

# Iraq opens polls campaign

Baghdad allows 28 banned candidates to stand

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Iraq officially kicked off the campaign season yesterday, just hours after an appeals panel banned a number of candidates from running in March nationwide elections.

Campaign posters were plastered across Baghdad and other cities by early Friday morning, urging people to go to the polls. In Basra, one poster read: "Your city needs someone who knows what Basra needs."

But in a move that was likely to raise tensions ahead of the March 7 parliamentary elections between the Shia-led government and Sunnis who claim they are politically undermined, the appeals panel late Thursday only cleared 28 candidates out of the hundreds blacklisted over suspected ties to Saddam Hussein's regime.

"The appeals were accepted either because of similarity of names or because there was not enough evidence against them," said Mudhafar al-Battat, a spokesman for the government-backed Accountability and Justice Committee tasked with weeding out hardcore supporters of Saddam's outlawed Baath party.

Al-Battat declined to identify those candidates barred from the election.

Ali al-Lami, head of the committee that drafted the blacklist, said he had been informed by the appeals panel of its decision to bar Saleh al-Mutlaq and Dhafer al-Ani, the most prominent Sunni lawmakers.

Al-Mutlaq, a fierce critic of Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, has acknowledged he was a Baathist until the late 1970s but quit the party. Al-Ani took the helm of the largest Sunni bloc in parliament after its moderate leader Harith al-Obeidi was assassinated in June 2009.

A number of those candidates blacklisted were either replaced by their party or dropped out of the election altogether.

Within hours of the decision, campaign posters in Baghdad were plastered across concrete blast walls that double as makeshift billboards a practice that has become popular in Iraq in recent years.

The start of campaigning had been postponed by more than a week to give the panel time to investigate the appeals of candidates on the blacklist.

Many candidates, including al-Maliki, were forced to remove campaign posters earlier this week after they were put up ahead of the official campaign period.

Meanwhile, the US military on Friday said five insurgents from an "Iranian-backed terrorist organisation" were killed in a shootout in an Iraqi-led anti-smuggling operation southeast of Baghdad.

"Suspected Kataeb Hezbollah terrorists were killed in the operation," said overnight, a US army statement said, at Ali ash-Sharqi, a village near the Iranian border and 265 kilometres (165 miles) from the Iraqi capital.

"While the number of casualties has not yet been confirmed, initial reports indicate five individuals were killed."

A security official in Amara, the capital of Maysan province, where the incident took place, said seven people had been killed and two others wounded in an exchange of fire involving American forces.

Intelligence information led "Iraqi security forces and US advisers to the village ... in search of known weapons cache sites," the US statement said.

"While approaching the village, the joint security team was fired upon by individuals. In response to the threat, members of the security team returned fire, killing individuals assessed to be enemy combatants."



Iraqi children wave election campaign banners of the Kurdish Islamic bloc in the northern Iraqi city of Arbil as official campaigning begins on Friday for the country's March 7 general election, only the second since now-executed dictator Saddam Hussein was ousted in the US-led invasion in 2003.



An image grab taken from a video posted on YouTube by the user onlymehdi allegedly shows Iranian police beating and arresting an Iranian opposition protestor in Tehran on Thursday. The United States accused Iran of attempting "a near total information blockade" to deal with anti-government protesters, calling the move unprecedented.

## Supreme leader warns West over bid to subjugate Iran

AP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader praised the mass turnout at the government-backed rally marking the 1979 Islamic Revolution and warned the West to stop putting obstacles in his country's path, state Press TV reported Friday.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei thanked the "tens of millions" across the country who celebrated Thursday's anniversary, saying the turnout at rallies reflected the nation's strength.

During Thursday's anniversary celebration, security forces clamped down hard on scattered anti-government demonstrations in the Iranian capital.

Police clashed with opposition activists, firing tear gas to disperse them and paintballs to mark them for arrest. Groups of hard-liners also attacked senior opposition figures including the wife of the head of the reform movement.

The massive government rally in central Tehran dwarfed the opposition gatherings, which were far smaller than other outpourings of dissent in recent months. Still, Thursday's events showed authorities must rely on full-scale pressures to keep a lid on demonstrations.

Khamenei said Thursday's rally should be a wake-up call for the "domestic enemies and deceived groups who claim to represent the people." He blasted the West, saying it was time for "foreign enemies to abandon futile efforts to

subjugate" Iran.

"The past 31 years are not enough to awaken a few arrogant and bullying states to their futile efforts to dominate this Islamic nation," said Khamenei, who has final say on all state matters.

The authorities had worried ahead of the anniversary that any significant protests or clashes would be seen as a major embarrassment on a day intended to showcase national achievements and unity.

An array of riot police, undercover security agents and hard-line militiamen seem on motorcycles had fanned out across Tehran on Thursday in what appeared to be the largest deployment since the post-election mayhem.

Hardliners and security forces prevented opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi and his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, from attending an opposition gathering. Hardliners attacked the car of another opposition leader, Mahdi Karroubi, and smashed its windows.

But Thursday's clashes were significantly less violent than previous opposition protest in late December, when eight people died and hundreds were arrested.

Authorities also jammed the Internet and mobile phones to disrupt the opposition. In Tehran, Internet speeds dropped dramatically and e-mail services such as Gmail were widely blocked.

## China warns of further damage to ties from Obama-Dalai meet

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday urged the United States to call off a meeting between President Barack Obama and exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama to prevent further damage to already strained ties.

The White House, in defiance of repeated angry Chinese protests in recent days, has said Obama would meet the Dalai Lama next week in Washington, just as the US leader seeks Beijing's help in imposing tough new sanctions on Iran.

Beijing has lodged a solemn representation with Washington, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxian said in a statement.

"We firmly oppose the Dalai Lama visiting the United States and US leaders having contact with him," Ma said.

"We urge the US side to fully understand the high sensitivity of Tibet-related issues, and honour its commitment to recognise Tibet as part of China and to oppose 'Tibet independence'," he added.

"China urges the US... to immediately call off the wrong decision of arranging for President Obama to meet with the Dalai Lama... to avoid any more damage to Sino-US relations." Despite political pressure at home, Obama avoided meeting the Dalai Lama when the Buddhist monk was in Washington last year, in an apparent bid to set relations off on a good foot with Beijing early in his presidency.

Obama, however, told Chinese leaders during his trip to Beijing in November that he planned to meet with the Dalai Lama, who is widely respected in the United States but branded a separatist by Beijing.

## UN highlights new threat from Haiti gangs

AFP, Geneva/Port-au-Prince

The United Nations peacekeeping mission in Haiti must tackle criminal gangs boosted by the escape of thousands of prisoners after the country's devastating quake, a UN spokesman said Friday.

"It is clear that MINUSTAH must go back to zero with the work that it had accomplished in the last three years in order to face the gangs in Haiti," said Corinne Momal-Vanien, a UN spokeswoman.

She added, however, that the "security situation is stable despite some isolated incidents."

"Security has always been a problem in some areas of Port-au-Prince... but the situation is under control, even in the areas such as Cite Soleil and Martissant, where United Nations troops and the Haitian police are patrolling daily," she said.

Some 5,000 of the 8,000 prisoners held in the main Port-au-Prince jail escaped after the January 12 quake which killed more than 200,000 people.

Edmond Mulet, acting head of the UN's

Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) was concerned that gang leaders were seeking to reorganise in order to take control of areas of the city, she added.

"According to information received, none of them have however been able to resume drug trafficking activities, but some clashes between gangs had been reported," said Momal-Vanien.

A call by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who had promised to deploy 3,500 additional UN personnel in Haiti, had resulted in "sufficient offers of troops," she said.

Haiti on Friday marked the one month anniversary of the devastating quake that killed more than 200,000 people and has left the 1.2 million homeless with an uncertain future.

A ceremony was to be held in Port-au-Prince where the National Palace is in ruin and the Champ de Mars square has been turned into a huge homeless camp.

The government said it would set up large screens at some of the homeless camps so people could follow the ceremony. It also urged Haitians to wear either black or white to show respect for the dead.

## CLIMATE CHANGE

### Going veggie may do more harm

ANI, London

A new study has determined that becoming a vegetarian can do more harm to the environment than continuing to eat red meat.

According to The Times, the study by Cranfield University, commissioned by the environmental group WWF, found that many meat substitutes were produced from soy, chickpeas and lentils that were grown overseas and imported into Britain.

It found that switching from beef and lamb reared in Britain to meat substitutes would result in more foreign land being cultivated and raise the risk of forests being destroyed to create farmland.

Meat substitutes also tended to be highly processed and involved energy-intensive production methods.

Lord Stern of Brentford, one of the world's leading climate change economists, caused uproar among Britain's livestock farmers last October when he claimed that a vegetarian diet was better for the planet.

He told The Times, "Meat is a wasteful use of water and creates a lot of greenhouse gases. It puts enormous pressure on the world's resources. A vegetarian diet is better."

However, the Cranfield study found that the environmental benefits of vegetarianism depended heavily on the type of food consumed as an alternative to meat.

"A switch from beef and milk to highly refined livestock product analogues such as tofu could actually increase the quantity of arable land needed to supply the UK," it said.



## Clinton leaves hospital after heart surgery

AFP, New York

Former US president Bill Clinton left hospital early yesterday after doctors successfully cleared up a clogged artery following his hospitalisation for chest pains, an aide said.

Douglas Band said Clinton was released from New York Presbyterian Hospital "in excellent health" and was resting at home in Chappaqua, New York.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### 'Osama successors would be worse'

ANI, Washington

Osama bin Laden's son has warned that "if his father is killed, his successors as new al-Qaeda chief would be "much, much worse."

"From what I knew of my father and the people around him I believe he is the most kind among them, because some are much, much worse. Their mentality wants to make more violence, to create more problems," ABC News quoted Omar bin Laden, who was raised in the midst of his father's fighters, as saying.

Osama, who was picked by Osama to succeed him as the leader of jihad, turned his back on his father's philosophy - a remarkable step for a man in an Arab culture where it is a sin to disobey his father and taboo to openly criticise him.

He recently opposed his father after hearing Osama in an audio tape praise the attempt by the "Detroit bomber".

"Attacking peaceful people is not being fair, it is unacceptable. If you have a problem with armies or governments you should fight those people. This is what I find unacceptable in my father's way," Omar said.

### 20 rebels killed in Caucasus

AFP, Moscow

Russian forces have killed 20 rebels in two days during an ongoing "counter-terrorism operation" in the Caucasus region of Ingushetia near the border with Chechnya, the FSB security service said Friday.

The operation, involving forces from the interior ministry in the mountainous Sunzhensky district, began Thursday to root out up to 30 militants fighting for Islamist Chechen rebel Dokka Umarov, the FSB said in a statement.

"As a result of ongoing clashes, 20 rebels have been killed," it said. "There were no losses among federal forces."

### Patrick Kennedy won't seek re-election

AFP, Washington

Representative Patrick Kennedy, son of the late senator Edward Kennedy, said Friday that he will not seek re-election to Congress, ending decades of Kennedy family presence in elected office.

Kennedy said he was deeply affected by the death of his father -- a Democratic icon of the US senate -- in August, but news reports suggest he was also set to face a bruising re-election campaign against a Republican opponent.

"Having spent two decades in politics, my life has taken a new direction, and I will not be a candidate for re-election this year," the 42-year-old Kennedy said in a video message, posted on the YouTube website.

### Palestine president meets Manmohan

ANI, New Delhi

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is on a two-day state visit to India, met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh here on Thursday.

Both leaders reportedly exchanged views on fresh efforts at initiating a peace process in the troubled region, especially the Russian proposal for an end-of-the-month meeting of the Quartet of the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the US.

Dr Singh announced a grant of ten million dollars as budget support to the Palestinian National Authority.

## Space station gets room, huge window to see Earth

AP, Cape Canaveral

Astronauts put the last big addition on the International Space Station early Friday, attaching a new room with an enormous bay window that promises to provide unprecedented panoramic views of Earth.

The room, named Tranquility, was hoisted into place by a giant robot arm as a pair of spacewalking astronauts floated nearby, excitedly watching everything take shape.

"We've got a whole bunch of camera views ... and every one of them looks spectacular," astronaut Stephen Robinson radioed from inside the shuttle-station complex.

"It looks spectacular from here, too," replied spacewalker Nicholas Patrick.

Patrick and Robert Behnken carried out the first spacewalk of the mission with amazing speed. They were an hour ahead at one point and picked up some extra chores 220 miles up.

## Yemeni soldiers killed as rebels break ceasefire

AFP, Sanaa

The Yemeni army said Shia rebels broke a ceasefire yesterday, just hours after it came into force, killing several soldiers in a string of attacks in the far north of the country.

The head of military operations in Saada province, General Mohammed Abdullah al-Qusbi, said he himself came under rebel attack.

"I escaped an assassination attempt by the rebels who opened fire on my car," Qusbi told AFP.

"The rebels broke the ceasefire and carried out a series of attacks in Iqab district which resulted in dead and wounded among our troops," Qusbi added.

It was the first report of violations of the ceasefire between the government and the rebels that came into force at midnight (2100 GMT Thursday) in a bid to end six years of on-off fighting.

Earlier, army commanders had reported a halt to clashes across the northern mountains after rebel leader Abdul Malak al-Huthi ordered his fighters to respect the truce announced by President Ali Abdullah Saleh late on Thursday.

"Calm reigns on all fronts from Saada and Malahidh (in the far north near the Saudi border) to Harf Sufian," further south, one field commander said.

Commanders had said they had seen rebel fighters start work on removing the roadblocks they have maintained on some of the trunk routes through the northern mountains blocking government traffic.

But in a sign of the distrust still felt by some within the army after six years of conflict, one officer told AFP he was waiting to see whether the rebels really respected the truce.

"We are holding our positions and keeping our fingers on the trigger," the officer said, asking not to be named.



Yemeni Defence Minister Mohammad Nasser Ahmad (R) inspects his troops in the northern province of Saada yesterday. The Yemeni army said fighting halted on all fronts as a truce with Shia rebels came into force six months after the government ordered a major offensive to try to end a six-year uprising.