



ACCRA: Supporters of Ghana's President elect Nana Akufo-Addo, of the New Patriotic Party, celebrates presidential election victory. — AP

AKUFO WINS GHANA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

ACCRA: Challenger Nana Akufo-Addo won Ghana's national election on Friday, tapping into an electorate fed up with a sputtering economy and ready for change. The erudite 72-year-old human rights lawyer cruised to victory winning 53.8 percent of the votes, according to the country's election agency.

"I will not let you down. I will do all in my power to live up to your hopes and expectations," Akufo-Addo said to an ecstatic crowd at his house in the country's capital of Accra. "I will do my best to serve your interests and put our country back on the path of progress and prosperity." Incumbent John Mahama conceded defeat in the evening two days after a hotly contested race that was seen as a test of the country's democracy in a region plagued by dictators and coups.

Mahama called to congratulate opposition leader Akufo-Addo, whose New Patriotic Party (NPP) supporters had been gathering for hours outside his house after local media gave him a clear lead following the Wednesday vote. "Yes he has conceded defeat," George Lawson of Mahama's New Democratic Congress (NDC) party told AFP.

Akufo-Addo had campaigned on a platform promising to boost growth and deliver jobs. "The president of Ghana is president for every single Ghanaian," Akufo-Addo said, as fireworks popped overhead and thousands of people cheered in the streets outside his house.

'Gold standard'

Akufo-Addo's supporters - almost all in head-to-toe white, a symbol of victory - had been dancing on his lawn for hours in anticipation of his victory speech. At one point, they broke out in an enthusiastic cappella rendition of Ghana's national anthem. "We have won," said Hajia Mustafa, a 44-year-old trader, flashing a wide smile. "I have my president, I have my choice." The high-stakes race between Akufo-Addo and Mahama has been seen as a litmus test of the stability for one of

Africa's most secure democracies. But fears of widespread violence erupting during the election never materialized, with a generally peaceful voting day followed by calm as the official results trickled in. "I think Ghanaians should be extraordinarily proud of themselves," said Ambassador Johnnie Carson of the National Democratic Institute, an election observer. "Ghana has distinguished itself in the last two and a half decades with integrity and transparency," Carson said. "It is a gold standard for democracy in Africa."

'Escaped violence'

Yet while the European Union Election Observation Mission said that Ghana "largely escaped the violence many had feared," it pointed to other areas of concern. "The misuse of incumbency, including unequal access to state media, and unaccountable campaign financing were areas Ghana could address in the future," said the mission in a statement.

Akufo-Addo will serve a four-year term in the former British colony, a once-booming country that has seen its economy slow, currency deteriorate and inflation soar. Mahama, who came to power in 2012 after beating Akufo-Addo, had urged voters to "stay the course," promising to deliver more infrastructure projects. In his third bid for the top job, Akufo-Addo blasted Ghana's poor economic growth rate-estimated at 3.3 percent in 2016, the lowest rate for two decades-and laid out a radical vision to transform the country's economy.

Akufo-Addo had also warned his supporters that "vigilance is key" at the polls in an attempt to avoid a repeat of the 2012 vote-narrowly won by Mahama with 50.7 percent-that he contested unsuccessfully in the country's Supreme Court. Ghana is the world's second biggest producer of cocoa after Ivory Coast and Africa's second biggest gold producer after South Africa. But it was forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2015 for a bailout as global commodity prices tanked. — AFP

FRANCE AIMING TO EXTEND THE STATE OF EMERGENCY

PARIS: The French government announced plans yesterday to extend a national state of emergency until after elections next year, citing a heightened risk of jihadist attacks coinciding with polls. The security measures in force since attacks in Paris that killed 130 people in November 2015 — will be debated in parliament Tuesday before their expected approval by the Senate on Thursday.

"This electoral campaign period, which naturally includes numerous public meetings and rallies, will also unfortunately incur an increased risk of attacks," said newly-appointed French Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve. The state of emergency—which gives police extended powers of search and arrest—has already been renewed four times.

France was also left in mourning in July this year after a Tunisian jihadist rammed a truck through a crowd of Bastille Day revellers in the city of Nice, killing 86 people. France will hold presi-

dential elections in April-May 2017 and legislative polls in June. The state of emergency must "encompass all electoral operations" Cazeneuve said at a meeting of the French cabinet, warning of the danger of those "who want to strike at the heart of our democratic values and republican principles."

The extension until July 15 would also allow a new president-incumbent Francois Hollande is not seeking re-election to assess security and prolong the state of emergency if necessary, Cazeneuve added. Hollande's tenure has been marred by the three major Islamist-inspired terror attacks-against Charlie Hebdo magazine in January 2015, then in Paris the following November and in Nice. Cazeneuve, the former interior minister who coordinated the introduction of the state of emergency, took over as prime minister on Tuesday after Manuel Valls stepped down to seek the Socialist nomination for the presidency. — AFP

GAMBIA'S LONGTIME RULER REFUSES TO BOW OUT, DEMANDS FRESH POLLS

INVESTIGATIONS REVEAL STRING OF 'UNACCEPTABLE ERRORS'

BANJUL: Gambia's leader of some 22 years Yahya Jammeh announced late Friday he would no longer accept defeat in recent elections, plunging the West African country into turmoil with a demand for fresh polls. Investigations into the December 1 vote have revealed a string of "unacceptable errors" on the part of electoral authorities, Jammeh said in a speech broadcast on state television, adding that he would no longer concede to opponent Adama Barrow.

"In the same way that I accepted the results faithfully believing that the Independent Electoral Commission was independent and honest and reliable, I hereby reject the results in totality," he said. "Let me repeat: I will not accept the results based on what has happened," he added, warning Gambians not to take to the streets to protest his decision. Soldiers were seen placing sandbags in strategic locations across the capital Banjul Friday, a development which triggered widespread unease among the already-spooked population, who had been panic-buying food before the vote due to fear of unrest.

As the military deployed onto the streets of the tiny nation, the US Embassy in Banjul urged the army to continue to show "respect for the rule of law and the outcome of the presidential election." "The Gambian people have made a clear choice for change and a new start," the embassy added. Latest official figures gave Barrow 43.29 percent of the votes in the presidential election, while Jammeh took 39.64 percent. The turnout was at 59 percent. Opposition spokeswoman Isatou Touray criticised on social media a "violation of democracy" and called for people to "remain calm, lucid, vigilant and not retreat."

On December 2, Jammeh made a magnanimous concession speech on television and promised to general surprise-a peaceful and swift handover of power to President-elect Barrow, sparking celebrations in the country. But on Friday he pointed to errors which awarded victory to his opponent Adama Barrow with a slimmer margin than initially announced, claiming that numerous voters had not been able to cast their ballots. "This is the most dubious election we ever had in the history of this country," he said. "We will go back to the polls because I want to make sure every Gambian votes under an electoral commission that is impartial, independent,



BANJUL: In a Thursday, Dec 1, 2016 file photo, Gambia's president Yahya Jammeh shows his inked finger before voting. — AP

neutral and free from foreign influence," he said.

Shock victory

Neighbouring Senegal immediately condemned the development, calling for a UN Security Council meeting on Gambia and urging Jammeh to accept the "democratic choice, freely expressed by the Gambian people" and continue a peaceful transition of power to President-elect Barrow. The US State department called the move "reprehensible and unacceptable breach of faith with the people of The Gambia and an egregious attempt to undermine a credible election process and remain in power illegitimately."

"We call upon President Jammeh, who accepted the election results on December 2, to carry out an orderly transition of power to President-Elect Barrow in accordance with the Gambian constitution," spokesman Mark Toner said. Jammeh's move upends the situation in Gambia, where the population had been hoping for a peaceful democratic transition after Barrow's shock victory this month ended

Jammeh's more than two decades in power. But pressure to prosecute Jammeh and top figures in his administration, who have been accused of widespread human rights violations, is one of the key challenges facing the new government. Many Gambians had tired of their leader's unpredictable behavior, including the declaration of an Islamic republic in a country with a history of religious tolerance, and its withdrawal from the Commonwealth and the International Criminal Court.

The perception that Jammeh simply took over businesses and properties for his personal gain also angered many, while police harassment and impunity by the security services, especially the National Intelligence Agency that reported directly to Jammeh, fed growing resentment. Barrow had vowed to set up a South Africa-style truth commission but ruled out a political "witch hunt" and promised that his predecessor would be able to "live in Gambia like any ordinary citizen". Dozens of opposition activists, including the leader of the United Democratic Party (UDP) had already been freed from prison on bail this week. — AFP

GAS TRAIN BLAST IN BULGARIA KILLS FIVE

SOFIA: At least five people were killed yesterday and 27 were injured when a freight train transporting gas derailed and exploded in the northeastern Bulgarian village of Hitrino, officials said. "Five victims have been confirmed dead so far and 27 injured," the interior ministry said in a statement. The train was carrying more than 20 tankers of propylene gas and propane butane when it derailed while entering the village's rail station.

The last two tankers hit a power line and exploded and seven tankers full of propylene went off the tracks, local police spokeswoman Assia Yordannova said. The

blast occurred at 5:37am (0337 GMT) at the village, located about 100 kilometers from Varna, Bulgaria's main port on the Black Sea. The interior ministry said there were 200 firefighters and rescuers at the scene. More than 50 houses were damaged and 40 families evacuated. "Four victims have been identified but we fear there will be more.

Twenty-five people were injured," civil defence chief Nikolay Nikolov said. A hospital in the nearby town of Shumen said an 18-year-old man had died from his injuries, while three people with life-threatening burns have been transported to a hospital in the city

of Varna, Bulgaria's largest port on the Black Sea.

Aerial footage showed a massive plume of black smoke rising over the small village, which is home to some 800 people. Charred tankers lay scattered around the tracks of the nearly ruined railway station. There was debris everywhere. "There is devastation in the area around the blast site. Twelve people have been rescued from under the ruins alive so far and firefighters are checking for more," Nikolov added.

Hitrino's station, the police headquarters and several homes along the railway tracks were razed. Fires raging in the area were

put out around noon, local authorities said. "There will be more than five victims.

There are several injured with 90 percent burns," Bulgaria's outgoing Prime Minister Boyko Borisov after arriving at the site. He appealed for blood donations for the hospitals treating the injuries. Residents said the firefighters had been "very slow" to arrive and many burst into tears while recounting how their houses collapsed. Cargo train accidents are relatively frequent in Bulgaria where railway tracks are obsolete and regularly pillaged by thieves. But victims are extremely rare. — AFP



HITRINO: Firefighters continue to work at the scene after a tanker train derailed and gas tank exploded. — AP

ITALY IN NEW GOVERNMENT ENDGAME, BANK FEARS RISE

ROME: Talks on creating a new Italian government entered a decisive phase yesterday as fears mounted that any new premier will have to handle a politically toxic banking crisis. President Sergio Mattarella is trying to broker a deal among political parties on the creation of a caretaker administration to guide the country to elections.

A nationwide vote is due by early 2018 but could take place up to a year earlier if there is no deal. Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni emerged as the pundits' favorite to succeed Matteo Renzi amid swirling speculation that the outgoing prime minister's re-appointment was also an option. Renzi resigned after a crushing defeat in last weekend's referendum on constitutional reform, plunging the country into a political crisis just as the long-anticipated banking crunch landed in the finance ministry's lap.

Mattarella has spent the last two days talking mainly to fringe parties without sufficient num-

bers in parliament to sway the decisions he has to make. The real work began yesterday with talks with junior coalition party the New Centre Right (NCD) to be followed by meetings with officials of the populist Five Star Movement, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and Renzi's Democratic Party. Interior Minister Angelino Alfano, the NCD's leader, emerged to say there was no need to rush to elections.

"The government... is not like a yoghurt. It does not have a 'best-before' date," he said sardonically. The need for a new government has become pressing following the European Central Bank's decision to reject Rome's request for more time to persuade investors to back a five-billion-euro private bailout for troubled bank Monte dei Paschi di Siena (BMPS). The bank, identified as being vulnerable to failure in stress tests last year, had asked for an extra five weeks to raise the funds it needs to avoid a government bailout under which, under EU rules,

debt holders will have to share some of the losses.

Renzi comeback opposed

BMPS shares slumped more than 10 percent on Friday, taking this year's slide in value to 85 percent. The bank's board was holding crisis talks over the weekend. Saving the world's oldest bank will be politically difficult for whoever oversees the operation. Most analysts see it and other Italian banks as needing radical restructuring involving inevitable redundancies. But there are many small investors who have BMPS bonds, and their savings will be hit in any rescue deal.

Imposing losses at smaller banks last year hit Renzi's standing hard and was linked to at least one suicide. The ECB appears to have judged that delaying a solution will only risk a wider crisis in the Italian banking sector that could have damaging implications for the rest of the eurozone. Italy's biggest bank, UniCredit, meanwhile is planning a

major capital-raising operation of its own which may have to be repriced, delayed or pulled as a result of the current uncertainty.

Among those who visited Mattarella yesterday morning was Arturo Scotto, a lawmaker with the Left Ecology party (SEL), who warned that any attempt to reinstate Renzi would be greeted with fury. "It would be a provocation to voters who not only rejected his reforms but also delivered a damning judgment on his social, political and environmental policies," Scotto said.

Veteran Finance Minister Pier Carlo Padoan, Renzi ally Graziano Delrio, and former anti-mafia prosecutor Pietro Grasso, are also being touted as possible new premiers. Renzi is reportedly lobbying hard to keep out Culture Dario Franceschini, who is seen as a potential rival to the outgoing PM for the leadership of the Democratic Party, which remains the country's most popular political force ahead of the fast-rising Five Star. — AFP