

Dozens killed in Nigeria amid election chaos

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Amid Saturday's hotly contested presidential poll, for whom a victor has yet to be determined, and in its immediate aftermath, 39 people have been reported killed during a rash of election-related violence. Results of the tally, expected to have been released on Monday, have now been delayed, with vote counting continuing today.

Preliminary results suggest incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari is leading his main rival, businessman Atiku Abubakar, who cried foul, stating there were widespread irregularities in the tally particularly in Nasarawa province and the capital Abuja.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) the official body overseeing elections in Nigeria, stated that Buhari has won a total of six states so far, with Abubakar winning the Federal Capital Territory, the area comprising Abuja.

Denouncing Buhari's lead at a press conference on Monday, Abubakar's People's Democratic Party (PDP) accused the Buhari government of colluding with election officials to sway the vote to the president.

Saturday's poll took place after the INEC postponed the polling, originally scheduled one week before, citing a lack of preparedness and election materials in several areas of the country. The delay was denounced by voters across the nation.

On Saturday, INEC abruptly canceled voting in the Bonny and Akuku Toro areas of Rivers State, citing the outbreak of violence by militants, and widespread allegations of irregularities and fraud at polling locations.

Before the election, in the town of Ubima, several gunmen raided an INEC office and stole boxes of ballots and robbed several poll workers.

INEC National Commissioner Festus Okoye told reporters in the capital city Abuja, "We have received reports related to incidents in Akuku Toro and Bonny

local government areas of Rivers State. The position of the commission is that elections will be conducted separately for that registration area later."

Out of a field of 70 candidates, only incumbent Buhari and Abubakar were considered front-runners. In the weeks before the poll, the contest was a virtual dead heat, with both candidates garnering a near even amount of support. After the poll's closing on Saturday, INEC reported that the tally for president was "too close to call," and vote counting would continue on Sunday.

The election occurred amid massive irregularities and allegations of fraud, with the poll carried out under a virtual police state. Hundreds of armed security forces were deployed to polling locations throughout the country, engaging in several acts of intimidation, beatings, and mass arrests, with an estimated 130 people arrested on Saturday.

Buhari delivered a televised address on Monday in which he declared that he had ordered the military and police to be "ruthless" with anyone allegedly engaged in voter fraud. "I warn anybody who thinks he has enough influence in his locality to lead a body of thugs to snatch [ballot] boxes or to disturb the voting system, he would do it at the expense of his own life," Buhari cautioned.

PDP spokesperson Kola Ologbongiyan denounced the president's remarks as "direct call for jungle justice" and a "license to kill."

The election's deadliest incident took place in Abonnema town in Rivers State, around 14 kilometers (nine miles) from Nigeria's main oil industry city of Port Harcourt, when seven were killed during a shootout between the Nigerian army and a group of militants. The incident occurred after the militants blockaded a highway and subsequently carried out an ambush of an army outpost.

In the southern Osun province, a regional office of

INEC in the town of Ijebu-Ijesha Oriade was set aflame by unknown saboteurs, destroying part of the building.

Several abductions of INEC staff occurred around the country, and one INEC official, Ibisika Amachree, was shot dead in Port Harcourt after the poll's closing.

In the hours preceding the opening of Saturday's poll, several bombs exploded at a refugee camp in the northern city of Maiduguri, a region particularly wracked by years of paramilitary conflict between the Nigerian army and the Islamist militia Boko Haram.

Speaking to CNN, Nigerian army spokesman Onyeama Nwachukwu said that the bombing attack occurred around 5 a.m. "There was an attack this morning at the camp by the militants, but the military has suppressed it at the moment." Nwachukwu told reporters that no deaths or injuries resulted from the bombings, and that the army would conduct an assessment of the incident.

It is clear that Washington is closely observing the outcome of the election, as evidenced by the presence of American troops in the region, including special forces personnel. For several years, the US has maintained a significant operational presence in West Africa, with the operation of several military outposts and bases in the neighboring countries of Cameroon, Niger, and Mali.

Fearing the potential of a wider outbreak of violence arising from the chaotic election, US Ambassador Stuart Symington issued a statement on Monday calling on Nigerians "to remain patient and to refrain from violence while the INEC compiles the final result of the tally."

Symington admonished, "No one should break the law by announcing results before INEC does, or break the peace by claiming victory before the results are final."

Washington is primarily concerned with China's significant economic expansion across West Africa, which it regards as a threat to American economic and geopolitical dominance on the continent.

Recently, Beijing and Abuja have cemented several proposals for a wide array of investment projects in the country, including this month's \$2.3 billion investment deal by China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), China's state-owned oil company, for a stake in Nigeria's vast Akpo field, which has been estimated to hold significant oil deposits. The deal

comes on top of previous investment stakes, secured by CNOOC over several years, totaling \$19 billion.

Additionally, America's substantial economic interests in West Africa underscore Washington's considerable military presence in the region. Operating in direct competition with Beijing and CNOOC, American oil giants Exxon-Mobil and Chevron have secured the rights to significant stakes in Nigeria's oil reserves.

The UK *Guardian* reported in 2016 that an investigation of Exxon-Mobil's potential corruption of oil extraction deals was initiated by Nigerian authorities, arising from Exxon Mobil's 2009 contract with the Nigeria Ministry of Petroleum Resources for stakes in the "Crown Jewels" of oil fields, which possess the most significant oil deposits in Nigeria.

Allegations of corruption were brought to authorities' attention when it became known that Exxon-Mobil beat out CNOOC for the contract, even though the American oil giant underbid CNOOC by \$2.25 billion.

No doubt rankling Washington's ire, Reuters reported on Monday that Exxon-Mobil, along with Chevron and British Royal Dutch Shell, have been ordered by the Buhari government to pay \$2.5 billion in back taxes it says are owed to local governments in the oil-producing regions of the south.



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