

## DUTCH POLLS TO TEST EUROPEAN WATERS FOR FAR-RIGHT

**THE HAGUE:** Dutch voters go to the polls next month in the first of a series of elections that will be a litmus test of European politics after Brexit and Donald Trump's shock victory in the US. All eyes are on the far-right, anti-Islam Freedom Party (PVV) and its outspoken leader, MP Geert Wilders. If the opinion polls prove right, Wilders is on track to deliver the country's establishment Liberal party of Prime Minister Mark Rutte and his Labor coalition partner a thumping on March 15.

What may prove Wilders's best polls showing ever could in turn boost the chances of his ideological allies in both France and Germany, where elections are due later in the year. Wilders, who has vowed to take his country out of the EU, has been riding high in the polls for months, propelled both by Trump's victory and the tensions triggered by Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II. But some say the polls are unreliable, while others maintain PVV supporters among the 12.6 million eligible to vote are keeping their cards close to their chests.

### Trump factor

Despite his blond, bouffant hair and political similarities, Wilders dismisses the easy moniker of being "the Dutch Donald Trump." But he has made no secret of his admiration for the new US president (he was a guest at the Republican convention) and like him has delighted in taking his message directly to voters via Twitter. He even got into hot water last week for "fake news" by tweeting a photo-shopped picture of a political foe supposedly surrounded by Islamist radicals. In recent weeks however, Rutte's

Liberal VVD has narrowed the gap, and the latest survey on Sunday predicted he would win about 24 seats to 30 for Wilders.

"After Trump's election, the PVV got a boost. But the survey today shows that 25 percent of PVV voters are reacting negatively to the measures taken by President Trump," respected pollster Maurice de Hond said. Even though Wilders has been a politician for at least two decades, "I think people increasingly want to vote for him because they don't see enough change," said Leiden University political expert Geerten Waling. Former harbor master Sijmen Kaper, 70, in the PVV eastern stronghold of Volendam, agreed. "The politicians aren't listening to the people. These people aren't racists, they are people who want things done differently," he said.

### Hard bargaining

Even if the PVV emerges as the largest party in parliament, it would fall far short of the 76 seats needed to form a governing coalition in the 150-seat parliament. That would herald weeks, or months, of bitter horse-trading, and perhaps bestow a kingmaker role on smaller up-and-coming parties such as environmentalists GroenLinks (GreenLeft). Many observers believe it unlikely that Wilders will end up in government. "Nobody wants to govern with him and he will never be able to get a majority," said Waling. "So he will be a huge opposition party." Rutte has already vowed not to work with Wilders, repudiating his radical anti-Islam platform and denouncing comments about Moroccans which saw the MP convicted of discrimination last year.



**VOLENDAM:** Photo shows tourists visiting the Dyke in Volendam. — AFP

Yet Rutte recently raised eyebrows when, in a not-so-subtle bid to drain support from Wilders, he shifted his tone more to the right demanding immigrants must adopt Dutch values or leave. Wilders himself insisted on Sunday that if his party wins the most votes,

then he cannot be ignored. "You can't just push aside 2.5 million voters ... after democratic elections," he told the WNL OP Zondag television program. He predicted such a move could lead "to such an unstable political assembly... that inside of a year it would collapse." — AFP

## GERMAN-ISRAELI GOVT MEETING 'CANCELLED'

### ISRAEL, GERMANY AT ODDS OVER SETTLEMENT BUILDING

**BERLIN:** A meeting between the governments of Germany and Israel that was scheduled to take place in May has been cancelled amid rising frustration in Berlin with settlement activity in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. A German spokesman said the governments had agreed to "postpone" the annual meeting of leaders and ministers until next year, blaming the delay on the busy schedule of meetings surrounding Germany's presidency of the G20.

An Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman confirmed the session has been called off, citing "schedule constraints on the German side." But German officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, suggested the real reason for the cancellation was the feeling that the two governments were too far apart on the issue of Middle East peace to make such a meeting worthwhile.

"Our relations have been completely pared

back," one senior German official said. "We have practically given up on making progress in the current environment." German governments have made strong relations with Israel a top priority ever since World War Two, going to great lengths to make amends for the killing of six million Jews by the Nazis. But relations have grown tense in recent years as Germany questioned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's commitment to a two-state solution with the Palestinians.

The election of US President Donald Trump appears to have emboldened Netanyahu to step up building in settlements, which are seen by Germany and many other countries as illegal and an obstacle to peace because they reduce and fragment the territory Palestinians need for a viable state. Israel disagrees, citing biblical, historical and political connections to the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which it captured in the 1967 Middle East war and where some 2.6 million Palestinians live. It has built about 120 settlements in the West Bank. About 350,000 settlers live there, with a further 200,000 in East Jerusalem.

Since Trump took office last month, Netanyahu has approved construction of 6,000 settler homes in the two areas, drawing international condemnation which the White House did not join. In recent days, however, the Trump administration has taken a more nuanced position, saying building new settlements or expanding existing ones may not be helpful in achieving peace. Netanyahu is to meet Trump in Washington today. Before his departure he sidestepped a question about whether he still supports creation of a Palestinian state, saying he would make his position clear during the visit. — Reuters



**JERUSALEM:** Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu chairs the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem. — AFP



**PARIS:** French President Francois Hollande (right) gestures as he sits next to French Labor Minister Myriam El Khomri during a visit in Aubervilliers, north of Paris. — AFP

## FRENCH PRESIDENT CALLS FOR 'JUSTICE' OVER POLICE RAPE

**PARIS:** French President Francois Hollande called for "justice" yesterday over the alleged rape of a black youth with a police baton, appealing for calm after more than a week of riots. "Justice must be served," Hollande said during a visit to the working-class suburb of Aubervilliers, situated in the tough Seine-Saint-Denis region northeast of Paris where Theo, a 22-year-old youth worker, was assaulted while being arrested.

But Hollande also condemned the nightly violence after the February 2 incident in a high-rise housing estate, calling the rioting "unacceptable." He said France was determined to "show that we are capable of living together in a peaceful society, but where respect is the rule and where we must be firm towards those who diverge from this principle."

Theo's treatment by four officers during a stop-and-search operation has sparked clashes with police and arson attacks in a string of impoverished, ethnically-mixed suburbs around the French capital. Dozens of people have been arrested, including 25 overnight Monday. Theo was hospitalized with severe anal injuries after one of the officers allegedly sodomised him with a truncheon. The officer in question has been charged with rape and his three colleagues with assault. All four have been suspended.

### 'Fuel to the fire'

With presidential elections in April and May, the alleged assault, which follows the death of a young black man in police custody in another Paris suburb last year, has become a campaign issue. Far-right leader Marine Le Pen on Monday launched a petition "to support the police" after blaming "laxism in French society" for the problems of the restive suburbs. The head of the anti-immigration National Front party called for a "major tightening of the screws" to boost police capabilities.

The remarks prompted Socialist presidential candidate Benoit Hamon to say she was "adding fuel to the fire." "She encourages violence through her hateful rhetoric," Hamon said. On Monday, Interior Minister Bruno Le Roux made an appeal for "responsibility, calm (and) faith in the justice system."

Hollande, who visited Theo in hospital last week, decided not to seek re-election. The leftist Hamon, who won the Socialist nomination, is given little chance of getting past the first round on April 23. The latest voter surveys show Le Pen with 27 percent support for the first round-more than any other candidate-though she is currently not expected to triumph in the May 7 runoff vote. — AFP

## KING OF UNIVERSITY DEGREES IS A 70-YEAR-OLD ITALIAN BAIETTI

**VELLETRI:** Boffins eat your hearts out: the world record holder for the number of university degrees is a cheery but truculent 70-year-old Italian. Luciano Baietti lives in the town of Velletri in the Alban Hills near Rome and spends his days pottering around his small house and garden. But at every morning at 3 am he pulls out his textbooks and starts studying. He now holds 15 bachelors or masters degrees from universities across Italy, and is already embarking on his 16th. "Thanks to books, I feel free, dammit," he said. "After all, the words share the same root," he says, referring to the Italian words libro (book) and libero (free). The certificates proving his prowess hang on the walls of his study, framing a portrait of the 19th century French essayist, Louis-Francois Bertin, whom he cites as an influence.

### Passion for a challenge

"He was a man of culture and knowledge," said Baietti, a former headmaster of a secondary school, who made it into the Guinness Book of Records in 2002 with his eighth degree, that time in motor skills. At that point he already had degrees in sociology, literature, law, political science and philosophy, most from Rome's prestigious La Sapienza University, one of the oldest in the world. Since then he's added seven others to his list, including one in criminology, a distance-learning one in military strategies from Turin, and the latest in tourism from an online university in Naples, which he was awarded at the start of this month.

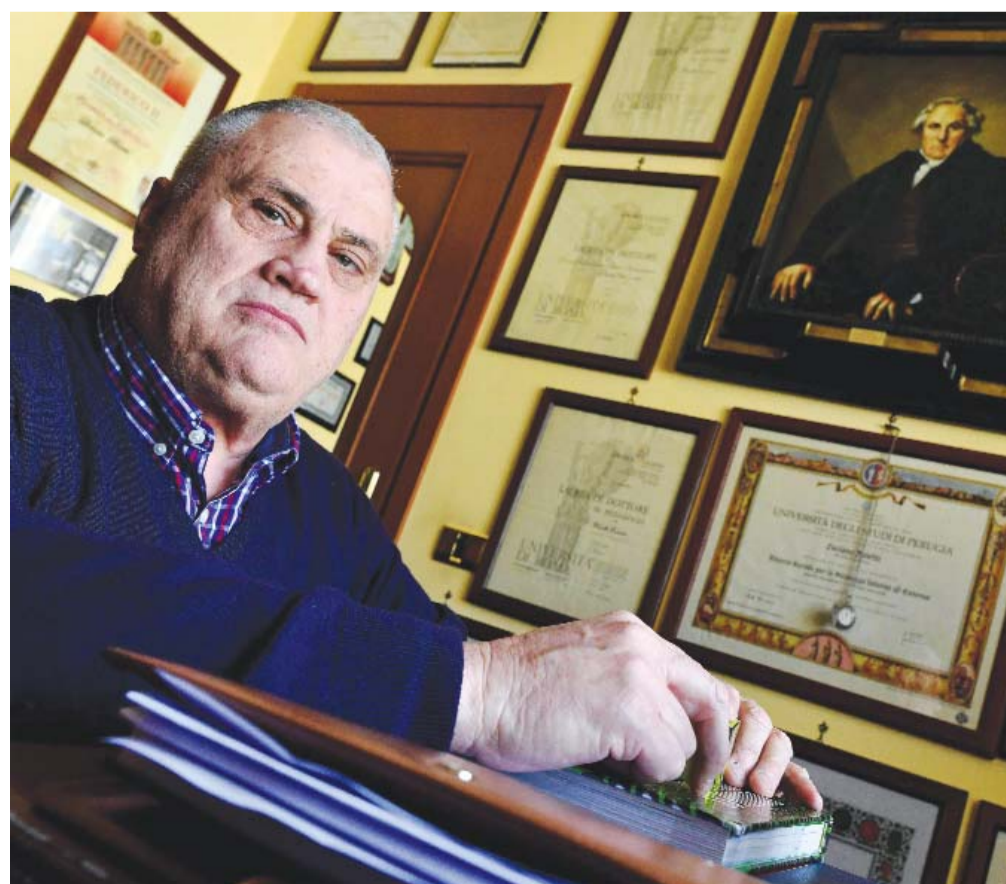
"Each time I set myself a new challenge, to see how far my body and my brain can go," says Baietti, who started life as a sports teacher. His long-suffering wife, some 30 years his junior, describes Baietti affectionately as "a real character" who is known throughout their town. He got most of the qualifications under his belt while also doing his day job and volunteering with Italy's Red Cross. This ageing eternal student's first degree was in physical education in 1972 - and he fell instantly in love with the academic world. "As well as the sporting events, there were modules in theory which I liked, and which gave me a taste for studying," he says.

### 'I surprised myself'

The most challenging and unusual degree so far has been the military strategies one: "It was co-organized by the defense ministry and Turin University and dealt with sensitive subjects related to national security." "We had to attend the exams in uniform," he recalls, showing off the regimental garb hanging in his wardrobe. His masters in criminology, which saw him interview prisoners, also had a lasting impact.

"Listening to them, I sometimes surprised

myself; I'd be convinced by their arguments, and would wonder about what was right or wrong-before realizing that I had gone off course." Baietti is back on course, and already preparing to start the next degree, this time in food science. Once again, he'll be pouring over his books by the light of his desk lamp as outside the world sleeps on. "At that time the brain is more open to assimilating knowledge, and it also allows me to keep a normal family life," he says with a grin. — AFP



**VELLETRI:** Luciano Baietti, awarded 'The more graduated man in the world' by the Guinness Book of World Records, poses under some of his university degrees in his house in Velletri, south of Rome. — AFP

## FORMER BOSS OF NIGERIA STATE-RUN OIL FIRM IN \$10M CASH PROBE

**LAGOS:** A former head of Nigeria's state-run oil firm is under investigation after almost \$10 million in cash was found at a property he owns. Anti-corruption agency the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) said it had seized \$9.8 million (9.2 million euros) from a house belonging to Andrew Yakubu. A further £74,000 (\$92,700, 87,300 euros) was also found at the property in the northern city of Kaduna. Images of the money-stacked in neat bundles and allegedly discovered in a safe-have featured prominently in the country's media for several days.

Nigeria is currently in recession and desperately in need of cash, having been hit hard by the slump in global oil prices since mid-2014 that has squeezed revenue and pushed up inflation. Politics watchers have pointed out the money could have financed a string of much-needed conventional and renewable power projects outlined in the 2017 federal budget. EFCC spokesman Wilson Uwujaren refused to be drawn on what would happen next. "We are still investigating the matter," he said. "At the end of our investigation we shall decide on our next line of action... Nothing is ruled out." In his defense, Yakubu has denied any wrongdoing. He admitted the money belonged to him but said it was a gift from friends.

### Anti-corruption drive

Yakubu was the group managing director of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) from 2012 to 2014, having been appointed by then president Goodluck Jonathan. In early 2014 the governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Lamido Sanusi, outraged Jonathan and his government claiming the NNPC had failed

to remit \$20 billion in revenue. The allegation of corruption cost Sanusi his job, officially on charges of "financial recklessness and misconduct," but his supporters saw the dismissal as politically motivated.

Jonathan and his oil minister Diezani Alison-Madueke repeatedly maintained that nothing like \$20 billion was missing. Yakubu was dismissed in 2014. Critics said he did little to clean up the NNPC's reputation as one of the world's most opaque and corrupt state oil firms. Since coming to power in May 2015, Jonathan's successor, Muhammadu Buhari, has made it his mission to reclaim what he says were "mind-boggling" sums of looted public cash. One of his first moves as president was to overhaul the NNPC, by trying to introduce greater transparency and efficiency.

Alison-Madueke has been caught up in the anti-corruption drive. She is currently facing fraud charges in Nigeria and the prospect of having to forfeit \$153 million to the government on suspicion of the sum having been obtained illegally. A court in Lagos was told on January 6 that the cash was allegedly siphoned from the NNPC and stashed in three bank accounts. Alison-Madueke has rejected the claim. The former OPEC president has been on police bail in London since October 2015 after being arrested in connection with a British investigation into international corruption and money laundering. Buhari's information minister Lai Mohammed on Sunday announced that some \$151 million and eight billion naira (\$26.3 million) in stolen state funds had been recovered from just three people. The \$9.8 million found at Yakubu's house was not part of the new recoveries, he said. — AFP