

## Iraqis vote almost unanimously for Hussein on yes/no ballots

TIKRIT, Iraq (AP) — Stuffing ballots into boxes by the fistful, citizens in Saddam Hussein's hometown of massive compounds and narrow lanes joined millions of other Iraqis on Tuesday for a vote choreographed as a show of support for their leader.

"All Iraq is for Saddam. He is our leader and our father," said one voter, showing off a ballot stamped "yes" in a thumbprint of blood.

Surface-to-air missile batteries and artillery outside Saddam's hometown, Tikrit, underscored the other message in Iraq's one-candidate presidential referendum: defiance of the United States in the face of possible war over Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction.

"I came to put my paper in the box and to say I don't want America to come here, and to say I hate Bush, because he wants to attack me," Dr. Ahmed Jawad, a parasitologist, said in a village outside Tikrit.

Iraq projected more than 11 million of Saddam's 22 million people would turn out for the referendum. The vote was a "yes" or "no" on Saddam's staying president for another seven years and on continuing the coup-installed, three-decade reign of his party.

The White House dismissed the one-man race. "Obviously, it's not a very serious vote and nobody places any credibility on it," press secretary Ari Fleischer said in Washington.

At home, Iraqis have spoken of besting Saddam's 99.96 percent "yes" vote the last referendum, in 1995. In the capital, Baghdad, Saddam's Baath Party staged neighborhood drives to get out the vote — with many projecting a 100 percent "yes" this time.

Officials said results would be announced at a news conference Wednesday morning. In a vote run with little show of impartiality or doubt about the outcome, however, it was impossible to tell if announced turnout or results would have any relation to votes cast.

Iraq limited reporters to state-escorted stops at polling places. There were no independent observers.

The true turnout seemed likely lower than the official projection. Some in Baghdad said privately they had no plans to vote.

Outside Baghdad, crowds at polling places visited by foreign reporters appeared to have been

gathered and waiting for the press, not for the vote.

At one desert polling site, robed Bedouin tribesmen broke into ballot-waving dances and songs lauding Saddam when journalists rolled up in a bus.

Descending on the polling place from miles around in white Japanese pickup trucks instead of camels, the Bedouin told reporters they had been well-fed by authorities as they waited for the cameras.

"Obviously, it's not a very serious day, not a very serious vote and nobody places any credibility on it."

— Ari Fleischer  
White House press secretary

Pushing her vote for Saddam into the ribboned ballot box, the old woman raised her head and let loose a tribal volley of celebratory trilling: "LU LU LU LU LU LU LU LU LU LU!"

Tikrit, 95 miles north of Baghdad, is a stronghold for Saddam, who comes from what was poor, settled Bedouin in the region.

Saddam's actual birth village of Al Aujaja, outside Tikrit, is off-limits to foreigners and most Iraqis these days.

Election authorities' press bus skirted only the edge of the town. Defense measures were evident in that small part, such as a sandbag gunner's nest at one intersection, before a mosque.

Radar arrays, bunkers and missile batteries, their mock-ups, held the flats outside Tikrit. U.S. missiles and bombs hit Saddam's town twice, in 1991, and in 1998, following the withdrawal of U.N. weapons inspectors.

A week after Congress authorized military force to wipe out Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, Tikrit physician Mohsin Zaqqari said he was "90 percent sure" U.S. airstrikes would hit again.

"I am voting not for Saddam, because my vote for Saddam was determined long ago, but I am voting against America and Britain," voter Abu Munaim said in Baghdad.

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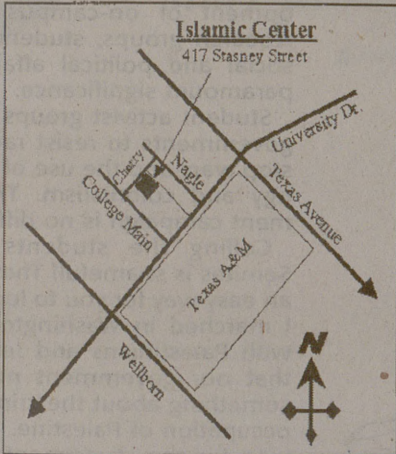
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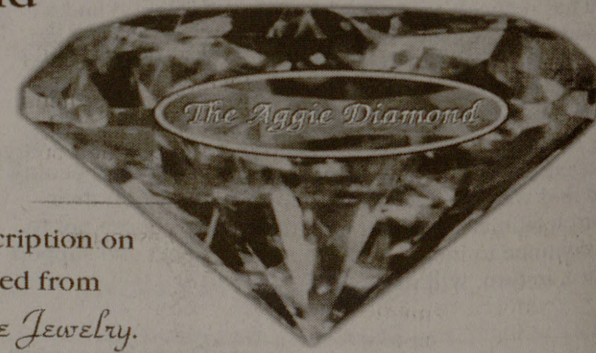


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