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Voters Throng Polling Stations for Togo's Presidential Election

By MICHAEL KAMBER
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LOMÉ, Togo, April 24 - Three people were killed and at least 15 injured in election-related violence Sunday in Togo, where voters packed polling stations for a presidential contest between the son of Africa's longest-serving ruler and a candidate representing a coalition of six opposition parties.

"We are here because after 38 years of only one regime, now we have a chance to bring about change," said Honsou Belami, an amateur soccer player, who had waited in line for hours at a polling station in Lomé, the capital.

He said he was planning to vote for Emmanuel Akitani-Bob, the leading opposition candidate.

Many voters said they hoped to end the era of the dictatorship of Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who died in February after ruling Togo for nearly four decades as head of the Rally of the Togolese People party.

Mr. Akitani-Bob, 74, was running against Mr. Eyadéma's son, Faure Gnassingbé, 39, who was vying for his second stint in power; the first was days after his father's death when the military installed him as president.

Soon afterward, legislators from the governing party rewrote the constitution to legalize his presidency, moves that set off violent street protests and drew international condemnation. Mr. Gnassingbé eventually stepped down and scheduled elections.

There were scattered street battles on the outskirts of the capital on Sunday between opposition supporters and the police. Late in the day, after the polls had closed, heavily armed police officers patrolled the city where burning barricades lined one of the main roads.

A Western diplomat based in Lomé said that three men had been killed, and that all three had suffered gunshot wounds. There were no more details available.

In other violence, the opposition coalition said its headquarters were raided Sunday by armed men who ransacked the offices and stole computers the group was using to tally results. A coalition spokesman, Homawoo Atsu, said some election workers in the offices had been bound.

North of Lomé, Richard Attipoe, a campaign director for Mr. Gnassingbé, and two of his bodyguards were badly beaten when Mr. Attipoe tried to vote. Mr. Attipoe blamed opposition supporters for the attack.

The period leading up to the election was also marred by clashes, and about seven people were killed. The opposition accused the government of voter registration fraud, and a radio station critical of Mr. Gnassingbé's administration was shut down. The opposition coalition's general coordinator, Yawovi Agboyibor, said at a news conference on Saturday that the vote would be "an electoral masquerade."

Mr. Gnassingbé appeared confident at the news conference Sunday and discounted the fraud accusations. "The opposition has already said if they do not win it is because of fraud," he said. "So if they talk of fraud, perhaps it is because they know they will lose."

The governing party campaigned on a record of stability under the longtime dictator, who oversaw a period in which Togo became one of the world's poorest nations, with a per capita income of about \$270 a year. Both parties have promised a renewed economy to the legions of unemployed young men that roam the streets in search of work.

As voting wound down in the afternoon, tension was high. Like many here, Michael Abah, 26, an unemployed computer technician, predicted trouble if the opposition lost again. "I don't know what violence brings," he said as he waited to vote, "but history tells us some nations achieve freedom through violence."

The results of the voting, which was being monitored by 150 observers from the Economic Community of West African States, or Ecowas, are expected within two days.
