

NEWS IN brief

Obama appoints new ME coordinator

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama has appointed a new coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf, the White House announced Saturday.

Philip Gordon, a veteran foreign policy expert, will take up his post on March 11.

The appointment came two weeks before Obama is set to visit Israel, Ramallah in the occupied Palestinian territories and Jordan.

Gordon has served as assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs since May 2009, with responsibility for US policy in 50 countries, as well as Nato, the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-

Netanyahu gets time to form govt

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli President Shimon Peres on Saturday gave Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a two-week extension to form a new coalition government, after he failed to do so in an initial four-week period.

After his Likud-Beitenu list emerged as the largest party in a January 22 election, winning 31 of the Knesset's 120 seats, Netanyahu was on February 2 tasked with forming a coalition.

If the additional fortnight passes without Netanyahu managing to form a coalition government, Peres will then have to ask a different member

Iran frees 14 journalists

AFP, Tehran

Iran has freed 14 journalist working for reformist papers who were arrested in January and accused of cooperating with a "Western-linked network", the reformist Shargh newspaper reported yesterday.

The newspaper said the journalists were released from jail after posting bail, while four others were still behind bars.

At the time of their arrest in late January the intelligence ministry said in a statement that the journalists belonged to "one of the biggest media

Musharraf vows return to Pakistan

AFP, Dubai

Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf said Friday he would return home within weeks to contest elections after nearly five years in self-imposed exile, but did not set a specific date.

"Under the advice of all my party men, we have decided that as soon as the interim government is in place, which we hope will be on March 16, within a week of that I will go back to Pakistan,"



US Secretary of State John Kerry talks with Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi at the presidential palace in Cairo yesterday. Kerry met the Egyptian president as he wrapped up a trip to Cairo, where he urged divided factions to reach a consensus that would pave the way for economic recovery.

PHOTO: AFP



Mubarak retrial to open on April 13

AGENCIES

The retrial in Egypt of ousted president Hosni Mubarak on charges related to the killing of protesters during the uprising against him will begin on 13 April, according to the country's state news agency.

Mubarak, former interior minister Habib al-Adly and six top security chiefs will be retried on orders of the Court of Cassation, Egypt's top appeals court, over the hundreds of killings during the 2011 uprising which ousted him from power.

The court agreed in January on a retrial for Mubarak, 84, who appealed against his life sentence for involvement in the deaths.

The April 13 date was decided by the president of the Cairo appeals court, Samir Abul Maati, MENA said, adding that Mubarak's sons Alaa and Gamal as well as fugitive businessman Hussein Salem would also be in the docks.

The ruling raised public anger over what was seen as a shoddy prosecution case. Critics believed Mubarak should have been convicted for directly ordering the crackdown and sentenced to death.

Mastermind of Algeria siege killed in Mali

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Armed forces in Chad claim to have killed Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the commander of an al-Qaeda-linked brigade which carried out a bloody assault to take western hostages at a gas plant in Algeria in January.

Belmokhtar died in a raid on an Islamist rebel base on Saturday, according to a military spokesman.

One of the world's most wanted terrorists, he had claimed responsibility for the strike on the In Amenas gas plant in which more than 60 people were killed after troops stormed the complex on 19 January.

In a statement read out on Chadian television, armed forces spokesman General Zacharia Gobongue said: "Chadian armed forces operating in northern Mali completely destroyed a terrorist base ... The toll included several dead terrorists, including their leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar."

Belmokhtar's death, if confirmed, would be a major blow to Islamist rebels in northern Mali who have been pushed into their mountain strongholds by French and African forces.

The report of his death comes days after Chad's president, Idriss Deby, said soldiers in Mali had killed another leading al-Qaeda commander in the Sahara, Adelhamid Abou Zeid. French officials said they could not confirm the killing of either Abou Zeid or Belmokhtar.

Chad is among several African nations that have contributed forces to a French-led military intervention in Mali aimed at ridding its vast northern desert of Islamist rebels who seized it nearly a year ago, following a coup in the capital.



Belmokhtar

Hundreds killed in Syria police academy battle

Assad offers talks with opposition, refuses to quit

AFP, Beirut

Hundreds of Syrian troops and rebels were killed in a week-long battle for a police academy in the northern province of Aleppo, with insurgents seizing control of most of the complex, a monitoring group said yesterday.

"Rebels have seized most of a police academy in Khan al-Assal in Aleppo province ... after eight days of fighting that left 200 troops and rebels dead," said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The Britain-based group said at least 120 army troops were among those killed in the battle for one of the regime's last remaining bastions in the west of Aleppo province. On Sunday alone, rebels had killed more than 34 troops at the facility.

A police source in Aleppo confirmed that much of the academy had fallen into rebel hands, reporting that 40 security forces were believed dead. As many as 300 rebels were among those killed, he said.

Elsewhere, three mortars hit an area near the army general command headquarters and a customs complex in the heart of Damascus, said the Observatory. The heavily-guarded area housing the

army command headquarters was last year targeted by a car bombing claimed by the jihadist Al-Nusra Front, and two mortar rounds hit the area on February 21.

President Bashar al-Assad insisted he will not step down and blasted Britain's support for his armed foes who reportedly killed dozens of soldiers yesterday in attacks on a police academy in northern Syria.

"We are ready to negotiate with anyone, including militants who surrender their arms," Assad told Britain's Sunday Times newspaper, in a rare interview conducted last week at his Al-Muhajireen palace in Damascus.

"We can engage in dialogue with the opposition, but we cannot engage in dialogue with terrorists," he said in the videotaped interview.

His offer of talks was aired as UN chief Ban Ki-moon and his Syria envoy Lakhdar Brahimi said they were prepared to broker peace talks between the Assad regime and the opposition.

A joint statement by the pair said the UN would "be prepared to facilitate a dialogue between a strong and representative delegation from the opposition and a credible and empowered delegation from the Syrian government".

Lie worked well

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posted on Saturday evening by one "Carbon Tasnim" of Faridpur, was circulated by Jamaat-Shibir activists through cell phones and computers.

The caption reads: From late Friday night to early Saturday, people from Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia saw Sayedee's face (in the moon). Such an image is God's sign that true devotees are honoured in different ways.

To draw attention of the people who do not use internet, announcements were made through loud-speakers of mosques about the picture, report our correspondents from Chittagong, Rajshahi and Bogra.

Besides, many people called The Daily Star staff members from different districts to verify if such a moon was really sighted.

In addition to using such bizarre and cheap photo manipulation for a heinous purpose, the Jamaat-Shibir men yesterday used women and children as human shields in Rajshahi and Bogra.

In the photograph, the black frame of Sayedee's spectacles and silk thread of his cap were mostly visible as the colour of those synthetic materials were more shining than his face.

The pro-Jamaat campaigners also pasted Sayedee's image on the national flag, propagating through social media that he could not be a Razakar.

The picture of Sayedee in the moon drew condemnation from regular Facebook users -- some among them are regular visitors of Basher Kella page.

Several Islami scholars termed the use of this fake picture "a Jamaat-Shibir ploy" to cheat ordinary believers and exploited their religious sentiments.

According to scholars, such an act is a "great sin". They note that such "sighting" of the moon can never happen in the light of the Quran and the Hadith.

"The sun and the moon will be the part of hell after Qayamat [Judgment Day]. Those doing this [trick] are only trying to make Sayedee a sinner and part of the hell," said Moulana Fariduddin Mash Ud, imam of Sholakia Eidgah in Kishoreganj.

"It is funny that Jamaat-Shibir is doing this by putting Sayedee's face on a photo of the moon," he added.

Moulana Ataullah, senior Naye-e-ameer of Bangladesh Khelafat Andolon, said it was not possible to see anyone's image in moon as per Islami shariah.

"This just cannot happen. It is his [Sayedee's] disciples who have been doing this," said Ataullah, also a son of famous Islami scholar Hafezzi Huzur. "Maybe if you think of someone for long, you can see his face in the shadow of a tree even."

The picture also prompted online bloggers and activists to make equally absurd jokes using Sayedee's pictures.

In one, for instance, Sayedee was shown as one of the three astronomers to have landed on the moon in 1969. In this picture, Neil Armstrong's face has been replaced by Sayedee's face.

Another showed Sayedee's face superimposed on the bottom of a baboon.

India

FROM PAGE 1

At the meeting, the Indian president highly praised Hasina for her initiative to build up a sub-regional cooperation among Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan in different areas.

"We could explore the area of sub-regional cooperation as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina first visualised the conception and took the initiative," Pranab said.

He also extended his sincere thanks and expressed gratitude for conferring "Friends of Liberation War Honour" to him and others for their support to the cause of Bangladesh in 1971.

"Indian soldiers have fought for liberation of many countries across the world and embraced martyrdom. But, Bangladesh is the only nation which has honoured us with the recognition," Pranab said. "That is why, I have selected Bangladesh as my first foreign country to visit after becoming the president of India," he told the premier.

Lauding the farsighted planning of Hasina, Pranab said Bangladesh maintained over six percent economic growth amidst severe global financial crisis.

He also conveyed the good wishes of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for the premier.

Railways Minister Mujibul Haque, PM's advisers Gowher Rizvi and Mashiur Rahman, Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque and Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Tariq Ahmad Karim, among others, were present.

After the meeting, the prime minister hosted a dinner in honour of the Indian president at the hotel.

He planned, incited war

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high position among civilians. The prosecution claimed that Ghulam Azam, being in a position of command, was liable for the crimes of his subordinates as he not only failed to prevent or punish them, he incited and encouraged them instead.

According to the evidence submitted by the prosecution, Ghulam Azam, as ameer of East Pakistan Jamaat-e-Islami in 1971, met the then governor of East Pakistan Lt Gen Tikka Khan and president of West Pakistan Yahya Khan several times. He formed auxiliary forces of the Pakistani army and delivered statements against the Liberation War.

The prosecutor reasoned that for the offences he had committed during the Liberation War, Ghulam Azam deserved the highest punishment as per the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973.

He then cited instances in which other war crimes tribunals of the world awarded capital punishments for such crimes.

The prosecution had been placing its closing argument for the last 10 working days at the tribunal.

Only one defence counsel was present at the Tribunal-1 yesterday. Before the prosecution began its closing arguments, defence counsel SA

Naim prayed that the tribunal adjourns the day's proceeding as some defence lawyers could not show up in court.

The tribunal rejected the prayer and asked him to take notes of the prosecution arguments.

Prosecutor Simon told the tribunal that the defence had not challenged the documents submitted to the tribunal by the prosecution.

Earlier, Ghulam Azam's son and also defence witness Brig Gen (dismissed) Abdullahil Aman Azmi in his deposition told the court that his father in no way called any specific religious group or common people "miscreants", rather he used the word to describe people who did not believe in united Pakistan.

Defying Azmi's claim, prosecutor Simon said documents and paper clippings submitted by prosecution show that the defence witness's claim was not valid.

Later, prosecutor Zead Al Malum began placing arguments on law points.

Tribunal-1 Chairman Justice ATM Fazle Kabir asked whether Ghulam Azam was in any committee formed by the military government during the Liberation War.

In stead of giving a straight answer, Malum said Ghulam Azam himself was the creator of different auxiliary forces and had met authorities con-

cerned several times.

Not satisfied with the reply, Justice Kabir asked again.

The prosecutor said Ghulam Azam was not in any committee but two members of his party were in the cabinet. There was no need for him to be in any committee, he added.

Tribunal member Justice Md Anwarul Haque then asked whether Ghulam Azam could be implicated in any war crimes as an individual.

Malum replied in the affirmative but did not specify how.

The court adjourned the case until today.

Meanwhile, Tribunal-1 yesterday asked the prosecution to submit formal charge against war crimes suspect Jamaat-e-Islami central leader Mir Quasem Ali on April 24.

On January 29, Tribunal-1 asked the prosecution to submit the investigation report or formal charges against Quasem yesterday.

Submitting a progress report on the ongoing investigation against Quasem, prosecutor Simon prayed two more months for submitting formal charges.

On query, the prosecutor informed the tribunal that Quasem had been kept in custody since June 17, 2012.

The suspect was brought before the tribunal yesterday.

China set to transfer power to new leader

AFP, Beijing

Thousands of delegates from across China meet this week to seal a power transfer to new leaders who have raised expectations with a deluge of propaganda during their first months running the Communist Party.

Xi Jinping is due to replace Hu Jintao as China's president at the annual National People's Congress (NPC) in Beijing, a rubber-stamp parliament which meets tomorrow. Li Keqiang will become premier, replacing Wen Jiabao.

It is the final step in a generational handover, four months after they took charge of the ruling party with pledges of cleaner government and greater devotion to people's livelihoods -- themes echoed across state-run media.

Xi's position in the Communist Party is his real source of power, but his forthcoming government title will give him a more visible role, including on state trips abroad.

Nearly 3,000 delegates will gather tomorrow for around 10 days to pass measures pre-approved by party leaders, including a reorganisation of government bureaucracy that will see major ministerial mergers.

Wildlife conference starts in Thailand

Meeting to deal with species extinction crisis

AFP, Bangkok

Global conservationists converged on Bangkok yesterday for the start of endangered species talks, as host Thailand was forced onto the defensive over the rampant smuggling of ivory through its territory.

The plight of elephants and rhinos -- threatened by poaching networks driven by insatiable demand for tusks and horn from Asian nations -- are set to dominate the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which lasts until March 14.

Thailand, seen as a hub for traffickers of all endangered species, is facing particular pressure over its ivory market.

Activists say criminals exploit a legal trade in Asian elephant tusks to sell illicit stocks of African ivory and conservation groups WWF and TRAFFIC have called on the Thai government to respond by outlawing the entire ivory trade.

Speaking at the opening of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in Bangkok, Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra said she will amend Thai law "with the goal of putting an end to the ivory trade".