

Retrial of Mubarak collapses in chaos

AFP, Cairo

The judge in the retrial of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak recused himself yesterday, in a chaotic opening hearing that lasted just seconds and saw a proud and combative Mubarak smile and wave in the dock.

Head judge Mostafa Hassan Abdallah told the court he would send the case to the Court of Appeal, which will then refer the trial to a new circuit, sending the fate of the ousted strongman back to square one.

As the judges filed out of the courtroom, uproar erupted with people shouting and waving their arms. Civil society lawyers attending the trial chanted: "The people want the execution of the president."

In October, the same judge had acquitted the defendants in the infamous "Battle of the Camels" trial, who were accused of sending men on camels and horses to break up a protest during the 2011 uprising that toppled Mubarak.

Mubarak, his former interior minister Habib al-Adly and six security chiefs were again in the dock -- albeit briefly -- for their alleged complicity in the murder and attempted murder of hundreds of peaceful protesters on January 25-31, 2011.

"This judge and this circuit acquitted all the defendants in the battle of the camels and there is a lot of doubt over their position. This prevents him from conducting this trial," said Amir Salem, a lawyer for the families of victims.

Months of rumours that Mubarak was in a coma or too weak to attend his retrial were put to rest yesterday as the former leader seemed healthy and strong as he sat in the defendants' cage, smiling and waving to supporters.

"We love you, big man!" a handful of his supporters yelled at him.

His sons Alaa and Gamal, who are also facing a new trial for corruption, also appeared to be in good spirits as they smiled and chatted to their father.



Ousted Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak is wheeled out of an ambulance outside the Maadi military hospital following a hearing in Cairo yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Morsi, army close ranks against abuse charges

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi and the military have closed ranks to deny charges that soldiers had killed and tortured protesters, following leaks of an inquiry report implicating officers.

Defence Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, who is also army chief, denied in a televised statement aired Friday that the military had committed abuses, after talks with Morsi, who named the fact-finding inquiry last year.

"I swear, by God, the armed forces did not kill nor order killings; it did not act treacherously, nor did it order treachery," said Sissi, standing next to Morsi.

Morsi in turn praised the armed forces for "protecting Egypt when it started its march on January 25," referring to the 2011 uprising that overthrew president Hosni Mubarak and ushered in interim military rule.

The Egyptian press and Britain's Guardian newspaper have published leaks from the report by the fact-finding panel, named shortly after Morsi took office in June, implicating the military in killings, torture and disappearances.

According to a Guardian report, the inquiry found that army officers ordered doctors to treat wounded demonstrators

without anaesthesia after they clashed with soldiers during protests against military rule in 2012.

The inquiry also reportedly documented cases of soldiers committing killings and torture during the 18-day uprising that overthrew Mubarak in early 2011, after he had deployed the military to try to quash the unrest.

In early January, the committee submitted its report to Morsi, who referred it to a "revolutionary prosecution" he created to investigate crimes during the revolt and under military rule.

It was not immediately clear whether the leaked sections were from drafts or the final report.

The US State Department urged Morsi to release the report, which he had ordered at a time of tensions with the military in 2012.

The New York-based lobby group Human Rights Watch stressed that "releasing the fact-finding report would be the Egyptian government's first acknowledgment of two years' worth of police and military abuses."

Despite reports in January that the inquiry would be published shortly, the document has been shrouded in secrecy, prompting some to accuse the government of suppressing the findings.



NEWS IN brief

Pope sets up council to reform Church

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday set up a group of cardinals to advise him on church governance and study reforms, marking the new pontiff's first step toward reforming the Catholic Church's opaque administration.

In a brief statement, the Vatican said that Francis had named eight cardinals from around the world to the group that will examine updating the constitution of the Roman Curia -- the Church administration, which analysts say is

6.3-magnitude quake hits Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A strong 6.3-magnitude earthquake hit western Japan early yesterday injuring at least 24 people and destroying some houses, officials and reports said.

It was the biggest earthquake to hit western Hyogo prefecture since 1995, when a 7.2-magnitude quake destroyed its port city of Kobe

Human H7N9 bird flu case in Beijing

AFP, Beijing

A seven-year-old girl is Beijing's first human case of H7N9 bird flu, local authorities said yesterday as China's outbreak of the disease spread to the capital.

Chinese officials announced nearly two weeks ago that they had found the H7N9 strain in humans for the first time, and the girl brought the number of confirmed infections to 44, 11 of

Gunmen attack Tamil newspaper in Sri Lanka

Set fire to office; fifth media attack this year

AGENCIES

Gunmen opened fire and torched the office of the main Tamil newspaper in northern Sri Lanka yesterday, police said, the latest in a string of attacks on the nation's privately owned media.

Three men staged the pre-dawn arson attack on the Uthayan newspaper's office and printing press in Jaffna, the main city in Sri Lanka's former civil war zone in the north of the country, owner Eswarapatham Saravanapavan told AFP.

"Employees preparing to deliver the morning newspaper fled as the gunmen stormed in," he said by telephone, adding there were no injuries but the printing press was destroyed.

The attack on the Uthayan newspaper office is the fifth attack on the media since January in Sri Lanka's former war zone in the north, and the second after the United Nations passed a resolution on March 21 calling on the government to address human rights violations, reports Reuters.

Police said a senior officer was heading an investigation into the attack, which occurred on the eve of the traditional Sinhala and Tamil New Year.

The newspaper owner, who is also an opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA) legislator, said it was the second strike on



the publication this month and added the assailants had to be from "either the government or para-militaries."

Sri Lanka lifted emergency rule in 2011 after the military crushed Tamil separatists two years earlier following a decades-long ethnic civil war in the island nation of 20 million people.

But troops are still deployed in Jaffna, 400 kilometres north of Colombo, and other parts of the country to support the police.

There was no immediate comment from the government, but the military denied any involvement in the attack in a statement.

The main opposition United National Party condemned the incident and said the government "must take full responsibility."

Blast targets bus in Pakistan; 9 killed

AFP, Peshawar

A bomb blast on a bus in Peshawar killed at least nine people yesterday, officials said, in the latest attack to hit Pakistan's troubled northwest ahead of historic polls next month.

The explosion occurred just hours after militants blew up the election offices of an independent candidate in the North Waziristan tribal district fuelling concerns that violence will mar general elections on May 11.

"At least nine passengers have been killed and seven injured. Bomb disposal officials told me that it was a timed device," Fazal Wahid, a senior police official told AFP.

Another officer, Imran Shahid said police were investigating the possibility a suicide bomber was involved in the attack which occurred as the bus was passing through the city's Matani suburb.

There was no immediate claim for responsibility, but Peshawar is regularly targeted by the Pakistani Taliban who have waged an insurgency against the state since 2007.

An intelligence official in the city said the attack may be a reaction to a fresh military push in the Tirah valley of the Khyber tribal district, where the army has been fighting Taliban and Lashkar-e-Islam militants.

Military officials said heavy fighting between Pakistani troops and militants has killed 23 soldiers and 110 militants in Khyber this week.

Khyber straddles the NATO supply line into Afghanistan, used by US-led troops to evacuate military equipment ahead of their 2014 withdrawal.

Officials say securing Khyber is key to protecting security in Peshawar, ahead of elections which will mark the country's first democratic transition of power after a civilian government has served a full term in office.



Suu Kyi arrives in Japan after 27 years

AFP, Tokyo

Myanmar's democracy hero Aung San Suu Kyi arrived in Japan yesterday, her first visit to the country where she spent time as a university researcher nearly three decades ago.

A group of well-wishers including Burmese gathered at Tokyo's Narita airport to greet the Suu Kyi, now her country's opposition leader, but were denied the chance to meet her as she left through a backdoor.

"I respect her like my mother," one of Burmese women said in an interview with public broadcaster NHK. "I want to tell her that I support her strongly."

Corrupt Milk Vita

FROM PAGE 20

The 3,000 employees to be reshuffled, including 200 officers, run the company's administration, procurement, transport, marketing, accounts and audit departments.

According to local government ministry sources, Milk Vita counts losses worth Tk 5 to 10 crore every month, subject to the size of the procurement and development scheme, thanks to gross pilferage, misappropriation and wastage.

For instance, the company earned Tk 65 crore in February but the expenditure that month stood at Tk 63.5 crore although the company is expected to make a much higher profit, said the sources.

MD Munir Chowdhury said Milk Vita was capable of making a net profit of Tk 10 crore each month if corruption and pilferage were contained efficiently. It could be turned into a productive and thriving business institution if the undue interference of the Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) and the management committee was stopped.

Last Sunday, State

Minister for Local Government Jahangir Kabir Nanak in a meeting with Milk Vita management committee, its officials and CBA leaders gave the go-ahead for legal actions against the corrupt, said meeting sources.

The meeting told the minister that sections of corrupt CBA officials and management committee members virtually dictated the affairs at Milk Vita in their coterie interests, dwarfing the company's desired growth, the sources added.

The state minister was also informed that the 12-member management committee had appointed as many as 600 unnecessary employees in the company on contract and daily basis apparently in exchange for underhand gains.

Some directors of the committee even mounted pressure on the managers of milk-chilling plants to accept substandard adulterated milk for marketing.

In the last several years, the management committee had run advertisements in little-known local newspapers which put no great

impact on the business, the state minister was told.

The meeting resolved that the 76 employees, who had been appointed by the management committee and CBA and were later dismissed by the government in January, are to be reinstated, since they were "victims of corrupt practices".

Following the decision, the 76 employees withdrew their strike after five days on Sunday night. The strike had halted production at Milk Vita's biggest plant in Baghabari, Sirajganj.

Vice-chairman of Milk Vita managing committee Shafiqur Rahman said, "We do not indulge in any corruption or anomalies, and now we are more alert about it."

The committee would help the authorities carry out the anti-corruption drive, he added.

Bangladesh Milk Producers' Cooperative Union, official name of Milk Vita, has 28 chilling and pasteurisation centres operating to collect milk from farmers and market packaged liquid milk, powder milk, butter, ghee and ice cream.

Pahela Baishakh

FROM PAGE 1

Pahela Baishakh roundness of a throbbing sort. It is these underpinnings of the season, indeed the beginning of a new year, that Bangalees remember today. There is the essential point of reference that was Akbar. The Haal Khata, the closing off of a year just ended and the commencement of a new one, a taking stock of crops, indeed of productivity are the underpinnings we speak of.

There is, then, about Pahela Baishakh something of the pastoral. In that larger sense of the meaning -- and quite removed from the formalities attendant on its advent in these largely urban times -- it is the village, that timelessness of agrarian life that Pahela Baishakh recalls every year. There is a plenitude of colour, an abundance of music redolent of Pahela Baishakh. Add to that colour and to that melody the power of nature to remind the world of what it does or can do to make its presence felt yet once again.

In the lowing clouds hanging over the rustic fields, in the winds which sweep across the earth before

flashes of lightning and ferocity of thunderclaps precede the fall of rain across the land comes that reminder of Baishakh being a particularly local affair for the people of this land as it is of the half of it that is today part of another land. Baishakh goes beyond the frontiers that demarcate the political realities which today define life in what once was one whole, unified Bengal.

And yet Pahela Baishakh brings all Bangalees -- here and over there and all across the Bangalee diaspora -- together in a spontaneous offering of homage to the land and to the natural elements that have kept it going for thousands of years. Baishakh is all that and much more. It is a symbolism of all the good Bangalees can claim for themselves through the poetry flowing from the minds of their greatest men. Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Dwijendra Lal Roy, Atulprasad and so many others have sung paeans to Bengal through the media of song and dance. Through the mysticism which defines faith, through the devotional songs of Lalon and

Hason Raja, Pahela Baishakh rediscovers the aesthetics of life in these parts.

Yes, this morning it is truly a celebration of the past we lose ourselves in. Pahela Baishakh is all about losing oneself to reinvent oneself. The Bangalee spirit that has all so often been a hallmark of its politics and its poetry once more goes back to the magic inherent in its heritage to expand the cultural parameters of the future.

In Pahela Baishakh, there are all the intimations of rain about to be sprinkled on earth, of storms ready to blow, of the rainbow taking hold of the imagination. In the waterfall laughter of women is a lilt touching the soul, ever so softly. In the conversations of men are heard the stirrings of the flute which long ago coursed through the hamlets of this land and will be heard once again this morning.

On Pahela Baishakh, we celebrate ourselves. We celebrate all that is of us, that has been our ancestors' and that will be our children's.

Shubho Nababarsha!