

Uganda president wins new term

AFP, Kampala
Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni cruised to a new five-year term yesterday, taking more than two thirds of the vote in elections the opposition said were marred by fraud.

Museveni, 66, was comfortably re-elected at the helm of the east African country, soon to become an oil-producing nation, with 68.38 percent of Friday's vote, according to full provisional results.

"The commission declares the candidate Yoweri Museveni elected president of the Republic of Uganda," commission chairman Badru Kiggundu said.

His main rival Kizza Besigye, who ran as the leader of the Inter-party Cooperation (IPC) opposition platform, lost to the veteran leader for the third time, after garnering only 26.01 percent of the vote.

The turnout stood at 59.9 percent, a weaker performance than the 69 percent achieved during the 2006 presidential election.

Some 14 million voters were called to choose their next president and members of parliament on Friday.



PHOTO: AFP
Several thousand Moroccans gather for a protest in Rabat demanding political reform and limits on the powers of the king (bottom left), hundreds of Yemeni Anti-government protesters (upper left) gather calling for the ouster of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh on the eighth straight day of anti-regime protests and a Bahraini woman (right) reads religious text as she sits in Pearl Square in the capital Manama after police and troops were withdrawn yesterday in what appeared to be a conciliatory move.

Students protest against regime in Sanaa

AFP, Sanaa

Hundreds of Yemeni students demonstrated yesterday outside the Sanaa university campus on the eighth straight day of anti-regime protests in the capital, an AFP correspondent reported.

Protesters chanted slogans demanding the ouster of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in power for 32 years, the correspondent said.

Around 100 of Saleh's supporters held a pro-government protest across the street from the campus while police set up a cordon to separate the two groups.

Pro- and anti-Saleh demonstrators have clashed violently over the past week in Sanaa with guns, batons and rocks with anti-regime protesters calling on the president to quit.

On Saturday, the police did not intervene as fierce clashes left five students wounded, according to an AFP correspondent.

Bahrain opposition plots strategy before talks

AFP, Manama

Bahrain's opposition wants the nation's rulers to guarantee they will back up their conciliatory words with actions, a Shiite leader said yesterday as he and other activists weighed the regime's offer for talks after nearly a week of protests and deadly clashes that have divided the Gulf nation.

The streets in the tiny but strategically important island kingdom were calmer as efforts shifted toward political haggling over demands for the monarchy to give up its near-absolute control over key policies and positions.

But bitterness and tensions still run deep after seesaw battles that included riot police opening fire on protesters trying to reclaim a landmark square and then pulling back to allow them to occupy the site. At least seven people have been killed and hundreds injured since the Arab wave for change reached the Gulf last Monday.

Bahrain's rulers appear desperate to open a political dialogue after sharp criticism from Western allies and statements by overseers of next month's Formula One race that the unrest could force the cancellation of Bahrain's

premier international event. Opposition leaders appear to be in no hurry to talk.

"Yesterday you kill people and today you want them to sit with you. It's not that easy," said a leader of the main Shiite opposition group Al Wafaq, Abdul-Jalil Khalil, adding no talks have yet taken place.

"We are not refusing a dialogue with the crown prince, but we need guarantees they will back words with action," Khalil said. He said the opposition's main demand is for the resignation of the government that is responsible for this week's bloodshed and has been led by the same prime minister the king's uncle for 40 years.

Bahrain holds particular importance to Washington as the host of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, which is the main U.S. military counterweight to Iran's efforts to expand its armed forces and reach into the Gulf. Bahrain's ruling Sunni dynasty has strong backing from other Gulf Arab leaders, who fear that Shiite powerhouse Iran could gain further footholds through the uprising led by Bahrain's Shiite majority.

More specifically, the protest demands include abolishing the mon-

archy's privileges to set policies and appoint all key political posts, along with addressing long-standing claims of discrimination and abuses against Shiites, who represent about 70 percent of Bahrain's 525,000 citizens.

No violence was reported yesterday, but many parts of the country were paralyzed by a general strike called by opposition groups and workers' unions.

At state-run Gulf Air, union leaders urged workers to join the strike. But an e-mail to employees by the airline's director warned that any no-shows could face dismissal. The carrier said no flights have been disrupted.

At another state-owned giant, The Bahrain Petroleum Company (BopCo), the trade union told workers they have the right to strike and some managers even told workers to leave work, said Mehdi Hasan, an electrical engineer at BopCo. Several managers were noting names of employees on strike, Hasan said.

"I am striking because right now in my life my demands to get rights from the government is my top priority," Hasan said. "I want the right to choose and elect those I want in the government."

Protesters demand change in Morocco

AFP, Rabat

Several thousand people rallied in Moroccan cities yesterday demanding political reform and limits on the powers of the king, the latest protests demanding change to have rocked the region.

Over 2,000 people took to the streets of the capital Rabat, 4,000 according to the organisers, shouting: "The people want change."

In Casablanca, the North African nation's biggest city, over 1,000 people came out demanding: "Freedom, dignity, justice," an AFP correspondent reported.

The demonstrations were peaceful as of midday.

"I want a Morocco that's more fair and with less corruption," said a student demonstrator in Casablanca who asked not to be named.

"We've got nothing against the king, but we want more justice and work," said another student who gave his name as Brahim.

Thousands rally again in Tunisia

AFP, Tunis

Thousands of demonstrators rallied on the streets of Tunis yesterday calling for the resignation of Mohamed Ghannouchi's transitional government.

Police helicopters circled overhead as demonstrators answering a call to protest on Facebook chanted "Ghannouchi's government out" and held up placards with the legend "The people want the regime to go".

Ghannouchi was prime minister under deposed president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from 1999 until he was ousted in a popular revolt on January 14.

Ghannouchi took the reins of a transitional government of national unity on January 17 which included many ministers who were part of the old regime, sparking daily protests by thousands of people.

"We are against Ghannouchi's government because our revolution has led to nothing with Ghannouchi, this is Ben Ali's team and it has changed nothing," said one of the demonstrators, teacher Samia Mahfoudh, 50. "It's a bluff."

"They are taking us for fools. All the members of the government and the regional councils have been elected by the former regime, the constitution has been reformed by the former regime. The RCD wants to sow terror," said another protestor.

Israel eyes with 'gravity' Iran 'routine' navy move

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel views the dispatch of two Iranian warships to the Mediterranean with "gravity," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday, as the vessels were expected to pass through the Suez Canal.

Egypt has given the two ships permission to cross the waterway en route to Syria, the first time Iranian warships will have done so since the Islamic revolution of 1979.

The planned passage has prompted criticism from Israel, with Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman calling it a "provocation."

Are plant hydraulics a path to adaptive dream machines?

AFP, Washington

Airplanes might soon have flexible wings like birds and robots could change shape as they please thanks to research under way on mimosa plants, researchers said.

The shrub's leaves, which can retract at the slightest of touches, could inspire a new class of structures that can twist, bend, harden and even repair themselves, explained University of Michigan professor of mechanical engineering Kon-Well Wang.

"This and several other characteristics of plant cells and cell walls have inspired us to initiate ideas that could concurrently realize many of the features that we want to achieve for adaptive structures," he said Saturday at an annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

"The phenomenon is made possible by

osmosis, the flow of water in and out of plants' cells," he said.

The mimosa is a type of plant able to move itself in a way that is visible to the naked eye in real time. The plant's "hydraulic system" makes that "nastic motion" possible.

Observing the process can be a gateway to designing cells with special mechanical properties, he believes.

"This and several other characteristics of plant cells and cell walls have inspired us to initiate ideas that could concurrently realize many of the features that we want to achieve for adaptive structures," Wang said.

"We can design those cells according to our needs. We can put those cells into structure, control them in different sequences," he explained.

"Currently we are looking at basic research only, but there are some applications that we have in mind," Wang said.

Merkel braces for battering in German state poll

AFP, Berlin

Chancellor Angela Merkel braced for a heavy defeat in polls yesterday in Germany's second city Hamburg at the start of a super election year, with surveys showing her conservatives set for a drubbing.

Voters in the first of seven state elections in what could prove to be an annus horribilis for Merkel are poised to hand power to the opposition Social Democrats (SPD), ending nearly a decade of conservative rule, polls show.

Polled opened at 0700 GMT, with 1.26 million voters called to cast a ballot.

In the run-up to the election, the SPD was polling nearly double the support enjoyed by Merkel's centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

However, local issues have featured heavily in the campaign and surveys show the SPD's lead over the CDU in Hamburg is not replicated nationwide, where the conservatives remain the most popular party.

The Hamburg election is an "absolute special case," said Manfred Guellner from polling institute Forsa.

Merkel herself sought to put on a brave face, telling a campaign rally: "In the last nine years, things have got gradually better for Hamburg."



PHOTO: AFP
A handout picture obtained from the Iranian President's office shows Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (R) meeting with German Foreign Minister and vice-chancellor Guido Westerwelle on Saturday in Tehran.

Palestinians protest Obama UN veto

AFP, Ramallah

Around 3,000 Palestinians gathered in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday to protest the US veto that nixed a Security Council resolution on Israeli settlements.

The crowd massed in Manara Square, a central traffic circle in the West Bank city, waving banners and shouting slogans against the American administration.

"Obama, you despicable man, we want self-determination!" shouted the demonstrators, many of them members of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party.

Fatah central committee members Mahmoud al-Alul told the crowd: "This decision is against the Palestinian people and its freedom, and it supports Israeli injustice, oppression and occupation."

"We tell Obama that we are a people that doesn't bow to anyone," he said, before demonstrators interrupted with cries of "get out Obama, get out you settler."

Fatah called for the protest after the United States used the first veto of President Barack Obama's administration to nix a resolution that would have condemned continued Israeli settlement building.

The resolution, drafted by the Palestinian leadership in an attempt to pressure Israel to halt settlement construction in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, was supported by all 14 other members of the Security Council.

The United States said its veto should not be interpreted as support for Israeli settlement construction, but that it did not believe the United Nations was the best place to resolve the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But in Ramallah, the veto drew fury and disappointment. "No to negotiations with Israeli settlements and American arrogance," one banner held by demonstrators read.

NEWS IN brief

Man dies in Senegal torching protest

AFP, Dakar

A man who torched himself in front of Senegal's presidential palace in a protest over his army pension died yesterday, a hospital doctor and a security source said.

Oumar Bocoum doused himself in flammable liquid and set himself alight outside President Abdoulaye Wade's official residence on Friday, in a protest mirroring several public torchings across the Arab world in recent weeks.

Bocoum was believed to be one of a group of former soldiers seeking an increase in their pensions. Some of them have threatened to set themselves on fire if their demands are not met.

Iran frees German reporters in woman stoning case

AFP, Tehran

Iran has freed two German reporters held for interviewing the son and lawyer of a woman sentenced to death by stoning for adultery, after commuting their jail terms to 50,000-dollar fines, state media announced on Saturday.

"The two accused detained in Tabriz have been released and are departing for their home country," said Malek Ajar Sharifi, the judiciary chief of East Azerbaijan in northern Iran, quoted by the official news agency IRNA.

The German foreign ministry said it hoped Marcus Hellwig and Jens Koch would soon be "under the protection of the embassy in Tehran."

Five African presidents to meet on I Coast crisis

AFP, Nouakchott

Five African heads of state, UN and African Union leaders were to meet here yesterday to seek a solution to Ivory Coast's political impasse, as doubt rises over the success of mediation efforts.

Since presidential elections on November 28, Gbagbo has refused to cede power to his rival, recognised by most of the international community as the rightful winner.

The five presidents were charged by the AU in January to come up with solutions to the Ivorian crisis.

'Islamists' hold hostages in unrest-hit city: Libya

AFP, Tripoli

A group of "Islamist extremists" have taken hostage members of the security forces and civilians in unrest-swept eastern Libya, a senior Libyan official told AFP yesterday.

"A group of Islamist extremists ... is holding hostage security elements and civilians, threatening to execute them unless a siege by security forces is lifted" in the city of Al-Baida, the official said, asking not to be named.

The group called itself the "Islamic Emirate of Barqa," after the ancient name of a region of north-west Libya, he said.

French soldier killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Paris

A French soldier serving with the Nato-led international coalition in Afghanistan was killed in an insurgent attack at the weekend, the president's office announced yesterday.

He was the 54th French serviceman to die in Afghanistan since the first deployment of international forces in 2001, it said.

The attack happened Saturday in the early evening in the Alasay valley in Kapisa province in the northeast of the country.