

Nigerians demand new elections after voting

By Glenn McKenzie
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAGOS, Nigeria — Nigeria's opposition demanded Wednesday that President Olusegun Obasanjo step down and annul last weekend's elections, which gave him a second term but were seen as deeply flawed.

Obasanjo's challengers said the vote was clearly fraudulent and threatened "massive revolt" unless he calls new elections. Obasanjo responded that the vote was fair and showed no sign of heeding the demands.

"I believe in the minds of many, many Nigerians, that this is a significant step forward in the history of elections in this country," he said. Obasanjo has insisted the vote was "peaceful, free and transparent."

International and local election observers have said voting was fraudulent in some states in the south and east of Nigeria, yet stressed it was too early to say whether results nationwide had been compromised. There were reports of ballot-box stuffing and instances when ballot boxes were stolen outright.

"It wasn't a disaster, but it's a long way from an election to be proud of," said Ross Herbert, research fellow at the South African Institute of International Affairs.

Obasanjo won a second term with 62 percent of Saturday's vote, compared to 32 percent for his leading rival, Muhammadu Buhari. Though several people were killed in election-related violence, the ballot was regarded as more peaceful than expected.

About 20 parties, including the main opposition group led by former junta leader Muhammadu Buhari, joined forces to demand that Obasanjo step down by May 29, dissolve the country's election commission and quickly allow a new vote.

"We avoid any form of violence, but

since the government is violent and has unleashed violence on the nation, the consequences will fall on Obasanjo," said Olagbade Ogboro, chairman of the National Action Congress, reading a joint statement.

"If Gen. Obasanjo fails to heed this humble advice being dished out to him, the consequence may be massive revolt," Ogboro said.

At least 35 people died in voting-related attacks in a legislative vote April 12 through last weekend. Still, the election was generally more peaceful than many expected.

Oil-rich but desperately poor, Nigeria frequently ranks among the world's most corrupt countries, and it has been destabilized by numerous coups since independence from Britain in 1960. The West African country of 126 million people has never seen a civilian government successfully hand over power to another.

There was no sign Wednesday of public celebration or protest in Nigerian cities, many of which were being heavily patrolled by police and army troops.

Buhari, who gained notoriety for launching a coup in 1983 after elections widely regarded as flawed, described the latest vote as the "most fraudulent Nigeria has held since independence."

Buhari told The Associated Press that he didn't support a military takeover, "but if it happens it is entirely the responsibility of the government for the failure of conducting a free and fair election."

His running mate, Chuba Okadigbo, said the party would challenge Obasanjo's win, although Buhari said he did not trust the courts and the election commission to take the case seriously.

Obasanjo has consolidated his ruling party's grip on the three main levels of government. The party swept legislative elections April 12 and took 28 of 36 states in a vote for state governors the same day as the presidential vote.

Group seeks release of youths held at Guantanamo Bay

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Amnesty International urged the United States on Wednesday to release or charge three minors who are being held in the U.S. detention camp for terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The military has not provided exact ages, confirming only that the three are 16 years old or younger. They are among about 660 detainees from 42 countries held on suspicion of links to al-Qaida terrorist network or the ousted Afghan Taliban regime.

"The detention of children in these circumstances is particularly repugnant and flouts basic principles for the protection of children under international law," William F. Schulz, executive director of Amnesty International USA, said in a statement.

The group called on the U.S. military to either release them or file formal charges and transfer them to a juvenile detention facility.

The youths are in a "communal setting" separate from adult detainees' individual cells, but all were "captured as active combatants against U.S. forces" and are considered enemy combatants, said Lt. Col. Barry Johnson, chief spokesman for the Guantanamo mission.

"We are treating them differently ... because as juveniles we recognize they have special needs," he said.

Johnson would not give ages or say how many there were, only "very few." However an official at the camp who spoke on condition of anonymity Wednesday said there were three of them.

Schulz said reports the youths were being interrogated were especially disturbing.

Johnson said juveniles are being held because "they have potential to provide important information in the ongoing war on terrorism."

He said they, like other detainees, could be released if it is determined they no longer pose a threat.

Johnson said all the juveniles had arrived at Guantanamo since Jan. 1. The camp received its first terror suspects in January 2001.

Human rights groups long have criticized the United States for holding the detainees without charge and interrogating them while they are not allowed access to lawyers.

Johnson said officials determined some detainees were 16 and younger during medical and other screenings after their arrival.

In September, Canadian officials reported that a 15-year-old Canadian was captured on July 27 after being badly wounded in a firefight in eastern Afghanistan. Prime Minister Jean Chretien said he was seeking consular access to the youth.

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researcher

Dog spreads cheer at Gulf air base

IN THE GULF REGION (AP) — He's a most atypical Marine — he chows down the prepackaged rations with gusto and gets a promotion whenever he bites an officer.

He's Dragon, the 4-month-old mutt adopted by Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 268 when they found him sniffing through garbage at their base near Iraq, whose exact location they won't allow to be made public.

Dragon — named in honor of the squadron's nickname of Red

Dragons — is a cheerful reminder of quieter times. He's full of goofy antics like bounding down the airstrip with a wrench in his teeth.

The Marines aren't sure what will happen to Dragon when it's time to go home. They hope to take him along but need funding for the vaccines and quarantine period.

For now, though, "he's good to have around," said Cpl. Christopher Oakeson, 22, of San Antonio, Texas, giving the part-German Shepherd a playful pat as

the puppy attacked a chew toy.

"With a war going on, it's nice to be able to just play with a dog sometimes."

As soon as the Marines' relatives heard about the puppy, they started sending him food, toys and other treats and now "he gets more boxes than any of us," said Sgt. Neuman Burrell, 35, from Kentwood, La.

Sporting a red collar with engraved ID tag, Dragon turns his nose up at dry dog food but devours the packaged Meal

Ready to Eat. The peanut butter and Thai chicken servings are his favorites.

He also enjoys baths with Herbal Essence shampoo, said Cpl. Amanda Hoenes, 21, of Branson, Mo.

Occasionally, he shows behavior that earns him the nickname "devil dog" — which Marines call themselves. Dragon barks at rival squadrons and sometimes bites. When he chomps an officer, the Marines give him a promotion.

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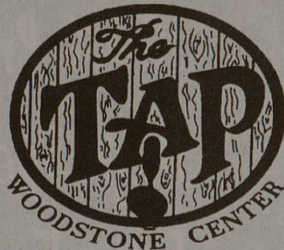
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