



Tanzania buries disaster victims as toll hits 224

The significance of attack on military parade in Iran

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MONTREAL: In this file photo, Women Foreign Ministers' pose for a picture during their meeting in Montreal, Canada. Female foreign ministers meeting for the first summit of its kind vowed to bring a "women's perspective" to foreign policy. — AFP (See Page 8)

Swiss region votes for 'burqa ban'

Islamic Central Council of Switzerland slams ban as 'Islamophobic'

GENEVA: A second Swiss canton will introduce a regional "burqa ban", after voters in St Gallen yesterday emphatically backed prohibiting all face-covering garments in public spaces. At the same time, voters across Switzerland resoundingly rejected initiatives aimed at boosting local farming and promoting more ethical and environmental standards in food production, amid fears of cost hikes and reduced consumer choice.

In the northeastern canton of St Gallen, nearly 67 percent of voters came out in favor of introducing the implicit "burqa ban", according to official results, which showed turnout was 36 percent. That paves the way for the canton to follow the example of the southern region of Ticino, where a law was introduced two years ago that appeared to be aimed at burqas and other Muslim veils. Three other cantons-Zurich, Solothurn and Glarus-have rejected introducing such bans in recent years.

A text stipulating that "any person who renders themselves unrecognizable by covering their face in a public space, and thus endangers public security or social and religious peace will be fined" was adopted by lawmakers in St Gallen late last year. That law passed the regional parliament with support from the populist right and centre parties-but the issue was put to the people after the

Green and Green Liberal parties demanded a referendum. Supporters of the ban insisted in campaign literature that "it is integral to our culture and our values to be able to look each other in the eyes without hiding".

'Islamophobic'

The Islamic Central Council of Switzerland yesterday slammed the ban as "Islamophobic". Other opponents have insisted the ban was useless, stressing that very few women wear burqas or other face-covering veils in St Gallen. Opponents have also pointed out that the canton already has a law prohibiting face-covering during demonstrations that require police authorization as well as at sporting events.

A review published recently on the effect of the law introduced in Ticino in 2016 meanwhile showed that football fans had felt the most impact, while fines for burqa-use could be counted on one hand, the ATS news agency reported. Switzerland's government last year



Canton becomes second to ban burqas in public

opposed an initiative aimed at creating a nationwide burqa ban, saying it should be up to the regions to determine if such measures are appropriate. Voters across Switzerland are however expected to be called to vote on the issue next year after the populist rightwing Swiss People's Party gathered the 100,000 signatures needed to put any subject to a referendum as part of Switzerland's famous direct democratic system.

Swiss snub 'fair food'

At the national level, the Swiss meanwhile overwhelmingly rejected two schemes linked to agriculture and food security which urged a shift towards more ethical and environmentally friendly food production, as well as protection for Swiss farmers against cheap food imports. The final results showed that 61 and 68 percent of voters respectively rejected the "Fair Food" and "Food Sovereignty" initiatives. The "Food Sovereignty" initiative, which had the backing of

Switzerland's powerful farmers' union, had among other things called for turning a moratorium on genetically modified organisms (GMO) into a total ban.

Early polls had suggested strong backing for both initiatives, but support fell after the government, parliament and other opponents argued they could send prices skyrocketing, limit consumer choice and might violate Switzerland's international trade obligations. Geneva and three other French-speaking cantons supported both initiatives, but the German-speaking part of the country voted massively against them. Also yesterday, Swiss voters overwhelmingly backed a proposal to enshrine support for cycling in the constitution.

All 26 cantons and nearly 74 percent of voters came out in favor of adding an article to the constitution giving federal authorities more responsibility for developing cycling paths across the country. The text meanwhile only provides federal authorities with the possibility of stepping in on matters related to promoting cycling without obliging them to do so, and the cantons are expected to remain largely in charge. The national votes this time failed to garner much excitement, resulting in below-average turnout, with only 37 percent of eligible voters casting their ballots. — Reuters

Torrential rains kill 4 in Tunisia

NABEUL: Flash floods in Tunisia's Cap Bon peninsula have killed at least four people, authorities said yesterday, as surging waters caused by heavy rains carried away homes, cars and chunks of road. Among the four dead were two sisters, swept away as they left work at a factory in Bou Argoub, 45 kilometers southeast of the capital, the interior ministry said. A 60-year-old man drowned near the town of Takilsa and another man was found dead in Bir Bouregba, close to the town of Hammamet, ministry spokesman Sofiene Zaag said.

Saturday's storm caused water levels in some areas to rise as much as 1.7 meters, as bridges and roads were damaged in record rains that dropped the equivalent of nearly six months of average precipitation. "It was raining since noon and (in the afternoon) it became torrential. The water flooded over the bridge and onto the road," Moncef Barouni, a resident in the coastal town of Nabeul, told AFP. In just minutes, "the water swept away the fence, then the

boiler room, the summer kitchen and a part of the house," he said. "I was scared for my life."

The storm dumped 200 millimetres (7.9 inches) of rain on Nabeul and up to 225 millimetres in the city of Beni Khalled, in the peninsula's centre, according to Tunisia's National Institute of Meteorology. It was the heaviest rainfall since the institute began keeping a record in 1995, the institute said, adding that it had issued a warning about the storms on Friday. Videos posted to social networks showed surging waters carrying cars and pieces of road in the north of the peninsula.

Tunisian authorities said they had dispatched police, army and rescue teams to the region on Saturday afternoon, in addition to mobilizing ambulances and two helicopters. Authorities also took preventative measures in the Sahel region further south in anticipation of further rains, but yesterday they appeared to have subsided. The sun was out yesterday and receding water levels meant most of the area's roads were passable by car, Zaag said, although the region's telephone networks were still largely out of service. Severe thunderstorms have hit the North African country since the middle of last week, flooding roads and damaging property, sparking anger against the authorities for allegedly failing to maintain drainage systems. —AFP



NABEUL, Tunisia: A picture taken yesterday in the Tunisian coastal governate of Nabeul shows people gathering at the site of collapsed bridge following deadly flash flooding in the town of Bir Challouf. — AFP

Paradise, power and polls: Five questions as Maldives votes

NEW DELHI: The Maldives-a country of 1,200 islands in the Indian Ocean best known for its white beaches and blue lagoons-voted yesterday in a presidential election. The archipelago of 260,000 people has seen political opposition suppressed and press freedom curtailed in recent years under its strongman leader. Will the poll nudge the Maldives back toward democracy, or further its spiral into autocracy? Here are five things to know:

Who is the incumbent?

Abdulla Yameen, a once mild-mannered civil servant turned strongman president, is seeking a second term in office. The 59-year-old has ruled with an iron fist since 2013. The free press has been cowed, the military used to stave off impeachment, and most opponents-even Yameen's own half-brother-have been jailed. In a power struggle in February, Yameen launched what the UN called an "all-out assault on democracy", declaring a state of emergency. At its height, he sent soldiers to storm the Supreme Court and arrest judges who had ordered the release of political prisoners. Emergency rule was not lifted for 45 days.

Who are the opposition?

The opposition have fielded a joint candidate, the little-known Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, 54. But campaigning has been difficult, with many key figures in exile. Mohamed Nasheed, an exiled

opposition figure and former president, withdrew his candidacy after being barred from running. He was convicted of terrorism in 2015 in a trial widely viewed as politically motivated.

Do they stand a chance?

The odds are stacked in Yameen's favor. Rights groups say his regime has used harsh fines and vague decrees to silence dissent and impose censorship in the lead-up to polling day. Even wearing T-shirts emblazoned with pictures of opposition figures is out of bounds, local journalists say. Human Rights Watch says new vote-counting rules adopted just days before the poll favor Yameen and may deny Maldivians a right to choose. The opposition has publicly expressed confidence that voters-at home and abroad-will come out against the regime. But it has accused Yameen of laying the groundwork to "steal" this election.

Why does it matter?

There are broader geopolitical concerns at play. The Maldives, like other smaller regional countries once firmly in India's orbit, has drifted closer to China in recent years, which has given hundreds of millions of dollars in loans to the atoll nation. Beijing has been accused of seeking to develop facilities around the Indian Ocean-a so-called "string of pearls"-to counter the rise of its rival and secure its own economic interests. The tropical archipelago is also a hugely popular holiday destination, attracting nearly 1.4 million foreigners in 2017.

What could happen next?

Election irregularities, or a repeat of February's constitutional hijinks, could see sanctions imposed. The European Union said in July it was ready to impose travel bans and asset freezes on individuals if the situation did not improve. The US State Department this month warned it would "consider appropriate measures" if the election was not free and fair. — AFP