

Tsvangirai to fight Mugabe in runoff polls

AFP, Pretoria
Zimbabwe opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai said yesterday he would contest a presidential runoff poll in his violence-wracked country, but called for international peacekeepers and observers to ensure a fair vote.
Tsvangirai, who beat veteran President Robert Mugabe in a first round of voting in March, also called for an end to violence in Zimbabwe to allow the as yet unscheduled second round to take place.
"A run-off election could finally knock out the dictator Mugabe for good," he told reporters in Pretoria.
"The run-off election could be the final round in a very long fight to liberate ourselves from our former liberator," he added in reference to Mugabe's stranglehold on power since the end of British rule in Zimbabwe in 1980.
Tsvangirai had previously refused to say whether he would take part -- even though failure to do so would have handed a victory to Mugabe -- and has accused the government of organising a campaign of terror against his supporters.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Hezbollah's Beirut move alters power balance

AFP, Beirut
Hezbollah's power grab in west Beirut marks a turning point in Lebanon's long-running political crisis and could have serious implications for the wider Middle East, analysts say.
"Hezbollah had said before it would never point its arms against its own country," said Nadim Shehadi, Lebanon specialist at the Chatham House think-tank in London.
"But it has crossed a huge red line, and it means Iran has crossed this line."
"The political consequences are immense, it could escalate regionally."
But while the Hezbollah-led opposition claimed victory, it

remains unclear if the Shia militant group will be able to secure the spoils, another analyst said.
"Hezbollah has won the first round but the situation will quickly turn against it," said Antoine Basbous of the Paris-based Observatory of Arab States.
"Beirut fell without resistance, but people regard Hezbollah, which is hanging up posters of Syrian and Iranian leaders, as an occupying force," he added.
Syria maintained a large military presence for nearly three decades until it was forced to withdraw after the 2005 assassination of former premier Rafiq Hariri in a Beirut bombing for which it was widely blamed.
Hariri's son Saad is now one of the leading figures behind the

governing coalition, while Syria and its regional ally Iran are the main backers of Hezbollah.
The areas taken over by Hezbollah and its Shia allies were predominantly Sunni areas that support the anti-Syrian ruling coalition.
According to Paul Salem, the director of the Carnegie Middle East Centre, "the power balances on the ground have changed now."
"The opposition has not indicated how it wants to translate this victory other than rescinding the government decisions," he said.
Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah accused the government on Thursday of declaring war against his movement by ordering a crackdown on its communica-

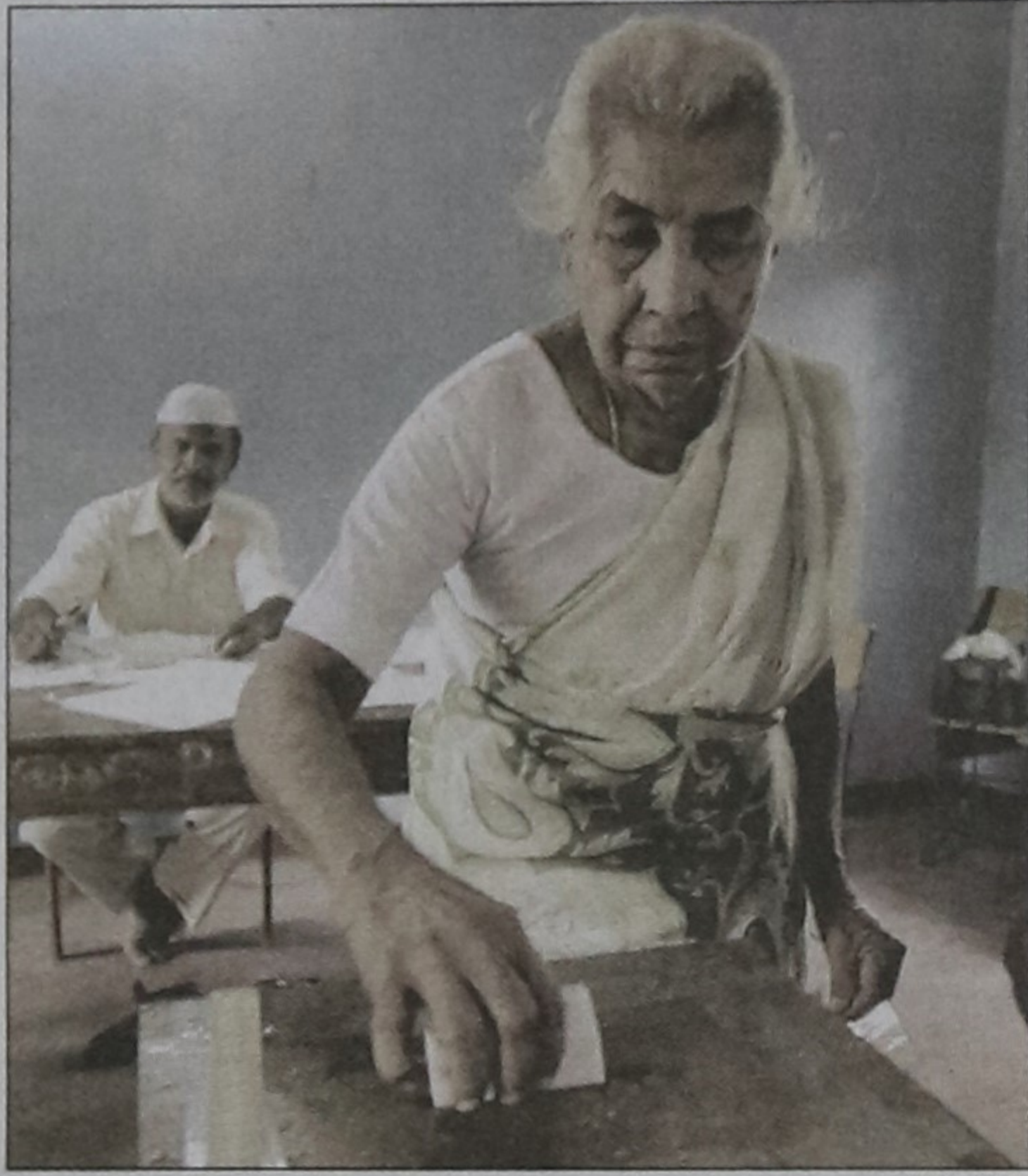
tions network and sacking the head of security at Beirut airport who is considered close to it.
After the events of recent days, "the opposition has further strengthened its position and the majority has been weakened to a certain extent," Salem said.
For Karim Makkissi, a professor at the American University of Beirut, however, the deadly clashes of the past few days also create an opportunity to finally end the 18-month-old standoff between the government and the opposition that has crippled Lebanese political life.
"Whenever there is a stalemate where nothing is happening, sometimes you need a bit of a shock to create a new opportunity," he said.



A Lebanese woman and her daughter walk past Lebanese soldiers deploying in a tense neighbourhood of Beirut yesterday. At least 29 people have been killed in the fighting that pitted Sunni supporters of the ruling bloc against Shia members of the opposition and brought the country dangerously close to a new civil war.

Israel raids on Gaza kill 5 Palestinians

AFP, Gaza City
Israeli air raids on Gaza killed five Hamas militants Saturday as the Jewish state warned the United Nations that it will defend itself against Palestinian rocket attacks from the isolated territory.
Egypt meanwhile opened its border with the besieged coastal strip to allow hundreds of sick and wounded Gazans to enter for medical treatment.
The first overnight raid, which killed two Hamas militants near Rafah at the southern end of the strip, was aimed at a police station used by Hamas, the head of Gaza emergency services, Dr. Muawiyah Hassanein, said.
The second attack targeted another Hamas police base in the city of Khan Yunis in the south of the territory and killed three members of the Hamas-run paramilitary group that polices the territory, he said.



A Sri Lankan woman inserts the ballot into the box as she casts her vote at a polling station in the eastern Sri Lankan province of Trincomalee yesterday.

Lanka holds vote in liberated east

AP, Batticaloa
Eastern Sri Lanka residents voted Saturday in their first major election, less than a year after the separatist rebels lost control of the region. The poll was hailed as a democratic milestone but marred by rebel attacks, one that left 11 people dead.
The government said the election was an important step in restoring normalcy to the Eastern Province, which it freed from 13 years of Tamil Tiger rule last July.
President Mahinda Rajapaksa has painted the election as a tacit referendum on his costly battle to crush the rebels in their remaining stronghold in the north and end this Indian Ocean island nation's 25-year civil war.
The rebels have been fighting since 1983 for an independent homeland for the ethnic Tamil minority in the north and east after decades of marginalisation under governments controlled by the Sinhalese majority.

"Nobody thought when we first liberated it... that the government would have elections and hand over this to the people, so its very symbolic," said Basil Rajapaksa, a lawmaker and the president's brother, who is the government's point man on the region. But a new round of attacks blamed on the rebels clouded the election.
Suspected guerrillas bombed and sank an empty navy cargo ship in the eastern port town of Trincomalee at about 2:15 a.m. Saturday, causing no injuries, said navy spokesman Cmdr. D.K.P. Dassanayake.
And a bomb hidden in a package exploded in a cafe Friday evening in the eastern town of Ampara, killing 11 people and sparking fears the rebels had more attacks planned for election day.
The attack in Ampara was carried out despite the presence of 28,000 police officers and an extra 4,000 soldiers in addition to the thousands already on duty.

Sadr group strikes deal to end Baghdad fighting

19 Shia extremists killed in battle

AFP, AP, Najaf
The movement of anti-American Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr said Saturday it had struck a deal with Iraqi officials to end weeks of fighting in Baghdad that left another 13 people dead overnight.
Sheikh Salah al-Obeidi, the spokesman for the cleric's office in the central shrine city of Najaf, said the deal to end the fighting in the movement's Baghdad stronghold of Sadr City would be effective from Sunday.
"We will stop the fire, stop displaying arms in public and open all the roads leading to Sadr City," Obeidi told AFP.
"This agreement will be executed from tomorrow. The Sadr movement has agreed to the contents of the deal and it has now become an official document."
Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh declined to give any immediate details of the agreement.
"I can't say anything, we will make an announcement soon about the agreement," he said.
Obeidi, who took part in the negotiations leading to the clinching of the deal in Baghdad, said the two

sides had reached agreement on most issues.
"The two groups agreed on 10 of the 14 points discussed. The agreed points do not include disbanding of Jaish al-Mahdi," he said, referring to Sadr's feared Mahdi Army militia.
Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, whose government is dominated by Shias, wants to disband Sadr's militia before October provincial elections.
The Sadr movement says it needs its weapons for self-defence until other Shia and Sunni groups nurtured by the US military and the Baghdad government are also disarmed.
"The agreement stipulates that the government's security forces have the right to make raids and searches (in Sadr City) for those who are wanted but by following the principles of human rights," Obeidi said.
The Sadr movement has repeatedly accused the security forces of randomly arresting its leaders.
An official from the United Iraqi Alliance, the Shia bloc that leads the ruling coalition, confirmed the agreement saying that Iraqi forces "will be allowed inside Sadr City to nab the wanted."
"It was also decided that all the

bombs planted on the streets of Sadr City should be removed," the official said on condition of anonymity.
Fighting in Sadr City continued overnight killing a US soldier and 19 Shia extremists, and one American soldier died of non-combat injuries, the military said Saturday.
"Every 10 minutes or so we heard explosions," said Sadr City resident Hussein Kadhim, 35. "Last night must have been one of the worst nights of fighting in the past month."
The US soldier, who was assigned to the Multi National Division Centre, died of non-combat related injuries Friday, the military said. The death raised the number of US military fatalities in Iraq to at least 4,074 since the Iraq war started in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count.
Iraqi health authorities said Saturday that 13 people were killed and 77 others wounded including women and children in clashes in the Shia militia stronghold of Sadr City district since Friday. It was not clear whether any militants were among them. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak to the media.

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Obama forges ahead

AFP, Washington
Democrat Barack Obama promised Americans a clean break from Washington's politics-as-usual as he campaigned Saturday to sew up the Democratic presidential nomination and rally more superdelegates to his side.
Since Obama's convincing win in North Carolina on Tuesday over rival Hillary Clinton and their photo-finish in Indiana, 12 more of the Democratic Party elite who have a say on the nomination contest have swung over to the Illinois senator, including seven in 24 hours.
The trickle of support is predicted to turn into a flood, with

only six primaries now left in their marathon battle to carry the party's flag into the November presidential elections against Republican John McCain.
Former candidate John Edwards, who dropped out of the close race in late January, stopped short of endorsing Obama on Friday, but said he has virtually wrapped up the contest ahead of the last primaries on June 3.
"Let's just assume that Barack is the nominee because it's headed in that direction," he told NBC television.
He added he thought Obama, who is on a historic quest to be the country's first black president, also had a "better chance" to beat McCain.

Gunmen kill 3 Shias in Pakistan

AP, Dera Ismail Khan
Police say gunmen have killed a Shia Muslim shop owner and two of his customers in an apparent sectarian attack in Pakistan.
Saturday's attack happened in Dera Ismail Khan, a town on the Indus River in Pakistan's northwest.
Police official Abdul Ghafoor said the family of the slain shop owner had an enmity with a Sunni Muslim militant group.

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Hu ends 'successful' Japan visit

AP, Tokyo
Chinese President Hu Jintao toured two ancient Buddhist temples and a leading electronics company yesterday on the last day of what he termed a successful Japan visit.
"This trip was satisfactory and successful," Hu told Nara Gov. Shogo Arai at a luncheon after the temple visits that was televised in part by public broadcaster NHK.
"Exchanges between China and Japan have been successful in many areas, and are expected to develop further," Hu said.
Hu toured the 7th century Horyuji Temple in Nara, which includes some of the world's oldest surviving wooden buildings, and told senior priests that cultural exchanges and deeper understanding are key to good relations.

N Korea hands over key nuke records

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul
North Korea has handed over the key records of its plutonium activity to the United States, pushing the nuclear negotiations closer toward the next phase.
The US State Department confirmed Thursday (May 8) that the North has given the visiting US team of experts some documents related to its main plutonium programme.
"He is going to bring with him a significant number of documents related to North Korea's plutonium programme," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters.

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