

IRAN POLLS

Hardliners set to gain

AFP, Tehran

Iran went to the polls yesterday for a general election that conservatives are expected to dominate amid voter apathy after an economic slump, multiple crises and the disqualification of thousands of candidates. The 11th parliamentary election since the 1979 Islamic Revolution comes after steeply escalating tensions between Iran and the United States and the accidental downing of a Ukrainian airliner by Iranian air defences that sparked anti-government protests. As he cast the first ballot in the election, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei urged all Iranians to take part, saying that doing so would "guarantee the country's national interests".

Voters formed long queues at polling stations in south Tehran, where conservatives have a solid support base, but far fewer were seen waiting to vote in upmarket northern neighbourhoods. One official accused Iran's enemies of overplaying an outbreak of the new coronavirus -- which has killed four people in the Islamic republic this week -- in a bid to harm the credibility of the election.

Experts predict a low turnout that they say will serve the conservatives at the expense of President Hassan Rouhani, who was re-elected in 2017 promising more freedoms and the benefits of engagement with the West. Iran has been in deep recession since US President Donald Trump reimposed sanctions after unilaterally pulling out of a landmark nuclear deal in 2018.

After four hours of voting, more than 7.5 million of the 58 million people eligible to vote had done so, the interior ministry said. Around half of the 16,033 hopefuls are contesting the 290 seats up for grabs across 31 provinces after the Guardian Council barred thousands of would-be candidates, mostly moderates and reformists.



Iranian women take selfies as they line up before casting their votes in a parliamentary election at a polling station in Tehran, yesterday. Inset, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei casts his ballot at a polling station in Tehran.

PHOTO: AFP



CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Vaccine trials to start late April

AFP, Beijing

China could start clinical trials for a potential vaccine for the novel coronavirus around late April, an official said yesterday.

Public and private researchers around the world have been working to develop treatments and vaccines to combat the COVID-19 virus that first emerged in central China in December.

More than 2,200 people have died and more than 75,000 have been infected by it in China. Another 11 people died abroad, with some 1,100 infections in around 25 countries.

"Several research teams were trying different techniques to develop a potential vaccine, and the earliest vaccine is expected to be submitted for clinical trials around late April," Xu Nanping, vice science and technology minister, told a press briefing.

China's vaccine development and research is currently "basically in step with other countries", he added.

The World Health Organization said Tuesday it could take a year or longer for a vaccine to become available.

China is currently using five different approaches to develop the vaccine to curb the spread of the virus, said Zeng Yixin, deputy director of China's National Health Commission.

These include using inactivated coronavirus to produce a vaccine, using genetic engineering to mass-produce proteins that could act as antigens for the novel coronavirus or modifying existing vaccines for influenza, Zeng said.

"At present, some projects have entered the stage of animal testing," he said.

Trump ally gets 40 months' prison

AFP, Washington

Donald Trump's longtime ally Roger Stone was sentenced Thursday to 40 months in prison for impeding a congressional investigation, in a case that ignited a firestorm over the US president's political interference in the justice system.

Stone, a veteran Republican operative and one of the president's oldest confidants, was convicted in November of lying to Congress, tampering with a witness and obstructing the House investigation into whether the Trump campaign conspired with Russia to cheat in the 2016 election.

"The truth still matters," said US District Court Judge Amy Berman Jackson as she handed down the sentence to Stone, who will remain free while his request for a new trial is considered.

"Roger Stone's insistence that it doesn't, his belligerence, his pride in his own lies are a threat to our most fundamental institutions, to the very foundation of our democracy."

Trump said soon after he believed Stone had a "very good chance" of being cleared in the long run, accusing the jury without evidence of being "tainted."

The president controversially commuted the sentences this week of nearly a dozen criminals with links to his friends and political allies -- including a corrupt politician and a tax fraud police chief.

But he ruled out immediately issuing a Stone the pardon many had been expecting.

"I'm going to let this process play out," he said at an event in Las Vegas. "At some point I'll make a determination... We're waiting."

Russia meddling in US again

US intel officials tell lawmakers that efforts are on to boost Trump ahead off 2020 polls

AFP, Washington

Russia is interfering in the 2020 campaign to try to get Donald Trump re-elected, US intelligence officials have warned lawmakers in a briefing that infuriated the president, who then replaced his intelligence chief, US media reported.

Trump erupted in anger at acting director of national intelligence (DNI) Joseph Maguire when he learned of the February 13 session with the House Intelligence Committee, The Washington Post and New York Times said Thursday.

Maguire aide Shelby Pierson reportedly told lawmakers Russia was once again meddling in the US election on Trump's behalf.

Trump complained that the Democrats would use the information against him, the reports said.

The president berated Maguire in an Oval Office showdown last week for the "disloyalty" of his staff, the Post reported, effectively thwarting his chances of becoming a permanent hire.

Trump announced on Wednesday he was replacing Maguire with Richard Grenell, 53, the ambassador to Germany and a Trump loyalist.

The president was impeached in December over accusations that he tried to coerce ally Ukraine into helping him win the 2020 election,

withholding military aid considered vital to the former Soviet republic in its war with Russia.

Democratic congressman Bennie Thompson said that by firing Maguire over the briefing "the president is not only refusing to defend against foreign interference, he's inviting it."

Schiff tweeted late Thursday that if Trump was interfering in the sharing of intelligence

Reports says infuriated with the briefing, Trump replaced intel chief

Kremlin denies 'paranoid' claims



information with Congress, it appeared that he was "again jeopardizing our efforts to stop foreign meddling."

The Kremlin yesterday dismissed the meddling claims as a paranoid falsehood.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the allegations were "like the usual paranoid announcements, which unfortunately will multiply as we get closer to the (US) election."

US intelligence concluded that Russia interfered in the 2016 election, especially through manipulation of social media, to support Trump.

The real estate tycoon-turned-president has however repeatedly called it a "Russia hoax" and has instead promoted a debunked conspiracy theory that Ukraine intervened instead.

Trump has been at odds with much of the national security establishment since he took office and claims, without providing evidence, that a "deep state" is working against him.

Since he was acquitted by the Republican-led Senate, an emboldened Trump has been purging the Justice Department, National Security Council and Pentagon of staff he considers disloyal.

Casualties have included NSC staffer Lieutenant Colonel Alex Vindman and EU ambassador Gordon Sondland -- both key witnesses in the impeachment inquiry -- Vindman's twin brother, an NSC lawyer who wasn't involved, and Pentagon policy chief John Rood.

Trump has declined to hire a permanent replacement for Dan Coats, who stepped down as DNI in August after standing firm on the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia interfered in 2016 to back Trump over Hillary Clinton.

Trump scoffs at S Korea's 'Parasite' Oscar win

US President Donald Trump on Thursday scorned the best picture Oscar for the South Korean film "Parasite," asking how a foreign movie could get the honor. "How bad was the Academy Awards this year?" Trump asked the crowd at a packed re-election campaign rally in Colorado Springs, Colorado. "We got enough problems with South Korea, with trade. On top of it, they give them the best movie of the year?" Trump asked in disbelief. "Parasite," a dark comedy exploring class divides, made history by becoming the first non-English-language film to win Hollywood's biggest prize. Trump, whose presidency has been built on a nationalist "America first" platform, said it was time to bring back classics from Hollywood's golden age. "Let's get 'Gone With the Wind.' Can we get 'Gone With the Wind' back please? 'Sunset Boulevard?'" he said.

UK police rule out terror in London mosque stabbing

British police on Thursday said they were not treating a London mosque stabbing as terror related as an elderly worshipper suffered non life-threatening injuries. "A 29-year-old man, who is believed to have been attending prayers, was arrested inside the mosque on suspicion of attempted murder," the London police said in a statement. The London Central Mosque said the assailant stabbed its Muazzin -- a religious leader who calls the faithful to prayer -- during the fifth daily prayer. One witness told Britain's domestic Press Association that the suspect "was praying behind him and then he stabbed him".

Ukraine minister joins China evacuees in quarantine



Ukraine's health minister said she will spend two weeks in quarantine with evacuees from coronavirus-hit China after protesters clashed with police and threw stones at returnees over infection fears. "I will spend the next 14 days with them, in the same premises, under the same conditions," Health Minister Zoryana Skaletska said late Thursday in a statement addressed to the residents of Novi Sanzhyr. The minister added that she was shaken by the panic and aggression. Zelensky urged compatriots to show solidarity and remember that "we are all human". Kiev has brought in 45 of its nationals and 27 foreigners, mostly from Latin America, in the central Poltava region from China. SOURCE: AFP

Thai court dissolves key pro-democracy party

AFP, Bangkok

A stridently anti-military Thai party was dissolved Friday and its key members banned from politics for a decade over a \$6 million loan by its billionaire founder, a withering blow to the kingdom's pro-democracy movement.

The ruling could edge a politically febrile kingdom -- whose economy is shrinking -- closer to the street protests, which have scored much of the last 15 years of Thai history.

The Future Forward Party (FFP), fronted by the charismatic auto-parts scion Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, emerged from nowhere in March last year to become Thailand's third biggest party in the first elections since a 2014 coup.

The party's radical agenda -- calling for full democracy, an end to conscription and the removal of the army from politics and business -- won it 6.3 million votes and pitched it against the powerful, conservative military.

But since their strong poll showing, Thanathorn and his 76 lawmakers have faced relentless rounds of legal cases in Thailand's courts.

Yesterday, the nine-member constitutional court dissolved FFP, ruling a \$6 million loan by Thanathorn breached the law governing political parties. The loan exceeded the \$315,000 limit on donations to parties by an individual, one judge said.

Sixteen party executives, including founder Thanathorn, were also "banned for running for political office for 10 years," judge Nakarin Mektriarat added.

Future Forward MPs remain lawmakers but have 60 days to find another party in parliament. The party could also relaunch, but without its charismatic key executives is likely to struggle to keep the same number in their ranks.



Students paint murals of US President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump on canvas sheets along a street in Mumbai, India, yesterday. Trump will be accorded the biggest public reception given to any foreign leader in years during his visit to India beginning on Monday, Indian officials say, one that could help paper over the two countries' growing friction over trade. PHOTO: REUTERS

Turkey seeks to defuse tension

Says it wants no 'face-off with Russia' as clashes kill dozens

AFP, Ankara

Turkey said Thursday it wanted no "face off" with Russia over its Syrian ally's months-long offensive against Turkish-backed rebels in northwest Syria.

Russia warned Turkey meanwhile to stop arming the "terrorists" saying Russian warplanes had struck Ankara-backed groups in the Idlib region.

The region's growing volatility prompted Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Emmanuel Macron in Berlin on Thursday to call for talks with Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

In their phone call with Putin, Germany said Merkel and Macron also voiced concern about a "humanitarian catastrophe" that has seen an estimated 900,000 people flee their homes since December.

Earlier on Thursday, Turkey blamed a Syrian regime air strike for the deaths of two of its soldiers in Idlib.

It brings the number of Turkish personnel killed by Syrian forces this month to 16. Five others were wounded on Thursday, the defence ministry said.

"We have no intentions of a face-off with Russia,"

Turkey's defence minister Hulusi Akar told CNN Turk broadcaster, adding talks would continue with Russian officials.

One of the issues being discussed is the airspace above Idlib and Turkey's expectations for Russia not to get involved, Akar said.

There has been no concrete agreement between Russia and Turkey after two rounds of talks between their respective delegations in Ankara and Moscow earlier this month.

Ankara insists that it wants to avoid a humanitarian disaster but also wants to avoid flow of refugees into Turkey, which is already home to 3.6 million Syrians.

Turkey has warned Damascus of an "imminent" operation if regime forces do not move back behind Ankara's military posts in Idlib.

Clashes were reported between regime forces and Turkey-backed rebels in Nayrab, between the provincial capital of Idlib and the town of Saraqeb, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. 25 fighters from both sides were killed, it added.

SYRIA'S IDLIB OFFENSIVE



Security threat 'very high' from far right

Says Germany after 'xenophobic' attack

AFP, Berlin

German interior minister Horst Seehofer yesterday said that the police presence would be increased across the country to counter the "very high" security threat from the far-right, after a gunman killed nine people in a racist attack late Wednesday.

"The security threat from right-wing extremism, anti-semitism and racism is very high," Seehofer said at a press conference in Berlin.

He also announced an "increased police presence" and "increased surveillance" at mosques, train stations, airports and borders. Right-wing extremism, Seehofer said, was the "biggest security threat facing Germany", and one which had left "a trail of blood" behind it in recent months.

Germany has already taken several measures to combat right-wing extremism after a string of violent incidents over the last year.

Last June, pro-migrant politician Walter Lübcke was murdered, while October brought an attack on a synagogue in the eastern city of Halle. Suspects in both cases have ties to the far-right scene.

Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht said the government would examine in detail how firearms could end up in the hands of "extremists". Yet both Seehofer and Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht underlined the difficulty of detecting attackers who act alone, as the key suspect in the Hanau shootings appeared to have done.

"Despite all our efforts, we cannot completely rule out such terrible crimes," said Seehofer.