

International

'ZANU-PF to form govt no matter who wins in polls'

Final day of Zimbabwe polls threatens Mugabe's power

HARARE, June 25: President Robert Mugabe's ruling party will form Zimbabwe's next government regardless of who wins parliamentary elections this weekend, party chairman John Nkomo told reporters today, says AFP.

Mugabe is not obliged under the constitution to appoint a government from the majority party in the 150-seat parliament.

"ZANU-PF will most definitely form the next government whatever the result of the legislative election," Nkomo told a press conference.

The president's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front is facing a strong challenge in the elections from the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by 48-year-old trade unionist Morgan Tsvangirai and formed only in September last year.

It has attracted massive support, and turnout was huge Saturday, though subdued Sunday morning.

Meanwhile, voting resumes today in Zimbabwe's parliamentary elections which threaten President Robert Mugabe's 20-year stranglehold on power.

The weekend of polling began on Saturday with a largely peaceful day of voting.

oters turned out massively in town and countryside after months of brutal intimidation of opposition supporters to vote in a parliamentary election threatening.

The government party and its main opponents both voiced confidence.

"We are winning... the prophets of doom are prophets of doom. Their prophecies are doomed," the president maintained as he voted Saturday in a working-class Harare suburb where he owns a house.

Morgan Tsvangirai, the 48-year-old trade unionist who formed the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in September last year, countered that he was "very optimistic."

"I will be satisfied with an overall majority," he said as he voted in Bulwer, 220 km south of Harare.

Two opposition candidates reported attacks, and rural voters reported some intimidation, but the polling was generally peaceful, according to international observers.

However several monitors told AFP that Zimbabwe police



People line up to cast their vote at a polling station in the town of Marondera some 90 km southeast of the capital Harare Saturday. Zimbabweans started polling on Saturday in the parliamentary elections. —AFP photo

had expelled election monitors from several polling stations in working-class suburbs of Harare on Saturday, saying they were not accredited.

"We were asked by the police to leave and not to come closer than 100 metres (yards) or be arrested," one monitor told AFP.

He was among 16,000 Electoral Supervisory Commission monitors who were to deploy at 4,000 polling stations in the weekend parliamentary elections after the government at the last minute reversed an order slashing the corps to 4,000.

The turnout was so large that supervisors in Harare had to send out for more staff and ballot papers, and some polling stations in the capital extended voting past the 7:00 p.m. (23:00 BST) cut-off time, even though polling continues Sunday.

The MDC had long predicted that a big turnout would favour its bid to take over the government.

It aims to replace Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), which has held huge majorities in parliament since independence from Britain in 1980.

In the densely populated working class suburbs of Harare, the atmosphere was one of joyful anticipation of change, mingled with fear of violence after clashes Friday in which a bus was burnt out.

Mugabe's party held 147 of the 150 seats in the last parliament.

The voting is taking place under the eye of some 300 foreign observers after the government withheld accreditation from more than 200 others.

A total of 5.1 million voters are registered in this country of 12.5 million people, where whites number 70,000 to 80,000 but have enormous economic power.

First results are expected to be announced Monday.

Observers praise voting

Earlier, international observers monitoring Zimbabwe's parliamentary elections this weekend praised the first day of polling Saturday after voters turned out en masse across the country with few reports of violence.

"It's been a good day for Zimbabwe," Pierre Schori, the

leader of the European Union mission, told AFP.

Bobby Bwalya, the head of the Electoral Commissions Forum of the 14-nation Southern African Development Community said: "We think it has been a very good start."

Voters turned out massively in towns and the countryside, soiling even sleeping outside polling stations to be sure to get to vote.

That kind of commitment laid to rest fears that months of brutal intimidation of opposition supporters would force many to stay at home.

Two opposition candidates reported attacks, and rural voters reported some intimidation, but polling was generally trouble-free, with many voters waiting patiently for hours in long queues.

"From the polling stations we've visited so far, we've found all of them peaceful," Bwalya told AFP.

About 300 international observers are in Zimbabwe to check out the country's fifth elections since independence, but another 200 who were supposed to work alongside them were refused government accreditation.

10 miners killed in Indian coal pit

BOMBAY, June 25: At least 10 miners were killed and five injured when a section of an open-cast coal mine collapsed in western India, police said today, reports AFP.

An official at the police control room in Bombay said the accident occurred at around 3:30 pm (16:00 BST) Saturday. He said the miners were excavating in a pit at Manjri village, some 700 km east of Bombay, when "some loose earth fell on them burying 15 people."

"They were trapped 35 feet (10.5 metres) below the ground. Five miners managed to come out but the rest were suffocated to death. Their bodies have been brought out."

He said it was not clear if the pit was run by a state-owned company or a private firm.

Delhi urged to ratify UN torture convention

NEW DELHI, June 25: India's national human rights body expressed deep disappointment on Sunday at New Delhi's failure to ratify the UN Convention against Torture, and urged it to do so as quickly as possible, reports AFP.

Justice J.S. Verma, chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) said in a message on the eve of the United Nations day in support of the victims of torture, that India had failed to keep a commitment.

Verma said although India had signed the convention in October 1997 and promised to "uphold the greatest values of Indian civilisation to promote and protect human rights", it had not yet ratified the treaty.

Taiwan's ruling party elects new chairman

TAIPEI, June 25: Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) today elected Frank Hsieh as its new chairman, three months after the party took the helm for the first time in half a century, reports AFP.

The election was non-eventful as Hsieh, mayor of Taiwan's second biggest city Kaohsiung, was the only candidate.

"No one offered to compete with him, suggesting he was the most proper candidate for the next chairmanship," Vice Premier Yu Shyi-kun said.

Within the party, Hsieh had long been a major competitor to President Chen Shui-bian, formerly mayor of Taipei.

Signs show Japanese favouring Mori govt

Low turnout in election

TOKYO, June 25: Japan's voters headed to the polls today in general elections which are expected to favour blunder-prone Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori and his ruling alliance, reports AFP.

Mori's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its two allies were tipped by final surveys to retain a majority while losing a slew of seats in the 480-strong lower house of parliament.

The powerful LDP has ruled Japan with only one 10-month break since its formation in 1955, and many of the country's 101 million voters feel they have no power to interrupt its reign.

"Nothing would change, even if I voted," said 29-year-old company employee Yoichi Miura at Tokyo's Shimbashi railway station, who had no intention of casting a ballot.

Some surveys had forecast a big turnout in the elections of more than 70 percent. But in the first nine hours of the drizzle-soaked vote, only 41.44 per cent of voters had cast a ballot -- a troubling sign for the opposition Democratic Party of Japan.

Opposition parties in Japan

rely heavily on wavering voters -- an estimated 40 per cent of the electorate -- to register protest votes against the government.

The turnout at 4 p.m. (13:00 BST) was down from 46.81 per cent at the same time in the previous lower house elections of 1996, when the final figure hit a record low of 59.65 per cent.

But voting this year has been extended by two hours to 8 p.m. (17:00 BST) and absentee ballots were expected to account for 5.5 per cent of the electorate, up from 2.9 per cent last time.

At one polling station near Japan's biggest fish market in central Tokyo's Tsukiji district, 23-year-old office worker Kazuhiko Takahashi said he cast a blank vote.

"I do not trust any of them," he told AFP.

For many people, however, the future of the fragile economy was their main concern.

After creating growth of just 0.5 per cent in the year to March 31, Mori's government is promising to keep pumping state money into the economy while pursuing moderate reforms.

"I want to make an economic recovery certain by building a stable government among the three parties... I want to solemnly await the people's judgement," Mori said.

The Democratic Party of Japan has vowed to cut wasteful state spending and lower the threshold for income tax.

"My main concern is economic recovery and I do not trust any of the opposition parties to deliver the recovery," said 40-year-old pinball parlour manager Hajime Usukura.

"But I want the party to fire Mori. He has no credibility at all and his qualities as a prime minister are zero."

Mori, a burly 62-year-old rugby fanatic, is in trouble over a litany of verbal gaffes delivered since he took power on April 5, after late prime minister Keizo Obuchi suffered a massive stroke, which led to his death six weeks later.

On Tuesday, Mori told wavering voters to stay in bed on election day.

The prime minister had already outraged large swathes of the electorate on May 15 by describing Japan as "God's country, centred on the emperor."

Attacks on Christians isolated acts: Vajpayee

ROME, June 25: Attacks on members of India's Christian minority are only isolated acts and there is no organised campaign against them, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said today ahead of a visit to Rome, reports AFP.

"There is no ethnic war being waged between Hindus and Christians," Vajpayee, scheduled to arrive here Sunday, said in an interview with the Italian newspaper La Stampa.

The Indian, who leads a government dominated by Hindu nationalists, was set to meet Pope John Paul II on Monday.

Attacks have increased recently on India's Christian community which represents less than 2.5 per cent of the population about a billion mainly Hindus.

Vajpayee said those attacking Christians were people who wanted to embarrass his government. They would not re-

main unpunished. "We are nationalists because we love our country which embraces Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and so many others," he told La Stampa.

After Rome, Vajpayee will travel to Lisbon to attend the first summit between India and the European Union.

On Saturday, Vajpayee urged Indian state governments to investigate "firmly and impartially" cases of violence against the Christian community and take speedy action.

Security was stepped up Saturday at a Christian cemetery in southern India where unidentified attackers dug up 45 graves, destroyed crosses and defaced tombstones.

The vandalism of the Rajahmundry cemetery comes in the wake of increased violence against the minority Christians in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, where the town is located.

Christians constitute less than five percent of the state's population. Over the last two months at least three people have been injured in six bomb attacks on different Christian institutions across the state.

Hindu fundamentalist groups are suspected to be behind the attacks but so far police have made no arrests.

There has been an upsurge in anti-Christian violence since 1998 when the Hindu nationalist BJP came to power in India, including the horrific burning of an Australian missionary and his two young sons.

Some Christian bodies have accused right-wing Hindus allied to Vajpayee's party of staging the hate attacks.

The new president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, Archbishop Cyril Mar Basileos, said: "We have evidence showing certain tolerance (on the part of the government) of these incidents."

Meet to discuss state of democracy in Poland today

WARSAW, June 25: UN chief Kofi Annan and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright join over 100 leaders meeting in Poland Monday to discuss the state of world democracy -- but states like China have not been invited, reports AFP.

Beijing joins a list of countries including Iraq, Iran, Libya, North Korea Cuba and Vietnam considered authoritarian or totalitarian by the organisers of the unprecedented gathering to climax with a Warsaw Declaration on democracy.

"We will encourage political leaders to uphold the values of tolerance and compromise that keep under guard effective democratic systems, and to promote respect for pluralism," said a draft of the declaration.

Tehran sewer tunnel collapses: 3 killed

TEHRAN, June 25: Three workers were killed when a central Tehran sewer tunnel collapsed late Saturday, suffocating them, the Iranian official news agency IRNA reported today, says AFP.

The agency said the bodies of two engineers, aged 28 and 30, had been recovered Sunday, but it would take several hours to bring out the third, of an Afghan worker.

The three had gone into the tunnel to find out why another part of the system had fallen in, IRNA said.

Tehran City Hall and a private company have been constructing the first proper underground sewerage network for the city of 10 million inhabitants.

Located at the foot of a chain of mountains, the Iranian capital relies on storm water and melt water running through open drains.

Taliban plan new offensive

KABUL, June 25: Opposition commander Ahmad Shah Massoud believes that the ruling Taliban militia is planning a new offensive in northern Afghanistan and has conveyed his fears to the United Nations, his spokesman said today, reports AFP.

Massoud met with the UN Secretary General's special envoy, Francesco Vendrelli, in the Tajikistan capital Dushanbe on Saturday and told him the Taliban attack was imminent, spokesman Sayed Hussain Anwari said.

"It was conveyed seriously to Vendrelli that the Taliban were preparing for an attack in line with their policy of continuation of fighting," Anwari said.

Anwari, who attended the Dushanbe meeting, said they had discussed the situation in war-ravaged Afghanistan

4 women hostages released

Talks to end Fiji crisis remain deadlocked

SUVA, June 25: Four women hostages held by Fiji coup plotters were freed early today but military authorities said talks to finally end the crisis were deadlocked, reports AFP.

"Efforts to try and move the talks forward today have failed," army spokesman Filipo Tarakinikini told a press conference at the army headquarters in Nabua, outside Suva.

Coup leader George Speight told reporters no more hostages would be freed until all his demands had been met, but said there would be further talks.

"There would always be a future in negotiations," he said. Tarakinikini hinted that the release in the early hours of Sunday of the four women hostages among the 31 held by Speight's men might signal a change in the army's position.

"The exclusion of women now from the parliamentary complex gives us less restrictions as far as we view the hostage situation," he said.

But Tarakinikini refused to be drawn into a discussion on whether this meant the army could now consider a military option to resolving the crisis.

"There is an element of chivalry in all this. We are glad that the women are out. That's it," he smiled.

Members of parliament Lavinia Padarath, Akinisi Korotamama, Adi Kolla Nailatikau and Marieta Rigamoto were

woken up early on Sunday and told they were to be released.

They were among 31 hostages seized by Speight and his men on May 19. The hostages still being held captive include Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, his cabinet and MPs.

Korotamama told reporters after leaving the Red Cross Centre following a debriefing session on her release that the other hostages "are okay. We see our Indian brothers every day."

"We are here and we are happy. I am not going to comment further as we want the men to come out," she said.

The women were taken home with police escorts. On Friday night the army announced that an agreement had been reached with the rebels that would resolve the political crisis leading to the release of the hostages. An accord was to have been signed Saturday morning.

The next morning, however, talks floundered over a new demand from Speight's group that they select the country's president.

This demand, Tarakinikini said, was "totally unacceptable" to the army.

"The president of this country must be selected by the Great Council of Chiefs to ensure the holder of the position commands the confidence of all the

chiefs in the country," he said.

"We have negotiated in good faith up to this point in time. I am conscious that the country has waited patiently. Our people are suffering and we are determined to resolve the crisis in a way that is satisfactory as much as possible under the circumstances to our people," he said.

Tarakinikini said the army was willing to sign the accord as agreed on Friday.

"But beyond that we just see an endless list of demands one after another. We've come to a part where we have to draw the line," he said, adding that Speight and his group were beginning to see the concessions as "weakness" on the part of the army.

Tarakinikini said the rebels stood for indigenous Fijian aspirations and wanted the constitution and the government headed by Chaudhry, the first ethnic Indian prime minister, out.

"Those have been done. We have promised that the constitution will be reviewed. Mr Mahendra Chaudhry and his government will not come back in this interim period. They're certainly most welcome to contest the next elections," he said.

The army is looking at an interim period of 24 months before the next general elections are called.

Bollywood bonanza in spotlight

Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam wins best picture award

LONDON, June 25: Bollywood came to London on Saturday night as a star-studded cast gathered at the Millennium Dome for India's equivalent of the Oscars, the first awards ceremony for the world's second largest film industry, reports AFP.

To screams and shrieks from mostly female fans and film buffs, Bombay's finest filed into the showcase London venue, while a smattering of Hollywood and Hong Kong stars such as Angelina Jolie and Jackie Chan turned up for the festivities.

"I find Indian films have so much in them, the drama, the dancing and the singing," said Chan before receiving a special lifetime achievement award. "I'm a big fan."

Australian pop pin-up Kylie Minogue also made an appearance to perform her new single Spinning Around for the 3,000 celebrities, stars, and directors at the International Indian Film Awards.

The film Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam won best picture award with Aishwarya Rai taking best actress in a leading role for her performance in the same movie, which also provided the best director, Sanjay Leela Bansal.

Sanjay Dutt won best actor in a leading role for his performance in Vaastav.

Hosting the event, watched by an estimated television audience of more than one billion,

was reigning Miss World, India's Yukta Mookhey, and legendary Bollywood star Anupam Kher.

The inaugural awards shindig was being held in London because Bollywood was looking for an international platform from which to project itself -- and because Britain has become a huge market for Indian films.

"London is the second biggest market outside India so it is the perfect place for the awards," said Shalini Patel, a

spokeswoman for the entertainment group Wizcraft that arranged the ceremony.

"In the last couple of months, some Bollywood movies have entered the UK top 20, which shows how popular these films are here," she told AFP. "And we're having it in the Dome because it's the most talked about place in Britain."

The awards do not carry any prize money, but each winner gets a trophy resembling the rising sun.

Among the other awards,

best female playback singer went to Alka Yagnik for Taal while Udit Narayan won the male version of the award. Best lyricist went to Anand Bakshi for Taal while best music direction was won by A R Rahman for the same film.

Best actor in a comic role was Anil Kapoor for his performance in Biwi No.1, while Naseeruddin Shah won best performance in a negative role in Sarfarosh.

Best actress in a supporting role was Sushmita Sen for her performance in Biwi No.1, while Anil Kapoor won the award for best actor in a supporting role for his performance in Taal.

Veteran Indian stars Lata Mangeshkar and Sunil Dutt received special awards for their contribution to Indian cinema. India annually produces about 800 films -- more than Hollywood. Indians are passionate about films. Some 20 million Indians are estimated to watch movies daily in 13,000 movie theatres.

The boy-meets-sari-clad-girl epics are enjoying growing popularity in Britain, and not just among its large Asian community. Two major cinema groups are to open new complexes with screens dedicated to Bollywood films.

The Indian film star who will have his image represented in wax at Madame Tussaud's is legendary actor Amitabh Bachchan.



Sanjay Dutt Best Actor



Aishwarya Rai Best Actress

BRIEFLY

Several hurt in blast in Spain: Several people were injured when a car bomb exploded shortly after midnight in Guetxo in the Basque region of Northern Spain, emergency services at the scene said Sunday, AFP reports from Guetxo.

There was no precise information on the numbers injured or the scale of their injuries but the sources said that one person had been hospitalised and several ambulances were on the scene in the Las Arenas quarter of Guetxo in Vizcaya province.

39 Chinese migrants held in US:

Thirty illegal Chinese immigrants were detained Saturday in Port Saint Lucie, Florida, US Border Patrol spokesman Joseph Mellia said, AFP reports from Florida.

The would-be immigrants, all adult men, were in good health and were taken to the Krome detention center in Miami, Mellia said. Only one of the men spoke with border police, and he said the group came from the Chinese province of Fujian, the spokesman said. Fujian is the home province of 58 would-be immigrants found dead in the back of a Dutch truck at Dover, England on Monday.

Nepal to crack down on drug abuse: A bill banning the sale of alcohol to Nepalese minors is to be tabled in parliament, state-run radio said yesterday AFP reports from Kathmandu.

"This bill, if passed by the parliament, will prohibit underage people from buying alcohol," the radio quoted Home Minister Govinda Raj Joshi as saying.

500 civilians killed in latest Lankan offensive

COLOMBO, June 25: At least 500 civilians have been killed in the latest offensive launched by Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels in the northern peninsula of Jaffna, a moderate Tamil party said today, reports AFP.

The mainstream Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), after an executive committee meeting here Saturday, urged the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Colombo government to enter peace talks.

"It is observed up to now, in the current conflict, consequent to the shelling and counter shelling and aerial bombing within the Jaffna peninsula... over 500 non-combat civilians have been killed," the TULF said.

It said many more had been injured since the LTTE mounted its ferocious offensive in April in a bid to capture the northern peninsula of Jaffna and warned that there could be an escalation of fighting.

International aid officials said they were unable to confirm or deny the LTTE claims of civilian casualties in areas they have been unable to visit.

However, aid officials said their estimate was that less than 100 people had been taken to two hospitals in the region while civilian fatalities had been "less than 10" when fighting was at its peak last month.

Last month, the military said it was able to halt the "rolling offensive" of the LTTE with the introduction of new weapons and thousands of troop reinforcements.

The LTTE, which has accused the LTTE of assassinating two of its mayors in Jaffna in May and September 1998, maintains that the Tigers should be involved in a political process to guarantee peace.

Six days ago, TULF vice president V. Anandasangari said they wanted the Tamil Tigers included in an interim council to administer the embattled northeastern region.

War defences must remain firm

ROK president at war anniversary

SEOUL, June 25: President Kim Dae-Jung insisted today that South Korea must retain a strong defensive bloc against North Korea as he made a new plea for peace on the 50th anniversary of the communist North's failed invasion, reports AFP.

Seizing on the momentum built up by his historic summit with the North's leader Kim Jong-Il, the president said in a speech to thousands of war veterans that any new conflict would decimate the whole Korean Peninsula.

He said the 85,000 US troops in South Korea and Japan must remain and that North Korea now understands this. The 10,000 strong crowd at the Seoul War Memorial, including 4,500 Korean and foreign veterans, applauded the president's call for strict vigilance against the North.

"Peace can only be guaranteed through a tight defence posture. I emphasise that we should not allow the slightest gap in our defence posture," he said.