

Nicaragua's Ortega set to win election; US blasts outcome

By Daina Beth Solomon
Reuters

SAN JOSE — Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega was set to win reelection on Sunday after jailing top rivals and criminalizing most dissent, following a vote the United States said was a sham whose outcome had been long predetermined.

Costa Rica, the country's southern neighbor, also rejected the election even before preliminary results were announced.

Polls in Nicaragua closed at 6 p.m. Lines of voters had formed in the capital, Managua, at some polling places in the morning, but then eased considerably, consistent with expectations of a historically low turnout.

Ortega, 75, a onetime revolutionary who helped depose the right-wing Somoza family dictatorship in the late 1970s, is already the Americas' longest-serving leader, with 15 consecutive years in power. He has ruled alongside his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, 70, the government's official spokesperson, since early 2017.

Seated next to her on Sunday afternoon at an event broadcast by state television, an open-collared Ortega hailed the election as a victory over terrorism delivered by the "immense majority of Nicaraguans," before launching into his critics.

"They didn't want us to be able to hold these elections," he said,



POLLING STATION: Civilians and military personnel queue to cast their vote during the country's presidential election in Managua, Nicaragua, on Sunday. Reuters

referring to his domestic opponents and their foreign backers. "They are demons who don't want peace for our people and instead opt for slander and disqualifications. Why? So that Nicaragua is embroiled in violence."

But U.S. President Joe Biden ripped into the Nicaraguan leader, saying in a statement issued before results were announced that Ortega and Murillo were "no different from the Somoza family" and had orchestrated a "pantomime election that was neither free nor fair, and most certainly not democratic."

Ortega was president in the 1980s before losing in a 1990 upset. He returned to the top job in 2007.

Since May, Ortega's police have imprisoned dozens of leading opposition figures, including seven presidential hopefuls, business leaders, journalists and even some of his old rebel allies.

Japan media: 0 daily COVID-19 deaths for 1st time in 15 months

TOKYO (Reuters) — Japan recorded no daily deaths from COVID-19 for the first time in more than a year on Sunday, according to local media.

Prior to Sunday, there hadn't been a day without a COVID-19 death since Aug. 2, 2020, according to a tally by national broadcaster NHK. The latest figures from the health ministry showed three deaths on Saturday.

COVID-19 cases and deaths have fallen dramatically throughout Japan as vaccinations have increased to cover

more than 70% of the population.

New daily infections peaked at more than 25,000 during an August wave driven by the infectious delta variant. The country has had more than 18,000 deaths from the disease during the course of the pandemic.

To avert a possible rebound this winter, the government plans to start booster vaccine shots next month and is working to secure pill-based treatments for milder cases to reduce hospitalizations.

Taliban appoint members as 44 governors, police chiefs around Afghanistan

KABUL (Reuters) — The Taliban appointed 44 of its members to key roles including provincial governors and police chiefs on Sunday, a key step in shoring up its governance as the country grapples with growing security and economic problems.

It is the first large-scale round of appointments announced since the cabinet was formed in September.

The Taliban released the list of its members' new roles, including Qari Baryal to serve as governor of Kabul and Wali Jan Hamza as the city's police chief.

The previous commander in charge of Kabul's security, Mawlawi Hamdullah Mukhlis, was killed this month in an attack on Afghanistan's largest military hospital in downtown Kabul.

The Taliban took over the country on Aug. 15 but have faced an uphill battle in their promise to restore order and security after decades of war. Islamic State have carried out a spate of attacks around the country, while the economy has been plunged into crisis.

There have been international calls for the group to negotiate with other political players to form an inclusive government including minorities and women, although substantive progress on that has so far not materialized.

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Was the US Capitol attack planned?

North Texas case adds to intrigue

By Kevin Krause
The Dallas Morning News

DALLAS - From a U.S. Capitol balcony, handgun on hip, he waved on the mob amassing at the threshold, like a battle commander leading the charge of an attacking army, according to court filings.

"And I climbed up there and I started going up the bannister and that's when everything started moving forward," Guy Reffitt allegedly said in a secret recording.

"I didn't make it in. But I started the fire," he said in another.

Reffitt, 49, reportedly shared his intentions with fellow militia members weeks before the assault, in a chat group using the encrypted messaging app Telegram: "The fuel is set. We will strike the match in D.C. on the 6th."

The government's case against the Wylie resident, one of the more serious involving the Jan. 6 siege, is providing more evidence that an armed attack of the Capitol was planned; evidence that was overlooked by the FBI in what critics call a massive security failure. How extensive or coordinated such plans were is a matter currently being investigated by a Congressional committee.

Prosecutors say the unemployed oil rig worker from North Texas was armed with a handgun and equipped with tactical gear and flexi-cuffs when he led the charge up the Capitol steps,



WHITE POWER SIGNS: Members of the far-right group Proud Boys make 'OK' hand gestures indicating "white power" as supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump gather in front of the U.S. Capitol Building to protest against the certification of the 2020 U.S. presidential election results by the U.S. Congress, in Washington, Jan. 6. Jim Urquhart/Reuters

toward police. Reffitt was one of the first rioters to make it onto the building, court records say.

But although some brought gas masks, Reffitt did not and was quickly repelled by pepper spray from officers defending the building. But like others, Reffitt wore body armor and a helmet. Prosecutors say his role in the attack was significant and contributed to the violent breaching of the Capitol building by causing a police line guarding the building to retreat.

"By his own admission ... the defendant led the charge that pushed back U.S. Capitol Police who were defending the Capitol building, and that allowed other rioters to rush inside, putting hundreds of lives at risk," Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeffrey S. Nestler said in court filings.

Nestler said Reffitt also recruited members to his militia; formed a security company to secretly arm the mili-

tia; ordered bear spray and riot shields; threatened to harm his children if they reported him; and planned future violence and acts of terrorism.

The House panel investigating the insurrection is examining all aspects of the attack, including the numerous online discussions and threats prior to Jan. 6. The committee also is looking into possible coordination between insurrectionists and planners of then-President Donald Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally that immediately preceded the violence. The committee is seeking phone or computer records for hundreds of people who were believed to be involved in the effort to overturn the November 2020 presidential election results.

Reffitt's attorney could not be reached for comment. But he has told a federal judge that his client, who remains behind bars, intends to go to trial and fight the charges. A trial date is currently set for February. If that date holds, Reffitt could be one of the first to take his case to a jury.

NBC News reported in April that a nonprofit research group found hundreds of social media posts discuss-

ing plans to take the Capitol building, including strategies for overwhelming police and maps of the building.

And Washington, D.C.'s homeland security office sounded the alarm in vain after noticing growing signs that Trump supporters were planning to violently disrupt Congress' joint session to certify the Electoral College vote, according to a recent Washington Post report.

The desperate D.C. officials were unable to convince federal law enforcement that a serious threat loomed despite numerous red flags and their frenzied efforts, The Post reported. The warnings of violence came from "local officials, FBI informants, social media companies, former national security officials, researchers, lawmakers and tipsters," The Post reported.

Six California men, four of whom identify as Three Percenter, an extremist militia movement, have been charged with more serious conspiracy counts after prosecutors said they plotted together on the Telegram app prior to the uprising.

Reffitt is also a Three Percenter, according to court records. But his failed charge at the Capitol seems to indicate a lack of coordination on the ground with other more serious and prepared insurrectionists.

About 30 defendants have been charged with conspiracy counts, including members of two other right-wing groups, The Oath Keepers and The Proud Boys. Reffitt is one of the few alleged rioters who is said to have brought a gun to the Capitol - a significant aggravating factor that carries greater punishment.

The Post reported that less than 80 of the roughly 650 people charged in connection with the Jan. 6 riot are linked to right-wing extremist groups such as militias.

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