

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Sarkozy loses first round to Hollande

AFP, Paris

Socialist champion Francois Hollande stamped his authority on the French presidential race Sunday, winning the first round of polling and setting up a May 6 run-off with incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy.

Hollande won between 28 and 29 percent of the vote in the first round, to Sarkozy's 25.5 to 27, according to estimates compiled from ballot samples by several polling agencies and obtained by AFP from multiple sources.

But the surprise package was the far-right anti-immigrant candidate Marine Le Pen, who won between 18 and 20 percent -- her National Front party's best showing which complicated forecasts for the second round.

Sarkozy is the only incumbent French president to lose a first round-vote in modern French history and opponents of all stripes queued up to pronounce his political obituary in live broadcasts and speeches to supporters.

"The exceptional score of Francois Hollande brings hope for change," said senior Socialist campaign official Manuel Valls, branding Sarkozy's second place finish



France's incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy, left, and his wife Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, right, leave a polling station in Paris yesterday after casting their votes. PHOTO: AFP

a "massive rejection." Marine Le Pen's father, National Front founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, refused to say who he would vote for in the second round now that his daughter has been eliminated,

but added: "I think Sarkozy is finished." Sarkozy's camp put a brave face on the defeat, insisting that with the votes of the Le Pen camp and that of centrist Francois Bayrou the right had not had a bad night and that

Sarkozy would bounce back before May 6. Turnout was high at at least 80 percent: down on the 84 percent turnout of 2007 but up significantly on the 72 percent of 2002 and belying fears that a low-key campaign would be capped by mass abstention.

The left has not won a presidential election in a quarter of a century, but with France mired in low growth and rising joblessness, opinion polls had long predicted that the left would beat the right-wing incumbent.

Hollande says Sarkozy has trapped France in a downward spiral of austerity and job losses, while Sarkozy says his rival is inexperienced and weak-willed and would spark financial panic through reckless spending pledges.

The eurozone debt crisis and France's sluggish growth and high unemployment have hung over the campaign, with Sarkozy struggling to defend his record and Hollande unable to credibly promise spending increases.

Opinion polls and campaigning were banned from midnight on Friday, and will now resume on Monday in the build-up to the May 6 run-off, which Hollande has hitherto been predicted to win by around 55 percent to 45.

Ready to hit Iran if ordered

Says Israeli military chief

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli forces are carrying out more special operations beyond the country's borders and will be ready to attack Iran's nuclear sites if ordered, the chief-of-staff said in an interview yesterday.

In an extract from an interview with the top-selling Yediot Aharanot daily, Lieutenant General Benny Gantz said that 2012 would be a critical year in efforts to halt what Israel and much of the international community believe is an Iranian nuclear arms programme.

"We think that a nuclear Iran is a very bad thing, which the world needs to stop and which Israel needs to stop -- and we are planning accordingly," Gantz said.

"In principle, we are ready to act. That does not mean that I will now order (air force chief) Ido (Nehushtan) to strike Iran," he added in the interview which will be published in full on Wednesday, on the eve of Israel's 64th anniversary as a state.

The United States says it does not believe Iran has so far taken a decision to develop a nuclear weapon, or that the time is right for military action, preferring to give international sanctions time to work.

But Israel, which sees a nuclear Iran as a threat to its very existence, claims Tehran may be on the cusp of "breakout" capability -- when it could quickly build a nuclear weapon -- and it does not rule out staging a pre-emptive strike of its own.

UN urges 5t fund for developing nations

AFP, Doha

UN and African officials yesterday urged sovereign wealth funds (SWF) worth an estimated \$5 trillion to invest in developing countries, even as they seek the right climate and demand steps against corruption.

Speaking at a debate as part of the World Investment Forum, officials from the UN Conference on Trade and Development and several African nations complained the level of investment inflows to the continent was too low.

"We have created a very conducive environment for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) but so far we have not seen any flow," Rwanda's trade and industry minister, Francois Kanimba, told the session.

"Big funds [like the SWFs] normally look for big projects, but we are small countries," he said.

Africa, home to most of the 49 least developed nations, needs huge investments in

agriculture and infrastructure but neither SWFs nor bigger world funds have shown keen interest in investing.

A programme manager for the International Fund for Agricultural Development, Abdelkarim Sma, said that foreign investments in Africa's agriculture sector were far too small.

"Some \$9 billion a year are invested in the African agriculture sector which is really nothing," Sma said.

"The investments needed are estimated at \$80 billion a year in order to secure food security for developing as well as developed countries," he said.

SWFs, held mostly by oil-rich countries in addition to China, Singapore and Hongkong and others, have traditionally preferred to invest in big corporations and assets in the West for risk considerations.

The assets of SWFs is only a quarter of the \$20 trillion world pension funds and form a small portion of the estimated \$21 trillion of FDI.



China, Russia hold first naval exercises

AFP, Beijing

China and Russia launched their first joint naval exercises yesterday, with war games in the Yellow Sea that come amid tensions between China and its Asian neighbours over territorial claims.

The six days of drills -- the first dedicated exercises involving navies of the two countries -- are taking place off China's east coast, the official Xinhua news agency said.

Although China has said the military exercises are designed to improve regional stability, they come at a time when Beijing is boosting military spending and more forcefully stating its case in territorial disputes.

China's army newspaper warned Saturday that other military exercises now taking place in Asia between the United States and the Philippines could lead to armed confrontation over the disputed South China Sea.

China and several of its neighbours have rival claims to uninhabited islands in the strategic maritime region, which is believed to be rich in oil and natural gas and straddles strategic shipping lanes vital to global trade.

Beijing and Tokyo also have a long-running dispute over another chain of islands in the East China Sea, called Diaoyu by China and Senkaku by Japan, which sit in rich fishing grounds that may also harbour energy resources.

China has 16 naval vessels and two submarines taking part in the exercises while Russia has four warships, according to state media.

UN vote is pivotal to end crisis in Syria

Says Annan, urges restraint from both sides

AGENCIES

Peace envoy Kofi Annan yesterday said the UN vote to deploy up to 300 observers in Syria was a "pivotal moment for the stabilisation of the country".

In a statement issued in Geneva, the UN and Arab League envoy also called on Syrian government forces to withdraw their tanks and weapons from cities.

"The government in particular must desist from the use of heavy weapons and, as it has committed, withdraw such weapons and armed units from population centres," he said.

Assad's opponents say his forces have continued shelling opposition strongholds in violation of the truce, while authorities say "terrorist armed groups" have kept up a campaign of terror against government targets.

A small UN team is currently in Syria to monitor a fragile ceasefire.

At least two people were killed in Douma



yesterday, a suburb of the capital, Damascus, activists said.

Activists also said three civilians were shot dead by security forces in the restive central city of Homs yesterday, despite the presence of two UN observers there. The UN has not commented on the claim.

Saturday's vote at the UN Security council came as monitors were allowed to visit Homs for the first time. The visit came amid a lull in fighting, which rebels said was because tanks had been temporarily hidden while observers were in the city.

The resolution gave the boosted observer force a mandate to monitor the situation for up to three months, but left it to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to decide how and when they will be deployed.

Although overall violence has fallen since the truce was agreed by the UN and Syria more than a week ago, many violations have been reported by activists and journalists on the ground.

Egypt scraps gas treaty with Israel

AFP, Cairo

Egypt has scrapped a 2005 gas export deal with Israel, which relies on Egyptian natural gas for 40 percent of its supplies to produce electricity, the chairman of a government holding firm said yesterday.

The accord was "annulled on Thursday with the East Mediterranean Gas Co (EMG) which exports gas to Israel because the company failed to respect conditions stipulated in the contract," Mohamed Shoeib told AFP.

The sale of gas to Israel, which signed a peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, has always been controversial in the Arab world's most populous country.

Egypt provides 43 percent of its gas supplies.



Indian workers give the finishing touches yesterday to India's first 1MW canal-top solar power plant at Chandrasana village of Mehsana district, some 45 kms from Ahmedabad on World Earth Day. This solar power plant on a 750 metre stretch of the Sanand Branch Canal of Sardar Sarovar Project will generate some 1.6 million units of clean electricity per year and will also prevent evaporation of some 90 lakh litres of water per year from the canal.

Aussie speaker stands down amid sex row

AFP, Sydney

Australia's parliamentary speaker stood aside yesterday following claims he sexually harassed a male staffer and misused taxi services in a case that could hurt the nation's fragile government.

Weekend reports alleged Peter Slipper harassed former staffer James Ashby, including telling him to shower with the door open when he stayed at his home, and "moaning" in a sexual manner after asking him for a massage.

The married Slipper, 62, was also accused of misusing taxpayer-funded taxi services.

Slipper arrived back in Australia from the United States on Sunday and released a statement "emphatically" denying the allegations.

'They're killing us'

World's most endangered tribe cries for help

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Trundling along the dirt roads of the Amazon, the giant logging lorry dwarfed the vehicle of the investigators following it. The trunks of nine huge trees were piled high on the back in incontrovertible proof of the continuing destruction of the world's greatest rainforest and its most endangered tribe, the Awá.

Yet as they travelled through the jungle early this year, the small team from Funai Brazil's National Indian Foundation did not dare try to stop the loggers; the vehicle was too large and the loggers were almost certainly armed. All they could do was video the lorry and add the film to the growing mountain of evidence showing how the Awá with only 355 surviving members, more than 100 of whom have had no contact with the outside world are teetering on the edge of extinction.

It is a scene played out throughout the Amazon as the authorities struggle to tackle the powerful illegal logging industry. But it is not just the loss of the trees that has created a situation so serious that it led a Brazilian judge, José Carlos do Vale Madeira, to describe it as "a real genocide". People are pouring on to the Awá's land, building illegal settlements, running cattle ranches. Hired gunmen known as pistoleros are reported to be hunting Awá who have stood in the way of land-grabbers. Members of the tribe describe seeing their families wiped out.

Human rights campaigners say the tribe has reached a tipping point and only immediate action by the Brazilian government to prevent logging can save the tribe.

This week Survival International will launch a new campaign to highlight the plight of the Awá, backed by Oscar-winning actor Colin Firth. In a video to be launched on Wednesday, Firth will ask the Brazilian government to take urgent action to protect the tribe.

The Awá are one of only two nomadic hunter-gathering tribes left in the Amazon. According to Survival, they are now the world's most threatened tribe, assailed by gunmen, loggers and hostile settler farmers.

Their troubles began in earnest in 1982 when a rail line was built to carry iron ore deposits from near by Carajás mountains funded by World Bank.

It, according to Survival's research director, Fiona Watson, proved a recipe for disaster.



Awa tribesmen in their natural habitat.

Romney closes gap with Obama

AFP, Washington

He has been mocked as rich and out of touch, struggled to woo his own party and left a trail of gaffes -- but Mitt Romney still has a genuine shot to make Barack Obama a one-term president.

A cascade of new polls, uncertain economic data and fresh concern that Europe's woes could cross the Atlantic, point to the Republican's best chance of beating Obama in November -- dismay about America's slow economic recovery.

Though Obama is ahead by a nose despite the slowest recovery in decades, the president has little breathing room should the economy slow this year, as it did in 2010 and 2011.

Voters seem to like Obama more and believe he cares more about the middle classes, according to early polls ahead of the November 6 election.

So, should the rebound maintain a pace that has created around million



Mitt Romney Barack Obama

jobs over five months, and if Obama navigates sudden crises at home and abroad, he looks well placed with his approval rating approaching 50 percent.

Yet polls suggest voters are not yet feeling the economic recovery, or Obama's strategy to create jobs -- giving Romney a fungible, yet genuine opening.

Major polls now show the Romney and Obama matchup largely within the margin of error.

In a Wall Street Journal/NBC poll this week, Obama led Romney by 49 percent to 43 percent. The New York Times/CBS survey had them pegged at 46 percent and a Quinnipiac University poll had the president up 46 to 42 per-

cent. "I think if the election were held today it could go either way," said Bruce Buchanan, a professor of government at the University of Texas.

Polls suggest Romney has started to unite his party after a divisive primary fight and reveal America is still a nation split down the political middle.

"This is going to be a very very close election. We are not going to win it 54 to 46 (percent) -- it is going to be very close," said a senior White House official.

However Romney has plenty to worry about too.

Though he leads Obama among white voters, he trails badly among the vital voting blocs of women and Hispanics -- by margins that guarantee a loss if he cannot close the gap.

And if unemployment ticks down from the current 8.2 percent, Obama's advantages elsewhere may be decisive.

And Romney must also conquer conventional wisdom, which doubts his skills as a candidate and chances of victory -- a feeling that the superior Obama campaign will surely exploit.

Iran says copying US drone, reveals 'codes'

AFP, Tehran

An Iranian military commander yesterday said the Islamic republic is building a copy of a US spy drone captured in December 2011 and revealed what he said were "codes" gleaned from unmanned aircraft.

"I am giving you four codes so the Americans understand just how far we have gone in penetrating the drone's secrets," General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the head of the Revolutionary Guards' aerospace division, told state television.

The unmanned, bat-winged RQ-170 went down in Iran four months ago, and Iran's gleeful military proudly displayed it on state television apparently intact, though with what appeared to be damage to one of its wings.

Iran claimed one of its cyberwarfare team hacked its controls by confusing its GPS guidance system, and said it would reverse-engineer the drone to make its own.

US officials admitted they lost the drone on a CIA mission over Iran, but asserted the stealth aircraft came down because of a technical problem, not Iranian intervention.

While US President Barack Obama made a vain request for Iran to return the drone, his defence secretary, Leon Panetta, voiced scepticism over how much technological knowledge Tehran could gain from the aircraft.