

International

'No sense of celebration;' Israel holds third election in one year

Opinion polls predict another stalemate

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought re-election yesterday under the weight of an imminent corruption trial, with the country's third ballot in less than a year predicted to end in another deadlock. The election follows inconclusive votes last April and September that dimmed the aura of political invincibility once enjoyed by Israel's longest-serving prime minister, who has denied wrongdoing in the three graft cases against him.

"Today I have no sense of celebration," President Reuven Rivlin said after voting, voicing the frustration across the country after a seemingly never-ending election season. "The feeling I have is not simple, it's even one of shame, when I face you, the citizens of Israel."

Opinion polls forecast that neither Netanyahu's right-wing Likud nor the centrist Blue and White party of his main challenger, former armed forces chief Benny Gantz, will win enough votes on their own, or with coalition allies, for a governing majority in parliament.

Israelis can vote until 10 pm, when media can publish the first exit polls and signal whether the deadlock has been broken. More stalemate could push Israel, where a 2020 budget is still pending, further into economic limbo. The candidates were more upbeat than Rivlin, who, as president, will guide any coalition talks in the weeks ahead.

Voting in his hometown outside Tel Aviv, Gantz told reporters: "I really hope that in the coming weeks, following the results, we can put Israel on a new path." Netanyahu, who voted in Jerusalem, said: "Go vote. It's a proud day." He said Israel had taken all precautions needed to control the spread of the

coronavirus and added: "People can go and vote with complete confidence."

Turnout figures will be watched closely, particularly given concern over the global outbreak and accusations of malicious rumors about contamination in areas seen as strongholds for particular parties. By noon, nearly 28% of eligible voters had cast ballots, the highest level at this stage in two decades. Voters under home-quarantine, such as those who have recently travelled back to Israel from coronavirus hot spots, voted at special polling stations wearing face masks and gloves.

'The defendant'

Israel's economy has weathered the political turmoil, with growth strong and the labor market tight. But the longer the stalemate continues, the heavier the toll, including the lack of new money for health, education, welfare or infrastructure projects until an annual budget is approved by parliament. Netanyahu, 70, hopes a peace plan that US President Donald Trump presented in

Longest-serving PM denies any wrongdoing



January will help him win an unprecedented fifth term though the Palestinians have rejected it. Netanyahu says recognition of Israeli sovereignty over settlements in the occupied West Bank will enable him to annex them within weeks of the election.

But his re-election bid has been complicated since the last election by his indictment on charges of bribery, breach of trust and fraud over allegations he granted state favors worth hundreds of millions of dollars to Israeli media barons in return for gifts and favorable coverage. The trial is due to begin on March 17,



JERUSALEM: Israelis wearing protective masks vote at one of the special polling station erected for the 5,600 voters under quarantine, many of whom had visited countries where the coronavirus COVID-19 is prevalent, during parliamentary election yesterday. —AFP

when post-election coalition wheeling and dealing is likely to be in full swing. Gantz calls Netanyahu "the defendant" and has accused him of seeking to retain power to promote legislation that would bar authorities from putting a sitting prime minister on trial.

Netanyahu says Gantz, 60, would need Arab politicians' support in parliament to form a government and they would tie his hands in any military action in the

region. He has portrayed Gantz as a "coward" incapable of confronting the many dangers Israel faces in a tense region and has suggested he is hiding secrets that would open him to blackmail by its foe Iran. The Israeli military said in a statement it had targeted a vehicle in the Syrian-controlled Golan Heights yesterday after an attempted sniper attack from the area. The frontier has been tense throughout Syria's civil war. —Reuters

Iraq crisis deepens after PM-designate steps down

BAGHDAD: Protest-torn Iraq yesterday faced more political gridlock after prime minister-designate Mohammed Allawi withdrew overnight, accusing lawmakers of obstructing his attempt to form a government. Oil-rich but poverty-stricken Iraq has for five months been rocked by the biggest wave of anti-government demonstrations since the 2003 US-led invasion toppled former dictator Saddam Hussein. The mostly youthful protesters demand the ouster of Iraq's entire political elite, which they accuse of being inept, corrupt and beholden to powerful neighbor Iran.

Allawi's departure plunges Iraq deeper into uncertainty and leaves President Barham Saleh 15 days to propose a new candidate - likely intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kazimi, according to political sources. Iraq has been in legal limbo since outgoing premier Adel Abdel Mahdi stepped down in December, as the constitution makes no provisions for such a resignation. Allawi's withdrawal a month after his appointment marks another first for

Iraq, which has never seen a premier-designate fail to secure parliamentary backing for a cabinet line-up.

Iraq's bitterly divided parliament had on Sunday failed for a third time to convene a confidence vote on Allawi's proposed government. In a letter to the president, Allawi charged that some factions were "not serious about reform or fulfilling their pledges to the people". One Iraqi official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP that "political leaders are living in a bubble" and dealing with the crisis "as though nothing has happened in the country".

'Holding Iraq hostage'

Allawi had been nominated as a consensus candidate among Iraq's divided political parties, and had emphasized that his cabinet would be made up of technocrats and independents. Anti-government demonstrators had nonetheless rejected him as too closely connected to the political elite. Powerful populist cleric Moqtada Sadr - who had backed the protest movement before he withdrew his support last month - condemned "corrupt" politicians for "holding the country hostage".

He hailed Allawi's decision to bow out as one taken "for the love of Iraq". The protesters have backed Alaa Al-Rikabi, a



BAGHDAD: Iraqi protesters gather during ongoing anti-government demonstrations in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. —AFP

pharmacist who has emerged as a prominent activist in the southern protest hotspot of Nasiriyah. Many celebrated Allawi's departure as a victory. "We have already removed Adel Mahdi and now Allawi," said Roqiya, a 20-year-old student demonstrating in Baghdad, who

charged that "political parties pursue only their own interests". Political commentator Hamid Abou Nour said Allawi's demise came precisely because he tried to reconcile the interests of political parties with those of the street, telling AFP that "he failed on both counts". —AFP

North Korea fires 'ballistic missiles'

SEOUL: North Korea fired what appeared to be two short-range ballistic missiles yesterday, the South's military said, weeks after Pyongyang threatened to demonstrate a "new strategic weapon" and its deadline for Washington to offer sanctions relief expired. The launch was the nuclear-armed North's first for more than three months and came as nuclear negotiations with the United States remain at a standstill.

The two devices were fired eastwards over the sea from the Wonsan area on the east coast and flew 240 kilometers at a maximum altitude of 35 kilometers, the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said. They were "believed to be short-range ballistic missiles," a JCS official said. South Korea's security ministers expressed "strong concern" the North was "carrying out actions giving rise to military tensions", the presidential Blue House said.

Japan's defense ministry said there was no indication of anything coming down in its waters or exclusive economic zone, but added: "Recent repeated launches of ballistic and other missiles by North Korea are a serious issue." The launch came as Pyongyang battles to prevent a coronavirus outbreak and days after the one-year anniversary of the collapsed Hanoi summit between leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump.

Negotiations have since been deadlocked over sanctions relief and what the North would be willing to give up in return, despite a high-profile June meeting in the Demilitarized Zone that divides the peninsula. Pyongyang carried out a series of weapons tests late last year, the last of them in November, often describing them as multiple launch rocket systems. It also carried out static engine tests, most recently in December.

At a party meeting at the end of that month, Kim declared that Pyongyang no longer considered itself bound by its moratoriums on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests, and threat-



Photo shows rockets and artillery being fired during a Korean People's Army joint strike drill at an undisclosed location. —AFP

ened to demonstrate a "new strategic weapon" soon. North Korea has a long history of seeking to demonstrate its military capability to try to obtain conces-

sions. "March is pretty reliably missile-testing season for North Korea," tweeted Ankit Panda, senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists. —AFP

At least 50 killed in northern Nigeria 'bandit' attacks

KANO: At least 50 people were killed in multiple attacks by armed 'bandits' on villages in an area of northern Nigeria rife with cattle theft and kidnappings, local officials said yesterday. Sources said around 100 armed assailants stormed into the villages of Kerawa, Zareyawa and Minda in Kaduna state at dawn on Sunday, gunning down worshippers as they left a mosque for morning prayers before killing residents,

burning and looting homes.

"So far 50 bodies have been recovered but the figure is not conclusive and is very likely to rise as rescue efforts are still under way," Zayyad Ibrahim, a lawmaker in the Nigerian parliament said yesterday. Several people were injured in the attacks and were taken to nearby hospitals Ibrahim said. The attacks were in retaliation for villagers allegedly assisting recent army operations against the so-called bandits in their forest hideouts, local councillor Dayyabu Kerawa said.

"The bandits accused residents from the targeted villages of providing information about their hideouts to the military," said Kerawa. "We buried 51 victims yesterday (Sunday) afternoon," Kerawa said. Kaduna police spokesman Mohammed Jalige said authorities were investigating the attacks. Violence has soared in

northwest Nigeria in recent years as criminal gangs involved in cattle rustling and kidnapping have carried out bloody raids on villages. The groups attack from hideouts in nearby forests exploiting a lack of security across the region.

The Birnin Gwari and Giwa districts of Kaduna state have been hit by violence and repeated reprisal attacks between bandits and local vigilante groups. Security forces in February announced a sweeping operation aimed at armed gangs in the area. Last month 21 people, including 16 members of one family, were killed when bandits attacked a village in a reprisal attack. Authorities in several states in northwest Nigeria have sought peace deals with the bandits to stop the bloodshed but these have failed to end the instability. —AFP

News in brief

Notorious militant sentenced

CAIRO: An Egyptian court yesterday sentenced to death an ex-special forces officer turned Islamist militant and 36 other jihadists over several terror attacks, including an assassination bid on a former interior minister. The Cairo criminal court condemned Hisham Ashmawy and 36 co-defendants to hang on 54 charges such as leading a terror group and targeting then-interior minister Mohamed Ibrahim in a 2013 suicide car bombing, a judicial source said. Ibrahim survived the bombing near his Cairo home but some 20 policemen and civilians were wounded. The death sentences can be appealed. Known locally as the "Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis", after the militant outfit he led in the restive Sinai region, Ashmawy later broke with the group after it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group in November 2014. —AFP

Seven Rohingya shot dead

COX'S BAZAR: Bangladeshi elite police yesterday shot dead seven suspected Rohingya gangsters involved in drug and people smuggling, a spokesman for the force said. Tensions are rising in south-east Bangladesh two and a half years after hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees fled a military offensive in Myanmar. The latest gunfight came after a recent spike in human smuggling as gangs lure refugees onto rickety fishing boats for often dangerous sea journeys to Malaysia. The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) said it was involved in a three-hour shootout with members of a bandit group led by notorious Rohingya gang leader known as Zokir. "So far we have recovered seven bodies with bullet wounds," RAB spokesman Abdullah Sheikh Sadi said. He added that it was unclear if Zokir was among the dead. —AFP

Chinese sentenced to death

BEIJING: A Chinese court has sentenced a man to death for fatally stabbing two officials at a checkpoint set up to control the spread of the new coronavirus outbreak. The virus has infected more than 80,000 people and killed nearly 3,000 in mainland China-prompting a wide network of temperature checks, travel restrictions, residential checks and closures nationwide. Many villages and communities have also implemented their own blockades and tough measures to keep people out, fearful that travelers could infect their communities. On Sunday a court handed down a death sentence to a 23-year-old man after he stabbed two officials at one local village checkpoint. The incident happened on February 6 when Ma Jianguo was driving a minivan through a checkpoint at Luo Meng village in Honghe, southwestern Yunnan province, where he was stopped. —AFP

Hanging of rapists postponed

NEW DELHI: The execution of four men convicted of the brutal gang-rape and murder of a student on a New Delhi bus in 2012 was indefinitely postponed by a court yesterday. The special court last month ruled the men were to be hanged today, but postponed the execution after one of them filed a mercy plea - the last remedy for death row convicts in India - to the president. "The execution has been deferred till further notice," defense lawyer AP Singh told reporters outside the court in the capital. Six people - five men and one juvenile - were charged with the attack on Jyoti Singh in a case that made headlines around the world and triggered massive nationwide protests. One of the men, the suspected ring-leader, allegedly committed suicide in his prison cell, while four others were convicted in 2013. —AFP