

Thailand in freefall after PM's ouster

Yingluck faces politics ban; protesters to 'appoint new govt'

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's deposed premier Yingluck Shinawatra faces a possible five-year ban from politics after anti-graft officials ruled yesterday that she should face impeachment proceedings, a move sure to further enrage her supporters.

But the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) said it would not extend its probe into a costly rice subsidy scheme to the rest of the caretaker cabinet as feared by officials of the battered ruling party.

That could have seen the cabinet ousted and sent the kingdom spinning into a deeper political crisis.

"The commission considers there is enough evidence to indict (Yingluck) and refers (the case) to the Senate," Panthep Klanarongran, chief of the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) told reporters.

If found guilty by the upper house Yingluck could face a five-year ban from politics.

The NACC said it is still considering whether Yingluck should face criminal charges, which could see her given a jail term.

Her billionaire elder brother Thaksin Shinawatra, lives overseas to avoid a prison sentence for corruption that he contends was politically motivated in the wake of his ousting by an army coup in 2006.

Thailand remains stuck in a political quagmire with the ailing government staggering on despite a slew of legal challenges and protests on Bangkok's streets.

Anti-government protesters, who accuse the Shinawatras of poisoning Thailand with corruption, said they would appoint a new government today - a move that would risk further political violence.

The protesters are known for their hyperbolic statements and it was not immediately clear what legal basis their vow was based on.

But Thai experts say the Thai constitution has an



article that may enable the appointment of a new executive body by the Senate.

The appointment of a new premier by the anti-government group "is the red line not to be crossed," said Thailand-based author and academic David Streckfuss.

"The Red Shirts will rise en masse," he said referring to Shinawatra supporters who are due to hold a mass rally on Saturday in a Bangkok suburb.

The NACC's decision comes a day after the Constitutional Court removed Yingluck from office for abusing her power in the 2011 transfer of a security official.

The ruling Puea Thai party swiftly appointed a deputy premier and commerce minister -- Niwattumrong Boonsongpaisan -- as Yingluck's replacement and vowed to push for new elections on July 20 to cut a path through the turmoil.

Yingluck was initially accused of negligence linked to the rice scheme, which paid farmers above market rates for their crop and became a lightning rod for anger from her political foes. They allege the scheme drained Thai finances, damaged the country's rice producing industry and fostered massive corruption -- all to shore up the Shinawatra's electoral base.

Anti-government protesters want an appointed "People's Council" to implement loosely-defined reforms aimed at eradicating Thaksin's influence on Thai politics.

At least 25 people have been killed and hundreds more wounded in political violence since they flooded Bangkok's streets and there are fears of wider clashes between pro- and anti-government supporters as the crisis snowballs.

Red Shirt chairman Jatuporn Prompan earlier accused the court and NACC of "teamwork" with the anti-government protesters in an attempt to pincer the ruling party. Warning of an imminent military coup, he urged Red Shirts to join a major rally tomorrow.



Syrian government forces hold up a portrait of President Bashar al-Assad while others raise the national flag on top of a pole in the old city of Homs yesterday, following a negotiated withdrawal of rebel fighters from the city centre where the opposition had held out under tight siege for nearly two years. The first in more than three years of conflict. The last rebels yesterday left the centre of the battleground Syrian city of Homs yesterday, handing a symbolic victory to President Bashar al-Assad ahead of a controversial election.

PHOTO: AFP

**SOUTH AFRICA POLLS
ANC rolls to victory**

AFP, Pretoria

With nearly half the votes counted in South Africa's landmark election, the ruling ANC looked certain to extend its 20-year rule yesterday, but with sizeable gains for the opposition.

Results from more than half the polling centres showed the ANC had garnered a thumping 63 percent of the popular vote, making it highly likely that President Jacob Zuma will return for a second five-year term.

ANC spokesman said the party -- which has been in power since the end of apartheid in 1994 -- expected to receive "an overwhelming mandate" from voters.

Meanwhile, a strong urban turnout appears to have significantly boosted support for the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA), whose share of the vote is currently 23 percent, up from 17 percent at the last election.

DA leader Helen Zille told AFP early yesterday that she expects the final tally to remain at 23 percent. DA support has been bolstered by successive scandals surrounding Zuma and frustration at rampant poverty and poor public services.

A record 25 million voters registered for the elections amid mounting anger over joblessness, inequality and corruption. Turnout is said to be over 70 percent, including hundreds of thousands of "born free" South Africans who were registered to vote in a gen-



Incredible 'fire tornado'

This is the moment a twisting column of fire shot into the sky after a Missouri farmer set his field alight. An amateur photographer took the picture of the rare phenomenon, which is often known as a 'fire devil', and posted it on Instagram. The tornado-like fire whirls are created when intense heat combines with strong winds to create a spinning vortex of flame.

PHOTO: INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Separatists reject Putin's call

AFP, Donetsk

Pro-Moscow rebels fighting in east Ukraine yesterday vowed to press on with disputed independence referendums, defying a call from President Vladimir Putin to postpone the vote in aid to ease tensions.

"The vote will happen on May 11," the leader of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk, Denis Pushilin, declared to reporters.

"The people's desire to hold the referendum is becoming even greater. There was a vote and a 100 percent decision was made not to change the date of the referendum," Pushilin said, to applause from members of the "republic's" ruling council.

On Sunday, people in the restive eastern region will be called to answer one simple question: "Do you support the declaration of independence by the Donetsk People's Republic?"

Insurgents in the other main rebel-held towns of Slavyansk and Lugansk also declared they would hold a plebiscite.

The move dashed hopes of an easing in the crisis sparked on Wednesday by Putin's surprise

UKRAINE CRISIS

- Rebels press ahead with referendum
- West divided over Putin's change of tact
- Russia, US lock horns at WTO over sanctions
- Moscow holds war games amid tensions

call to the rebels to postpone their referendums.

In a stunning about-face, the Kremlin strongman also backed a presidential election planned by Kiev's interim leaders on May 25 that Moscow had only recently described as "absurd".

But the Cold War-style tension was ratcheted up another notch yesterday as Russia conducted military drills, including test-firing ballistic missiles.

Russia's defence minister also warned that the country's nuclear capable forces remained on "constant combat alert".

Putin had said that Kiev must cease its military

operations in the east in return for his backing the May 25 election.

But yesterday, Kiev vowed to press forward with what it calls an "anti-terrorist" operation against insurgents holding a dozen or so towns and cities in the east.

Putin's proposals had appeared to offer the first glimmer of hope that the seemingly inexorable decline into war might be averted.

But they sparked mixed reactions from a sceptical West. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier welcomed the "constructive tone" of Putin's comments, but Yatsenyuk said the Kremlin strongman was "talking through his hat". Yatsenyuk was supported by Washington who termed the move as eyewash.

Meanwhile, Russia yesterday accused the United States of breaching the rules of global commerce by slapping sanctions on its banking sector over the Ukraine crisis, at a World Trade Organization session.

The United States hit back, saying that it took its WTO obligations seriously and had assessed its sanctions package carefully to ensure it did not

NIGERIAN SCHOOLGIRL ABDUCTION World powers join search

AFP, Abuja

Nigeria's president yesterday said that Boko Haram's mass abduction of more than 200 schoolgirls would mark a turning point in the battle against the Islamists, as world powers joined the search to rescue the hostages.

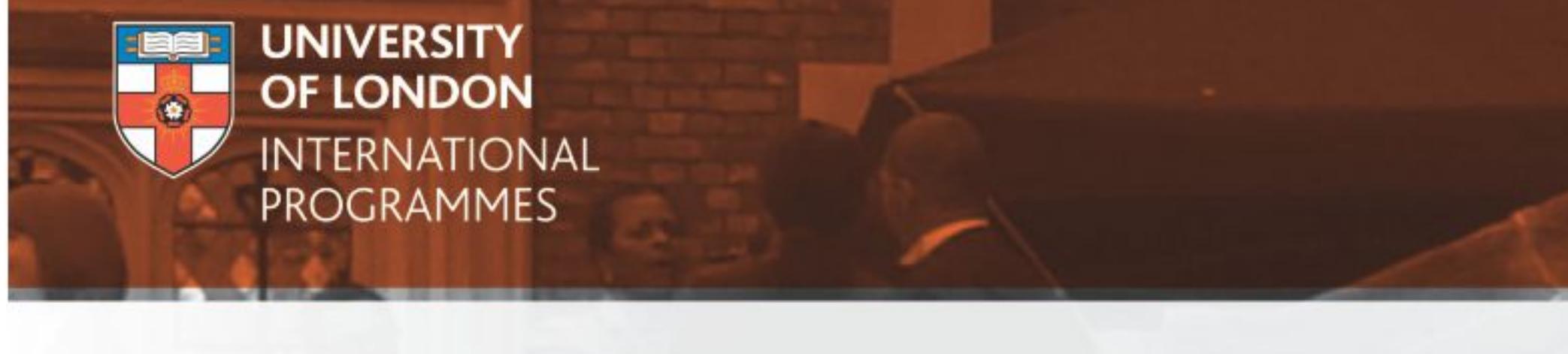
President Goodluck Jonathan's administration has struggled to contain Boko Haram's bloody five-year uprising and experts have questioned whether Nigeria can end the violence without help.

"I believe that the kidnap of these girls will be the beginning of the end of terror in Nigeria," Jonathan told delegates at the World Economic Forum, thanking Britain, China, France and the United States for their offers of help to rescue the hostages.

The four world powers have pledged varying levels of assistance to track down the girls whose April 14 mass abduction from Chibok in northeastern Borno state has sparked global outrage.

As concern grew worldwide over the fate of the 223 girls being held hostage and the rescue mission ramped up, the Islamists carried out another massacre near the northeast border with Cameroon.

Area Senator Ahmed Zanna put the death toll at 300, citing information provided by locals, in an account supported by other witnesses.



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