

Russia braces for tense polls

AFP, Moscow

Russians prepared yesterday for parliamentary elections amid dwindling support for the ruling United Russia party and unprecedented pressure on election observers.

Voting in the world's largest country will begin at 2000 GMT Saturday local time in the Russian Far East regions and end 21 hours later when polling stations close at 1700 GMT Sunday in the exclave of Kaliningrad wedged between Poland and Lithuania.

The leader of Russia's only independent election monitor was detained for several hours, in a move she described as government pressure on the group ahead of Sunday's parliamentary vote.

Golos leader Lilya Shibanova was held at Moscow's main airport after refusing to hand over her laptop "for checking". On Friday, the group was fined for allegedly violating election law.

Police were on high alert ahead of the polls and the expected subsequent protests, with Moscow parking lots cleared out around polling stations and over 50,000 officers mobilised to ensure order through the weekend.

President Dmitry Medvedev heads the party list for United Russia, and opinion polls have shown that while it is still almost certain to retain its parliamentary majority, its support may be eroding after years of dominance.

But 46 percent of Russians expect the vote to be rigged, according to a Levada opinion poll held in November, with 51 percent convinced that the elections are only an "imitation competition" with predetermined results.



PHOTO: AFP

A picture taken yesterday shows a relatively empty Tahrir Square. Protestors have started leaving the square with only a few hardliners boosted by day tourists still occupying their tents overnight.

Five killed in restive Yemen city

AFP, Sanaa

Five Yemenis were killed yesterday in shelling by government forces targeting the country's second city of Taiz and in shootings, as clashes threatened to derail a fragile power-transfer deal.

Protests also continued in the capital Sanaa demanding that President Ali Abdullah Saleh be put on trial, in rejection of an amnesty he was given for signing a Gulf-tailored peace deal.

Yesterday's casualties take the death toll from clashes and bombardments by government forces since Thursday to 30, after nine people, including a young girl, two soldiers and colonel, were killed on Friday.

The escalation of violence came hot on the heels of an order by Vice President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi late on Friday to cease fire and negotiate a pullout of troops and militiamen from the city.

'Get to the damn table'

US urges Israel to end isolation in Middle East

BBC ONLINE

US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta yesterday urged Israel to "mend fences" with Turkey, Egypt and others in the Middle East to reduce its growing isolation.

Panetta called on Israel to restart peace talks with the Palestinians.

The peace process with the Palestinians has been stalled for more than a year, bedevilled by continuing Israeli settlement construction in occupied territories and by the Palestinians' bid for full membership of the United Nations.

Panetta said Israel should "lean forward on efforts to achieve peace with the Palestinians".

"Rather than undermining the Palestinian Authority, it is in Israel's interests to strengthen it by... continuing to transfer Palestinian tax revenues and pursuing other avenues of co-operation," he said.

When asked by an audience member after his speech what Israel could do to get the peace talks restarted, he said: "Just get to



Leon Panetta

the damn table."

"The problem right now is we can't get them to the damn table."

He added that the US remained committed to Israel's security and would not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons.

In a speech in Washington, he said Israel was not entirely to blame, referring to an "international campaign" to isolate it.

"Unfortunately, over the past year, we've seen Israel's isolation from its traditional security partners in the region grow, and the pursuit of a comprehensive Middle East peace plan has effectively been put on hold," he said.

He said a nuclear-armed Iran posed the greatest threat to the security and prosperity of the Middle East.

President Barack Obama had not ruled out using military action to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons, but Mr Panetta said a strike would only delay its nuclear programme by one or two years.

He said military action was a "last resort".

EGYPT POLLS

Islamists sweep early results

Liberals, protest figures have few bright spots

AFP, Cairo

Early results from Egypt's first post-revolution election showed Islamist parties sweeping to victory, including hardline Salafists, with secular parties trounced in many areas.

Partial figures trickled in for the areas of the country that voted in record numbers on Monday and Tuesday, confirming earlier predictions that Islamist parties would win at least two thirds of the ballots cast.

In Port Said, the moderate Islamist alliance led by the previously banned Muslim Brotherhood triumphed with 32.5 percent of votes for parties, while the hardline Al-Nur party gained 20.7 percent, the state-owned Al-Ahram daily said.

The liberal Wafd party won 14 percent, while another Islamist party Al-Wassat, which advocates a strict interpretation of Islamic law, recorded

12.9 percent, according to Al-Ahram.

In the southern Red Sea district, the Brotherhood's alliance won 30 percent, while secular coalition the Egyptian Bloc came in second with 15 percent, said Al-Ahram.

Full results were initially meant to have been published on Wednesday but have been delayed several times. The election commission promised on Friday evening at a chaotic press conference to post them on its website.

There appeared few bright spots for the liberal secular movement which played a key role in the overthrow of the 30-year rule of Hosni Mubarak in February after an 18-day uprising.

It has since splintered and has been outgunned by the more organised Brotherhood, well known to Egyptians as a result of its decades of opposition to the Mubarak regime and its exten-

sive charitable and social work.

In Cairo, the rising star of the movement, Amr Hemzawi, won a seat in the upmarket Heliopolis district, but elsewhere leading figures of the revolution were either struggling or had been beaten.

In Tahrir Square, the epicentre of protests against Mubarak, demonstrators had returned last week to protest against the military rulers who took over when the strongman quit but their numbers had dwindled to a few hundred yesterday.

According to independent daily Al-Masri Al-Yum, no women were elected in the first round.

It was only the opening phase of a parliamentary election that is taking place in three stages, but the returns reveal the political trends that will shape the country's transition to democracy.

For the lower house of parlia-

ment, the rest of the country will vote in a further two stages later this month and in January. An upper house will then be elected in another three stages.

The prospect of an Islamist-dominated parliament raises fears among liberals about civil liberties, religious freedom in a country with the Middle East's largest Christian minority, and tolerance of multi-party democracy.

Independent Salafist presidential candidate Hazem Abou Ismail told a television interviewer this week that he would prevent "men and women from sitting together in public, press reports said.

However, the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party says it strives for a "civil state, defined as a non-military non-religious state... that respects human rights" according to its political programme.

NEWS IN brief

Zambia won't arrest Bush

AFP, Lusaka

Zambia will not arrest former US president George W Bush during his African tour for violating international torture laws, the foreign minister said yesterday.

Rights group Amnesty International had Thursday urged Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zambia to arrest Bush during the five-day tour to promote efforts to fight diseases like cancer, AIDS and malaria.

Kambwili said Zambia would only arrest Bush if the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other international organisations such as the United Nations asked the southern African country's government to do so.

Aussie ruling party backs gay ties

AFP, Sydney

Australia's ruling Labor Party yesterday agreed to support gay marriage, but consented to lawmakers voting with their conscience on the issue should a same-sex marriage bill come to parliament.

After passionate and emotional speeches from both sides of the debate at the Australian Labor Party conference in Sydney, delegates agreed to change their party platform in favour of marriage equality for gay couples. The decision was met with rousing applause from the 400 delegates and hailed by supporters as historic.

UN joins Libya rogue weapon hunt

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Friday added the hunt for rogue surface-to-air missiles and other weapons in Libya to the duties of the UN mission in the country.

Growing concern over the weapons caches -- particularly thousands of shoulder-fired rocket launchers -- left by late dictator Muammar Gaddafi led to the extension of the UN's duties. Libya's neighbours have expressed fears that the weapons and ammunition could get into the hands of radical groups.

Mladic's charges cut to speed up trial

BbcOnline

The war crimes tribunal for the former Yugoslavia is reducing the number of charges against the former commander of Bosnian Serb forces, Gen Ratko Mladic, because of fears about his health.

The tribunal accepted the prosecutor's request to cut the number of crimes in the indictment from 196 to 106.

Judge Bakone Justice Moloto said the decision was made "in the interest of a fair and expeditious trial".

Gen Mladic was arrested in Serbia in May after 16 years on the run.

Rich in 'conspiracy against poor'

UK's ex-deputy PM slams rich countries' effort to scrap Kyoto agreement

BBC ONLINE

Rich nations are trying to scupper a new climate deal, ex-deputy Prime Minister John Prescott said yesterday.

The Labour peer alleged a "conspiracy against the poor" was in danger of destroying attempts to get a successor to the 1997 Kyoto agreement.

He said the current Kyoto provisions should be suspended instead of allowing them to expire in 2012.

The US said it was committed to making a success of the UN climate talks currently taking place in South Africa.

Lord Prescott told Radio 4's Today programme the clock should be stopped on the Kyoto provisions and a "reassessment" made in 2015 - or a new deal would "wither on the vine".

"That is what Canada and America want, and one or two other countries," he said.

"It is a conspiracy against the poor. It is appalling. I am ashamed of



PHOTO: AFP

Some thousands of protesters march under the banner of "climate justice" in Durban yesterday on the sidelines of the UN climate talks.

such countries not recognising their responsibilities."

Lord Prescott - the Council of Europe's rapporteur on climate change - said politicians should not

use the global financial crisis as an excuse for putting off action on climate change.

Problems stemming from climate change would make the current

financial crisis look "like a tea party", he added.

The Kyoto protocol bound industrialised countries to overall cuts of about 5% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2012, compared with 1990 levels.

The treaty did not require rapidly developing countries China, India and Brazil to reduce their emissions.

Several countries - including Japan, Russia and Canada - have said they will not take any further cuts under the Kyoto Protocol.

A US State Department spokeswoman said the US was committed to making a success of the UN climate talks in Durban.

She said: "Our priority will be to advance the balanced package of agreements that was first negotiated in Copenhagen and then adopted in Cancun.

She added that the US would not weigh in on the Kyoto debate as it was not party to the Kyoto Protocol.

Tipai will rather be good

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said the Tipaimukh dam in India would have no adverse environmental impact on Bangladesh, reported a private television channel.

"We are back with full satisfaction that it [Tipaimukh project] will not do any harm to us; rather it will be good for us," the adviser told reporters at Shahjalal International Airport on his return from India.

Rizvi and Economic Affairs Adviser to the prime minister Moshir Rahman went to New Delhi on Wednesday to discuss the project and its impact on Bangladesh with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The water flow can be

controlled during the monsoon while additional water will be available in the lean season if the hydroelectric project is implemented, added Rizvi.

They also had meetings with Indian ministers for water resources and power, and the national security adviser.

India was ready to carry out a joint survey on the project, mentioned the advisers.

The Indian government would inform Dhaka about the outcome of the survey, Moshir told reporters. "Delhi has assured Dhaka of taking all necessary measures if Bangladesh has any objection."

The advisers also ruled out the BNP's claim that the

Tipaimukh project would turn out to be a second Farakka for Bangladesh.

During a meeting between the Indian prime minister and the two advisers in New Delhi on Friday, India offered Bangladesh a stake in the project by making an investment and getting electricity in exchange.

Concerns have been raised in Bangladesh following reports that a promoters' agreement has been signed between National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC), the government of Manipur state and Sutlej Jal Vidut Nigam on October 24 to set up a joint venture company to implement the project.

Rival militias wage turf war near Tripoli

REUTERS, Tripoli

One local official was killed and a militia base reduced to ruins in a clash between rival armed groups near the Libyan capital, the latest flare-up of tension between militias that is destabilising the new Libya.

Two months after Muammar Gaddafi was killed, Libya's new government is still unable to impose its authority on the ground.

The violence in Janzour, a town about 17 km west of the capital, demonstrated that these militias remain the biggest threat to Libya's security despite attempts by the newly-formed interim government to get them under control.

The incident began early on Friday morning, when Ashraf Abdelsalam Al-Marni Swayha, deputy head of the Janzour military council, approached a checkpoint in the town with his driver.

The checkpoint was manned by a militia unit made up largely of fighters from Zintan,

played a big role in ousting Gaddafi.

According to Abdelnasser Frandah, head of the local council in Janzour, the fighters at the checkpoint stopped Swayha's car, he told them he was deputy head of the local militia.

"They answered him: 'We do not care about the Janzour military council.' He ordered his driver to go and they started shooting at him," Frandah told Reuters yesterday. "He fell as a martyr and the driver was slightly injured."

In a report released last week, the United Nations identified Libya's disparate militias as "a major challenge continuing to face the National Transitional Council," the interim leadership which replaced Gaddafi.

Following some recent incidents, the transitional council convened tribal leaders at a conference aimed at reconciling rival groups. But the latest violence in Janzour suggests that the conference did not work.