

Finally, Saleh leaves Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

President Ali Abdullah Saleh left Yemen yesterday for neighbouring Oman from where he will go to the United States for treatment, hours after making a farewell speech asking the people to forgive him.

Saleh headed for Oman "where he will spend a few days before going to the United States," Abdulhafiz al-Nahari, spokesman for Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) party, told reporters.

The trip "is for medical treatment and is not official," Nahari said.

In a televised farewell speech delivered just hours before he left, Saleh said he will head to the United States for medical treatment and asked Yemenis for forgiveness.

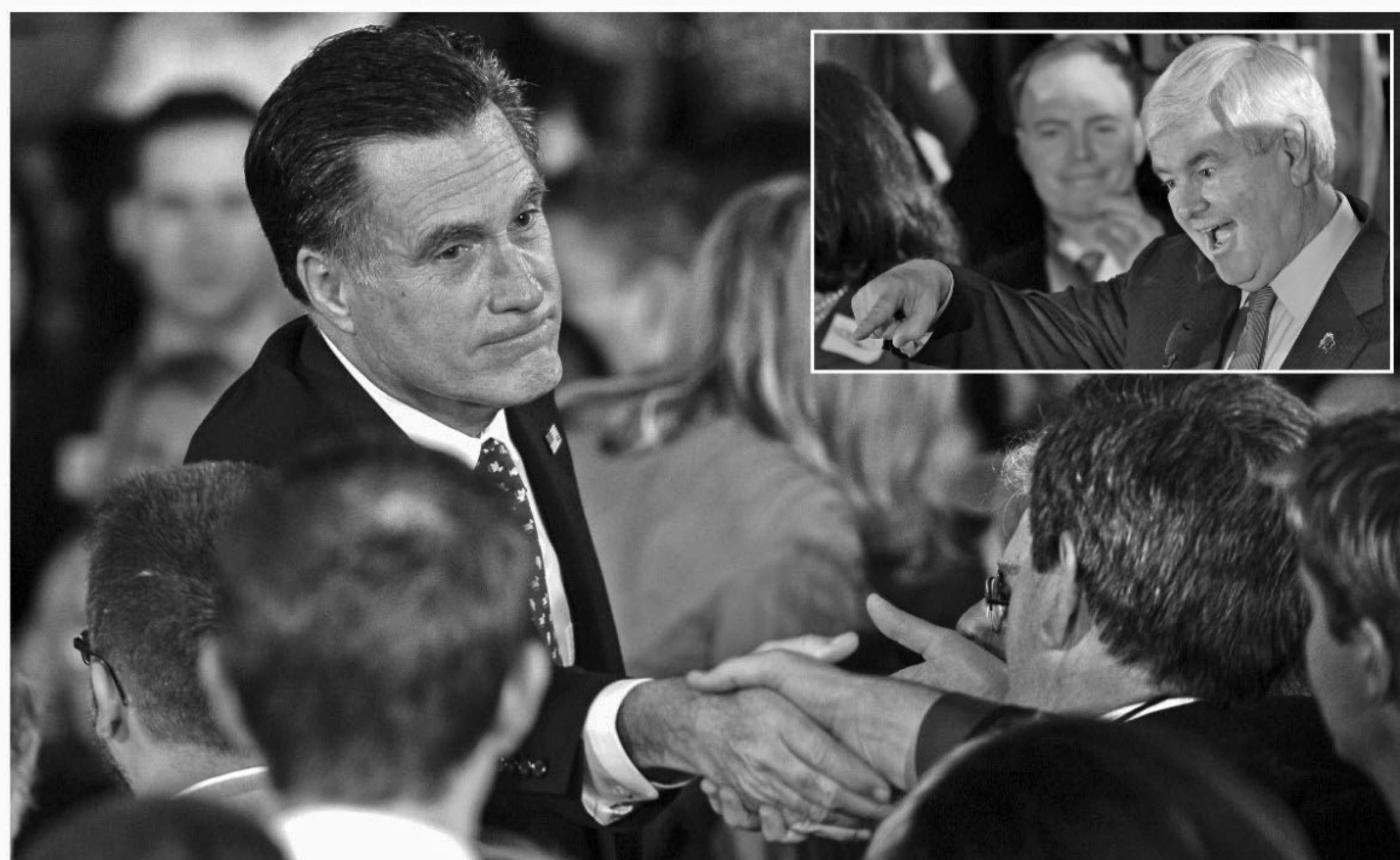
"I will go to the United States for treatment and will then return as head of the GPC party," Saleh said.

"I ask for forgiveness from all my people, men and women, for any shortcomings during my 33-year-long rule," he added. A senior GPC official, Sultan al-Barakani, said last week that Saleh would travel abroad for treatment and return after that.

The White House and the US State Department declined to comment yesterday.

His departure came a day after parliament adopted a law giving Saleh "complete" immunity from prosecution in return for stepping down under a transition deal brokered by the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council.

The law, which also grants limited immunity to his aides, has drawn wide condemnation from young protesters, who have seen hundreds of their compatriots killed by Saleh's security forces and loyalists since the uprising began in January 2011.



Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney greets supporters after addressing a primary election night rally in Columbia, South Carolina on Saturday and victorious Newt Gingrich, inset, waves at supporters after the poll result.

Romney to release tax returns

BBC ONLINE

US Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney has said he will release recent tax returns today after his defeat to Gingrich in South Carolina primary.

Romney, the early favourite in primary elections, appeared embarrassed during the South Carolina campaign by the issue of how much tax he paid.

Last week he said he in effect paid 15%, less than most working Americans.

The candidate winning South Carolina has gone on to win the Republican nomination in each election since 1980.

Speaking on Fox News Sunday, Romney said the question of tax had become a distraction for his campaign, and he wanted to refocus on the main issues.

"I will release my tax returns for 2010, which is the last returns which were completed, on Tuesday of this week," he said.

Libya ruling council deputy quits

REUTERS, Benghazi

The deputy head of Libya's ruling National Transitional Council (NTC) said yesterday he was resigning after a series of protests against the new government which the country's leader warned could drag Libya into a "bottomless pit."

Late on Saturday, a crowd demanding the government's resignation smashed windows and forced their way into the NTC's local headquarters in Benghazi, in the most serious show of anger at the new authorities since Muammar Gaddafi was ousted.

Abdel Hafiz Ghoga, vice-president of the NTC and one of the council's highest-profile members, was the target of some of the protesters' criticism. He said he was quitting to try to limit the damage to the council.

"My resignation is for the benefit of the nation and is required at this stage," Ghoga told Al Jazeera television.

He was jostled by an angry crowd of stu-



Abdel Jalil

Hafiz Ghoga

dents when he visited a university in Benghazi on Thursday. He had to be pulled away to safety.

Meanwhile, NTC chief Mustafa Abdel Jalil, speaking in Benghazi earlier yesterday, appealed to the protesters to be more patient.

"We are going through a political movement that can take the country to a bottomless pit," he said. "There is something behind these protests that is not for the good of the country."

"The people have not given the government enough time and the government does not have enough money. Maybe there are delays, but the government has only been working for two months. Give them a chance, at least two months."

The protests in Benghazi, in eastern Libya, are particularly troubling for the NTC because the city was the birthplace of the revolt against Gaddafi's 42-year rule. It was the site of the NTC's headquarters during the revolt.

Gingrich wins South Carolina primary

Reshapes Republican race to White House; Romney vows fightback

AFP, Columbia

Republican White House hopeful Newt Gingrich walloped rival and longtime frontrunner Mitt Romney in South Carolina's primary, dramatically reshaping the topsy-turvy race.

The former House speaker, repeatedly declared politically dead over the past year, surged Saturday to a shock victory in the battle to become the party's standard-bearer against Democratic President Barack Obama in November 6 elections.

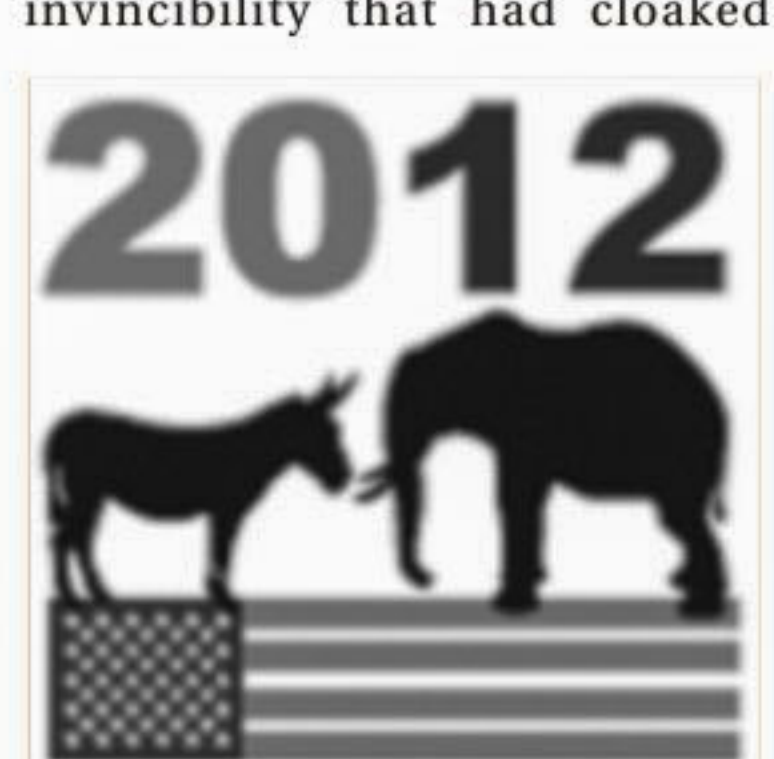
With 100 percent of the precincts counted, Gingrich had captured 40.4 percent of the vote, compared to 27.9 percent for Romney.

After a tussle for third place in South Carolina, Santorum was at 17 percent with libertarian congressman Ron Paul on 13 percent.

Gingrich triumphantly cast his insurgent win here as a blow delivered by Americans "who feel that the

elites in Washington and New York have no understanding, no care, no concern, no reliability and in fact do not represent them at all."

The result destroyed the aura of invincibility that had cloaked



Romney, the former Massachusetts governor and had made him the man to beat in a race that now moves to Florida for its primary on January 31.

"We need to build on this victory

by going to Florida. I need your help," Gingrich told cheering supporters, asking supporters to help him bridge the fundraising chasm separating him from Romney's potent campaign machine.

"This race is getting to be even more interesting," Romney told cheering supporters packed into a room dressed up as though for a victory rally before congratulating Gingrich for "a hard-fought campaign."

"I don't shrink from competition. I embrace it," added the multi-millionaire investor, who is leading in the Florida opinion polls.

South Carolina marked Gingrich's first triumph after Christian conservative former senator Rick Santorum squeaked out a victory in Iowa and Romney romped home in New Hampshire, dividing up the electoral spoils and bragging rights.

With three winners in first three contests, the Republican fight's "epicenter" is now vote-rich Florida,

Susan MacManus, professor of political science at the University of South Florida, told AFP.

Voters said they had chosen Gingrich over Romney because of the former speaker's perceived toughness that they expect him to demonstrate in the contest against President Obama.

"It's time for a bulldog president," said Rema Thomas, 60, who lives in the town of Chapin and decided to vote for Gingrich after watching the two South Carolina debates. "Grab them by the pant leg and don't let go until you draw blood. That's Newt."

But Romney still has a good chance of winning the long race.

"Beyond the media impact, and some momentum, the fundamentals -- money, organization, and endorsements signalling establishment support -- still favour Romney," said Matt Dickinson, a political scientist at elite Middlebury College.

NIGERIA UNREST

Death toll rises to 178

REUTERS, Kano

Gun and bomb attacks by Islamist insurgents in the northern Nigerian city of Kano last week killed at least 178 people, a hospital doctor said yesterday, underscoring the daunting challenge President Goodluck Jonathan now faces to prevent his country sliding further into chaos.

A coordinated series of bomb blasts and shooting sprees mostly targeting police stations on Friday sent panicked residents of Nigeria's second biggest city of more than 10 million people running for cover.

The scale of the carnage makes this by far the deadliest strike claimed by Boko Haram, a shadowy Islamist sect that started out as a clerical movement opposed to western education but has become the biggest security menace facing Africa's top oil producer.

The streets were quiet yesterday in Kano. Churches, which would usually be filled with worshippers on Sunday in the religiously mixed city, were largely empty.

Meanwhile, a further 10 people were killed on Sunday in Bauchi state, which neighbours Kano, when police fought gunmen attempting to rob a bank, the police said. Boko Haram robbed several banks last year to fund its insurgency.

The government has announced a dusk-to-dawn curfew in Kano.

Boko Haram has been blamed for killing hundreds of people in increasingly sophisticated bombings and shootings, mostly targeting security forces, establishment figures and more recently Christians, in country of 160 million people split roughly evenly between them and Muslims.



In this photograph, child rights activists hand over to a police woman a box full of sandals as a statement of support for a 15-year-old Indonesian boy who was arrested and beaten by police for stealing an officer's worn-out sandals. In recent weeks Indonesians frustrated with a corrupt legal system and reports of children arrested for petty crimes -- some of them abused by police -- have been mocking their law enforcers with flowers, coins and used footwear. PHOTO: AFP

Arabs to extend Syria mission

Saudi blames regime, quits mission

AGENCIES

The Arab League was set to extend its mission in Syria for another month yesterday despite Saudi Arabia said Riyadh was pulling its observers from the widely criticised Arab League observer mission.

Saudi Arabia "is withdrawing from the mission because the Syrian government has not respected any of the clauses" in the Arab plan aimed at ending the crisis there, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said.

He also urged Arab nations to "seriously respect the decisions taken by the council of the Arab League to impose sanctions on Syria, in order to cause it to respect its commitments" to stop the violence.

However League ministers meeting in Cairo are also expected to approve an increase in the number of observers.

The 165-strong mission expired on

Thursday, but reports of political violence across the country continue.

The Syrian government is expected to agree to the league's extension.

The league's foreign ministers are meeting in Cairo to discuss the conclusions of Syria mission chief Gen Mohammed al-Dabi.

The opposition Syrian National Council has formally asked the league to refer the crisis to the UN Security Council.

Meanwhile, Syrian rebels said that army deserters had briefly taken control of much of the Damascus suburb of Douma on Saturday night after fierce fighting with the security services.

The rebels later decided to withdraw for fear of reprisal raids from the government forces, the group said, adding that no deserters or government troops were present in Douma by Saturday night, only a basic police force.

In a separate development, at least 14

people died after a van carrying prisoners was blown up on a road in north-west Syria on Saturday, reports say.

The official Sana news agency said the police van was attacked by an "armed group" on the Idlib-Ariha highway.

Opposition groups confirmed the attack but did not say who carried it out.

Activists said armed rebels then stormed the state hospital and found another 60 bodies in the mortuary, some of them showing signs of torture.

Rights activists also said 30 unidentified corpses had been discovered at the National Hospital in Idlib.

The UN says that more than 5,000 have died since protests against President Bashar al-Assad erupted last March.

The government in Damascus says that some 2,000 members of the security forces have also been killed combating "armed gangs and terrorists".

NEOShield to assess Earth defence

BBC ONLINE

NEOShield is a new international project that will assess the threat posed by Near Earth Objects (NEO) and look at the best possible solutions for dealing with a big asteroid or comet on a collision path with our planet.

The effort is being led from the German space agency's (DLR) Institute of Planetary Research in Berlin, and had its kick-off meeting this week.

It will draw on expertise from across Europe, Russia and the US.

It's a major EU-funded initiative that will pull together all the latest science, initiate a fair few laboratory experiments and new modelling work, and then try to come to some definitive positions.

Industrial partners, which include the German, British and French divisions of the big Astrium space company, will consider the engineering architecture required to deflect one of these bodies out of our path.

Should we kick it, try to tug it, or even blast it off its trajectory?

"We're going to collate all the scientific information with a view to mitigation," explains project leader Prof Alan Harris at DLR.

"What do you need to know about an asteroid in order to be able to change its course - to deflect it from a catastrophic course with the Earth?"

It's likely that NEOShield will, at the end of its three-and-a-half-year study period, propose to the politicians that they launch a mission to demonstrate the necessary technology.

The NEO threat may seem rather distant, but the geological and observational records tell us it is real.

The European Space Agency designed - but never launched - the Don Quijote mission

On average, an object about the size of car will enter the Earth's atmosphere once a year, producing a spectacular fireball in the sky.

About every 2,000 years or so, an object the size of a football field will impact the Earth, causing significant local damage.



Mubarak still president!

AFP, Cairo

Hosni Mubarak is still president of Egypt as he never signed a resignation letter, his lawyer asserted in court yesterday as he began wrapping up the defence case in the trial of the ousted strongman.

"Mubarak did not write a letter of resignation," Farid al-Deeb told the court.

"The document was signed by Omar Suleiman," Egypt's former spy chief who was appointed by Mubarak as vice president during a popular uprising last year demanding that the veteran leader quit.

As a result, Deeb said, the Cairo criminal court is not competent to try Mubarak, who should be referred to a "special tribunal."

Mubarak stepped down on February 11 last year, pushed out of power after an 18-day revolt against his regime.

He has been on trial since August charged over the deaths of hundreds of protesters killed during the uprising. Being tried with him are his former interior minister and six security officials.

The prosecution wants Mubarak to hang for the killings.

Mubarak is also facing charges of corruption along with his sons Gamal and Alaa in a separate trial in the same court.

The defence began on Tuesday a five-day challenge and is due to wrap up the case concerning Mubarak and his sons later yesterday.