

UK GENERAL ELECTION ON DECEMBER 12

Tories headed for easy win: survey

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservatives are heading for a comfortable win in next month's election, according to a detailed new poll, amid reports that the rival Labour party is refocusing its strategy.

The YouGov survey published late Wednesday said if the contest were held now, the Conservatives would snatch 44 seats from the main opposition party to win a 68-seat majority in the House of Commons.

The poll -- the biggest so far in this campaign to predict election results seat-by-seat -- uses a model that correctly forecast 93 percent of seats in the last election in 2017, according to YouGov.

Britain votes on December 12, with Johnson hoping to secure a majority to be able to push through his plan to leave the European Union at the end of January.

The data showed larger swings from Labour to the Conservatives in areas that are more pro-Brexit, especially in England's northern and central regions.

Labour has promised a new referendum on Brexit, and although leader Jeremy Corbyn says he would be neutral, many of his top team have said they would campaign to stay in the EU.

The Tories are keen not to seem complacent, however. Dominic Cummings, a Johnson advisor who masterminded the 2016 Brexit campaign, warned just hours before the YouGov poll was published that the race remained tight.

The YouGov poll predicts the Conservatives' total seat count would climb to 359 out of a total of 650, compared to 211 for Labour -- representing a 51-seat loss for the left-wing party.



Iraqi demonstrators gather as flames start consuming Iran's consulate in the southern Iraqi Shia holy city of Najaf on Wednesday. Inset, An Iraqi mourner chants slogans while carrying a coffin of a man killed in yesterday's clashes.

PHOTO: AFP

Crackdown in Iraq kills 25 more

Tensions high as protesters defy curfew after Iran mission torched in Nasiriyah

AFP, Nasiriyah

Iraq's southern hotspot of Nasiriyah was in bloody upheaval yesterday after a government crackdown killed 25 protesters and thousands defied a curfew to march in their funerals, following the dramatic torching of an Iranian consulate.

Iraq's capital and south have been torn by the worst street unrest since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, as a protest movement has vented their fury at their government and its backers in neighbouring Iran.

Late Wednesday, protesters outraged at Tehran's political influence in Iraq burned down the Iranian consulate in the shrine city of Najaf, yelling "Victory to Iraq!" and "Iran out!"

Demonstrators across Iraq have blamed powerful eastern neighbour Iran for propping up the Baghdad government which they are seeking to topple.

In response, Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi early yesterday ordered



military chiefs to deploy in several restive provinces to "impose security and restore order", the army said.

But by the afternoon, after the protesters' deaths, the PM had already removed one of the commanders, General Jamil Shummary.

Shummary had been dispatched to the premier's birthplace of Nasiriyah, a southern city that has been a protest hotspot for weeks.

The ensuing crackdown was particularly bloody, with at least 25 protesters killed and more than 200

wounded as security forces cleared sit-ins with live fire, medics and security sources said.

The provincial governor in Nasiriyah, Adel al-Dakhili, blamed the crackdown on Shummary, who was the military commander of the southern port city of Basra when demonstrations there were brutally suppressed in 2018.

Dakhili demanded the premier sack him, and hours later, state television announced Abdel Mahdi had ordered Shummary removed

from the post.

The latest violence brought the death toll since early October to over 370, with more than 15,000 wounded according to an AFP tally, as authorities are not releasing updated or precise figures.

Thousands of Nasiriyah's residents took to the streets to mourn the city's dead in funeral processions, defying a curfew announced there earlier in the day.

Demonstrators who had been dispersed by security forces regrouped at Nasiriyah's police station, setting it on fire.

Events in southern Iraq have unfolded dramatically since late Wednesday, when protesters stormed the Iranian consulate in the Shia holy city of Najaf.

They set tyres and other items ablaze around the consulate, sending tall flames and thick clouds of smoke into the night sky, an AFP correspondent witnessed. They also broke into the building itself, which had been apparently evacuated by its Iranian staff.

Europeans can't invoke nuke deal's dispute mechanism

Says Iran as France raises possibility of return of nuclear sanctions over breaches

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said that European parties to the 2015 nuclear deal could not trigger a dispute mechanism in the agreement that could lead to the reimposition of UN sanctions.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian had Wednesday raised the possibility of triggering the mechanism, but Iran's foreign ministry disputed that this would be permissible.

The deal "does not allow the European parties to invoke the mechanism as Iran is exercising its legal right in response to the United States' illegal and unilateral actions," ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said, quoted by semi-official news agency ISNA.

The nuclear deal -- known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action -- has been unravelling since May 2018 when the United States unilaterally withdrew from it and began reimposing sanctions on Iran.

The three European countries still party to the deal -- Britain, France and Germany

-- have been trying to salvage it.

But their efforts have borne little fruit and one year after the US pullout Iran began retaliating by taking a series of steps to row back its commitments to the accord.

On Wednesday, Le Drian said that "every two months there is another notch (from Iran) to the extent that we are wondering today... about the implementation of the dispute resolution mechanism in the treaty".

"Given the succession of actions taken by the Iranian authorities, who are progressively at odds with the contents of the JCPOA, the question comes up," he added.

Since May, Tehran has made a number of moves that have raised concerns in the West that it is moving towards abandoning the agreed limits to its nuclear activities.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) set out the terms under which Iran would restrict its nuclear programme to civilian use in exchange for the lifting of western sanctions.

US envoy to EU accused of sexual misconduct

AFP, Washington

A US ambassador nominated by President Donald Trump who provided key testimony in his impeachment hearings was accused Wednesday of sexual misconduct by three women.

Gordon Sondland, the US envoy to the European Union, denied the allegations, with his lawyer alleging that the accusers were trying to taint his credibility in the inquiry.

The Portland Monthly published named accounts by three women who said that Sondland, a wealthy hotel owner from Seattle, retaliated against them professionally after they rejected him sexually.

One of the women, Jana Solis, said she met Sondland in 2008 when she was seeking work in her position as a safety expert for hotels.

She said Sondland met her for lunch and offered her a job as "my new hotel chick" before slapping her rear.

Another woman, Nicole Vogel, said she met Sondland in 2003 over dinner to seek investment in a new magazine. He then took her to a hotel he owned and invited her to see a room, where he requested a hug and then "grabs my face and goes to kiss me," she said. Vogel said she refused and left. She pointed to an email afterward in which Sondland declined funding for her project.

Sondland in a statement rejected all the accusations. Vogel owns the Portland Monthly, which published the article.



Demonstrators clash with riot police during a protest against the government in Santiago on Wednesday. Looters sacked a hotel and several supermarkets in Chile in another night of unrest as tensions flared in the crisis-hit South American country.

Vietnamese families bury first victims of UK truck tragedy

Throngs of weeping relatives yesterday buried the first of 39 Vietnamese people found dead in a truck in Britain last month, in emotional ceremonies for the young victims whose deaths have rattled their rural towns. The first of the remains arrived in Vietnam from London on a commercial flight Wednesday, closing a weeks-long, agonising wait by families eager to have their children back home. All 31 men and eight women found dead in a refrigerated trailer in Essex on October 23 were Vietnamese. The tragedy has shone a grim light on the dangers of illegal migration into Britain, a top spot for many young Vietnamese hoping for better lives. Some families told AFP they borrowed tens of thousands of dollars to send their children to Europe.

European Parliament declares symbolic 'climate emergency'

European Union lawmakers yesterday declared a "climate emergency" in a symbolic vote that heightens pressure for action against global warming at an upcoming summit. With increasingly erratic weather patterns from wildfires in Australia to floods in Europe being linked to climate change, governments are under scrutiny to find urgent solutions at the United Nations' summit in Spain on Dec 2-13. After a debate on Monday night, the European Union (EU) legislature voted in favour of the declaration with 429 lawmakers for, 225 against and 19 abstaining.

Ex Maldives leader jailed for money laundering

Disgraced Maldives ex-president Abdulla Yameen was sentenced to five years in prison for money laundering yesterday after a corruption probe into the former strongman's rule of the luxury tourist destination. Yameen, who ran the Indian Ocean archipelago with an iron fist before his shock election loss in 2018, was accused of illegally transferring one million dollars from one of his bank accounts during an ongoing graft investigation. The 60-year-old was arrested in February on charges of bribing witnesses in the ensuing money laundering trial. Authorities also froze bank accounts belonging to Yameen that held around \$6.5 million at the end of last year following accusations he had taken illicit payments. Investigators believe Yameen could have millions more stashed abroad and are working to repatriate the cash. SOURCE: AFP

Earth heading towards 'tipping point'

Warn climate scientists, call for action to avoid 'existential threat to civilization'

CNN ONLINE

The Earth is heading toward a "global tipping point" if the climate crisis continues on its current path, scientists have warned, as they called for urgent action to avoid "an existential threat to civilization."

The group of researchers, who published a commentary in the journal Nature, say there is growing evidence to suggest that irreversible changes to the Earth's environmental systems are already taking place, and that we are now in a "state of planetary emergency."

A global tipping point is a threshold when the planet's systems go beyond the point of no return -- such as the loss of the Amazon rainforest, accelerated melting of ice sheets, and thawing of permafrost -- the authors of the commentary say. Such a collapse could lead to "hothouse" conditions that would make some areas on Earth uninhabitable.

"We argue that the intervention time left to prevent tipping could already have shrunk towards zero, whereas the reaction time to achieve net zero emissions is 30 years at best," the authors said.

Led by Timothy Lenton, professor of



climate change and Earth system science at the University of Exeter, in southwest England, the team identified nine areas where they say tipping points are already underway.

Those include widespread destruction of the Amazon, reduction of Arctic sea ice, large-scale coral reef die-offs, melting of the Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets, thawing of permafrost, destabilizing of boreal forests -- which contain vast numbers of trees that grow in freezing northern climes -- and a slowdown of ocean circulation.

The team claims that these events are interconnected and change in one will impact another, causing a worsening "cascade" of crises.

The idea of a climate tipping point is not new. The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) introduced the concept 20 years ago.

Back then, the UN suggested such "large-scale discontinuities" would only come about when global warming exceeded 5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

But the authors say data from the two most recent IPCC reports in 2018 and September 2019, suggest tipping points can happen between 1 C and 2 C of warming.

Global average temperatures are today around 1 C higher than in the pre-industrial age and continue to rise.

One report from 2018 -- of which Lenton was part of -- suggested that a domino effect will kick in if global temperatures rise more than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

The UN Environment Program (UNEP) 2019 Emissions Gap report said at the current rate, temperatures are expected to rise 3.2 C by 2100.

Iran arrests 8 with CIA links in unrest

AFP, Tehran

Iran has arrested eight people it accused of CIA links and sending abroad information on recent urban unrest, days after the United States said it had received thousands of messages on a protest crackdown in the Islamic republic.

Human Rights Watch has accused Tehran of "deliberately covering up" more than 140 deaths that it said came when security forces suppressed demonstrations against a sharp fuel price hike.

Iran said that among the more than 500 people arrested were eight who were "linked to the CIA", state news agency IRNA said late Wednesday, citing the head of the intelligence ministry's counter-espionage department.

Iran's arch-foe the United States has said it received thousands of messages from the Islamic republic about the protests, including photos and videos, after issuing an appeal for people to defy sweeping internet restrictions.

The unrest came after a year and a half of biting sanctions re-imposed by US that aim to contain its regional influence.