



An anti-government activist is arrested by the National Guard during clashes in Caracas on July 27, on the second day of a 48-hour general strike called by the opposition. Venezuela's opposition called for a nationwide protest on Friday in outright defiance of a new government ban on demonstrations ahead of a controversial weekend election. (AFP)

Venezuela

Colombia will not recognize result of Venezuela assembly vote

Maduro presses on with vote despite protests

CARACAS, July 29, (Agencies): Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro was pushing forward Saturday with a controversial weekend vote, despite growing domestic political opposition, international condemnation and deadly street protests.

On Friday, his forces faced small groups of protesters defying a ban he had imposed on demonstrations against the election he has called Sunday to choose a new body to rewrite the constitution.

Blockades went up across a few roads in Caracas and in a border town with Colombia, San Cristobal as well as in Maracaibo and Guayana, but the scale was far less than the mass protests seen earlier this week before the ban took effect.

"It's normal that there's fear, but people are still coming out into the streets despite it all," a lawmaker in the opposition-controlled National Assembly, Freddy Guevara, said at one of the Caracas protests.

Maduro on Thursday warned that anyone taking part in protests against his "Constituent

Assembly" risked up to 10 years in prison.

The threat appeared to dampen public anti-government demonstrations of the sort that, in the past four months, have led to 113 deaths — eight of them during a two-day general strike that ended Thursday.

The most recent reported fatality occurred Friday when an 18-year old protester was killed in San Cristobal.

Opposition

Human rights organizers said another activist, a 23-year-old violinist famous for playing at anti-government protests, had been arrested in Caracas. An opposition mayor, Alfredo Ramos, was also arrested for not lifting barricades under a court order.

Meanwhile, international censure of Maduro remained fierce.

US Vice President Mike Pence spoke by telephone to a detained prominent Venezuelan opposition leader, Leopoldo Lopez, who early this month was moved from prison to house arrest.

In implicit support for the opposition, Pence praised Lopez's "courage."

He also called for the "unconditional release of all political prisoners in Venezuela, free and fair elections, restoration of the National Assembly, and respect for human rights in Venezuela," a statement from his office said.

Meanwhile, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos said on Friday the Andean country will not recognize the result of an "illegitimate" assembly vote in neighboring Venezuela, amid opposition concerns that the election will lead to dictatorship.

"This constituent assembly has an illegitimate origin, and because of that, we cannot recognize its result," said Santos, speaking at an education event and repeating a call for a peaceful solution to unrest in Venezuela.

Relations between the South American neighbors have been tense for years. Venezuela has closed the border several times in a crackdown on smugglers and it deported hundreds of Colombians it accused of criminal activities in 2015.

Nigeria

'Meet demand'

Boko Haram video shows 3 kidnapped

LAGOS, July 29, (AFP): Boko Haram Islamists have published a video showing three kidnapped members of an oil exploration team, after an ambush in northeast Nigeria earlier this week that killed at least 50.

In the four-minute video, the trio identify themselves as being from the University of Maiduguri and call on the government to meet the jihadists' demands in exchange for their safe return.

The men were part of a Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) team on a mission to find commercial quantities of oil in the Lake Chad basin when they came under attack on Tuesday.

"I want to call on the acting president professor Yemi Osinbajo to come to our rescue to meet the demand," one of the men says in the video, which he said was shot on Friday.

Attack

He attributed the attack to the Islamic State-supported Boko Haram faction headed by Abu Mus'ab Al-Barnawi, which has promised to hit military and government targets.

"They have promised us that if their demands are met they will release us immediately to go back to the work we were caught doing," the man added.

There was no indication of where the video was shot but the convoy came under attack near Magumeri, some 50 kilometres (31 miles) by road northwest of Maiduguri.

Most of the victims were soldiers and civilian militia members providing security. Five members of staff from the university — two lecturers, two technologists and a driver — were also killed, vice-chancellor Ibrahim Njodi said on Friday.

University of Maiduguri spokesman Danjuma Gambo confirmed the identities of the three kidnapped men in the video.

"They are our staff but one more is yet to be accounted for," he told AFP.

Experts said the attack — Boko Haram's bloodiest this year — underscored the persistent threat posed by the jihadists, despite government claims the group is a spent force.

"It's a confirmation of the boldness and reassurance that Boko Haram has managed to gain over the last six weeks," Yan St-Pierre, from the Modern Security Consulting Group in Berlin, told AFP.

Africa

S. Sudan army captures town: South Sudan's government said on Friday it had taken the last town before the main rebel base of Pagak, where thousands of civilians have fled to escape fighting near the border with Ethiopia.

Mai-wut had been under rebel control since the beginning of the war in late 2013 and is a gateway to the main rebel stronghold of Pagak, which if taken by the government would weaken the rebellion led by former vice president Riek Machar.

In a separate blow to Machar, a senior commander allied to the rebel leader's SPLM-IO group said on Friday he had left to join up with a separate rebel faction, led by General Thomas Cirillo, the most senior officer to defect from President Salva Kiir's army in the last year.

Mai-wut sits along a supply route from Ethiopia to another town, Mathiang, which is adjacent to the Paloch oilfields, the main source of government revenue.

Dickson Gatluak Jock, a spokesman for the forces of South Sudan's First Vice President Taban Deng Gai, who were involved in the fighting, said three government soldiers were killed and five others wounded in capturing Mai-wut. (RTRS)



Kiir

Madagascar politician shot, dies: A veteran political figure in Madagascar has died of gunshot wounds at his home, police said on Friday, after posting about personal problems on social media.

Mamy Rakotoarivelo, a former parliament speaker and a key figure in talks that resolved a political crisis that dogged the country in the early 2000s, was found with a gunshot wound to the head.

In recent days he had posted details of problems with his finances and love life to his personal Facebook account.

A firearm was recovered from the scene, officers said in a statement.

Rakotoarivelo served as a chief of staff to former president Marc Ravalomanana and was instrumental in resolving a dispute with the outgoing administration of Didier Ratsiraka following the contested 2001 election. (AFP)

Mugabe's wife 'possible successor': Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe's wife once said the 93-year-old leader should run "as a corpse" in the 2018 elections if he dies before the vote. Now politically ambitious Grace Mugabe is positioning herself as a possible successor, saying one of the ruling party's two vice presidents should be a woman.

Her remarks on Thursday inject extra intrigue into a succession debate that has featured fighting within the ruling ZANU-PF party and a widespread sense of uncertainty in a country with debilitating economic problems. (AP)

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