

Israel plans 1,400 new settlements

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel will reveal plans to build 1,400 settler homes in the West Bank and in east Jerusalem to coincide with the weekend release of Palestinian prisoners, military radio said yesterday.

A third batch of Palestinian prisoners is due to be released tomorrow as part of conditions that Israel agreed to when it committed to resume US-brokered peace talks with the Palestinians in July.

Palestinians have warned that new settlements would destroy the fragile peace process.

Military radio said 600 new housing units would be built in the existing settlement in east Jerusalem, a mostly Arab sector annexed by Israel, while the remainder would be constructed in West Bank settlements.

Israel has come in for repeated criticism from the United States and most of the international community for pressing ahead with a drive to build Jewish settlements on land

Palestinians want for their future state. Netanyahu last week said nothing would stop his government from pushing ahead with the constructions.

Erdogan under fire

3 more MPS quit AKP govt as resignation demand intensifies; army rules out coup

AFP, Ankara

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was being battered on all fronts yesterday, as a graft scandal savaging his government sparked party resignations, fresh street protests and pushed the currency to a record low.

But the premier, who is credited with a decade of economic prosperity in Turkey despite increasingly being seen as autocratic, was defiantly holding on to power, even as the stakes piled up.

He told supporters of his Islamic-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) that the corruption probe, which has already taken down part of his cabinet and several high-profile political and business figures, was a "smear campaign" orchestrated by outside forces.

Yesterday, three lawmakers quit the AKP. One of them, former culture minister Ertugrul Gunay, said the party was being directed by "arrogance".

Later, rallies were held in Ankara and Istanbul with protesters yelling "Government, resign!".

In Istanbul, police fired water cannon and plastic bullets to disperse hundreds of demonstrators.

In Ankara, some protesters were seen holding up empty shoe boxes -- a reference to media images of boxes stuffed with cash found

at the homes of one of the corruption suspects. Erdogan has tried to contain the fall-out, but to little avail.

On Wednesday, after his interior, economy and environment resigned -- with the latter also calling for the premier to follow suit -- Erdogan reshuffled nearly half his cabinet.

He has also ordered the firing of dozens of police chiefs and decreeing that investigating police to inform their superiors before launching investigations demanded by public prosecutors.

One public prosecutor on Thursday said police and prosecution chiefs were blocking the expanding inquiry by refusing to carry out arrest warrants.

But Turkey's top court yesterday blocked the government decree, which it said would cause "irrevocable

damage". Pro-government media had suggested the corruption inquiry could be a setup to trigger a military coup.

But the army, seen as guarantor of the country's secular traditions, made it clear yesterday that it would not get involved.

"The Turkish Armed Forces do not want to get involved in political debates," the army said in a statement posted on its website.

The backdrop to the crisis is a power struggle between Erdogan and former ally Fethullah Gulen, a US-based Turkish cleric who is hugely influential at home and

GRAFT SCAM



Tayyip Erdogan

Fight rages on in South Sudan for control

AFP, Juba

Government forces and rebels in South Sudan were battling for control Friday of a key oil town as regional powers met in an effort to broker an end to the worsening civil war.

Witnesses reported heavy fighting overnight in Malakal, capital of the oil-producing Upper Nile State, and both government forces allied to President Salva Kiir and rebels loyal to ex-vice president Riek Machar insisted they were in control after days of street battles.

In Nairobi, regional leaders gathered for a fresh attempt to draw up a peace plan that could broker an end to the nearly two weeks of fighting, which has left thousands dead and tens of thousands of others seeking protection with the UN amid a wave of ethnic violence.

The United Nations meanwhile announced extra troops and "critical assets" like helicopters would be on the ground by today. The fighting started on December 15 after Kiir accused Machar, whom he sacked in July, of attempting a coup. Machar denied this, and said the president was exploiting a clash between members of the army as a pretext to carry out a purge.



In this photograph, right, taken on February 28, 2002, an Bajrang Dal activist armed with a iron stick shouts anti-Islamic slogans in Ahmedabad. Left, Narendra Modi.

I was 'shaken to the core'

Modi voices grief, opens up on Gujarat riots

AFP, New Delhi

India's fiery opposition candidate for premier, Narendra Modi, yesterday voiced his "grief" and "misery" over deadly 2002 anti-Muslim riots that swept his home state of Gujarat after he became chief minister.

Modi, in his frankest statement to date about the riots that have dogged him in his quest to become prime minister in looming national elections, said in a blog he was "shaken to the core" by the violence.

As many as 2,000 people, mainly Muslims, were hacked, burnt and shot to death in the riots 11 years ago, according to human rights activists.

"Grief, sadness, misery, pain, anguish, agony -- mere words could not capture the absolute emptiness one felt on witnessing such inhumanity," Modi, named by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as its candidate for premier, wrote.

"This is the first time I am sharing the



PHOTO: AFP

harrowing ordeal I had gone through in those words at a personal level," he added.

Modi's leadership of the state during the riots remains a contentious issue in the run-up to the elections. The 64-year-old, tipped in opinion polls to become India's next prime minister in general elections due in May, has been accused of being slow to stamp out the violence. But Modi denied the charge.

The 2002 violence erupted after a train carrying Hindu devotees was torched in Gujarat, prompting a wave of Hindu-led reprisal attacks against Muslims. A 2005 inquiry concluded the train fire was accidental.

Modi's statements came a day after a Gujarat court found no evidence he conspired with other government officials to stoke the violence and had told them to allow Hindu anger turn to bloodshed.

The ruling national Congress party, routed in a recent string of state polls, has sought to depict Modi as a strident Hindu nationalist unfit to rule a secular india.

NEWSIN brief

6 more Greenpeace activists leave Russia

AFP, Saint Petersburg

Five British Greenpeace activists and one Canadian flew out of Russia yesterday following an amnesty which halted their prosecution for a protest against oil drilling in the Arctic, the environmental group said. The activists took off on a plane heading for Paris from Saint Petersburg's

Three Nato personnel killed in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

A Taliban suicide attacker detonated an explosives-packed car next to a Nato military convoy in Kabul yesterday, killing three Nato personnel and injuring at least four civilian passers-by, officials said. The blast in the Afghan capital left the twisted remains of the attacker's car spread across the scene along with several other badly-damaged vehicles,

Kejriwal to take metro on oath day

AFP, New Delhi

Arvind Kejriwal, the leader of an upstart anti-corruption party, yesterday said he will take a metro train to the public grounds where he is to be sworn in as New Delhi's chief minister. Kejriwal's decision to use public transport echoes his pre-poll promise to end the VIP culture of Delhi's political elite and set a down-to-earth tone for his

29 killed in Thailand bus accident

AFP, Bangkok

A bus carrying 40 New Year travellers plunged off one of Thailand's highest bridges in the kingdom's northeast, leaving at least 29 people dead, police said yesterday. The accident occurred around early yesterday. No foreigners

Floods, landslides kill 44 in Brazil

AFP, Brasilia

At least 44 people have died and more than 60,000 have been left homeless following torrential rain in southeast Brazil over the past few weeks, officials said Thursday. In Espirito Santo state, Civil Defense officials reported a total of 27 fatalities in what they described as the worst rains in 90 years.



BEIRUT BLAST

Lebanese security forces inspect the scene of a huge car bomb explosion that rocked central Beirut, yesterday. Top left, Security forces and people react just after the blast and bottom right, fire fighters try to extinguish fire. Lebanon's coalition opposed to the Syrian regime implied Damascus and its Shia ally Hezbollah were behind the blast that killed six people, including Mohamed Chatah (Shatah), former finance minister and adviser to Lebanese ex-premier Saad Hariri. Damascus denied the accusation.

PHOTO: AFP

He was strong till the end

Man who oversaw Saddam's hanging recalls his last moments

AFP, Baghdad

Mowaffak al-Rubaie sits in his office with a statue of Saddam Hussein behind him, the rope used to hang the dictator around its neck, recalling his final minutes.

The former national security advisor, who oversaw Saddam's 2006 execution, said he remained strong until the end, and never expressed any regret.

"A criminal? True. A killer? True. A butcher? True. But he was strong until the end.

"I received him (Saddam) at the door. No one entered with us -- no foreigners, and no Americans," Rubaie said in an interview with AFP at his office in the Kadhimiyah area of north Baghdad, near the prison where the execution took place 7 years ago.

"He was wearing a jacket and a white shirt, normal and relaxed, and I didn't see any signs of fear. "Of course, some people want me to say that he collapsed or that he was drugged, but these facts are for history," Rubaie said.

"I didn't hear any regret from him, I didn't hear any request for mercy from God from him, or request for pardon.

Saddam Hussein, who ruled Iraq for more than two decades marked by brutal repression, disastrous wars and punishing international sanctions, was hanged after being found guilty of crimes against humanity for the 1982 killing of 148 Shia villagers in Dujail.

He was president from July 1979 until the March 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, and was found by American forces hiding in a hole on a farm in December of that year.

Saddam was executed three years later on December 30, 2006 after a summary trial.



The picture shows a bust of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and the actual rope used to hang him.

Deadly clashes erupt across Egypt

3 killed, 256 arrested after Islamists defy terror law

AFP, Cairo

Three men were killed and nearly 265 pro-Islamist protesters were arrested as clashes erupted across Egypt yesterday, after authorities outlawed rallies by the Muslim Brotherhood, now designated a terrorist group.

Riot police fired tear gas at stone-throwing protesters in several cities, swiftly clamping down on rallies after the midday Friday prayers, the usual time for Islamist demonstrations.

The military-installed government has banned protests by Brotherhood members demanding the reinstatement of deposed president Mohamed Morsi, after listing the movement as a terrorist organisation on Wednesday.

Interior ministry spokesman Hany Abdel Latif told AFP police were investigating the deaths. He accused the protesters of using firearms and petrol bombs.

Smoke rose from Al-Azhar university's student dormitory in Cairo as police fired tear gas against protesters pelting them with rocks from inside the building, AFP correspondents said.

Pussy Riot punk wants Khodorkovsky in power

AFP, Moscow

A freed member of the Pussy Riot punk band yesterday said the rockers still wanted Russian President Vladimir Putin out of power, adding she would like freed ex-tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky to stand in elections and replace him.

"As far as Vladimir Putin is concerned, our attitude towards him has not changed," Nadezhda Tolokonnikova said alongside her bandmate Maria Alyokhina, speaking at their first news conference since their release earlier this week.

"We would still like to do what they put us in jail for. We would still like to drive him out."

In February 2012, several members of Pussy Riot jumped around the altar of the church and attempted to sing what they called a "punk prayer" calling on the Virgin Mary to "drive Putin out."



Maria

She said she would like Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who was last week released under a pardon, to run for president.

Asked at the news conference to describe Putin, Tolokonnikova said he was "closed, non-transparent".

Their release two months early from their two-year prison terms came after an amnesty backed by Putin.



Nadezhda

Japan town agrees to relocate US base

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese officials in Okinawa yesterday approved the long-stalled relocation of a controversial US military base, a breakthrough that could remove a running sore in relations between Tokyo and Washington.

More than 17 years after the two allies agreed to move the US Marines' Futenma Air Station from a densely populated urban area, the local government has finally consented to a landfill that will enable new facilities to be built on the coast.

The agreement will burnish the credentials of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in the US, possibly taking some of the sting out of American criticism of his provocative visit Thursday to a war shrine seen by China and Korea as a symbol of Japanese militarism.

The issue has been deadlocked for years, with huge opposition to any new base among Okinawans fed up with playing host to an outsized share of the US military presence in Japan, and who want it moved off the island altogether.

The deal gives the go-ahead for landfill near Camp Schwab on the east of the island, one of a number of large tracts of land the US military uses. Two runways will be



shows like the BBC's Sherlock and CBS's Elementary.

But a quirk in US copyright law which protected ten short stories in the vast Holmes canon had allowed the descendants of author Arthur Conan Doyle to retain intellectual property rights in the US.

Holmes scholar Leslie Klinger, who challenged the estate, celebrated the ruling.

"Sherlock Holmes belongs to the world."

"People want to celebrate Holmes and Watson. Now they can do so without fear of suppression by Conan