

S Sudan rulers hail valid vote for freedom

Turnout threshold reached

AFP, Juba

South Sudan's ruling party said yesterday that the 60-percent turnout threshold required for a landmark independence vote to be declared valid has been reached after just three days of polling.

The former rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement cited its own estimates for the achievement which has to be officially confirmed by the South Sudan Referendum Commission that is organising the week-long vote.

But there were long queues at polling stations again yesterday as voters responded to calls from the party for a "100 percent turnout," although the shine was taken off the jubilant mood in the south by deadly tensions over the flashpoint district of Abyei on the border

with the north.

"The mark that would make the referendum valid is past," said SPLM deputy secretary general Anne Itto, referring to the threshold set by a 2005 peace agreement that ended a devastating 22-year civil war with the north in which an estimated two million people died.

"The 60-percent threshold has been achieved but we... are asking for a 100-percent turnout."

Referendum commission spokeswoman Suad Ibrahim said the SPLM's boast was plausible. "It's quite possible. It could even be higher," she told AFP.

Loudspeaker trucks criss-crossed the potholed dirt tracks of the southern regional capital Juba urging voters to respond to the call.



Residents congregate to watch the rising tide (Upper left), a submerged house (Below left) and a catamaran is washed past a partially submerged office building as flood waters inundate Brisbane Australia yesterday.

Netanyahu calls for military threat to Iran

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday said international sanctions against Iran would only be effective if they were backed by a "credible" military threat.

Netanyahu, speaking to foreign reporters in Jerusalem, repeated a call first made in November, saying it was the only way to ensure Tehran ended what he said was its drive to acquire nuclear weapons.

The Israeli leader said only the fear of real consequences had deterred Iran in the past, adding that the sole pause in its programme took place in 2003.

Shot US lawmaker improves; gunman's family sorry

AFP, Phoenix, Arizona

The US lawmaker shot in the head in an attack killing six in Tucson can now breathe unaided, doctors said Tuesday as the gunman's family broke their silence to say they were "so very sorry."

Surgeons gave an upbeat outlook for Representative Gabrielle Giffords' condition, as President Barack Obama prepared to travel to Arizona and a harrowing account emerged about the youngest victim in Saturday's shooting spree.

"She's holding her own," said Michael Lemole, the head neurosurgeon who operated on Giffords, adding that she was still responding to simple commands, a key sign for her recovery prospects.

Loughner's family, besieged by media since the shooting, meanwhile made their first comment, saying they were "so very sorry" for the victims of their son's attack.

"There are no words that can possibly express how we feel. We wish that there were, so we could make you feel better. We don't understand why this happened," they said in a statement released to media.

"It may not make any difference, but we wish we could change the heinous events of Saturday. We care deeply about the victims and their families, and we are so very sorry for their loss."

Israeli warplanes in fresh strikes on Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli warplanes renewed their air strikes in the Gaza Strip, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned of the consequences if Palestinian rocket fire continued.

The first air strikes on the southern Gaza city of Khan Yunis killed a militant of the Islamic Jihad and wounded another man, Palestinian sources said.

The Israeli military confirmed the attack, saying it had targeted a member of Islamic Jihad who "was involved in planning a massive terrorist attack in the heart of Israel."

Troops deploy in capital as Tunisia sacks minister

Protesters to be freed

BBC ONLINE

Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has dismissed his interior minister and ordered the release of most of those detained during recent protests.

He has also created a special committee to investigate corruption and the actions of some officials, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi has said.

Ahmed Friaa will replace Rafik Belhaj Kacem at the interior ministry.

Earlier, troops were deployed in the capital yesterday morning for the first time since the civil unrest erupted last year after fresh protests about unemployment and poverty in a suburb.

Armoured vehicles and soldiers armed with automatic weapons were seen patrolling the city's main avenues and taking up positions outside key buildings, including the state television headquarters.

Human rights activists, meanwhile,

said a strike had been called in Kasserine, a region at the centre of the unrest.

A trade union official told the BBC that all workers in Kasserine were observing the strike call. It has not been possible to verify this claim.

In disturbances in the region's capital on Tuesday, residents said a number of protesters had been shot dead by police snipers. The police said they had fired warning shots and only acted in self defence.

Officials say 21 people have been killed since the protests began in the south of the country in mid-December, but human rights and trade union activists believe the number of dead to be at least 50.

People taking part in the demonstrations say they are angry about unemployment, poverty, corruption and government repression.

President Ben Ali has said the riots are a "terrorist act" orchestrated by foreign forces to damage Tunisia.

Wind of change in young Buddhist monks

PTI, Itanagar

Young Buddhist monks are not averse to owning a television set or a motorcycle and would even love going around wearing jeans and sweatshirts, unlike in the past.

Early morning at around 4:30, the voices of the monks echo in the Thubchog Gatseling Monastery in West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, as they begin offering prayers which they believe, would take them to the "right path and enlighten their lives"

Jambey Dorjee, a young monk in the monastery, says he would not mind having a television set and a motorcycle, if he could. "As for the dress, I am satisfied with my robes," he says.

His confederate Lobsang Tsering, however, says he would like to wear jeans, jackets and sweaters to stay warm.

At the age of 20, Tenzing Sherab, a

saffron-robed youth with a shaven head has already completed nine years at the monastery in Bomdila, the district headquarters, which borders the Tibetan region of China.

The Bomdila monastery is among several Buddhist places of learning that dot the region, including the monastery in Tawang, about 40 kms northwest of Bomdila.

Asked about the monastic life, Sherab says, "I am going the right way by following the path of Buddha. I think about enlightenment. We don't want to be attached to the wheel of life."

Unlike in the past, the monks are nowadays allowed to put on warm clothes over their robes.

Pema Wangchuk, a senior monk at the monastery, recalls when monks were not allowed to wear jackets or sweaters. "Now they wear warm clothes over their robes during winter," he says.

More deaths, misery from Philippine floods

AFP, Manila

Widespread flooding in the Philippines has claimed seven more lives, raising the death toll from two weeks of heavy rain to 40, officials said yesterday.

The seven deaths occurred over the past four days as floods engulfed Samar, the country's third-largest island, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council said in its latest bulletin.

Seven other people remain missing after being swept away by floods or buried by landslides. Soldiers and government personnel are evacuating more people in Samar and nearby Leyte island, the bulletin said.

Communication lines with North Korea reopened

CNN, Seoul, South Korea

The South Korean Ministry of Unification confirmed yesterday that it has reopened communication channels with Pyongyang, North Korea, in the border area of Panmunjom.

A media officer at the ministry said officials reopened a direct hotline between the two Koreas and Red Cross communication channels.

With the reopening of the direct communication line, the two Koreas are able to discuss issues such as holding reunions for separated families and initiate contact for aid or inter-Korean talks.

It is the first time in eight months that the two sides have reopened the hotline.

North Korea cut off the hotline on May 26 to protest South Korea's response to the sinking of the Cheonan naval ship in March, which killed 46 sailors.

South Korea and the international community blamed the North for the sinking, but Pyongyang has denied the accusations.

Tensions rose again in November, when North Korea shelled Yeonpyeong Island.

11 Bangladeshi workers killed

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A Mauritius national was also killed in the accident.

All the bodies were kept in a local hospital while the injured were undergoing treatment, the consul general reported.

The dead are: Akther (Passport: E0314113), son of Ali Abjal of village Solabaria; Al Mamun (Passport: Z0170334), son of A Yousuf of village Saidabad; Joy Hossain (Passport: E1049905), son of Taher Miah of village Goalnagar; Md Mostafijur Rahman (Passport: C0469490), son of Abdul Hakim of village Saidabad under Kasba; Md Rakibul Hasan (Passport: E0230462), son of Md Ali Afjal of village Durgapur under Ashuganj; Mohammed Saidur (Passport: E1241290), son of Rashid Miah Rahman of village Gonga Sagar under Akhaura; Sagor (Passport: E1262162), son of Jaju Miah of village Chakchandarpur under Kasba of Brahmanbaria district; Md Jahidul (Passport: E1875100), son of Jalaluddin; Moktar (Passport: E1874890), son of Monu Molla of village Sonakanda under Titas; Selim (Passport: E1876107), son of Renu Mia of village Banchhampur under Titas of Comilla district and Md

Elias Gazi (Passport: F0723931), son of Md Huzu Gazi, 21/2 Uttar Madartek, Bashabo under Sabujbagh in Dhaka (home-district Comilla).

The injured are: Mamun (Passport: E0913783), son of Dhanu Mia of village Mongalkandi under Homna; Md Hassan Sarkar (Passport: E 0068189), son of Md Dulal Sarkar of village Barashwar under Burichong of Comilla district; and Sumon (Passport: E0229351), son of Kuddus Miah of village Barail under Sarail in Brahmanbaria.

Talking to reporters, Director General of Africa Wing of the Foreign Ministry M Wahidur Rahman said steps have been taken to bring back the bodies and the injured people are being provided with necessary treatment.

He said the dead and injured Bangladeshi workers went to Mauritius on December 30 as sewing machine operators for Pandemonio Co Ltd.

The director general said the honorary consul general informed him that all the workers had insurance coverage and they will get compensation while the company will provide costs for

return of the bodies.

Wahid said both Bangladesh and Mauritius enjoy excellent bilateral relations and the country has been importing Bangladeshi workers in garments, construction and fishing industries.

"Currently over 12,000 Bangladeshis are working in Mauritius and every day more workers are going there with work permit. Even 23 people left for Mauritius today [yesterday]."

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni talked with Mauritius Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade Arvin Boolell.

The Mauritius minister on behalf of his government and people expressed deep shock at the death of Bangladeshi workers and conveyed sympathy to the bereaved family members.

He assured Bangladesh of compensation for those killed.

Dipu Moni instructed officials concerned at the foreign ministry to work for quick return of the bodies. She also expressed deep shock at the death of the workers and conveyed sympathy to the bereaved family members.

Rich rewards for Russian spies: report

AFP, Moscow



Anna Chapman
A Russian spy

economic affairs since December, the Kommersant daily said, citing sources close to the company.

A spokesman for Transneft declined immediate comment when reached by AFP.

After their expulsion from the United States, Pereverzeva along with her husband Mikhail Kutzik, who went under the alias of Michael Zottoli, and other fellow spies received a heroes' welcome in Russia.

One of the 10 Russian spies expelled from the United States last summer has landed a top job in Moscow by becoming an aide at the national oil pipeline monopoly, a report said yesterday.

Natalia Pereverzeva, who lived in the United States under the name of Patricia Mills, has been hired by the secretive oil monopoly Transneft and worked as an aide to its president on foreign

NEWS IN brief

Bombs kill four Nato troops in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Four Nato soldiers were killed in separate Taliban-type bomb blasts in eastern Afghanistan on yesterday, the alliance's International Security Assistance Force said.

Three troops were killed by a single improvised explosive device (IED) that exploded in eastern Afghanistan while the fourth soldier died in a similar attack in the south of the country, the force said.

No further details, including the exact location of the incident or the nationalities of the victims, were disclosed but most Nato soldiers in eastern

Swiss bids for UN Security Council seat

AFP, Geneva

Switzerland said yesterday it was bidding for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2023-2024, saying membership would help raise its profile as an "honest broker."

"Today, the Federal Council has decided to register Switzerland on the list of candidates of the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2023-2024," said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a statement.

"Membership of the Security Council would give Switzerland a platform to pursue its interests in the field of peace promotion and to raise its profile as an

Turkish doctor held over Kosovo organ trade

AFP, Pristina

A doctor dubbed the "Turkish Frankenstein" in Kosovo for his alleged involvement in illegal organ trading has been arrested in Istanbul, the EU mission in Kosovo, EULEX, said yesterday.

"EULEX can confirm that doctor Yusuf Sonmez has been detained in Istanbul by Turkish authorities yesterday," Kristiina Herodes, a spokeswoman for the EU rules of law mission EULEX, said.

"The arrest was carried out based on a warrant issued by the district court in Pristina in relation to the so-called Medicus case," she said, adding that EULEX prosecutors are working closely with

Nobel laureate Desmond Tutu accused of 'demonising' Israel

AFP, Cape Town

An online petition has accused the revered anti-apartheid icon Archbishop Desmond Tutu of "demonising Israel" with its organisers demanding he be axed as the patron of local Holocaust centres.

The petition, by three Cape Town locals and which has drawn nearly 350 supporters, accuses the Nobel Peace Prize laureate of being a bigot, dishonest and a "defamer of Israel and the Jewish

Mozambique storms, floods kill 12

AFP, Maputo

Lightning killed eight churchgoers in central Mozambique with a separate storm and floods raising the death toll to 12, police and state media said yesterday.

"The group was meeting under a tree when the thunderstorm started," in Mossurize district in Manica province close to the border with Zimbabwe on Sunday, provincial police spokes-