

International

Debt-ridden Zambia votes in closely contested polls

Economic woes, debt crisis dominated election campaign

LUSAKA: Zambians were voting in a general election yesterday after a tense campaign dominated by economic woes, a debt crisis and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Sixteen presidential candidates are vying for the top job, but the frontrunners are incumbent Edgar Lungu, 64, and his long-time rival Hakainde Hichilema, a business tycoon, who are facing off at the polls for the third time. Hichilema, 59, who is running for a sixth time, is backed by an alliance of 10 parties.

After voting shortly after polls opened at 6am (0400 GMT) Lungu exuded confidence he would retain the job he had held for the past six years. "We are winning, otherwise I wouldn't have been in the race if we were not winning, we are a winning team," the upbeat Lungu told reporters outside a nursery school in Chawama, a poor neighborhood of Lusaka.

But a flagging economy and rising living costs have eroded his support base in recent years, surveys suggest, and the election could be seen tighter than 2016 polls when he narrowly scraped a victory over Hichilema. Lungu, a lawyer by training, is accused of borrowing unsustainably, particularly from Chinese creditors, to finance a spree of infrastructure projects.

Under him, Zambia became the first African country to default on its sovereign debt since the

coronavirus pandemic began, while inflation soared to 24.6 percent in June, the highest rate in more than a decade. Africa's second biggest producer of copper after the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the eighth producer in the world, missed another debt repayment this year.

Winding queues of hundreds of people formed before dawn outside polling stations, hours before voting was due to open around densely-populated and working class neighborhoods of Lusaka.

Almost mid-way through the voting day in central Lusaka's popular Mtendere township, hundreds of voters patiently waited for their turn to cast ballots, chatting away or sucking on ice lollies, or popsicles, sold by a roving vendor. The atmosphere was relaxed and festive, with nearby taverns serving beer while music blasted from cars driving in heavy traffic on bumpy roads.

Copper miner Thomas Wandu, 41, had been queuing for seven hours to vote for Lungu.

"Underground, things are not how they are supposed to be," he told AFP, referring to what he described as low and delayed wages by his Chinese employers.

'Hoping for change'

Lungu's critics point to the high cost of living, poverty and joblessness. In Chamawa town-



LUSAKA: Voters wait at noon in long queues to cast their ballots outside the Post Office in central Lusaka, yesterday. — AFP

ship unemployed school teacher Ernest Chimba, 35, was "hoping for change... because the cost of living in Zambia has gone really high". Tensions flared in the run-up to polling in this southern African country of 17 million people.

Supporters of Lungu's Patriotic Front (PF) and Hichilema's United Party for National Development (UPND) clashed in the runup to voting, prompting Lungu to order an unprecedented deployment of the army. —AFP

US frustration mounts over Afghan failure to halt Taliban

WASHINGTON: The failure of Afghan security forces to blunt the advance of the Taliban has left US officials deeply frustrated after spending billions to train and equip the country's military for two decades. President Joe Biden and other officials have repeatedly called for Afghan leaders to unite and fashion a clear strategy amid mounting worries that the insurgents could besiege Kabul within months.

"We spent over a trillion dollars over 20 years. We trained and equipped with modern equipment over 300,000 Afghan forces," Biden said Tuesday after the Taliban captured several more provincial capitals with little resistance. "Afghan leaders have to come together," Biden said. "They've got to fight for themselves, fight for their nation."

Ahead of the completion of the US withdrawal on August 31, the Pentagon and the State Department closely echoed Biden's words, expressing concerns over the Taliban's gains in the absence of US and NATO troops for the first time since the 2001 invasion. "The Afghan forces have the capability, they have the capacity, they have numerical advantage, they have an air force," said Defense Department spokesman John Kirby on Tuesday. "It's really going to come down to the leadership and the will to use those capabilities." Privately US officials express surprise at the speed of the Taliban's advance. —AFP

Hong Kong saw net outflow of 90,000 residents over last year

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's population declined by 1.2 percent in the last year, including nearly 90,000 more residents departing than moving to the city, figures released yesterday showed, as Beijing cracked down on dissent and the pandemic kept the finance hub sealed off.

The population decrease continues the largest decline since the city began keeping comparable records in 1961 and comes during a period of intense political turmoil. Mid-year population estimates for 2021 showed Hong Kong's population stands at 7,394,700 — a decrease of 87,100 (1.2 percent) from the same time last year.

End of year figures for Hong Kong in 2020 also showed a 1.2 percent decline, and yesterday's numbers suggest there has been no respite in the drop-off. Hong Kong had only once before recorded a year of population decline, by 0.2 percent after the SARS epidemic in 2003.

The city houses a rapidly ageing society with deaths over the last year outstripping births by 11,800. But the government data also revealed a new cause for population decline—more residents leaving than arriving. The figures showed a net outflow of 89,200 Hong Kong residents for the period. That is over four times higher than the 20,900 outflow recorded for the same mid-year period in 2020.

In 2018 and 2019, Hong Kong recorded an inflow of 8,500 and 23,000 respectively. Hong Kong has kept coronavirus infections low by closing itself off to non-residents for most of the pandemic.

The move has kept people safe but crippled the travel industry



HONG KONG: Hong Kong's mid-year population estimates for 2021 showed Hong Kong's population stands at 7,394,700 — a decrease of 87,100 (1.2 percent) from the same time last year.

and made it difficult for both residents and expats to see loved ones overseas. Thousands of Hong Kongers have also packed their bags to escape a broad crackdown on dissent in response to huge and often violent democracy protests two years ago. Over the spring and summer, the airport witnessed frequent tearful farewells as residents boarded flights, mostly to Britain, which has said it will offer a pathway to citizenship for many Hong Kongers in response to Beijing's crackdown.

The Hong Kong government does not keep official statistics for how many have left the city for good, but figures point to some sort of exodus taking place. Around 1,500 Hong Kongers on average were leaving via the airport each day in July, up from around 800 in the first half of the year and despite the pandemic throttling international travel. — AFP