

EGYPT UNREST

Mubarak forms reform committees

AP, Cairo

President Hosni Mubarak set up a committee yesterday to recommend constitutional amendments to relax presidential eligibility rules and impose term limits seeking to meet longtime popular demands as a standoff with protesters seeking his ouster enters its third week.

Mubarak's decrees were announced on state television by Vice President Omar Suleiman, who also said that Mubarak will set up a separate committee to monitor the implementation of all proposed reforms. The two committees will start working immediately instead of staying on through September elections. Yesterday's decision was the first concrete step taken by the longtime authoritarian ruler to implement promised reforms.

Mubarak's efforts to stay in office got a boost from the Obama administration, which conceded that it will not endorse calls for the

president's immediate departure, saying a precipitous exit could set back the country's democratic transition.

After several days of mixed messages about whether it wants to see Mubarak stay or go, Washington stepped up calls for a faster, more inclusive national dialogue on reform in Egypt. Under Egypt's constitution, Mubarak's resignation would trigger an election in 60 days. U.S. officials said that is not enough time to prepare.

"A question that would pose is whether Egypt today is prepared to have a competitive, open election," State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said. "Given the recent past, where, quite honestly, elections were less than free and fair there's a lot of work that has to be done to get to a point where you can have free and fair elections."

"I think that would be a challenging undertaking," he said.

Mubarak also ordered a probe into last week's clashes between the protesters and government supporters as well as mass detentions of human rights activists and journalists. The committee will refer its findings to the attorney-general, Suleiman said.



PHOTO: AFP

(Clockwise from left) An anti-government protester holds a placard in Cairo's Tahrir square yesterday showing pictures of people killed in the uprising. Blood stained shirts and pictures of protesters killed during the uprising are displayed at a barricade in Tahrir square. Protesters sleep next to an army tank at a barricade in the square on the 15th day of protests.

NEWS IN brief

Romania may toughen its laws about witches

AP, Bucharest

Legislation being debated in Romania would require witches to get a permit and make it possible to fine or even imprison one whose prediction turns out to be false.

The draft bill has just started its way through Parliament in Romania, where witchcraft has been part of its culture for centuries.

On Jan 1, Romania changed its labour laws to officially recognize witchcraft as a profession, angering some witches.

Vasile Bleotu, a Social Democrats lawmaker, said yesterday that the Senate passed the draft legislation last week but it still must be approved by a financial and labour committee and Romania's Chamber of Deputies.

Suspected US spy drone crashes in Yemen

AFP, Aden

A suspected US spy drone crashed near the south Yemen town of Loder yesterday before Al-Qaeda gunmen made off with the wreckage, a police official and witnesses said.

The drone crashed in Jahayn village near Loder, in Yemen's Abyan province where Al-Qaeda has a strong presence, and was found by local residents, the official told AFP.

Witnesses said residents called in police, who collected the debris.

Russia to stop setting clocks back in winter: Medvedev

AFP, Moscow

Russia will from next autumn stop putting its clocks back in winter, President Dmitry Medvedev said yesterday, meaning that Moscow will be four hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) all year round.

"I have taken a decision to cancel the move to 'winter' time starting from autumn of the current year," Russian news agencies quoted Medvedev as telling a meeting in the Kremlin.

He explained the move by saying that the need to adapt to the time change each year was causing Russians "stress and illness".

US 'deplores' religious killings in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

The United States yesterday condemned an outbreak of bloody religious violence in Indonesia which has left three people dead and several churches badly damaged.

The violence erupted on Sunday when a 1,000-strong mob of Muslim extremists attacked members of the minority Ahmadiyah sect in West Java province.

A shocking video of the lynching shows the Muslim fanatics armed with machetes, sticks and rocks screaming "Allahu Akbar" (God is Greatest) as they set upon their victims in a wild frenzy.

US, Kyrgyzstan sign air base fuel supply deal

REUTERS, Bishkek

Kyrgyzstan and the United States signed an agreement yesterday on jet fuel supplies to a US air base in the Central Asian state, replacing previous deals with a more transparent system.

The new government in Kyrgyzstan, which also hosts a Russian air base, has tried to remove opaque supply schemes which it says favoured the clan of former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, deposed in a popular uprising last April.

Chechen militant claims Russia airport attack

AFP, Moscow

The leader of Islamist militants in Russia's North Caucasus yesterday claimed the attack at Moscow's main airport that killed 36 people and issued a chilling warning of more suicides to come.

Doku Umarov, the head of a Chechnya-based rebel group that aims to enforce Islamic rule across the Northern Caucasus, made the claim in a video that was posted two weeks after the suicide bombing at Moscow Domodedovo airport.

"This special operation was carried out on my orders," said the bearded militant in a video posted on the Kavkaz Centre website which is the main channel for messages by North Caucasus rebels.

"God willing, these special operations will be carried out in the future," said the leader of the Caucasus Emirate rebel group.

"There is no doubt of this, as we will have



Doku Umarov

hundreds of brothers who will be ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of enforcing the word of Allah and to avenge the enemies of Allah," he said.

The bearded Umarov, who Russian special forces have repeatedly tried and failed to kill over the last few years, was shown wearing a black skullcap and khaki military fatigues, apparently speaking from inside a tent.

Umarov last year also claimed the suicide attacks on the Moscow metro in March carried out by female suicide bombers that killed 40 and wounded dozens during the morning rush hour.

He said the January 24 airport attack staged at the international arrivals hall was aimed at avenging Russia's crimes in the North Caucasus region and warned Prime Minister Vladimir Putin future attacks could be even deadlier.

AFGHAN BLASTS Nato soldier, policeman killed

AFP, Kabul

A Nato soldier and an Afghan policeman were killed in two separate blasts in Afghanistan yesterday, officials said.

The soldier died following a bomb attack in southern Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said, giving no further details.

The Afghan police officer was killed in Balkh province in northern Afghanistan when an improvised explosive device struck a police vehicle.

"One police has been killed and three others were injured," a local police spokesman said.

AUSTRALIA FLOOD MPs weep for disaster victims

AFP, Sydney

Australian lawmakers wept yesterday as they paid tribute to the tens of thousands of citizens whose lives have been rocked by floods, fires and cyclones, as authorities reined in a major blaze which gutted 68 homes.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard choked back tears as she recounted the nation's horror summer, marked by huge floods that killed 35 people in Queensland state, top-strength Cyclone Yasi and wildfires still raging on the west coast.

Fire crews yesterday managed to contain the inferno, which destroyed at least 68 homes and damaged 32 more as it tore through heavily-wooded areas on the southern outskirts of Perth, Australia's fourth-largest city.

"Firefighters are working to strengthen containment lines and mopping up in some sections," emergency officials said of the blaze at Roleystone, which was so fierce it caused a bridge to collapse.

The wildfires came just days after Cyclone Yasi ripped into Australia's northeast coast, wiping out sugar and banana crops and devastating hundreds of homes in Queensland state, which is still reeling from record floods.

Palestinians to hold local polls on July 9

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinian cabinet decided yesterday to hold local elections on July 9, in what will be the first time the people have gone to the polls since 2006, officials said.

"The cabinet decided during its meeting today to hold local elections on Saturday 9 July and charged the electoral commission with making the necessary preparations for it," government spokesman Ghassan Khatib told AFP, reading from an official statement.

Local polls were originally set for July 17, 2010 but postponed after the Islamic Hamas movement, which rules Gaza, said it would not participate.

At least 297 killed in Egypt protests Says HRW

AFP, Cairo

At least 297 people have been killed in protests against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak since January 28, Human Rights Watch said, adding that the real death toll is likely to be significantly higher.

Egypt researcher Heba Morayef said on Human Rights Watch's website that the US-based rights group had confirmed 232 deaths in Cairo, 52 in Alexandria and 13 in Suez.

The vast majority died on January 28 and 29 as a result of live gunfire, she said. On both days, riot police fought running battles with protesters around the country demanding Mubarak stand down.

"A significant proportion came as a result of rubber bullets fired at too close a range and tear gas canisters fired into the crowd at close range," Morayef said.

Human Rights Watch believes that hospital officials were instructed to downplay the overall number of deaths, Morayef said.

"The actual number of deaths will likely be significantly higher than 297, because our count is only based on key hospitals in three cities. We have only included numbers of dead that we were able to verify ourselves," she said.

Rival Koreas meet for talks to ease tension

APP, Seoul

North and South Korea struggled to settle differences yesterday in their first talks since the North's deadly shelling of a South Korean island last November, but agreed to keep talking for a second day.

Military officers from the two sides met at the border village of Panmunjom to prepare for a planned higher-level military meeting at a date to be fixed, but disagreements over the agenda kept them haggling well into the evening.

The November 23 bombardment of Yeonpyeong island near the disputed Yellow Sea border killed two marines and two civilians, outraging Seoul and briefly sparking fears of full-scale war.

The South also accuses the North of torpedoing a warship near the maritime border last March and killing 46 sailors, a charge Pyongyang denies.

Seoul's team was insisting that the upcoming meeting should discuss both

attacks, a defence ministry spokesman told AFP. The South wants the North at that meeting to apologise and punish those responsible.

The spokesman declined to confirm a Yonhap news agency report that the North "expressed its view" about the incidents and proposed a broad agenda on easing tensions.

Yonhap said the North also called for an end to cross-border leaflet launches by South Korean activists, and accused South Korean warships of violating its territorial waters.

The two delegations agreed to meet again on Wednesday, the spokesman said.

The South had said it saw yesterday's meeting -- in a building known as Peace House -- as an opportunity to test the sincerity of its neighbour's recent peace overtures.

After warning last year of nuclear war on the peninsula, Pyongyang abruptly changed tack in January and launched a series of appeals for dialogue.

Mob burns churches in Indonesia

AFP, Temanggung, Indonesia

Indonesian Muslims burned churches and battled police yesterday as the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation struggled with a wave of religious violence.

Two days after a Muslim lynch mob killed three members of a minority Islamic sect, crowds of furious Muslims set two churches alight and ransacked a third in the Central Java town of Temanggung, police said.

They were demanding the death penalty for Antonius Bawengan, 58, a Christian man who was sentenced to the maximum five years in jail for distributing leaflets insulting Islam.

"Today was the climax of the trial... The mob shouted that he should receive the death sentence or be handed over to the public," Central Java province police spokesman Djihartono told AFP.

The protesters chanted "kill, kill" outside the court and "burn, burn" as they set upon the churches, in an area of Java where Muslims and Christians normally mix peacefully. A Catholic school was also vandalised.

About 1,500 protesters threw stones at police, who responded with tear gas and warning shots. One police vehicle was set ablaze in the mayhem, which erupted inside the court and spilled into the streets.

The latest outbreak of religious violence in Indonesia -- often cited as a bastion of pluralism -- came as pressure mounted on the government to tackle extremism and demonstrate its oft-touted commitment to diversity.



Church personnel try to put out burning vehicles in the parking lot of the Christian Pentecostal Church in Temanggung in the Indonesian province of Central Java yesterday.