

Egypt begins work on new charter

Experts yesterday begin work to amend a divisive constitution rammed through by ousted Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, while his supporters called for intensified rallies in Cairo demanding his reinstatement. Egypt's caretaker cabinet has sought to forge ahead with an army "roadmap" for a political transition amid heightened tensions as Morsi's Islamist supporters press on with the protests that have sparked bloody violence. Interim president Adly Mansour named a committee of four university professors and six judges to come up with a new constitution. In the wake of the July 3 coup, Egypt's new army-backed administration suspended the constitution that had been drawn up by an Islamist-dominated panel and adopted by referendum in December with a majority of 64 percent, but with a voter turnout of just 33 percent. The experts will have 30 days to complete their task, after which their amendments will be brought before a 50-strong body representing different groups in Egyptian society, which will submit final changes to Mansour. The caretaker president will then have 30 days to call a referendum on the new charter, paving the way for new elections.



(From L) Queen Mathilde of Belgium, Queen Paola of Belgium, King Albert II of Belgium and King Philippe of Belgium wave to the crowds from the balcony of the Royal Palace in Brussels yesterday.

Belgium king gives up throne to son

Crown Prince Philippe has been sworn in as the seventh Belgian king after his father King Albert of Belgium abdicated yesterday in an emotionally charged ceremony. The 79-year-old signed away his rights as the kingdom's largely ceremonial ruler at the Royal Palace in the presence of Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo, who holds the political power in this 183-year-old parliamentary democracy. However, one of the duties the monarch does have is trying to resolve constitutional crises. The Oxford- and Stanford-educated, trained air force pilot took the oath to warm applause promising to uphold the constitution. King Albert's resignation on the grounds of ill-health came after nearly 20 years on the throne. He announced his abdication plans less than three weeks ago, so there was little time to turn the occasion into a huge international event. No foreign royals were at the ceremony. Philippe will face a tough task in the coming months. The fractious nation, divided by language, holds parliamentary elections in June 2014 amid calls for even more autonomy for the language groups. Prince Philippe has been groomed for the job as a leader of foreign trade delegations over the past two decades. 'He is a very wise person, a person who is very well prepared,' said EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, who attended the ceremony. 'He knows the politics of Belgium and Europe very well.'

NEWS IN brief

6.5 quake rattles New Zealand

A powerful 6.5-magnitude earthquake rocked central New Zealand yesterday, sending frightened people into the streets, halting trains and downing power lines. Although no substantial damage was reported, New Zealand remains on edge about severe earthquakes following a devastating tremor two years ago that killed 185 people in the main South Island city of Christchurch.

Curfew lifted in Kashmir Valley

Curfew was lifted from all parts of Kashmir yesterday but normal life in the Valley remained affected due to the strike call given by hardline Hurriyat Conference to protest against the firing incident in Ramban district that left four persons dead. More than 100 persons, mostly security force personnel, were injured in the clashes between protestors and law enforcing agencies.

Tibetan dies after self-immolation

A Tibetan monk died after setting himself on fire in southwest China, reports said yesterday, in the first such protest for more than a month. Kunchok Sonam, 18, carried out the protest on Saturday protesting Chinese oppression.

Poll violence kills 3 in West Bengal

Violence continued to rock panchayat elections in West Bengal with at least three Congress party workers killed and several others, including two policemen, injured ahead of today's fourth and last phase of polling.

JAPAN UPPER HOUSE POLL

Ruling coalition secures big win

Voters handed Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ruling coalition a thumping victory in upper house elections yesterday, exit polls showed, likely ushering in a new period of stability for politically volatile Japan. The projected victory means both chambers will be under government control, unblocking the bottleneck that has hampered legislation for the last six short-term premiers. That will strengthen Abe's hand as he tries to push through painful, but necessary, structural reforms aimed at dragging Japan out of two decades of economic malaise. "We want to respond to people's desire to feel a sense of economic improvement," Abe told reporters as the results emerged. "I want to make a virtuous cycle of improving the employment situation, increasing salaries and bringing about a rise in corporate investment." Exit polls by NHK showed Abe's Liberal Democratic Party and its junior partner New Komeito claimed at least 73 of the 121 seats being contested. Voter turnout was low, at an estimated 52.60 percent, according to projections by Kyodo News. There are 242 legislators in the upper house, serving six-year terms. Elections are held for half of the seats every three years. The coalition already has 59 seats that were not up for election on Sunday. Official results will likely come today.

MIDDLE EAST PEACE BID

Israeli PM warns of tough talks as skepticism grows

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday warned ministers that renewed peace talks with the Palestinians will be tough amid growing skepticism about a peace deal. US Secretary of State John Kerry on Friday said Israeli and Palestinian negotiators had agreed to meet to prepare a resumption of direct peace talks, stalled since 2010. "Negotiations won't be easy but we're entering them honestly, sincerely," Netanyahu told ministers at the weekly cabinet meeting, the first since Kerry's announcement. The premier repeated pledges that if the talks produced a draft treaty he would put it to a referendum. Analysts said the negotiations, announced by Kerry, were doomed to fail, while cabinet ministers and senior officials reacted with caution and even outright opposition to the plan. "I am against a Palestinian state," Transport Minister Yisrael Katz, a member of Netanyahu's own Likud party, told AFP on his way into a cabinet meeting. "I can (only) support starting talks that are not preconditioned on the 1967 borders or a settlement freeze," he said.



Housing Minister Uri Ariel told Maariv he opposed a settlement freeze. Palestinians have long demanded that peace talks be based on the 1967 lines that existed before Israel occupied the West Bank, and have stressed that settlement building in the territory must be frozen before they would resume talks. Due to the lack of detail about the peace talks, speculation is swirling as to how exactly Kerry managed to convince the two sides to agree to come together. "There is no Israeli declaration that the basis for the talks is the 1967 borders, there is no freeze of construction in any kind in (the West Bank), and there is no prisoner release before the talks begin," Yediot quoted an Israeli official as saying. It reported that Netanyahu might have agreed to an "unofficial" settlement freeze. The Palestinians too remained cautious. Former negotiator Uri Savir, who led Israel's team at the talks leading up to the 1993 Oslo Accord, told BBC radio on Sunday that he thinks the planned talks do indeed have merit. Casting aside the doubts, he likened Kerry's efforts to those of "Superman".



Women hold banners as they attend a rally honoring Trayvon Martin in Manhattan in New York City on Saturday. Demonstrators rallied in many cities across the country to protest the acquittal of neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman and press for his federal prosecution in the shooting death of teenager Trayvon Martin. Inset, singer Beyonce, left, meets with mother of Trayvon.

Wave of blasts kills 65 in Iraq

A wave of bombings killed 65 people in Baghdad province, officials said, as Iraq struggles to contain its worst violence since 2008, in which over 520 have died this month. Twelve car bombs and a roadside bomb hit the city of Baghdad on Saturday night, while another bomb exploded in Madain to the south of the capital, a police colonel and a medical official said. The blasts also wounded 190 people. The bombs struck as Baghdad residents turned out to shop and relax in cafes after iftar, the meal that breaks the daily fast during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. In the deadliest incidents, two car bombs killed 12 people in the Karrada, while two car bombs and a roadside bomb hit Zafraniyah, both areas in central Baghdad.

BJP virtually anoints Modi as PM candidate

Ruling himself out of the Indian prime ministerial race, BJP president Rajnath Singh yesterday virtually anointed Narendra Modi as its man to the top job if the party comes to power after the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. He also claimed that the party will get more allies nearer elections and after the polls too. The developmental issues rather than the Ram Janma Bhoomi dispute would dominate BJP's poll campaign. "It's not necessary that party president should also be a crowd puller and a prime ministerial candidate. I have an assignment to do for my party. I have a job to deliver -- that is victory of the party in the 2014 elections." "Seven months before the elections, I have nominated Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as Chairman of the party's Election Campaign Committee. What is unusual in that? We have nominated Modi like other parties do and why read between lines. I have named him as campaign head in view of his image, popularity and commitment to the party," he told a press conference here at the start of his five-day trip to New York and Washington. Giving all indications that it could be Modi who is the prime ministerial candidate, Singh said the chief minister is the certainly the most popular and tallest leader of India now. "He is a crowd puller not only in Gujarat but also in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar -- from North to South, East to West. He is one single leader with a national appeal. His popularity will help the party in the elections," he said.



Pioneering journo Helen Thomas dies

Helen Thomas, the long-time dean of the White House press corps who covered US presidents from John F. Kennedy to Barack Obama, died Saturday. She was 92. From her front row seat in the White House press room, Thomas was a formidable, sharp-tongued inquisitor of every US president she covered. Thomas' passing triggered a torrent of tributes, including one from Obama. "Helen was a true pioneer, opening doors and breaking down barriers for generations of women in journalism," he said in a statement. Thomas began covering the White House for United Press International in the early 1960s, one of only a few women in a male-dominated Washington press corps. The daughter of Lebanese immigrants, she had a strong interest in the Middle East and was a fierce defender of Palestinian rights. She also was critical of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Syria's Assad is stronger now, says British PM

David Cameron has admitted the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, has strengthened his position in recent months as he warned that the country faced a "depressing trajectory". In an interview on the Andrew Marr Show on BBC1, the UK prime minister also gave his clearest indication to date that Britain will not be supplying arms to the Syrian rebels despite pressing for the lifting of the EU arms embargo. Cameron insisted he was still committed to helping the Syrian opposition but he admitted that its numbers included "a lot of bad guys". He also acknowledged that Assad had strengthened his position. The prime minister said: "I think he may be stronger than he was a few months ago, but I'd still describe the situation as a stalemate. And yes, you do have problems with part of the opposition that is extreme, that we should have nothing to do with." But Cameron said that it would be wrong

US court renews spy program

A secret US court has renewed the government's authority to carry out a controversial phone surveillance program exposed by fugitive intelligence leaker Snowden. The panel's decision, made public Friday in an unprecedented move, extends the program, which affects millions of Americans, by three months, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, or ODNI, said in a statement. Set up in 1978 after the Watergate scandal, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court consists of 11 judges nominated for seven years by the president and the Supreme Court.

Woman 'raped', then jailed in Dubai

A Norwegian sentenced to 16 months in jail in Dubai for having sex outside marriage after she reported an alleged rape has said she decided to speak out in hopes of drawing attention to the risks of outsiders misunderstanding the Islamic-influenced legal codes in this cosmopolitan city. The case has drawn outrage from rights groups and others in the West since the 24-year-old interior designer was sentenced on Wednesday. "I have to spread the word. ... After my sentence we thought, 'How can it get worse?'" she told AP in an interview at a Norwegian aid compound in Dubai where she is preparing her appeal scheduled for early September. The Norwegian, who worked for an interior design firm in Qatar since 2011, claims she was sexually assaulted by a co-worker in March while she was attending a business meeting in Dubai. She called the police and was given a medical examination seeking evidence of the alleged rape and underwent a blood test for alcohol. She was detained for four days after being accused of having sex outside marriage, which is outlawed in the UAE though the law is not actively enforced for tourists as well as hundreds of thousands of Westerners and others on resident visas. She managed to reach her stepfather in Norway. Norwegian diplomats later secured her release and she has been allowed to remain at the Norwegian Seamen's Center in central Dubai.