

PUNJAB BY-POLLS WIN Imran Khan calls for early election

AFP, Lahore

Former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan yesterday called again for an early national election after his party seized control of the state assembly in Punjab, the country's most populous province.

Twenty seats were up for grabs in the Punjab by-election, which was seen as a popularity test for the former international cricket star dismissed by a no-confidence vote in April.

His Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party won 15, with the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) of current Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif taking four, and one going to an independent.

Sunday's vote was also seen as a bellwether for national elections that must be held by October next year, although Khan has campaigned across the country for an earlier poll since being dismissed.

"The only way forward from here is to hold free and transparent elections," Khan tweeted early yesterday after the Punjab votes were tallied.

"Any other way will only lead to increased political uncertainty and further economic chaos."

Khan has drawn thousands to rallies since being ousted, giving lengthy speeches claiming the government was imposed on Pakistan by a US-led conspiracy.

He also blames the current government for soaring inflation, although most analysts agree Sharif inherited the country's economic woes -- which were given some relief last week by an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to resume a rescue package.

Pakistan newspapers suggested the Punjab result was a consequence of the economic hardships currently felt by the country.



A member of the Queen's Guard receives water to drink during the hot weather, outside Buckingham Palace in London, Britain, yesterday. Britain and France went on heatwave alert yesterday bracing for record temperatures as southwest Europe wilted under a scorching sun and ferocious wildfires devoured more forests.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Voting begins to elect India's new President

AFP, New Delhi

India's parliament yesterday began voting for a new President, with a female politician from the country's marginalised tribal community the favourite for the post.

Droupadi Murmu, from the Santhal tribe, has been nominated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party for the largely ceremonial position.

If elected, she would be India's first tribal President and second female President. The incumbent, Ram Nath Kovind, is the country's second President from the Dalit community, the bottom of the Hindu caste system.

Murmu, 64, began her career as a schoolteacher in the eastern state of Odisha before going into politics. She has held ministerial positions in the state government, and been governor of the neighbouring state of Jharkhand.

Her main opponent for the presidency is veteran politician Yashwant Sinha, an ex-BJP member and former finance and external affairs minister, who has been backed by opposition parties including Congress.

The counting of votes will be held on July 21 and the new President will take oath on July 25, under the schedule announced by the Election Commission.

Nearly half of EU territory 'at risk' of drought

Researchers at the European Commission warn as the region wilts under punishing heatwave

AFP, Brussels

Researchers at the European Commission warned yesterday that nearly half of the EU's territory is currently at risk of drought, as southwest Europe wilted under a punishing heatwave.

In a report for July, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre said that 46 percent of the EU's territory was exposed to warning-level drought, with 11 percent at an alert level, with crops already suffering from the lack of water.

Italy was the hardest hit, with the Po River basin in the north of the country facing the highest level possible of drought severity, the EU said.

In Spain, water reservoir volumes are currently 31 percent lower than the 10-year average, the report said, while in Portugal, water to produce hydroelectric energy is at half the average of the previous seven years.

The EU researchers also warned that the lack of water and strong heat are driving crop yields lower in France, Romania, Spain, Portugal and Italy.

Weather forecasts predict more of the same, the report said, adding to an already "very critical situation" that will exacerbate the effects on agriculture, energy and water supply.

Weather catastrophes triggered by climate change have cost Germany at least 80 billion euros since 2018, another "horrifying" official study said yesterday, as disasters grow more frequent and intense.

The report commissioned by the economy and environment ministries estimated the impact of drought, floods and extreme heat in Germany between 2000 and 2021 was nearly 145 billion euros (\$147 billion), most of it seen in recent years.

Since 2018 alone, damage to buildings and infrastructure as well as lost revenue in sectors such as forestry and farming in Europe's top economy reached over 80 billion euros.

Environment Minister Steffi Lemke said the "horrifying scientific data" illustrated the "enormous

damage and costs" of the climate crisis.

"The numbers sound the alarm for more prevention when it comes to the climate," she said in a statement. "We have got to and will invest more in climate protection and adaptation to protect our people."

Economy Minister Robert Habeck, whose brief includes climate policy, said national measures would have to go hand-in-hand with accelerated global action to "keep the impact of the climate crisis at a bearable level".



The study showed accelerated effects over time, with the abnormally hot, dry summers of 2018 and 2019 and deadly floods in the Rhineland one year ago recorded as particularly devastating.

The 2018-2019 droughts were shown to have cost 34.9 billion euros, the floods an estimated 40.5 billion euros, and damage from severe storms another 5.2 billion euros.

However, the authors of the study said their estimates were almost certainly too low as key factors including health effects and the consequences for biodiversity were not included.

The report came as a heatwave engulfing parts of southwest Europe was expected to reach regions of Germany. Scientists blame climate change and predict more frequent and intense episodes of extreme weather.

UK TV debate axed over Tory image fears

AFP, London

Television bosses were yesterday forced to scrap a planned debate between contenders for the leadership of Britain's Conservative party, as MPs voted again to narrow down the field.

The five remaining candidates -- Rishi Sunak, Liz Truss, Kemi Badenoch, Penny Mordaunt and Tom Tugendhat -- had been due to appear in the third televised debate on Tuesday night.

But former finance minister Sunak and Foreign Secretary Truss pulled out, Sky News, which was due to host the programme, said.

"Conservative MPs are said to be concerned about the damage the debates are doing to the image of the Conservative party, exposing disagreements and splits within the party," it added in a statement.

Conservative MPs are holding a series of votes to whittle down the candidates to just two, before a wider ballot of the Tory grassroots.

The latest starts at 1600 GMT, with Tugendhat expected to win the least number of votes and be eliminated when the result is announced from 1900 GMT. Boris Johnson announced on July 7 he was quitting as Conservative leader after a government rebellion in protest at his scandal-hit administration.

CONTENT VIOLATIONS Russia fines Google \$370m

REUTERS, Moscow

Alphabet's GOOGL.O Google was fined 21.1 billion roubles (\$373 million) by a Russian court for a repeated failure to remove content that Moscow deems illegal, the state communications regulator Roskomnadzor said yesterday. Russia has long objected to foreign tech platforms' distribution of content that fall foul of its restrictions, but what had been a simmering dispute has erupted into a full-on battle since Moscow assembled its armed forces before sending them into Ukraine in February. Late last year, Google was fined 7.2 billion roubles for failing to remove or block content.

Three slain in US shooting, 2 hurt

AFP, Washington

A man opened fire at a mall in the US state of Indiana on Sunday killing three and injuring two, officials said, the latest armed rampage in a country plagued by gun violence. The attack ended when a "good Samaritan" shot the gunman dead, police said. "We experienced a mass shooting this evening at the Greenwood Park Mall," Mark Myers, mayor of Greenwood, Indiana, said in a statement. The town is about 10 miles south of downtown Indianapolis, the state capital. The gunman, who has not been identified, entered the mall's food court at about 6:00 pm carrying a rifle along with several magazines of ammunition and opened fire, said Chief Jim Ison of the Greenwood Police Department.



US school shooter faces death penalty

AFP, Miami

A young man who gunned down 17 people at his former high school in Parkland, Florida went on trial yesterday, with jurors set to hand down either the death penalty or a life sentence.

Nikolas Cruz took an AR-15 assault rifle into Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Valentine's Day in 2018 and killed 17 students and staff members.

Cruz -- who was 19 at the time -- has already pleaded guilty to 17 counts of first-degree murder and 17 counts of attempted murder for those wounded during the massacre.

The trial is being held to determine his sentence. The death penalty requires a unanimous decision by the jury; Cruz will otherwise be handed life without parole.

The Florida shooting stunned a country accustomed to gun violence and sparked new efforts, led by students from the school itself, to get lawmakers to pass tougher gun control laws.

Operators ask govt to pay

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payments against the bills of February," he told UNB.

He hoped that there would be a major breakthrough in bill settlements soon as their persuasion continued at the highest policy-making level.

The BPDB usually purchases electricity worth Tk 4,000 crore per month.

Now, the payments against the bills of four months -- March, April, May and June -- are to be cleared. In addition, payments of some partial bills of February have also not been cleared.

By this calculation, the total amount of the pending bills will be over \$1.5 billion, said Imran, also the director of Confidence Group, which owns a number of power plants.

The BPDB has been facing a cash crunch for the last few months which forced it to move a proposal to Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) to raise the electricity price at retail level.

The energy regulator is yet to make any decision though it recently held a public hearing on the issue.

The BPDB, however, disagreed with the calculations done by Bippra saying that it normally takes 45 days to clear a bill

Sri Lanka renews

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state intelligence officers loyal to Rajapaksa directly or indirectly supported the bombers.

Rajapaksa was forced to flee last week when tens of thousands of protesters stormed his official residence after months of demonstrations across the country demanding his resignation over Sri

payment after submission.

"If the due payment is calculated this way, the amount will be equivalent for two and a half months," said Saiful Hasan Chowdhury, director of public relations of the BPDB.

He said BPDB has cleared most of the payments against the bills of February.

BPDB documents show that the government has to spend a total of Tk 71,878 crore in the FY2021-22 for power production, of which Tk 44,434 crore will be spent for purchasing electricity from the private sector.

Of this amount, Tk 37,963 crore will be required for purchasing electricity from the independent power producers (IPP) and small IPP plants in the private sector, which produces 38 percent (8,807 MW) of the total generation.

Bippra leaders said the delay in payment is not the only problem that the private power producers are facing.

"The rising price of US dollars, unavailability of the green backs with banks and paying penalties for delayed payment to foreign lenders and equipment suppliers have been the major problems," said the Bippra president.

Lanka's economic crisis.

The nation's 22 million people have been enduring severe shortages of essentials since late last year after the country ran out of foreign exchange to finance even the most vital imports. The country defaulted on its \$51 billion foreign debt in mid-April and is in talks with the IMF for a possible bailout.

Solar storm

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These storms come as the Sun is in the active phase of its 11 year-long solar cycle, with incidents like these expected to increase in frequency.

Over the weekend, an enormous structure of plasma and magnetic field known as a "prominence" broke away from the Sun.

"The sheer size of the prominence is impressive," says Dr Sebastian Voltmer, who captured an image of it, told SpaceWeather. "It was spectacular to see a very fast moving part of it ejecting and detaching to the side."

Potent solar storms can have serious effects on human activities. Some research suggests that satellites have been dropping out of their orbits due to increased solar wind activity and smaller craft, known as CubeSats, have been destroyed completely. The decrease in altitude for these satellites is 10 times faster than it has been in the past, at a cost of tens of millions of dollars.

Ghana reports first cases of deadly Marburg virus

AFP, Accra

Two cases of the deadly Marburg virus have been identified in Ghana, the first time the Ebola-like disease has been found in the West African nation, health authorities announced Sunday.

Earlier in the month, blood samples taken from two people in the southern Ashanti region suggested the Marburg

virus.

The samples were sent to the Pasteur Institute in Senegal which confirmed the diagnosis, the Ghana Health Service (GHS) said.

"This is the first time Ghana has confirmed Marburg Virus Disease," said GHS head Patrick Kuma Aboagye said in a statement.

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