American 'failure'

AP, Cairo

A new video of al-Qaeda's No 2 leader released on Saturday mocks President Bush and US legislation requiring the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, saying the bill would rob the group's fighters of the chance to kill more Americans.

Osama bin Laden's deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri derided the new US-backed Baghdad security plan, recounting an April 12 suicide bombing in Baghdad's heavily protected Green Zone when an attacker slipped through security and killed a Sunni legislator in the Iraqi parliament's cafeteria. An al-Qaeda-led amalgam of Sunni insurgents in Iraq claimed responsibility.

"And lest Bush worry, I congratulate him on the success of his security plan, and I invite him on the occasion for a glass of juice, but in the cafeteria of the Iraqi parliament in the middle of the Green Zone," al-Zawahiri said.

The video was obtained Saturday by US-based monitoring groups who released a transcript to media.

Al-Zawahiri, shown seated before a bookshelf in a white robe and turban, addresses legislation pushed by Democratic leaders, and vetoed by Bush, that would have required the first US troops in Iraq to be withdrawn by Oct. 1 with a goal of a complete pullout six months later.

Tornado kills 9 in Kansas

AP, Greensburg

The eerie beeping of battery-operated fire alarms buried beneath mounds of debris punctured the silence that fell over this community as hundreds of rescue workers pulled out of town.

News of another approaching storm brought an uneasy quiet Saturday night as emergency crews called off the search for more victims of a tornado that killed at least eight people and devastated this southwest Kansas farming town a day earlier.

The National Weather Service said it had received reports "well into the double digits" of twisters touching down in six southwest Kansas counties. Numerous tornadoes were reported from South Dakota south into Oklahoma as forecasters scrambled to keep issuing warnings.

"We need support," said Greensburg Administrator Steve Hewitt. "We want everybody to know this is a huge catastrophe."

At least eight people have died in the Greensburg area. Friday's weather was blamed for nine deaths in the region, a number authorities feared could rise even before the latest twisters. All its residents have been evacuated.

Among the few structures that survived was the Bar H Tavern. It was briefly converted into a morgue. Command operations for rescue efforts were moved into the town's stately courthouse, damaged but also still standing.

All the churches have been destroyed. Every business along the town's main street has been demolished for most, all that remains are steel girders, tattered insulation, splintered wood. The towns fire engines were crushed.

Other crumpled vehicles were tossed into the melee.

The town's claim to fame is the world's biggest hand dug well. Its condition is unknown because it is buried under a mountain of debris. The attraction's gift store has disappeared.

For decades, meteorite hunters from throughout the world have been drawn here to hunt for space rocks in the rich soil near here. The town's extensive meteorite collection, including its famed 1,000-pound pallasite meteorite, is casualty of the storm.

"It is very scary right now," said Hewitt.

Hewitt estimated 95 percent of the town of 1,500 was destroyed and predicted rescue efforts could take days as survivors could be trapped in basements and under rubble.

Search on for plane in Cameroon

AP, Lolodorf

Fog, thick forest and an unexplained silence from an emergency transponder hampered search efforts Sunday as rescuers combed a remote area for a Kenya-bound flight that crashed with 114 people on board.

A Kenyan Airways official said at a news conference in Nairobi that the company's plane had stopped emitting signals after an initial distress call, though an automatic device should have kept up emissions for another two days.

"Why the signal is not being heard right now, we're not quite sure," said Kenya Airways CEO Titus Naikuni.

The silence complicated an already difficult rescue mission. Wreckage has yet to be spotted.

Rescuers had suspended the search because of heavy rains late Saturday. The rains subsided by daybreak, but fog persisted.

"It's a forest, and there's no access in terms of road network," Naikuni said. "We are talking equatorial forest tall, huge trees."

Sunday worshippers said prayers for those aboard at Kenyan churches, including Nairobi's Anglican cathedral.

The jet bound for the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, went down early Saturday near Lolodorf, about 90 miles southeast of the coastal city of Douala, where it had taken off after midnight, said Alex Bayeck, a regional communications officer.

There was no word on survivors, Bayeck said by telephone Saturday en route to the crash site.

Palestinian leaders to talks US security plan

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas was set to meet Prime Minister Ismail Haniya of Hamas to discuss a proposed US security plan that the Islamist movement has already rejected, an official told AFP.

The president "will travel to Gaza today and meet with Prime Minister Ismail Haniya to present to him the American plan," said chief negotiator Saeb Erakat.

On Saturday Hamas, the senior partner in a coalition with Abbas's secular Fatah party, rejected a US plan put to Israel and the Palestinians to end rocket fire in exchange for eased restrictions on Palestinian movement.

The document, a copy of which was obtained by Israel's Haaretz daily on Friday, sets out a timeline for implementing steps on security and movement, along with moves to bolster security services loyal to Abbas.

The proposed steps include Israel lifting restrictions on Palestinian movement and the Palestinians deploying forces to prevent the launching of rockets that are regularly fired by Gaza-based militants into the Jewish state.

The Palestinian Authority welcomed the measure as "a very good approach," while Israel warned it would not be able to implement some of the recommended steps for security reasons.

UN report upbeat on climate change

AFP, Bangkok

After two grim warnings on the impact of climate change, the world's top experts were unusually upbeat in assessing ways to protect the Earth, but said that national leaders have no time to waste.

The report delivered by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the UN's top authority on the subject which met in Bangkok last week, said humanity could at least slow global warming with existing, affordable technology.

But the experts warned that time was of the essence to ward off the most destructive effects of climate change.

"We believe that human beings are capable of reducing the problems that we may get on climate

change," Ogunlade Davidson, the co-chair of the meeting, told AFP.

"The only difficulty is to get the political will to do that," he said.

The report following the IPCC's Bangkok meeting was its third of the year.

The first, released in Paris in February, found it highly likely that global temperatures would rise by 1.8 to 4.0 degrees Celsius (3.2 to 7.2 Fahrenheit) over the next century.

However, it also warned that temperatures could even climb by 6.4 degrees C (11.52 F).

A second report in Brussels in April highlighted the catastrophic damage that global warming could cause, including the extinction of up to 30 percent of animal and plant life.

The first two reports offered little good news, but this one is different,

said Davidson.

"The third assessment says there are possible solutions and you can do it at a reasonable cost," he said.

The options laid out covered simple measures like switching to energy efficient light bulbs and adjusting the thermostat in the office.

But they also included extremely controversial and complex techniques such as nuclear power, and the storing of carbon dioxide -- the major greenhouse gas -- underground instead of letting it spew into the atmosphere.

Renewable energies, such as wind, solar and biofuel, were highlighted as an important part of the mix, while the experts said putting a price on using the fossil fuels that produce greenhouse gases was important.



Iraqis walk through the rubble of a pre-dawn rain on the Baghdad Shia stronghold of Sadr City yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP