The Kabul Times DAILY
facebook.com/thekabultimes
INTERNATIONAL
Qaus 29-1400 Monday 20 December 2021 INo: 125- Vol: LIX
www.thekabultimes.gov.af

Kabul	9°	Mostly Sunny
Herat	20°	Cloudy
Mazar	12°	Mostly cloudy

USD	01	GBP	01	INR	1000	PKR	1000	EUR	01	IRR	1000	AED	01
AFN	99.35	AFN	127.25	AFN	1199	AFN	526	AFN	108.58	AFN	2.44	AFN	26.67

Hong Kong votes in overhauled 'patriots'-only election

Hong Kong voters headed to the polls on Sunday for the first time since an electoral overhaul and a sweeping national security law were imposed on the city.

The Legislative Council election – in which only candidates deemed by the government to be "patriots" can run – has been criticised by some activists, foreign governments and rights groups.

Hong Kong government leaders have been urging people to vote, saying the poll is representative. They insist the overhaul, like the security law imposed last year, was needed to ensure stability after protracted protests that rocked the Asian financial hub in 2019.

Turnout has been at the core of election debates, with the government on Saturday sending blanket text messages to Hong Kong residents urging people to vote and some critics calling on people to stay away as a protest.

It is a crime in Hong Kong to incite someone not to vote or to cast an invalid vote.

Early indications suggested turnout was far lower than the last legislative election in 2016, according to Reuters news agency witnesses.

The previous turnout election was 58 percent, while the 43.6 percent in 2000 was the lowest since Britain returned the city to Chinese rule in 1997.

Some of the first to vote as polls opened at 8:30am (0030 GMT) said they were keen to do their civic duty to ensure stability.

University language teacher Tam Po-chu, 79, said she hoped the new council would be responsive to the public. "There's no use if they do not think of the Hong Kong people," she said.

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam, among the first to vote, told reporters at a polling station in the suburban Mid-Levels district that the government "had not set any target" on the turnout rate, and she was not aware of any set by the Chinese leadership.

Beijing's Liaison Office in the city did not respond to Reuters requests for comment on voter turnout.

Before Lam spoke, several protesters from the League of Social Democrats opposition group chanted demands nearby for full universal suffrage and waved a banner reading "forced to be silent … spirit of freedom, vote with your conscience".

Security was tight around the city, with 10,000 police and some 40,000 government election workers deployed. Police chief Raymond Siu told reporters that the mass deployment was to ensure balloting at hundreds of polling stations across the city would be held safely and smoothly.

Chief Secretary John Lee, a former security chief, urged people to turn out, saying those excluded were "traitors" who wanted the vote to fail.

In the run-up to the election, more than 10 people were arrested for allegedly inciting people to cast blank ballots, including people who had reposted social media posts from others, according to government statements.

aljazeera

Jordan: Palestinian refugees struggle amid UNRWA funding cuts

Amman, Jordan – Inside Jordan, Ali is a foreigner from the Gaza Strip. But outside, he is regarded as a Jordanian.

"How?" the 35-year-old asks. "I'm stuck in between; not here, nor there."

Although he was born and raised in Jordan, Ali does not have Jordanian citizenship. His ID says he is a Palestinian from the Gaza Strip, courtesy of his grandfather who fled the territory during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

The small, plastic card is the only remaining indicator that Ali is a "foreigner" – a label that restricts almost every aspect of his life, from his job, to the car he drives, to the nationality of his children. He studied electrical engineering but, unable to get a job in the field, he works for a medical lab in Amman conducting COVID-19 tests. He says he cannot vote, pays more than four times the amount for his driver's licence and passport fees, and must undergo a lengthy, security approval process before he can buy an apartment.

"Life goes on," the father of two told Al Jazeera. "But, you spend your whole life searching for another nationality, for a better one. For your kids. I don't want my kids to live in the same situation I live."

"If you think I'm Jordanian, give me the full citizenship," he said. "If you think I'm Palestinian, get me back to Palestine."

When the West Bank was put under the administrative control of Jordan in 1950, its residents were entitled to Jordanian citizenship. This excluded Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, who lived under the Egyptian domain, said Jawad al-Anani, a former Jordanian labour minister, told Al Jazeera. During the 1967 war, those fleeing the Israeli-occupied West Bank were residents of Jordan, while those fleeing the Gaza Strip were not. When Jordan cut administrative ties with the West Bank in 1988, those originally from the West Bank living in Jordan's pre-1950 lands maintained full citizenship rights, while those from Gaza remained foreigners, said al-Anani.

For these Palestinian refugees without citizenship in Jordan, including nearly 175,000 forcibly displaced from Gaza in 1967, and 18,000 others who fled Syria's war-torn regions, public benefits are nearly non-existent, said Widian Othman, Jordan spokeswoman for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

This leaves UNRWA – the under-funded, cash-strapped agency – their only support network to turn to. In Jordan, UNRWA runs 161 schools for nearly 120,000 students, 25 health centres and provides food and cash assistance to about 60,000 of the most vulnerable Palestinian refugees, essential for those without Jordanian nationality, said Othman.

A UNRWA donor conference, held in Brussels in mid-November, left the agency with roughly 40 percent of its required funds, said Tamara Alrifai, UNRWA spokeswoman.

"The chronic underfunding of UNRWA has created immense distress to the agency, to the staff and to the refugee community," said Alrifai. "It has prevented UNRWA from truly being able to upgrade and modernise its services." The UN agency provides services for 5.7 million Palestinian refugees – largely descendants of those who were forcibly displaced from their towns, villages and cities in Palestine in 1948 and 1967, and ended up in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt.

About 40 percent of these refugees live in Jordan, according to UNRWA figures.

"The fact that Palestinian refugees suffer from the oldest unresolved conflict in the region plays against them in that there is donor fatigue and a slow erosion of their plight and their story," said Alrifai.

aljazeera

Latest round of nuclear talks 'worse than they should have been': Senior US diplomat

The seventh round of indirect talks between the US and Iran on the 2015 nuclear deal was "better than it might have been, but worse than it should have been," a senior State Department official said Friday.

"But I also caution that we should curb enthusiasm because we're now at best where we were last June," the official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told reporters.

The official also expressed surprise that Iran chose to suspend the talks on Friday, held in Vienna.

"Regardless of whatever progress was made, the pace at which we are moving" is not sufficient, the official added.

Nevertheless, the official said, again, that the US was prepared to continue negotiations to reach a deal.

"The choice really is in Iran's hands whether it chooses to accelerate its program or… whether it chooses to negotiate seriously and realistically," the official said.

Earlier, European officials and the European Union envoy Enrique Mora said time was running out on reaching a deal to reactivate the JCPOA.

And Germany, France and the United Kingdom also expressed their disappointment after Iran asked to adjourn the latest round of talks on Friday.

"There has been some technical progress in the last 24 hours, but this only takes us back nearer to where the talks stood in June," they said, referring to the monthslong stalling by Iran after they elected a new president.

Also, on Friday, senior White House officials warned that the breakout time for Iran to develop a nuclear deal had reached alarming levels.

Russia urges West to release Afghan funds to stem migrants

MOSCOW: The Kremlin has urged Western leaders to unfreeze Afghanistan's assets to fund humanitarian relief and avert an exodus of migrants to Europe fueled by the Taliban's takeover.

The international community does not recognize the hardline Islamist group, which gained control of Afghanistan in August after foreign troops hastily withdrew from a two-decade deployment.

More than half of Afghanistan's 38 million people are facing food shortages, according to the United Nations, with the winter forcing millions to choose between migration and starvation.

Zamir Kabulov, the Kremlin's envoy to Afghanistan, said that Russia had warned the West its hold on assets and transfers could see thousands of Afghan families "run to Europe this winter".

"The West is afraid of migration flows," he told the Russian news agency RIA Novosti.

"So let's unfreeze Afghan money. We must do everything we can so there isn't any need for hundreds of thousands of Afghan families to leave the country."

Washington seized nearly $9.5 billion in assets belonging to the Afghan central bank after the Taliban gained control of the country and the aid-dependent economy has effectively collapsed.

Russia since has voiced concerns over the proliferation of terror groups in the country, including the Islamic State group, and warned terror groups planned to infiltrate neighboring ex-Soviet countries posing as refugees.

Omicron COVID-19 variant spreading rapidly in countries with high immunity: WHO

The omicron coronavirus variant has been reported in 89 countries and the number of cases is doubling in 1.5 to 3 days in areas with community transmission, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Saturday.

Omicron is spreading rapidly in countries with high levels of population immunity, but it is unclear if this is due to the virus' ability to evade immunity, its inherent increased transmissibility or a combination of both, the WHO said in an update.

The agency designated omicron a variant of concern on Nov. 26, soon after it was first detected, and much is still not known about it, including the severity of the illness it causes.

"There are still limited data on the clinical severity of omicron," the WHO said. "More data are needed to understand the severity profile and how severity is impacted by vaccination and pre-existing immunity."

It added, "There are still limited available data, and no peer-reviewed evidence, on vaccine efficacy or effectiveness to date for omicron."

The WHO warned that with cases rising so rapidly, hospitals could be overwhelmed in some places.

"Hospitalizations in the UK and South Africa continue to rise, and given rapidly increasing case counts, it is possible that many healthcare systems may become quickly overwhelmed." **alarabiya**

India: Man beaten to death at Sikh Golden Temple

A man has been beaten to death at one of Sikhism's holiest shrines in India after he allegedly attempted to commit a sacrilegious act by trespassing into an inner shrine, according to local media reports.

Police said the incident took place on Saturday at about 17:45 local time (11:45 GMT) and was captured on camera as evening prayers at the Golden Temple in Amritsar were being broadcast on television.

Footage showed the man jumping over the rail and into the temple's central enclosure, where the holy book Guru Granth Sahib is kept, and picking up a sacred diamond-encrusted sword.

Deputy commissioner of Amritsar police Parminder Singh Bhandal said he was apprehended by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) staff members deployed in the shrine complex and led to the main administration's office.

"While the employees were taking him to the office, some of the other devotees present in the shrine beat him up so much that he died upon reaching the office," Bhandal said, according to the Hindustan Times.

Protests broke out outside the SGPC head office after the broadcast as people demanded that the man be handed to them.

His identity remains unknown but he is believed to be in his early 20s, according to a police review of security camera footage. A post-mortem examination was set to take place on Sunday.

UK troops will not be deployed to Ukraine to defend against Russia

Britain and its allies are "highly unlikely" to send troops to defend Ukraine if Russia invades the country, the UK's defence secretary has said.

"We shouldn't kid people we would," Ben Wallace told the Spectator magazine. "The Ukrainians are aware of that."

Russia has moved thousands of troops near Ukraine's eastern borders, leading Western powers to urge President Vladimir Putin to de-escalate tensions.

Moscow has denied plans to attack and has asked for urgent talks with the US.

On Friday, Russia demanded strict limits on the activities of the US-led Nato military alliance in countries in Eastern Europe.

The alliance was originally set up to defend Europe against possible threats from the former Soviet Union.

In an interview with the Spectator, Mr Wallace said Ukraine was "not a member of Nato, so it is highly unlikely that anyone is going to send troops into Ukraine to challenge Russia".

"That is why we are doing the best diplomatically to say to Putin don't do this," he said, adding that "severe economic sanctions" were the most likely form of deterrent.

Mr Wallace has previously said that the UK stands "shoulder to shoulder with the people of Ukraine" and remains determined to support them.

Earlier this week, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned Mr Putin of "significant consequences" of any "destabilising action" in the region.

Ukraine shares borders with both the EU and Russia, but as a former Soviet republic it has deep social and cultural ties with Russia. The Kremlin has accused Ukraine of provocation with its ambition to join Nato.

In proposals announced on Friday, Russia set out a series of radical demands - including requiring countries that joined Nato after the fall of the Soviet Union not to deploy troops or weapons in areas where they could be seen as a threat to Russia.

Heavy bombers and warships would not be allowed in areas outside their national airspace or waters from which they could launch an attack as part of the proposals.

That would mean Nato not playing any role at all in any of the three Baltic republics or Poland, as well as having to abandon any plans for Ukraine and Georgia to eventually join the Western alliance.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said on Saturday that the proposals were an attempt to avoid a possible military conflict.

He said Moscow was ready to hold talks with the US in an effort "to turn a military or a military-technical scenario of confrontation into a political process which will really strengthen military security", Russia's Interfax news agency reported.

The US has said it is open to discussions, but that it would be putting its own concerns on the table too. White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki also said on Friday that there would be "no talks on European security without our European allies and partners".

Russia has long resisted Ukraine's move towards European institutions.

It invaded Georgia during a brief war in 2008 and seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, before backing separatists in eastern Ukraine. Conflict in the east began in April 2014 and has claimed more than 14,000 lives, with casualties still being reported. **bbc**