

Egyptians adopt divisive charter

Opposition cries foul, says will appeal result

AFP, Cairo

Egypt has adopted a new, Islamist-backed constitution with nearly two-thirds support in a referendum preceded by weeks of sometimes bloody protests, official media said yesterday.

However, the secular-leaning opposition, which has alleged fraud, said it will appeal the referendum result.

Polling "fraud and violations" skewed the results of the two-stage referendum, the final leg of which was held on Saturday, the National Salvation Front charged in a press conference in Cairo.

Germany immediately backed the call for a transparent investigation into the results. Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said: "The new constitution can only meet with acceptance if the process of its adoption is beyond reproach."

Egyptian state media and President Mohamed Morsi's supporters in the Muslim Brotherhood said the constitution was passed with the support of nearly



two-thirds of voters, based on unofficial tallies.

The state news agency MENA had reported the final results would be released on Monday.

Opposition to the charter have fuelled demonstrations for the past month, some of them violent, such as clashes that wounded 62 people in

Egypt's second city of Alexandria on Friday, the day before the final round of voting.

Morsi and Islamists backing the charter say it is necessary to restore stability after the early 2011 revolution that toppled president Hosni Mubarak.

But the opposition accuses Morsi of steamrolling through the referendum without consensus on the charter, and argues that a low voter turnout of around 32 percent undermined the plebiscite's legitimacy.

Approval of the constitution would trigger parliamentary elections in two months' time to replace an Islamist-dominated assembly that was dissolved by Egypt's constitutional court before Morsi's election in June.

US in N Korea's rocket range: Seoul

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's recent rocket launch amounted to the test of a ballistic missile capable of carrying a half-tonne payload as far as the US west coast, the South Korean defence ministry said yesterday.

North Korea launched its three-stage Unha-3 rocket on December 12, insisting it was a purely scientific mission aimed at putting a polar-orbiting satellite in space.

Yesterday's estimate was based on analysis of an oxidiser container -- recovered from the rocket's first-stage splashdown site -- which stored red fuming nitric acid to fuel the first-stage propellant.

The estimated range of 10,000 kilometres covers the whole of Asia, eastern Europe and western Africa as well as Alaska and a large part of the US west coast including San Francisco.

Peace in Afghanistan 'top priority': Kayani

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's powerful army chief has made reconciling warring factions in Afghanistan a top priority, military officials and Western diplomats say, the newest and clearest sign yet that Islamabad means business in promoting peace with the Taliban.

General Ashfaq Kayani is backing dialogue partly due to fears that the end of the US combat mission in Afghanistan in 2014 could energise a resilient insurgency straddling the shared frontier, according to commanders deployed in the region.

"There was a time when we used to think we were the masters of Afghanistan. Now we just want them to be masters of themselves so we can concentrate on our own problems," said a senior Pakistani military officer stationed in South Waziristan, part of the tribal belt that hugs the Afghan border.

On December 7, Kayani hammered home his determination to support a negotiated end to the war in Afghanistan at a meeting of top commanders at the army headquarters in Rawalpindi.

"He (Kayani) said Afghan reconciliation is our top priority," said a Pakistani intelligence official, who was briefed about the meeting.

Major progress with Kayani's help could enable US President Barack Obama to say his administration managed to sway Pakistan - often seen as an unreliable ally - to help achieve a top US foreign policy goal.

Afghan officials, who have long suspected Pakistan of funding and arming the Taliban, question whether Kayani genuinely supports dialogue or is merely making token moves to deflect Western criticism of Pakistan's record in Afghanistan.

NEWS IN brief

Court to rule on Mubarak appeal

REUTERS, Cairo

A Cairo court has decided it will rule on the appeal of ousted former President Hosni Mubarak on January 13, a court source said yesterday, a move that could lead to Mubarak being retried over the killing of protesters last year.

Mubarak and former Interior Minister Habib al-Adli were sentenced to life in prison in June after a court ruled they were responsible for the deaths of around 850 people who were killed



No change in Modi visa policy: US

PTI, Ahmedabad

Observing that Gujarat remains an important state for its investment, the United States on Saturday, said it would continue to engage with the state across a broad range of issues including trade, investment, university linkages and people to people exchanges.

However, it refrained from making any comment on the Assembly elections in the state, terming it domestic Indian politics, and also on the issue of a visa to chief minister Narendra Modi, saying there has been no change on its policy in this regard.

Iran fighting 'economic war'

AFP, Tehran

Iran is engaged in a "smart economic war" with Western powers whose sanctions against its nuclear programme are hurting some Iranians, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said on Saturday.

Western sanctions could not cripple Iran's economy, Ahmadinejad said in a live interview on state television, referring to an oil embargo imposed by the European Union.

"Iran is engaged in a smart economic war with the enemy," he added.

According to the International Energy Agency, Iranian exports in November were estimated at 1.3 million barrels per day, down from nearly 2.3 million last year.

Mayawati foresees early polls

THE HINDU ONLINE

Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati foresees early general elections but said her party would not do anything to bring down the government.

"In its first term the UPA was trying to balance its coalition partners. In its second term because of its wrong policies poverty, unemployment and inflation is up. With only one-and-a-half years left for the UPA-II, we do not want it to be said that they could have achieved much but for the BSP," she said in an interview to The Hindu on Saturday.

UK faces flood disruptions

BBC ONLINE

Flooding and heavy rain are continuing to cause problems in south-west England and parts of Wales and Scotland.

One severe flood warning remains in Cornwall, and there are about 165 flood warnings in England and Wales.

Scotland has 30 flood warnings, mainly for Perthshire, Tayside and Angus. There is significant flooding in Stonehaven, near Aberdeen.

SEX ASSAULT PROTEST

Police firing kills journo in Manipur

AFP, Guwahati

Police shot dead a television journalist yesterday when they opened fire during a protest against a sexual assault on a film actress in India's north-east, an official said.

The 36-year-old, who was working for the Doordarshan network, was "killed in police firing" in Imphal, capital of Manipur state, police spokesman A. Singh told AFP.

The journalist died on the spot from one of the bullets, Singh said.

The shooting comes amid a wave of protests in India over a student's gang-rape in New Delhi last weekend.

Manipur has been rocked by its own series of protests after the actress known as Momoko was dragged from stage in full public view last week by an armed militant belonging to a banned rebel outfit despite the presence of security personnel.

He then tried to rape her but she managed to fight him off and flee.

Momoko, also a popular model, has waived her right to anonymity and appealed on television for her attacker's arrest.

On Saturday, crowds had pelted stones at police in Imphal, damaging six of their vehicles, prompting authorities to impose a curfew in parts of the state.



PHOTO: AFP

A family watches the Copahue volcano spewing ashes from Caviahué, Neuquen province, Argentina, some 1500 km southwest of Buenos Aires yesterday. The authorities of Chile and Argentina issued yellow alerts due to the eruption of the Copahue volcano, placed in the border between both countries.

Delhi gang-rape protest rages on

Govt, opposition appeal for calm; promise quick action

AGENCIES

The heart of the Indian capital turned into a battle zone yesterday as thousands massed to denounce the brutal gang rape of a young woman triggering appeals for calm from both the government and opposition.

Outnumbered police and paramilitary personnel fired umpteen tear gas shells and repeatedly used batons to break up emotionally charged crowds screaming "We want justice!" and hurling stones and water bottles.

Six drunk men were joyriding in a bus when they picked up the physiotherapy student and her 28-year-old male companion. They took turns raping her before throwing the pair off the speeding vehicle.

During her ordeal the victim was attacked with an iron rod, causing

serious intestinal injuries.

All six of the alleged attackers have now been arrested and remanded in custody.

Fearing more violent protests, police declared areas close to the president's residence and the parliament off-limits and detained those who defied the prohibitory orders.

All the routes leading to landmark government buildings were cordoned off and metro stations in the vicinity were closed to the public.

However, several hundred protesters managed to breach the cordon around India Gate and braved tear gas and water cannons.

PTI quoting witnesses said several people, including security personnel, were injured.

As protests over the gang-rape incident escalated, the ruling

Congress yesterday appealed for calm with Rahul Gandhi emphasising that decisions cannot be driven by emotions and that they should be taken in a "rational" manner.

Party president Sonia Gandhi and Rahul had an over 90 minute-long meeting with a group of protesters at her 10 Janpath residence during which Minister of State for Home Affairs R P N Singh and Congress spokesperson Renuka Chaudhury were also present.

The leaders assured speedy action while refusing to give a time-frame for it.

Meanwhile, BJP leader Sushma Swaraj also called for an all-party meeting and made an appeal to youths not to resort to violence, saying this is not the solution.

Italy set for polls in February

Monti says ready to lead again

AFP, Rome

Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti yesterday said he was ready to govern the country again but would not be a candidate in the February election.

"If one or more political forces adhere to my agenda and put forward the idea of proposing me for the post of premier, I would weigh the option," the outgoing premier said following his resignation on Friday.

Monti cannot officially be on the ballot for the February 24-25 vote as he is already a senator-for-life but under Italy's electoral system he could be asked to join the government, even as prime minister, by whoever wins.

"I am ready to give my approval, my encouragement and, if called to, my leadership" to those parties who get behind the reforms, Monti said.

Monti's return could turn the February vote into a nail-biting three-way race between the scandal-tainted Berlusconi who has dismissed Monti as "a complete disaster", former communist Pier Luigi Bersani and a Monti-backed reform coalition.



Mario Monti

Fire destroys market in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

A huge fire swept through a market in downtown Kabul yesterday, destroying hundreds of shops and forcing the city's nearby money exchange to evacuate, police and witnesses said.

There were no reports of any casualties in the early morning blaze which destroyed most of the cloth market's 500 shops, Kabul fire department officials told AFP.

A fire department official speaking on condition of anonymity said an electrical short circuit was the most likely cause of the fire, which was so severe that Nato and Afghan army fire squads were called in to help.

Syria still in control of chemical arms

Says Russia; air strike kills dozens

AGENCIES

Syria has acted to consolidate its chemical weapons into "one or two" places to prevent rebels capturing them, Russia's foreign minister said on Saturday.

Sergei Lavrov said the weapons had previously been "scattered" across the country and they were "under control" for the time being.

Lavrov told journalists on a flight returning to Moscow from an EU-Russia summit in Brussels: "According to the information we have, as well as the data of the US and European special services, the (Syrian) government is doing everything to secure (its chemical stockpiles)."

Lavrov also said President Bashar al-Assad had no plans to leave Syria.

Meanwhile, international peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi arrived in Syria yesterday in a new bid to resolve the brutal 21-month conflict, as an air strike on a bakery in central Syria town of Halfaya was reported to have killed dozens.

Meanwhile, the world's largest Muslim body condemned threats made by Islamist rebels against two Christian towns, warning of fresh confessional strife.

Taliban call for new Afghan constitution

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's Taliban has called for a new constitution as a pre-condition for it joining the nation's fledgling peace process, according to a declaration issued by representatives at a landmark meeting in France.

"Afghanistan's present constitution has no value for us because it was made under the shadows of B52 bombers of the invaders," said the declaration.

"Islamic Emirate, for the welfare of their courageous nation, need a constitution that is based on the principles of the holy religion of Islam, national interest, historical achievements, and social justice," it read. The meeting in France was organised by the Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS), and was held behind closed doors at an undisclosed location near Paris.

The talks come against a background of accelerating efforts to draw the Taliban and other opponents of President Hamid Karzai into negotiations on how Afghanistan will be run after Western troops withdraw in the end of 2014.

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