

International

Niger stages historic elections despite jihadist bloody attacks

Poll could seal a first peaceful handover between elected presidents

NIAMEY: Voters went to the polls in Niger yesterday for an election that could seal a first peaceful handover between elected presidents, against the backdrop of a bloody jihadist insurgency. The West African country, unstable since gaining independence from France 60 years ago, is ranked the world's poorest country according to the UN's Human Development Index. Around 7.4 million people are registered to vote for the ballot for presidency, which coincides with legislative elections.

"I expect the Nigerien president to put security, health, progress and democracy first," Aboubakar Saleh, a 37-year-old launderer, told AFP in Niamey without revealing who he voted for. Issaka Soumana, a 52-year-old lorry driver, said he wanted change. "Niger is not moving forward. Our country must rise," he said, brandishing his thumb stained with ink to show he had cast his ballot. President Mahamadou Issoufou, who was elected in 2011 after the country's last coup in 2010, is voluntarily stepping down after two five-year terms.

"It is a special day for Niger which will experience for the first time in its history a democratic transition," Issoufou said after voting at the city hall in Niamey. The frontrunner in the 30-strong field is his designated successor, Mohamed Bazoum, 60, a for-

mer interior and foreign minister. "It is a great pride that this date of December 27 has been respected," Bazoum said after voting. Bazoum's main rival, former prime minister Hama Amadou, was barred from contesting the vote on the grounds that in 2017 he was handed a 12-month jail term for baby trafficking—a charge he says was bogus.

Overshadowed by insecurity

Polling stations are scheduled to close at 7:00 pm but are instructed to close later in case of delays to ensure 11 hours of voting. Partial results for the presidential election are expected to be announced today with final counts on Wednesday or Thursday. A second round, if necessary, will be held on February 20. Campaigning has been overshadowed by insecurity—Niger is being battered

by jihadists on its southwestern border with Mali, and its southeastern frontier with Nigeria.

A jihadist insurgency that has spilled across borders in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger claimed some 4,000 lives last year from jihadist violence and ethnic bloodshed stirred by Islamists, according to the UN. In Niger itself, hundreds have died in the past five years, and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes. The economy, already fragile, has suffered devastating blows. Around 42 percent of Nigeriens



NIAMEY: Niger's outgoing president Mahamadou Issoufou casts his ballot at a polling station yesterday. — AFP

lived last year on under \$1.90 (1.56 euros) per day, according to the World Bank, while nearly a fifth of its surging population of 23 million relied on food aid.

Army deployed

On Monday, seven troops and 11 suspected jihadists died in an ambush in the southwestern region of Tillaberi, the government said on Thursday. On December 12, 34 villagers were massacred in Toumour,

in the southeastern region of Diffa, on the eve of municipal and regional elections that had been repeatedly delayed because of poor security. The army has been massively deployed for yesterday's vote, the authorities say. "Sporadic attacks will not prevent the staging of the elections," a spokesman said on Thursday. The attack in Toumour triggered three days of national mourning, but the elections the following day went ahead smoothly, officials say. — AFP



Campaigning overshadowed by insecurity

CAR votes in polls marred by violence

BANGUI: Voters went to the polls yesterday in the Central African Republic (CAR) in presidential and legislative elections marred by the latest flare-up in a long-running civil war, with many voters unable to cast their ballots. Incumbent Faustin Archange Touadera is the frontrunner in polls that follow a week of turbulence marked by accusations of an attempted coup, rebels briefly seizing the fourth-largest town and Russia and Rwanda dispatching military personnel to help the beleaguered government.

UN peacekeepers and local and Rwandan soldiers were patrolling the streets of the capital yesterday with armored vehicles posted outside polling stations. Although some stations opened late in Bangui because of a lack of voting materials, senior election officials told AFP they would stay open later to make up for it. "It's very important for me to be here, as a citizen. I think this vote will change our country, whoever the president will be," teacher Hortense Reine said.

Sixteen candidates are vying for the presidency - Touadera's main rival is former prime minister Anicet Georges Dologuele. Polls are due to close at 5:00 pm with partial results expected on January 4 and the final totals on January 19. A runoff will be held on February 14 if there is no overall majority in the first round.

Threats against voters

Away from Bangui, sporadic fighting has been going on for nine days and scattered incidents were reported yesterday. In the northwest, more than 500 kilometers from the capital, rebels seized election materials in Kouli and officials received death threats in Ngaoundaye, according to a senior UN official. In some areas, rebels threatened anyone who went to vote. Meanwhile, thousands of people had not received their voter cards because of the dire security situation, according to local and UN



BANGUI: Voters wait as electoral commission officials check the voters roll at the Barthelemy Boganda high school polling station in the 4th district yesterday. — AFP

officials who all requested anonymity.

"How do we vote when we don't even have our voter cards," Robert, from Boali 80 kilometers north of Bangui told AFP by phone - explosions audible in the background. "Everyone is fleeing at the moment. I'm holed up at home." Ahead of the elections many of the 1,500 candidates contesting the 140 seats in the national assembly were unable to campaign. Former president Francois Bozize, who wanted to stand but was barred by judges because he is under UN sanctions, urged people not to vote and backed a rebel coalition. "Stay at home. Let Touadera place his ballot in the box alone," Bozize said in an audio message published online which his party confirmed to AFP.

Coup allegations

The government on December 19 accused Bozize of attempting a coup alongside armed groups advancing on the capital, a charge he denies. Fears about the rebels swept the city in the following days, although the UN peacekeeping force MINUSCA said their advance had been stopped. The rebel coalition on Wednesday announced a 72-hour "unilateral ceasefire" in the runup to the vote, only to call

it off on Friday saying it would resume its march on the capital. On Tuesday, the CAR's fourth-largest town, Bambari, 380 kilometers northeast of Bangui, was overrun but security forces backed by UN peacekeepers regained control the following day. Yesterday, polling stations in Bambari remained closed in the morning because of gunfire from armed groups, according to Jeannot Nguemendji, president of the local peace committee.

Legitimacy concerns

The mineral-rich but poverty-stricken CAR has been unstable since independence 60 years ago. Thousands of people have died since a civil war erupted in 2013 and more than a quarter of the population of 4.9 million have fled their homes. Of these, 675,000 are refugees in neighboring countries and cannot vote. Even though bloodshed has receded in intensity over the last two years, violence remains chronic. Militia groups hold sway over two-thirds of the territory. Experts and opposition figures have already asked what legitimacy the president and 140 MPs to be elected will have, given the obstacles to holding a free vote. — AFP

the most passionate advocates against joining the EEC organize their last stand on December 31. Five hundred people join a torchlit procession to the sound of bagpipes in front of the Palace of Westminster, the seat of the British parliament.

January 1973: Divided Britain joins Europe

PARIS: On January 1, 1973 Britain joined the European Economic Community in festive spirits following a decade of tough negotiations, though public opinion on membership was mixed. For around 10 days, as part of a "Fanfare for Europe" gala, 300 sports and cultural events were held nationwide showcasing the EEC countries.

Membership had increased from six to nine, with Denmark and Ireland also joining alongside Britain. The Conservative government's europhile prime minister Edward Heath described Britain's entry to the bloc as "very moving". Football players from the three new states played against a team of players from the six other countries. Italy loaned a Michelangelo for an exhibition, the Netherlands provided a Rembrandt. Only the Louvre spoilt the fun by refusing to let the "Mona Lisa" leave Paris. Here is a look back at AFP's reporting from the time.

Hastings and Waterloo

On the eve of the big day, the British press devote their front pages to the event. A chapter of a thousand years of history is closing, says The Sunday Times. The Sunday Telegraph predicts joining would prove as decisive for British history as the Battles of Hastings or Waterloo. "The Daily Mail above all warns its readers against the use of inappropriate common parlance that could shock the citizens of the eight other countries," writes AFP. Meanwhile

'A fool's paradise'

AFP's reporter Basile Tesselin heads to a London pub to test the mood. "We have our own government, a parliament we elect," a print worker tells him. "We do not want to be led by who knows what from Brussels. Everything we have is better than what you have." "I'm wary of you, I see you coming," says a taxi driver from Scotland.

"You suck up to us, and then once we're in your sacred trap, your fool's paradise, you'll make us fall out with our real friends, the Americans, the Canadians, the Australians. And you'll all become communists and take us down with you." The list of recriminations grows: fears that VAT (Value Added Tax) will increase, that the weight of trucks will



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson gestures as he holds a remote press conference to update the nation on the post-Brexit trade agreement at 10 Downing Street on Dec 24, 2020. — AFP

become an issue, and on the free entry of Europeans. "I like going to Europe," says one truck driver from Scotland. "Particularly to France. I feel at home there. I don't trust the English."

The opposition Labor Party quickly makes clear its intention to renegotiate the accession treaty. Its leader Harold Wilson accuses the government of having "abdicated" its responsibilities to Brussels. In 1974, Labor returns to power and, after securing a renegotiation, organizes a referendum the following year on whether or not to remain in the EEC. The "Yes" vote wins by 67 percent. On June 23, 2016, 41 years later, Britons will vote by 52 percent to leave the European Union. Brexit plunges Britain into more than three years of crisis before its departure becomes reality on January 31, 2020. — AFP

News in brief

Three killed in Illinois shooting

WASHINGTON: Three people were killed and another three wounded Saturday in the US state of Illinois when a shooter opened fire at a bowling alley, police said. A suspect in his 30s was in police custody. Rockford city police urged people on Twitter to stay away from the area near the Don Carter Lanes bowling alley, as it was an "active situation" and officers were clearing the site. The force posted on Twitter shortly after midnight: "37-year-old white male suspect is in custody. There are no others being sought at this time." "It's still an ongoing investigation. We do have three individuals that are confirmed deceased," police chief Dan O'Shea earlier told a press conference near the scene of the shooting. He said three other people had been wounded from the gunfire and were being treated at local hospitals. He did not specify whether the shooter had a motive. — AFP

Syrian refugee camp set ablaze

BEIRUT: A Syrian refugee camp in northern Lebanon was set on fire Saturday night following a fight between members of the camp and a local Lebanese family, state media reported. The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, confirmed a large fire had broken out in a camp in the Miniyeh region and said some injured had been taken to hospital, but did not provide an exact number. "The fire has spread to all the tented shelters"-made of plastic sheeting and wood-UNHCR spokesman Khaled Kabbara said. The camp housed around 75 families, he said. The National News Agency reported that the fire followed an "altercation" between a member of a Lebanese family and "Syrian workers". — AFP

Jihadists snatch dozens of loggers

KANO: Boko Haram jihadists have seized around 40 loggers and killed three others in northeast Nigeria near the border with Cameroon, militia sources and residents told AFP on Saturday. The hostages were rounded up by the insurgents on Thursday in Wulgo forest near the town of Gamboru where they went to collect firewood, the sources said. The jihadists have increasingly targeted loggers and farmers in the northeast, accusing them of passing information to the military and local militias. "A group of more than 40 loggers left Shehuri on the outskirts of Gamboru on Thursday and never returned by evening as usual," said militia leader Umar Kachalla, who was involved in the search. — AFP

4 killed in army chopper crash

ISLAMABAD: A military helicopter has crashed in mountainous northern Pakistan, killing four soldiers including the two pilots, the army said. The chopper crashed Saturday in the Gilgit-Baltistan region "due to technical reasons" while transporting the body of a soldier to the military hospital in Skardu, it said in a statement. Pakistan has a chequered military and civilian aviation safety record, with frequent plane and helicopter crashes over the years. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) came under heavy scrutiny this year after one of its planes came down among houses in Karachi, killing 98 people. In August 2015, 12 people were killed when an army chopper crashed in the northwest. — AFP