

CRUCIAL TEST FOR ITALY'S RENZI IN LOCAL VOTE

ROME: Italians go to the polls today for municipal elections that represent tests for both Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and the country's divided right, with both fearing a chastening defeat in Rome. More than 1,300 municipal councils will be elected in a two-round ballot to be completed on June 19, with the primary focus on the major cities of Bologna, Milan, Naples, Turin, and especially the capital, where the populist, anti-establishment Five Star is heading the race for the mayor's seat.

Rome has been without an elected leader since last October, when Ignazio Marino, a member of Renzi's centre-left Democratic Party, was forced to quit over an expenses scandal. That episode and a much bigger, unrelated scandal over organized crime's infiltration of City Hall have bolstered Five Star's Virginia Raggi.

She goes into Sunday's vote with polls indicating she could secure around 30 percent of first round votes. The PD's Roberto Giachetti was trailing on around 24 percent. Losing Rome would not augur well for Renzi

four months before he puts his position on the line in a referendum on constitutional reforms designed to end decades of gridlock in parliament. And the setback would be even greater if, as looks possible, the PD candidate in Milan is also defeated. Five Star meanwhile are hoping that success in Rome will give them the platform they need to transform themselves into Italy's principal opposition in the run-up to national elections due by June 2018 at the latest.

'Glorious defeat'

"I think for Five Star the best outcome in Rome would be to lose narrowly in the runoff, they could talk that up as a glorious defeat and continue to be in opposition," said Piergiorgio Corbetta, an academic specialist on the movement. "If they win they have to make the move from being a protest party to proposing things and it will only take six months for them to show they are genetically no different from the other parties they accuse of corruption and dishonesty," he said. With former premier Silvio

Berlusconi now a fading figure on the national stage, Italy's right is being reshaped and the battle for leadership is being played out in Rome.

Giorgia Meloni, a candidate put up by one of several grouplets that emerged from Italy's neo-fascist movement, is being backed by the anti-immigrant Northern League, whose leader Matteo Salvini wants to united all the right behind himself. But Berlusconi has backed another candidate, Alfio Marchini, having told the pregnant Meloni that the role of mayor was not compatible with motherhood. PD candidates are comfortably ahead in the polls in Turin and leftist bastion Bologna while the outgoing mayor of Naples, an independent who has been a vocal critic of the government, is also expected to be returned to power.

Perhaps concerned about the impact of losing both Rome and Milan for the momentum of his reform program, Renzi has played down the significance of the local elections. "The municipals are about mayors, the people whose job it is to repair



ROME: Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (right) attends a campaign meeting of Roberto Giachetti, Democratic Party (PD) candidate for the mayoral election in Rome upon the first round of the election that will be held today. — AFP

the streets, not the government of the country," he said recently. Some 16,000 polling stations open at 7.00 am (0500 GMT) and close at 11.00 pm. There are con-

cerns the turnout could be low with millions of Italians enjoying a long holiday weekend as a result of Republic Day falling on Thursday. — AFP

32 SOLDIERS DIE AS BOKO HARAM ATTACK IN SOUTHEASTERN NIGER

NIGERIA RECOVERS \$9.1 BILLION IN STOLEN MONEY, ASSETS

NIAMEY: Thirty two Nigerian soldiers were killed in a Boko Haram attack on Friday night against the southeastern town of Bosso, close to the border with Nigeria, Niger's defense ministry said yesterday. "On Friday, hundreds of assailants of Boko Haram attacked" the position of the army of Bosso, the ministry said in a statement. "The counter-offensive conducted early this morning helped to retake control of all the positions in the city of Bosso. The situation is under control," it added.

19 militants killed

Meanwhile, Nigerian troops killed 19 Boko Haram militants during clashes in northeast Borno state, while two soldiers suffered gunshot wounds, the army said yesterday. Acting upon an intelligence report on the presence of Boko Haram fighters in the militants' Chukungudu camp, troops and civilian JTF (joint task force) members, launched the attack on Friday.

"During the encounter at the camp, the troops killed 19 Boko Haram terrorists including their notorious leader in the area, called Ameer Abubakar Gana," the statement said. There was no independent confirmation of the army statement. The two soldiers who suffered gunshot wounds were said to be responding to treatment. The troops destroyed an improvised explosive devices (IED) making factory, detonated four primed IEDs, recovered two anti-air-



OGONI, Nigeria: A soldier helps a fellow soldier adjust his ammunition belt during the launching of a cleanup operation of Ogoniland in the Niger Delta region. Nigeria's vice-president Yemi Osinbajo launched a \$1 billion oil pollution cleanup program in the Niger delta, after President Muhammadu Buhari pulled out of visiting the restive region. Yemi Osinbajo stood in for Buhari, who had been due to attend the ceremony in the Ogoniland area of Rivers state in what would have been his first visit to the delta as president. — AFP

craft guns and other weapons and vehicles. Boko Haram's seven-year insurgency has devastated infrastructure in the impoverished northeast region and forced some 2.1 million people in Nigeria to flee their homes, according to the UN's refugee agency.

Stolen money, assets

In another development, Nigeria's government has recovered \$9.1 billion in stolen money and assets, its information and culture minister said yesterday, as its corruption crackdown continues against the backdrop of the country's worst economic crisis in years. President Muhammadu Buhari, elected last year largely on his vow to fight corruption, has vowed to recover "mind-boggling" sums of money stolen from the oil sector and said public coffers were "virtually empty" when he took office last May.

Since then the country has endured an economic crisis caused by the sharp fall in global oil prices, making the need to recoup lost money more acute. Crude sales account for around 70 percent of national income. In a statement, Information Minister Lai Mohammed said cash and assets recovered between May 29 last year, when Buhari took office, and May 25 this year totaled \$9.1 billion. The government has said it plans to generate 3.38 trillion naira (\$17 billion) this year from non-oil sources to help fund the \$30.6 billion budget signed into law by Buhari last month. It was not immediately clear how

much outstanding money in total is still being sought by the government. "All these are monies recovered from individuals and entities who had either hidden, stolen, diverted or were in possession of monies belonging to the nation," the minister's special adviser, Segun Adeyemi said. "These recovered funds include monies withheld by past government officials, monies kept in private accounts, monies diverted to private pockets and monies in possession of government officials not disclosed after leaving government."

The information minister said he could not name any individuals from whom money had been recovered for legal reasons. He said some of the money came after companies that had failed to pay taxes were forced to do so retrospectively. The ministry also said a total of \$321 million was yet to be recovered from Nigerians in Switzerland, the Britain, the United States and the United Arab Emirates or their assets held in those countries. Last month Buhari urged other countries and the United Nations to speed up the process of repatriating stolen money held abroad, which he said was becoming "tedious". — Agencies

BISHOPS COULD BE FIRED OVER 'NEGLIGENCE' ON CHILD ABUSE

VATICAN CITY: Catholic bishops guilty of negligence in respect to child abuse cases can now be dismissed from office, Pope Francis said yesterday in a move hiking pressure on the Church's hierarchy. The move was announced just two weeks after the pope came under fire for meeting a top French cardinal accused of covering up for a pedophile priest in a scandal that has shaken France's Catholic Church.

The decision, which will also apply to other senior Church officials, was unveiled in a papal decree which said such cases would now fall under existing canon law allowing for prelates to be sacked for "serious reasons". "The Church, like a loving mother, loves all her children, but treats and protects with special affection the smallest and most helpless," the papal decree said. Pope Francis came to power promising a crackdown on cover-ups and a zero tolerance approach to abuse itself, but victims' groups have expressed discontent with his record on ridding the Church of the taint of pedophilia.

Known as an Apostolic letter, the text stresses the need for "special diligence" in caring for minors and vulnerable adults, with those who demonstrate negligence in tackling cases of abuse facing the threat of dismissal. That diligence is required even "without grave moral culpability" on the part of the bishop involved, Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi said in an

explanatory statement. "For removal from office, in the case of abuse of minors, it is 'sufficient for the lack of diligence to be grave' while in other cases a 'very grave' lack of diligence must be demonstrated," he added. A "college of legal experts"—cardinals and bishops—has been set up to assist the pope reach a decision arriving at a definitive decision in a particular case.

The Barbarin case

A string of historic pedophilia cases in North America and Europe has unleashed widespread criticism of the Catholic hierarchy, including allegations that in some cases bishops were aware of sexual predators among the priesthood but failed to curb them. Last month, Francis held a surprise meeting with French Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, the under-fire Archbishop of Lyon who is suspected of covering up for a pedophile priest. The meeting came just days after the pope was quoted as saying it would be "nonsensical and imprudent" to seek Barbarin's resignation at this stage. It was not immediately clear whether the papal decree would impact on the Barbarin case. French examining magistrates are currently carrying out two preliminary investigations to decide whether to pursue charges against the archbishop for his handling of the allegations against Bernard Preynat, a priest in his diocese who has been charged with sex abuse. — AFP

BRITON JAILED 15 YEARS IN US OVER N KOREA DRUGS

NEW YORK: A British man was sentenced to 15 years in a US prison on Friday for conspiring to import 100 kilos (220 pounds) of North Korean methamphetamine into the United States. Scott Stammers, who pleaded guilty to conspiracy in August 2015, will be deported after serving his 181-month sentence. Dressed in khaki pants and an olive top, Stammers declined an opportunity to address the New York court. "No, I'm fine, thank you very much sir," he told US Federal Judge Andrew Carter. Stammers had faced a sentence of up to 30 years, but the judge cited mitigating factors that included the fact that he has two children and was held in harsh conditions in Thailand before being extradited.

He said the defendant's "somewhat difficult upbringing" was another reason, as was his past use of alcohol, cocaine and methamphetamine, which "may have contributed to his involvement in this offense." "Mr Stammers I wish you the best of luck. I hope you can get your life back on track," said

Carter, expressing hope that the defendant can be the father that "your children need you to be." He was one of five defendants arrested in Thailand in September 2013 on suspicion of preparing to ship the drugs by boat.

Two of his co-defendants belonged to a criminal gang, which claimed to have stockpiled a ton of North Korean methamphetamines in the Philippines for storage, according to US court documents. Stammers lived in the Philippines prior to his arrest and was involved in operational details of criminal activity in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, US prosecutors said. Court documents described him as a poor student and said he got first job in private security at 18. Within a year he was stabbed on the job, but went onto make "a good living" handling security matters across Southeast Asia, according to court filings. Despite difficulties at school, he developed a working knowledge of Tagalog, spoken in the Philippines, Thai and Cantonese, they added. — AFP



ABUJA: Nigeria's former national security adviser Sambo Dasuki attends a hearing to face charges of possessing weapons illegally, at the Federal High Court in Abuja, Nigeria. Dasuki is accused of diverting \$2.1 billion meant to fight the Boko Haram Islamic insurgency. — AP

FRANCE FLOODS EASE AS SWOLLEN SEINE RECEDE

PARIS: The rain-swollen River Seine in Paris began receding yesterday after reaching its highest level in three decades, easing fears after devastating floods sent the Louvre and other riverside museums scrambling to protect their treasures. From a peak of 6.10 meters in the early hours of yesterday, the river began to subside, falling to 6.04 meters at 10:00 am, the environment ministry's Vigicrues flood watch website said.

The record for the Seine is 8.62 meters, reached in 1910. "We're now in the stabilization phase, even if we could still get one or two centimeters more," said Bruno Janet, head of modeling at Vigicrues. The city remained on orange flood alert but the threat appeared to have shifted to northeastern France, where threatened storms could cause other rivers to burst their banks, as well as around the northern port of Le Havre where the Seine flows into the sea. The Louvre and Orsay museums, which sit on opposite banks of the Seine, remained closed Saturday, a day after shutting their doors in a race to move art treasures from their basements to higher ground.

Yesterday, pieces of driftwood, plastic bags and other detritus swept past in the muddy waters which engulfed the city's famous riverside walkways, a popular haunt of strolling couples. Two metro stations remained closed and services on a train line that hugs the Seine was

still suspended in places. Boat traffic was also suspended. The City of Paris said it had opened two gyms to shelter the homeless. Across Europe, at least 17 people have been killed in floods caused by pounding rains that have trapped people in their homes and forced rescuers to navigate swamped streets in lifeboats.

Four of them have died in France, Prime Minister Manuel Valls said Saturday. More than 20,000 people have been evacuated over the past week from the Loire Valley and the greater Paris area. Over 17,110 homes remained without power Saturday, electricity supplier Enedis said. Paris firefighters warned people to keep away from dangerous parts of the river, but crowds gathered undeterred on bridges to snap pictures of the fast-flowing waters. "It is a reminder that nature is more powerful than man and we cannot do anything, only wait," said Gabriel Riboulet, a 26-year-old entrepreneur, as he took in the scene.

'Catastrophic' damage

French President Francois Hollande said a state of "natural catastrophe" would be declared when the cabinet meets on Wednesday, a necessary step to trigger compensation payments. Nationwide losses could reach more than 600 million euros (\$680 million), said Bernard Spitz of France's association of insurers. The head of national railways opera-

tor SNCF, Guillaume Pepy, said the rail network had suffered "catastrophic" damage which would run to tens of millions of euros.

Persistently heavy rainfall across western and central Europe has claimed victims from at least four countries. Eleven people have been killed in the German states of Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg, and two in Romania, while a beekeeper died in Belgium while trying to save his hives. In France, the victims included a man on horseback who drowned after being swept away by a swollen river in Evry-Gregy-sur-Yerres, southeast of Paris. Environment Minister Segolene Royal said she feared more bodies would be found as waters receded in villages in the centre of the country, some of which have suffered their worst floods in a century.

Seine star power

The closure of the Louvre and Orsay museums, which receive a combined total of 12.5 million visitors a year, highlighted the flood threat to key cultural sites. Eva Palomares, a holidaymaker from the Italian city of Milan, said she was disappointed to be unable to visit the Louvre but added: "The star today is the Seine. You have to feel its angry rumble." On Friday evening, Hollande visited the museum, where dozens of volunteers toiled through the night to bring some of the 38,000 artworks

thought to be at risk to safety. The Louvre will remain closed until Wednesday while the Orsay said it would reopen Tuesday. The Grand Palais exhibition centre was also shut, as were two of the National Library's sites. The down-

pours have added to the gloom caused by months of protests and strikes over a labor reform bill that have continued in the run-up to the June 10 kick-off of the Euro 2016 football championships. — AFP



Picture shows a flooded bank of the Seine River. — AFP