



Maldivian voters wait to cast their ballots at a polling station in Male yesterday. Voting got under way in the Maldives to choose the country's first-ever democratically elected president in a run-off between Asia's longest serving leader and a former political prisoner.

## Maldives nationals vote in presidential run-off

AFP, Male

Voters turned out in strength yesterday to choose the Maldives' first democratically-elected president in a run-off between Asia's longest serving leader and a former political prisoner.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the 71-year-old frontrunner, faces his toughest critic Mohamed "Anni" Nasheed, 41, after failing to win an outright victory in the October 8 first round.

Hotel employee Hussein Iqbal said he spent an hour in line to vote but felt it was worth it. "I voted for change," he said.

"Gayoom was the president when I was born," said Sabra Noordeen, 22, an opposition activist. "I'm keen to see a change so I went early and voted Anni," referring to the name by which the opposition leader is commonly known.

But Ibrahim Shahib, a private sector employee, said he voted for Gayoom, who has served as president since 1978 and steered the Maldives' transformation from a fishing-based economy to luxury tourism hotspot.

## Pak-Afghan meeting mulls talks with Taliban

US considering talks with militants

AFP, Islamabad/Washington

Pakistani and Afghan officials and tribal elders Tuesday discussed the possibility of holding talks with Taliban militants to try to end deadly violence on their porous border, officials said.

Fifty delegates were meeting on the second day of a "mini-jirga" in Islamabad, following up from a major tribal council held in August 2007 between the two key allies in the US-led "war on terror".

In the run-up to the meeting there was a flurry of reports that the US-backed Afghan government was in secret negotiations with top Taliban commanders in a bid to end the bloodshed.

The Pakistani foreign office would not confirm details of the discussions between the delegates, who are drawn from political parties as well as from the ethnic Pashtun tribes that straddle the border.

"They are meeting in two committees which will then report to the overall meeting," foreign office

spokesman Mohammad Sadiq told AFP.

But a senior Pakistani official said that they brought up the subject of talks with the Taliban, a hardline Islamist movement that ruled Afghanistan from 1996-2001 and now has roots on both sides of the border.

"There is an effort to come up with suggestions and modalities for opening talks with the Taliban," said the official, who was involved in organising the meeting but spoke under condition of anonymity.

"They are discussing what is the best way forward, whether there has been a change in the atmosphere in Pakistan and Afghanistan (that would allow talks). It is not an isolated meeting," added the official.

Violence has soared on both sides of the border in recent months, with Washington and Kabul urging Islamabad to tackle militant "safe havens" in Pakistan's tribal belt.

Pakistan has also suffered a

wave of suicide attacks.

The jirga was expected to appoint five delegates from each country to establish contact and hold peace talks with "armed opposition groups," The News daily reported.

Sources within the council did not confirm the numbers involved, but told AFP they would form a group that would be sanctioned by the Afghan and Pakistani militaries and governments to "engage the Taliban in serious negotiations for finding a peaceful solution."

Meanwhile, the United States is considering taking part in talks with elements of the Taliban in a sharp change in tactics in Afghanistan, the Wall Street Journal reported yesterday citing unnamed officials.

"Senior White House and military officials believe that engaging some levels of the Taliban -- while excluding top leaders -- could help reverse a pronounced downward spiral in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan," the paper said on its website.

## 'Pakistani girl mauled by dogs, shot dead by inlaws'

AFP, Karachi

A pregnant Pakistani teenager was mauled by dogs and then shot dead by her inlaws over a property dispute, the girl's parents and a human rights group said.

But 17-year-old Tasleem Solangi's death was later justified as an honour killing by a local jirga or tribal council over allegations that she had affairs with other men, they claimed.

The incident, which happened in March but details of which have only emerged, is the latest honour killing that has claimed the lives of more than 150 women this year.

Gulsher Solangi, from Khairpur district, 425 kilometres (265 miles) from the southwestern city of Karachi, said his daughter's new family, who deny any wrongdoing, repeatedly beat her after her marriage and demanded she transfer land and pay money to them.

She was killed when he refused to hand over his property, he added.

"I saw my daughter running helplessly trying to save herself from hounding dogs," the 59-year-old farmer said, adding that he was held inside a house as his daughter was thrown to the baying pack.

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