

International

# Khan's party begins coalition talks as rivals plan protests

## Parties pledge to boycott joining National Assembly

ISLAMABAD: Imran Khan's party said it has begun talks with independents and small parties to form a coalition government after a resounding triumph in Pakistan's general election, as rival parties planned protests over alleged vote rigging. Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party (PTI) won 116 seats in Wednesday's ballot, short of the 137 needed for a simple majority but a surprisingly strong showing that helped fuel suspicion of rigging.

The latest tally, which was updated yesterday afternoon following long delays, showed the outgoing Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party in distant second place with 64 seats. Khan's party has begun reaching out to potential coalition partners to form a government, according to spokesman Fawad Chaudhry, a task that analysts said should be straightforward. "We have contacted small parties and independent members, they will soon meet party leaders in Islamabad," Chaudhry said late Friday, adding that the process was likely to take about 10 days.

Chaudhry's comments followed an announcement by rival parties vowing to launch a protest

"movement", after foreign observers voiced concerns about the contest. More than a dozen parties calling themselves the All Parties Conference (APC) promised to protest over the results. However the group remained divided with some parties pledging to boycott joining the National Assembly and others calling for a new vote.

The PML-N announced its support for the group but stopped short of saying it would boycott the new parliament. And the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), which was notably absent from the APC, said in a separate announcement that it rejected the results, but vowed to try to convince the other parties to participate in the parliamentary process.

### No stamina

Retired general and analyst Talat Masood said the APC may succeed in sparking pockets of unrest but did not see the movement upsetting stability at the national level. "Opposition parties are divided and they are not genuinely in a mood to form any major opposition. I don't think they have this stamina and the support of the people for going for a big movement," said

Masood. The protests announcement late Friday came as the United States, the European Union and other observers aired reservations over widespread claims that the powerful military had tried to fix the playing field in Khan's favor.

Khan's victory represents an end to decades of rotating leadership between the PML-N and the Bhutto dynasty's PPP that was punctuated by periods of military rule.

The vote was meant to be a rare democratic transition in the Muslim country, which has been ruled by the powerful army for roughly half its history. But it was marred by violence and allegations of military interference in the months leading up to the vote, with Khan seen as the beneficiary.

The former cricket star will face myriad challenges, including militant extremism, an economic crisis with speculation that Pakistan will have to seek a bailout from the International Monetary Fund, water shortages and a booming population. He will also have to contend with the same issue as many of his predecessors: how to maintain a balance of power in civil-military relations. — AFP



ISLAMABAD: Newly elected independent candidates Rafaqat Ali Gilani, center, Muhammad Hanif Patafi, left, and Basharat, right, who joined Pakistan's cricket-turned politician and head of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice) party Imran Khan, talks to the media after a meeting with Khan in Islamabad. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Indian truckers end strike

MUMBAI: Indian truckers have called off their strike after eight days as the government agreed to consider their demands to cut levies on diesel fuel, an official of the protesting group said yesterday. The All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC), an organization of transporters that organized the strike, had demanded a cut in federal and state levies on diesel by bringing the fuel under the scope of the nationwide Goods and Services Tax (GST). India's Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari late on Friday said the government was sympathetic towards truckers' concerns and had formed a committee to look into their demands. — Reuters

#### Plane crash in Swiss kills four

GENEVA: Four people died when their light aircraft crashed into the summit of a glacier in the Swiss Alps, police said yesterday, in the latest fatal accident to hit the popular tourist region. The plane went down 3,300 meters above sea level at 4:45 pm on Friday in an area known as the Dunand Pass, police in southern Valais canton said in a statement. After receiving an alert, authorities dispatched rescue teams to the summit but found the pilot and three passengers dead at the scene. "The circumstances of the accident have not yet been determined," police added. The victims have not yet been formally identified. — AFP

#### Mauritius minister resigns

PORT LOUIS: The minister for gender equality in Mauritius has stepped down, the prime minister announced, after an inquiry on the Indian Ocean island linked politicians, police, lawyers and prison guards to drug traffickers. The findings of the commission of inquiry released Friday accused the minister, Roubina Jadoo-Jaunbocus, a lawyer, of meeting jailed drug traffickers who were not her clients. She was also alleged to have been complicit in money laundering and arranging a money transfer to a drug trafficker. With deputy speaker in the national assembly Sanjeev Teeluckdharry also resigning after being implicated in the scandal, the commission called for further in-depth investigations to take place. — AFP

## Doctors sacked in Nicaragua for treating wounded protesters

MANAGUA: More than a dozen doctors, nurses and technical staff in a public hospital in Nicaragua have been sacked because they treated wounded anti-government protesters and were seen backing their cause, medical sources said Friday. Those fired "without any legal justification" worked at the Oscar Danilo Rosales Hospital in the northwestern city of Leon, surgery and endoscopy department chief Javier Pastora said. The hospital is run by the health ministry.

The allegation bolstered reports that those perceived to back protest claims calling for the ouster of President Daniel Ortega were being persecuted by his government and sympathizers. Nicaragua has seen more than three months of unrest as those protests were brutally countered by police and armed pro-government paramilitaries. More than 300 people have been killed and thousands have fled to neighboring Costa Rica for safety, according to rights groups. Pastora, who has worked in Nicaragua's public health system for 33 years, said the staff members were fired because they were deemed to support the protesters by treating them. "They said we were people showing solidarity and support for the people's fight," he said. Pastora said at least nine medical specialists were among those fired.

### Dismissed in surgery

"I was in surgery when they came from human resources to tell me I could no longer stay because I was fired," said one of the dismissed medics, cancer surgeon Aaron Delgado. A dismissed pediatrician, Edgar Zuniga, called the axings "arbitrary." They were fired "for thinking differently, for saying Nicaragua needs democracy, freedom, that the repression and killings must stop and there has to be dialogue," he said.

The staff and residents in Leon held a protest in front of the hospital demanding the sackings be reversed. Leon used to be a bastion of support for the Sandinista movement Ortega leads, but as the unrest took hold, there too paramilitaries and anti-riot police have stormed the city several times to crush protests. Rights groups say more than 2,000 people have been hurt across the country since the clashes erupted mid-April. — AFP

## Polls open in Australia 'Super Saturday' by-elections

SYDNEY: Australia's political leaders made last-gasp bids to sway voters yesterday as polls opened in five by-elections that could see the conservative government boost its wafer-thin parliamentary majority. The seats are being contested following a string of forced resignations in the opposition Labor party after the High Court reaffirmed an obscure provision in the 1901 constitution that bars dual citizenship from elected office.

Picking up just one of them will double Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's parliamentary majority to two. The

outcome is also being seen as a barometer on Turnbull's re-election prospects and whether opposition Labor leader Bill Shorten should potentially be replaced ahead of national polls due by May next year. Half a million people are eligible to vote.

Two of the five seats are considered Labor strongholds while another looks likely to remain with the independent Centre Alliance. The others—Longman in Queensland state and Braddon in Tasmania state—are too close to call, although an opinion poll in Saturday's The Australian newspaper suggested Labor could cling on. Should Turnbull's Liberal coalition win a seat, it would be the first time a government has clinched one from the opposition at a by-election in 98 years.

Turnbull has framed the polls as a referendum on the government's "jobs and growth" agenda while Labor is campaigning on better health funding. "All of our candidates are standing for stronger economic growth, lower taxes,

more jobs, higher wages, guaranteed funding for essential services that comes from a stronger economy," Turnbull said during a final pitch in Braddon. "Labor is a threat to all of that." "We're saying to Australians voting today: don't put your essential services at risk. Don't put your jobs at risk. Don't put stronger economic growth at risk."

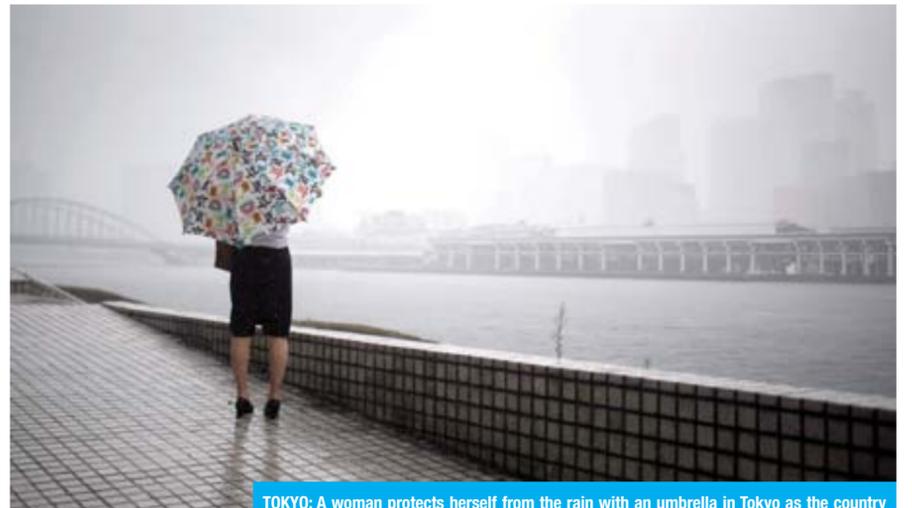
While the government continues to trail Labor in opinion polls, the deficit has been narrowing and Shorten's personal popularity has been waning. "I accept that when these campaigns started, Labor was the underdog in both Braddon and Longman. But Labor never gives up," said Shorten, also campaigning in Braddon. "The critical question to ask yourself when you cast your vote in these by-elections, is whether or not you want more of the same? Or do you want to see this government do better? Do you want to see better for our hospitals and schools? Better for our wages? Or do you just want to see more tax cuts for the top end of town?" — AFP

## Disaster-hit Japan braces for powerful typhoon

TOKYO: A powerful typhoon hurtled towards Japan yesterday, prompting local authorities to issue early evacuation orders, with western areas recently devastated by floods and landslides in the storm's crosshairs. Typhoon Jongdari, packing winds of up to 180 kilometers an hour, is forecast to make landfall on the country's main island yesterday night or early today, according to Japan's Meteorological Agency.

TV footage showed high waves smashing onto rocks and seawalls on the coastline in Shimoda, southwest of Tokyo, and trees buffeted by strong winds and heavy rain. The storm, currently some 200 kilometers south of Tokyo, is expected to barrel towards the western Chugoku region today, where record rainfall earlier this month unleashed flooding and landslides, killing around 220 people and leaving more than 4,000 survivors still living in temporary shelters. The weather agency warned of heavy rain, landslides, strong winds and high waves, and urged people to consider early evacuation. "We want people especially in the down-pour-hit regions to pay close attention to evacuation advisories," meteorological agency official Minako Sakurai told reporters. The western city of Shobara in Hiroshima prefecture issued an evacuation order to some 36,400 residents as a precautionary measure, officials said.

TV footage showed workers and residents hurriedly piling up sand bags to build temporary barriers against potential floods. "Although it has not rained here, we are urging people to evacuate before it gets dark," Masaharu Kataoka, a city official, said. More evacuation orders and advisories were issued in western Japan, including Kure in Hiroshima prefecture, where some 6,380 residents were urged to evacuate, news reports said. In Japan, evacuation orders are not mandatory and people often remain at home, and are



TOKYO: A woman protects herself from the rain with an umbrella in Tokyo as the country braces for Typhoon Jongdari. — AFP

later trapped by rapidly rising water or sudden landslides. "It's going to deal a double punch," a resident in Okayama told public broadcaster NHK, referring to the recent killer downpours and the incoming typhoon. "We are seriously worried," he said. More than 410 domestic flights have been cancelled so far because of Typhoon Jongdari, while ferry services connecting Tokyo with nearby islands were also cancelled due to high waves, news reports said.

The flooding in the Chugoku region was Japan's worst weather-related disaster in decades, and many residents of affected areas are still living in shelters or damaged homes. "We are fully ready 24 hours a day to evacuate residents," Tadahiko Mizushima, an official of Okayama prefecture in

Chugoku, said. "We are paying special attention to the areas where restoration of river banks is under way as it would be the first heavy rain since the disaster."

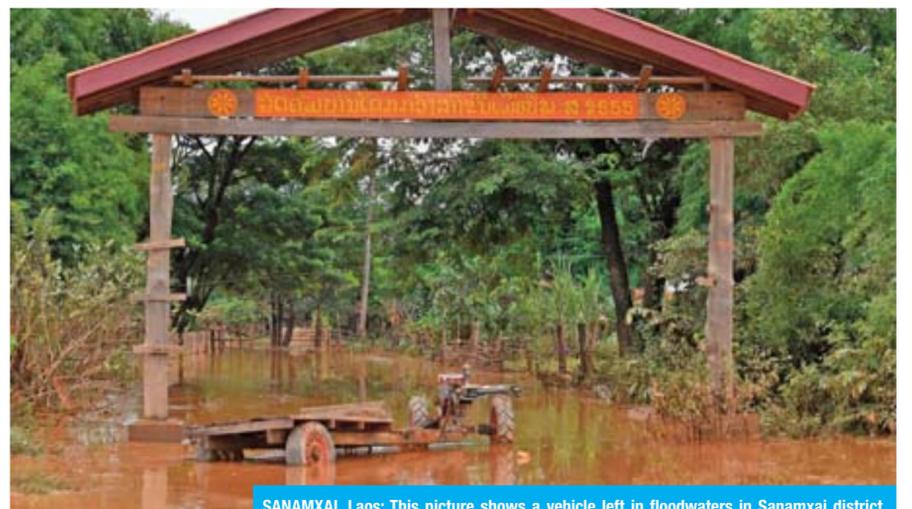
Officials are particularly cautious after the deadly downpours because many people did not heed evacuation orders and became trapped. Some critics said the orders were issued too late. "We are afraid that people may not be able to evacuate due to strong wind or floods blocking evacuation routes," Hiroshima governor Hidehiko Yuzaki told reporters. "I would like people to evacuate in advance so that they can save their lives," Yuzaki said. Japan is now in typhoon season, and is regularly struck by major storm systems during the summer and autumn. — AFP

## Thick mud hampers Laos dam rescue

ATTAPEU, Laos: Rescuers battled thick mud and flood waters across a swathe of remote southern Laos to find survivors of a dam burst that submerged entire villages, as an official suggested more than 1,100 people may still be unaccounted for. The exact number of dead and missing from Monday's dam collapse remains a mystery because of the complexity of the rescue operation in an inaccessible area and the secretive reflexes of Laos's Communist authorities in the face of an unprecedented crisis.

"The search is very complicated, many areas cannot be accessed by cars or boats. Also we have limited modern equipment to bring to the field," deputy secretary of Attapeu province committee Meenaporn Chaichompoo told reporters Friday. She also said hundreds still have not been located, five days after the dam burst. "We can't find 1,126 people," she said, adding that 131 have been confirmed missing by relatives. Initially officials said 27 people were confirmed dead, but Meenaporn reduced that to six, without explanation. The remoteness of the disaster zone and slow trickle of often contradictory information has sparked fears the death toll could rise sharply. A stretch of land dozens of kilometers long and wide was submerged when the Xe-Namnoy dam collapsed after heavy rains.

Slowly retreating floodwaters have cut off access to villages and covered much of the area with thick, sticky mud. "This is one of the worst (disasters) I've ever seen. Especially because we're not a very strong country in terms of rescue operations," a volunteer rescue worker said, requesting anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to media. Days into the treacherous search for survivors, questions are being raised about the quality of the construction of the \$1.2 billion dam, a joint venture between South Korean, Laotian and Thai



SANAMXAI, Laos: This picture shows a vehicle left in floodwaters in Sanamxai district, Attapeu province, following a dam collapse that caused flooding. — AFP

firms. Operators said it burst after heavy rains in a country regularly battered by monsoons.

But Laos Minister of Energy and Mines Khanmany Inthirath said poor design contributed to the accident, according to state media. One of the Korean firms involved in the project, SK Engineering & Construction, said it was investigating the cause of the dam break and would donate \$10 million in relief aid. The accident has kicked up criticism of Laos' ambitious dam-building scheme as it bids to become a major power exporter, billing itself

the "battery of Asia" with more than 50 projects set to go online by 2020. Villagers have complained of being displaced, while river waters crucial for fishing and farming have been diverted, destroying livelihoods in one of Asia's poorest countries. The accident has prompted fears over the safety of other dams in the country. "Most of the dams are built by foreign companies and Laos authorities don't have expert knowledge and management to check for weaknesses or problems, that's our worry," villager Si Wonghajak said yesterday. — AFP