

Egypt votes for Mubarak's successor

AFP, Cairo

Egyptians were voting yesterday in historic presidential elections contested by Islamists and secularists promising different futures for the country after the overthrow of veteran dictator Hosni Mubarak.

Queues formed outside polling stations long before they opened at 08:00am, with voters in a festive mood.

"It's a beautiful day for Egypt," said Nehmedo Abdel Hadi, who was voting at the Omar Markram school in Cairo's Shubra neighbourhood.

"Now I feel this is my country and I have dignity," said the 46-year-old woman, who wears a full-face veil.

Across the city, in the leafy Mohandesseen neighbourhood, Rania, wearing gym clothes and a ponytail under her baseball cap, was at the front of the line.

"It's the first time in Egypt's history we choose our president," she said, preferring to keep her choice "a secret between me and my ballot box."

More than 50 million eligible voters have been called to choose one of 12 candidates wrestling to succeed ousted president Hosni Mubarak.

Voting over two days is taking place at 13,000 polling stations, with initial results



PHOTO: AFP

An Egyptian woman shows her ink-stained finger after casting her ballot yesterday.

expected on Sunday. Voting ends at 8:00pm on both days.

A senior interior ministry official said police were on standby across the country and helping soldiers secure polling stations.

The election marks the final phase of a tumultuous transition overseen by the ruling military council after Mubarak was

ousted in a popular uprising last year.

After decades of pre-determined results, for the first time, the outcome of the vote in the Arab world's most populous nation -- which also pits revolutionaries against old regime members -- is wide open.

According to pollsters, the large number of voters undecided between candidates

reflecting radically different trends and the novelty of a free presidential vote make yesterday's election almost impossible to call.

Among the leading contenders is former foreign minister and Arab League chief Amr Mussa, who is seen as an experienced politician and diplomat but like Ahmed Shafiq, Mubarak's last prime minister, is accused of belonging to the old regime.

The powerful Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohammed Mursi faces competition from Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh, a former member of the Islamist movement who portrays himself as a consensus choice with a wide range of support.

The next president will inherit a struggling economy, deteriorating security and the challenge of uniting a nation divided by the uprising and its sometimes deadly aftermath, but his powers are yet to be defined by a new constitution.

The ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), in power since Mubarak's ouster, urged Egyptians to turn out en masse to the polls, while warning against any "violation."

The SCAF has vowed to hand power to civilian rule by the end of June, after a president is elected, but many fear its retreat will be just an illusion.

Climate talks at risk of floundering: EU

AFP, Bonn

Europe yesterday warned at climate talks in Bonn that efforts to forge a new global pact to avert environmental disaster were in danger of floundering, and some pointed fingers at China.

Nine days into talks meant to set the stage for a United Nations gathering in Qatar in December, where countries must adopt an amendment to the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, negotiators complained that procedural bickering was quashing progress hopes.

With only two days left in this negotiating round, the parties have failed to appoint a chairperson or agree on an agenda for a newly established body dubbed the ADP tasked with overseeing the drafting of a new pact by 2015.

"If this slow pace of negotiations continues... it poses the risk of unraveling the Durban package," Danish chief negotiator Christian Pilgaard Zinglensen warned on behalf of the Council of the European Union.

He was referring to an agreement reached in South Africa last year to bind all countries under a new pact from 2020 to curbing Earth-warming greenhouse gas emissions, not just developing nations as is the case now.

As countries bicker, researchers recently predicted Earth's temperature rising by as much as five degrees Celsius (9.0 degrees Fahrenheit) from pre-industrial levels, instead of the 2 C (3.6 F) limit being targeted.

While rich nations bear most of the historical responsibility for global warming, their place is being taken by emerging giants such as China, India and Brazil who emit massive amounts of carbon as they strive to rise out of poverty.

UNSC 'unfit for purpose'

AFP, London

The UN Security Council has failed to match the courage shown by protesters around the world and is increasingly "unfit for purpose," Amnesty International said in its annual report today.

The rights group called for the signing of a strong treaty on the global arms trade when the United Nations meets on the issue in July, saying it would be an acid test for world leaders to place rights over profits.

Amnesty highlighted the failure to end the bloodshed in Syria and said repeated vetoes by major arms exporters Russia and China had left the UN's top security body "looking redundant as a guardian of global peace."

The report also singled out emerging powers India, Brazil and South Africa, saying they were "complicit through their silence" on key rights issues.

Amnesty's Secretary General Salil Shetty said that in the 21st century the UN Security Council was "simply not fit for purpose. If they do not change the way in which they behave, I think there are going to be increasing questions about the relevance of the body."

In its 50th annual report, Amnesty said the vocal support by many global powers in the early months of the Arab Spring in 2011 had not translated into action, with many international leaders now looking the other way.

In Syria the group said there was a "clear and compelling case" for alleged crimes against humanity by Bashar Al-Assad's regime to be referred to the International Criminal Court.

"The determination of some UN Security Council mem-



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

bers to shield Syria at any cost leaves accountability for these crimes elusive and is a betrayal of the Syrian people," said Shetty.

Amnesty said it was the conference on a global treaty limiting the arms trade in July that would really show whether UN member states were willing to take on serious challenges.

The conference is set for July 2-27 in New York. It follows an agreement in 2009 by most of the world's major weapons exporters, including the United States, to seek a treaty that strengthens controls on the trade.

"Without a strong treaty, the UN Security Council's guardianship of global peace and security seems doomed to failure; its permanent members wielding an absolute veto on any resolution despite being the world's largest arms suppliers," said the report.

The UN General Assembly passed a resolution in 2006 calling for such a treaty, but the United States, the world's biggest exporter of weaponry, voted against it, the only country to do so.

The report also focused on other areas, including:

- China, which Amnesty said had thrown the "full weight" of its security apparatus into suffocating protests.
- Russia, where civic activism grew amid the biggest protests since the Soviet Union, but opposition voices were "abused and systematically undermined."
- Myanmar, where the government allowed Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi to stand in elections and freed hundreds of political prisoners, although fighting with ethnic groups and fresh detentions showed "limits to the reform".

Yemen faces 'catastrophic' food crisis

BBC ONLINE

Instability in Yemen has left the country facing a hunger catastrophe, with nearly half of people without enough food, aid groups have warned.

In a joint warning, a group of seven charities said 10 million Yemenis - 44% of the population - are undernourished, with 5 million requiring emergency aid.

Yemen has been shaken by pro-democracy protests, communal unrest in the north, and an Islamist conflict in the south.

The warning comes a day before an international conference on Yemen.

In their warning, the aid agencies - CARE, International Medical Corps, Islamic Relief, Merlin, Mercy Corps, Oxfam and Save the Children - say this focus is preventing action to alleviate poverty and hunger.

Obama, Romney tied in presidential race

Romney wins two more primaries

AGENCIES

Americans are split between President Barack Obama and his Republican challenger Mitt Romney less than six months before the presidential poll in November, according to two new polls.

A Washington Post/ABC News survey released Tuesday showed the two candidates statistically tied with 49 percent of Americans backing Obama and 46 percent supporting Romney.

When asked which contender would best handle the economy, Obama and Romney were tied at 47 percent.

A NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll released also showed that voters are nearly evenly split between Obama (47 percent) and Romney (43 percent).



Barack Obama



Mitt Romney

Meanwhile, Republican Mitt Romney won primary votes Tuesday in the southern states of Alabama and Kentucky, bringing him within arm's reach of scoring the delegates needed for his party's formal White House nomi-

nation.

The Republican nomination race has been largely academic for months since the other main candidates have dropped out, and Romney is the party's nominee in all but name.

A total of 75 delegates were at stake in the primaries.

Romney is likely to reach the magic number of 1,144 delegates to formally clinch the party nomination when Texas voters cast primary ballots on May 29.

EU SUMMIT

Merkel challenged over EU growth

AFP, Brussels

France and Germany opened an EU summit yesterday on a collision course over how to spur growth in the debt-stricken eurozone, as markets plunged and the euro hit a near two-year low.

"We have to act straight away for growth... otherwise there will still be doubt on the markets," new French President Francois Hollande insisted amid deepening worries over Greece's eurozone future and Spain's troubled banks.

"We have no time to waste," the freshly-elected Socialist leader stressed on arrival for his first EU summit after a cost-conscious train ride from Paris.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel faced mounting pressure to give ground on her hardline austerity doctrine as the European single currency fell to \$1.2564 and London, Frankfurt



Merkel talks with Hollande yesterday

and Paris stock exchanges each shed well over two percent.

But she rejected a call by Hollande for eurobonds -- jointly pooled eurozone debt -- which the French leader considers a potential solution to the crisis.

Non-euro Britain was also shaping as a force to be reckoned with, blocking other core ideas put forward by European Union officials and backed by Hollande -- including a tax on financial transactions.

London vehemently rejects the tax, home as it is to three quarters of Europe's financial services industry.

After Germany's central bank said the picture in Athens ahead of June 17 elections was "highly alarming," leaders were expected to warn Greek voters that Athens must honour a 237-billion-euro (\$300 billion) bailout deal agreed in March.

Contingency planning that diplomats called "commonsense" stems from arguably even greater worries about Spain and Italy, after a report by Fitch Rating agency showed foreign investors had fled Spanish and Italian debt in huge numbers.

Yesterday's talks were not intended to deliver concrete decisions, but were set to endorse a trial for EU "project bonds" to attract long-term private investment for Europe's incomplete energy, transport and digital networks.

Nishat starts

FROM PAGE 20

packing our baggage. We expect to reach Kathmandu on Monday and Dhaka on June 1 or 2," said Nishat, the first Bangladeshi woman to reach the highest summit of the world.

Asked about their physical condition, Mohit said, "We are fine; but feeling very sick due to continuous hard work in the last few days."

"We went through a huge hardship. Now we are taking rest to be fit for further trekking," said Mohit, the first Bangladeshi to scale up the mountain twice.

Meanwhile, the second Bangladeshi woman mountaineer, Wasfia Nazreen, was climbing towards the summit having left from the base camp in the early hours of

Monday.

Wasfia expects to reach the summit sometime on Friday morning, according to her last Facebook update posted on Sunday.

Nishat and Mohit said they met Wasfia on May 9 for the last time in Khambhu Bazar area on way to the summit.

"Usually the climbers push for summit following the weather forecast. I have come to know that she (Nazreen) will reach summit on May 25. As far as I know, weather will remain favourable on that day," said Nishat last evening.

Thirty-one-year-old Nishat from Laxmipur scaled the Everest on May 19. Musa Ibrahim was the first Bangladeshi to conquer Everest on May 23, 2010.

Aussie tycoon world's richest woman

AFP, Sydney

Australia's richest person Gina Rinehart has eclipsed Wal-Mart heiress Christy Walton to become the world's wealthiest woman, according to an annual index by Business Review Weekly.

A preview of the respected BRW Rich 200 list, published Wednesday, put the mining tycoon's personal fortune at Aus\$29.17 billion (US\$28.48 billion), a figure that sees her outstrip Walton for the first time.

In March, Forbes placed Walton and her family's net worth at US\$25.3 billion, while Rinehart's fortune stood at US\$18 billion.

BRW rich list editor Andrew Heathcote said mining magnate Rinehart had almost tripled her wealth in 12 months as commodity prices rose and she pulled off two deals in iron ore and coal.

"The Aus\$18.87 billion increase in her wealth is unparalleled. It is a product of foreign investment in new projects, increased production and a recovery in the iron ore price over the past six months," said Heathcote.

Rinehart, 58, heiress to an iron ore prospecting empire built in Australia's resources-rich west, is a controversial figure who stridently campaigned against new mining taxes and recently bought up big in the media sector.



Gina Rinehart

Iran, world powers seek breakthrough in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

World powers pressing Iran to scale back its nuclear programme yesterday offered a new batch of incentives that fell short of the sanctions relief sought by Tehran, which made a counter-proposal.

A spokesman for EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, the lead negotiator for the P5+1 -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States plus Germany -- said the proposals made at a meeting in Baghdad were "of interest to Iran."

The talks, which follow a preliminary first gathering in 15 months in Istanbul in mid-April, was expected to go into a second, unscheduled day today, an official with the Iranian delegation said.

Ashton's spokesman gave no details but media reports said they included a revival of previous attempts at a deal whereby Iran would ship abroad its stockpiles of enriched uranium in return for fuel for a reactor producing

medical isotopes.

The Iranian official, however, noted: "A possible swap of uranium enriched by Iran for fuel isn't very interesting for us because we are already producing our own fuel."

Other incentives reportedly included easing Iranian access to aircraft parts and a possible suspension of an EU insurance ban on ships carrying Iranian oil.

NUCLEAR TALKS

But beyond a pledge not to impose any more, the package made no mention of easing the barrage of sanctions that have been piled on Iran -- with more to come in July -- over suspicions the country wants nuclear weapons.

Iranian state media ran reports slamming the P5+1 package, with the IRNA news agency calling it "outdated, not comprehensive, and unbalanced."

NEWS IN brief

Chan re-elected as WHO chief

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organisation yesterday re-appointed Margaret Chan as its chief, who declared universal health care as her top priority.

Chan was re-elected to head the agency for five more years at a meeting of the World Health Assembly, the WHO's decision-making body, in Geneva.

It is the second consecutive term for the former Hong Kong health chief who has headed the United Nations body since November 2006 and was the sole candidate nominated ahead of Wednesday's election.

Chan, who the WHO said received the backing of 88 percent of members who voted, said she would focus on noncommunicable diseases, mental health and improving the WHO's performance through reform.



Margaret Chan

Chemical castration for sex offender

AFP, Seoul

South Korea will this week chemically castrate a man repeatedly convicted of sexually assaulting children in the country's first use of the punishment, an official said yesterday.

The 45-year-old surnamed Park is due to be released from prison in July after serving a 10-year sentence for the attempted rape of a 10-year-old girl.

He will be given an injection every three months for the next three years to reduce his sexual urges by manipulating his hormones "whether he likes it or not", justice ministry official Kim Hyung-Yul told AFP.

Park previously served three prison terms for sexually attacking girls under the age of 16 in 1984, 1991 and 1998.

Japan radiation acceptable: WHO

AFP, Geneva

Radiation affecting residents in Japan's Fukushima prefecture since the nuclear plant disaster is below the reference level for public exposure in all but two areas, the World Health Organization said yesterday.

The WHO said that in the rest of the world the estimated 0.01 mSv dose received during the year following the March 11, 2011 disaster were below, and often far below, what is considered "very small".

The report compiled by experts and based on data available up to September last year also said radiation doses received beyond the first year are likely to be lower than that after the 1986 Chernobyl catastrophe.

Environmental data showed a greater influence of a shorter-lived radionuclide than longer-lasting ones, the report said.