

Libyans vote in first post-Gaddafi poll

Good turn out amid reports of sabotage, violence in the east

REUTERS, Tripoli

Crowds of joyful Libyans, some with tears in their eyes, parted with the legacy of Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorship yesterday as they voted in the first free national election in 60 years.

But in the eastern city of Benghazi, cradle of last year's uprising but where many now want more autonomy from the interim government in Tripoli, protesters stormed a handful of polling stations and publicly burned hundreds of ballot papers.

Authorities also reported a case of gunmen preventing voters from entering polling stations in the eastern oil port town of Ras Lanuf, but said 94 percent of polling stations around the North African country were up and running normally.

Libyans are choosing a 200-member assembly which will elect a prime minister and cabinet before laying the ground for full parliamentary elections next year



Libyan protesters gather around burnt ballot boxes and electoral material outside a polling station in Benghazi yesterday.

under a new constitution.

Candidates with Islamic agendas dominate the field of more than 3,700 hopefuls, suggesting Libya will be the next Arab Spring country - after Egypt and Tunisia - to see religious parties secure a grip on power.

In Benghazi, protesters

stormed a polling station just after voting started and set fire to hundreds of ballot slips in a public square in a bid to undermine the election's credibility.

Witnesses said at least four polling stations had been hit in such attacks. One man was shot in the arm and taken to hospital with

heavy bleeding after a stand-off between vote boycotters and those in favour of the elections.

Nuri al-Abbar, chairman of the electoral commission, said acts of sabotage, mostly in the east, prevented 101 polling stations from opening.

Yet in the capital Tripoli, voting was smooth.

"I am a Libyan citizen in free Libya," said Mahmud Mohammed Al-Bizanti. "I came today to be able to vote in a democratic way. Today is like a wedding for us."

Polls close at 8:00pm (but meaningful partial results are not due until today and a full preliminary count is not expected until Monday at the earliest.)

On the eve of the vote, interim Prime Minister Abdurrahim El-Keib urged Libyans to turn out en masse to counter those who argue the new assembly will not reflect the will of the country.

Many easterners, whose region is home to the bulk of Libya's oil sector, are angry that the east has been

allotted only 60 seats in the assembly compared with 102 for the west.

The make-up of the congress has been a matter of heated debate, with factions such as the federalist movement calling for more seats.

The outgoing National Transitional Council (NTC) says seats were distributed according to demographics, with 100 going to the west, 60 to the east and 40 to the south.

But factions in the east want an equal split and had threatened to sabotage the vote if this demand is not met.

Libya has not seen elections since the era of the late King Idris, whom Gaddafi deposed in a bloodless coup in 1969.

Also causing concern was the southern area of Kufra in the Sahara desert, where tribal clashes were so fierce that election observers were unable to visit, and there were reports of delays to voting in some places.

Flood disasters kill 103 in Russia

AFP, Moscow

Severe flash floods and a landslide in Russia's southern Krasnodar region have killed at least 103 people and affected nearly 13,000 in the area's worst natural disaster in decades, officials yesterday said.

President Vladimir Putin was expected to personally inspect the worst-hit areas as officials feared the death toll could go up even further.

"He will be there soon," spokesman Dmitry Peskov told AFP. Residents were caught completely by surprise by the force of the waters, which ripped up paving and traffic lights, flooded the ground floors of houses, railways and roads, witnesses and officials said.

One woman reportedly had to spend a night up a tree before being rescued from the floods caused by what officials said were exceptionally heavy rainstorms.

In the district of Krymsk, an area worst hit by the disaster, officials had already discovered 92 bodies including that of a 10-year-old, a police spokesman told AFP.

The town of Krymsk is located around 200 kilometers northwest of the Black Sea resort town of Sochi where Russia is gearing up to host the Winter Olympic Games in 2014.

Officials have not been able to explain the large number of deaths, except by saying that the water swelled in the local Bakanka river and the disaster struck while Krymsk residents were asleep.

"Everything happened at night and very quickly," the regional administration said in a statement.

Annan admits Syria failure

Violence spills border; 60 killed

AFP, Damascus

International envoy Kofi Annan acknowledged the failure so far of his mission to bring peace to Syria, as more than 60 people were killed in violence yesterday that also spilled over into Lebanon.

In comments published in French by the Le Monde newspaper, Annan was quoted as saying that significant efforts had been made to try to resolve the crisis peacefully and politically.

However, the plan had not been successful and perhaps there was no guarantee that it would succeed, he said.

The Annan plan, which insists on a cessation of violence by all sides, has made little headway, and activists say at least an estimated 16,500 people have now died since the uprising began in March last year.

On the ground, Syrian forces bombarded towns in the northern province of Aleppo. Raging violence claimed at least 60 lives across the country, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

In Lebanon, a teenager died when a rocket hit her house in the border region of Wadi Khaled, a Lebanese security official told AFP, adding that five others were wounded by rockets and exchanges of gunfire.



Kofi Annan

Tax billionaires to help poor: UN

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations on Thursday called for a tax on billionaires to help raise more than \$400 billion a year for poor countries.

An annual lump sum payment by the super-rich is one of a host of measures including a tax on carbon dioxide emissions, currency exchanges or financial transactions proposed in a UN report that accuses wealthy nations of breaking promises to step up aid for the less fortunate.

The annual World Economic and Social Survey says it is critical to find new ways to help the world's poor as pledged cash fails to flow.

The report estimates that the number of people around the globe worth at least \$1 billion rose to 1,226 in 2012.

There are an estimated 425 billionaires in the United States, 315 in the Asia-Pacific region, 310 in Europe, 90 in other North and South American countries and 86 in Africa and the Middle East.

Together they own an estimated \$4.6 trillion so a one percent tax on their wealth would raise more than \$46 billion, according to the report.

But the UN acknowledged that the idea is unlikely to get widespread support from the target group, saying that for now its tax on the unimaginably wealthy remains "an intriguing possibility."

Without commenting on any of the individual taxes proposed, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said that if the new "innovative financing" is to become viable, "strong international agreement is needed."

India floods kill 121, displace 6m

AFP, Guwahati

The death toll from heavy monsoon rains which have caused massive flooding in India's northeast has risen to more than 120, with six million forced to flee their homes, officials said yesterday.

The weather office forecast that more rains during the next 24 hours would lash the region, which is suffering from its worst flooding in recent years.

Assam state has been hardest hit by the annual rains, while flooding has also struck the nearby states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Meghalaya.

An estimated six million people have been forced to leave their homes to escape the floodwaters and find

Garcia Marquez 'suffering from dementia'

BBC ONLINE

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the Colombian writer and winner of the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature, is suffering from dementia, said his brother.

Jaime Garcia Marquez told students at a lecture in the city of Cartagena that his brother, who is 85, phones him frequently to ask basic questions.

"He has problems with his memory. Sometimes I cry because I feel like I'm losing him," he said.

He says the author has stopped writing altogether.

The BBC's Arturo Wallace in Colombia said there have been rumours about Garcia Marquez' memory problems.

Jaime Garcia Marquez, his younger brother, is the first family member to speak publicly about it.

Invited to talk about his relationship with Gabo, as the writer is affectionately known in



Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Colombia, Jaime said he could not hold back from talking about his illness anymore.

"He is doing well physically, but he has been suffering from dementia for a long time," he said. "He still has the humour, joy and enthusiasm that he has always had."

The 1967 masterpiece of magic realism, One Hundred Years of Solitude, begins with the story of a family unable to care for their senile grandfather.

"It is a disease that runs in the family," said Jaime Garcia Marquez.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez currently lives in Mexico and has not made many public appearances in recent years.

His novels include Love in the Time of Cholera, Chronicle of a Death Foretold and The General in His Labyrinth.

He is best known for One Hundred Years of Solitude, which has sold more than 30 million copies and been translated into



PHOTO: REUTERS

A runner is lifted by his scarf onto the horns of a fighting bull on the first day of the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain yesterday. The seven-day festival is a symbol of Spanish culture that attracts thousands of tourists to watch the bull runs despite heavy condemnation from animal rights groups.

Iran threatens to shut Hormuz

US navy deploys 'floating base' to Gulf

AFP, Tehran

Iran has plans to close the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the oil-rich Gulf but only if its interests are seriously threatened, its top military commander said in remarks reported yesterday.

"We have plans to close the Strait of Hormuz because military commanders must have plans for any situation," Iran's armed forces chief of staff, General Hassan Firouzabadi, said late on Friday according to ISNA news agency.

"But Iran, acting rationally, will not close the corridor through which 40 per cent of the world's energy passes, unless its interests are in serious trou-

ble," he said.

Several commanders and officials have vowed that Iran reserves as an option closing the strait -- a strategic oil choke point -- if its nuclear programme is targeted by military strikes.

Meanwhile, US navy on Friday deployed a "floating base" off the coast of Bahrain to support countermeasure operations in the Gulf.

The deployment of the USS Ponce, an aging American naval ship, marks the latest in a gradual buildup of American forces in the region since tensions spiked with Iran in December over its nuclear program.

Equipped with a helicopter landing

deck and space for troops, the amphibious transport ship, in service since 1971, can support an array of missions as a "forward staging base" involving special forces, countermeasure operations or repair work for warships, officials said.

Apart from the Ponce, the Navy has deployed two aircraft carriers to the region and doubled its mine sweeper fleet in the area from four to eight ships on June 23.

Threats of closing down the strait, renewed repeatedly since December, have generated warnings from the United States which says any attempt by Iran to close the waterway is a "red line" that would trigger a US military reaction.

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Ukraine bus crash kills 14 pilgrims

REUTERS, Kiev

A bus carrying Russian pilgrims crashed in northern Ukraine yesterday morning, killing 14 people, and injuring 22, Ukrainian and Russian Emergencies Ministries said.

The bus, with 41 people on board, came off the road and rolled over near the city of Chernihiv at 5.30am local time, the Ukrainian ministry said in a statement.

Russia's Emergencies Ministry said in a separate statement the passengers were pilgrims. The ministry was sending a plane to evacuate the injured, Interfax news agency

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