

Iraqis vote in key test of nation's progress

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqis voted in provincial elections on Saturday in a crucial test for a nation struggling to emerge from years of sectarian strife and to strengthen its fledgling democracy.

Security for the country's first ballot since 2005 was extremely tight with Iraqi police and military deployed in force as part of ramped-up measures aimed at preventing militant attacks and turnout was forecast to be high.

But six policemen and a civilian were injured in a bombing in the mainly Shia Turkmen town of Tuz Khurmatu north of Baghdad.

And in the Sunni Arab town of Tikrit, the hometown of executed dictator Saddam Hussein, four flash bombs exploded near several polling centres, but police said there were no casualties.

About 15 million people are eligible to vote to elect councils in 14 of Iraq's 18 provinces. Polling was to close at 1400 GMT but was extended by an hour. Results are expected to start rolling in on Tuesday.

Turnout is being closely watched, particularly among minority Sunni Arabs

who massively boycotted the last parliamentary elections in 2005.

"This is a victory for all the Iraqis," Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said after voting in the highly-fortified Green Zone in Baghdad.

He said an expected high turnout will be an indicator of "the Iraqi people's trust in their government and in the elections" and "proof that the Iraqi people are now living in real security."

Security has much improved in recent months, but insurgents still mount attacks on civilians and security forces, especially in the mainly Sunni Arab areas of Diyala province and the northern city of Mosul.

"The people are afraid to come to vote because of the terrorists, but I came to vote to show to the people that they don't have to be afraid," said Mushtar Jabar, a 32-year-old taxi driver in Baquba, the capital of Diyala.

Sargun Hanna, 53, a Christian in Hamdaniyah, a town near Mosul, said she had not intended to vote but changed her mind.

"I did not intend to go to give my vote, but I came today to send a message to the

terrorists who attacked Christians -- we want to tell them that we are citizens of Iraq," she said.

Saturday's election is seen as a key test of Iraq's steadily improving security and political system as US President Barack Obama looks to redeploy American troops to Afghanistan, with a target withdrawal date of end-2011.

"Obviously the president will watch the results, and believes that the provincial elections this weekend mark another significant milestone in Iraq's democratic development," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said on Friday.

Authorities sealed Iraq's borders, shut down airports and imposed transport bans and night-time curfews as part of a massive security lockdown for the election.

The United Nations and Iraq's Independent High Election Commission is organising the elections, with 800 international observers, including US nationals, overseeing the ballot.

More than 14,400 candidates are standing for 440 seats in councils, which appoint the provincial governor and oversee finance and reconstruction, with a combined budget of 2.5 billion dollars.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi women show off their ink stained fingers after voting in the provincial elections at the Salhiyeh polling station in central Baghdad yesterday. Voting in Iraq's provincial elections began amid tight security in the nation's first ballot since 2005.

30 YEARS ON Revolution not limited to Iran: Ahmadinejad

AFP, Tehran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said yesterday that Iran's Islamic revolution was not limited to its borders, as the country paid tribute to the man who led the overthrow of the shah 30 years ago.

"The revolution is lively and alive after 30 years," Ahmadinejad said at a ceremony marking the anniversary of the return from exile of the father of the revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

"We are still at the beginning of the path and greater changes are ahead. This thunderous revolution will continue until justice is implemented," the firebrand president said.

"Although the Islamic revolution happened in Iran it is not limited to Iranian borders."

Ahmadinejad was joined at the ceremony at Khomeini's mausoleum in southern Tehran by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as well as members of the government and military commanders.

Each year, to mark Khomeini's triumphant return after 15 years in exile, all schools, trains and boats ring their bells at precisely 9:33 am, the moment his plane touched down on February 1, 1979.

Abbas rejects Hamas' call for new PLO

AFP, Ramallah

PLO chairman Mahmud Abbas is leading a chorus of opposition to calls by rival Hamas supreme Khaled Meshaal for a new leadership to replace the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

The Damascus-based Meshaal this week said that the PLO -- which has long been internationally recognised as the sole representative of the Palestinians -- had become obsolete.

Meshaal's remarks put the spotlight again on the protracted Hamas-Fatah feud, which has prevailed since the Islamists seized the Gaza Strip in June 2007 after ferocious street battles with Abbas loyalists.

The PLO, which was founded in 1964, includes Abbas's secular Fatah party and several other Palestinian factions but not the Islamist Hamas group.

"The Palestine Liberation Organisation in its current form does not represent anymore a

point of reference for the Palestinians," Meshaal said on Wednesday in the Qatari capital, Doha.

"It has become a centre of division for the Palestinian household."

Meshaal said Hamas and other radical factions opposed to the policies of the Western-backed Abbas would set up "a new, national authority" representing all Palestinians groups.

Abbas, who is also president of the Palestinian Authority and heads the negotiations with Israel, accused Meshaal of wanting to destroy the PLO.

"Meshaal's statements regarding the establishment of a new authority to replace the Palestine Liberation Organisation is an exercise in time-wasting," Abbas said on Friday.

"While he talks about establishing an organisation, he really wants to destroy what has been the voice (of the Palestinian people) for 44 years."

The PLO "is recognised by Arabs, Muslims, and... 120 countries," Abbas said.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (L) speaks with Hassan Khomeini, grandson of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the late founder of the Islamic republic, as they attend a ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of his return from exile at Khomeini's mausoleum in Tehran yesterday.

Obama's offer to talk shows US failure, says Iran

AFP, Tehran

US President Barack Obama's offer to talk to Iran shows that America's policy of "domination" has failed, the government spokesman said on Saturday.

"This request means Western ideology has become passive, that capitalist thought and the system of domination have failed," Gholam Hossein Elham was quoted as saying by the Mehr news agency.

"Negotiation is secondary, the main issue is that there is no way but for (the United States) to change," he added.

After nearly three decades of severed ties, Obama said shortly after taking office this month that he is willing to extend a diplomatic hand to Tehran if the Islamic republic is ready to "unclench its fist."

In response, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad launched a fresh tirade against the United States, demanding an apology for its "crimes" against Iran and saying he

expected "deep and fundamental" change from Obama.

On Saturday Iran's vice president in charge of executive affairs Ali Saidloo also said Washington must "apologise" as a first step to signal a change in US policy towards Tehran.

"Washington has to take the first step and the first step is to apologise as it has to change its mind and ethics," Saidloo was quoted as saying by Mehr.

Iranian politicians frequently refer to the US administration as the "global arrogance," "domineering power" and "Great Satan."

Tensions with the United States have soared over Iran's nuclear drive and Ahmadinejad's vitriolic verbal attacks against Washington's close regional ally Israel.

Former US president George W. Bush refused to hold talks with the Islamic republic -- which he dubbed part of an "axis of evil" -- unless it suspended uranium enrichment. It also never took a military option to thwart Tehran's atomic drive off the table.

Madagascar mayor proclaims himself in charge of country

AFP, Antananarivo

Madagascar's opposition leader Andry Rajoelina proclaimed himself in charge of the island's affairs during a rally yesterday, in a shock move escalating his battle against the president's regime.

"Since the president and the government have not taken their responsibilities, I therefore proclaim that I will run all national affairs as of today," he said.

A request for the immediate resignation of the president will soon be filed with parliament in order to comply

with the legal procedure," the Antananarivo mayor told thousands of supporters.

His announcement comes after days of increasing political tension on the Indian Ocean island between the popular 34-year-old mayor and the regime of President Marc Ravalomanana.

"We are currently setting up a transitional government and I will be the one in charge of it," he said.

Madagascar was rocked by riots when tens of thousands turned out for a similar protest on January 25, while another demonstration was held peacefully on Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of Madagascar's opposition leader and Antananarivo Mayor Andry Rajoelina gesture at a rally yesterday in the centre of the Malagasy capital. Rajoelina proclaimed himself in charge of the island's affairs on Saturday during the rally against the regime.

Millions to get malaria help by 2010

AFP, Davos

Hundreds of millions of mosquito nets and anti-malaria kits are to be distributed by 2010, officials behind a campaign to halt about one million malaria deaths a year said yesterday.

But they urged donors not to ditch the campaign because of the economic crisis, saying there was a real chance the malaria epidemic could be eliminated in coming years.

"The resources to attack this problem -- to eliminate malaria deaths -- is there. We can achieve universal distribution of bed nets, of malaria medicine, of indoor spraying within 2010," said Rajat Kumar Gupta, who chairs the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

In sub-Saharan Africa alone, some 600 million people are said to be at risk from the disease. Scott Case, a campaigner, said this means 300 million bed nets are required in the region.

Corporate leaders from Standard Chartered Bank, ExxonMobil and News Corporation have come together to launch a 100-million-dollar (78-million-euro) fund-raising campaign.

Zimbabwe opposition will join government Says Tsvangirai

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai said Friday he will join a unity government with President Robert Mugabe almost a year after disputed polls, but the US and others questioned if it would work.

Heeding a call by Southern African leaders, Tsvangirai told reporters after a meeting of his Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) that he will be sworn in as prime minister on February 11.

"We are unequivocal, we will go into this government," said Tsvangirai almost one year after disputed polls that plunged the country into crisis.

"The SADC (Southern African Development Community) has decided and we are bound by that decision," he said after his party's national council agreed it would go ahead with the unity government.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon hailed the decision, while also pressing for crucial development in Zimbabwe.



PHOTO: AFP

A painted stork spreads its wings as it flies from a tamarind tree at Mechirajupalli village in Warangal District, some 200km from Hyderabad yesterday. Painted storks (mycteria leucocephala) are migratory birds, which nest in the area from January till June.

NEWS ANALYSIS

North Korea angling for Obama's attention

AP, Seoul

Sharpening its rhetoric, North Korea is trumpeting its refusal to honour accords designed to keep the peace with South Korea particularly along a disputed maritime border that has long been a flashpoint.

Seoul has scrambled troops to land and sea borders amid signs the communist regime in Pyongyang may be setting the stage for another naval skirmish in the Yellow Sea. But the real focus of North Korea's warning Friday may well be Washington.

The White House says it is still reviewing US policy on North Korea one item on a long list of foreign and domestic issues clamouring for Barack Obama's attention.

An impatient Pyongyang seems to be trying to move itself to the top of Washington's foreign policy agenda by warning that the two Koreas are at the brink of war because of the hard-line stance of South Korea's pro-US president.

The two Koreas technically remain at war because their 1950-53 conflict ended in a truce in 1953, not a peace treaty. In 1991, however, the two signed a pledge to boost reconciliation efforts and refrain from invasion particularly along their disputed

western sea border.

But North Korea's Kim Jong Il, a leader with a flair for drama, knows the value of a naval skirmish or a well-timed missile test to remind the world that his country may be poor but still has the power to cause trouble if it doesn't get its way.

Fifty years ago, North Korea was considered the richer, more advanced of the two Koreas. Today, South Korea's economy ranks 13th in the world while the Stalinist North is one of the poorest nations.

The North's relations with its main ally, China, have cooled somewhat in recent years, and help from Russia has slowed since the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Flooding and mismanagement in the mid-1990s destroyed North Korea's farms and economy, forcing the proud nation to rely on hand-outs to feed its people.

When then South Korean President Kim Dae-jung ushered in a "sunshine" era of reconciliation a decade ago, Kim Jong Il shook his hand heartily in 2000 and accepted the generous aid that came with it.

But the warming in relations didn't stop the North from building up its military or its nuclear weapons programme.

North Korea, population 23 million, may be impoverished, but it has the world's fourth-largest military and an arsenal of long-range missiles, including one believed capable of reaching the United States.

Despite years of international attempts to curb Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, it is believed to have built a handful of atomic weapons. In 2006, it carried out an underground test explosion despite agreeing to abandon its nuclear programme.

Taking a new tack, conservative Lee Myung-bak took office as South Korea's president last February with a harder-line policy: No more unconditional aid until the North abides by its commitment to dismantle the nuclear weapons programme.

That stance enraged Pyongyang, which cut off reconciliation talks and branded Lee "human scum" and a traitor to Korean reunification. While Pyongyang fumes, Lee has remained calm and intractable, resulting in a fast deterioration of ties. He said Friday he was hopeful ties would be restored soon, but his recent decision to put the architect of his North Korea policy in charge of the ministry dealing with Pyongyang further angered the North.