

## International

# Snap decision to delay election disappoints voters in Nigeria

## Reports of problems with the delivery of election materials

**ABUJA:** Nigerians hoping to cast their ballots in elections set for Saturday were instead turned away from polling stations after the electoral commission's snap decision to delay the vote by a week. The move "deeply disappointed" President Muhammadu Buhari, who issued a statement calling for calm. "I, therefore, appeal to all Nigerians to refrain from all civil disorder and remain peaceful, patriotic and united to ensure that no force or conspiracy derail our democratic development," he said.

Many voters were caught unawares by the early morning announcement and arrived at polling places to find the doors barred and staff absent. "Why didn't they announce the delay earlier? Why make the announcement in the middle of the night?" asked Chidi Nwakuna, a businessman who showed up early to vote in the southern city of Port Harcourt. Voting had been due to start at nearly 120,000 polling stations in Africa's most populous nation at 0700 GMT, with a record 73 candidates on the ballot.

Buhari, 76, was set to seek a second term of office against a stiff challenge from the main opposition candidate, former vice president Atiku Abubakar, 72. But rumors began circulating late on Friday about a possible postponement after widespread reports of problems with the delivery of election materials, including ballot papers. Members of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) held an emergency session in Abuja and after examining the logistics plans concluded the timetable was "no longer feasible", commission chairman Mahmood Yakubu said.

Presidential and parliamentary elections are now set for February 23, and governorship and state assembly elections have been pushed back to March 9, Yakubu said. "This was a difficult decision for the commission to take but necessary for the successful delivery of

elections and the consolidation of our democracy," he added. The two main political parties swiftly condemned the move and accused each other of orchestrating the delay as a way of manipulating the vote, sentiments echoed by voters. "I see this postponement of the election as a... ploy to rig," said Oyi Adamezie, a voter in the city of Warri.

### 'We will overcome this'

For his part, Abubakar of the main opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) blamed the Buhari government for "instigating the postponement" but called on supporters to remain calm. "We will overcome this. You can postpone an election but you cannot postpone destiny," he added in a statement. Nigeria has postponed voting before: in 2015, INEC announced a six-week delay just one week before the election, citing security concerns linked to the Boko Haram insurgency.

The six-week delay was seen as a way for then president Goodluck Jonathan to claw back votes after a strong challenge from Buhari, an opposition candidate. The same argument

may be made again, with little to separate Buhari and Abubakar. Yet even before the delay's announcement, challenges were apparent in the vote's organization. In many areas suffering intermittent electricity supply and poor road infrastructure, thousands of INEC agents had been working into the night to deliver election materials. "They had much time to prepare," said Austin Onwusoanya, a civil servant in the largest city Lagos who was to manage a polling unit that now stood unused. "There are other things going on."

### Campaign trail

Yesterday's last-gasp postponement comes after an election campaign in which Buhari had sought to por-



**YOLA:** A woman checks her name in a voting list without knowing that the general elections was postponed at a polling station. —AFP

tray himself as a continuity candidate. He came to power in 2015 on a promise to defeat Boko Haram Islamists, tackle rampant corruption and improve the country's oil-dependent economy. But the jihadists still mount attacks, and there is widening insecurity elsewhere, while slow growth as the economy limps back from recession has hit Buhari's stock.

So, too, has the perception he has only targeted political opponents as part of his high-profile anti-corruption campaign. Buhari's purported shortcomings have been a feature of Abubakar's campaign, who has billed himself as a modern, energetic and pro-business leader. The former vice-president's past has also fea-

tured prominently, as the ruling party resurrected controversies from his time in office and alleged links to corruption.

The election — the sixth in the 20 years since civilian rule was restored — is likely to be one of the last times men of Buhari and Abubakar's generation will feature so prominently. They have been fixtures on Nigeria's turbulent political scene for decades and are the oldest on the ballot. Just over half of the 84 million registered voters are aged 18-35, prompting calls for more representative candidates unburdened by involvement in Nigeria's traumatic past. —AFP

## Macron sends invite to Italian prez as ambassador returns

**PARIS:** French President Emmanuel Macron invited his Italian counterpart to Paris, his office said Friday, in a conciliatory gesture as France's ambassador returned to Rome after he was recalled for a week in a diplomatic spat between the neighbors. Macron, who spoke by telephone to Italian President Sergio Mattarella on Tuesday to "reaffirm the importance" of bilateral ties, asked the French ambassador to deliver the invitation at a meeting Friday evening, the Elysee Palace said.

Mattarella, a centre-left politician, is an elder statesman whose job as president carries limited political powers. France had announced on February 7 that it was recalling its ambassador, Christian Masset, to protest "unfounded attacks and outlandish claims" by Italy's populist coalition government — led by deputy prime minister Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini. "I am very happy that the ambassador is on his way back to Italy," Luigi Di Maio, who is deputy prime minister, told reporters in Rome. "I shall meet him, I want to ask him for a meeting," Di Maio added.

Relations between the two countries have fractured due to repeated clashes between Di Maio and Salvini's populist coalition government and France's centrist Macron. Paris was incensed when Di Maio made a surprise visit to France on February 5 to meet a group of radical "yellow vest" protesters who have led demonstrations against Macron. "The wind of change has crossed the Alps," Di Maio wrote afterwards of the three months of protests against Macron, adding that he was preparing a common front ahead of European Parliament elections in May. —AFP

## UK and Russia hold first talks in over a year

**LONDON:** Junior foreign ministers from Britain and Russia met in Germany yesterday in the highest-level contact between the two countries since an alleged nerve agent attack in Britain last March froze diplomatic relations. Britain's Minister for Europe Alan Duncan held talks with Russia's First Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov on the margins of the Munich Security Conference, according to the foreign office in London.

"Alan underlined that we have deep differences, and the Russian state would need to choose a different path and act as a responsible international partner before there can be a change in our current relationship with Russia," it said in a statement. The meeting is the first between ministers from the two countries following the poisoning of a former Russian spy in the English city of Salisbury on March 4 which Britain has blamed on Moscow.

The attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal, which Britain said was done using a Soviet era nerve agent Novichok, plunged relations to their lowest ebb in decades. The attack killed a British woman who came into contact with the Novichok, as well as injuring several others including a policeman. Among a raft of responses, London suspended all planned high-level bilateral contacts between the two countries, and cancelled ministers and members of the royal family attending last summer's World Cup in Russia. —AFP

## French to mark three months of 'yellow vest' protests

**PARIS:** Demonstrators are to hit French city streets again yesterday, marking three months of "yellow vest" protests as a poll now suggests that most of the country wants them to stop. The number of those attending the weekly rallies has dropped since 287,000 turned out on November 17, the first Saturday of protest.

And for the first time, a poll found Wednesday that more than half those questioned felt it was time to end the protests. On February 9, the 13th weekend of anti-government actions, 51,000 people took to the streets according to police, though protest organizers put the figure at 118,000. Violence has marred nearly every large-scale rally. In Paris, where 4,000 gathered last week, clashes broke out outside the National Assembly building where one demonstrator lost a hand, reportedly as he tried to bat away a stun grenade.

Masked activists tried to break down barriers protecting the parliament but were repelled by police firing tear gas and grenades. As the march continued, vandals burned rubbish bins and cars

and smashed bus shelters, cash machines and shop windows along the route. One of the torched vehicles belonged to Sentinelle, an anti-terrorism unit. Interior Minister Christophe Castaner expressed his "indignation and disgust" in a tweet.

Some 550 shops have been damaged by protesters in the capital since mid November. Thousands of protesters also turned out in the southern cities of Marseille, Montpellier, Bordeaux and Toulouse — strongholds of the movement — as well as several cities in the north and west of France. The "yellow vest" movement started as a protest against rising fuel taxes, but it has become one of opposition to President Emmanuel Macron's policies.

Speaking at a meeting with local mayors on Thursday, Macron said it was time for a "return to reason", adding that authorities would act with "greater firmness" against violent demonstrators. The interior ministry said 1,796 people have been sentenced for rioting or other acts of violence over the past three months, while 1,422 more are awaiting trial. Ex-boxer Christophe Dettinger who became a hero to some protesters after beating up police officers during a demonstration in January was convicted Wednesday and given a one-year prison term.

### 56 percent want protests to stop

An Elabe opinion poll published Wednesday said 56 percent of French people now wanted the protests to stop — 11 points higher than a month ago.

## Vatican defrocks former US cardinal for sex abuse of minor

**VATICAN CITY:** Pope Francis has defrocked a former cardinal in a first for the Roman Catholic church over accusations American Theodore McCarrick sexually abused a teenager 50 years ago, a Vatican statement said yesterday. McCarrick, 88, who resigned from the Vatican's College of Cardinals in July, is the first cardinal ever to be defrocked for sex abuse.

He was found guilty in January by a Vatican court for sexually abusing a teenager, a decision confirmed by the pope in February, with "no further recourse", according to the statement. It said McCarrick was guilty of "sins against the Sixth Commandment with minors and with adults, with the aggravating factor of the abuse of power". The announcement marks a spectacular fall from grace for the once influential cardinal and comes ahead of a Vatican conference from February 21-24 bringing together bishops from around the world to discuss protecting children within the Church.

Sex abuse scandals around the globe, and most recently in the United States and Chile, have shaken the church, with Pope Francis promising a policy of "zero tolerance" even for high-ranking church members. McCarrick, former archbishop emeritus of Washington, was barred from practising as a priest in July last year, after which he resigned his honorary title of cardinal. He currently lives in Kansas.

### Sex with adult seminarians

McCarrick was known for having sex with adult seminarians before he was accused of sexually abusing at least one teenager. Prosecutors in the US state of Pennsylvania last year found 300 priests were involved in child sexual abuse since the 1940s, crimes that were covered up by a

string of bishops. Prosecutors in half a dozen other US states have announced plans for similar investigations.

The pope accepted the resignations of several bishops in Chile last year after investigations revealed decades of sexual abuse by clergy in their dioceses. In March 2015, Pope Francis allowed Keith O'Brien to keep the title of cardinal after the former Bishop of Edinburgh and former leader of the Catholic church in Scotland resigned over allegations of inappropriate sexual behavior towards priests in the 1980s.

The only previous case of a cardinal resigning came in 1927, when Pope Pius XI accepted the resignation of French cardinal Lois Billot, who had himself renounced his status for political reasons. Cardinals act as close papal advisors and can attend conclaves to elect new pontiffs if they are aged below 80. McCarrick had been one of the most prominent American cardinals active on the international stage.

Although officially retired, McCarrick had continued to travel abroad regularly, including on human rights issues. McCarrick was ordained a priest in 1958 and rose through the ranks in the Archdiocese of New York before being installed as archbishop of Washington in 2001, a post he held until 2006. The claims against him were made public in June by Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the current archbishop of New York. Dolan said an independent forensic agency "thoroughly investigated" the allegation.

A review board that included jurists, law enforcement experts, parents, psychologists, a priest and a religious sister then "found the allegations credible and substantiated" and the Vatican ordered McCarrick to stop exercising his ministry. At the time, he released a statement maintaining his innocence but added that he "fully cooperated" in the investigation. Senior US church officials said they had received three allegations of McCarrick's sexual misconduct with adults decades ago, two of which resulted in settlements.

The US Catholic website Crux quoted a man as accusing him of abuse in New York's St Patrick's Cathedral when he



**RENNES:** People demonstrate yesterday in Rennes during the 14th consecutive week of Yellow vest (Gilets Jaunes) movement nationwide protests against French President's policies and top-down style of governing, high cost of living, government tax reforms and for more "social and economic justice." —AFP

And while 58 percent of people still backed or had sympathy for the protesters, that was five points lower than two weeks ago and nine points below the level in early January.

Two out of three people thought the recurring Saturday rallies were no longer in keeping with what "yellow vests" originally stood for. Macron has pledged 10 billion euros (\$11.2 billion) in response to anger over the high cost of living, including tax cuts for some pensioners and measures to boost low wages.

He has also spearheaded a "grand

national debate" by way of the internet and town hall meetings to gather opinions on how the country could be reformed. It was not known how many people might turn out for protests over the weekend as social media messaging has alternatively called for blocking the Arc de Triomphe monument in Paris yesterday, or marching down the Champs-Elysees avenue today. Others suggested "yellow vests" should return to their original tactics of massing at roundabouts nationwide and blocking traffic. —AFP



**VATICAN CITY:** In this file photo taken on March 11, 2013 then US cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick arrives for a meeting on the eve of the start of a conclave at the Vatican. —AFP

was a 16-year-old in the 1970s. Other cardinals caught up in scandal include Australia's top Catholic George Pell, number three in the Vatican. Pell faces prosecution in Australia for historical child sexual offences. Pell and Chilean Cardinal Francisco Javier Errazuriz were both removed from the so-called C9 Council of Cardinals, an international advice body set up by Francis himself, the Vatican said in December.

Despite being removed from the C9, Pell, 77, remains in charge of Vatican finances, the third most powerful position in the Roman Catholic Church. He has pleaded not guilty to the charges. Defrocking is the most severe ecclesiastical punishment for a priest, who is reduced to the status of a lay person and no longer allowed to lead mass. —AFP