

Close contest in presidential polls Nigerians move to push out military rule

LAGOS, Feb 28: Tens of millions of Nigerians took to the nation's all-but-empty streets to cast their votes in presidential elections that mark the final phase of democracy's return to Africa's most populous nation, reports AP.

The long-awaited vote Saturday, which came six years after Nigeria's last attempt to remove soldiers from power, set former Finance Minister Olu Falae against retired Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military ruler seeking a civilian comeback 20 years after leaving power. Early results were expected today.

"Democracy is sweet," said Kola Orolu, smiling broadly as he stood next to an open sewer running through the poor Idiara neighbourhood of Lagos.

"This is the last chance for an elected government," he said. "People are fed up."

Cities and towns ground to a halt as officials, fearing the voting could spark violence, ordered shop owners to keep their doors closed and drivers to leave their cars at home.

At outdoor polling stations in the commercial capital of Lagos, voters began lining up for accreditation, while on some street corners, groups of

exuberant young men shared bottles of palm wine, singing and chanting party slogans.

Nigeria, an ethnically divided country with large oil reserves but extreme poverty, has been held in a military choke hold for most of its 39 years of independence, its riches plundered by successive junta bosses.

The country's last attempt at democracy — presidential elections in 1993 won by businessman-turned-opposition-leader Moshood Abiola — was annullled by the military. Abiola later died in prison.

Reuter adds: Former military ruler General Olusegun Obasanjo and his rival Olu Falae appeared neck and neck as early results trickled in from Nigeria's landmark presidential election.

The West African nation waited nervously for the official outcome of the polls held nationwide on Saturday, and which the Electoral Commission said it would start to announce today.

Pre-election favourite

Obasanjo, who relinquished power 20 years ago, appeared to have lost some support in the ballot to end a crippling 15-year stretch of military rule in Africa's most populous nation.

Gunmen kill prominent Sunni Muslim activist in Punjab

LAHORE, Feb 28: Gunmen shot to death a prominent Sunni Muslim party in a small town of the eastern Punjab province Saturday in the latest escalation of religious violence, reports AP.

Police said two gunmen riding a motorcycle opened fire with automatic weapons on Haji Abdul Waheed, 42, while he was standing outside his shop in Naring Mandi town, 60 kilometres (36 miles) northeast of the province's capital, Lahore.

Waheed was a prominent member of the militant Sipah-e-Sahaba party, or the Guardians of the Friends of the Prophet, which wants Pakistan to be declared a Sunni Muslim state.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility. But police said it seemed another of the tit-for-tat shootings in the Punjab province in which more than 40 people have died during the past two months.

Sipah-e-Sahaba is locked in a bloody conflict with Shi'ite Muslim groups that oppose a Sunni Muslim state.

India vows not to lose land, says Vajpayee

NEW DELHI, Feb 28: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today asserted that India was determined not to lose its territory any further and said both India and Pakistan will have to make efforts to ensure that the agreements signed between the two countries in Lahore recently lasts, reports PTI.

"We have not attacked any country in our 50 years of independence, but we have been attacked several times and have lost our land. We are determined not to lose our land in future," Vajpayee said after inaugurating a "Bhagwan Mahavir Kendra" here.

The Prime Minister said there was no alternative to "Ahimsa" (non-violence) and that problems between nations can be sorted out only through dialogue.

Asserting that his path-breaking visit to Pakistan and the agreement on confidence building measures between the two countries were signs of self-confidence and not weakness.

He said friends can be changed but not neighbours. Both the countries will have to make efforts to ensure that the agreements signed recently last.

Israel seals border with WB, Gaza for 4-day

JERUSALEM, Feb 28: Israel said on Saturday it was sealing the border with the West Bank and Gaza Strip for four days to prevent Palestinians from entering the country during a Jewish holiday, reports Reuter.

"Defense Minister Moshe Arens acted on the advice of the security establishment to impose a general closure ahead of the Festival of Purim which begins this week," the Israeli Army said in a statement.

In the recent years, Muslim suicide bombers opposed to Palestinian peace moves with Israel have launched attacks in Tel Aviv against Israeli civilians during holidays.

The closure was scheduled to begin at 2200 GMT on Saturday and would last until 2200 GMT on Wednesday.

Chinese PM concludes Russia trip: Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji returned from his first official visit to Russia aimed at strengthening relations and trade, Xinhua news agency reported, AP says from Beijing.

It said Zhu and his party were greeted at a ceremony in the Great Hall of the People. The two neighbours are struggling to overcome a sharp fall in trade triggered by the financial crisis.

Viagra to be sold in S'pore: Impotence drug Viagra will be making its debut in Singapore in less than six weeks, a newspaper said Sunday, AP reports from Singapore.

Viagra's manufacturer, Pfizer, told The Sunday Times that it agreed to comply with the conditions set by the Ministry of Health for the sale of the drug.

Quake rattles N Japan: A moderate earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 4.1 struck the northwestern coast of Japan on Sunday morning, but no damage was reported, AP says from Tokyo.

The quake hit at 10:36 am (0136 GMT) near the port of Sakata in Yamagata prefecture, about 40 km north of Tokyo, the Meteorological Agency reported.

A Ukrainian officer walks by a SS-19 nuclear missile booster, on Friday, the last to be destroyed at the missiles dismantling site. Ukraine became a nuclear-free state in 1996 when the last warheads of its SS-19 and SS-24 rockets were shipped back to Russia in exchange of around \$1 billion worth of fuel for Ukraine's five nuclear power plants.

— AFP photo

Clinton, Arafat to discuss declaration of Palestinian statehood Mar 23

JERUSALEM, Feb 28: Yasser Arafat will meet President Bill Clinton on March 23 to discuss a Palestinian declaration of independence, a Palestinian official said Saturday, reports AP.

Arafat will seek American and European backing for Palestinian statehood and a guarantee that if he postpones a declaration of independence past May 4 that he will not have to wait long, Palestinian negotiator Nabil Shaath told The Associated Press.

May 4 is the deadline set in the Oslo Peace Accord for the end of a five-year period of Palestinian autonomy.

The United States and several European countries have urged Arafat to delay a declaration of statehood, saying it would hurt the peace process.

Shaath said Arafat has been discussing the May 4 deadline with many world leaders.

International

Libya rejects new deadline

ICJ should deal with Pan Am bombing case: Gaddafi

CAIRO, Feb 28: Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi appears to be pulling back from a UN-brokered compromise on the 1988 Pan Am bombing case, reports AP.

In a joint statement issued Saturday in Tripoli with visiting Namibian President Sam Nujoma, Gaddafi said the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague, Netherlands, was the proper venue for a trial on the bombing of a Pan Am passenger jet over Lockerbie, Scotland, that killed 270 people, including 198 Americans.

The United States and Britain have pushed for the case to be heard by a Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands.

The International Court of Justice, also known as the World Court, has ruled in Libya's favour once before, deciding in February 1998 that it had the authority to hear the Lockerbie case.

The court has no enforcement powers and relies on voluntary compliance with its rulings.

Despite the decision, the United States and Britain continued to pursue the matter through the UN Security Council, which imposed sanctions

on Libya in 1992 to compel the country to turn over two Libyans wanted in the case.

The statement from Gaddafi argued that the council — where United States and Britain wield tremendous power — is not the right UN body to handle the matter.

"It is not the authority of the Security Council to deal with the Lockerbie case," the statement said. The statement was read over state-run Libyan Television, which was monitored in Cairo.

On Friday, Libya's UN Ambassador Abuzeid Omar Dorda, made a similar argument, saying the Lockerbie issue was legal, not political, and that the council was a political body.

Tripoli fears that as veto-wielding members of the Security Council, the United States and Britain, may try to block the lifting of sanctions even if the two men are handed over for trial.

Peter Burleigh, the United States' deputy UN ambassador, said he couldn't comment on the Libyan statement because he hadn't seen anything official on it. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan also said he had no comment.

Libya on Saturday also rejected the new deadline.

Libya has been arguing with UN officials for weeks over terms of a trial. Last August, Gaddafi agreed in principle to a proposal from the United States and Britain that the suspects be tried by Scottish judges under Scottish law in the Netherlands.

The Security Council later agreed that once the suspects were turned over, air and trade sanctions would be suspended.

Still, Libya has sought repeated clarifications via UN mediators and is believed to be dissatisfied that UN sanctions would be suspended, not lifted. It also has questioned arrangements for jailing the suspects, if they are convicted, in Scotland.

It was not clear if Saturday's statement was a total rejection of recent efforts to bring the suspects to trial.

On Friday, the United States and Britain gave Libya a one-month deadline to turn over the

two men, and the Security Council was to vote on the matter.

There was no clear indication what Washington and London were prepared to do if the deadline passed, but both have threatened to seek further UN sanctions.

Libya on Saturday also rejected the new deadline.

Malaysia's ex-IGP admits assaulting Anwar Ibrahim

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 28: Malaysia's former inspector general of police (IGP) Abdul Rahim Noor today admitted through his lawyer to assaulting sacked deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim during police detention, reports Reuter.

Abdul Rahim's lawyer Teh Poh Teik told a Royal Commission investigating injuries Anwar suffered after being arrested in September that his client had instructed him to admit to the assault. The also said Rahim had "acted under grave provocation."

Teh's remarks came after one member of the commission, Mahadev Shankar said to Teh that his cross examination of Anwar seemed to suggest that Rahim had assaulted Anwar.

Teh said "that's my position. That's the instruction from my client and... he acted under grave provocation."

Earlier Teh had asked Anwar during cross examination, you were hit by Rahim because you provoked him."

Anwar replied "there was absolutely no conversation at all in the cell."

Teh said "you provoked him (Rahim) by uttering the words, this is the father of the dogs."

Anwar denied making the

statement. There was no utterance of that sort, he said.

Anwar testified before the commission on Tuesday, describing being beaten around the head neck and arm after being arrested on September 20. And saying police personnel had told him then police chief Rahim had assaulted him.

That was the first time he had implicated Rahim who resigned last month following an internal police probe into the incident.

Anwar told the commission on Tuesday he was blindfolded and handcuffed when he was assaulted. He appeared in court in September with a black eye and bruises on his neck and arm.

Anwar has pleaded not guilty to 10 counts of corruption and sexual misconduct at a trial in the Capital High Court. The court is examining four corruption counts each of which carries a maximum penalty of 14 years in jail and a 20,000 ringgit (5,000 dollars) fine.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said he sacked Anwar because he was morally unfit. But Anwar said he was a victim of a conspiracy by Mahathir's close associates.

Move to end war with Ethiopia Eritrea ready to accept OAU's peace plan

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 28: Eritrea, after military setbacks, announced on Saturday it would accept a peace plan put forward by the Organisation of African Unity to end its border war with Ethiopia, reports Reuters.

The 15-member UN Security Council, meeting in an emergency session, immediately welcomed Eritrea's statement, a reversal of earlier positions, and called for both sides to stop fighting immediately.

The meeting followed a similar statement from President Bill Clinton in Los Angeles who said he had been informed of the decision by Eritrean President Isayas Afewerki by letter.

The Security Council demands an immediate halt to all hostilities and calls on the parties to refrain from the further use of force," the council said in a statement issued at a formal meeting attended by Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

"The Security Council welcomes the acceptance by Eritrea at the head of state level of the Organisation of African Unity framework agreement and recalls the prior acceptance of the agreement by Ethiopia," said the statement, read by council president Robert Fowler of Canada.

The Council was responding to an official letter from Eritrea's UN Ambassador, Haile Menkerios, that said "the government of Eritrea accepts the OAU framework agreement to peace for an expedited demarcation" of its border.

They simply want to have these people under their control so that no incidents occur around the trial," said Gerardo Sanchez, of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, which named some of the detained dissidents.

The activists, thought to be temporarily arrested as a preventive move, were all members of small groups oppose to Fidel Castro's communist government or independent journalists working illegally outside the state-controlled media.

Dozen dissidents held in Cuba

HAVANA, Feb 28: Cuban authorities have arrested up to a dozen dissidents in order to prevent trouble around the upcoming trial of the island's best-known jailed political activists. Dissident groups said on Saturday, reports Reuter.

"They simply want to have these people under their control so that no incidents occur around the trial," said Gerardo Sanchez, of the Cuban Commission for Human Rights and National Reconciliation, which named some of the detained dissidents.

The activists, thought to be temporarily arrested as a preventive move, were all members of small groups oppose to Fidel Castro's communist government or independent journalists working illegally outside the state-controlled media.

Changes in asylum laws protested in London

LONDON, Feb 28: More than 2,000 people gathered in central London on Saturday to protest proposed changes to Britain's asylum laws, saying they will encourage racism against refugees, reports AP.

The missing items include four telephones, a television set, a video recorder, a sound mixer, two computer printers and a polony cutter worth 8,000 rand (1,300 dollars), the paper reported.

The demonstrators in Trafalgar Square, from anti-racism groups and asylum seekers' rights groups, said the Asylum and Immigration Bill will be unfair and oppressive.

The bill would introduce a new system of distributing refugees around the country and would replace financial benefits with vouchers for food and prepaid accommodation.

The government proposed the changes when the system was found to be struggling to cope with a surge in the number of people applying for refugee status.

The Australian All Starts Dance Team performs along Orchard Road Saturday during the Chingay parade in Singapore. Some 200,000 people watched the annual event featuring 2,500 performers from Singapore as well as several foreign countries.

— AFP photo

60 pc Iranians turn up for voting

Moderates lead in polls

TEHRAN, Feb 28: Political moderates and reformers apparently led embattled hardliners in early returns Saturday from Iran's first municipal elections since 1979, reports AP.

An election official at the Interior Ministry estimated that as many as 25 million Iranians cast ballots, or about 60 per cent of the 40 million eligible voters. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

The heavy polling Friday demonstrated broad interest in a contest that could boost reformist allies of president Mohammad Khatami in the power struggle against hard-liners.

About 330,000 candidates ran for about 200,000 seats on municipal councils.

Interior Minister Abdolvahed Musavi Lari thanked Iranians for their "massive turnout." He said that the votes could take

a week to count, especially in large cities like the capital, Tehran.

The independent Jahan-e-Islam daily quoted unidentified election officials as saying pro-Khatami candidates were the front-runners in early results from several cities.

An informal poll by reporters indicated that Khatami's loyalist and former Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri was the first choice of many voters in Tehran.

In the city of Rasht, in northern Gilan province, allies of Khatami also appeared to be ahead, said an election official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Emrah Yazdi, the head of a small opposition Freedom Movement party, said the election was historic "because it installs democracy."

— AFP photo

Clinton's life seems almost back to normal