



An Indian paramilitary soldier stands alert over voters as they queue to cast their votes at a polling centre in Mahanpur, some 35 km west of Agartala yesterday during voting for Tripura state assembly elections.

## Moderate polling in peaceful Tripura

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Agartala

Moderate polling was recorded on Saturday in the northeastern state of Tripura in the single-phase assembly elections with no incidents of violence till the early afternoon, officials said.

"Polling began at 7 am with men and women queuing up in large numbers to cast their votes in 60 assembly constituencies," said GSG Ayyangar, the chief electoral officer.

According to Ayyangar, more than 50 per cent votes had been cast by 1.30 pm and the tempo was expected to increase as the day progressed.

New voters and women appeared the most enthusiastic. "I expect over 80 per cent voting when polling ends at 4 pm," Ayyangar said.

In some of the polling stations, technical trouble with electronic voting machines (EVM) halted voting for brief periods.

# Good progress on Iran, but 'not sufficient': IAEA

## Rice sees strong case for fresh sanctions

AFP, Vienna

The UN atomic watchdog said Friday it had made "quite good progress" in its long-running investigation into Iran's disputed nuclear drive, but was still not in a position to offer a verdict on Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

In a confidential new report, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) complained that Iran was continuing to defy UN demands to halt uranium enrichment.

Furthermore, it had started developing faster and more efficient centrifuges to produce enriched uranium, which can be used to make the fissile material for a bomb.

The IAEA has "recently received from Iran additional information," said the report, which will be put to its board of governors next month.

"As a result, the agency's knowledge about Iran's current declared nuclear programme has become clearer."

However, the information "has been provided on an ad hoc basis and not in a consistent and complete manner," the UN watchdog complained.

That meant that the agency "is not yet in a position to determine the full nature of Iran's nuclear programme."

Tehran insists its nuclear drive is purely peaceful, while the United States and other Western powers accuse it of covertly seeking to develop a nuclear bomb.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reacted to the IAEA report saying it gave "a very strong case" for imposing a third round of UN sanctions against Iran.

Washington plans to host talks in the US capital Monday with foreign ministry officials of the six powers -- the five UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany -- to review a proposed third UN sanctions resolution over Iran's nuclear programme.

In Tehran, top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili said further sanctions would be a "disgrace", arguing that the report proved that accusations that Iran wanted nuclear weapons were baseless.

The IAEA said nearly all of the key outstanding issues agreed in

the so-called "work plan" drawn up the IAEA and Tehran last autumn had been resolved.

Nevertheless, one crucial issue was still outstanding: Iran's alleged work in missile and explosives experiments which could point to a possible military dimension to its nuclear programme.

The IAEA recently received permission from key countries to confront Iran with intelligence documents regarding the experiments.

Tehran's response was to dismiss the allegations as "baseless", while offering no hard facts to disprove them, a senior IAEA official complained.

"The ball is in Iran's court," the official said.

# Dozens killed as Turkish army pursues Kurdish rebels in Iraq

AFP, Ankara

Turkish troops pursued Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq on the third day of a major ground operation yesterday as the military put the initial death toll from the clashes at around 50.

Iraq has protested against the operation launched Thursday evening and the United Nations and Western powers have called for restraint.

At least 24 members of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and five soldiers were killed in the clashes, the military said overnight.

It estimated that at least 20 other rebels were killed by artillery and helicopter fire, but said the exact toll would not be known until troops reach the targeted area.

The military also reported panic among the PKK, which is believed to have been caught by surprise.

Turkish incursions into northern Iraq, which were frequent in the 1980s and 1990s, were usually launched with the spring thaw in the rugged, snow-bound moun-

tains of the region when PKK militants begin to sneak into Turkey.

"It has been understood from preliminary information that the terrorists have suffered heavy losses," the military said. "According to intelligence, the (PKK) leaders are trying to flee the region, running southwards in panic."

Heavy fighting and artillery fire continued late into the night Friday, villagers in the area told AFP.

They reported hearing sustained exchanges of automatic fire in the Hakurk and Sidekan regions, on the Iraqi side of the border across from the Turkish town of Cukurca, as fighter planes and helicopters flew reconnaissance missions throughout the night.

Sustained artillery fire could be heard until midnight (2200 GMT) in the Bamerni area, about 40 kilometres to the southwest, where the Turkish army has maintained a small base since the 1990s, the villagers said.

The soldiers poured into the Kurdish region of northern Iraq from 7 pm (1700 GMT) Thursday after eight hours of air and artillery

strikes.

Ankara says an estimated 4,000 PKK rebels are holed up in northern Iraq and use the region as a springboard for attacks on Turkish territory as part of their bloody campaign for self-rule in Kurdish-majority southeast Turkey.

Their separatist campaign has claimed more than 37,000 lives since 1984.

Turkish newspapers on Saturday hailed the incursion.

"Winter crackdown on terrorist den," the liberal Milliyet headlined on its front page, while the popular Vatan called for "Vengeance for the martyrs".

But several columnists warned against staying too long in the region and urged the government to back up military measures with economic, social and democratic reforms to win over Turkey's sizeable Kurdish community.

Iraqi leaders on Friday summoned Turkey's charge d'affaires in Baghdad to protest against the operation and Ankara quickly gave assurances on the nature and scope of the incursion.

## Zardari tries to rope in MQM for coalition

PTI, Islamabad

Stepping up consultations for forming a coalition government in Pakistan, PPP co-Chairman Asif Ali Zardari discussed possible cooperation with pro-Musharraf MQM's chief Altaf Hussain, a move apparently opposed by PML-N of Nawaz Sharif.

Amid mounting worries about the future of President Pervez Musharraf, the PML-Q, which had backed him, fired his first salvo against the beleaguered leader on Friday night, saying his decision to impose emergency was responsible for its "disastrous" performance in the February 18 polls.

The party, which bagged 39 parliamentary seats in the polls, is to shortly hold an extraordinary meeting in Islamabad apparently to prevent possible defections of its elected representatives.

Zardari spoke to the London-based Hussain on phone late on Friday night and discussed the political situation in the wake of Monday's general election in which the PPP has emerged the largest party in the National Assembly.

The MQM too performed well in the polls, bagging 19 seats in the lower house of parliament and emerging as the second largest party in the southern Sindh province, where the PPP is set to form the government.



Detained Pakistani lawyer Aitzaz Ahsan (C), who led deposed chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry's legal fight against his suspension by President Pervez Musharraf, is greeted by lawyers as he arrives for casting his vote in the High Court's annual election in Lahore yesterday.

# Pressure on Zardari, Nawaz to work with Musharraf

THE DAWN, Islamabad

Western envoys in Islamabad continued on Friday what seemed to be hectic contacts with the leaders of parties that won last Monday's elections amid mounting worries about President Pervez Musharraf's political future.

The president has come under renewed pressures after the elections threw up all opponents of his iron-fisted rule for more than eight years and crushed the main party of his loyalists.

The meetings, mainly of American and British ambassadors with the leaders of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), have led to speculations about possible counsels to the makers of the future government to try to co-exist with Musharraf despite years of their mutual hostility.

No details have been available of the talks, except that matters about transition to democracy and counter-terrorism were among subjects discussed, indicating the West's concerns about the future of Pakistan's key role in the so-called war on terrorism of which the president is the architect.

US ambassador Anne W. Paterson on Friday had a second contact with PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari within a few days, though this time accompanied by a Congressional delegation that earlier met President Musharraf.

British High Commissioner Robert Brinkley held a second meeting with Sharif, only a day after the PML-N leader reiterated his hard line against the man who toppled him as prime minister in the Oct 12, 1999 coup, by telling a news conference that "sooner he (president) left the better".

Washington's known preference for a power-sharing between Musharraf and the PPP had led to the return of PPP leader Benazir Bhutto to Pakistan after about nine years of self-imposed foreign exile.

But any deal cut then was overtaken by Ms Bhutto's Dec 27 assassination in a gun-and-bomb attack after she addressed a campaign rally in Rawalpindi and the rout of the previously ruling and pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League in the elections, which left the two main winning parties the most sensible course of power-sharing between themselves rather than with those who will remain virtual political untouchables for now.



Sri Lankan security officials examine the scene of a bomb blast on the outskirts of Colombo yesterday. Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels set off a parcel bomb aboard a private bus in the outskirts of Colombo injuring at least 18 people, the defence ministry said.

## 21 killed in Lankan fresh fighting

AP, Colombo

Scattered battles in the war-torn jungles of northern Sri Lanka killed 20 separatist guerrillas and a soldier, the military said Friday, while the rebels accused the government of killing eight civilians in an airstrike.

The violence came as fighting between the two sides has sharply increased in recent weeks, with the government vowing to retake rebel-controlled territory and crush the Tamil Tigers after more than two decades of warfare.

On Friday, soldiers fired at a group of rebels who tried to infiltrate the government-held Welioya region, killing six guerrillas, the military said in a statement.

In fighting Thursday in the Mannar area along the Indian Ocean nation's west coast, troops killed three rebels who were trying to cross the front lines and two others in a separate confrontation, the military statement said. In nearby Vavuniya, troops killed nine fighters in two clashes, the military said.

# 'There is no need to impeach Musharraf'

CNN, Islamabad

Pakistan parliamentary elections took place Monday, and even though formal results haven't been announced, it was clear from preliminary Election Commission results that Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party and Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N dominated.

Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari said on Thursday they want to reappoint Pakistan's Supreme Court justices, who were ousted by Musharraf in November when he imposed a countrywide state of emergency.

The opposition leaders said details of how the justices will be reappointed will be worked out when the parliament convenes.

In the meanwhile, PPP Vice-Chairman Makhdoom Amin Fahim is being considered the most likely candidate for the post of Pakistan Prime Minister. He spoke to CNN about what Pakistan's future would be under his leadership.



Makhdoom Amin Fahim

ernment without him?

Makhdoom Amin Fahim: I think there's no need at the moment but the parliament is sovereign. Once we go to the parliament, the parliament will look at every issue. We should not rock the boat at this time. We must have civil transition of power from the military to the civilians.

CNN: Are you willing to sit with the Taliban and negotiate and get them involved in the political system?

Makhdoom Amin Fahim: We are not in favour of terrorism anywhere in the world. We will try to settle this issue through the parliament with the support of the people of Pakistan. Now, their advice will be the guideline.

CNN: Would you be willing to sit down with members of Taliban and these militant groups face to face?

Makhdoom Amin Fahim: We have not said anything about whether we'll be sitting with them or not. I think we should leave handling and tackling this to the parliament.

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