

DESPERATE BID TO END CRISIS Egypt assembly votes on new constitution

AGENCIES

An assembly charged with writing Egypt's new constitution began voting on its final draft yesterday, a process President Mohamed Morsi hopes will help to end a crisis which erupted when the Islamist gave himself sweeping new powers.

In one of its first steps, the constituent assembly voted to keep sharia, or Islamic law, as the main source of legislation.

This is unchanged from the previous constitution under Hosni Mubarak, who was toppled as president last year.

Morsi's decree last week halting court challenges to his decisions, which provoked protests and violence across the country, will lapse if Egyptians approve the new constitution.

Speedy completion of the draft would allow a



referendum to be held as soon as mid-December but Morsi's opponents have attacked the attempt to rush the process.

Morsi, had been expected to speak at 7:00pm but a presidential official said he could appear later in an interview with state television.

Two people have been killed and hundreds injured in the protests since last Thursday's decree, which deepened the divide between the newly-empowered Islamists and their opponents.

Once the assembly backs the draft it will go to Morsi for approval, a step expected at the weekend. He must then call the referendum within 15 days. If Egyptians approve the constitution, legislative powers will pass straight from Morsi to the upper house of parliament, in line with an article in the new constitution, assembly members said.

Obama hosts Romney for lunch

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama and erstwhile Republican opponent Mitt Romney held a private lunch yesterday at the White House as they tried to move on from a bitterly personal election campaign that divided America.

In their first encounter since the election, the former foes sat down alone in the president's private dining room off the Oval Office, which, until his defeat on November 6, Romney had envisioned taking over in January.

The meeting was closed to the press, and Romney, now stripped of his Secret Service detail, arrived and left an hour and twenty minutes later, in a large black Lincoln car, from a side door of the West Wing, avoiding reporters.

The encounter was likely a testing personal moment for the former Massachusetts governor, who was convinced even on election day that he would be the 45th US president, but was outwitted by Obama's political machine.

Neither Romney nor Obama appeared to have any warmth or even great respect for one another, in a campaign that flared into open dislike during their contentious three presidential debates last month.

Blasts kill 40 in Iraq

AFP, Hilla

Bombs mainly targeting Shia Muslims and security forces in Iraq yesterday killed 40 people and wounded 124 others in the deadliest day of violence to hit the country in more than two months.

The attacks, the worst since 76 people were killed on September 9, included the second series of bombings against Shias this week, after three car bombs exploded near their places of worship in Baghdad on Tuesday, killing a dozen and wounding scores more.

Embattled Indian govt agrees to vote on FDI

AFP, New Delhi

India's government has conceded to opposition pressure to allow lawmakers a vote on allowing foreign supermarkets in the country, in a bid to end a parliamentary deadlock that has stalled key reforms.

The announcement to hold the non-binding vote comes as the opposition protested against the policy, describing it as a sell-out to foreign chains such as Walmart that could force small family-owned stores to shut.

"I have admitted the motion and will allow discussion on the subject. The date and time... will be decided," Speaker Meira Kumar told the lower house of parliament. "Now onwards I hope the house will run smoothly."

Although the vote will not affect the government's ability to enact the policy,

Premier Singh would suffer a major public setback if his policy fails to win enough support from lawmakers.

Sushma Swaraj, leader of the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose lawmakers have led the noisy disruptions, welcomed the decision.

"I assure you the house will function peacefully," she added.

Singh said on Tuesday he was confident of winning the vote in parliament over an issue which is seen as a test of strength of the ruling Congress party ahead of general elections in 2014.

The reforms have triggered widespread opposition but the government and many industry leaders argue that a modern retail system would improve value and choice for consumers, create jobs and enable farmers to reduce wastage.

POLITICAL STANDOFF

Nepal's president extends deadline

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's president yesterday gave the restive nation's warring political factions six more days to form a national unity government to take Nepal into parliamentary elections next year.

The decision came after leaders of all the main parties had failed to strike a deal on the political make-up of a proposed new cabinet, missing a 4:00pm deadline despite a final day of frantic negotiations.

"The president has given us six more days and we will try to agree in that given time," Jhalanath Khanal, chairman of the opposition Unified Marxist Leninists (UML) said after meeting the president with the other party

leaders. Nepal has been run by a caretaker Maoist-led government since the collapse in May of an interim assembly that had failed in its main task of drawing up a new constitution following a 10-year civil war that ended in 2006.

The impoverished Himalayan nation, tucked between giant China and India, has been plagued by instability since the Maoist insurgency ended and the monarchy was abolished in 2008.

Talks have been stalled over who should lead the new administration, with the opposition blocs publicly rejecting the idea of a Bhattarai-led national unity government and the premier refusing to step aside.

NEWS IN brief

'Assange has lung trouble'

AFP, Quito

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who has been holed up at Ecuador's London embassy for five months, has a lung condition that could get worse, the South American country's envoy to Britain said Wednesday.

"He has a chronic lung condition that could worsen at any time," Ambassador Ana Albán told

BP banned from US govt contracts

AFP, Washington

British oil giant BP was temporarily banned from winning new US government contracts Wednesday after agreeing to plead guilty to criminal charges in the deadly 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster.

Two weeks after BP agreed to pay \$4.5 billion to settle criminal charges in the case.

The blowout and sinking of the Deepwater Horizon drilling platform left 11 people dead and spewed some 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico over 87 days, blackening beaches in five states.

War Crimes: Kosovo ex-PM acquitted

AFP, The Hague

A UN war crimes court yesterday acquitted Kosovo's ex-prime minister Ramush Haradinaj of murder and torture during the 1990s war of independence, enraged Belgrade with the second such acquittal in two weeks.

More than 10,000 people died in the fighting which marked one of the darkest chapters of the

Myanmar breaks up mine protest

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar riot police fired water cannon and tear gas at protesters against a Chinese-backed copper mine yesterday, injuring dozens in a crackdown hours before Aung San Suu Kyi visited the area.

Demonstrators, who say farmers have been evicted to make way for the mine, recounted being shaken from their sleep in the early hours of the morning as police moved in to disperse them.

Concorde killing verdict quashed

AFP, Versailles

A French court yesterday cleared Continental Airlines of any crime over the July 2000 crash of an Air France Concorde but upheld a ruling that the US airline bore civil responsibility for the disaster.

The disaster which left 113 people dead and eventually led to Concorde being taken out of service.

Two tickets share \$550m US jackpot

BBC Online

Two winning tickets - bought in Arizona and Missouri - share a \$550m US Powerball lottery jackpot, the second-biggest US prize ever, organisers said yesterday.

No-one has yet come forward to claim the prize. Statisticians calculated that a player had more chance of becoming US president, dying from a bee sting or getting struck by lightning than hitting the jackpot.

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