

BIHAR STATE POLLS

Ruling NDA ahead in see-saw contest

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The race for power in the Indian eastern state of Bihar was set to go down to the wire yesterday as trends available late this evening indicated that the opposition alliance led by Rashtriya Janata Dal narrowed the gap against ruling National Democratic Alliance which includes BJP.

As per the latest data from the Election Commission, the NDA has won four seats and led in 120 seats while the RJD combine has bagged two seats and was ahead in 106.

The majority mark in the 243-assembly is 122.

A final picture is expected only around midnight because of the tardy pace of vote count.

Despite the NDA leading the table, having won or leading in 125 seats, three more than the number required for a simple majority in the 243-member assembly, it's not done and dusted yet. With more than two third of the votes still to be counted, and the margin of lead being less than 1,000 in about a score of seats, the game is still wide open.

Going by the trends, the BJP looks set to trump its senior NDA partner Janata Dal (U) of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar in Bihar. The party leads in 74 seats. The JD(U) has so far won two seats and its candidates were leading in 39 seats.

The RJD has won two seats and its nominees are leading in 68 others, giving a close competition to the BJP to finish as the largest single party. Its ally Congress is leading in 19 seats.

It was a see-saw battle all the way when vote-count began this morning. First, the opposition alliance established a lead and an hour into the counting, the NDA surged ahead and stayed in that position for much of the day. The opposition made a thrilling comeback later in the day.

The Bihar election was the first democratic exercise in the midst of the pandemic amid a high-octane campaign that saw the Nitish Kumar battling the anti-incumbency amid a rebellion in NDA. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has campaigned heavily in the state.



Azerbaijanis wave the national flag as they celebrate in the streets of the capital Baku yesterday, after Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed a ceasefire following a string of Azeri victories in fighting over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

PHOTO: AFP

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

WINNERS

WHO WENT TO WAR

Ethiopia's PM Abiy Ahmed -- who won last year's Nobel Peace Prize -- has ordered a military offensive on the northern Tigray region of the country. Ahmed, who won it for ending the 20-year conflict with Eritrea, is far from the first laureate to later wage or support war.



BARACK OBAMA: The first black US president got the prize only nine months after his inauguration in 2009. But far from ending America's foreign wars, as he said he hoped to do, they continued for all eight years of his term, with airstrikes or military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan.



AUNG SAN SUU KYI: The reputation of Myanmar's leader has been left in tatters with the country accused of the ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas and trampling on the rights of other minorities. The 1991 laureate, who won the prize for her heroic resistance to the country's military, now rules in an uneasy power-sharing agreement with them.



HENRY KISSINGER: In 1973, the US secretary of state shared the prize with North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho for negotiating ceasefires that didn't hold. Critics said the award "made political satire obsolete" given Kissinger's role in the carpet bombing of Cambodia and Operation Condor killings to keep pro-US South American dictators in power.



THEODORE ROOSEVELT: The then US president won in 1906 for negotiating an end to the Russo-Japanese war a year earlier. But even at the time, the nomination of the "military mad" leader of the "Rough Riders" volunteer cavalry regiment in the Spanish-American war, was disputed, with Swedish newspapers saying Alfred Nobel would be spinning in his grave.

Ceasefire halts fighting

Russia deploys peacekeepers; celebrations in Azerbaijan, anger in Armenia

REUTERS

Russian peacekeeping troops deployed to the mountain enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh yesterday as part of a ceasefire deal to end six weeks of heavy fighting between Azerbaijan and ethnic Armenian forces.

Under the deal, Azerbaijan will keep territorial gains made in the fighting, including the enclave's second city of Shusha, which Armenians call Shushi. Ethnic Armenian forces must give up control of a slew of other territories between now and Dec. 1.

Armenia's defence ministry said military action had halted and calm had been restored in the breakaway territory, which is internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan but populated and, until recently, fully controlled by ethnic Armenians.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the deal should pave the way for a lasting political settlement of a conflict that has killed thousands, displaced many more, and had threatened to plunge the wider region into war.

Nato member Turkey, Azerbaijan's main supporter and arms supplier, said the deal had secured important gains for its ally and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu hailed it as a "sacred

success".

The ceasefire triggered celebrations in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, where cars and buses sounded their horns in delight and people cheered and waved the Azeri national flag. "This (ceasefire) statement has historic significance. This statement constitutes Armenia's capitulation. This statement puts an end to the years-long occupation," Azeri President Ilham Aliyev said.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT

Some Azeris regretted fighting had ended before Azerbaijan controlled all of Nagorno-Karabakh and were wary of the arrival of peacekeepers from Russia, which long dominated the region in Soviet times.

Unrest broke out in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, where crowds stormed and ransacked government buildings overnight, labelling the deal a betrayal. Some demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan.

Nagorno-Karabakh leader Arayik Harutyunyan said there had been no option but to conclude a peace deal because of the risk of losing the whole enclave to Azerbaijan. Pashinyan said he had

concluded the peace deal under pressure from his own army.

In fighting that flared on Sept. 27, Azerbaijan says it retook much of the land in and around Nagorno-Karabakh that it lost in a 1991-94 war in which about 30,000 people were killed.

The capture of Shusha, or Shushi, appears to have been a turning point. Perched on a mountain top above Stepanakert, Nagorno-Karabakh's biggest city, it gave Azerbaijan's forces a commanding position from which to launch an assault.

Russia, which has a defence pact with Armenia and a military base there, is likely to hail the deal as a sign it is still the main arbiter in the energy-producing South Caucasus, which it sees as its own backyard, despite Turkish attempts to muscle in.

Russian peacekeepers will remain for at least five years, expanding Moscow's military footprint in the region. Putin said they would be deployed along the frontline in Nagorno-Karabakh and in a corridor between the region and Armenia.

Under the agreement, Azerbaijan will gain a road link to an Azeri enclave on the Iranian-Turkish border, something that will give Turkey a land bridge to the rump Azerbaijan.

African bloc wants ceasefire in Ethiopia

REUTERS, Nairobi

The African Union (AU) called for a ceasefire in north Ethiopia where federal troops fighting local Tigrayan forces were reported to have captured an airport yesterday and the region's leader accused Eritrea of sending soldiers across the border.

Hundreds have died in air strikes and fighting in an escalating conflict some fear could slide into civil war given deep animosity between the Tigrayans and PM Abiy Ahmed, who comes from the largest Oromo ethnic group.

Various Tigrayan forces surrendered during the seizure of Humera airport, near the border with Sudan and Eritrea, while the military also captured a road leading from the town to the Sudanese border, the Fana broadcaster reported.

Abiy, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019, ordered air strikes and sent troops into Tigray last week after accusing the TPLF of attacking a military base. Tigrayans say Abiy's government oppresses and discriminates against them and behaved autocratically in postponing a national election.

Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a peace deal two years ago, but Afwerki's government remains hostile to the Tigrayan leadership after its role in a devastating 1998-2000 war.

The 44-year-old prime minister is Africa's youngest leader and won his Nobel prize for democratic reforms and for making peace with Eritrea. But his militancy against Tigray has alarmed diplomats and a full-scale war could further damage an economy already reeling from the coronavirus crisis.

NEWS IN BRIEF



Top Palestinian official Erekat dies of Covid-19

Palestine Liberation Organisation secretary general and chief negotiator Saeb Erekat died yesterday of coronavirus complications at the age of 65, the Palestinian president's office said. A lung transplant recipient who suffered from pulmonary fibrosis, "Saeb Erekat died at Hadassah Hospital" in Jerusalem, where he had been admitted on October 18, president Mahmud Abbas's office said. Hadassah hospital said Erekat "passed away in the intensive care unit," where he had been in critical condition for several weeks. Erekat was part of every team to negotiate with Israel since 1991, with the notable exception of the delegation that secretly hammered out the Oslo accords of 1993.

'Lockdown' is Collins Dictionary Word of the Year

Collins Dictionary yesterday said that "lockdown" is its Word of the Year in 2020 following a dramatic increase in usage during the spread of Covid-19. Lexicographers said they picked the word because it had become synonymous with the experience of populations across the world as governments look to curb the coronavirus pandemic. Collins registered more than a quarter of a million usages of "lockdown" during 2020. "Coronavirus", "social distancing", "self-isolate" and "furlough" as well as "lockdown" and "key worker" were included in the longer list of 10 words of the year.

Thai PM urges calm 'from all sides' in protests

Thai Premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha yesterday urged calm from all sides as tensions rise between royalist groups and pro-democracy protesters calling for reforms to the monarchy. The kingdom has for months seen massive demonstrations led by student leaders calling for democratic reforms, with some bolder figures issuing challenges to Thailand's unassailable monarchy. The movement's demands have sent shockwaves through its royalist establishment, spurring monarchist groups to stage counter-protests which have led to some minor scuffles with protesters. Prayut -- whose removal from office is one of the movement's key demands -- yesterday said both sides are entitled to "express their opinions" -- as long as it is within the law. "A confrontation is not the way to solve a problem," he said after a cabinet meeting.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Treaty-breaking Brexit laws fail to pass UK parliament

REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Boris Johnson suffered a heavy defeat in parliament's upper chamber on late Monday over proposed laws which would allow him to breach Britain's EU exit treaty - a plan that has been criticised by US president elect Joe Biden.

The Internal Market Bill is designed to protect trade between Britain's four nations after Brexit. It contains clauses ministers say are needed to protect Northern Ireland's delicate status as part of the United Kingdom, but would also break international law in a "specific and limited" way.

The House of Lords voted to strip those clauses from the bill in a series of defeats for the ruling Conservative Party. The government does not have a majority in the Lords and even some high-profile Conservative members opposed the clauses.

Far from backing down, however, the government said it would retake the contentious clauses when the bill returns to the House of Commons, where it had previously passed by 340 votes to 256.

The publication of the bill in September provoked criticism with some saying it would wreck Britain's international standing. Biden tweeted on Sept. 16 that anything which endangered the peace accord between the Irish republic and Northern Ireland would threaten Anglo-American trade.

Johnson says the clauses are there to act as a safety net in case ongoing negotiations with the EU fail to work out how goods can flow between Britain, the British province of Northern Ireland, and across the open border with EU member Ireland.

Many instead saw the bill as a negotiating gambit to win concessions from the EU in trade negotiations. Brussels has launched legal action against Britain over the proposals. The final wording of the bill has to be agreed by both houses, and typically the unelected Lords does not permanently block laws supported by the directly elected House of Commons. However, the clauses may no longer be needed if talks with the EU on how to make the Irish border work are successful.

AFGHAN WOMAN SHOT, BLINDED, FOR GETTING A JOB

REUTERS, Kabul

The last thing 33-year-old Khatera saw were the three men on a motorcycle who attacked her just after she left her job at a police station in Afghanistan's central Ghazni province, shooting at her and stabbing her with a knife in the eyes.

Waking up in hospital, everything was dark.

"I asked the doctors, why I can't see anything? They told me that my eyes are still bandaged because of the wounds. But at that moment, I knew my eyes had been taken from me," she said.

She and local authorities blame the attack on Taliban militants - who deny involvement - and say the assailants acted on a tip-off from her father who vehemently opposed her working outside the home.

For Khatera, the attack caused not just the loss of her sight but the loss of a dream she had battled to achieve - to have an independent career. She joined the Ghazni police as an officer in its crime branch a few months ago.



The rights activists believe a mix of Afghanistan's conservative social norms and an emboldened Taliban gaining influence while the United States withdraws its troops from the country is driving the escalation. Khatera's dream as a child was to work outside the home and after years of trying to convince her father, to no avail, she was able to find support from



A protestor holds a sign outside the US Supreme Court building, as the court justices engage in arguments over the fate of Obamacare laws, in Washington, US, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US SC takes aim at Unraveling Obamacare

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's outgoing administration took aim in the US Supreme Court yesterday at razing the "Obamacare" health program his predecessor built, a move which could cancel the health insurance of 20 millions in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The high court opened arguments in the long-brewing case over the constitutionality of the 2010 Affordable Care Act, under which then-president Barack Obama's government sought to extend health insurance to people who could not afford it.

Under ACA, poor adults have access to the Medicare program normally open only to retired people over 65; young people 26 years old or less can be covered by their parents' insurance; and people whose preexisting medical conditions led to their being denied commercial health insurance have coverage.

Since taking office in 2017, Trump has tried to undermine the ACA. His government first eroded one key provision through legislation, the "individual mandate" which requires people who stay uninsured and refuse to sign up for the ACA to pay a penalty. Congress reduced the penalty to zero, and now, in a lawsuit filed by Texas and several other Republican-led states, they want the Supreme Court to declare the entire ACA unconstitutional, arguing it cannot stand without the individual mandate.

While Obamacare has proven popular, it stands at risk on technical legal grounds, at a Supreme Court which has turned sharply to the right since Trump appointed three justices to the court.