

# Egypt opposition rejects government reform offer

AFP, Cairo

Opponents of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's embattled regime yesterday dismissed as insufficient an offer to include them in political reform plans and renewed their demand that he step down.

In a landmark concession, Vice President Omar Suleiman agreed to sit down with the groups, which included the banned Muslim Brotherhood, but the talks produced no immediate breakthrough in the two-week-old standoff.

As night fell, central Cairo's now iconic Tahrir Square was still filled with thousands of anti-regime protesters, adamant that the start of dialogue will not divert them from their campaign to unseat Egypt's strongman.

"It's bullshit. That's my honest opinion," said 25-year-old Nora Abul Samra. "When he leaves they can do whatever they want. They still believe there is a constitutional way to do it, but this is a revolution."

After two weeks of mass street protests and more than 300 deaths -- and with global pressure mounting on Suleiman to negotiate a peaceful transi-

tion to more democratic rule -- the government met its most powerful foes.

Government spokesman Magdi Radi said the parties agreed to form a committee of judges and politicians "to study and propose constitutional amendments and required legislative amendments... by the first week of March."

Negotiators also agreed to open an office for complaints about the treatment of political prisoners, loosen media curbs, to lift an emergency law "depending on the security situation," and reject foreign interference.

But Suleiman refused another key demand of the opposition, saying he would not assume Mubarak's powers and rule in his stead during the transition.

Not all of the opposition movements involved in the 13-day-old uprising against Mubarak's rule were present at the talks, with former UN nuclear watchdog head and leading dissident Mohamed ElBaradei notably not invited.

Other opposition leaders met Suleiman in a palatial government hall under a huge portrait of the absent Mubarak. The Muslim Brotherhood, although represented despite the ban,

left unsatisfied by the outcome.

Mahmud Ezzat, the Brotherhood's number two leader, told AFP by telephone that the group had not pulled out of the talks because it felt it had made progress, but warned that street protests would continue.

In his view, by sitting down with the opposition, the regime had tacitly "admitted that this is a popular revolution and its demands are legitimate. And one of our demands is that the president must leave."

Asked whether he believed Mubarak would step down, Ezzat said: "That hinges on popular pressure, and we support the popular pressure. It must continue."

Another senior Brotherhood figure, Essam al-Erian, told reporters: "Our demands are still the same. They didn't respond to most of our demands. They only responded to some of our demands, but in a superficial way."

Some of the undaunted protesters celebrated Christian prayers in the central Cairo square, the epicentre and symbol of the revolt, in memory of the estimated 300 people killed since demonstrations against Mubarak broke out.



PHOTO: AFP

Egyptian anti-government protesters gather at Tahrir Square in Cairo on the 13th day of protests behind the makeshift barricades and an image taken from Egyptian state television Al-Masriya shows new Egyptian Vice President Omar Suleiman (*inset*) speaking during talks between the Egyptian regime and several opposition groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, in Cairo yesterday.

## NEWS IN brief

### ElBaradei shut out of Egypt talks

AFP, Washington

Leading Egyptian opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei said he was "not invited" to take part in negotiations yesterday on the future of a post-Mubarak Egypt, and criticized the talks as "opaque."

"I should start by saying I have not been part of the negotiations. I have not been invited to take part in the negotiations or dialogue but I have been following what has been going on," he told NBC television's "Meet the Press" program.

### Main Irish opposition party to lead new government

AFP, Dublin

Ireland's main Fine Gael opposition party is on course to lead the country's new government after the February 25 general election and has increased its lead, according to an opinion poll yesterday.

Several days after the election was called, the Sunday Business Post/Red C tracking poll showed support for the centre-right Fine Gael had gone up two points to 35 percent since the paper's last poll a week ago.

"Fine Gael remains firmly on course to win the general election and lead the next government -- most likely in a coalition with the Labour party," the newspaper said.

### Philippines 'seriously concerned' over rebel split

AFP, Cotabato, Philippines

The chief Philippine government negotiator said yesterday he was "seriously concerned" after a feared rebel commander broke from the main Islamic separatist group ahead of peace talks.

Ameril Umbrakato's split from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) could compromise talks between the government and the rebels, warned negotiator Marivic Leonen, casting a pall over hopes for an end to one of the world's longest-running insurgencies.

"The government views the reported resignation of a known commander of the MILF with serious concern and looks forward to a clarification from the MILF (peace) panel," Leonen said in a statement.

### Explosion kills five at Romanian mine

REUTERS, Bucharest

An explosion ripped through a coal mine in western Romania, killing five miners at a depth of some 400 metres (1,000 ft) below ground, authorities said late on Saturday.

A rescue team found the bodies of the miners, between 30 and 35 years old, who had been working to repair a power transformer, Dan Buhaescu, mayor of the town of Uricani, was quoted as saying by news agency Agerpres.

### Israeli woman pleads guilty to leaking army secrets

AFP, Jerusalem

A Tel Aviv court yesterday convicted a young Israeli woman of leaking classified military documents, but dropped espionage charges as part of a plea-bargain agreement, media reports said.

Anat Kam, who is in her 20s, was convicted on charges of illegal possession of classified data, and passing it to another person without authorisation, the website of the Haaretz newspaper said.

But the court agreed to drop the more serious charge of "serious espionage" with intent to harm Israel's security, which carries a maximum sentence

## Embattled Australia hit by wildfires

AFP, Perth, Australia

Wildfires destroyed homes and flooding claimed the life of a man in embattled Australia yesterday, as officials warned that last week's monster cyclone would compound economic woes.

Three major fires razed properties around the west coast city of Perth, as a volatile weather system trailing Cyclone Yasi, a top-level storm that battered Australia's northeast coast Thursday, continued to wreak havoc.

"There have been homes destroyed but we are not sure how many at this stage," an emergency spokeswoman told AFP describing conditions as "pretty nasty."

Local media said up to 20 houses had gone up in flames at Roleystone, a heavily wooded area on the southern outskirts of Perth, with another out-of-control blaze on the northern fringes forcing more than 150 evacuations.

Both were described as a threat to lives and property, with officials urging residents to "act immediately to survive" by either abandoning their home, if it was safe to do so, or preparing to defend their property from the flames.

Analysts have put the damage to Australia's agricultural sector as a result of the recent disasters at Aus\$1.4 billion.

Canberra has announced a one-off tax on higher-income earners to help meet the cost of rebuilding from the floods.

## Iran begins trial on US 'spies'

AFP, Tehran

The much-delayed trial of three young Americans accused of spying against Iran opened yesterday, more than 18 months after they were arrested on the unmarked border with Iraq while on a hiking trip.

The prosecution of Sarah Shourd, Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal comes at a time when anti-American rhetoric is at fever pitch in Iran as it marks the anniversary of its 1979 Islamic revolution.

Sources close to the lawyer of the trio said the trial, held in a closed session, had commenced.

## Police fire kills two in Tunisia

REUTERS, Tunis

At least two people were killed and 17 others wounded in northern Tunisia on Saturday when police opened fire to quell a protest after a senior police officer slapped a woman in the face, official and media sources said.

The head of police in the city of El Kef was arrested after the shooting, an Interior Ministry source said.

Four policemen had been arrested earlier on Saturday on suspicion of links to the death on Friday of two civilians while in police custody in Sidi Bouzid, the epicentre of a popular revolt that ousted last month President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and reverberated across the Arab world.

Public confidence in the police has been at a low since the revolt, with many Tunisians blaming police officers for killing protesters and associating them with the ousted president.

A rally by hundreds of protesters in front of the police station in El Kef, north of the capital Tunis, degenerated when they tried to occupy its premises, the ministry source said.

"About 1,000 people gathered in a protest in front of El Kef's police station to demand the dismissal of the head of the police in the city for power abuse while exercising his duties," the source told Reuters.

## Tannery owners not helpful

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the deadline to August 28, 2010 and directed the industries ministry to submit a compliance report within six months.

The authorities failed to meet this deadline as well prompting the government to file a petition with the HC to again extend the deadline by two years.

The state minister said the government formed a five-member committee on July 29, 2009 to supervise relocation of the industries. In efforts to implement the High Court's verdict, the Directorate of Environment has published advertisements in newspapers three times to inform owners of the move.

The owners were served notices three times in 2009 asking them to let the Directorate of Environment know how they plan to relocate in line with the HC verdict. The deadline for responding to the notices ended on November 19, 2009.

Most owners responded within the deadline and some are still sending in their replies, the state minister said.

"But their response did not reflect any positive gesture...", the state minister said.

He said a meeting on relocation of the factories and removal of waste was held on January 4 with himself in the chair. According to the meeting's decision, owners of all tanneries will have to complete construction of infrastructure including the central effluent treatment plant within a

year, the state minister said.

In response to another query, the state minister said the directorate of environment has taken various measures to control industrial pollution in the capital.

The measures include preparing an action plan to control pollution of the Turag, implementation of a project to control pollution caused by waste of industries in Dhaka district, and preparing an electronic database of all industries across the country by bringing them under geographic information system.

On stopping pollution by brick kilns, he said the government has asked owners of brick kilns across the country to make their brick kilns more environment friendly following a certain procedure within the next two years.

He, however, said there is no specific figure about the number of brick kilns at the ministry. He said there are around 10,000-12,000 brick kilns in the country.

### SHIP BREAKING

In response to a separate query, the state minister said the government is preparing rules to give the ship-breaking industry a permanent shape. It will be made environmentally sustainable by preventing individuals from bringing in any ship with dangerous toxic materials into Bangladesh territory.

He said the government is also preparing guidelines to ensure safety of workers, and for waste management and environmental management of ship-breaking yards.

## US welcomes Brotherhood talks with caution

AFP, Munich, Germany

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton cautiously welcomed yesterday the Muslim Brotherhood's involvement in political dialogue in Egypt, saying Washington would "wait and see" how talks develop.

"Today we learned the Muslim Brotherhood decided to participate, which suggests they at least are now involved in the dialogue that we have encouraged," Clinton told National Public Radio (NPR) from Germany.

"We're going to wait and see how this develops, but we've been very clear about what we expect."

## Arab revolts bad news for Al-Qaeda: experts

AFP, Cairo

If the popular revolts that have rocked Tunisia and Egypt gain momentum and spread across the Middle East, they could strike a catastrophic blow to Al-Qaeda's violent ideology, experts say.

While some in the West fear pro-democracy protests in the Arab world could see authoritarian secular regimes overthrown by equally hardline Islamists, other observers say the movements pose a far greater threat to jihadi militants.

Groups like Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda have long preached that peaceful protest is useless in the face of autocracy. They condemn electoral politics and urge Muslims to use violence to combat injustice and oppression.

But if street protests in Tunisia can force an dictator into exile and in Cairo can force a regime to promise free elections and sit down with its opponents, why should angry young Arabs turn to bombs and guns?

"Ultimately, it works against the idea of the resort to violence," Maha Azzam, who studies the Middle East for the London-based think tank Chatham House, told AFP in Cairo's Tahrir Square, which is occupied by protesters.

Some in the West and in neighbouring Israel have expressed concern that a free vote in Egypt could lead to victory for the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, and that this would be a boost for violent factions in the region.

But observers in Cairo say the Brotherhood's power is exaggerated and that in any case it is not a violent movement like Al-Qaeda. It could play a role in multi-party politics, representing a political Islamist constituency.

"If it succeeds and if the transition is peaceful and successful, if it leads to a political system that includes all groups, it will be detrimental for the radical groups," she added.

Al-Qaeda, whose intellectual head

and number two figure is the Egyptian doctor Ayman al-Zawahiri, has long condemned any participation in elections, indeed any participation in secular political life.

The Muslim Brotherhood, in contrast, has battled for representation.

"The jihadi groups are at a crossroads," said Dominique Thomas, an expert in radical Islam at the School of Higher Studies in Social Sciences in Paris.

"If these events snowball, and raise democratic expectations in the region and people are able to overthrow dictatorships with pressure from the street, that would be a stunning blow to their theories," he said.

"If it's the will of the people that topples regimes, Al-Qaeda and jihadi groups will find it hard to bounce back and modify their narrative," he said.

"And, amid all this excitement, they've been strangely quiet. They're probably confounded. Bin Laden or Zawahiri will have to speak out soon, or their whole discourse will lose credibility," he said.

Another leading expert, Jean-Pierre Filiu of New York's Colombia University and Paris' Sciences-Po, agreed. "Al-Qaeda was caught completely unawares by the popular uprisings in the Arab world," he told AFP.

"They've gone completely silent on the subject, incapable of commenting on the news, so far is it beyond their understanding," he said.

Signs are emerging the extremists have themselves recognised the threat.

"It is a dangerous mistake for the jihadists to separate from the peoples," wrote radical cyber-preacher Abu Mundhir al-Shanqiti in an online sermon monitored by the US-based SITE online terrorism watchdog.

"We should forgive them, get closer to them and beg them to listen to us, because separating the jihadi movement from the popular Muslim movement is the end of this movement," he warned his followers.

## Religious clash in Indonesia kills six

AFP, Jakarta

More than 1,000 Indonesian Muslims clashed yesterday with supporters of a minority sect branded heretical by the government, leaving up to six people dead, a report said.

Protesters surrounded a house in Pandeglang district in West Java yesterday morning, state-run news agency Antara reported, to stop the Ahmadiyah Islamic sect from holding their worship there.

Antara said six people were killed in the clash, which was sparked after a sect follower stabbed a resident, but police could only confirm three dead.

"Three died and they were members of Ahmadiyah in Jakarta but they have yet to be identified. Four people were seriously injured," district police chief Alex Fauzi Rasyad told local television station MetroTV.

## India detains 52 in pirate ship capture

AFP, Mumbai

The Indian navy and coastguard captured a suspected pirate "mothership" and detained more than 50 people after a firefight yesterday off southwestern India, the defence ministry said.

"There were 52 people in all," defence ministry spokesman Captain M Nambiar told AFP but was unable to specify the numbers of suspected pirates and rescued hostages, nor could he give their nationalities.

All were found on board a Thai fishing vessel that had been hijacked up to six months ago off the coast of Somalia and is thought to have since been used as a floating base to mount attacks on shipping, a ministry statement added.

Mumbai police said they were expecting to interview all those detained when they arrive in the city.

Indian navy and coastguard were sent to hunt the pirates after the crew of a Greek-flagged vessel said they had been attacked some 100 nautical miles west of Kavaratti, off the state of Kerala in southwest India.

Two high-speed skiffs were located in the early hours of yesterday and chased back to the mothership. Coastguard and navy were fired on twice, the statement said.

Fifteen suspected pirates face trial in India after they were caught in the same area on January 28.

They were also said to have used another hijacked Thai fishing vessel as a mothership.

Piracy has made shipping increasingly perilous off the Horn of Africa and led to the deployment of an international force to protect the key maritime corridor.