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THE STRAITS TIMES

Indonesians in S'pore turn up early to vote for new president

Arlina Arshad
 Indonesia Bureau Chief
Hariz Baharudin, Linda Yulisman and Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja
 Indonesia Correspondents

JAKARTA - Enthusiastic Indonesians formed a queue outside the country's embassy in Singapore on Feb 11 more than an hour before the polling booth opened at 8am to cast their ballots for a new president, as overseas voting got under way in several countries.

Of the 106,000 Indonesian citizens in Singapore who were eligible to vote, half were expected to vote by post. Some 57,000 Indonesians, from mothers pushing prams to domestic workers, turned up at the embassy in Chatsworth Road to vote directly.

"I was very excited to come to the embassy to vote today. I already knew in my heart which candidate I would pick. The voting process is so smooth and fast," Ms Iis Jumiyati, in her 50s, told The Straits Times in a video message.

Meanwhile, at home in Indonesia, a mandatory "cooling-off" period had started, following a hectic final day of mega rallies by presidential hopefuls to mark the end of the 75 days of campaigning.

Front-runner Prabowo Subianto, a former special forces commander and the current Indonesian Defence Minister, is locked in a three-way fight with former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan and former Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo.

The race is tight, with opinion surveys through January showing nobody breaching the golden 50 per cent simple majority mark to win the election outright. Analysts have widely predicted a June run-off, but the tide appeared to be turning for Mr Prabowo days before the polls.

After months of stagnant electability ratings, the two latest surveys showed Mr Prabowo clearing the

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Ms Rizki Kusumastuti, First Secretary of the Indonesian Embassy in Singapore, showing her ink-stained finger after voting on Feb 11. ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

President Tharman • Asia 'full of opportunity'

Despite an increasingly uncertain world, international markets, including China, will be the main source of growth for businesses in Singapore, said President Tharman Shanmugaratnam. He also said Singapore is lucky to be in Asia. It may be an unpredictable region with many risks, but it is a "region full of opportunity".

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S'pore's nursing strength boosted by 5,600 in 2023, higher than target

MOH to share details of long-term incentive programme for nurses before end of CNY

Elisha Tushara
 Correspondent

Efforts to enhance Singapore's nursing workforce have paid off, with 5,600 nurses accepting offers to work in the public healthcare system in 2023, including 4,500 already registered to work.

Speaking on Feb 10 during a visit to Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH), on the first day of Chinese New Year celebrations, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said the number recruited exceeded the target announced earlier.

"We are always short of healthcare manpower. So, last year, we set ourselves a target to recruit 4,000 nurses, in private as well as public healthcare systems, in order to first replenish those we lost during Covid-19 and, at the same time, expand our workforce further," said Mr Ong.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) said in January that the number of nurses registered in 2023 surpassed the figure seen in the previ-

ous year, when 3,400 new nurses were registered.

There were 43,772 nurses and registered midwives in Singapore in 2022, including 36,995 registered nurses.

The ministry had announced in 2022 the need for intensified local and overseas recruitment to make up for nurses who left the country or the profession during the Covid-19 pandemic, and to meet the growing healthcare needs of Singapore's ageing population.

The Republic experienced a higher attrition rate of foreign nurses in 2021 and 2022, as borders reopened and the global competition for healthcare professionals intensified.

MOH also previously announced that by 2030, 82,000 nurses, allied health professionals and support care staff will be needed to operate hospitals, clinics and eldercare centres to support Singapore's ageing population.

In July 2023, Mr Ong said more foreign nurses were granted permanent resident status in 2023, in

recognition of the essential role they played in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic and supporting Singapore's growing healthcare needs.

Most of the foreign nurses here are from the region, including the Philippines, Malaysia and Myanmar.

During his visit to TTSH, Mr Ong said that MOH would announce the details of a long-term incentive programme for nurses before the 15th day of the Chinese New Year.

He said long-term incentives are already given to teachers, and officers in the Home Team and the Singapore Armed Forces.

Noting that nurses form the biggest group of professionals within Singapore's healthcare system, Mr Ong said the incentive can "become quite a significant component of their remunerations".

During his visit, the minister thanked healthcare staff who were working during the public holiday to keep essential healthcare services running over the festive period.

He dropped by Ward 5C - the smart ward of the hospital that tests technological innovations to improve inpatient care - to distribute Chinese New Year goodie bags containing oranges and red packets to patients and staff.

Addressing healthcare staff, Mr Ong acknowledged that working in public healthcare can be challenging.

"Patient load is rising, patients' families can be demanding. But whatever it is, I think we have to do it together, help out each other, and work as a team," he said.

Senior staff nurse Samantha Loke Xin Yu, 29, has been working at TTSH for more than six years.

Ms Loke, who works in the emergency department, told The Straits Times that it was not her first time working during Chinese New Year.

"When you sign up as a healthcare worker, you already know what you are in for. Everyone in healthcare makes sacrifices," said Ms Loke, adding that her shift on the first day of Chinese New Year started at 8am and ended at 4.30pm.

She worked the night shift on the second day, from 10pm to 8.30am.

Though it takes some getting used to, Ms Loke, who is single, said her family understands that the nature of her work is important and complex.

"Be it a public holiday or not, everybody needs to be taken care of."

elisha@sph.com.sg

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung (centre) with healthcare staff at Tan Tock Seng Hospital on Feb 10. During his visit, the minister thanked staff who were working during the public holiday to keep essential healthcare services running. He also visited the hospital's smart ward, which tests technological innovations to improve inpatient care, to distribute goodie bags containing oranges and red packets to patients and staff. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Myanmar junta declares it will enforce military service law for young people

YANGON - Myanmar's junta is enforcing a law allowing the military to summon all men aged 18 to 35, and women aged 18 to 27, to serve for at least two years, it said on Feb 10, as it struggles to crush opposition to its 2021 coup.

The country has been in turmoil since the military takeover in February that year, which ended a 10-year experiment with democracy and sparked mass protests and a crackdown on dissent.

The junta is now struggling to crush widespread armed opposition to its rule, and recently suf-

fered a series of stunning losses to an alliance of ethnic minority armed groups.

The junta "issued the notification of the effectiveness of People's Military Service Law starting from Feb 10, 2024", its information team said in a statement.

The law was authored by a previous junta in 2010, but was never brought into force.

The Feb 10 statement did not give further details, but said the Defence Ministry would "release necessary by-laws, procedures, announcement orders, notifications

and instructions".

It did not give details on how those called up would be expected to serve.

The junta said previously that it is taking measures to arm pro-military militias as it battles opponents across the country.

A "national military service system involving all people is essential because of the situation happening in our country", junta spokesman Zaw Min Tun said in an audio message released by the information team.

Under the earlier law, the age

bracket for "skilled" men and women was 18 to 45 years and 18 to 35 years, respectively, although details on "skilled" were left vague.

That law also had a stipulation that during a state of emergency, the terms of service could be extended up to five years, and those ignoring summons to serve could be jailed for the same period.

The junta announced a state of emergency when it seized power in 2021, with the army recently extending it for a further six months.

Since the coup, pro-democracy People's Defence Forces have en-

listed tens of thousands of young recruits, and are taking the fight to the junta across swathes of the country.

In late October 2023, an alliance of ethnic minority fighters launched a surprise offensive in northern Shan state, capturing territory and taking control of lucrative trade routes to China.

The success of the northern offensive and the military's failure to mount a counter-attack has dented morale among low- and mid-level officers, according to several military sources contacted by AFP, all

of whom requested anonymity. More than 4,500 people have been killed in the military's crackdown on dissent and over 26,000 arrested, according to a local monitoring group. AFP

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