

Landmark referendum

Millions of Soviets vote despite violence

MOSCOW - Millions of people voted Sunday in a landmark referendum on whether to preserve the fracturing Soviet Union. Violence prevented some people from casting ballots, while others were lured to the polls with scarce goods.

Hanging in the balance in the first referendum in Soviet or even Russian history was not only the fate of this vast country and its more than 100 ethnic groups, but also the future of Mikhail Gorbachev.

The Soviet president lobbied heavily for approval and predicted victory in the referendum, which asked citizens whether they want to stay together in a renewed federation.

No results were immediately available from the vote, but public opinion polls indicated it would pass, giving Gorbachev the popular mandate he seeks to crack down on separatists.

He has been pushing for the referendum since December to bypass democratically elected legislatures in the republics that he contends are dominated by nationalist extremists.

Gorbachev wanted to appeal directly to the people to restore national unity shattered by sometimes violent ethnic, legal and political disputes.

The country, however, is already so divided that six of the 15 Soviet republics, or 10 percent of the 200 million eligible voters, refused to vote in the referendum.

Violence in Moldavia on Sunday reflected the fractures.

Hundreds of nationalist Moldavians, aided by police, enforced a local boycott by blocking access to the seven polling stations the Red Army set up in the republic's capital, Kishinev, according to Associated Press correspondent Dan Petreanu. The nationalists beat up ethnic Russians and Ukrainians who tried to vote. No serious injuries were reported.

Moldavia is among the six republics whose parliament decided not to hold a referendum. The others are the Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, plus the Caucasus republics of Georgia and Armenia.

A smiling Gorbachev declared

“It is the fate of the people, of hundreds of peoples, of such a great state, and if you will, the fate of civilization.”

Soviet president Gorbachev

himself confident of victory as he voted near his home in southwest Moscow.

He told reporters the issue was larger than his political future.

“It is the fate of the people, of hundreds of peoples, of such a great state, and if you will, the fate of civilization,” said the Soviet leader, as his wife, Raisa, stood at his side.

He has repeatedly tried to turn the referendum into an issue of patriotism, of preserving the motherland for which millions lost their lives.

Polls were open from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Preliminary results were not to be available before Monday. By midday, turnout ranged from a low of 18 percent in Leningrad to a high of

80 percent in Kazakhstan, according to an Associated Press check of several regions of the country.

The referendum, a lead-up to approval of a new Union Treaty that would delegate more power to the republics, asked: “Do you consider it necessary to preserve the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal, sovereign republics in which human rights and freedoms of any nationality (people of all ethnic groups) will be fully guaranteed?”

All 15 republics have declared some form of sovereignty. In alternative referendums in the three Baltic republics, voters overwhelmingly approved outright independence.

Gorbachev on Sunday repeated his warning that if the referendum fails and the union breaks up, a civil war could erupt.

“I don't think our people are suicidal,” he said.

Gorbachev's chief political rival, Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin, called the referendum question ambiguous and accused the Kremlin of trying to scare people into approving it.

Yeltsin refused to say how he voted, but he made clear he differs sharply with Gorbachev over the structure of a new union.

“The position of the center is such that it wants to preserve the system,” Yeltsin told reporters.

Poll officials, apparently worried about a low turnout, put out more than the usual bait they offer for voters. Scarce beer and cigarettes went on sale inside a polling station in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital. Moscow officials offered chocolate and oranges and hired an orchestra to play.

Allies refuse to move warplanes

DHAHRAN, Saudi Arabia - In a second round of cease-fire talks, allied commanders met with Iraqi military commanders Sunday and told them they cannot move their warplanes inside Iraq for any reason, a top U.S. official said.

Meanwhile, the secretary of the Army, Michael Stone, said American forces will remain in the Persian Gulf beyond the July 4 date set by President Bush as “a special day of celebration for our returning troops.”

In another development Sunday, 500 Iraqi prisoners of war were returned to their country through a remote Saudi Arabian border outpost, bringing to about 1,900 the number repatriated since hostilities ended.

The Central Command said a delegation headed by Maj. Gen. Robert Johnston, the chief of staff, met with 10 Iraqi military officers at 1 p.m. (5 a.m. EST) in U.S.-occupied Safwan in southern Iraq.

“The talks centered on cease-fire

agreements,” the command said in a communique. “This meeting was a continuation of previous military discussions. In the past several days, the U.S. has learned that the Iraqis have flown some of their military airplanes.”

The command said this was clearly a violation of the terms of a temporary cease-fire set by Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, the U.S. commander in the gulf, at the first round of peace talks two weeks ago in Safwan.

“Now, the Iraqi military has indicated that it intends to fly more airplanes, to move them around within Iraq,” the command said. “This, too, would violate the terms of the temporary cease-fire.”

The meeting was held to hear why the Iraqis want to fly some of their aircraft, U.S. officials said. The command said it would consider the request and respond appropriately. Its communique on the meeting Sun-

day gave no details of what took place or what the U.S. response was.

However, Secretary of State James Baker said Sunday the U.S. government had refused Iraq's request to move the warplanes. He said the denial came in the past 24 hours but would not say how it was communicated.

“That's something that was agreed to at the very time operations were suspended,” Baker said on ABC's “This Week with David Brinkley.”

Baker, who just returned from a tour of the Middle East, acknowledged that the prohibition had a “collateral effect” of hindering Baghdad from fighting rebel insurgencies inside Iraq that began as the war ended. But he insisted the move was not intended to help topple Saddam Hussein's government.

Asked if the United States was assisting the Iraqi rebels, Baker said

only that the U.S. government was not providing them with arms.

Kurdish rebel leader Jalal Talabani has claimed that Iraqi government troops were using helicopters and warplanes to drop napalm and incendiary bombs Saturday on the northern cities of Karahanzeer and Shamshamal.

Saddam Hussein is battling twin rebellions by ethnic Kurds in northern Iraq and Shiite Muslims in the south. Thousands of people have been reported killed.

Defense Secretary Dick Cheney has said allied troops now occupy about 15 percent of Iraq and will hold the territory until a formal cease-fire is worked out between Iraq and the allies.

Troops of the 101st Airborne and the 1st Cavalry Divisions have moved back to their most advanced positions to the Euphrates River to signal to Saddam that he cannot move his forces, including aircraft, as he chooses.

Yugoslavs wait for a decision from military

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia - A tense Yugoslavia waited Sunday for a sign as to whether the military would intervene to help Serbia's hard-line Communist leadership hold the troubled nation together by force.

The army, seeking to quash reports that the military was divided over whether to support Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, declared Sunday that it was “completely united.” Reports, however, indicated the armed forces remained divided on whether to back Milosevic.

There were indications that military officials were meeting, but no further statements were issued. There were no signs of increased military activity.

Also Sunday, the main opposition Serbian Renewal Movement renewed its call for the resignation of Milosevic's Socialist government, the renamed Serbian Communists.

The opposition party has been backing daily protests by tens of thousands of anti-Communist demonstrators in the last week. It blames the government for violence at a rally on March 9 that left two people dead and 120 injured when police and protesters clashed.

The country was pushed to the brink of a military crackdown after Serbia, the country's largest republic, announced Saturday that it no longer recognized federal authority because Yugoslavia's executive branch — the federal presidency — refused to impose a nationwide state of emergency.

Killings, beatings raise questions

KUWAIT CITY - A series of slayings and beatings of Palestinians, Iraqis, Kuwaitis and other people is rocking this newly liberated country and raising questions about who is in control.

“Who is in charge?” asks a Kuwaiti army major. “I don't bloody well know.”

Prior to Iraq's invasion in August, Kuwait was one of most stable countries in the region. But the war disrupted every facet of life, and the recently returned government so far appears weak and unable to assert its authority.

Somebody is killing, beating and abducting Palestinians and other third

country nationals. Somebody else is gunning down Kuwaiti army and resistance fighters manning checkpoints throughout the city.

Just who is responsible is difficult to tell.

Kuwaiti resistance fighters blame the Kuwaiti army. The army blames the resistance. Everybody blames the Palestinians.

Since Feb. 26, when Iraqi troops fled Kuwait, more than 45 bodies of non-Kuwaitis have been delivered to Kuwait's three main hospitals, hospital officials said.

Most of the 15 bodies dumped at Mubarak al-Kabeer Hospital shared

the same trait, doctors said.

The men have been shot between the eyes, they were blindfolded and their hands were tied behind their backs, they said. Of them, 12 were identified as Palestinians; three were Iraqis.

Officials at Amiri Hospital said they had received what they believed were at least 10 new Iraqi bodies and one Sudanese corpse — all had been shot and all were in civilian clothes.

“None of them had identification,” said one doctor. “Still, we are quite certain they were not Kuwaiti.”

In the Palestinian neighborhood of Hawalli, several families interviewed

over three days said they were missing sons or husbands.

One boy, Iyad Khomana, a 13-year-old Palestinian, disappeared with three friends from a gasoline line several days after liberation, according to his aunt. His body was found March 2 with a bullet in the head, according to the death certificate kept by his family.

Also since liberation, 20 Kuwaiti soldiers and resistance fighters have been killed manning checkpoints around the city, mostly in drive-by shootings, Ministry of Justice officials say.

Albania frees prisoners amid unrest

VIENNA, Austria - Communist Albania freed 42 political prisoners Sunday from its most notorious labor camp, but opposition activists said the government has not fully met its pledge to release all political prisoners.

Albania had billed the release as a fulfillment of its promise last week to free all political prisoners from the jails in which hundreds, maybe thousands of government opponents died during 46 years of Stalinist rule.

The release came amid reports of renewed clashes between police and citizens flocking to the port of Durres after hearing rumors they could board

ferries for Italy.

Albanian radio, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corp., reported “confrontations” between police and Albanians who flocked to Durres on Friday and Saturday.

Gene Pollo, a spokesman for the opposition Democratic Party, confirmed that there were casualties but he had no details.

After 20,000 Albanians fled recently to Italy across the Adriatic Sea, authorities declared Durres port a military zone to halt the exodus.

Authorities had said 123 political prisoners would be released this weekend. In addition to the 42 prison-

ers from Burrel, reportedly Albania's harshest prison, 81 were to have been released from various prisons throughout the Balkan nation.

A Westerner who witnessed the release of the Burrel prisoners, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the freed men told of 26 remaining political prisoners who had gone on a hunger strike to demand their freedom.

Arben Puto, a leader of Albania's first human rights group, has said the 120 are serving sentences for espionage and sabotage but that his group is convinced they are innocent.

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