

CHARGES OF INFECTING HUNDREDS OF CHILDREN WITH AIDS

Libyan court confirms death penalty for 6 foreign medics

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's Supreme Court yesterday confirmed the death penalty against six foreign medics convicted of infecting hundreds of children with the AIDS virus in a case that has dragged on for eight years.

The five Bulgarian nurses and Palestinian doctor were not in court for the verdict, announced the day after a compensation deal was reached with the children's families that could see the death sentences commuted to prison terms.

"In the name of the people, the court has decided not to accept the defendants' appeal and confirms the death penalty against them," chief judge Fathi Dahan said.

Libya's top legal body is due to meet next week to examine the compensation deal negotiated by the Kadhafi Foundation, a charitable body headed by the son of Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi.

"The Supreme Judicial Council is going to meet on Monday and it will be up to this body to cancel or commute the verdict pronounced today by the supreme court," foreign minister Abdel Rahman Shalgham told reporters.

Nurses Snezhana Dimitrova, Nasya Nenova, Valya Cherveniaszka, Valentina Siropulo and Kristiana Valcheva and Palestinian doctor Ashraf Juma Hajju -- who now has Bulgarian nationality -- have been behind bars since February 1999 but have always protested their innocence.

They were convicted of infecting 438 children with HIV-tainted blood at a hospital in the Mediterranean city of Benghazi and sentenced to death in May 2004. Fifty-six of the children have since died.

But foreign health experts have cited poor hygiene as the probable cause of the epidemic in Benghazi, Libya's second city.

Bulgaria's Deputy Foreign Minister Feim Chaushev said Sofia was pursuing talks with Tripoli despite the rejection of their final appeal.

"From now on everything is in the hands of Libya's Supreme Judicial Council. Our efforts continue and

we continue talks with the Libyan side for finding a positive solution to the case," Chaushev told Inforadio.

Bulgarian lawyers for the nurses condemned the verdict.

"I am devastated. Justice was not done," lawyer Hari Haralambiev told Bulgarian national radio by telephone from Tripoli.

"Libyan justice wrote a sad and shameful page in its book. It is obvious now that Libyan justice was exploited for reaching other goals," the Bulgarian coordinator of the defence Trayan Markovski added.

Salah Abdessalem, director of the Kadhafi Foundation run by Kadhafi's son Seif al-Islam had said on Tuesday that a compromise acceptable to the children's families had been reached.

"This accord satisfied all the parties and puts an end to this crisis," he said, adding that the deal was between the families and a special aid fund for victims set up by Tripoli and Sofia in 2005 under EU auspices.

The Supreme Court had deferred its judgment at an initial hearing on June 20, when the prosecution sought confirmation of the death sentences against the six, who say their confessions were extracted by torture.

A representative of the victims' families has said the compromise deal would see the death penalty commuted to jail terms, which could be served in the medics' country of origin, as Libya and Bulgaria have an extradition treaty.

US President George W. Bush had urged Kadhafi in a letter delivered on Monday to help in the dispute, telling him that the case and lingering issues tied to the 1989 Lockerbie bombing needed his attention.

The six medics still face defamation charges brought by a senior police officer after being acquitted in May on similar charges.

The cases arise from claims that the medics "confessions" in the AIDS trial were forced from them under torture, including beatings, electric shocks and being threatened with dogs.

If found guilty in the new trial, brought by Salim Jomaa Salim, head of the police dog unit, they face sentences of up to three years in jail.



AFP file pictures show (from L to R top row): Valia Georgieva Cherveniaszka, Nasia Stoitcheva Nenova, Valentina Manolova Siropulo and (bottom row): Christiana Malinova Valcheva, Snezhana Ivanova Dimitrova and Doctor Ashraf Ahmad Juma Hajju, who were condemned to death in Tripoli 19 December 2006, on charges of spreading HIV-AIDS among hundreds of children in a Benghazi hospital.

Suicide blast in Algeria kills 8

AFP, Algiers

A suicide bomber rammed a vehicle into an army barracks in Algeria yesterday, killing eight people, security sources and witnesses said.

Witnesses said the bomber drove the vehicle at high speed into the barracks in Lakhdaria, south-east of the capital Algiers.

The eight killed included both soldiers and civilians, the sources said, but did not indicate the number of wounded. They said the death toll could rise.

Several ambulances took the casualties to hospital.

In April, 30 people were killed and more than 220 injured in triple suicide bombings in Algiers claimed by the extremist Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC).

The group last September pledged its allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and renamed itself as Al-Qaeda's branch in Islamic Mahgreb.

Lanka claims capture of key Tiger base

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday claimed its forces had captured a key Tamil Tiger base in the east of the island after months of clashes, as Norway tried to renew peace efforts by meeting with the rebels.

The military took control of the Thoppigala jungle base used by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) near dawn, the defence ministry said in a statement. It gave no further details about the latest offensive.

"Commandos and soldiers... reached Thoppigala a few hours ago," the statement said. "With this victory, the troops have captured the nerve centre of the LTTE terrorists in their last stronghold in the eastern province."

There was no immediate comment from the Tigers, who for more than three decades have led a campaign for an independent homeland for minority ethnic Tamils concentrated in the island's north and east.

"The victorious soldiers are presently clearing enemy 'pockets' scattered in the dense jungle and are pursuing the LTTE cadres who are on the run," the statement said.



PHOTO: AFP

Soldiers carry the body of a Philippine soldier onto a helicopter in Lamitan town in Basilan province where 14 marines were killed during a gunbattle with Islamic militants yesterday.

Militants kill 14 Philippine marines, behead 10

AFP, Manila

Islamic militants killed 14 Philippine marines searching for a kidnapped Italian priest during a major gunbattle, and later beheaded 10 of them, the military said yesterday.

The troops were ambushed on southern Basilan island by a joint force from the Philippines' main Islamic rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and the Al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf, a marine spokesman said.

Lieutenant Colonel Ariel Caculitan said 14 marines were killed in the eight-hour clash, increasing an earlier death toll after more bodies were recovered. Ten had been discovered beheaded, he said in Manila.

"All 10 marines earlier reported missing have been found dead," Caculitan told reporters. "All were beheaded," he added.

Another nine were injured in the gunbattle with about 300 militants

near Tipo-Tipo town on Tuesday, he said.

Intelligence reports said Italian priest Giancarlo Bossi, 57, was being kept in an area where MILF forces were known to operate and the troops had been sent in to investigate, said regional marine commander Ramiro Alivio.

About 80 marines clashed with the MILF militants backed by Abu Sayyaf fighters, after arriving there early Tuesday, said Colonel Alivio.

"We can confirm 14 were killed and nine were wounded," Alivio told AFP.

"All of our men have (now) been accounted for," he said.

Some of the beheaded had been found by provincial authorities in Basilan and been turned over to the military, other marines said.

Bossi, of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME), was seized by unknown heavily armed men near his parish church in southern Zamboanga peninsula on June 10.

MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu acknowledged the group's fighters clashed with the military on Tuesday, but he denied Abu Sayyaf militants were involved, and accused the troops of violating a ceasefire by entering an MILF area.

The MILF claimed on its website that its forces killed 23 marines, including 10 "who were beheaded by unknown groups after the fighting." It said the group has launched a probe "because Islam prohibits mutilation or commission of any atrocity against a fallen enemy."

Four MILF fighters were killed in the battle and seven were injured, it added, updating the rebel toll.

The rebels destroyed two military trucks and seized 27 guns during the ambush, it added.

The 12,000-strong MILF is the country's main separatist rebel group and is currently engaged in peace talks with the government in Manila.

Musharraf now braces for ferocious backlash

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has been criticised abroad for his perceived appeasement of extremists, but he now faces a ferocious Islamist backlash after crushing the Red Mosque militants.

Protests have erupted in several cities during the nine-day operation against the Islamabad mosque after it launched a Taliban-style campaign for Islamic law, culminating in a bloody uprising that has cost more than 85 lives.

Hundreds of demonstrators chanting "Musharraf is a dog!" rallied Wednesday in the conservative city of Peshawar near the Afghan border, while 20,000 armed tribesmen earlier in the week swore revenge on the military ruler.

Extra troops have been deployed in parts of northwestern Pakistan with close links to the Red Mosque after attacks killed more than half a dozen policemen and left the tent-housed offices of two aid agencies in flames.

Warnings of possible revenge suicide attacks on western targets by Islamic militants have prompted the authorities to boost security across the country, officials say.

Baitullah Mahsud, a key Pakistani Taliban leader based in the tribal area of South Waziristan, has reportedly sworn to avenge the mosque raid.

"If militants can hoard so many weapons not far from the presidency, the backlash could be even more



violent," said Fateh Mohammad Burfat, head of the criminology department at Karachi University.

"The resistance shown by militants to the army commandos in the Red Mosque may just be a taste of what they are capable of," Burfat said.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Analysts warned that the militants would be keen to dissuade Musharraf from using the Red Mosque assault as a launching pad for a final attempt to crush extremists elsewhere in the country, especially the tribal areas.

But Musharraf -- as he has so often since he angered Islamists by withdrawing his support for Afghanistan's Taliban regime after 9/11 -- finds himself between a rock and a hard place when dealing with Islamic militancy.

On the other side are growing

demands from NATO and US-led forces in Afghanistan to crack down on Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters sheltering in Pakistan's tribal areas who are launching attacks across the border.

Musharraf is a key US ally whose regime has been propped up by billions of dollars in military and other aid from Washington, yet a string of US officials have visited Pakistan this year to push him on the issue.

The United States backed the raid on the mosque.

US State Department spokesman Tom Casey said Pakistani authorities had "proceeded in a responsible way on this issue". President George W. Bush meanwhile praised Musharraf as a "strong ally" against "terrorists".

The raid has at least partly eased a campaign led by secular, pro-democracy opposition parties to unseat Musharraf over his suspension of the country's chief justice in March.

They have repeatedly urged him to take on the extremists, but their words have often fallen on deaf ears as the personally westernised Musharraf seeks to please the more conservative ruling party that he relies on for support.

"There is clear evidence from this operation that the government is very serious about preventing the 'Talibanisation' of the country," said Rasool Bakhsh Raees, professor of political science at the Lahore University of Management and Sciences.

German hostage freed in Iraq after 5 months

AFP, Berlin

A German woman held hostage in Iraq since early February has been freed but her son remains in the hands of the kidnappers, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said yesterday.

"Hannelore Krause's hostage ordeal has come to an end after 155 days. We are relieved and share in the joy of the family," Steinmeier told reporters in Berlin.

But he added: "The dire uncertainty about her son, who is still in captivity, remains."

Krause, 62, in an interview broadcast on Al-Arabiya television on yesterday urged Germany to heed the kidnappers' call to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, saying her son's life was at stake.

"I ask Germany to pull its troops out of Afghanistan. If it fails to do so, then my son will be slaughtered," she said.

"I want to reassert to peaceful Muslims that Germans are present in land which is not their own."

Krause and her 20-year-old Sinan were seized from her house in Baghdad on February 6 by members of a militant Islamist group called the Kataeb Siham al-Haq (Righteous Arrows Battalions).

The kidnappers in March threatened to execute both mother and son within 10 days unless Germany withdrew from Afghanistan.

It later renewed the ultimatum



Hannelore Krause

and in April released a video in which a frail-looking Krause was shown crying, begging for help in German and saying she longed to be reunited with her husband.

"I'm so afraid and we only have a few days left," she said as she clutched her son's arm.

Steinmeier said Krause was freed on Tuesday afternoon, but declined to give details of the circumstances of her release for fear it could jeopardize her son. He said the government was doing "everything in our power" to ensure he was released unharmed.

Krause, who is married to an Iraqi doctor, Mohamed Al Tomachi, had settled in Iraq some 40 years ago and taken an Iraqi name, Um Mazin.

Their son worked at the Iraqi foreign ministry and was married a few months before the kidnapping.

Judge me after my coffin's closed: Abe

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's beleaguered Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has dismissed his plunging support rate ahead of elections, saying politicians would be judged "after their coffins are closed," reports said yesterday.

The conservative leader, who has campaigned to build a nation prouder of its past, noted that his grandfather, former prime minister Nobusuke Kishi, was also unpopular while in office.

"Support rates were also fairly low for my grandfather but I believe he is now appreciated highly," Abe said in a group interview with sports newspapers conducted Tuesday.

"It is true that evaluations of politicians are formed gradually after their coffins are closed," he said, as quoted by the Nikkan Sports paper.

Quoting another former conser-

vative prime minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone, Abe said that politicians "are tried in a court called history."

Abe, who took office in September as Japan's first prime minister born after World War II, has pushed to shake off legacies of defeat, including by rewriting the US-imposed 1947 pacifist constitution.

But his support rate has sunk below 30 percent in recent weeks amid a series of scandals and gaffes involving top ministers, including one who committed suicide.

Abe would likely face pressure to resign if his coalition fares poorly in July 29 elections for the upper house of parliament.

Abe's maternal grandfather Kishi fought widespread protests by leftists during his 1957-1960 tenure as premier as he built a new alliance with the United States.

