

Egypt waits on referendum results

Judges review ballot

AGENCIES

Egypt yesterday was awaiting official results of a referendum on a new constitution reportedly backed by two-thirds of voters but which the opposition alleged was riddled with fraud.

"No official date has been fixed" for the final polling figures, a member of the electoral commission, Mohamed el-Tanobly, told AFP.

The Muslim Brotherhood backing President Mohamed Morsi and media say an unofficial tally shows 64 percent of ballots backed the new charter.

Meanwhile, Egyptian judges were yesterday investigating complaints of voting irregularities before declaring the result of a referendum set to show that a controversial new constitution has been approved, reports Reuters.

Opponents of the constitution, drawn up mostly by Islamists and fast-tracked to a vote by President Mohamed Morsi, have demanded a full probe into what they say were a litany of irregularities.

But the National Salvation Front opposition coalition claims numerous instances of polling "fraud and violations" and is demanding the electoral commission investigate before issuing its official figures.



HAPPY CHRISTMAS AROUND THE WORLD

Clockwise from left, Indian children dressed as Santa Claus ride on a rickshaw in Amritsar yesterday ahead of Christmas day. Members of the public sit in St Paul's Cathedral in London during the Christmas carol service. Lebanese gather around a Christmas tree in Beirut. Students play band music wearing Christmas outfits in Taipei. Children in Christmas outfits bang pans to make noise during a parade in Taipei. People enjoy a traditional Christmas bath in Monaco. An elephant dressed in a Santa Claus costume perform for students in Thailand.

PHOTO: AFP

Afghan policewoman kills US adviser

AP, Kabul

An Afghan policewoman shot and killed an American adviser outside the police headquarters in Kabul yesterday, the latest in a rising tide of insider attacks by Afghans against their foreign allies, senior Afghan officials said.

The woman, identified as Afghan police Sgt Nargas, had entered a strategic compound in the heart of the capital and shot the adviser with a pistol as he came out of a small shop with articles he had just bought, Kabul Governor Abdul Jabar Taqwa told The Associated Press.

The woman was taken into Afghan custody shortly after the attack.

Earlier, she had asked bystanders where the governor's office was located, the governor said. As many Afghans, the policewoman uses only one name.

A Nato command spokesman, US Air Force Lt Col Lester T Carroll, said the woman was arrested after the incident. The slain adviser was a contractor whose identity wasn't immediately released.



Prince Harry kills Taliban commander in Afghanistan

PTI, London

Prince Harry who is an RAF helicopter pilot deployed in Afghanistan, has killed a Taliban leader in an airstrike, notching up his first 'kill', British media reported yesterday.

The 27-year-old, the third in line to the British throne, was called in to provide air support to troops tracking a commander-level Taliban chief and hit the target with a 100 lb Hellfire missile fired from an Apache helicopter.

It is the first time the prince has been involved in a fatal airstrike against a Taliban commander, a report in The Sun said.

According to the Daily Mail, the attack is said to have happened in late October, shortly after the prince returned to Afghanistan for his second deployment as gunship co-pilot.

A defence insider said, "We were on patrol and the Apache helicopters were called in. We heard this posh voice come over the radio and knew it was Big H. They were tracking a Taliban leader - he was commander-level."

Captain Harry Wales - as he is known in the Army - is a co-pilot gunner in the Apache unit which has the highest 'kill rate' in the war.

As the co-pilot gunner, Harry commands missions, fires the weapons, navigates and sometimes take over the controls.

Air strike on Syria bakery kills dozens

Brahimi in Damascus; Russia says chemical arms use would be 'political suicide'

AFP, Damascus

Peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday held talks with Syria's president on the "worrying" situation in the country, as Damascus fended off accusations its forces bombed a bakery killing dozens of civilians.

The talks in the capital came as Russia played down fears President Bashar al-Assad's regime would use chemical weapons against the armed opposition, saying to do so would amount to "political suicide".

"I had the honour to meet the president and as usual we exchanged views on the many steps to be taken in the future," Brahimi told reporters at his hotel, a day after he arrived to launch a fresh bid to end the conflict roiling the country.

The UN-Arab League envoy said the

Syrian crisis was "always worrying", with more than 44,000 people killed since the uprising against Assad's regime erupted in March last year, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Brahimi expressed hope that "all parties are in favour of a solution that draws Syrian people together."

"Assad expressed his views on the situation and I told him about my meetings with leaders in the region and outside," said the veteran Algerian diplomat who took over his present task from former UN chief Kofi Annan.

Brahimi last visited the country on October 19 for talks with Assad and other officials in a bid to clinch a temporary ceasefire for the Muslim feast of Eid al-Adha.

Russian opposition leader faces new probe

AP, Moscow

A prominent Russian opposition leader faces his third investigation in five months as authorities intensify pressure on the opposition.

The Investigative Committee said in a statement yesterday that they launched a new probe against Alexei Navalny, who was already charged with theft and with fraud and money laundering in two separate cases.

Investigators now say they also suspect Navalny of defrauding the Union of the Right Forces, a now defunct liberal party, of 100 million rubles (\$3.2 million) in 2007.

Navalny, a charismatic 36-year-old lawyer, made his name exposing corruption in state-controlled companies. Last winter, he spearheaded a series of street rallies in Moscow that drew up to 100,000 people before March's vote that handed Putin a third presidential term.

In July, the lawyer was charged with the theft of half a million dollars from a state-owned timber company. Earlier this month, Navalny and his brother were charged with defrauding a transportation company of about \$1.8 million.



Alexei Navalny

PUTIN IN NEW DELHI

Russia, India sign \$3b defence deals

AGENCIES

Boosting their military ties, India yesterday inked deals worth around \$3 billion with Russia to procure 42 new Su-30 MKI combat aircraft and 71 Mi-17V5 medium-lift helicopters.

The contracts for acquiring these weapon systems were signed during the 13th India-Russia Annual Summit after talks between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and visiting Russian President Vladimir Putin in New Delhi, reports PTI.

At the Summit meeting yesterday, a joint venture agreement was also inked between Elcom Systems Private Ltd. and OAO "Vertoleti Rassi" (JSC "Helicopters Russia"), which aims to set up a modern industrial facility for manufacturing Russian Mi and Kamov choppers in India.

Under one contract worth around \$2.2 billion for licence production of 42 Su-30MKIs, Russia will deliver technical kits to the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) to assemble them here.

With this contract, the number of Su-30MKIs in the IAF would go up to 272 in next four to five years with 170 of them already at present in the force.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with Chairperson of the UPA Government Sonia Gandhi during a meeting at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi yesterday.

These multi-role frontline aircraft could also be equipped with Indo-Russian joint venture BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles.

Under the contract for 71 Mi-17V5 choppers, 59 of the machines would be given to the IAF while the remaining 12 would be used by paramilitary forces in their anti-Naxal operations.

These helicopters would be used by the IAF to replace its existing fleet of older versions of Mi-17 and Mi-8 aircraft in its inventory.

This is a follow up order by the IAF

for the new 'V5' version as it is in the process of inducting 80 such machines for which orders were placed around three years ago.

Already more than 40 of them have been inducted into the force at locations including Bathinda in Punjab, Srinagar and Bagdogra in West Bengal.

India is now the world's largest arms importer and Russian-made military equipment accounts for 70 percent of its arms supplies, reports AFP.

11 kids killed in China road crash

AFP, Beijing

Eleven young children died yesterday when the overloaded van they were travelling in plunged into a pond in east China's Jiangxi province, state press and a rights group said.

The accident happened as the van was taking the children to school and all of the 11 victims were between four and six years old, the Henan Business Daily reported.

It said that four other children, a teacher and the driver survived the crash, which happened in the morning near the city of Guixi.

Xinhua news agency, which initially reported only three fatalities, later said eight of the victims had died after they were transported to hospital.

The rights group said that the mini-van was overloaded and that its maximum capacity was just seven people.

NEWS IN brief

N Korea slams South's Xmas lights

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday slammed a display of Christmas lights staged by a South Korean church group near the tense border as an "unacceptable provocation".

The giant display -- featuring thousands of glittering bulbs on a tree-shaped steel tower -- was put up Saturday on a military-controlled hill at Gimpo west of Seoul.

The lights, which can be seen several kilometres away in the impoverished North which suffers chronic power shortages, will remain switched on until early January.

Volcano alert raised in Chile

AFP, Santiago

Chile issued a top-level red alert Sunday for its Copahue volcano, in the south on the Andean border with Argentina, as it rumbled to register a greater potential threat.

The National Emergency Office issued a red alert but did not order evacuations as no towns are in the current risk area.

"The intensity of seismic signals suggests the eruption in progress is on the smaller side (but) we are not ruling out the possibility that the activity could turn into a larger-scale eruption," the Geology and Mining Service said in a statement.

India test-fires Astra missile

IANS, Bhubaneswar

India yesterday successfully test-fired its indigenously developed Astra air-to-air interceptor missile from a defence base in Odisha for the third time within a week, an official said.

The beyond-visual-range missile was tested from the Integrated Test Range (ITR) at Chandipur, about 230 km from here. The missile intercepted a simulated target.

"There was no actual target. It successfully intercepted a simulated target at an altitude of 4 km," ITR director MVKV Prasad said.

4 Mexico police killed in ambush

AFP, Morelia

Four municipal policemen were killed in an ambush by a local organized crime group in Mexico, officials said Sunday, without identifying the group.

Michoacan state attorney Marco Vinicio Garibay told AFP that the attackers, who had earlier threatened the officers, staged the morning attack on a road between the cities of Brisenas and Sahuayo, in the western Mexican state.

There is still no sign of the Brisenas police chief, two policemen and another municipal official kidnapped two weeks ago, according to Garibay.