

US slams polls, tells govt to free Besigye



Police guard the road leading to Dr Kizza Besigye's home in Kasangati at the weekend. PHOTO BY ABUBAKER LUBOWA

Below par. The US government says the elections fell short of standard democratic principles.

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KAMPALA. One of President Museveni's biggest allies, the US government, has slammed last Thursday's presidential elections as "deeply inconsistent with international standards and expectations for any democratic process", telling the Ugandan government to release Opposition leader Dr Kizza Besigye from house arrest immediately.

The US Department of State, however, commended Ugandans for "participating actively and peacefully in the February 18, elections" and said they "deserve better."

"Delays in the delivery of voting materials, reports of pre-checked ballots and vote buying, ongoing blockage of social media sites, and excessive use of force by the police, collectively undermine the integrity of the electoral process," the deputy spokesperson at the Department, Mr Mark Toner said in a statement.

President Museveni, 71, was last Saturday announced winner by the Electoral Commission with 60.8 per cent of the vote tally, extending his 30-year rule for another five years.

His main challenger Kizza Besigye, who has been placed under house arrest since Friday, received 35.4 per cent.

"We are also concerned by the continued house arrest of Opposi-

tion presidential candidate Kizza Besigye. We call for his immediate release and the restoration of access to all social media sites," Mr Toner said in a statement.

He encouraged all those intending to contest the Thursday election results to do so lawfully, urging the government to "respect the rights and freedoms of its people and refrain from interference in those processes."

Relaxed siege

By yesterday afternoon, the government had relaxed the siege and confinement of Dr Besigye, allowing him to receive or address journalists.

Dr Besigye, a four-time presidential challenger of President Museveni, and former bush war hero, was last week detained by police at least four times in equal days before the Election Day.

The presidential election results were announced while he was under house arrest with no one allowed inside his Kasangati home except close family members.

ILLEGAL BLOCKADES

Social media blockade: Uganda Communications Commission on Thursday shut down social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, along with Mobile Money transfer services on the pretext of "national security." President Museveni justified the shutdown saying it is just a small dose of how far the State can go or what it can do.

Last Saturday, international election observers from the European Union and Commonwealth slammed the election as not free and fair on account of glaring mass irregularities most prominently the crude conduct of the police.

The European Union Election Observation Mission said the voter enthusiasm for democratic process was eclipsed by an atmosphere of intimidation and ruled that the Electoral Commission lacks independence and transparency.

The Commonwealth Mission Observer Group made a similar verdict concluding "once again, these elections fell short of meeting key democratic benchmarks."

However, President Museveni while addressing journalists at his country home in Rwakitura yesterday, described the European Union and Commonwealth election observers as "jokers", "I am not a joker."

He said he does not "need lectures from anybody on elections. I have been organising elections since 1963 at Ntare [School]."

He dismissed claims of rigging, saying anyone with intentions of contesting the results "is not serious."

"Why did we agree to lose in some areas like Kampala?" he wondered.

The US provides about \$760m (Shs2.62 trillion) in support to Uganda annually with more than half of it (\$440m [Shs1.5 trillion]) going to the health sector and military.