

Egypt constitution signed into law

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi has signed into law a new constitution in spite of weeks of opposition protests, but he was left facing an economic crisis and international disquiet over his rule.

The Islamist-dominated senate convened yesterday to swear in 90 new members appointed by Morsi. It was expected to draft a law for legislative elections for the dissolved lower house that have to be held by the end of February.

The National Salvation Front opposition coalition said it would vie for seats in the parliament, which has powers under the new charter that could hamper Morsi's ability to govern.

"We will work together to enter the election," Front spokesman Khaled Dawoud said.

He also said the coalition would legally contest the referendum, which it claims was riddled by fraud. Its supporters had demonstrated since late November against the document, with some clashes with pro-Morsi supporters turning bloody.

The national electoral commission said late Tuesday that 64 percent of voters



Mohamed Morsi

in the two-round referendum backed the new constitution. Turnout was 33 percent it said.

Morsi immediately afterwards signed into law the charter, which had been written up by his Islamist allies.

Christians and liberals boycotted the process in protest at changes they saw as weakening human rights, especially those of women, and possibly paving the way for the introduction of a form of fundamentalist Islamic law.

The United States, which gives \$1.3 billion a year to Egypt's influential military, called on Morsi to work to "bridge divisions" with the largely secular opposition.

The political crisis has taken a heavy toll on Egypt's economy.

The state-owned Al-Ahram newspaper reported there was "Fear in the Egyptian street" after rating agency Standard and Poor's downgraded Egypt's long-term credit rating one notch to 'B'.

It said reported that the government has restricted travellers from leaving or entering the country with more than 10,000 dollars.



Building stocked with fireworks on fire in Lagos Island yesterday. Fire tore through a crowded neighbourhood of Nigeria's largest city of Lagos yesterday, killing at least one person and injuring 30 others after a huge explosion rocked a building storing fireworks.

PHOTO: AFP



US FISCAL CLIFF Obama cuts holiday to deal crisis

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama was to cut his holiday short and head back to Washington yesterday to try to address the "fiscal cliff," a set of tax hikes and spending cuts to take effect next year.

Despite weeks of negotiations, Obama has been unable to reach a budget deal with congressional Republicans to slash the deficit and avert the mandatory austerity measures, which could pitch the economy back into recession.

The White House said Tuesday that Obama would fly back from his native Hawaii yesterday, cutting short his Christmas break and raising the possibility of renewed negotiations in Washington as early as Thursday.

Democratic and Republican leaders traded blame last week over the failure to reach a deal before the holidays to prevent most Americans from seeing their taxes go up next year.

The so-called fiscal cliff is the result of a poison pill agreement reached earlier this year that would require major spending reductions as tax cuts passed under former president George W. Bush expire at the end of the year -- should Democrats and Republicans fail to reach a deal to cut the deficit.

The White House has offered a deal with \$1.2 trillion in revenues -- by fulfilling an Obama campaign promise to allow the Bush tax cuts to expire for the wealthy -- and nearly \$1 trillion in spending cuts.

Netanyahu launches re-election bid

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday put Iran at the top of his re-election campaign, pledging that halting Tehran's nuclear programme would be his first priority as premier.

"Who do (Israeli voters) think is the most suitable candidate to deal with the Iranian threat? With the missile threat? With the threat of terror?" he asked supporters in Jerusalem in a speech at the official launch of his campaign for January 22 polls.

"We still have a lot ahead of us," he said. "First and foremost we must stop Iran's nuclear programme, and the time for that is slipping away. That is my first mission as prime minister."

Israel and Western powers accuse Iran of seeking to acquire a weapons capability under the guise of its nuclear energy programme. Iran denies the charge.

"With God's help, we will continue to live and build in Jerusalem, which will always stay united under Israeli sovereignty," Netanyahu said.

On Monday, Israel approved the latest in a series of plans for approximately 5,000 Jewish homes in east Jerusalem and the West Bank.



Winter storms kill two in US

REUTERS, Alabama

A major winter storm system swept through the southern United States on Tuesday, spawning tornadoes in several states and killing two people in weather-related road accidents.

The National Weather Service (NWS) said a tornado struck Mobile, Alabama, home to about 200,000 people, at about 5:00pm local. There were reports of damage to trees and widespread power outages, along with some structural damage, but no injuries or fatalities.

Tornadoes also touched down in Mississippi, Texas and Louisiana, flattening houses and causing some injuries, according to the NWS.

Japan PM unveils cabinet

BBC ONLINE

Japan's new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday unveiled his cabinet as he begins the task of economic revitalisation.

The cabinet was named shortly after parliament voted for Abe as PM, following his party's emphatic poll victory earlier this month.

The Liberal Democratic Party and its coalition partner have a two-thirds majority in the lower house.

Abe, who was also PM in 2006-07, chose another former premier, Taro Aso, for the key role of finance minister.

Analysts say the cabinet includes a number of Abe's close allies as he eyes the task of pulling Japan out of a prolonged economic slump.

The former Trade and Industry Minister Akira Amari was named as minister for economic revival and veteran Toshimitsu Motegi was chosen for the post of trade minister.

Some reports say he will be tasked with energy policy in the aftermath of last year's Fukushima nuclear disaster.

Fumio Kishida has been given the foreign ministry and defence ministry went to Itsunori Onodera.

Abe is seen as a hawkish, right-of-centre leader. His previous term in office ended ignominiously amid falling popularity and a resignation on grounds of ill health.



Shinzo Abe

But he returns to power at a critical moment and is Japan's seventh premier in six years.

The grandson of a former prime minister and son of an ex-foreign minister, Abe, 58, has pledged to take a tough line in a territorial row with China.



Taro Aso



Fumio Kishida



Itsunori Onodera

Emerging powers to pay more for UN

AFP, United Nations

China, Brazil, India and other emerging powers yesterday agreed to major increases in their United Nations payments as the global body hammered out a new budget deal this week to avoid its own fiscal cliff.

The boom countries will pay more as economic crisis allows European nations, such as Britain, Germany and France and Japan to cut their contributions.

While the sums involved are not huge by global standards -- the revised UN budget for 2012-2013 is \$5.4 billion -- diplomats say the new share-out is a snapshot of the world's changing economic fortunes.

China will pay an extra 61 percent in UN fees, taking its share of the budget from 3.2 to 5.1 percent. It will overtake Canada and Italy to become the sixth biggest UN contributor.

Brazil has agreed to an 82 percent hike in payments. It will pay 2.9 percent of the budget instead of 1.6 percent. India's payments will increase 24 percent, taking its budget share from 0.5 to 0.66 percent. And Russia's payments will go up by 52 percent.



Israel Antiquities Authority archaeologist Anna Ririkh displays a clay figurine used for religious rituals and practices, dated to the early monarchic period (9-10th century BC) of the Judaeen monarchy yesterday, uncovered in Tel Motza near Jerusalem during rescue excavations.

PHOTO: AFP

27 killed in Kazakh army plane crash

AFP, Almaty

All 27 people on board a Kazakh military jet that crashed while carrying the Central Asian state's top border guard officials have died, the state security service said yesterday.

The victims included the acting head of the Kazakh federal border service Turganbek Stambekov and his wife, the statement said.

The disaster also claimed the lives of much of the top leadership of the border service, it added.

US ADOPTION BAN Russia clears last hurdle

AFP, Moscow

Russia's upper house of parliament yesterday unanimously backed a bill barring Americans from adopting Russian children, leaving the controversial measure in the hands of President Vladimir Putin.

The vote was the last legislative hurdle for the bill, one of the toughest pieces of anti-US legislation in Russia in years that now just needs to be signed by Putin to become law. Putin is expected to sign it.

Syrian military police chief defects

Death toll hits 45,000

AGENCIES

The commander of Syria's military police has defected from President Bashar-al-Assad's government and reportedly fled to Turkey as the death toll in Syria's civil war has topped 45,000, a watchdog said yesterday.

Lt Gen Abulaziz al-Shalal is one of the highest-ranking officials to join the uprising against the Syrian regime.

The army had failed to protect Syrians and turned into "gangs of murder", the general said in a video statement.

After reportedly crossing the border into Turkey, Gen Shalal released a statement saying he had defected because the military had perpetrated massacres in towns and villages instead of protecting Syrians.

"I declare my defection from the army because of its deviation from its fundamental mission to protect the nation and transformation into gangs of murder and destruction," he said in a video message posted online.

Opposition sources said the commander had been secretly co-operating with the rebels from the outset, the BBC's Middle East correspondent Jim Muir reports.

"Definitely, there are other high-ranking officers who want to defect but the situation is not suitable for them to declare defection," he said.

An unnamed Syrian security source confirmed the army chief's defection but played down its significance, Reuters news agency reports.

The death toll in Syria's civil war has topped 45,000, a watchdog said yesterday, as a new push by peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table appeared to have failed.

The grim statistics added gravity to a warning by the United Nations that Syrians are losing hope of any end to the bloodletting and that the humanitarian situation across the country is rapidly deteriorating.

"In all we have documented the deaths of 45,048 people," Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights told AFP, adding that more than 1,000 people were killed in the past week alone.



Abulaziz al-Shalal

Killing people is 'what I do best'

AFP, New York

A convicted felon who committed suicide after shooting dead two firefighters he lured into an inferno wrote in a note that killing people was his favorite pastime, police said Tuesday.

Authorities also said they found human remains in the charred skeleton of his house that likely belonged to the gunman's sister, who lived with him.

"I still have to get ready to see how much of the neighborhood I can burn down and do what I like doing best -- killing people," read part of the note discovered in the wake of Monday's shooting in the upstate New York town of Webster, Police Chief Gerald Pickering told reporters.

He said the typewritten note by 62-year-old William Spengler was two or three pages long, but would not be released at this time.

Investigators suspect the victim found in what was left in the house is Cheryl Spengler, 67. She had not been seen since Monday. The brother and sister were said to not get along.

Pickering was unable to confirm whether Cheryl Spengler had died in the fire or if she was killed beforehand. A medical examiner is working on identifying the remains.

After setting his home and car ablaze, Spengler took up a sniper position, waiting for firefighters to arrive. He was armed with three weapons and an "arsenal" of ammunition, according to Pickering.

He had a Smith & Wesson .38 cali-

ber revolver, a Mossberg 12-gauge pump action shotgun and a .223 Bushmaster rifle -- the same military-type assault rifle used in the recent elementary school shooting in Connecticut that left 26 people dead.

As soon as the firefighters arrived on the scene, Spengler shot at them. His rampage came to a halt thanks to a policeman who returned fire.

In addition to the two firefighters killed, two of their colleagues sustained "serious injuries" and underwent surgery, Pickering said, noting they were in stable condition. A police officer was treated and has been released from hospital.

Seven homes were destroyed in the blaze, as the shooting thwarted initial efforts to douse the flames.