

THAILAND CRISIS

Govt to go ahead with Feb 2 polls

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand's embattled government is pushing ahead with a general election on next Sunday despite warnings it could end in violence and the country left without a functioning administration for six months.

The decision to go ahead with the polls came at a meeting between Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and Election Commission officials and cast further doubt over any quick resolution to months of protests aimed at ousting the government.

The demonstrations are the latest eruption in a political conflict that has gripped Thailand for eight years, broadly pitting Bangkok's middle class and royalist establishment against the mainly poor, rural supporters of Yingluck and her brother, ousted former premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

The protesters reject the election that Yingluck's party will almost certainly win.

They want to suspend what they say is a fragile democracy commandeered by former telecoms tycoon Thaksin, whom they accuse of corruption, and eradicate the political influence of his family by altering electoral arrangements.

As part of their campaign, the protesters have been disrupting election preparations and early voting. In some constituencies, candidates have been unable to register and there might not be a quorum to open parliament and choose a government. The Election Commission said it would hold by-elections until all parliamentary seats are filled. That could take up to six months and leave Thailand



Pedestrians try to keep warm as they walk through downtown in below-zero temperature Chicago, Illinois on Monday. A rare blast of snow, sleet and ice hit the US south yesterday, prompting schools to close, airlines to cancel flights and emergency officials to warn of icy roads. The winter storm could extend from southern Louisiana and the Gulf Coast into northern Florida and through the Carolinas. Temperatures in parts of those regions could feel as cold as -34 celsius yesterday, the National Weather Service said.

PHOTO: AFP

UKRAINE TURMOIL

PM, govt resign to ease crisis

AFP, Kiev

Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and his entire government resigned yesterday in a bid to defuse Ukraine's deadly crisis, giving in to months of pressure as parliament scrapped anti-protest laws that had infuriated the opposition.

Azarov said he had taken a "personal decision" to resign to keep Ukraine together as a state, as parliament met in an emergency session to vote on reforms and amendments backed by President Viktor Yanukovich.

Parliament overwhelmingly voted to scrap anti-protest laws that sparked the current crisis when the ruling party pushed them through the Verkhovna Rada in a symbolic show-of-hands vote on January 16.

But opposition leaders said they would continue to harness street power to wring even more gains from Yanukovich.

"We have to change not only the government, but the rules of the game as well," declared boxer-turned-politician Vitaly Klitschko. "We are sure the struggle will continue," he said.

The dramatic twists in Ukraine's two months of turmoil came as Russian President Vladimir Putin met with EU chiefs at a summit in Brussels expected to be dominated by the turmoil.

The European Union and United States cranked up pressure on Yanukovich to impose serious reforms to end a standoff that has turned parts of Kiev into a war zone patrolled by masked protesters and that has left three activists dead.

In a morning announcement that took the opposition by surprise, Azarov yielded to months of pressure from the opposition who made his resignation a key demand of protests based in Independence Square in Kiev.

Ex-leader Morsi back on trial

Police general shot dead

AFP, Cairo

Former president Mohamed Morsi went on trial Tuesday on charges of breaking out of prison, a day after Egypt's military endorsed the army chief who deposed him as a presidential candidate.

With tensions linked to the trial running high, gunmen shot dead a police general as he left his home in a west Cairo neighbourhood, the latest in a wave of attacks on security officials.

Morsi, ousted by the army in July, is already on trial for inciting the killings of opposition activists during his presidency and faces two other trials that have yet to begin.

Television showed Morsi, dressed in a white prison uniform, gesticulating angrily at the court, both arms raised. "Who are you," he demanded to know, adding "do you know who I am?"

In response, a judge said "I am the president of the Cairo Criminal Court."

Another 21 defendants were in the dock with him, among them the supreme guide of his now-banned Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Badie. Morsi also faces charges of espionage involving Hamas, with that trial due to open on February 16, and for insulting the judiciary, for which a date has yet to be set. The Islamist leader was deposed following

Back to square one

Army returns to politics as it backs Sisi for president

AFP, Cairo

Three years after a popular uprising forced out ex-general Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's army is again pushing a commander to stand for president after he ousted the first civilian head of state.

On Monday, the army endorsed its Field Marshall Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's candidacy for an election he is expected to win amid a strong nationalist fervour since he overthrew president Mohamed Morsi.

In just over six months, Sisi has managed to win accolades from a vast section of Egyptians for leading the ouster of Morsi and crushing the Muslim Brotherhood movement to which the Islamist belongs.

Morsi was toppled after one turbulent year in office following mass street protests amid allegations of grabbing power and ruining an already deteriorating economy.

Announcing its backing for Sisi, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces said that "the people's trust in Sisi is a call that must be heeded as the free choice of the

EGYPT CRISIS



people".

Sisi is soon expected to resign as army chief and announce his candidacy in a presidential election scheduled to be held by mid-April.

A victory for the 59-year-old would keep alive a tradition of Egyptian presidents being drawn from the armed forces.

Mubarak and all of his predecessors came from the military, starting with the charismatic colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled Egypt between 1954 and 1970. And after Mubarak's ouster, it was Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi who ruled Egypt until the election of Morsi in June 2012. But Tantawi's tenure was marred by deadly street protests before Morsi was elected.

To Sisi's supporters, he is the best option for ending three years of political instability following the 2011 uprising that ended Mubarak's reign.

And to his critics and experts it is the military's decades-old iron grip on Egypt that has once again brought an army man to the forefront after civilian leaders blew their shot at power.

Pakistan ready to 'smash Taliban'

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Pakistan is being put on a "war footing" to counter a surge in terrorism, according to a senior leader in the ruling party who promised military strikes against the Taliban and brushed aside human rights fears about draconian new anti-terror laws.

Rana Sanaullah, the law minister of Punjab and one of the prime minister's closest confidants, told the Guardian the time had finally come to "smash" militant safe havens.

A spike in Taliban-led violence has prompted a dramatic rethink in policy from a government long determined to avoid a confrontation with the country's militant groups.

Expectations are growing of a long-delayed military push against al-Qaeda-linked groups operating from North Waziristan, a semi-autonomous tribal area on the Afghan border. In a meeting on Monday evening of assembly members of the governing Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), a majority voted to support a military operation against militants.

"Without eliminating terrorism and extremism we cannot place Pakistan on fast track of development," the prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, told the gathering of parliamentarians.

The government has not announced exactly what it plans to do, leading some sceptics to doubt their resolve. Sanaullah said a decision had been made to launch military operations but the army would be left to decide exactly what

NEWSIN

brief

Mladic slams satanic UN court

CNN ONLINE

Former Bosnian Serb army chief Ratko Mladic refused to testify yesterday at the trial of former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic in the Netherlands and denounced the UN-backed court as "satanic." Both men are on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for their role in the conflict that followed the breakup of the former Yugoslavia two decades ago. Both Mladic and Karadzic are accused of genocide, crimes against human-

45 killed in Nigeria market attack

CNN ONLINE

Suspected Boko Haram militants opened fire on a village market and burned homes in the northeastern Nigerian state of Borno, killing at least 45 people and injuring 26 others, the state's police commissioner said.

The gunmen arrived in the village of Kawuri in all-terrain vehicles, shot people at the market late Sunday while traders were closing shop for the day, and burned a number of thatched homes, Borno state

Israeli PM under fire over son's affair

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Benjamin Netanyahu has been criticised by right-wing politicians in Israel who have accused the country's prime minister of failing to set an example for the Jewish people by not preventing his son from dating a non-Jewish girl.

Yair Netanyahu, a 23-year-old student, is thought to be dating a Norwegian woman after the pair met at the prestigious Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel, which they both attend. Judaism is traditionally seen as matrilineal, with a child's religion determined by that of its mother. Mr Netanyahu has not escaped

Gay sex ban: Indian SC won't review

AFP, New Delhi

India's top court yesterday rejected a plea filed by the government and activist groups to review its shock ruling which reinstated a colonial-era ban on gay sex. A Supreme Court bench dismissed petitions filed by the government and rights groups against a verdict last month that re-criminalised gay sex and made it an offence punishable by up to life imprisonment.



Valerie Trierweiler, the ex-partner of French President Francois Hollande, interacts with health workers and children during a visit a slum in Mumbai, yesterday. After losing her title as France's first lady, she has begun forging a new role as a goodwill ambassador, with her glamour guaranteeing her maximum publicity on a charity trip to India.

Rahul blames Modi for Gujarat riots

TNN, New Delhi

Rahul Gandhi, the scion of India's first political family, has said he is not driven by the desire for power and that the multiple tragedies suffered by his dynasty have hardened him to personal loss. He also accused Narendra Modi, opposition's prime ministerial candidate, of fanning riots in Gujarat in 2002.

Rahul is widely seen as a likely prime minister if the Congress party pulls off an unlikely victory at tough national polls due within months.

"[I am] battle-ready, of course. We're going to win," Gandhi told Arnab Goswami, the editor in chief of the local Times Now channel in a rare interview broadcast on Monday evening.

Rahul has drawn a distinction between the 2002 Gujarat riots and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots on the grounds that while the violence in Gujarat was aided and abetted by the Narendra Modi state government, in the 1984 riots the government tried to stop the violence.

Covering considerable ground in a detailed, freewheeling interview with Times Now, Rahul indicated his role in Congress's decision to support the Aam Admi Party. He appreciated AAP's ability to connect with people, saying, "I think you reached out to people in a particular way that was good, there are things that I don't think we should take away from them."

However, he vehemently denied that Congress was propping up AAP to check BJP, saying, "I think you underestimate the power of the Congress party, I don't think the Congress party could even do that if they wanted to", adding sharply, "I think questions about whether we have supported AAP or not supported AAP, frankly it is a ridiculous notion."



SYRIA CRISIS

Geneva talks hit snag

AFP, Geneva, Washington

Syria's warring sides would not meet at peace talks in Geneva a second time yesterday, the UN said, after a morning session broke up with the regime accusing Washington of "arming terrorists".

After announcing the start of a morning session around 11:00am, the UN said in a terse statement later that "no meeting has been planned for this afternoon".

Meanwhile, a specially-equipped US naval ship departed for Italy on Monday on a ground-breaking mission to destroy Syria's most dangerous chemical agents, Pentagon officials said. The ship is due to arrive in the southern port of Gioia Tauro in about "two to three weeks," sources said.

Folk song legend Pete Seeger dies aged 94

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Pete Seeger, the American troubadour, folk music singer and activist, has died at a hospital in New York. He was 94.

His death was confirmed by his grandson, Kitama Cahill-Jackson, who said that the singer died on Monday night after six days in hospital.

Born in New York City into an artistic family, his mother, Constance, played violin and his father, Charles, a musicologist, was a consultant to the Resettlement Administration.

He first gained fame as a member of the Weavers in 1948, and the quartet went on to have hits with their versions of songs including Goodnight Irene. Later in the 1960s folk revival he performed with Bob Dylan and, more recently, with Bruce Springsteen. He performed and recorded for six decades and was still an activist: as recently as October 2011, he marched in New York City as part of the Occupy Wall Street protests; and he wrote to Russian president Vladimir Putin requesting the release of Captain Peter Willcox and the Arctic 30 in November 2013.

In the McCarthyite political climate of the 1950s, his leftist views got him blacklisted and he was kept off commercial television for over a decade.



ODDLY enough

Humans can smell sickness in others

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A team of researchers at the Karolinska Institutet, in Sweden, say there is anecdotal and scientific evidence to suggest that diseases have particular odours and human being can sense that. For example, Scrofula, an infection of the lymph nodes, reportedly smells like stale beer, and a person who suffers from diabetes will sometimes have acetone-smelling breath.

The team, led by Professor Mats J Olsson, said being able to detect these smells could represent a critical adaptation to help humans avoid potentially dangerous illnesses.

Europeans got fair skin only 7,000 yrs ago

IANS, London

Debunking the theory that lighter skin gradually arose in Europeans nearly 40,000 years ago, new research has revealed that it evolved much recently — only 7,000 years ago.

"The findings also hint that light skin evolved not to adjust to the lower-light conditions in Europe as compared to Africa, but instead to the new diet that emerged after the agricultural revolution," said Carles Lalueza-Fox, a paleogenomics researcher at the