

Egypt Islamists rally in show of strength

AFP, Cairo

Tens of thousands packed Cairo's Tahrir Square yesterday as Islamists flexed their political muscle in perhaps Egypt's largest protest since a revolt overthrew president Hosni Mubarak in February.

Islamists from across the country flocked into the central square to defend what they called "Egypt's Islamic identity" and to demand that parliamentary elections take place as scheduled by the end of the year.

The rally, organised by hardline Salafite groups and the influential Muslim Brotherhood movement, came as tensions grow between secular activists and the military on the one hand, and Islamists on the other.

"The people demand the application of God's law," thousands chanted under the searing sun, many of them carrying umbrellas or pouring water on their heads to counter the heat.

The rally was officially to start after the Muslim noon prayer, but thousands had already made their way to the square overnight and by morning chants calling for an "Islamic state" rang across Tahrir.

Islamist groups have been organising the rally for weeks, sparking fears of clashes with secular anti-military protesters who have been camped out in the square since July 8.

After two days of meetings, the secular and Islamist groups agreed to try to put their differences aside and focus on the common goals in order to save the revolution that toppled Mubarak, organisers said.

On the podiums set up around the square, speakers called for unity and partnership, but the protesters chanted Islamist slogans.

Liberal activists such as Mohamed ElBaradei, the former UN nuclear watchdog chief turned anti-Mubarak dissident, want the military rulers to accept a declaration of guiding principles for a new constitution.

The Islamists fear that such a document, which the military has said it would be willing to accept, might threaten the second article in Egypt's old constitution, which says Islamic law is the main source of law.



Egyptian demonstrators rally in downtown Cairo's Tahrir square yesterday. Tens of thousands packed the square to show unity during a fragile transition from ousted president Hosni Mubarak's regime.

ROW WITH GOVT Turkey military chiefs quit

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's army chief-of-staff and the entire military command have resigned in a row with the government over promotions for generals held in an alleged anti-government plot, media reported yesterday.

General Isik Kosaner stepped down after several meetings in recent days with Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, ahead of a meeting of the army's high command which decides on promotions for senior officers.

As well as Kosaner, the commanders of the army, air force and navy also quit, NTV and CNN-Turk reported, which is unprecedented in Turkey, a Nato member.

50 killed in Congo shipwreck

AFP, Kinshasa

At least 50 people drowned and some 35 are reported missing after a boat accident on a river in the northwest of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Equateur province government said yesterday.

The vessel, which was wrecked late Wednesday, was carrying at least 200 passengers.

The large motorised barge, which was also carrying goods, collided during the night with another boat, which was empty, on the Tshuapa river, 115 kilometres east of the provincial capital Mbandaka, spokeswoman Rebecca Ebale Nguma said.

115 people have been rescued so far, said an official. Rescue workers searching for more bodies, she added.

Murdoch remains BskyB chairman

AFP, London

British pay-TV giant BskyB said yesterday that James Murdoch will remain chairman despite the phone-hacking row at main shareholder News Corp, as the broadcaster revealed a 23-per cent jump in profits.

The firm also announced a £750-million (\$1.2-billion, 854-million-euro) share buyback and hiked its shareholder dividend to calm the waters after the scandal forced Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. this month to scrap a takeover bid for BskyB.

The crisis had sparked calls for Rupert's son James to resign the chairmanship of BskyB, but the company's board gave him their unanimous support at a meeting late on Thursday.

"Following the withdrawal of the News Corporation proposal, the board will return to normal processes. James Murdoch remains chairman," BskyB said in an annual results statement yesterday.

Operating profits soared to £1.073 billion in the 12 months to June, compared with £872 million in the group's previous financial year, BskyB said in the statement. That was in line with market expectations.

BskyB, which broadcasts live English Premier League football and blockbuster movies, added that it now has 10.3 million household subscribers, a proportion of whom pay monthly fees to access its Internet broadband and telephone services.

The scandal erupted earlier this month when it emerged that the News of the World, News Corp.'s market-leading British Sunday tabloid newspaper, had hacked the voicemail messages of murdered 13-year-old schoolgirl Milly Dowler.



James Murdoch

AFRICA LAND BUY-UPS China rejects German claim

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday rejected claims by a German official that it has been buying up land in the drought-ravaged Horn of Africa, saying the allegations are "completely unfounded" and have "ulterior motives".

Germany's Africa policy coordinator Guenter Nooke said on Thursday that China has been involved in "large-scale land purchases" which have contributed to the devastating drought affecting the region.

"China has never had plans to buy land overseas and China has never purchased land in Africa," the foreign ministry said in a statement sent to AFP.

China has sent \$14 million worth of food aid to drought-stricken countries in the Horn of Africa, he added.

All south Somalia slipping into famine: UN

REUTERS, Geneva

The whole of drought- and conflict-wracked southern Somalia is heading into famine as the Horn of Africa food crisis deepens, the United Nations said yesterday.

In a report for countries sending aid, the UN's umbrella humanitarian agency OCHA said the "crisis in southern Somalia is expected to continue to worsen through 2011, with all areas of the south slipping into famine."

Appealing for a further \$1.4 billion "to provide life-saving assistance to more than 12 million people" across the four countries of the Horn, OCHA said the overall emergency was likely to continue growing for at least 3-4 months.

The UN declared a famine in two regions of southern Somalia -- where 3.7 million people are going hungry -- on July 20 and since then tens of thousands of Somalis have flooded into northern Kenya.

The situation was severe right across the Horn, in Somalia, northern Kenya, Djibouti and Ethiopia, OCHA said. Food shortages were expected to reach crisis levels in refugee areas in August and September, according to the report.

"The areas of highest concern for the coming six months have been identified as southern and central Somalia, the north, south and east of Ethiopia, north-eastern and south-eastern Kenya, and the refugee camps in Djibouti, Kenya and Ethiopia."

The report said the situation in the worst affected areas of Ethiopia and Kenya were expected to ease from emergency to crisis levels towards the end of this year.

But the deterioration in southern Somalia was likely "given the very high levels of both severe malnutrition and under-five mortality in combination with worsening pastoral conditions, a continued increase in local cereal prices, and a below-average harvest."

The crisis was intensified, it said, by fighting in Somalia -- much of which is controlled by Islamist Al-Shabaab militias who have been preventing some aid agencies bringing in supplies.

"If access for humanitarian aid and workers to worst-affected areas of Somalia does not improve, continued flows of refugees to the Kenyan and Ethiopian borders can be expected," OCHA said.

NEWS IN brief

Ex-Tunisian president Ben Ali given 16 years for corruption

AFP, Tunis

A court sentenced Tunisia's exiled former leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to 16 years in prison Thursday for corruption and property fraud, in the latest sentence handed to the ex-president.

Ben Ali, who fled to Saudi Arabia last January after a popular revolt against his 23-year rule, has already been sentenced in his absence to a total of more than 50 years in two separate trials.

Hariri UN tribunal confirms Hezbollah suspects' names

AFP, The Hague

The UN-backed tribunal investigating the 2005 death of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri yesterday confirmed the names of four Hezbollah suspects indicted in the case and the charges against them.

Pre-trial judge Daniel Fransen ordered confidentiality around the charges against Salim Ayyash, 47, Mustafa Badreddine, 50, Hussein Anaissi, 37 and Assad Sabra, 34, he dropped.

S Korea lodges protest with Japan in islands row

AFP, Seoul

South Korea summoned the Japanese ambassador yesterday to protest over a planned visit by four Tokyo lawmakers to a location near islands claimed by both countries, an official said.

Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Jae-Shin told envoy Masatoshi Muto that authorities would turn the four legislators back when they arrive at Seoul's Gimpo airport, Yonhap news agency quoted a foreign ministry official as saying.

Ethnic Serbs blockade Nato troops in north Kosovo

REUTERS, Pristina/Belgrade

Ethnic Serbs from Kosovo's north said yesterday they had blockaded Nato troops who took control of border posts with Serbia this week to halt violence provoked by a customs dispute with Belgrade.

Nato said it was negotiating with the ethnic Serbs to get the roadblocks removed as it tries to ease tensions over the row between Kosovo, which is 90 per cent ethnic Albanian, and Serbia which refuses to recognise independence of its former province.



Relatives of dead miners react at Sukhodolskaya-Vostochnaya coal mine in Lugansk region yesterday. Twenty miners died and another 17 were missing yesterday after an explosion in the coal mine in eastern Ukraine known to be dangerous due to large methane build-ups, officials said.

US holds nuke talks with North Korea Presses for disarmament

AFP, United Nations

The United States pressed North Korea to take "concrete and irreversible" steps to give up its nuclear arsenal Thursday as the two held talks on how to improve hostile relations.

The US State Department said the first of two days of meetings in New York had been "serious and businesslike." North Korea's representative also called the atmosphere "constructive."

While the United States has stressed that North Korea must make moves to scrap its nuclear weapons if six decades of tensions are to be ended, it was not known whether North Korea made any specific demands.

The US special envoy on North Korea, Stephen Bosworth, and the North's first vice foreign minister Kim Kye-Gwan held about 4.5 hours of talks at the US mission to the United Nations.

"The atmosphere was good, the meeting was constructive and interesting. We exchanged views on general issues," Kim said during a break.

For its part, the US State Department hailed the discussions as "serious and businesslike."

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said the talks were "exploratory" to determine whether North Korea is ready to carry out a 2005 accord and take "concrete and irreversible steps toward denuclearization."

North Korea agreed in principle at the talks in 2005 to scrap its weapons program, but staged nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009.



Humala sworn in as Peru's president

AFP, Lima

Leftist former army officer Ollanta Humala was sworn in Thursday as president of Peru, aiming to confront the high poverty plaguing his Andean nation despite its solid economic growth.

The new government would have "a market economy open to the world, with an emphasis on social integration," Humala said.

Humala became Peru's first leftist president in almost four decades in a ceremony in Congress attended by a dozen Latin American heads of state.

Norway buries victims as police quizzes gunman

AFP, Oslo

Norway was burying yesterday the first victims of the twin attacks that killed 76 people exactly one week before, as police questioned the killer for a second time.

Police said prosecutors had appointed two psychiatrists to assess the mental health of Anders Behring Breivik, 32, and determine if he is criminally responsible.

"The bullets hit our young, but they also struck an entire nation," Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg said at a commemoration ceremony in the capital, calling the massacre "an attack on democracy."

Flags flew at half-mast across the country of five million.

Norway's Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere was attending the funeral of Bano Rashid, who was originally from Kurdistan, in the town of Nesodden, near the capital.

Rashid, a Labour Party youth activist among the 68 killed on the island of Utoeya as they attended a party summer camp, had written frequently about the evils of racism and discrimination.

Another shooting victim, 19-year-old Ismail Haji Ahmed, was being buried at Hamar, in Norway's south-west, TV2 reported.

Meanwhile his lawyer said the killer behind Norway's July 22 attacks was planning to hit other targets.

"Things happened that day, which I don't want to go into (here), which meant events unfolded differently from what he had planned," Lippestad added.

The far-right extremist said in a 1,500-word tract published on the Internet that he was trying to change the policies of western European governments who were encouraging Muslim immigration.

Meanwhile, an Englishman cited by Behring Breivik as his "mentor" yesterday denounced the Norwegian's actions as "pure evil" that "did not equate to anything I am involved in."

Paul Ray, 35-year-old leader of a "Knights Templar" movement inspired by medieval crusaders against Islam, told The Times of London: "I could never use what he has done to further my own beliefs."

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