

Morsi trial over Egypt jailbreak set for Jan 28

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's deposed president Mohamed Morsi and 130 others, including Hamas members, will go on trial on January 28 over a jailbreak during the 2011 uprising, judicial sources said yesterday.

The prosecution said last month there were a total of 132 defendants, all of whom were also accused of murdering police officers.

The trial, set to begin exactly three years after the prison break, will be the third for Morsi on various charges, amid a crackdown on his Islamist Muslim Brotherhood movement following his July ouster by the army.

Prosecutors claim that Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah and jihadist militants attacked prisons and police stations during the first few days of the revolt against Hosni Mubarak, killing policemen and helping thousands to escape.

Morsi is already on trial for allegedly inciting the killings of opposition activists during his one year in power. And he is being tried separately for espionage involving Hamas.

Myanmar leader backs charter amendment

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's leader yesterday lent his support to reform of the country's junta-era constitution, indicating he would back changes to allow opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to become president.

Thein Sein, a former general who has won international praise for dramatic reforms since he became president in 2011, said lively debate about revising the charter showed increasing "political maturity".

"I believe that a healthy constitution must be amended from time to time to address the national, economic, and social needs of our society," he said in a speech published in the English-language New Light of Myanmar newspaper.

He said he supported amending provisions which exclude anyone whose spouse or children are overseas citizens from becoming president -- a clause widely believed to be targeted at Suu Kyi whose two sons are British.

America's first retail marijuana stores open

AFP, Denver

Marijuana users celebrated Wednesday as Colorado became the first US state to allow retail cannabis sales, putting it in the vanguard of efforts across the country to legalize the drug.

The western state famous for its ski resorts and breathtaking mountain vistas has issued 348 retail licenses -- including for small pot shops -- that can sell up to 28 grams of pot to people aged 21 or older.

Washington state on the Pacific Coast will follow Colorado several months from now, when it also allows stores to begin selling cannabis.

Iraq war veteran Sean Azzariti was the first person to legally purchase cannabis for recreational use in the United States.

"It's an absolute honor, I couldn't be happier. It's a huge stepping stone for other states as well, so it's a huge honor, to say the least," Azzariti told reporters.

Azzariti, who has campaigned to legalize weed, said marijuana helps alleviate his post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.

As America's attitudes on marijuana use evolve, Colorado and Washington legalized recreational consumption of the drug in November 2012 referendums, but the new rules coming into force allow cannabis shops.

Washington state is expected to open more than 300 pot shops in June.

Israel ex-prime minister Ariel Sharon's 'life in danger'

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE



Ariel Sharon

Former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, who has been in a coma for eight years, was in critical condition yesterday, clinging to life after a decline in the functioning of various bodily organs, his doctors said.

Dr Zeev Rotstein, director of Tel Hashomer hospital, said Sharon's condition had deteriorated over the past two days and that a number of vital organs, including his kidneys, were suffering from "critical malfunction".

"He is in critical condition and his life is definitely in danger," Rotstein told reporters. "The feeling of the doctors treating him and also that of the family with him is that there is a turn for the worse."

He said Sharon's family is at his bedside.

Sharon, 85, suffered a devastating stroke on 4 January 2006, five years after being

elected prime minister. He spent months in hospital in Jerusalem before being transferred to a long-term care facility at Sheba medical centre near Tel Aviv.

Last January, doctors said the former prime minister had exhibited "robust activity" in his brain during tests. Scans showed Sharon responding to pictures of his family and recordings of his son's voice. However, doctors said the chances of him regaining consciousness were almost zero.

Four months ago, Sharon underwent surgery to insert a new feeding tube, through which he receives fluids.

A former military general, Sharon was a hardline rightwinger in political office. But in 2005 he ordered the unilateral withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip, a move many considered a dramatic change in his

NEW YEAR'S CELEBRATION 'Only' 1,067 vehicles torched in France

AFP, Paris

Some 1,067 vehicles were torched in France over New Year's Eve, Interior Minister Manuel Valls announced, a marked drop from last year in what has become a turn-of-the-year tradition in rundown areas.

Every year, the night of December 31 to January 1 sees hundreds of cars set ablaze across the country in an orgy of vandalism -- as much a tradition as champagne and oysters in more affluent parts of France.

Briefing reporters late on Wednesday, Valls said the number of cars torched over this New Year's Eve had dropped by more than 10 percent.

Authorities had stopped publishing official figures on the number of burnt cars after it was discovered a district-by-district breakdown was fuelling a destructive competition between rival gangs. But last year, Valls had promised to publish the figures again.

Some 53,000 policemen were deployed across the country during New Year's Eve to try and avoid any violence, but three people were knifed and died, including one in Paris.

Mystery shrouds Palestinian envoy's death in Prague

AFP, Prague

Czech and Palestinian investigators were probing yesterday the mysterious death of the Palestinian envoy to Prague, who was killed by an exploding safe.

Czech police have said they believe the blast was caused by the accidental detonation of an anti-theft device on the safe at the envoy's residence rather than an attack.

"A mystery," read the front-page headline of MF DNES, the top-selling Czech broadsheet daily.

Jamal al-Jamal, 56, who had been in the post of ambassador only since October, suffered fatal injuries to his head, chest and stomach in the explosion.

His 52-year-old wife was treated for smoke inhalation in hospital but discharged on Wednesday.

"The safe that exploded was in almost

everyday use," said Palestinian embassy spokesman Nabil al-Fahel.

"The safe was pretty old, it was purchased in mid-1980s and according to our information there was no built-in anti-theft system," he said, adding that the embassy was in the process of moving to new premises.

Asked what he thought had caused the blast, Fahel said: "We don't know exactly, we're waiting for the outcome of the investigation."

A special Palestinian team is in Prague to help investigate the death of Jamal, a member of the ruling Palestinian Fatah party who served as a diplomat in Bulgaria and Egypt as well as the Czech Republic.

The Palestinian foreign ministry said the blast occurred on Wednesday as Jamal was opening the safe. He was taken to hospital with serious injuries and was operated on but later died.



PHOTO: AFP

ANTARCTIC SHIP RESCUE

These pictures taken yesterday shows a helicopter picking up the first batch of passengers from the stranded Russian ship MV Akademik Shokalskiy as another batch prepares for airlift, inset. All 52 passengers were airlifted from the icebound vessel by a helicopter from a Chinese icebreaker and are safe on board an Australian supply ship, rescuers said. The Akademik Shokalskiy has been stuck in ice since December 24, 100 nautical miles east of the French base Dumont d'Urville, with several icebreaking attempts failing to reach it.

73,000 killed in Syria war in 2013

AFP, Beirut

More than 73,000 people were killed in Syria in 2013, the bloodiest year yet in the brutal civil war that began in March 2011, an NGO said on Wednesday.

The tally from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights came as renewed regime air strikes in the northern city of Aleppo killed at least five people. The group said it considered the international community "a partner in the shedding of the blood of the Syrian people" because it had failed to take "serious action" to stop the war.

The Britain-based group said it had documented the deaths of 73,455 people between January 1, 2013 and December 31, 2013, including 22,436 civilians. More than 130,000 people had been killed since the rebellion began, it said.

The group slammed the international community, saying it "failed to take serious action to stop the massacres that have been committed and continue to be committed".

9% young British 'have nothing to live for'

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Hundreds of thousands of young people feel they have nothing to live for, with the long-term unemployed being particularly pessimistic about their prospects, a youth charity has warned.

The warning is based on the findings of a YouGov poll for the Prince's Trust Macquarie Youth Index, which also reports that 40% of jobless young people have experienced symptoms of mental illness, such as suicidal thoughts, or feelings of self-loathing and panic attacks, due to their unemployment.

Of those polled, 9% said they did not "have anything to live for". This statistic, if applied to the population as a whole, equates to 750,000 people aged between 16 and 25, the Prince's Trust said.

The situation was found to be worse among the long-term unemployed (those unemployed for six months or more), with 21% agreeing.

Paul Brown, Prince's Trust director, said: "We need to recognise that unemployment doesn't just lead to economic disadvantage for young people but can scar them."

There are more than 900,000 unemployed people aged 16 to 24 in Britain.

Of those polled, 281 were not in employment, education or training and 166 had been unemployed

Huge blast kills four in Beirut

AFP, Beirut

A car bomb killed four people in southern Beirut yesterday, the fourth attack to hit the Hezbollah bastion since the Shia group announced its intervention in Syria last year, the health minister said.

The bombing came just weeks after a twin suicide bombing killed 25 people at the Iranian embassy in the same area and marked a new breach of the tight security in Hezbollah's stronghold in the capital's southern suburbs.

Hezbollah's public confirmation last April that its fighters had intervened in the Syrian civil war alongside President Bashar al-Assad's forces has deepened sectarian divisions between Shias and Sunnis, most of whom sympathise with the rebels.

"The toll from the terrorist explosion in Haret Hreik is four killed and 65 wounded," Health Minister Ali Hassan Khalil said in a statement carried by the official National News Agency.

Earlier, a ministry source had reported five killed.

The blast hit the busy Al-Arid Street commercial district. Panicked residents scurried around the streets as Al-Manar broadcast warnings to leave the area for fear of further bombs.

The National News Agency reported that the explosion was caused by an explosives-packed four-wheel-drive vehicle.