

TENSIONS FLARE IN ZAMBIA AMID SLIDE TO 'DICTATORSHIP'

LUSAKA: Nearly a year after coming to power in a contested election, Zambian President Edgar Lungu is facing a growing chorus of criticism over his government's moves to clamp down on dissent. "Zambia eminently qualifies to be branded a dictatorship," the country's religious leaders said in a rare statement on Friday, the latest sign that opposition to Lungu's authority is spreading. At the heart of the tensions is the arrest and continued detention of opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema, a wealthy businessman who has run for president five times, and narrowly lost out to Lungu last August.

His United Party for National Development (UPND) unsuccessfully tried to contest what it called a stolen election, and in April Hichilema was arrested on treason charges after his convoy allegedly refused to give way to the presidential motorcade. He has since been moved to a maximum security prison and it is unclear when he will return to court. In the meantime, the authorities have kept up

pressure on his supporters, including blocking a prominent South African opposition leader from attending Hichilema's trial last month. "Hakainde's arrest for treason was at first dismissed as an intimidatory gimmick by president Lungu," said Telesphore Mpundu, the archbishop of the Lusaka diocese, but "outrage over Hichilema's arrest and incarceration is growing." Treason is a non-bailable offence in Zambia, with a minimum jail term of 15 years and a maximum sentence of death. And Lungu himself did not mince his words during last year's campaign, warning political rivals and activists that "if they push me against the wall, I will sacrifice democracy for peace."

'What crisis?'

Last week, parliament suspended 48 UPND lawmakers who boycotted Lungu's address to legislators in March, depriving them of pay while demanding they recognize Lungu's legitimacy. The govern-

ment has also increased pressure on media outlets that support the opposition, further eroding Zambia's longstanding reputation as a stable democracy. Tensions are mounting even as the government battles slowing economic growth after prices plunged for copper, the country's key export, leading to soaring inflation and unemployment.

"We have to see the violent arrest and subsequent detention of Hichilema, and the suspension of the 48 opposition lawmakers, in a much wider context," said Sishuwa Sishuwa, a politics lecturer at the University of Zambia. "One that has seen the critical free press stifled and eventually shut, a number of nonstate actors such as trade unions and religious organizations co-opted or muted, and free speech effectively suppressed," he said.

The government has dismissed the claims. "What crisis? There is no crisis," Lungu told journalists Friday after the church leaders' statement. Earlier in the week, government spokeswoman Mulenga Kampamba told

AFP: "Who tells you the country is sliding into a dictatorship? We are a democratic country where state institutions are operating without any interference."

But such claims have failed to sway many outside observers, with Amnesty International's Southern Africa director Deoprose Muchena warning in April that Hichilema and his aides were "victims of longstanding persecution" by the authorities, facing charges that are designed to "harass and intimidate". For Lungu's critics, his intentions of silencing Hichilema have been made brutally clear.

Earlier this year, a senior official in Lungu's Patriotic Front party hinted that the government was losing its patience. "He should take note that we will treat him the way a rat is treated if you want to catch it, for those of us who eat mbeba (rats) we know how to catch a rat," said deputy secretary general Mumbi Phiri. "It is time that we confined him to the dustbins of political history." Days later Hichilema was arrested. — AFP

BRITAIN HURTLING INTO THE BREXIT UNKNOWN

MAY WEAKENED, INSECURE AFTER FAILED ELECTION GAMBLE

LONDON: With her strategy unclear and her position insecure, Prime Minister Theresa May plunges this week into tortuous divorce talks with the European Union that will shape Britain's prosperity and global influence for generations to come. At one of the most important junctures for Europe and the West since the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, May's government is reeling from a crisis of her own making - the loss of her parliamentary majority in a June 8 snap election she did not need to call.

Such is the collapse of May's authority that her entire Brexit strategy is being picked apart in public by her ministers, her lawmakers and her allies on the eve of formal negotiations which begin in Brussels today at 0900 GMT. Despite signals from both France and Germany last week that Britain would still be welcome to stay if it changed its mind, Brexit minister David Davis insisted on Sunday there would be no turning back. "As I head to Brussels to open official talks to leave the EU, there should be no doubt - we are leaving the

post-election deal to stay in power with the support of a small Northern Irish party, there are fears of a disorderly exit that would weaken the West, imperil Britain's \$2.5 trillion economy and undermine London's position as the only financial centre to rival New York.

Compounding the pressures on the British leader, she has been widely accused of failing to show enough empathy with victims of a horrific tower block fire in London last week. One European diplomat in London said the political upheaval was such that it was difficult to know what to write back to his capital, pouring scorn on May's campaign slogan of 'strong and stable leadership'. "What can you say of meaning about such chaos?" the diplomat asked. "I suppose it isn't quite a strong and stable Brexit yet."

What Kind of Brexit?

Leaving the European Union was once far-fetched: Only 15 years ago, British leaders were

said Anand Menon, professor of politics at King's College London. Before the election, May proposed a clean break from the EU: leaving its single market, which enshrines free movement of people, goods, services and capital, and proposing limits on immigration and a bespoke customs deal with the EU. Opponents describe that as a "hard Brexit". They argue instead for a "soft" version, prioritizing some form of continued access to the single market in order to minimize economic damage.

While European leaders try to gauge what to expect from Britain, May is so weakened that her own finance minister and the partners on whom she will rely for her majority, Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, are giving her public guidance. "My clear view, and I believe the view of the majority of people in Britain, is that we should prioritize protecting jobs, protecting economic growth, protecting prosperity as we enter those negotiations," finance minister Philip Hammond said.

Dog's Breakfast

While Britain's economy has shown unexpected resilience since the Brexit vote, there are signs of weakness. Business leaders say the uncertainty means they are having to plan on the assumption that Britain leaves without a proper deal. "Everything is all over the place," said a senior executive responsible for Brexit preparations at a FTSE 100 company. "It's a bit of a dog's breakfast at the moment because there is a lot of maneuvering and a lot of moving parts."

Brexiters accept there is likely to be some short-term economic pain but say Britain will thrive in the longer term if cut loose from what they see as a doomed experiment in German-dominated unity and excessive debt-funded welfare spending. Opponents of Brexit fear that ditching a 60-year strategy of trying to hedge European integration with a special relationship with Washington or a brittle Commonwealth of former colonies would undermine what remains of Britain's global influence.

The first issue at the Brussels talks will be the status of millions of EU citizens living in the United Kingdom and British residents of the other 27 countries, including their right to stay, to work, and to access medical care. The extent of Britain's exit bill needs to be decided, with the EU27 expected to seek tens of billions of euros they see as London's fair share of programs to which it has committed.

The situation in Ireland - where the only land border between the EU and United Kingdom will lie - will also be discussed. May wants to negotiate the divorce and the future trading relationship before Britain leaves, followed by what she calls a phased implementation process to give business time to prepare for the impact of Brexit. The EU wants to deal with the first phase of divorce talks before moving on next year to discuss trade, though EU officials acknowledge that the agreements to be reached before Britain leaves can only be concluded as a whole package simultaneously.

Three days after the talks begin, May is due to travel to Brussels for an EU summit - a chance for the other 27 leaders to take stock of their negotiating partner in the sharply altered climate brought about by the dramas of the past two weeks. — Reuters



LONDON: Mayor of London Sadiq Khan (right) is embraced by a parishioner as he leaves St Clement's Church in Notting Hill yesterday, close to Grenfell Tower, after attending Sunday service in which the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire disaster were remembered. —AFP

GOVT SCRAMBLES TO LIMIT FALLOUT FROM LONDON FIRE

LONDON: The British government yesterday scrambled to contain political fallout from the London high-rise inferno that has claimed at least 58 lives. The cause of Wednesday's blaze is still under investigation, but anger has mounted in the community amid reports that exterior paneling used in an extensive renovation completed last year may have spread the flames. Treasury chief Philip Hammond said Sunday he believes the flammable cladding used on the building's exterior is banned in Britain.

Labour Party lawmaker David Lammy said that the government and the police should immediately seize all documents relating to the building's renovation to prevent the destruction of evidence that could show criminal wrongdoing. "The prime minister needs to act immediately to ensure that all evidence is protected so that everyone culpable for what happened at Grenfell Tower is held to account and feels the full force of the law," Lammy said.

He said all records, including emails, minutes of meetings, correspondence with contractors, safety assessments, specifications and reports - must be kept intact. "When the truth comes out about this tragedy, we may find that there is blood on the hands of a number of organizations," Lammy said. Prime Minister Theresa May said more help will be sent to the scene to help survivors cope and find alternative housing now that the 24-story Grenfell Tower has been destroyed. "I have ordered that more staff be deployed across the area, wearing high visibility clothing, so they can easily be found, dispense advice and ensure the right support is provided," May said after a meeting with survivors at her Downing Street office on Saturday.

In addition, British health authorities will provide long-term bereavement counselling for those who lost loved ones in the tragedy. Counselors are already working with 52 families. There has been a public outcry at the government's initial failure to provide up-to-the minute information. May, criticized in the first few days after the blaze for failing to meet with victims, says the public inquiry looking into the tragedy will report directly to her.

She says she will receive daily reports from the stricken neighborhood, where hundreds of people have been displaced. Anger among residents has been mounting in recent days as information about the missing has been scanty and efforts to find temporary housing have faltered. British officials say they are helping the Syrian family of the first officially confirmed victim of the London tower blaze to come to Britain.

The Home Office said late Saturday night it will make arrangements for the family of Mohammad Alhajali to "travel to the UK in these terribly sad circumstances." The 23-year-old Alhajali is the only victim of the Grenfell Tower fire to be officially named as the difficult process of identifying human remains continues. His family said in a statement that Alhajali "came to the UK because he had ambitions and aims for his life and for his family."

Police say at least 58 people are either confirmed or presumed dead, with the figure likely to rise in coming days. Officials are using dental records, fingerprints and DNA samples to try and positively identify victims. They say they will also use visual elements like tattoos and scars, in the painstaking process. Sixteen bodies have been taken to a mortuary for examination. — AP



LONDON: Demonstrators hold placards and chant during an anti-Conservative Party Leader and Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) protest on Whitehall, opposite the entrance to Downing Street on Saturday. — AFP

European Union," said Davis, who will launch the talks with chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier. "Now, the hard work begins. We must secure a deal that works for all parts of the United Kingdom, and enables us to become a truly global Britain."

Britain has less than two years to negotiate the terms of the divorce and the outlines of the future relationship before it is due to leave in late March 2019. Both sides need an agreement to keep trade flowing between the world's biggest trading bloc and the fifth largest global economy. But the other 27 members of the EU combined have about five times the economic might of Britain. They also have a strong incentive to deny the UK a deal so attractive it might encourage others to follow the British example.

With May still hammering out the details of a

arguing about when to join the euro, and talk of an EU exit was the reserve of a motley crew of sceptics on the fringes of both major parties. But the turmoil of the euro zone crisis, fears in Britain about immigration and a series of miscalculations by former Prime Minister David Cameron prompted Britain to vote by 52 to 48 percent for Brexit in a June 23 referendum last year.

Leaving the EU - the biggest blow since World War Two to European efforts at forging unity - is now the official consensus of both the Conservatives and the opposition Labour Party. Amid such upheaval, though, there is little agreement on what kind of Brexit May should try for - even assuming she can hold onto her job. "The United Kingdom's political tectonic plates are moving at the very moment when we are negotiating

MACRON EYES NEXT STAGE IN REVOLUTION

PARIS: French voters went to the polls yesterday in a parliamentary election set to hand a landslide victory to the centrist party of President Emmanuel Macron which would complete his stunning reset of national politics. The new assembly is due to be transformed with a new generation of lawmakers - younger, more female and more ethnically diverse - winning seats in the aftermath of Macron's success in last month's presidential election.

The scale of the change is forecast to be so large that some observers have compared the overhaul to 1958, the start of the present presidential system, or even the post-war rebirth of French democracy in 1945. It is also entirely unexpected: Macron was unknown three years ago and initially given little chance of emerging as president, but he and his 15-month-old *Republique en Marche* (Republic On the Move, (REM) party have tapped into widespread desire for change.

And yet despite the zest for renewal the vote has failed to generate much excitement. Official statistics showed turnout at middling down more than three points over the last election in 2012 at 17.75 percent, revealing a degree of election fatigue. REM and its allies are forecast to win 400-470 seats in the

577-strong parliament, one of the biggest post-war majorities that would give the pro-EU Macron a free hand to implement his business-friendly program.

'Desperately seeking an opposition'

Yesterday's voting is the decisive second round of the election after a first round last weekend that was topped by REM and which was also marked by low turnout. If confirmed, REM's crushing win will come at the expense of France's traditional parties, the rightwing Republicans and Socialists, but also the far-right National Front which faces major disrepute. The Socialists are set to be the biggest victim of voters' desire to reject establishment figures associated with years of high unemployment, social unrest and lost national confidence.

Pollsters predict the party will lose well over 200 seats after its five years in power under former president Francois Hollande, leaving them with only around 20. "People are tired of always seeing the same faces," said Natacha Dumay, a 59-year-old teacher voting in the northeastern Paris suburb of Pantin where Socialist former justice minister Elisabeth Guigou was voted out a week ago. "Even if we don't

know the new faces it's not important. We're not voting for individuals but for a program," she added.

The main concern for observers and critics is the likely absence of any political counterweight to Macron, leading some to forecast that opposition could be led through street protests or in the media. "Desperately seeking an opposition," declared the front page of Saturday's *Le Parisien* newspaper.

Virtual unknowns

Turnout will be closely watched after it hit a nearly 60-year low in



LE TOUQUET, France: French President Emmanuel Macron (center) rides a bicycle in the streets on Saturday. —AFP

the first round, leading some to warn Macron that his mandate is not as strong as he thinks. REM won 32 percent of the total number of votes cast in the first round, but this represented only about 15 percent of registered voters. "Go and vote!" Prime Minister Edouard Philippe urged on Thursday, calling it both "a right and a responsibility". Around half of REM's candidates are virtual unknowns drawn from diverse fields of academia, business or local activism. They include a mathematician, a bullfighter and a former Rwandan orphan. — AFP

THOUSANDS ATTEND KIEV GAY PRIDE AMID TIGHT SECURITY

KIEV: More than 2,000 people took part in Kiev's gay pride event yesterday amid a heavy police presence, as nationalist protesters tried to stop the event and set fire to a rainbow flag. Participants walked through the city center protected from counter-protesters by Ukrainian police in helmets and bullet-proof vests as well as National Guard troops. Ukraine's pro-European authorities ensured the gay pride event could go ahead despite widespread homophobic attitudes in the ex-Soviet country where gay marriage is not permitted.

Police said around 2,500 marchers took part, protected by almost 5,000 officers. They detained six protesters who tried to break through a cordon of riot police. None of the marchers were injured, the interior ministry said, but the head of Kiev police said two of its officers suffered minor injuries. "Finally in our country we are able to come out for our rights and show that we exist," said one participant, Tetiana. "I feel nervous and happy that I can come out and not fear anything."

Another marcher Volodymyr Kosenko said: "I feel pride today because I see round me my friends and acquaintances and my husband. I see people who came out to say that everyone is equal in

Ukraine." Marchers shouted slogans such as "We're different, we're equal!" and "Ukraine for all!" Among the marchers was British Ambassador Judith Gough, who wrote on Twitter there was a "fine party atmosphere."

But more than 100 ultra-nationalists tried to block the route and burned a rainbow flag. "I'm convinced that this is wrong. It's a sin and it can destroy our country morally," said Irina, a student. "I condemn the propaganda of homosexuality in Ukraine and particularly the holding of gay parades. I came to speak out against it. The Bible says clearly it's a sin," added Kyrlo Babentsov, another protester.

A spokeswoman for Amnesty International in Ukraine, Mariya Guryeva, praised the police for ensuring crowd safety, calling this "very positive." "This is positive evidence the Ukrainian authorities are trying to ensure the citizens' rights to peaceful protests and to express their views," she told AFP. But she cautioned that homophobic crimes still largely go uninvestigated and police "are very reluctantly to put such crimes on record." Last year's Kiev event was held in the city center for the first time amid an unprecedented police presence and attracted around 700 participants. — AFP