

Iraqi govt allies see gains in elections

AP, Baghdad
Allies of Iraq's US-backed prime minister appeared yesterday to have made gains in the provincial elections, rewarding groups credited with reining in insurgents and militias, according to unofficial projections.
Initial results from Saturday's landmark voting are not expected for days. But reports by Iraqi media and interviews by The Associated Press suggest candidates backing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had strong showings in the crucial Shia heartland in southern Iraq.
If the indications prove true, it would strengthen al-Maliki's hand ahead of national elections later this year and reflect a shift away from the more religious parties dominating the country.
Nationwide turnout was 51 percent, said Faraj al-Haidari, chairman of the election commission. It ranged from 40

percent in the Sunni-dominated Anbar province in western Iraq to 65 percent in the Salahuddin province, which includes the hometown of Saddam Hussein.
Final figures were not yet ready for the Baghdad area, but al-Haidari said initial reports placed it at about 40 percent.
Al-Maliki's supporters appeared to hold the lead in many areas of the south, including the key city of Basra and the Shia spiritual centre of Najaf, according to Iraq's private Al-Sharqiya television. The trend was supported by voter comments in Basra and other areas.
Many voters praised last year's government-backed crackdown that broke the Shia militia control in Basra and other areas.
"Al-Maliki ended the militiamen's reign of terror," said Faisal Hamadi, 58, after voting in Basra. "For this he deserves our vote."
Gains by al-Maliki's allies would come

directly at the expense of the biggest Shia party, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, which is a senior partner in the government but has hinted it could make a bid to take the leadership in national elections later this year.
The Supreme Council has a strong base among Shia religious authorities - who are seen with suspicion by some Iraqis because of perceived ties to neighbouring Iran and claims they fuelled sectarian violence.
In the western Anbar province, Sunni tribesmen also are hoping to ride public support for their role in fighting insurgents.
The so-called Awakening Councils, which rose up against al-Qaeda in Iraq and other factions in late 2006, are credited with leading a turning point of the war. The tribal leaders are now seeking to capture seats on the provincial councils, which control spending, jobs and other important regional influence.



A security member of the Islamic Resistance Movement Hamas walks through rubble of the destroyed presidential offices in Gaza City on Saturday. Israeli bombing and airstrikes razed virtually the whole compound during the 22-day assault on the Gaza Strip that left 1,300 Palestinians dead before it ended on January 18.



Thousand of protesters, so-called "Red Shirts" break through a gate in front of the Government house in Bangkok on Saturday. The protesters spent nearly two hours marching towards Government House, arriving just before midnight after making their way past four steel barricades across their route, manned by unarmed riot police.

Thai govt rejects quit call by protesters

AFP, Bangkok
Thailand's deputy prime minister on Sunday rejected an ultimatum by thousands of protesters demanding the government step down, raising the prospect of more rallies in the turmoil-wracked kingdom.
Suthet Thaugsuban, one of three deputy prime ministers, said supporters of ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra were free to repeat Saturday's mass rally, but insisted the new Democrat Party-led government would stay in office.
"This is not the time for the dissolution of parliament -- people want the government

to go ahead with administering the country," he told reporters.
About 30,000 Thaksin sympathisers clad in their signature red shirts and waving banners reading "Bring Back Democracy" marched to the prime minister's Government House offices in Bangkok late Saturday before dispersing.
Their main targets are figures in the six-week-old government who are linked to the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), a royalist group whose protest campaign last year helped topple the previous Thaksin-linked ruling party.

Gaza war strengthens hardliners

AP, Gaza City
The biggest gains in the Gaza war have gone to the hardliners on both sides. Hamas is declaring victory, while Israel's leading hawk is the front-runner in elections just over a week away.
But a new phase in peace efforts has opened with Barack Obama's election as US president and the international community may find itself offering Hamas incentives to moderate rather than shunning it.
Hamas is exulting in the widespread support it

received in the Muslim world and many Western countries. Israeli public opinion has emerged tougher and more inclined to choose Benjamin Netanyahu over the more dovish candidates.
Israeli strategists say the offensive, mounted to halt rocket fire on Israeli settlements and cut the flow of arms to Hamas, has dealt the militants a heavy blow. But it has not yet led to a permanent arrangement that would stop Hamas weapons smuggling and rocket attacks, and fighting could erupt again at any moment.

The crippling international blockade imposed on Gaza's borders with Israel and Egypt has failed to oust Hamas since it seized control in June 2007. And the Israeli onslaught that killed nearly 1,300 Palestinians has not seriously hampered its ability to rebuild itself. The tunnels through which it gets its arms are still operating.
Meanwhile, Palestinian moderates led by President Mahmoud Abbas have been discredited, along with their US-backed policy of reaching Palestinian statehood through negotiations.

Obama, Pentagon pull in different directions on no nuke goal

AFP, Washington
President Barack Obama has set a goal of a "world without nuclear weapons" but the Pentagon is leaning in a seemingly contradictory direction: a modernised nuclear arsenal.
The new administration has signalled its intent to swiftly engage Russia in negotiations on deeper cuts in their respective arsenals, with the ultimate aim of reducing them to zero.
But US Defence Secretary Robert Gates has been leading

another kind of charge, arguing in the final months of the previous administration that deeper cuts must be underpinned by production of a new warhead to replace an ageing nuclear stockpile.
"To be blunt, there is absolutely no way we can maintain a credible deterrent and reduce the number of weapons in our stockpile without either resorting to testing our stockpile or pursuing a modernisation programme," he said in an October 28 speech.

Gates' speech at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, says Jan Kristensen, an analyst at the Federation of American Scientists, was "an attempt to set a bottom line."
In Kristensen's view, the secretary's message was: "You can cut the numbers, but below that we need to have a strong capability, not only to maintain what we have, but also to build up if we need to."
Kristensen added: "That is the big clash."
Gates is not alone in his thinking.

Fire kills 23 at Russian retirement home

AFP, Moscow
Russian authorities said yesterday they had found the remains of 23 people who died when a fire gutted a wooden retirement home in the country's remote northwestern republic of Komi.
Saturday's fire in the town of Podyelsk follows similar incidents across Russia, highlighting lax enforcement of fire safety regulations and inadequate Soviet-era infrastructure contributing to short life expectancy in the country.
"We have found 22 bodies and four fragments of biological origin," a spokeswoman for the investigative committee of the regional general prosecutor's office, Svetlana

Korovchenko, said.
That led authorities to believe a total of 23 people had died in the accident, she added.
A spokesman for the local branch of the emergency situations ministry, Valentin Kudryashov, confirmed that 23 people had perished in the blaze, while three had been rescued.
The local authorities have previously said a total of 26 people had been at the care home when fire broke out early Saturday evening.
Authorities opened a criminal investigation into the accident, Korovchenko, told AFP by phone from the regional capital of Syktyvkar, 100 kilometres (60 miles) from Podyelsk.



Iraqi women pass US soldiers from the Bravo 5-1 Cavalry at the entrance of a polling station in the eastern town of Khanaqin, in Diyala province near Iraq's border with Iran yesterday. Millions of Iraqis voted in provincial elections on Saturday in a crucial test for a nation struggling to emerge from years of sectarian strife to strengthen its fledgling democracy.

N Korea hails 'invincible' army, warns of conflict

AFP, Seoul
North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il has hailed his troops as "invincible" as state media on Sunday warned of a possible military conflict with South Korea amid heightened tensions.
Kim expressed confidence in his soldiers' ability to "shatter any surprise invasion of the enemy at a single blow" as he inspected an army unit, the North's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.
"The KPA (Korean People's Army)... has grown to be the

invincible revolutionary ranks all members of which devotedly defend the Party and the leader," it quoted Kim as saying, without giving a date for the visit.
The KCNA dispatch came days after North Korea scrapped all political and military agreements with the South, further raising tensions between the two sides, which technically remain at war as the 1950-1953 Korean War ended without a peace treaty.
"To our nation in an armistice, confrontation means an escalated tension which could

lead to an inescapable and unavoidable military conflict and war," Rodong Sinmun, the North's ruling communist party paper, said Sunday.
Rodong then warned of the South's "destruction" if Seoul keeps ignoring warnings from the North.
Accusing the South of pushing relations to the brink of war, the North announced Friday that all political and military agreements would be nullified, including one covering their Yellow Sea border -- the scene of bloody naval clashes in 1999 and 2002.

Obama's Kenyan relative arrested on drug charge

AP, Nairobi
The half-brother of President Barack Obama was arrested for alleged possession of marijuana on Saturday near his home in a Nairobi shantytown, police said.
George Obama, who is in his 20s and barely knows the president, had one joint of marijuana on him, said Joshua Omokulongolo, the police chief in the area.
"He is not a drug peddler," Omokulongolo told The Associated Press. "But it's illegal, it's a banned substance."

NEWS ANALYSIS India wary of Obama's S Asia focus

AFP, New Delhi
With US President Barack Obama still in the early days of his presidency, India is keeping a wary eye on policy changes that could irritate what has become a key strategic relationship.
Approaches to terrorism and the Kashmir dispute have been flagged as potential irritants by Indian officials in relations that saw a remarkable transformation during the Bush presidency.
The high point of ties between the world's largest and oldest democracies during the Bush years was the nuclear

deal that ended a decades-old freeze on India buying technology and power plants from the global market.
"When it came to India, (former president George) Bush was exceptional. Whenever any matter on India reached him, Bush overruled his team to address Indian concerns," said former Indian ambassador to Washington Naresh Chandra.
"I don't think we can expect that kind of personal commitment (from Obama) though all his statements are in line with whatever objectives India holds dear. One has to see how the general is translated into specifics," he said.

New Delhi is keeping its fingers crossed ahead of an expected South Asia visit February by Richard Holbrooke, named special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan days after Obama's inauguration.
"Let's wait and see how things evolve," an Indian official said.
New Delhi was caught off-guard by Obama's plans for Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the Taliban is waging a bloody insurgency.
Pakistan's northwestern tribal belt has become a stronghold for hundreds of extremists who fled Afghanistan after the US-led invasion toppled the hardline Taliban regime in late 2001.

NEWS ANALYSIS Poverty, shrinking freedoms fuel Madagascar woes

AFP, Antananarivo
Economic hardship and shrinking civil liberties in Madagascar are the root of the discontent spearheaded by a charismatic young mayor against the regime, analysts said yesterday.
Antananarivo's 34-year-old mayor, Andry Rajoelina, upped the ante on Saturday when he proclaimed himself in charge of the country's affairs, accusing President Marc Ravalomanana of abandoning the people to their fate.
While the speed at which the political tension escalated on the Indian Ocean island may have surprised even Madagascaners, the ingredients of a popular revolt had been there for months, observers said.

"It's not really a surprise. There was a latent malaise since last year caused mainly by the dire conditions in which the population lives, a drop in purchasing power, all this combined with a mood of defiance towards the regime," analyst Jean-Eric Rakotoharisoa said.
"In the last legislative elections in 2007, abstention levels in Madagascar reached record levels. It was the Madagascan people's peaceful way of saying there were serious problems," said Rakotoharisoa, a professor of constitutional law at Antananarivo University.
Over the past week at least 68 people have died in riots across the island following protests called by the new opposition leader.
Rakotoharisoa argued that what is now

known in the impoverished country as "Daewoo scandal" had an impact on public opinion.
The huge South Korean conglomerate is believed to have been leased a huge chunk of farmland on the island -- some 5,000 square miles -- by the government.
"Land is sacred in Madagascar... and this project was seen as a kind of national treason," the academic explained.
The second dominant factor that triggered the political unrest of the past few weeks lies in what residents feel has been a tightening of civil liberties.
"The current crisis is caused by violations of democratic values," said Desire Ramakavelo, a former minister of armed forces in the nineties who holds a PhD in political science.

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