

International

Merkel goes all out for Laschet as German party lags in polls

German Chancellor to retire after 16 years in power

BERLIN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday lauded her party's candidate Armin Laschet as the best choice to succeed her, as polls showed the gaffe-prone Rhinelander still trailing badly ahead of this month's election. Laschet, the chancellor candidate for Merkel's conservative CDU/CSU bloc, was long the favorite to be the next German leader, but his ratings have plummeted following a series of missteps. The frontrunner is now Vice Chancellor and Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, whose centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) are enjoying a late spurt in the final weeks before the September 26 vote.

"It is a special election, not only because no incumbent chancellor is running for re-election for the first time since 1949," the outgoing Merkel said in what was likely her last speech in parliament ahead of the vote. "It is also a special election because it is a decision on the direction of our country in difficult times - and it is not irrelevant who governs this country," she said. "The best way for our country is a CDU/CSU-led federal government with Armin Laschet as chancellor, because his government would stand for stability, reliability, moderation and centrism."

Merkel to the rescue

Merkel, who is retiring after 16 years in power, did not get involved in the race to pick a candidate from her party to run in the elections. But with the Christian Democrats' poll ratings plummeting to their lowest in the post-war period, the party is now encouraging as many joint appear-

ances as possible between Merkel and Laschet. A poll for the NTV broadcaster published yesterday showed the conservative alliance on just 19 percent, with the SPD out ahead on 25 percent and the Greens - an early favorite in the race - on 17 percent. The CDU/CSU bloc won 33 percent at the last election in 2017 under Merkel, who remains immensely popular with the public.

Merkel appeared alongside Laschet at a digital summit on Monday, and also accompanied him at



Christian Democrats' poll ratings plummet to their lowest

the weekend on a tour of two towns hit hard by deadly floods in July. In North Rhine-Westphalia, where Laschet is the regional premier, Merkel told reporters he was "leading the largest state in Germany very successfully". "Anyone who can lead a state like this can also lead Germany as chancellor," she said after visiting local officials in charge of the reconstruction effort, insisting her heart was "very much in it" when it came to



BERLIN: German Chancellor Angela Merkel talks with North Rhine-Westphalia's State Premier and Germany's conservative Christian Democratic Union's (CDU) chancellor candidate Armin Laschet during a session at the Bundestag, the German lower house of parliament yesterday. — AFP

endorsing him as her successor.

Downward slide

Laschet's response to the floods in his state was the beginning of a downward slide for the 60-year-old, after he was caught on camera joking with local officials during a tribute to flood victims. Things then went from bad to worse when he said in a TV interview that it would be wrong to "change poli-

cies just because of one day", in what sounded to many like making light of the catastrophe. In a bid to reverse the trend, Laschet on Friday introduced eight allies who would serve as ministers or advisors on issues including renewable energy, digitalization and helping the ailing arts sector in the pandemic. If the alliance's fortunes don't improve soon, it could crash out of the chancellery in favor of an SPD-led government. — AFP



MEXICO CITY: The head of the Venezuelan Government delegation, Jorge Rodriguez, points to a document as he speaks to the press at the hotel where the negotiations between the Venezuelan government and the opposition are taking place in Mexico City. — AFP

Venezuelan rivals narrow differences in Mexico talks

MEXICO CITY: Venezuela's government and opposition on Monday found common ground on two fronts, including the country's pandemic response, in a tentative step towards ending a long-standing political crisis. The signing of two "partial agreements" came after representatives of President Nicolas Maduro and opposition leader Juan Guaido held four days of talks in Mexico City mediated by Norway. They agreed to meet again on September 24 to 27, with the key issues of elections and sanctions still to be resolved.

The accords involve social protection - including dealing with the coronavirus - and Venezuela's stance on a disputed border area controlled by Guyana. "The parties agreed to establish mechanisms for restoring and obtaining resources to meet the needs of the COVID-19 pandemic, including those from multilateral organizations," a joint statement said. That includes drawing on funds from the International Monetary Fund, head government negotiator Jorge Rodriguez said.

The two sides agreed to each "designate three representatives to form a National Board of Social Care to address the areas of health and food," according to the joint statement. Chief opposition representative Gerardo Blyde said that it was "important for all of us to have achieved a space that we hope will be depoliticized to agree on all these measures in humanitarian matters." He added: "We will do everything in our power, each one of the parties, to obtain funds for humanitarian matters."

'Success for Venezuelans'

The two sides also agreed Venezuela has a "historic and inalienable" claim to Guyana's Essequibo region, the focus of a century-old dispute. Venezuelan prosecutors have previously accused Guaido of treason for allegedly plotting to hand over Essequibo to multinational companies. A warning from Maduro on Sunday that the negotiations would not result in "impunity" was seen as a warning to the opposition leader, who faces multiple accusations in Venezuela. Maduro welcomed the outcome of the talks as "a success for Venezuelans," while Guaido said that progress on the humanitarian front would help to save lives. "We are clear that the tragedy in our country requires not only urgent attention, but also fundamental solutions for which we are fighting," Guaido tweeted. The talks have a seven-point agenda including electoral guarantees, easing sanctions and political rights - but not the departure of Maduro, accused by the opposition of fraudulent reelection in 2018. — AFP

Impunity rules as juntas take over in Mali, Chad, Guinea

BAMAKO: Power grabs in West Africa over the past year - in Chad, Mali and most recently Guinea - are enjoying newfound impunity, leaving citizens angry and distressed. "What's the use of constitutions, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and international diplomacy if after all anything goes?" asked Ahmed Sankare, a mobile telephone vendor in the Malian capital Bamako.

ECOWAS and many voices in the international community condemned the Guinea coup, as they did a year ago and again in May for Mali. The words have been the same: restore constitutional order, free detainees, set a timeline for elections. But a year later, Mali's military remain in command, with doubts growing over their promise to return the Sahel country to civilian rule through elections in February 2022.

In Chad, after Idriss Deby Itno died fighting rebels on April 20, his son

seized power. Former colonial power France, Chad's main trading and strategic partner, quickly gave its blessing to the new leadership, refraining from describing what took place as a coup. In Mali as in Chad, the new presidents are the product of special forces - Colonel Assimi Goita in Bamako, General Idriss Deby in N'Djamena. And in both countries, the constitution has been replaced by a "transition charter".

'A favorable climate'

"I do think that the international community has sacrificed its leverage, first by its acquiescence to the coup in Mali - the US is the only major external power to maintain a cut-off of military assistance to Bamako until constitutional order is restored," said Peter Pham, former US envoy to the Sahel. "And then by Chad, where France led the way by literally, in the person of Macron, embracing the son of the late President who took over," he added, referring to French President Emmanuel Macron.

Jean-Herve Jezequel of the International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank warned against the idea that the coups in Mali and Chad helped trigger Guinea's putsch. But "the way these recent coups in Chad and Mali were accepted, even validated, by regional and international actors has



CONAKRY: Members of Guinea's armed forces celebrate after the arrest of Guinea's president, Alpha Conde in a coup d'etat in Conakry. — AFP

probably created a favourable climate for what happened in Guinea," he said. Burkinabe news outlet Wakat Sera drew parallels between the coups in Guinea and Mali. The new strongman in Conakry, Lieutenant Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, simply "recited the formula for power grabs through arms... like a recording that all putschists everywhere use", it argued.

'Domino effect'

In Bamako, a top official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the coups in Mali and Chad could create a

"domino effect", with militaries elsewhere saying to themselves "why not us?" In Guinea's case, "experience tells us to be extremely cautious and not too naive," Fabien Offner of Amnesty International said. "Some see the end of the (Alpha Conde) regime as a good thing, (but) it's not the first time that there are hopes in West Africa and they are often dashed," he said. The message in the Wakat Sera editorial to the international community was clear: "Stop with the ostrich policy" and the "broken record" of toothless condemnations, it said. — AFP



KHAN YUNIS: A fireball rises following an air strike in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, late on September 6, 2021. — AFP

Zionists strike Gaza after incendiary balloon attacks

GAZA: Zionists launched airstrikes against Gaza on Monday night, the army said, retaliating after incendiary balloons launched from the blockaded Palestinian enclave had started fires. Blaming Hamas for the balloons, the Zionist army said it had targeted locations belonging to the militant group that controls the Gaza Strip. "Overnight, IDF fighter jets struck a Hamas rocket manufacturing workshop, as well as a Hamas military compound in Khan Yunis," the Zionist army said in a statement.

"The strikes were in response to Hamas launching incendiary balloons into Zionist territory," the

statement added. Witnesses said that the army had also fired artillery at the north of Gaza. According to medical sources in the Palestinian enclave, no one was killed. Earlier in the day, Zionist firefighters had said that incendiary balloons had caused three bushfires at sites close to the Gaza Strip. Launching the makeshift devices is a common tactic of militants in Gaza, which Zionists has blockaded for nearly 15 years.

Zionists frequently responds with airstrikes. Monday's strikes come after six Palestinians broke out of a Zionist prison earlier in the day through a tunnel, triggering a massive manhunt. Hamas and Zionists fought a devastating 11-day conflict in May, the worst between the two sides in years. Though it ended with an Egypt-brokered ceasefire and a pledge for Qatari aid to ease poverty in the Palestinian enclave, incendiary balloons and occasional border clashes have continued in the months since. — AFP

Syrian refugees face torture and rape: Amnesty

BEIRUT: Dozens of Syrians who returned home from abroad have been subject to detention, disappearance and torture by security forces, Amnesty International said yesterday, warning Syria is not yet safe for repatriation. In a report titled "You're going to your death," the rights group documented a series of violations by security forces against 66 Syrians, including 13 children, who have returned since 2017. Amnesty said the cases proved "that no part of Syria is safe to return to."

"Syrian intelligence officers have subjected women, children and men returning to Syria to unlawful or arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment including rape and sexual violence, and enforced disappearance," the rights group said. Among the cases listed, the rights group documented five cases of returnees who died in detention. The fates of 17 others who were forcibly disappeared remain unknown, Amnesty said. The rights group also documented 14 cases of sexual violence committed by security forces, including seven cases of rape, committed against five women, a teenage boy and a five-year-old girl.

"Any government claiming Syria is now safe is willfully ignoring the horrific reality on the ground," Amnesty said, calling on European governments to "immediately halt any practice directly or indirectly forcing people to return to Syria". More than 6.6 million Syrians have sought refuge abroad since the start of the conflict in 2011, with most resettling in neighboring countries such as Turkey and Lebanon. Denmark, Sweden, and Turkey have recently upped pressure on refugees to return home after a decade of war, arguing most of the country is now safe, Amnesty said. The Syrians interviewed by Amnesty include returnees from Lebanon, which for years has exerted pressure on refugees to return. The report cited testimony from a Syrian woman, Alaa, who was arrested along with her 25-year-old daughter at a border crossing as they came back from Lebanon. — AFP