

Thais vote for junta charter

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand yesterday voted to approve a junta-scripted constitution, preliminary results showed, in a boost to the army's political aspirations and a body blow to the country's stuttering pro-democracy movement.

The military says its new constitution will curb endemic political corruption, bring stability after years of unrest and pave the way for a general election next year.

But critics say it aims to neuter civilian politicians and introduce a tethered democracy under the stewardship of the military and its royalist allies.

Partial results released by the Election Commission late Sunday showed 62 percent of voters had approved the charter, with 90 percent of votes counted so far.

Authorities gave a subdued turnout estimate of 55 percent of Thailand's 50.2 million registered voters, after a poll run-up that saw independent campaigning and open debate barred. Official results will be released Wednesday.

The referendum was the first time Thais have been able to go to the polls since former army chief Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha toppled the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014.

The kingdom is split after a decade of political turmoil that has damaged growth, seen democracy shunted aside and left scores dead in rival

street protests.

A triumphant junta leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha, who has struggled for two years to convince many Thais of his ability to unite the country, swiftly hailed the win as step towards "a bona fide democracy" free from graft.

In a terse message released through the prime minister's office, he also hit out at "interference by foreign elements" using "malicious intent,"



Prayut Chan-O-Cha

without naming the parties.

The most contentious clauses call for a junta-appointed senate -- including six seats reserved for military commanders -- to check elected lawmakers and increased powers for courts, which are already accused of political bias.

Another clause makes it easy to begin impeachment proceedings, while a new proportional representation voting system could pro-

duce weak coalition governments.

The preliminary results illustrated the kingdom's bitter geographic divide.

Only the impoverished, rural northeast -- a region that has voted in droves for successive Shinawatra governments turfed out by the army -- and the deep south -- hit by a Muslim insurgency -- voted against the charter.

But millions came out in favour of the military's charter, especially in the capital and the south.

Thailand has a long history of turbulence. The military has successfully seized power 12 times since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932 and this constitution will be the kingdom's 20th.

But the latest chapter in the political crisis -- dubbed the "lost decade" -- has been particularly painful. Since a 2006 coup toppled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's billionaire brother who is now in self-exile, power has flipped between elected governments linked to him and rule by the army and its establishment supporters.

Shinawatra parties have won all general elections since 2001, scooping up votes by promising greater wealth and opportunity to the nation's poor. Yesterday's marked the Shinawatras' first loss at the polls for 15 years.

Prayut had promised to hold elections in the summer of 2017, whether or not the charter was passed. But his previous election date promises have slipped.



HUNGER AS WEAPON OF WAR

50m suffer in 17 countries

AFP, Paris

While grain silos in many Western countries may overflow this winter, tens of millions of people risk going without food as hunger is being used more than ever as a weapon of war.

More than 50 million people living in 17 conflict-ridden countries are in "severe food insecurity", two UN agencies warned recently.

The protracted conflicts in Yemen and Syria place those two nations at the top of the list established by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP).

In Yemen, 14 million people -- over half the population -- are now considered to be facing a food crisis or emergency.

Meanwhile in Syria, 8.7 million people or 37 percent of the pre-conflict population, "need urgent food, nutrition and livelihoods assistance", in particular aid to farmers, said the agencies.

The same goes for parts of northeastern Nigeria, which has borne the brunt of an insurgency by Boko Haram islamists since 2009, and where the aid group Doctors Without Borders estimates half a million people face a humanitarian catastrophe.

Thousands of hungry people forced from their homes by fighting there had to wait until the end of July to receive their first food aid.

Meanwhile, most of the world's top wheat producers are enjoying bumper crops, pushing prices down on global commodity markets and benefiting countries like Egypt that are dependent upon imports.

But for countries gripped by conflict, importing food is logistically difficult if not impossible and at prices out of the reach of most of the population which have lost their livelihoods. Maintaining local agricultural production, even traditional small-scale farms, thus often becomes critically important for reducing hunger while helping keep down the number of refugees, said the head of the FAO's emergency unit, Dominique Burgeon.

In certain parts of Syria this year people who have been displaced from other regions are helping till the fields and take in the harvest.

Even so, that hasn't saved the agricultural sector, on which four-fifths of the rural population depends, from collapse.

In June, Pope Francis condemned the fact it is often more difficult to deliver humanitarian aid than to obtain weapons.

"It makes no difference where arms come from; they circulate with brazen and virtually absolute freedom in many parts of the world," said the pontiff during a visit to the WFP's headquarters. "As a result, wars are fed, not people."



Rebel fighters fire towards positions of regime forces in Ramussa on the southwestern edges of Syria's northern city of Aleppo on Saturday.

Fighting in Aleppo after Syria rebels 'break siege'

Regime denies claim, redeploys troops; food trucks enter rebel-held area

AFP, Beirut

Syrian regime forces were on the defensive around Aleppo yesterday after a rebel alliance said it inflicted a major setback by breaking a three-week government siege of the battered city.

A coalition of rebels and jihadists surged through regime territory on Saturday to open a new route into Aleppo's besieged eastern neighbourhoods, home to an estimated 250,000 people.

The breakthrough was met with euphoric scenes among civilians and opposition fighters in eastern districts, but sparked fear of food shortages among residents of regime-controlled western areas.

Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said the development was one of the most significant setbacks for government forces since the conflict erupted

in March 2011.

"Despite more than 600 Russian strikes, the regime forces were not able to hold on to their positions," he said.

Reports said Syrian regime forces were redeployed yesterday to try to



avoid being surrounded in neighbourhoods they control in Aleppo. State media denied that the siege had been broken and that its own forces were surrounded, saying the battle for Syria's second city was ongoing.

The Observatory said there were intermittent air strikes and clashes on the southern edges of the city yesterday, where the opposition alliance overran a series of buildings in a military academy the previous evening.

Yesterday, rebel forces brought seven pick-up trucks full of fruit and vegetables into the eastern districts of Aleppo to be distributed to local markets, an opposition fighter said.

The fight for Aleppo is among the fiercest so far in Syria's chaotic multi-front war, which has killed more than 280,000 people. The Britain-based monitor said at least 130 civilians and 700 fighters from both sides have been killed since the opposition alliance launched its offensive on southern Aleppo on July 31.

Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate said it had seized huge caches of weapons from regime forces in the artillery school south of Aleppo.

MACHETE ATTACK ON COPS IN BELGIUM IS claims responsibility; new attack foiled

REUTERS, Brussels

Islamic State yesterday claimed responsibility for an attack by a machete-wielding man in Belgium that left two female police officers seriously injured, the group's Amaq news agency said on Twitter.

Shortly before the claim, Belgian prosecutors had identified the assailant as a 33-year-old Algerian, K B, who had lived in Belgium since 2012, saying that he may have been inspired by terrorism.

The attacker, who shouted "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest) during the assault on Saturday, was shot by police and died of his injuries. He was carrying a rucksack but no explosives or other weapons were found.

"There are indications that the attack may have been inspired by a terrorist motive," the prosecutors said in a statement. "He is known to police for criminal acts, not for terrorism."

Prosecutors searched two houses in Charleroi after the attack but did not provide details.

Earlier yesterday, Belgian police arrested

a man with a machete in the eastern city of Liege, broadcaster VRT reported.

It said Liege police had cordoned off an area before detaining the man. It said he was of Turkish origin, did not use the machete and was not previously known to the police.

Belgium is increasing security at police stations after Saturday's attack in Charleroi, Prime Minister Charles Michel told a press conference yesterday.

Islamist bombers killed 32 people in suicide attacks at Brussels airport and a metro station in March. Many of those who carried out attacks in Paris in November, which killed 130 people, were based in Belgium.

Belgium and its capital Brussels, which houses European Union institutions and the headquarters of Nato, are currently on a security alert level of three out of a maximum four, denoting a "possible and probable" threat.

Belgium has been on high alert since suicide bombers struck Brussels airport and a metro station near the European Union's institutions on March 22, killing 32 people.

NEWSIN brief

Macedonia storms kill at least 20

AFP, Skopje

Fierce storms packing strong winds and torrential rains overnight killed at least 20 people in Macedonia's capital of Skopje, the health minister said yesterday. The freak weather included winds blowing at more than 70 kilometres an hour and resulted in flash floods and landslides, with cars swept away by the violent torrents.

Japan protest China radar in E China Sea

AFP, Tokyo

China has installed a radar with potential military functions in a disputed area of the East China Sea, Japanese media said yesterday, in the latest flare-up of tensions between the two countries. The Japanese foreign ministry said China had placed a surface search radar and surveillance camera on one of its structures in a gasfield which is claimed by both countries, the Nikkei business daily reported.

Building collapse traps 6 near Mumbai

AFP, Mumbai

Rescuers were yesterday searching for a family of six feared trapped in a building that collapsed and killed two people on the outskirts of the Indian city of Mumbai, police said. Police said there was little hope of finding the family including three children alive. The two-storey building that had earlier been declared dangerous by local officials crumbled overnight in the district of Thane outside Mumbai following days of monsoon rain.

Clinton widens lead over Trump to 8 points: poll

AFP, Washington

Democrat Hillary Clinton has widened her lead over White House rival Donald Trump to eight points after both parties' nominating conventions, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll out yesterday.

Clinton led Trump 50 to 42 percent among registered voters, according to the telephone survey carried out August 1-4.

She got a strong bounce in the support from her nomination -- which unlike the fractious Republican convention, showed a united party -- but has also benefitted from major gaffes by Trump.

Ahead of the nominating conventions Clinton had a four-point lead over Trump, according to an ABC News survey.

WAR ON ILLEGAL DRUGS IN PHILIPPINES Duterte tells 160 govt officials to surrender

AFP, Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, who is waging a bloody war on drug suspects, yesterday publicly named over 160 judges, mayors, legislators, police and military men allegedly involved in narcotics and warned them to surrender.

"Due process has nothing to do with my mouth (statements). There are no proceedings here, no lawyers," he said in a pre-dawn speech just before he began listing them.

More than 800 drug suspects have been killed by police or vigilantes since Duterte's election on May 9, in a campaign which has attracted widespread criticism from rights groups.

The president listed nine judges and over 50 current or former congressmen, mayors and other local officials whom he alleged were involved in illegal drugs.

Duterte ordered their security escorts withdrawn and cancelled their firearms permits, adding that they would face sanctions. He also named about a hundred retired or active police officers and soldiers whom he said were involved, and relieved them of duty.

"If you show the slightest violence in the resistance, I will tell the police, 'Shoot them'," he told reporters and soldiers in the southern city of Davao.

He said soldiers and police should immediately surrender to their superiors while the judges should report to the Supreme Court.



People wave Turkey's national flags during the Democracy and Martyrs Rally, organized by Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and supported by ruling AK Party (AKP), oppositions Republican People's Party (CHP) and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), to protest against last month's failed military coup attempt, in Istanbul, Turkey, yesterday. The rally brings to an end of three weeks of demonstrations in support of Erdogan after last month's failed coup. Some media predicted that up to 3.5 million people could attend it.

PHOTO: REUTERS