

U.S. States Have Closed 1,200 Polling Places: Report



Volunteer Alfred Leblanc (center) directs early voters at the Gwinnett County Voter Registrations and Elections Office in Lawrenceville on October 18, 2018.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - States across the American South have closed nearly 1,200 polling places since the Supreme Court weakened a landmark voting-discrimination law in 2013, according to a report released by a civil-rights group on Tuesday.

The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights found that states with a history of racial discrimination have shuttered hundreds of voting locations since the court ruled that they did not need federal approval to change their laws. The report did not have comparisons with polling places in other regions.

The report comes as Republican-led states impose a range of other restrictions,

from shorter voting hours to photo-ID requirements. As turnout has surged in recent elections, voters in cities like Phoenix and Atlanta have endured hours-long waits to cast their ballots.

Seven counties in Georgia now only have one polling place, the report found.

Under the Voting Rights Act of 1965, areas with a history of voting discrimination - such as requiring African American or Hispanic voters to pay a poll tax or pass a literacy test - had to first convince the U.S. Justice Department or a federal court that any election changes they wished to make would not have had a discriminatory effect. The Supreme Court struck down that portion of the law in 2013.

"We don't have that anymore - that's the most troubling thing," said Leigh Chapman, head of the civil rights group's voting-rights program.

The law covered a swath of southern states stretching from Virginia to Texas, along with Arizona, Alaska and a few counties in states like New York, North Carolina, Florida, Michigan, South Dakota and California.

Voters in many U.S. states can now mail in their ballots or vote in person before Election Day. But most still cast their ballots in person in last year's vote, just as they did in 2012, according to figures compiled by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

State election officials have cited a variety of reasons, from budget pressures to disability laws, for closing polling places, while officials in many parts of Texas and Arizona have tried to shift from neighborhood-based polling places to "voter centers" that accept ballots from all qualified citizens.

Those states saw the sharpest decrease in polling locations, according to the report.

Election officials in Texas have closed more than 1 in 10 voting locations statewide, according to data collected by the Leadership Conference, with the biggest drops in the counties surrounding Dallas and Austin, which have large Hispanic and African American populations.

In Arizona, more than 1 in 5 polling locations were closed, the data showed.

Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi closed roughly 1 in 20 polling locations, while the declines were less dramatic in Alabama, Alaska and North Carolina.

North Korea Fires More Projectiles in Message to U.S.



People in South Korea watch TV news reports showing file pictures on North Korea's latest missile launch.

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea launched two projectiles toward the sea on Tuesday, South Korea's military said, hours after the North offered to resume nuclear diplomacy with the United States but warned its dealings with Washington may end without new U.S. proposals.

The launches and demand for new proposals were apparently aimed at pressuring the United States to make concessions when the North Korea-U.S. talks restart. North Korea is widely believed to want the United States to provide security guarantees and extensive relief from U.S.-led sanctions in return for limited denuclearization steps.

The North Korean projectiles fired from its South Phyongan province, which surrounds its capital city of Pyongyang, flew about 330 kilometers (205 miles) across the country and in the direction of the waters off its east coast, according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defense Ministry.

The military said South Korea will monitor possible additional launches. The JCS didn't immediately say whether the weapons were ballistic missiles or rocket artillery. "More detailed analysis is needed to determine the exact specifications," JCS spokesman Kim Joon-rak said.

Tuesday's launches were the eighth round of launches since late July and

the first since Aug. 24. The previous seven launches have revealed short-range missile and rocket artillery systems that experts say would potentially expand its capabilities to strike targets throughout South Korea, including U.S. military bases.

On Monday night, the North's first vice foreign minister, Choe Son Hui, said North Korea is willing to resume nuclear diplomacy in late September but that Washington must come to the negotiating table with acceptable new proposals. She said if the proposals don't satisfy North Korea, dealings between the two countries may end.

President Donald Trump called North Korea's announcement "interesting."

"We'll see what happens," Trump said. "In the meantime, we have our hostages back, we're getting the remains of our great heroes back and we've had no nuclear testing for a long time."

The White House said it was aware of the new reports of projectiles being launched from North Korea and was continuing to monitor the situation and consulting with its allies in the region.

South Korea's presidential office said national security adviser Chung Eui-yong presided over an emergency National Security Council meeting where officials expressed "strong concern" over the continuing short-range launches by the North.

Australians Flee Homes as Bushfires Rage

SYDNEY (Reuters) -- A 12-year-old boy started a bushfire and two teenage girls were questioned over another blaze in Australia's Queensland state, police said on Tuesday as forest fires forced hundreds of people to flee their homes in the country's east.

Strong winds have fanned some 140 bushfires in northern Queensland and neighboring New South Wales state this week, with flames ravaging thousands of hectares of land.

At least eight of the fires are suspicious, Queensland Police Commissioner Katrina Carroll told reporters, and police said they had questioned three children over blazes.

The 12-year-old boy was questioned after a group of teenagers were found on Monday in bushland near a skate park in Brisbane, Queensland's capital.

The boy deliberately lit a fire which spread to a nearby storage facility, destroying a fence, two shipping containers and their contents, police said.

The boy was processed through the state's juvenile legal system, which meant he was released with a caution, a police spokeswoman told Reuters.

Police were questioning two 14-year-old girls over a fire in bushland near the Gold Coast, the spokeswoman said.

"Some of the fires have involved children playing and obviously the consequences are dire as a result of that and ... some of them have been purposeful and malicious," Carroll said.

"People can die. Buildings and residences are being destroyed," she added.

In Queensland alone, low humidity levels, high winds and dry vegetation have fueled 85 fires that have destroyed or damaged 84 houses across the state, fire service officials said.

There were more than 400 people in evacuation centers, acting Queensland Premier Jackie Trad told reporters, adding there were no casualties.

"Apart from Sunshine Coast, we are still seeing fires right throughout the state," she said.

In New South Wales, firefighters were battling about 55 fires and five properties had been confirmed destroyed, the NSW Rural Fire Service said on Monday.

Bushfires have started earlier than normal in the southern hemisphere spring. Australia's Bureau of Meteorology said winds would intensify throughout the day on Tuesday, but fire threats should abate on Wednesday.

China Warns of Military Response to UK Provocations



Britain's new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth is due to be deployed to the South China Sea in 2021.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- China has warned Britain against sailing ships through disputed waters in the South China Sea, saying that such a move would be "hostile" and hinting that Beijing would be forced to respond militarily.

Reacting to a suggestion that the UK might send its aircraft carrier close to the contested Spratly Islands, with U.S. jets on board, China's ambassador to the UK said Britain "should not do this dirty job for somebody else".

Speaking to the Defense Correspondents' Association in London, Liu Xiaoming rejected the argument that the Royal Navy would be upholding international rules concerning Freedom of Navigation.

"The South China Sea is a vast ocean, it is three million square kilometers wide, we have no objection to people sailing around there but do not enter Chinese territorial waters within twelve nautical miles," Liu said.

"If you don't do that, there shouldn't be a problem. The South China Sea is wide enough to have free navigation of shipping."

The Spratly and Paracel Islands sit in strategic shipping lanes and are variously claimed by a number of na-

tions in the region including China, Vietnam and the Philippines.

The United States navy conducts occasional operations in the South China Sea to challenge China's territorial claim.

In February last year, the former Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson said that Britain must be ready to use "hard power" to deter adversaries and so the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth would be sent to the South China Sea on her first operational deployment.

The Chinese defense attaché, speaking alongside the ambassador at the same event, said: "If the U.S. and UK join hands in a challenge or violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China, that would be hostile action."

But the UK government responded by insisting the aircraft carrier would still visit the South Pacific in 2021.

Ambassador Liu also said that China would be forced to intervene in Hong Kong if the state's security forces lost control.

"If the riots become uncontrollable for the Hong Kong government, China cannot sit on its hands and watch. Hong Kong is part of China. We can't watch this violence go on and on."

Kashmiris Recount Brutality by Indian Forces



Kashmiris run for cover as smoke rises from teargas shells fired by Indian security forces during clashes in Srinagar, August 23, 2019.

SRINAGAR (AFP) -- Burhan-uz-Zaman Parrey, 16, had a gaping wound in his shoulder the size of a cricket ball, the latest victim of what Kashmiris say is indiscriminate brutality by Indian forces.

He is one of the lucky ones. Locals accuse Indian security forces of being responsible for four deaths since New Delhi stripped Kashmir of its autonomy and imposed a crippling lockdown on August 5.

Parrey told AFP that he went out for a walk with a friend on the evening of August 6 and turning a corner ran into members of the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF).

One put the barrel of a pellet-firing shotgun gun to his upper body and "fired a shell right into my right shoulder", the teenager said.

Then one of the soldiers "put his boot on my shoulder and pushed the shell further inside", he said. "Another tried to crush my neck. I thought they wanted to see me dead right there."

Only when some women started shouting did the soldiers leave and neighbors took Parrey to hospital.

According to his father Nazir Ahmad, doctors located "more than 400 pellets" in his torso. Medical records

seen by AFP showed that "multiple pellets and one plastic canister" were removed.

CRPF Inspector General Zulfiqar Hassan said there was "no report or record of this incident" but would launch an inquiry -- if the boy filed a report.

Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since 1947. In the Indian-administered part, tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, have died in an insurgency -- that New Delhi blames on Islamabad -- since 1989.

India's national security advisor said on Saturday that apart from a "vocal minority" egged on by Pakistan, a "majority" of Kashmiris support its August 5 move.

However, and despite restrictions on movement that were reinforced this week, there have been hundreds of protests and stone-throwing incidents.

According to multiple sources, several thousand people have been detained. They include almost all the region's top politicians -- without charge.

The internet and mobile phones also remain cut off in the Kashmir Valley, the main trouble area. UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet said Monday she is "deeply concerned".

News in Brief

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia is close to completing preparations for a like-for-like response following a U.S. missile test that was carried out last month, the RIA news agency cited Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko as saying on Tuesday. The Pentagon said last month it had tested a conventionally-configured cruise missile that hit its target after more than 500 km (310 miles) of flight, its first such test since the demise of the landmark INF nuclear arms limitation treaty.

GENEVA (Reuters) -- Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told the top United Nations human rights forum on Tuesday that India's "illegal military occupation" of the Muslim-majority territory of Kashmir raises the specter of "genocide". India revoked the autonomy of the disputed Himalayan region, home to 8 million people and a flashpoint for the nuclear-armed neighbors, on Aug. 5. "The forlorn, traumatized towns, mountains, plains and valleys of Indian-occupied Jammu & Kashmir reverberate today, with the grim reminders of Rwanda, Srebrenica, the Rohingya, and the pogrom of Gujarat," Qureshi told the UN Human Rights Council. "The people of Indian-occupied Jammu & Kashmir are apprehending the worst...I shudder to mention the word genocide here, but I must...The Kashmiri people in the occupied territory - as a national, ethnic, racial and religious group of people - face grave threats to their lives, way of living and livelihoods from a murderous, misogynistic and xenophobic regime," he said.

HONG KONG (Dispatches) -- Hong Kong's embattled leader warned the United States on Tuesday not to "interfere" with her government's response to the city's unrest, after fresh riots called on Washington to ramp up pressure on Beijing. Protesters took to the streets again on Sunday, marching to the American consulate to call on Congress to pass a bill expressing support for the riots. The proposed law could undermine Hong Kong's special U.S. trade privileges by mandating regular checks on whether authorities were respecting the Basic Law that underpins the city's semi-autonomous status. But Hong Kong's pro-Beijing Chief Executive Carrie Lam said that any change to its economic relationship with Washington would threaten "mutual benefits". "It's extremely inappropriate for any country to interfere in Hong Kong's affairs," she told reporters. "I hope that no more people in Hong Kong actively reach out to tell the United States to pass the act." Beijing on Tuesday echoed Lam's remarks, with foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying saying: "We hope that they can withdraw their black hands in Hong Kong as soon as possible."

LONDON (AFP) -- Beleaguered British Prime Minister Boris Johnson vowed to continue his attempts to strike a new Brexit deal with Brussels, after losing yet another vote on Tuesday during a chaotic parliamentary session. Johnson slammed the opposition for voting against his call for a snap election in the final minutes of a stormy late-night debate ahead of a controversial suspension of parliament called by the prime minister. He said he would "strive to get an agreement" at a summit in Brussels next month -- the alternative being a "no-deal" departure that critics warn would spark economic chaos. Johnson accused his opponents of shirking their duty by blocking an early election. He held a cabinet meeting later on Tuesday to plot his next move after a series of defections and expulsions left him far short of a parliamentary majority and unable to garner enough votes from MPs to hold an early election.

MADRID (Reuters) -- Spain stood on the brink of a repeat election on Tuesday after the Socialists and far-left Unidas Podemos said they had made no progress in a new round of talks aimed at striking a government deal and overcoming major differences between the two. Spain's politics has been in limbo since an inconclusive election in April, which the Socialists won, but without enough seats to govern on their own. If parliament does not vote in Socialist leader Pedro Sanchez as prime minister by Sept. 23, there will be a new parliamentary election on Nov. 10. "We see no path for reaching an agreement," Socialist negotiator Adriana Lastra said, urging Podemos to reconsider its demand that they be made part of a coalition government. The Socialists want Podemos to back them without being in the cabinet, which the latter refuses. Lastra said the Socialists were willing to hold new talks, but Podemos said that came with an ultimatum.

ALGIERS (Reuters) -- Algerian Prime Minister Noureddine Bedoui will resign soon to pave the way for elections this year that the army sees as the only way to end a standoff over months of protests, two senior sources told Reuters on Tuesday. Bedoui's departure is a major demand of protesters, who in April forced president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to quit after 20 years in office, and who have rejected fresh elections until there is a more thorough change of the power structure. Bedoui's resignation is intended to "facilitate" the holding of elections said the two senior officials, speaking on condition they were not further identified. Powerful army chief Lieutenant General Ahmed Gaed Saleh said last week that the electoral commission should by Sept. 15 call an election, a move that would trigger a 90-day countdown to the vote. Students holding a weekly protest on Tuesday chanted that they would accept no elections "until the gang is removed", a reference to Bouteflika's power circle, an elite entrenched largely since independence from France in 1962.