

Split Egypt set for referendum

AFP, Cairo

A divided Egypt is being called to vote in a referendum tomorrow on a new constitution that the secular opposition fears will be used by President Mohamed Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood to usher in Islamist interpretation of laws.

Protests over the draft charter, and over near-absolute powers that Morsi gave himself for two weeks to push it through, have failed to sway the president from his path.

The country's powerful army, which ruled for 16 months following the ouster of president Hosni Mubarak early last year, has tried in vain to bring both sides together for talks to calm the crisis.

Fears of violence remain after violent clashes in Cairo last week in which eight people were killed and more than 600 injured.

Morsi has ordered the referendum to be split over two consecutive Saturdays because many judges are refusing to monitor voting.

The opposition National Salvation Front on Wednesday said it was urging its supporters to vote "no" -- but also said it could call a last-minute boycott if the referendum was not brought back to just one day of voting, and if judges and independent observers did not monitor every polling station.

Morsi has ordered the army to secure state institutions, giving it powers of arrest until the referendum result is known.

Regime losing control of Syria Says Russia; minister wounded as blasts, attacks intensify around capital

AFP, Damascus

A car bomb killed 16 people outside the Syrian capital yesterday hours after a bombing wounded the interior minister as Damascus ally Moscow acknowledged the regime may lose the fight against rebels.

Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said yesterday that the Assad regime is losing "more and more" control of Syria after 21 months of conflict.

"As for preparing for victory by the opposition, this, of course, cannot be excluded," Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov was quoted as saying by the ITAR-TASS news agency.

"You need to look the facts in the eyes -- the government regime is losing more and more control over a large part of the country's territory," he said.

His comments appear to be the first time that a senior Russian official has explicitly acknowledged that the opposition could defeat Assad and take power in Syria.

Russia has so far defiantly refused to turn against Assad's regime despite the conflict that according to rights groups has killed 42,000 people since March last year.

Meanwhile, the latest bombing struck outside an army housing complex and near an elementary school, and children made up seven of the

SYRIA CIVIL WAR



Scud missiles

The attacks so near the capital, coming on top of the rebels' seizure of key bases in recent weeks that have given them control of large swathes of the northwest and the east.

The rebels' capture of the Sheikh Suleiman base on Monday gave them full control of a belt of territory running from the outskirts of second city Aleppo to the Turkish border.

Late last month they made a major push up the Euphrates valley, giving them control of territory in the east from the Iraqi border to the outskirts of the provincial capital of Deir Ezzor.

dead and many of the 23 wounded, state media and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported.

It followed a triple bomb attack on the interior ministry on Wednesday that killed at least five people and put Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim al-Shaar in hospital with a shoulder injury sustained when his office ceiling collapsed, a security source told AFP.

It is the second time Shaar has been wounded in an attack.

He narrowly escaped being killed in a spectacular July 18 bombing that claimed the lives of four other top security officials, including the defence minister and President Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law.

The Observatory said 121 were killed nationwide on Wednesday, including 57 civilians.

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Syria used Scuds against rebels: US

AFP, Damascus

The Syrian regime has fired Scud missiles at rebel forces trying to oust Bashar al-Assad, a US official said Wednesday, after Arab and Western states recognised the opposition bloc as the sole representative there.

"Scuds landed within Syria," the official told AFP. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said "we're seeing missiles employed now" but she refused to divulge intelligence on what type of missile.

But the US official speaking later said he could confirm a New York Times story that the regime was unleashing Scuds.



PHOTO: AFP

Deputies of the opposition fight with deputies of the majority for a second time in two days, during the second session of the newly elected Ukrainian parliament in Kiev yesterday. Ukraine's parliament has seen several physical confrontations in recent years amid bitter confrontation between opposition and pro-government camps.

Millions vote in test for Modi's PM ambitions

AFP, Ahmedabad

Millions voted yesterday in India's Gujarat state where Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi is seeking a big win to spur his prime ministerial ambitions, 10 years after anti-Muslim riots on his watch.

Crowds thronged polling stations in the first of two rounds of voting in the western state, one of India's fastest developing regions that has been run since 2001 by chief minister Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Polling officials said over 10 million people out of the 38-million-strong electorate had cast their ballots in the first seven hours, amid reports that many more were still queuing up at voting centres.

Though he has never declared his ambition to be prime minister, his desire for the top spot in his party is an open secret and



he is widely thought to be angling to lead the BJP into national elections due in 2014.

Modi's links to some of the worst sectarian violence in post-independence India make him a hate-figure for many Muslims and secularists.

His main rival in Gujarat is the left-leaning Congress party, which runs the federal government and is dominated by the Gandhi dynasty which has run India for most of its post-independence history.

The final phase of the balloting is scheduled for December 17, with counting to take place three days later.

On the campaign trail, Modi has targeted the corruption-plagued federal government in Delhi and the heads of the ruling Congress party, particularly the Italian-born leader Sonia Gandhi, who he portrays as out-of-touch and foreign.

Ex-Thai PM charged with murder

AFP, Bangkok

Former Thai prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva was charged with murder yesterday, his party said, over a civilian's death during a crackdown on anti-government rallies two years ago.

Abhisit and his then-deputy Suthep Thaugsuban were formally charged at Bangkok's Department of Special Investigation (DSI), making them the first officials to face a court over Thailand's worst political violence in decades.

About 90 people died and nearly 1,900 were wounded in a series of street clashes in 2010.

NORTH KOREA ROCKET LAUNCH China defies UN sanctions call

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday resisted US-led pressure to bring its ally North Korea to heel for launching a long-range rocket, arguing that any response from the United Nations should be "prudent" and measured.

The United States demanded further action from China -- Pyongyang's foremost patron -- and US allies pressed for stronger sanctions, after the UN Security Council condemned North Korea for carrying out Wednesday's banned launch.

But foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei told reporters that China believes any UN response "should be prudent, appropriate and conducive to peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and avoid the escalation of the situation".

North Korea says it placed a satellite in orbit for peaceful research, but critics say the launch amounted to a banned ballistic missile test that marked a major advance for the communist state's nuclear weapons programme.

Hong reaffirmed that China "regrets" the rocket launch, avoiding much stronger language of condemnation used by the United States, South Korea and Japan among others.

Mojaheed was seen

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witness in the case against Mojaheed, told the International Crimes Tribunal-2.

Earlier, eighth prosecution witness in the case Lutfar Rahman, a neighbour of Munnu, testified that Mojaheed along with others had raided Munnu's house during the Liberation War. The raiders had detained Munnu's brother Nannu, as they could not find him.

The three-member tribunal headed by Justice ATM Fazle Kabir with members Justice Obaidul Hassan and Judge M Shahinur Islam recorded Habibul's testimony.

A 64-year-old retired government official, Habibul, said after the crackdown on March 25, 1971, he and some stu-

dents and army personnel had taken part in a training to fight the occupation army.

"I used to conduct the PT [Physical Training] as I was in Scout. The training continued until April," said Habibul, adding that he left his house in Faridpur town after the Pakistani occupation army had entered there on April 21, 1971.

Three days later, he took shelter on the outskirts of the town, but returned home after a few days, said Habibul.

He said he along with friends had decided to foil the programme the occupation army had chalked out marking the Pakistan Day on August 14, 1971. But the army had raided his house on the programme day.

Habibul said when he

was escaping Razakar Jahangir tried to catch him but failed, as Habibul had jumped into a water body knocking Jahangir down. The witness said during the time he might have seen Mojaheed in the army jeep.

Although he could escape the detention, the Pakistani army had picked up his brother Sirajul Haque Nannu and tortured him, said the witness, adding that his brother was released after his mother's humble plea.

Defence counsel Gazi MH Tamim cross-examined the witness. He could ask only four questions before the case proceeding was adjourned until December 17 upon his time petition.

QUADER MOLLAH'S CASE

The sixth and last defence

witness in the case against another Jamaat leader Abdul Quader Mollah testified before the tribunal yesterday.

Witness AIM Lokman, who was the then Imam of Shahidullah Hall of Dhaka University, was acquainted with Quader Mollah, a then residential student of the hall. Mollah had left the campus for home three to four days after the historic March 7 speech by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Mollah had returned to the dormitory perhaps in the last part of 1972 or in early 1973, said the witness, adding that Mollah had told him that he was staying at home during the time.

The tribunal fixed December 17 for recording arguments.

9/11 TRIAL US to keep secret torture testimony

AFP, Washington

A US military judge ordered Wednesday that testimony from defendants accused of taking part in the September 11 attacks describing their torture and secret imprisonment must be kept secret.

Judge James Pohl released his ruling on his military tribunal's website, agreeing with a request from the US government that the testimony should be kept secret from the public and media for reasons of national security.

Human rights groups and media organizations has challenged the so-called "40-second rule" which allows the authority to delay live telecast of the trial proceedings.

NEWS IN brief

Philippines storm toll tops 900

AFP, Manila

The death toll from the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines this year has climbed above 900, with hundreds still missing, the government said yesterday.

Typhoon Bopha killed 902 people mostly on the southern island of Mindanao, where floods and landslides caused major damage in nearly 2,000 villages on December 4, the civil defence office said.

A total of 615 people remain missing, it said.

Global child trafficking rising: UN

AFP, Vienna

Children -- most of them girls -- now make up 27 percent of all human trafficking cases, marking an alarming increase in recent years, a UN agency said Wednesday.

The majority of trafficked persons are women, accounting for 55 to 60 per cent of victims detected globally. Girls under 18 made up two thirds of all trafficked children and now constitute 15-20 per cent of the total number of all detected victims, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said in its annual report.

UN team in Iran for nuclear talks

AFP, Tehran

UN atomic watchdog experts yesterday arrived in Iran to renew efforts to engage Tehran over its disputed nuclear programme, but media reports said an inspection visit to suspectsites was off the agenda.

The IAEA says the talks aim to reach agreement on a "structured approach" for Tehran to address allegations of weaponisation and for the watchdog to gain broader access to Iran's nuclear sites and people working in the programme.

Thursday's talks are the latest in a string of fruitless meetings this year between Iran and the IAEA, with the latest in August in the Austrian capital.

Inefficiency costing Pak \$72m a day

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan wastes a whopping \$51 to \$72 million every day as a result of inefficiency, corruption and tax shortcomings, the head of an anti-corruption watchdog said yesterday.

The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) said the losses come from leaks, corruption and incompetence, tax losses, land grabbing, loans and defaults, overstaffing, energy losses, project delays, cost overruns, administrative costs and

'Pak army, Taliban guilty of abuses'

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistan military and the Taliban are guilty of rights abuses with a lack of justice fuelling a crisis in the tribal areas on the Afghan border, a report by Amnesty International said yesterday.

The military is using new security laws and a colonial-era penal system to act with impunity in the northwestern, semi-autonomous region where Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked violence is

Unity deal: Nepal gets 5 more days

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's president yesterday gave rival political parties a third extension to his deadline for forming a national unity government to lead the country into elections next year.

Nepal's main parties have failed to strike a deal on the political make-up of a proposed new cabinet, despite being given 13 extra days after missing the original November 29 target.

Talks have stalled over who should lead the new cabinet, with the opposition rejecting the incumbent PM, Baburam Bhattarai, and the premier refusing to step aside.

Employment Notice for Communication Officer

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