

PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS TO BE HELD ON SEPTEMBER 21

RAMALLAH: The top Palestinian court is to decide on September 21 on the fate of keenly anticipated local elections after the latest attempt to hold polls was suspended, a minister said late Thursday. Municipal elections had been scheduled for October 8 but were suspended by the high court on Thursday following disputes between the rival Fatah and Hamas movements. It now remains to be seen if a new date will be set or if the vote will be shelved indefinitely.

"The Supreme Court will consider (the case) in a session on Wednesday 21 September and make a definitive and final decision," local government minister Hussein al-Araj told the official Palestinian news

agency Wafa. "We will implement any decision of the court in accordance with the applicable laws." Islamist movement Hamas, which runs the Gaza Strip, boycotted the last Palestinian municipal elections in 2012, but had been due to participate this year. Hamas has rejected the suspension, calling it a "political decision."

Fatah and Hamas have not contested an election since 2006 parliamentary polls, which Hamas won-sparking a conflict that led to fierce fighting in Gaza the following year that saw Fatah forces ousted. An attempt to hold local elections in 2010 was abandoned. This year's vote was planned with 81-year-old president and Fatah leader Mahmud Abbas

under heavy political pressure as opinion polls have suggested most Palestinians would like him to step down.

There has been no Palestinian presidential election since 2005 and Abbas has remained in office despite the expiry of his term in 2009. The high court said it had suspended the elections after an appeal by lawyer Nael Al-Houh. Houh said his appeal was based on the fact that the elections were not being held in Jerusalem and over concerns related to polling in the Gaza Strip.

In Gaza, a court run by Hamas cancelled Fatah candidate lists in several municipalities for "violating the election law", according to a judicial source and a spokesman for Fatah.

Jamal Dajani, a spokesman for the prime minister in the Fatah-run government in Ramallah, downplayed suggestions of political pressure to cancel the elections. "We look at it as a judicial decision and not a political decision," he told AFP, saying the court had made its decision independently. "The president, the prime minister and the central elections committee were proceeding with organizing the elections for October 8." Arif Jaffal, head of the Marsad elections monitoring group NGO, called Thursday's announcement a "sad day for Palestinians." He said the electorate was "expecting the local elections to move towards (ending) the political stalemate between the West Bank and Gaza." — AFP



ANKARA: European Union's Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini, second left, EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn, left, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, second right, and Turkey's EU Minister Omer Celik speak to the media after their talks. — AP

TURKEY AND EU AGREE TO EASE TENSIONS AFTER FAILED COUP

'WE MUST WORK TOGETHER BECAUSE THERE ARE PROBLEMS'

ANKARA: Turkey and the European Union yesterday agreed to ease tensions that had darkened Ankara's prospects of joining the bloc in the wake of the failed July 15 coup. EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn-making the highest-level EU visit to Turkey since the coup-said that new chapters in Ankara's long-running accession process should be opened and that visa liberalization was still on the table.

Several Turkish and EU officials had engaged in a war of words after the attempted putsch, with Brussels slamming the ensuing crackdown and Ankara unhappy with an apparent lack of solidarity from the bloc. "The key element which we agreed to was that we talk more to each other and a little bit less about each other, showing full respect," Mogherini said after talks with Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and EU Minister Omer Celik. Mogherini unequivocally condemned the coup aimed at ousting President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, saying: "There is no space whatsoever... for any attempt

at a coup." She said the sides had an "in-depth discussion" about ensuring the rule of law was protected following criticism of the crackdown in which tens of thousands of people have been arrested or dismissed over alleged links to the putsch. She said the main outcome of the meeting was "a strong recommitment to dialogue and common work on all strands of our cooperation." Cavusoglu added: "We must work together because there are problems that emerge that affect all our people. If there is a problem, we must mutually solve it."

'A candidate country'

Hahn acknowledged there had been "many irritations" on both sides following the coup, emphasising that Turkey had to behave in a manner befitting of a candidate member. "Turkey was, is and will be a candidate country. And as a candidate country we have to apply higher standards." Turkey's bid to join the EU dates back to the 1960s with formal talks starting in 2005 but the duration of the process has caused

severe rancor in Ankara. After the attempted coup, Erdogan mulled bringing back capital punishment, a move which would spell an end to the bid. The issue of the death penalty was not raised at the press conference. Hahn emphasized that visa liberalization for Turks travelling to the EU-which Ankara wants completed this year-was still on the agenda. He said chapters 23 and 24 of the accession process-covering justice and rights and freedom and security-should be opened as soon as possible and that a settlement to end the division of Cyprus would help this. Celik said Ankara was ready to open all 35 chapters of the EU accession process. So far, only 16 chapters have been opened. "Turkey is a European country, a European democracy. Europe's future is our future," he said. The unresolved situation in Cyprus-which is divided between the Greek-ruled, internationally-recognized south and the Turkish north-remains a huge obstacle to Turkey's membership bid, with the Republic of Cyprus blocking the opening of several new chapters. — AFP

IS FAMILIES EXPELLED FROM COMMUNITIES

TIKRIT: Iraqi authorities are expelling the families of suspected Islamic State members from their homes as the jihadist group loses ground, raising fears of communal violence if people seek to settle old scores. Relatives of more than 200 militants are being forced to leave Dhuluiya, 70 km north of Baghdad, and Hit, 130 km to the west, government and security officials said.

Iraqi forces backed by a US-led coalition have recaptured more than half the territory seized in 2014 by Islamic State, also known as ISIL and Daesh, and are gearing up for an offensive on the jihadists' de facto capital of Mosul later this year. But the expulsions raise the spectre that the ultra-hardline group's anticipated demise could trigger yet more conflict, if Iraqis seek to root out sympathizers and pursue retribution outside the law for Islamic State crimes they say include massacre, rape and enslavement.

Government forces and allied Shi'ite Muslim militias kicked Islamic State out of Dhuluiya nearly two years ago, but late last month police forced relatives of suspected insurgents, identified through intelligence and neighbours' testimonies, to leave 52 houses in the town, a local police officer said. "After the liberation of Dhuluiya, tensions started to surface among the residents, especially people who lost relatives because of Daesh's extreme rules," said tribal leader Sheikh Ibrahim al-Jabouri. "We fear a fissure in society. Vengeance against Daesh families will only lead to more death."

Last week, a Reuters photographer observed members of the Samarra Operations Command, which handles security in Salahuddin province where Dhuluiya is located, marking the walls of shuttered houses with graffiti that said "Locked down by order of the Samarra Operations Command," and "There is no place for you among us". Most of the families have moved in with relatives in nearby districts, said Jasim Al-Jibarra, head of Salahuddin provincial council's security committee. Others may have slipped into neighboring Kirkuk province.

Collective punishment

An official at Iraq's Ministry of Migration and Displacement condemned forced expulsions as "oppressive" but could not confirm they were happening. "The Iraqi constitution guarantees the right to freedom of living and settlement for each and every citizen," he said, declining to be named. The United Nations warned that the expulsions, which it said are becoming widespread, endanger civilians' lives and undermine efforts at reconciling the country's minority Sunnis and Shi'ite majority. "People who may have nothing to do with ISIL are effectively being punished for what a family member may or may not have done," said Francesco Motta, representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Iraq. "There are no legal standards applied to the family member who's supposed to be suspected or accused of participating or supporting ISIL and ... the family members are being punished collectively." In the western city of Hit, 170 families have been given until the Eid Al-Adha holiday, which begins on Sept. 12, to leave, a police official and an international aid worker told Reuters. Hit, which spent a year and a half under the extremists' control, was retaken in April by Iraqi forces who quickly returned most residents to their homes. Mayor Muhannad Zbar said he was willing to empty the city of half its population if they were shown to have links with Islamic State. With neighboring districts refusing to host them, the exiles may have no choice but to return to territory controlled by the jihadists. — Reuters