

## International

## Confidence vote puts Bulgarian government's fate in the balance

## Cracks in coalition began to appear soon after Russia's invasion of Ukraine

**SOFIA:** Bulgaria's coalition government faced collapse Wednesday just six months after taking office, as MPs prepared to vote on a no-confidence motion that if passed could mean fresh elections. But analysts say there is no guarantee that another national vote in this country of 6.5 million people, which last year went through three such polls, would end the country's political instability.

In the most recent elections last November, the party of liberal Kiril Petkov came out ahead and went on to form an unwieldy coalition government with three other parties. An energetic, pro-European prime minister, Petkov promised to end Bulgaria's endemic corruption after a decade of rule by the controversial conservative Boyko Borisov.

But cracks in the coalition began to appear soon after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and earlier this month, the anti-establishment ITN party led by entertainer Slavi Trifonov withdrew its support. Borisov's conservative GERB party swiftly filed a no-confidence motion citing "the failure of the government's economic and financial policy" as consumer inflation soared.

The vote is expected just after 7:00 pm local time (1600 GMT). The motion needs 121 votes in the 240-seat parliament to succeed. The ruling coalition can rely on the support of just 109 of 240 lawmakers. Six MPs from the ITN grouping are also expected to back the government, but its only hope of clinging to power hinges on more ITN lawmakers giving their last-minute backing.

In a defiant speech to his supporters outside parliament on the eve of the vote, Petkov vowed: "We

will never betray the cause we began with. "Sooner or later Bulgaria will be where it should be—prosperous, European, with a working judiciary, with good education and healthcare," he said.

## Aggravated tensions

In a country with strong historical ties with Moscow, the Ukraine conflict has "accentuated divisions and weakened the government", said Ruslan Stefanov of the Center for the Study of Democracy think-tank. Despite the country's heavy dependence on Russian gas and oil, Petkov opposed Moscow's demand to open a ruble account to pay for Russian gas—a response to European Union sanctions. As a result, the country faced a cut in supplies in response.

This meant "Bulgarian oligarchs who pocketed commissions" on energy deliveries found themselves deprived of income, said Ognyan Minchev, head of the Sofia-based Institute for Regional and International Studies. And that, he said, "aggravated tensions within the coalition as well as between business circles and the government".

Another source of tension was Ukraine's appeal for arms to fight the Russian invasion. While most of the parties in the government were ready to authorise such deliveries, the Socialists—also part of the ruling coalition—remained opposed.

The final straw however came from the EU's drive to settle longstanding historical and cultural disputes between Bulgaria and neighbouring North Macedonia. It was Petkov's advocacy of rapprochement with Skopje that the ITN says prompted them to quit the coalition.

## Thousands take to the streets



**SOFIA, Bulgaria:** Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov speaks during a demonstration to support the government in Sofia before facing a no-confidence vote. —AFP

## Fragmented landscape

Even if the government survives the no-confidence vote, it will still struggle to govern because of its lack of a clear majority, political analyst Dimitar Dimitrov told public broadcaster BNR on Wednesday. If the no-confidence motion does pass, President Rumen Radev can make three attempts to see if any party can form a governing majority.

Failing that, parliament will be dissolved, and the politicians will go back to campaigning for

elections that would have to be held within two months. But even if there were fresh elections, they would be unlikely to provide a durable solution to a political landscape that remains highly fragmented, says Dimitar Ganey of the Trend polling institute.

Thousands of Bulgarians took to the streets on Wednesday in a demonstration of support for Petkov's drive for reforms—which now looks doomed. —AFP

## Prince Charles pays tribute to genocide victims in Rwanda

**KIGALI, Rwanda:** Prince Charles laid a wreath on Wednesday at a memorial to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda during the first visit to the country by a British royal. The Prince of Wales and his wife Camilla paused in silent tribute at the Kigali Genocide Memorial, the final resting place for more than 250,000 victims of the massacres almost three decades ago.

The royal couple signed a note of remembrance to accompany a wreath of white flowers.

They also spoke with survivors of the genocide in which some 800,000 mainly Tutsi people were murdered by Hutu extremist forces over about 100 days between April and July 1994. Housing skulls, bone fragments and shreds of clothing, the memorial is a confronting testimony to the horrors of the

genocide and a customary stop for foreign dignitaries visiting Rwanda.

Charles and Camilla also toured the memorial museum where they viewed photographs of the victims and their possessions, and heard personal testimonials about the killings.

The royal couple touched down late Tuesday in Rwanda where the Prince of Wales is representing his mother, Queen Elizabeth II, at a Commonwealth summit this week.

The leaders of many Commonwealth nations are expected in Kigali in the coming days for the meeting of the 54-member club of mainly former British colonies.

Rwanda, a former German and Belgian colony, joined the Commonwealth in 2009 and has in recent years moved closer to the English-speaking world.

Inaugurated in 2004 during the 10th anniversary of the killings, the Kigali Genocide Memorial has an education centre, a garden, library, and a 1200-seat amphitheatre that hosts workshops, plays, and cultural films.

The victims' remains are laid out in three main



**KIGALI, Rwanda:** Britain's Prince Charles (C), Prince of Wales, and Britain's Camilla (3rd-L), Duchess of Cornwall pose for a photo with a group of Genocide survivors during a visit of the Kigali Genocide Memorial. —AFP

rows, and more have been buried as new graves are uncovered around the country. At the burial ground, The Wall of Names is dedicated to victims of the genocide. —AFP

## Two kidnapped Chibok girls freed in Nigeria after eight years

**MAIDUGURI, Nigeria:** Nigerian troops have found two former schoolgirls who were abducted by Boko Haram jihadists eight years ago, the military said Tuesday, freeing some of the last victims of the 2014 Chibok abduction.

The two women each carried babies on their laps as they were presented by the military, after captivity with militants who stormed their school in April, 2014 in northeast Nigeria in a mass kidnapping that sparked international outrage.

Major-General Christopher Musa, the military commander of troops in the region, told reporters the girls were found on June 12 and 14 in two different locations by troops. "We are very lucky to have been able to recover two of the Chibok girls," Musa said.

Dozens of Boko Haram militants stormed the Chibok girls' boarding school in 2014 and packed 276 pupils, aged 12-17, at the time into trucks in the jihadist group's first mass school abduction. Fifty-seven of the girls managed to escape by jumping from the trucks shortly after their abduction while 80 were released in exchange for some detained Boko Haram commanders following negotiations

with the Nigerian government.

In the recent releases, one of the women, Hauwa Joseph, was found along with other civilians on June 12 around Bama after troops dislodged a Boko Haram camp, while the other, Mary Dauda, was found later outside Ngoshe village in Gwoza district, near the border with Cameroon.

On June 15 the military said on Twitter that they had found one of the Chibok girls named Mary Ngoshe. She turned out to be Mary Dauda. "I was nine when we were kidnapped from our school in Chibok and I was married off not long ago and had this child," Joseph told reporters at the military headquarters.

Joseph's husband and father-in-law were killed in a military raid and she was left to fend for herself and her 14-month-old son. "We were abandoned, no one cared to look after us. We were not being fed," she said.

Thousands of Boko Haram fighters and families have been surrendering over the last year, fleeing government bombardments and fighting with the rival group Islamic State West Africa Province. The conflict has killed more than 40,000 people and displaced 2.2 million more since 2009.

Dauda, who was 18 when she was kidnapped was married at different times to Boko Haram fighters in the group's enclave in the Sambisa forest. "They would starve and beat you if you refused to pray," Dauda said about life under Boko Haram.

She decided to flee and told her husband she was



**MAIDUGURI, Nigeria:** Kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls Hauwa Joseph (L) and Mary Dauda pose with their babies at Maimalari Barracks in Maiduguri, northeast Nigeria. —AFP

visiting another Chibok girl in Dutse village near Ngoshe, close to the border with Cameroon. With the help of an old man who lived outside the village with his family, Dauda trekked all night to Ngoshe where she surrendered to troops in the morning.

"All the remaining Chibok girls have been married with children. I left more than 20 of them in Sambisa, she said. "I'm so happy I'm back." After the Chibok school mass abduction jihadists carried out several mass abductions and deadly attacks on schools in the northeast. —AFP

## 'Life goes on' for unfazed Taiwanese on frontline islands

**XIYU, Taiwan:** Since moving from Taiwan's capital to the outlying Penghu islands for the peace and the fishing 11 years ago, Lin Chih-cheng has grown accustomed to the roar of Chinese fighter jets puncturing the lull of the surf. "If there's a day where they don't take off, it feels weird," laughed Lin, an affable 61-year-old who runs a juice stall with his wife on the western Xiyu Islet.

The archipelago's location about 50 kilometres (30 miles) out in the Taiwan Strait means it is likely to be on the front line of any potential invasion by China—a perennial possibility that has loomed ever larger in the

last few years. Beijing claims all of Taiwan as its territory, and its pledge to take it by force if necessary has begun to seem less farfetched as China projects an increasingly aggressive stance on the world stage. But in the sleepy fishing towns on the islands, many locals are sanguine despite the frequent—and noisy—reminders of the military threat.

"Everyone says tension between both sides is high now, but I am not worried," said Lin. "I have confidence that our government is not beating the war drum." Xiyu's azure waters and twisting, heart-shaped stone weirs have made it an Instagrammer's paradise.

Business is good at the juice stall, where Lin and his wife blend cactus fruit and ice flower into sweet, cold drinks for a stream of thirsty tourists. Just down the road are a very different set of customers—the soldiers at a Sky Bow base, home to Taiwan's surface-to-air anti-ballistic missile and anti-aircraft defence systems.

"I actually do a lot of deliveries to the base," Lin

said. "I have been inside. It feels quite normal to me." The presence of troops has been a fact of life for decades on the island, where they are seen more as a source of income than one of dread. "People from both sides (of the strait), we actually share the same language and culture," Lin said. "Who wants war? We actually get along with each other. The affairs of those in power are none of our business."

But Penghu has found itself at the mercy of geopolitical forces many times throughout its history. "Penghu is a hard-to-defend place," Chen Ing-jin, a 67-year-old local historian and architect, told AFP. "It's flat and has many coastal areas, which makes it very hard to prevent possible landings."

The Dutch, French and Japanese all invaded with little trouble, and signs of war-past and present-are everywhere. The historic forts, now there for tourists rather than defence, have been replaced by serious modern firepower. —AFP

## News in brief

## Swiss to lift ban on cannabis

**GENEVA:** The Swiss government on Wednesday decided to lift the ban on cannabis for medical use from August 1. Patients who are medically prescribed the drug will no longer need to seek exceptional permission from the health ministry. The sale and consumption of cannabis for non-medical purposes will remain prohibited. The government "intends to facilitate access to cannabis for medical use for patients" and was therefore lifting the ban on its use for that purpose, it said in a statement. Parliament backed amending the law in March 2021. "The decision to use a cannabis-based medicine for therapeutic purposes will rest with the doctor, in consultation with the patient," the government said. The new regulations could benefit thousands of people suffering from severe chronic pain, it added, including those with cancer and multiple sclerosis. —AFP

## Passenger jet catches fire

**MIAMI:** Investigators were headed to Miami Wednesday after a passenger jet's landing gear collapsed and it caught fire as it touched down at the US city's international airport, forcing 140 people to flee the burning and mangled aircraft. Three people were hospitalized after the crash of Red Air Flight 203 late Tuesday, according to Miami-Dade fire officials, but no deaths or serious injuries have been reported among those on board. Dramatic video footage showed people being evacuated from the McDonnell Douglas MD-82 aircraft, lying askew on the runway with its nose crumpled as thick black smoke billows from its body. Red Air, a Dominican budget carrier which only launched in November last year, said the plane was arriving from Santo Domingo when it met with "technical difficulties." —AFP

## Six dead in tribal dispute

**KUT:** Six people, including a soldier, were killed in Iraq on Wednesday during a clash between two tribes sparked by a dispute over agricultural land, police said. The violence in Al-Uzair district, south of Amarah in the southeastern province of Maysan, lasted several hours, said Saad al-Zaidi, police spokesman for the area. The soldier was from one of the two tribes and had been "on leave when the conflict broke out because of disputes over farmland", he told AFP. Despite beefed up security measures, Maysan province, which borders Iran, is a route for drug traffickers where tribal rivalry often degenerates into violence. In May, eight people were killed in the same region when clashes between members of the same tribe broke out over farmland. Further complicating the task of law enforcement, assassinations or attempted assassinations targeting judges or police officers are also common. —AFP