

International

Regional powers back Tshisekedi as new DRC leader despite dispute

Election dispute has raised fears of fresh bloodshed

KINSHASA: Regional powers hailed Felix Tshisekedi as DR Congo's incoming president yesterday, despite claims by his opponents of an election stitch-up and the African Union earlier warning of "serious doubts" over the result. Announcing the final results of the much-delayed poll, the Constitutional Court threw out a legal challenge by runner-up Martin Fayulu in an overnight declaration early yesterday.

It declared Tshisekedi the winner, paving the way for him to take over from the country's longtime leader Joseph Kabila, 47. The election dispute has raised fears of fresh bloodshed in the vast and volatile central African nation. The chairman of the African Union (AU), Rwandan President Paul Kagame, was due in Kinshasa today after the AU questioned the election results. The bloc had called for the final results to be delayed. But the 16-nation Southern African Development Community congratulated Tshisekedi yesterday for being declared president-elect and called for a peaceful handover of power.

"The SADC reiterates the need to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the DRC," its chairman Hage Geingob, president of Namibia, said in a statement. "SADC calls upon all Congolese to accept the outcome, consolidate democracy and maintain a peaceful and stable environment." Hundreds of Tshisekedi's supporters celebrated by blowing whistles and horns near his party headquarters in the capital Kinshasa, where the atmosphere was otherwise calm yesterday.

Fayulu alleges 'coup'

Fayulu has described the outcome of the vote as an "electoral coup". He called for peaceful protests, though no major incidents were reported across the country yesterday. Fayulu has alleged that Tshisekedi promised to protect Kabila's political and financial interests in return for helping to ensure his victory.

"I ask the entire international community not to recognize a power that has neither legitimacy nor legal standing to represent the Congolese people," he said of Tshisekedi. The winning candidate called for unity. "This is not a victory for one side or the other," Tshisekedi said in a video message. "The Congo we are going to build will not be a Congo of division, hate and tribalism — it will be a Congo that is reconciled, a strong Congo, looking towards development, peace and security for all."

Tshisekedi's victory was provisionally announced earlier this month by the Independent National Election Commission (CENI) but it was challenged both at home and abroad. Yesterday, the Constitutional Court, which is made up of Kabila's allies, said Fayulu had failed to prove any inaccuracies in the figures. It described his call for a recount as "absurd". The court declared Tshisekedi as the "president of the Democratic Republic of Congo by simple majority".

The Financial Times and other foreign media have reported seeing documents that confirm Fayulu as the winner. The influential Roman Catholic Church, which says it deployed 40,000 observers to monitor the poll, has also dismissed the official outcome.

Fears of bloodbath

Awaiting Sunday's court announcement, hundreds of Tshisekedi's supporters gathered outside the court holding placards saying "No to interference" and "Independent country" as riot police stood nearby. Leader of the country's oldest and biggest opposition party, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress, 55-year-old Tshisekedi has never held high office.

The dispute has raised fears that the political crisis that began when Kabila refused to step down at the end of his constitutional term in office two years ago could turn into a bloodbath. The vast country lived through two regional wars in 1996-97 and 1998-2003. The previ-



KINSHASA: Opposition presidential candidate in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) Martin Fayulu, flanked by his officials, speaks during a press conference on January 18, 2019 at his party headquarters in the capital Kinshasa after the African Union called to suspend the announcement of final results from presidential elections. —AFP

ous two elections, in 2006 and 2011, were marred by bloody clashes.

Doubts over vote result

At a summit on Thursday, AU leaders said there were "serious doubts" about the election figures and called for the final results to be delayed. DR Congo government spokesman Lambert Mende had snubbed the demand, saying: "I don't think it is the business of the government

or even of the African Union to tell the court what it should do." He said the new president would "probably" be sworn in tomorrow along with a new legislature — dominated, according to official election results, by Kabila allies. Ahead of Kagame's visit, the European Union said it joined the AU in inviting "all the Congolese players to work constructively with this delegation to find a post-electoral solution which respects the Congolese people's vote". —AFP

Pope heads to Panama for giant youth meeting

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis will make his first trip to Panama on Wednesday for a gathering of more than 150,000 young Catholics from across the globe at the World Youth Day festival. The 82-year-old pope will use the major event on the Catholic calendar to address the problems of poverty, corruption and migration in his native Latin America, church officials said.

"Our youth, particularly in Central America, need opportunities," said Panama Archbishop Jose Domingo Ulloa. Often, their "hard reality" was a choice between emigration or "falling into the clutches of drug traffickers," said Ulloa, in Rome for a preparatory visit. It will be Francis' third World Youth Day event, having presided over the gathering in Rio de Janeiro shortly after his election as pope in 2013 and again in Krakow, Poland in 2016. In Poland, he challenged conservative governments in Central and Eastern Europe to soften their resistance to migrants seeking refuge from conflict in the Middle East.

A voice for migrants

In a similar way, he is expected in Panama to stand up for migrants from El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras

who make up the majority of those traveling in caravans to the US border, despite the opposition of President Donald Trump and the American right. "Many of the young people who are participating in the WYD are immigrants themselves," Vatican spokesman Alessandro Gisotti said. Hundreds of thousands of Central Americans cross the border into Mexico every year, heading north in search of a better life. Millions more have fled economic collapse and political repression in Venezuela, straining social services in neighboring countries. "The recent image of migrant caravans from Central America, with all their suffering, will be very much in mind," said Ulloa.

Youth 'can change the world'

In an advance message to the event, Francis said many young people, both believers and non-believers, had "a strength that can change the world." On Friday, he said in a separate video message to the World Indigenous Youth gathering in Soloy, Panama, to hold on to their cultures and roots by fighting marginalization, exclusion, waste and impoverishment.

"Return to native cultures. Take care of the roots, because from the roots comes the strength that will make you grow, prosper and bear fruit," he told hundreds of young indigenous Catholics who will join the WYD gathering next week. Fighting poverty will be a key theme. Extreme poverty in Latin America hit its highest level for nine years in 2017, according to a report by the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. —AFP

Backlash in Nigeria as main candidates shun election debate

LAGOS: Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari and his main challenger yesterday faced accusations of arrogance, disrespect and elitism, after they failed to turn up for a debate between election hopefuls. Buhari, of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), and Atiku Abubakar, from the main opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), were supposed to have been among five candidates at the set-piece discussion on Saturday night.

But Buhari stayed away, citing his "busy and hectic official and campaign schedules" and because he had already taken part in a live, televised question-and-answer session. Abubakar returned from the United States and headed to the venue in Abuja but "at the last second he decided not to appear", debate moderator Mark Eddo announced. Abubakar, referred to across Nigeria as "Atiku", later blamed Buhari, saying the president's absence was "a slight on all of us and our democracy".

"We came here for a Presidential debate, not a candidacy debate, and I, Atiku Abubakar, cannot challenge or question an administration where the man at the helm of the affairs of the nation is not present to defend himself or his policies," he added. Nigeria goes to the polls to elect a new president on February 16 in what is expected to be a close race between the two main parties. The PDP was in power for 16 years from 1999, when democracy was



LAGOS: A man walks past a campaign billboard for Nigeria's incumbent president and candidate to his re-election for the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) President Muhammadu Buhari, and Vice-President Yemi Osinbajo, at Ilupeju. —AFP

restored after decades of military rule. Buhari's victory in 2015 was the first for an opposition candidate.

'Utter disgust'

The other three candidates at the debate all said Buhari and Abubakar's absence was not surprising and both were from the old ruling class. Retired army general Buhari, 76, headed a military government in the 1980s, while Abubakar, a wealthy businessman four years his junior, was vice-president under Olusegun Obasanjo from 1999 to 2007. All three are among a number of ageing politicians to have dominated Nigeria for decades in a country

where some 60 percent of the population of more than 180 million is aged under 30.

Oby Ezekwesili, a former education minister, of the Allied Congress Party of Nigeria, said: "I think it's important for us to acknowledge that there is a political class that simply needs to fade away from our country. The idea that the will of people will be subject to the whims and caprices of our politicians should be a total anomaly," added the ex-World Bank vice-president. Fela Oludare, an entrepreneur and motivational speaker, of the Alliance for New Nigeria, accused Buhari and Abubakar of acting like "rulers (who) don't explain to their subjects what they're going to do". —AFP

Suspected car bomb explodes in N Ireland

LONDON: A suspected car bomb exploded in the Northern Irish city of Londonderry on Saturday, police said, with leading politicians alleging the blast was terror-related. The Police Service of Northern Ireland tweeted a photograph of the scene outside a courthouse as it warned that evacuations were taking place due to a second suspect vehicle in the British province's second city.

"Police are in attendance at the scene of an incident in Derry/Londonderry city centre," the PSNI tweeted. "We would ask for patience and co-operation of the public and the business community as we carry out our initial inves-

tigations." "Bishop Street closed. Stay away. Suspected car bomb," an earlier tweet said.

The force added on Facebook: "As far as we know no one injured. There is another car we are not happy about. There are ongoing necessary evacuations," it posted. Politicians from all sides on the island of Ireland condemned the incident. Former Northern Irish first minister Arlene Foster, who heads the province's Democratic Unionist Party, referred to it as a "pointless act of terror", while the Republic of Ireland's foreign minister Simon Coveney called it a "car bomb terrorist attack".

The three decades of sectarian bloodshed in Northern Ireland, known as the Troubles, were largely brought to an end under the 1998 Good Friday peace accords. Car bomb attacks were responsible for some of the worst atrocities. Foster, who leads the pro-British DUP, said: "This pointless act of terror must be condemned in the strongest terms. Only hurts the people of the city. Perpetrated by people with no regard for life." —AFP

Russians protest strategic Kuril isles handover to Japan

MOSCOW: Hundreds of Russians protested against a feared giveaway of strategic islands to Japan yesterday, two days before a key summit between the countries' leaders in Moscow. Between 300 and 500 people gathered on Suvorovskaya Square, just outside Moscow city centre, for an authorized rally called by several nationalist politicians, opposed to any move to cede any of the four islands claimed by Tokyo.

The Soviet army claimed four islands, the so-called south Kurils, in the closing days of World War II. The dispute over their sovereignty prevented the two countries from signing a peace treaty, a situation President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sought to rectify last year. Abe is set to hold talks on the issue with Putin on Tuesday, following a meeting last week between foreign ministers Sergei Lavrov and Taro Kono.

Moscow has said the islands' sovereignty is not a bargaining chip and the Kurils will remain Russian territory, but many people distrust official rhetoric and suspect a different line of negotiations behind the scenes.



MOSCOW: Protestors hold a protest in Moscow yesterday, demanding to stop talks on assigning Kuril islands to Japan. —AFP

Some protesters carried signs saying "The Kurils are Russian land" and "Giving away the Kurils is state treason", an AFP correspondent observed. The Kremlin has ridden a wave of nationalism following Moscow's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and any attempt to structure an agreement with Japan around a territorial compromise would likely be poorly received.

Protester Svetlana Fedosova, 26, said ceding the islands would be seen as a "weakness" by

Russia's enemies and would lead to Russia's undoing. "Other countries will also demand readdressing the results of World War II," she said. "Then we'll have to give away Karelia, Kaliningrad, and all the lands we've conquered," she told AFP, referring to Russia's western regions that previously belonged to Finland and Germany. "People demand a stop to backstage talks with Japan", one of the rally's organizers, leftist politician Sergei Udaltsov, wrote on Twitter after the rally. —AFP