

SPD STRUGGLES TO EXPLOIT MERKEL WEAKNESS

BERLIN: Germany's Social Democrats are struggling at a party congress this week to emerge from Angela Merkel's shadow, where they've languished for a decade and been unable to exploit her current weakness in the polls. Chancellor Merkel's junior partners in her left-right "grand coalition" government have long been stuck in the doldrums, currently tallying only about 24 percent support among voters. The country's second-strongest party trails Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) by 15 points even as the migration crisis has eroded her support, particularly among her own rank-and-file.

The embattled leader, Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel, a dynamic public speaker but little-loved among Social Democrats, has been blamed for the stagnation of the venerable party, now in its 150th year. His critics also complain that he has failed to snatch issues back from the master tactician Merkel, often credited with

occupying the middle ground in German politics. Nevertheless, with no challenger in sight, Gabriel was on Friday reelected with 74.3 percent of the vote, down from the 83.6 percent he obtained at the party's last polls in 2013.

'That's Enough'

In an address to around 600 delegates meeting in Berlin yesterday, Gabriel hit out at Merkel's pro-austerity policies during the eurozone debt crisis for the gains of France's far-right National Front. "I have always warned Merkel against trying to impose austerity on France," he said, ahead of his reelection. "Without it, (FN leader Marine) Le Pen would not have made it that far," he said.

But observers noted that the debt turmoil had also presented challenges for the SPD. While Merkel backed a fresh bailout for Greece under strict conditions over the summer, Gabriel had appeared to struggle

to find a firm position. In the end, Gabriel, "who is targeting the centrist electorate", opted not to challenge the pro-austerity line favored by the chancellor "knowing that most Germans are very sceptical when it comes to Greece", political scientist Oskar Niedermayer said.

The most dramatic example of how Merkel has poached key issues has been in the refugee crisis - the defining issue of German politics this year. By embracing an open-doors policy for Syrians fleeing war and terror, Merkel has won over many voters from the traditional left who might never have considered voting CDU. Recognizing his weak support in the party, Gabriel announced in October that he was willing to hold a party referendum to decide who will lead the SPD into the 2017 general election.

Merkel, who is holding her own party congress from Monday, is expected to decide next year whether she will stand for

a fourth term at the helm of Europe's top economic power. In the run-up to the party congress, SPD vice president Ralf Stegner insisted that the mighty Merkel could be defeated: "12 years at the chancellery: that's enough!" SPD supporter Clara Klapprodt, 19, admitted she had little confidence her party could win the 2017 general election. "To do that, we would need a real vision capable of winning people over," she told AFP at the congress which opened Thursday.

However another SPD supporter, Wilhelm Drabke, said he was keeping hope alive but that it would take another candidate, popular Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, to topple Merkel. Steinmeier already took on Merkel once, in 2009, leading the party to its worst showing since 1949 with just 23 percent of the vote. It remains unclear whether he would be willing to risk reliving the experience. — AFP



BUJUMBURA: In this Dec 9, 2015 photo, a young boy joins other onlookers at the scene where five dead bodies, seen behind, were found in a street in the Cibitoke neighborhood of the Burundian capital. — AP

ATTACKS ON MILITARY BASES IN BUJUMBURA

12 INSURGENTS KILLED

NAIROBI: Heavily-armed gunmen launched coordinated assaults on three army bases in the Burundi capital yesterday, leaving at least a dozen attackers dead, the military said, in the worst unrest since a failed May coup. Army spokesman Colonel Gaspard Baratuza claimed that 12 attackers were killed and 21 captured while five soldiers were wounded, following the early morning assaults on a base at Ngagara and a military training college in the capital, as well as another base at Mujejuru, 40 km outside the city.

Baratuza said the attackers aimed "to stock up on weapons and ammunition". "The army has defeated them seriously," the spokesman said, while Bujumbura residents reported continuing gunfire into the afternoon. Clashes continued throughout the day in different parts of the capital with witnesses describing heavy firing, including artillery, lasting several hours at the military locations.

Streets were deserted as city residents

stayed home and the army and security forces attempted to lockdown the city. Witnesses reported many arrests by security forces of mainly young residents of different city neighborhoods. US Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region, Thomas Perriello, said he was "alarmed" by the violence and called for an "immediate ceasefire and calm".

Yesterday's firefights are the heaviest since a failed coup in May, sparked by President Pierre Nkurunziza's bid for a third term, which he later won in disputed elections in July. Months of street protests have devolved into regular armed attacks with gunfire disrupting the nights and dead bodies appearing on city streets almost every day. Attacks on security forces have escalated, with frequent ambushes of police convoys by rebels armed with assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars aimed at government installations. Eight months of unrest have claimed the lives of at

least 240 people so far while more than 200,000 have left for neighbouring countries, according to the UN.

Worst Fighting in Months

Frightened residents of Bujumbura said yesterday's fighting was the worst in months. "I am holed up in the corridor of my house with my wife and children," said Eric, a resident of Musaga. "Pray for us because we will die!" As sporadic gunfire continued around Bujumbura, a government spokesman claimed on Twitter that the attacks had been foiled. Referring to the gunmen as "Sindumuja" - meaning "I am not a slave", a name sometimes used for the insurgents - presidential media advisor Willy Nyamitwe wrote, "Tonight the Sindumuja tried to attack military camps but they failed." "A failed coup in May 13, many defeated attacks including this one... all their plans against Burundi fail," he added later. — AFP

PUTIN SAYS RUSSIA BACKS FSA ALONG WITH ASSAD TROOPS

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin said yesterday Russia supports the opposition Free Syrian Army, providing it with air support, arms and ammunition in joint operations with Syrian troops against Islamist militants. His statement appeared to be the first time Moscow said it was actually supporting Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's opponents in the fight against Islamic State forces. Putin said last month the Russian air force had hit several "terrorist" targets provided by the Free Syrian Army.

Western and Arab states carrying out air strikes against Islamic State for more than a year say that Russian jets have mainly hit other rebel forces in the west of Syria. "The work of our aviation group assists in uniting the efforts of government troops and the Free Syrian Army," Putin told an annual meeting at the defence ministry. "Now several of its units numbering over 5,000 troops are engaged in offensive actions against terrorists, alongside regular forces, in the provinces of Homs, Hama, Aleppo and Raqqa," he said, referring to the Free Syrian Army. "We support it from the air, as well as the Syrian army, we assist them with weapons, ammunition and provide material support."

Putin said strikes by Russia's air force and navy had inflicted heavy damage on the infrastructure of Islamic State, which controls large areas of eastern Syria and western Iraq. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said, however, that the influence of Islamic State was increasing in Syria, where militants control around 70 percent of the country. The number of IS fighters in Iraq and Syria totals around 60,000, Shoigu said, and there is a threat of violence spilling over into post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Talking to his generals, Putin issued a veiled warning to Turkey, whose downing of a Russian bomber jet near the Syrian-Turkish border last month sent bilateral relations to a freezing point and led Moscow to impose economic sanctions to Istanbul. "I want to warn those who may again try to stage provocations against our troops," he said. "I order you to act in an extremely tough way. Any targets threatening Russia's (military) group or our land infrastructure must be immediately destroyed," Putin told the generals. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu earlier yesterday called on Russia for calm, but said Turkey's patience is not unlimited. — Reuters