



MILLIONS OF IRAQIS VOTE IN FIRST FREE ELECTION

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After months of preparations and the deployment of thousands of troops to try and bolster security, millions of Iraqis went to the polls Sunday to cast ballots in the nation's first major free election in more than 50 years.

One day after the election, in which insurgents killed at least 45 in attacks throughout the country, interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi called on all Iraqis to unite to build a strong democratic Iraq.

"We are entering a new era of our history and all Iraqis - whether they turned out or not - should stand side by side to build their future," Allawi said. "Now is a suitable time for us to work together so that the whole world can watch the capabilities of this great country."

Who voted?

Despite the threat of violence, election officials estimated at least 8 million Iraqis, or roughly 60 percent of the electorate, turned out Sunday to cast their vote. Election observers, who noted sporadic turnout in Sunni Muslim parts of the country, said low voter participation by the Sunnis could undercut the legitimacy of the national assembly.

While the central part of the country reported light voter participation, in the southern Shiite city of Basra, British Independent Television News reported voter turnout as high as 90 percent.

In the United States, President Bush, while warning that more violence was to come, declared the Iraqi election a successful first step in bringing democracy to the Middle East.

"The people of Iraq have spoken to the world, and the world is hearing the voice of freedom from the center of the Middle East," the president said in a televised statement from the White House after the Iraqi polls closed.

Reports from ballot locations portrayed a largely peaceful and often celebratory mood at polling stations.

"Am I scared? Of course I'm not scared. This is my country," the Associated Press reported 50-year-old Fathiya Mohammed as saying at one polling location in Baghdad.

Limited violence

Although violence was not as widespread as feared, attacks did take their toll.

In one of the deadliest incidents, a bomber was able to board a bus carrying voters to polling stations in the town of Hilla south of Baghdad. A Polish military spokesman said the attacker then detonated his explosives, killing himself and at least four others.

Also, insurgent efforts to intimidate polling workers appeared to work in some parts. CNN reporter Jane Arraf reported in the war-torn northern city of Baquba that as many as one-third of polling locations were not able to operate Sunday because workers did not show up.

A Web site statement purportedly from Jordanian militant and al-Qaida ally Abu Musab al-Zarqawi claimed responsibility for election-day attacks, although the claim could not be verified.

"Lions from the martyrs' brigade of the Al Qaeda Organisation for Holy War in Iraq ... killed policemen, National Guard, Americans and inflicted wounds on the enemy," the statement read.

A successful vote

But despite the problems, international and Iraqi leaders hailed the vote as a success.

"This is a historic moment for Iraq, a day when Iraqis can hold their heads high because they are challenging the terrorists and starting to write their future with their own hands," Allawi told reporters.

In New York, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, whose chief envoy to the troubled nation helped organize Sunday's ballot, praised Iraqi voters as "courageous."

"They know they are voting for the future of their country, they are voting for the day when they will have their destiny in their own hands, so we must encourage them and support them," Annan said in a statement.

The votes the Iraqis cast on Sunday were to elect 275 members of a national assembly. The assembly, which will replace the interim Iraqi government headed by Allawi, will select the country's next president and will debate a new national constitution.

Also at stake in Sunday's vote were 18 provincial assemblies and the autonomous Kurdish parliament in the north.

-- Compiled from wire reports and other media sources

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