

Syria votes amid opposition boycott

US wants urgent Iranian steps

AP, Damascus

Syrians cast ballots yesterday in parliamentary elections billed by the regime as key to President Bashar Assad's political reforms, but the opposition dismissed the vote as a sham meant to preserve his autocratic rule.

The voting for Syria's 250 member parliament is unlikely to affect the course of Syria's popular uprising, which began 13 months ago with anti-Assad protests. The regime has violently cracked down on dissent and many in the opposition have armed themselves, pushing the country toward civil war.

The UN says more than 9,000 people have been killed in Syria's turmoil.

Polls opened at 7 a.m. and Syrian state TV showed voters lining up and dropping white ballots in large, plastic boxes. Election officials say more than 7,000 candidates are competing seats in the legislature in a country of almost 15 million eligible voters out of a population of 24 million.

The elections are the first under a new constitution, adopted three months ago. The charter for the first time allows the formation of political parties to compete with Assad's ruling Baath party and limits the president to two seven-year terms.



A Syrian official checks the identification of individuals before they vote in the parliamentary elections at a polling station in Damascus yesterday.

Assad has made a series of gestures toward reform to try to allay the crisis, but his opponents say his efforts are too little, too late. He set nationwide parliamentary elections for May 7. The vote was initially to take place in March but was postponed after a referendum in February on the country's new constitution that allowed new political parties to run.

The parliament is not considered an influential body in Syria, where the real power is concentrated around Assad and a tight coterie of family and advisers. Experts say that despite the legal changes, Syria's oppressive security services keep true regime opponents

from participating in politics.

Some voters said they hoped the process would bring change. Damascus voter Hind Khalil, 23, said she'd vote for some independent candidates as well as members of the new parties.

"They have fresh ideas that might bring in change," she said. "I hope that they will work for the welfare of the country and for combatting corruption and bribery."

The opposition has called the elections a farce and says it will accept nothing short of the fall of Assad's regime.

"The face of the regime will not change," said activist Mousab Alhamadee, speaking on Skype from the central city of Hama.

Alhamadee said streets were empty and shops were closed as residents observed a general strike to protest the elections. Activists reported strikes in towns and villages throughout Syria, and some hung posters of those killed during the uprising around their neighborhoods, saying their "martyrs" are the only suitable candidates.

It is unclear if voting will take place in all parts of the country, especially in areas heavily damaged by government shelling and clashes between government troops and rebels.

PHOTO: AFP

NUCLEAR TALKS

US wants urgent Iranian steps

REUTERS, VIENNA

The United States called on Iran yesterday to take "urgent practical steps" to build confidence during nuclear talks with world powers, and the European Union said Tehran must suspend sensitive atomic activities.

Iran and the six powers resumed discussions in mid-April in Istanbul after a gap of more than a year - a chance to ease escalating tension and help to avert the threat of a new Middle East war.

The major powers - the United States, France, Britain, China, Russia and Germany - and Iran are to meet again on May 23 in Baghdad.

"We remain concerned by Iran's persistent failure to comply with its nonproliferation obligations," US envoy Robert Wood told an international nuclear conference in Vienna, attended also by Iran.

"We seek a sustained process that produces concrete results, and call on Iran to take urgent practical steps to build confidence and lead to compliance with all its international obligations," Wood added.

At the same meeting, the 27-nation European Union said in a joint statement that Iran "must suspend" its uranium enrichment activities - something Tehran has repeatedly refused to do.

The West says Iran's nuclear work is a cover for developing atomic bombs and wants verifiable assurances to the contrary from Tehran - for example, by accepting much more intrusive UN inspections and curbing its enrichment capacity.

Netanyahu calls for early polls

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday he will push for September 4 as the date for early elections, as he moved to have a bill passed to dissolve parliament.

"We are proposing September 4," Netanyahu told a cabinet meeting, stressing that the target was to hold elections in four months' time.

A draft of the agenda for yesterday's meeting of the ministerial Committee for Legislation includes a vote on a bill to dissolve the 18th Knesset, and a proposal "to bring forth the date of the elections for the 19th Knesset to Tuesday, September 4, 2012."

The bill is expected to easily pass the ministerial vote, but could face opposition when it comes before the Knesset later yesterday from the ultra-nationalist Yisrael



Beitenu, the centre-right Kadima party and the centrist Independence party.

All three parties would like to delay dissolving the Knesset until MPs have voted on a new law governing military service for ultra-Orthodox Jews.

On Sunday night, Netanyahu announced his intention to bring forward the elections from the scheduled date of October 2013, but he didn't give an exact date.

"I don't want there to be a year-and-a-half of political instability accompanied by blackmail and populism. I'd prefer a short electoral campaign of four months that will ensure political stability," he told a meeting of his rightwing Likud party in Tel Aviv.

Netanyahu's speech on Sunday ended months of speculation about whether he would seek to bring forward the elections in a bid to bolster his position and capitalise on his popularity.

Opposition in Nepal rejects unity govt

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's third-largest political party yesterday rejected appeals by Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai to join a national unity government, threatening an attempt to break years of deadlock.

The Unified Marxist Leninist (UML) party said it would not participate in the government despite a May 27 deadline for parliament to agree a new constitution in a key step for the peace process.

"This cabinet led by the Maoists is against the spirit of consensus," UML spokesman Pradeep Gyawali told AFP.

Bhattarai, the Maoist prime minister, is expected to remain in office until the constitution is in place before allowing the dominant Nepali Congress party to lead the next government.

Putin sworn in as president

Proposes Medvedev as prime minister

AGENCIES

Vladimir Putin took the oath of office in a brief Kremlin ceremony yesterday, while on the streets outside thousands of helmeted riot police prevented hundreds of demonstrators from protesting his return to the presidency.

"I consider service to the fatherland and our nation to be the meaning of my life," Putin said in addressing 3,000 guests in a glittering Kremlin hall, reports AP.

Meanwhile, Putin yesterday proposed his Kremlin predecessor Dmitry Medvedev as the country's new prime minister under a job swap agreement first announced last year.

The lower house of parliament's speaker Sergei Naryshkin said Putin submitted Medvedev's name for confirmation shortly after taking the oath of office for a third Kremlin term, reports AFP.

The State Duma lower house is expected to hold a special session today to consider Medvedev's candidacy.



Despite unprecedented security measures in the center of Moscow, where streets were closed to traffic and passengers prevented from exiting subway stations, at least 1,000 opposition activists tried to protest along the

route Putin's motorcade took to the Kremlin yesterday.

The demonstrators, separated into several groups, were met by helmeted riot police. A total of 120 were detained, including opposition leader Boris Nemtsov.

Putin's inauguration came a day after an opposition protest drew more than 20,000 people, fewer than the mass demonstrations in the months that preceded his March election but still a sign that the anger over Putin's return to the Kremlin has not faded.

Sunday's protest turned violent when some demonstrators tried to march toward the Kremlin and riot police beat back the crowds with batons and detained more than 400 people. The use of force after the winter's peaceful rallies indicate that Putin may take a harder line toward the protesters now that he is once again president.

After taking the oath of office with his hand on a red copy of Russia's constitution, Putin stated his commitment to democracy.

NEWS IN brief

Egypt interior ministry quells riot police protest

AFP, Cairo

Hundreds of Egyptian riot police stormed out of their camp and cut off a desert highway out of Cairo following reports that an officer had killed one of their colleagues, state media reported yesterday.

"Senior security officials have managed to contain the crisis involving conscripts in the Central Security Forces who cut the Cairo-Ismailiya desert road," on Saturday, the state-owned Al-Ahram said, in a rare report of any dissent within interior ministry ranks.

A security official confirmed to AFP that hundreds of CSF conscripts had stormed out of the "January 25" camp and took to the streets.

But the official denied that a CSF conscript had been killed, and said the protest had been fuelled by "a rumour."

Malaysian clerics issue fatwa against demos

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian clerics have issued a fatwa against demonstrations, days after Prime Minister Najib Razak said a quashed election reform rally was being used to topple the government ahead of polls.

Tens of thousands defied a government ban and took to the streets on April 28 to demand clean elections, breaking through barricades and clashing with police, who fired tear gas and chemical-laced water, arresting 513 people.

"Rioting, causing disturbance and damaging public property are all forbidden by Islam," National Fatwa Committee chairman Abdul Shukor Husin told state media late Sunday.

Armenia ruling party win strengthens president's grip

AFP, Yerevan

Armenia's governing party yesterday won parliamentary elections that strengthened President Serzh Sargsian but again highlighted problems with the ex-Soviet state's fragile democracy.

European observers from the OSCE praised the election process as competitive but said it had been undermined by a series of democratic failings including pressure on voters, while opposition leaders vowed street protests.

Sargsian's Republican party took 44.05 percent of the vote after all ballots from Sunday's contest were counted, the Central Election Commission said.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meets with United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Chairperson Sonia Gandhi in New Delhi, India yesterday.

Short party for Hollande after French election win

REUTERS, Paris

Francois Hollande's honeymoon after his election as France's first centre-left president in 17 years was cut short yesterday by jittery financial markets eager for signals on his policies and how hard he will push back against German-led austerity.

The Socialist beat conservative Nicolas Sarkozy with 51.7 percent of Sunday's run-off vote after a bruising campaign dominated by the same anger over economic crisis that has felled 10 other European leaders since late 2009.

After jubilant left-wingers partied in the streets into the early hours in Paris, financial markets stuttered as the victory of anti-austerity parties in Greece, more than Hollande's election, fuelled fears about a new chapter in Europe's crisis.

Hollande, who delivered a victory speech in his rural base of Tulle in central France on Sunday before flying to Paris to address tens of thousands of supporters in historic Bastille square, admitted the festivities would have to be short-lived.



"There is a lot of joy and pride but also apprehension at taking on this responsibility at a difficult time for the country and for Europe," he said.

"In every capital, beyond the heads of state and government, there are people who have found hope thanks to us, who are looking to us and want to put an end to austerity."

But, his chief economic adviser said, the new team was not coming in to power to "hand out money".

The new president is expected to be sworn in on May 15. Hollande will travel to Berlin shortly thereafter to challenge Germany's focus on austerity policies and press new ideas for stimulating growth as fears about the euro zone's debt crisis resurface following an inconclusive election in Greece.

The French woke up to Hollande, arms outstretched, beaming on the front pages of morning newspapers. Left-leaning daily Liberation ran the headline "Normal!" a reference to the new president's image as a man of the people.

Pakistan dragging its feet on Mumbai mastermind

Says Hillary Clinton

REUTERS, Kolkata

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said yesterday that Pakistan had not taken enough action against Hafiz Saeed, the Islamist blamed for masterminding the 2008 attack by Pakistan-based gunmen on Mumbai, India's financial capital.

India has repeatedly called on Pakistan to bring Saeed to justice, an issue that has stood in the way of rebuilding relations between the nuclear-armed neighbors since the carnage in Mumbai, where gunmen killed 166 people over three days.

"We're well aware that there has not yet been the steps taken by the Pakistani government to do what both India and the United States have repeatedly requested them they do," Clinton told a town-hall meeting in the Indian city of Kolkata.

"And we're going to keep pushing that point. So it's a way of raising the visibility and

pointing out to those who are associated with him that there is a cost for that," she said.

Clinton also said the United States believes al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is somewhere in Pakistan, reports Reuters.

She said Washington was "intent upon going after those who are trying to keep al Qaeda operational and inspirational", and it was in Pakistan's interest to pursue them too.

"It is in their interest, and it is in the interest of their sovereignty, to go after terrorists who are operating on their territory," she said. "And you have to demonstrate that you're not going to cede authority or territory to terrorists."

Meanwhile, Clinton called on India yesterday to further cut its imports of Iranian oil, saying New Delhi should use its growing clout to help isolate the Islamic republic.

"India... is certainly working towards lowering purchases of Iranian oil. We commend the steps they have taken thus far," she told an audience in Kolkata, reports AFP.

Floods kill 26 at Afghan wedding

AFP, Kabul

At least 26 people were killed and more than 100 were missing after flash floods hit a wedding party in northern Afghanistan, an official said yesterday.

Most of the victims were women and children as the floods, caused by heavy rains, swept through three villages in Deh Mardan district of Sari Pul province, he said.

"We have found 26 bodies mostly women and children -- and over 100 others are still missing," Fazlullah Sadat, head of the provincial disaster management authority, told AFP.

"This is a human tragedy. We have a lot of human losses," said Sadat.

Rescue teams had been dispatched to search for the missing he said, adding that the floods also swept away livestock and swamped agricultural lands.

Militant attack kills 32 Yemeni troops

REUTERS, Aden

Islamist gunmen killed at least 32 soldiers yesterday when they stormed a military position in southern Yemen where militants control broad swathes of territory, a military official said.

Yemen has seen a surge in violence in the south since President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi took office in February. The government has responded with air strikes and the United States has repeatedly used drones to kill militants.

The attack on yesterday came hours after a suspected US drone strike killed two men in a neighboring province, including one the government described as a senior member of al Qaeda.

The military official told Reuters that gunmen attacked Yemeni troops outside the city of Zinjibar, capital of Abyan province, killing at least 32 servicemen. He said they captured a number of soldiers and made off with weapons and ammunition.

At least 40 soldiers were wounded in the attack, the official and medical sources said. A spokesman for Ansar al-Sharia, an al Qaeda-linked group that took Zinjibar last year, said his side captured 28 soldiers and a tank in the raid.

In a similar attack in March, militants killed about 100 troops in Zinjibar after Hadi took office.

Yemen's government and an al Qaeda-linked group active in the south both said the missile strike hours earlier in neighbouring Shabwa province killed Fahd al-Qasaa, who had been convicted of involvement in the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole warship in Yemen's southern port of Aden.