

French connections

The European Union and the United States led congratulations yesterday to French election winner Nicolas Sarkozy, who is expected to forge closer ties to Washington and work to raise Europe's global standing.

US President George Bush was among the first world leaders to telephone Sarkozy to congratulate him on his convincing victory over socialist presidential candidate Segolene Royal in the run-off election.

"The United States and France are historic allies and partners. President Bush looks forward to working with president-elect Sarkozy as we continue our strong alliance," said Gordon Johndroe, spokesman for the White House National Security Council.

European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said he had "full confidence" in the 52-year-old rightwinger to "provide a driving force" for reform in the 27-country bloc.

Barroso said in a statement: "I rejoice at the prospect of working together for the strengthening of the European Union, in a spirit of open-mindedness, for a Europe that does not withdraw on itself but, strong in its values and assets, will win over the challenge of globalisation."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Sarkozy would strengthen the French-German axis at the heart of the EU, expressing hope that under him, their countries' friendship "will continue to be the basis to secure lasting peace, democracy and prosperity in Europe".

By late afternoon, some 75.11% of France's 44.5 million eligible voters had cast ballots to choose a successor to President Jacques Chirac, the highest turnout since the 1965 election won by Charles de Gaulle.

According to projections, Sarkozy won 53% of the vote compared to 47% for Royal.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair telephoned Sarkozy to congratulate him on his win, and Spain's Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero praised him as a "solid politician".

He "represents an open and modern right" that would help France "recover its self-assurance and keep being a part of the European locomotive in the 21st century", a statement from Zapatero's office said.

Italian centre-left Prime Minister Romano Prodi said Sarkozy had won a "handsome victory", saying: "My country, my government and myself, personally, continue to consider France as a key ally and you, personally, as a friend."

Former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, a conservative, added: "This clear victory by Nicolas Sarkozy demonstrates the desire for change that is present across Europe and not only in France."

Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende praised the French people for choosing "change and modernisation", while Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen urged a "rapid clarification" of Sarkozy's position on a proposed EU constitution which was rejected by French voters in a referendum in 2005.

Sarkozy has proposed a "mini-treaty", cherry-picking the practical parts of the constitution, which could be ratified by parliament, not by referendum.

Peace

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert expressed hope that he and Sarkozy could work together towards peace in the Middle East.

Congratulations also came from French-speaking parts of Africa, where Sarkozy has promised an overhaul of relations and tacitly criticised Chirac's "personal" ties with the leaders of questionable regimes.

Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika said the French people had "chosen in you a man of heart and of action".

Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade added: "It is with personal pleasure that I offer you my warmest congratulations on your brilliant election ... which shows unmistakably the trust in your social project."

New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark said she hoped relations between France and New Zealand would continue to improve under Sarkozy.

"France is an important partner for us and things have come a long way since the times of nuclear testing and the Rainbow Warrior," Clark told Television New Zealand.

Greenpeace's flagship, the Rainbow Warrior, was destroyed in Auckland Harbour in 1985 by a bomb planted by French military spies, killing one person. Relations were further strained in 1995 when Chirac ordered a resumption of nuclear testing in French Polynesia.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva congratulated Sarkozy on his victory and his "firm resolve" to further improve ties with France, currently the fourth-largest investor in the South American country.

In Hungary, the president-elect's 92-year-old great aunt said she was "elated" but "not the least bit surprised" that the son of a Hungarian immigrant had risen to become the ruler of France.

"I don't want to sound arrogant, but I could have predicted two years ago that he would win. He has such drive, has so much experience and is so talented and intelligent," said Mariann Sarkozy.
- Sapa-AFP

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