



KAMPALA: Uganda's long-time President Yoweri Museveni waves to supporters from the sunroof of his vehicle as he arrives for an election rally at Kololo Airstrip in Kampala, Uganda. — AP file photo

UGANDA'S MUSEVENI WINS ELECTION, OPPN CRIES FOUL

EU, COMMONWEALTH OBSERVERS SLAM HANDLING OF POLL

KAMPALA: Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni extended his 30-year rule yesterday, winning an election that international observers said lacked transparency and his main opponent, who was placed under house arrest, denounced as a sham.

One of Africa's longest serving leaders, Museveni won 60.8 percent of the vote, while main opposition candidate Kizza Besigye secured 35.4 percent, according to the electoral commission.

"We have just witnessed what must be the most fraudulent electoral process in Uganda," Besigye said in a statement, calling for an independent audit of the results. Museveni said he had been placed under house arrest. A Reuters reporter saw his house encircled by police in riot gear and media were barred from going near it.

Museveni, 71, has presided over strong economic growth but faces mounting accusations at home and abroad of cracking down on dissent and failing to tackle rampant corruption in the nation of 37 million people. Museveni's ruling National Resistance Movement party said the veteran leader's victory showed "opponents failed to offer any alternative apart from empty promises".

Earlier, European and Commonwealth observers criticized the handling of the election. The EU observer mission said Thursday's election was conducted in an intimidating atmosphere, while Commonwealth observers said the poll

"fell short of meeting some key democratic benchmarks".

Eduard Kukan, chief observer for the EU mission, told reporters in Kampala that the poll was undermined by a "lack of transparency and independence" at the Ugandan electoral commission.

"State actors created an intimidating atmosphere for both voters and candidates," he added.

Museveni brought calm and stability to Uganda after decades of chaos at the hands of leaders Idi Amin and Milton Obote, but many opposition voters accuse the former guerrilla fighter of becoming increasingly autocratic and wanting to rule for life. The opposition had tried to tap into mounting anger among young voters, especially in urban areas, where unemployment is high and many are frustrated by the poor state of schools and hospitals.

"We are disappointed, the election has been rigged," said 23-year-old Brenda in Kampala, who refused to give her second name due to fears for her security. "I have never seen another president and it seems it will be like that until he dies."

'Intimidating atmosphere'

"To my fellow Ugandans... remain vigilant and steadfast. The struggle is long and hard but, in the end, we shall win if we continue in our patient and steadfast resolve," Besigye said in a statement.

"The regime cannot survive without our cooperation. Let us denounce this electoral theft by withdrawing our recognition of the regime and ceasing to co-operate with it."

The election on Thursday was disrupted in Kampala by the late arrival of ballot boxes and papers and angry demonstrations by voters that the police quelled using tear gas.

At nearly 28,000 other polling centres voting passed off smoothly, but the ballot was extended for a second day in 36 places after delays that Commonwealth election observers called "inexcusable" and that "seriously detracted from the fairness and credibility of the result."

European Union election observers on Saturday said that "voting was conducted in a calm and peaceful environment in the vast majority of the country". But the observers also voiced criticism over the "lack of transparency and independence" of the electoral commission. Besigye, who was arrested during campaigning on Monday and again on Thursday evening, was taken into custody for a third time on Friday. Police had stormed Besigye's Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) headquarters on Friday to arrest him, saying they wanted to prevent him from unilaterally proclaiming his vote score. "This action severely violates freedom of expression," the EU mission said, accusing Museveni's NRM party and government bodies of "creating an intimidating atmosphere." — Agencies

PEOPLE DETAINED BY MILITARY VANISH IN NIGERIA'S NORTHEAST

YOLA, Nigeria: First come the whispers, then accusations loud enough to raise alarms throughout Nigeria's northeastern villages ravaged by extremist violence. Next, people accused of being Boko Haram are rounded up, sometimes by the military, sometimes by a civilian self-defense force. Many are never seen again.

The murmurs exploded into a rare open-throated protest recently when a teacher and two middle-aged farmers were taken away in Duhu village. Women who knew the men insisted they did not belong to the Islamic extremist group, and marched to a nearby military base to demand their release. Instead, the men were shot to death and their bodies were dumped outside town.

Nigeria's military denied ever detaining elementary school teacher Habu Bello and farmers Idrisa Dele and Umaru Hammankadi last month. But several villagers told The Associated Press that they watched as the men were led away by uniformed soldiers who accused them of being Boko Haram fighters. Threats to civilians come from all sides and extrajudicial killings have not abated despite the president's declaration of victory over Boko Haram. The insurgents have shown no mercy, but many people are equally afraid of the soldiers and the self-defense Vigilante Group of Nigeria.

Now, they are learning to fear their own neighbors as well. As refugees return home and try to rebuild lives from nothing - houses have been razed, wells poisoned, crops and livestock looted - some are capitalizing on the fear and insecurity to settle old scores, erase debts, win land disputes or otherwise get rid of enemies, human rights lawyer Sunday Joshua Wugira explained. "If you have a problem with someone, you can influence the military to pick them up and then you will never hear about them again," he told AP from his offices in the northeastern city of Yola, where police are investigating the January killings of three brothers from the Fulani tribe. Police have detained members of the civilian self-defense group, who said they took the suspected insurgents to the military barracks for detention, but were turned away and then a separate group of soldiers seized and killed the brothers, Deputy Superintendent Othman Abubakar said.

Unborn children not spared

Even unborn children are not free from allegations of terrorism. A teenager said she was captured last year by Boko Haram fighters who attacked her village and killed her father. Soldiers arrived to hunt down extremists, but interrogated her three brothers instead. Vigilantes then seized and killed them, she said.

Kidnapped by Boko Haram at 16 and raped in captivity, she was freed in November when soldiers attacked the extremist camp where she was being held. She tried to return to her home village, but had to flee again because vigilantes threatened to kill her unborn child, calling it a "terrorist baby," she said. The AP does not identify victims of sexual assault.

Duhu district leader Mustapha Sanusi said he has no official record of detainees being killed or disappeared, but has notified the military and legislators about complaints. "I don't have any figures, but I can confirm to you that there have been a series of complaints about extrajudicial killings," he told the AP. He called for a federal investigation and said "the military should always operate within the confines of the law."

Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari promised to end military abuses last year, pledging an investigation into Amnesty International's allegations that since 2011, the military has been responsible for the deaths of some 8,000 detainees who were shot, starved or tortured. That's more than a third of the estimated 20,000 people killed during the 6-year-old insurgency. Human rights groups also accuse the self-defense fighters of extrajudicial killings but no one has collated figures.

Buhari's spokesman, Garba Shehu, referred requests for comment for this AP report to the military, but army spokesman Col. Sani Kukasheka Usman did not respond. However, the army on Thursday announced the establishment of a special office to "investigate all cases of human rights complaints brought before it." And it said it has established a special court martial to try "all cases of indiscipline and related acts of misconduct, including human rights abuse." Buhari told a delegation from the United States Institute of Peace this week that "mechanisms" have been put in place to ensure human rights are respected in the fight against terrorism. — AP



Soldiers guard people fleeing from Boko Haram's carnage and about to be searched to ensure there are no insurgents infiltrating a refugee camp. People detained by the military and a civilian self-defense force are disappearing in northeast Nigeria, some wrongly accused of fighting for Boko Haram by neighbors settling old scores. — AP

I'LL DO ANYTHING TO KILL TIME: REFUGEE IN GERMANY

BERLIN: In the Berlin gym that now serves as his home, Afghan student Yaza sweeps the floor over and over again, just to keep himself from "going crazy with boredom". The 24-year-old, who spent months on the road after fleeing the Taliban, told AFP: "I'll do anything to not go mad."

That includes helping to distribute meals or building bunk beds. In between time, he rolls cigarettes with others in the same boat as him, exchanging stories about their road into exile, the countless borders they crossed and the exorbitant sums they paid to human traffickers. Tens of thousands from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere are waiting impatiently for German authorities to process their asylum requests.

Many long to return to work or college, but before they obtain residency, they have to find ways to kill time. "I studied economics in Kabul but I can't work here before I obtain a long-term residence visa," said Yaza, who arrived in Germany three months ago.

At the back of the gym, a group of young Iraqis and Syrians sporting track pants and slippers are sitting under a basketball net, listening to Arab pop music blaring from a mobile phone.

Idriez, 22, from the western Syrian port city of Latakia, was trying to work out the complexities of German grammar. "Der, die, das," he recited, glancing at a whiteboard where volunteers had written the masculine, femi-

nine and neutral forms of the article 'the'.

"I want to go back to school here but I need to be able to speak German first," he said, before losing himself in his book "German for Beginners".

Repetitive days

The days at the shelter, also home to 168 other people, are monotonous, punctuated only by breakfast, lunch and dinner. Morning and midday meals are usually comprised of cheese, bread, olives and a hard-boiled egg. In the evening, a warm meal is served.

Although children usually get sent to school fairly quickly, young men and women often have to wait months before they can start German classes.

In a nearby church, volunteers give classes every Monday and Wednesday to arm the newcomers with some basic German as they battle their way through complex bureaucracy. The rest of the time, however, the refugees live in a parallel world, with little or no contact with German society.

Economists have been calling on authorities to speed up the integration process by offering training more swiftly. "The process of integration like language classes should begin as soon as possible, because that's what determines whether integration would be successful in the long term," said Thomas Liebig, an economist specialising on migration issues at the OECD. — AFP

UKRAINE AND REBELS SWAP NINE PRISONERS

MARINKA, Ukraine: Ukraine and pro-Russian rebels yesterday exchanged nine prisoners captured in the country's war-torn east in the first such swap this year, an AFP journalist witnessed.

The swap between the Kiev army and the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) took place at mid-day on a road through fields close to the town of Marinka, some 20 kilometres (12

miles) southwest of the rebels' de facto capital Donetsk. The pro-Russian eastern militia handed over three Ukrainian soldiers and the Ukrainian forces gave up five rebels captured in the course of fighting,

according to officials from both sides.

The Ukrainian side also handed over a senior Orthodox monk from Donetsk. He was detained at a checkpoint in August for allegedly collaborating with the separatists.

"Negotiations for the exchange were difficult," the DPR human rights ombudswoman Daria Morozova told reporters. Morozova underlined that it is impossible for the sides to exchange all their prisoners, although this is one of the measures required by the Ukraine peace agreement reached in Minsk last year.

Kiev is still seeking the release of 134 people in captivity, said lawmaker Iryna Gerashchenko, one of Ukraine's envoys in Minsk. "Today after an almost four-month pause, the process of liberating hostages finally started," she wrote on Facebook.

More than 9,000 people have been killed and 20,000 injured since the revolt against Ukraine's new pro-Western leadership erupted in April 2014, according to the United Nations. Kiev and the West accuse Russia of supporting the insurgents and sending regular troops across the border, claims that Moscow denies. — AFP



KIEV: People pay their respects in honor of the "Heavenly Hundred" on Independence Square in Kiev, Ukraine, yesterday. The "Heavenly Hundred" is what Ukrainians in Kiev call those who died during months of anti-government protests in 2013-14. — AP

AUSTRIA REJECTS EU FLAK OVER MIGRANTS CAP

VIENNA: Austria's combative interior minister rejected yesterday EU criticism of its cap of 80 asylum claims per day, saying a letter of complaint from the bloc's migration commissioner was "sent to the wrong address". "It should be generally known that Austria does not have an external EU border and is therefore not the first safe country that these people (migrants) set foot in," Johanna Mikl-Leitner told the Austria Press Agency (APA).

"If everybody stuck to the content of the letter (from migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos), then Austria would not have a problem with it. But the letter was clearly sent to the wrong address," Mikl-Leitner said. Instead, the complaints should be sent to safe countries that the migrants pass through on

their way to Austria, she added, in a reference in particular to Greece, the main entry point in the European Union for migrants.

In 2015, more than a million migrants reached Europe-nearly half fleeing the five-year-old Syrian civil war, and many risking their lives crossing to Greece and Italy in overloaded boats. The huge influx has caused a major political headache, fuelling the rise of populist parties on the back of concerns about jobs and security, and driving a wedge between members of the 28-nation EU.

Thousands more migrants have made the journey this year too, travelling up from Greece through countries in the western Balkans towards Austria and beyond.

Austria last year took in 90,000 asylum

seekers, making it one of the highest recipients in the EU on a per-capita basis, while almost 10 times that number passed through, mostly to Germany and Sweden. Faced with a resurgent far-right opposition topping opinion polls, Chancellor Werner Faymann's centrist government this week imposed the new cap and said only 3,200 migrants could transit per day. Austria-one of several members of the passport-free Schengen Zone to reimpose some border controls-is also tightening these checks and will only take in 37,500 asylum seekers this year.

On Thursday, amid widespread criticism of Austria, Avramopoulos sent a letter to Mikl-Leitner calling the cap "plainly incompatible with Austria's obligations under European

and international law." The measures have also raised fears that when migrant numbers rise as expected again in the coming months as spring arrives, there will be a dangerous backlog of people along the Balkans route from Greece northwards.

New asylum claims

On Friday, when the new restrictions came into effect, no single migrant entered Austria, due to bad weather. Yesterday 396 people, many of them families and including some elderly people, entered at the main Spiefeld border crossing point with Slovenia in southern Austria, police said.

But of these only 12 applied for asylum, the others saying they wished to travel

onwards to Germany and transported in army buses to migrant centres, police spokesman Wolfgang Braunsar said. Vienna says its unilateral moves are necessary because a German-backed EU plan agreed in November for Turkey to stem the flow of migrants leaving its shores for Greece is not yet working.

The EU and Turkey are due to hold a summit on March 6 to seek to firm up their agreement, which would see migrants flown directly from Turkey and shared in theory around certain members of the bloc. In return for sealing its borders, Turkey would receive several billion euros (dollars) in aid and other sweeteners including reinvigorating its drive for EU membership and easing visa restrictions. — AFP