

DEADLY ATTACK ON COPS
Outcry as 188 sentenced to death in Egypt

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian court condemned 188 people to death Tuesday over a deadly attack on police, as the prosecution said it will appeal the acquittal of ex-president Hosni Mubarak over protester deaths.

Global rights groups Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International slammed Egypt yesterday over the mass death sentencing.

The accused, of whom 143 are behind bars, were found guilty of taking part in an August 14, 2013 attack on a police station in Kerdassa, a village on the outskirts of Cairo, killing 13 policemen.

The attack took place on the same day security forces violently dismantled two massive pro-Morsi protest camps in Cairo in an operation that led to clashes in which at least 700 lost their lives.

Death sentences in Egypt are subject to approval by the mufti, the country's highest Muslim religious authority. The verdict is to be confirmed or commuted on January 24.

Since the army deposed Morsi last year, at least 1,400 of his supporters have been killed in a crackdown on protests and hundreds sentenced to death in swift trials.

The UN human rights office said Tuesday that Egypt must rein in its security forces and investigate rights abuses against protesters.

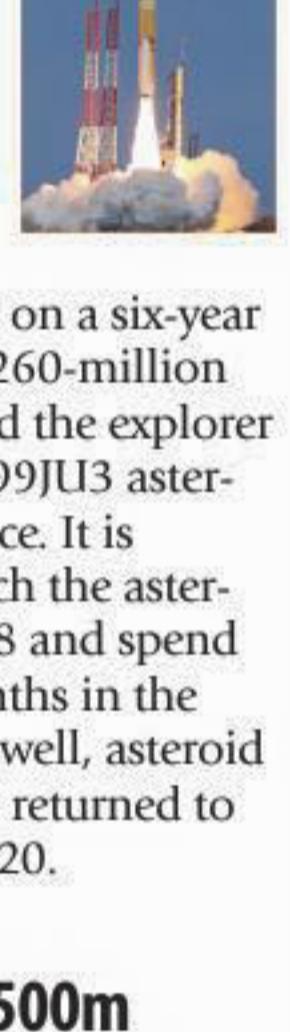
It said it was deeply concerned by "the seriously damaging lack of accountability for human rights violations committed by security forces in the context of demonstrations".

The sentences came as the public prosecutor's office said it will appeal a court decision to drop a murder charge against Mubarak over the deaths of protesters during the 2011 uprising that drove him from power.

NEWS IN brief

Japan launches asteroid probe

AFP, Tokyo



EU releases 500m euros in aid to Ukraine

AFP, Brussels

The European Union released 500 million euros in loans to Ukraine yesterday, the latest portion of a 1.6 billion aid programme launched in March to rescue an almost bankrupt Kiev government. The expected payout comes a day after Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko unveiled a new government tasked with pushing through anti-corruption reforms, a key condition of the EU's loan programme.

Israel to hold snap election on March 17

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli political leaders yesterday agreed to hold a snap election next March, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gambling on gains for the right and his return to power. Parliament's spokesman said the vote would be held on March 17, after Netanyahu tore apart his fractious coalition government by firing two centrist ministers and calling for the early election.

US welcomes Iran strikes on ISIS

Anti-jihadist coalition reports significant progress; Kerry says years of war ahead

AFP, Brussels

US Secretary of State John Kerry yesterday welcomed any Iranian military action against Islamic State jihadists in Iraq as "positive" after the Pentagon said Tehran had carried out air strikes against the group.

Kerry, hosting a meeting of an anti-ISIS coalition in Brussels, said international airstrikes were finally stopping the advance of the jihadists across Iraq and Syria, but warned it could take years to finally defeat them.

But in a sign of the deepening complexity of the regional conflagration, Syria's Iranian-backed President Bashar al-Assad criticised the Western and Arab air strikes for having no effect.

Kerry told the meeting of officials from 60 states in the coalition that a campaign of around 1,000 strikes had had a "significant" impact on the Sunni extremist ISIS, which declared a caliphate in Syria and Iraq in June.

He denied there was any military coordination with Iran, after



John Kerry sits next to Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi during a meeting of the anti-ISIS coalition in Brussels, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

the Pentagon said earlier that Iranian F-4 Phantom jets -- acquired from the United States before the 1979 Islamic revolution -- had deployed against ISIS fighters in eastern Iraq's Diyala province.

But he suggested there is a tacit understanding between mainly Shia Iran and the United States to tackle a common threat.

"If Iran is taking on (ISIS) in

some particular place... and it has an impact, then it's going to be net effect (that) is positive," Kerry told a press conference after the meeting.

Iran refused to confirm or deny carrying out any such strikes.

Iranian forces have been active on the ground in Iraq assisting Shia militia and Baghdad government units, but this was the first time the United States had said the

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Iranian air force was taking part.

The coalition issued a statement saying that the militant group's "advance across Syria and

most prestigious centres of Sunni Islam learning, yesterday condemned "barbaric crimes" committed by ISIS.

Militants are acting "under the guise of this holy religion and have given themselves the name 'Islamic State' in an attempt to export their false Islam," Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb told the opening session of a two-day international conference in Cairo on fighting extremism.

Meanwhile, an Iraqi official has denied that the mystery woman detained in Lebanon is the wife of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi, despite the Lebanese government's claims.

Following the announcement of the woman's capture, Lebanese authorities claimed that a child travelling with her - a daughter or son depending on reports - had been DNA tested and was a positive match for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the shadowy ISIS leader. Instead the Iraqi official identified her as the sister of Omar Abdul Hamid al-Dulaimi, who is being held in Iraq as a

terror suspect.

They also agreed to develop a "multifaceted" strategy to combat ISIS, including stopping the flow of foreign fighters, cutting finance and "delegitimisation" of its powerful, social media-driven brand.

Meanwhile

the head of

Egypt's Al-Azhar, one of the



West trying to topple Rajapakse
Claims Sri Lanka ruling party
AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's ruling party yesterday expressed fears of a "Western conspiracy" to topple President Mahinda Rajapakse who faces an unexpected challenge at upcoming polls from his former health minister.

Plantations Minister Mahinda Samarasinghe said unnamed Western nations were trying to destabilise the country and were secretly backing Maithripala Sirisena, who quit the government last month to mount a challenge against his one-time boss.

Rajapakse, the region's longest serving ruler, called the election for January 8, two years ahead of schedule in a bid for an unprecedented third term.

"There is a systematic campaign to destabilise Sri Lanka," said Samarasinghe, who is also Rajapakse's special envoy on human rights. "Maithripala Sirisena entering as a candidate is part of that Western conspiracy."

Sri Lanka faces international censure over Colombo's failure to investigate allegations that its troops killed up to 40,000 ethnic minority Tamil civilians in the final stages of the separatist war in 2009.

Rajapakse has used criticism of his resistance to a UN-mandated probe into the allegations to strengthen his nationalistic credentials among the ethnic majority Sinhalese community.

Samarasinghe did not name the countries responsible for the alleged conspiracy, but he discounted reports that neighbouring India was behind the move.

Islamists kill 150 in Nigeria

AFP, Kano

More than 150 people, including 38 police, were killed in a dawn raid by Boko Haram on the northeast Nigerian city of Damaturu this week, emergency services said yesterday.

The violence on Monday saw intense fighting on the streets of the Yobe state capital and coincided with a double female suicide bombing in the main city of neighbouring Borno state, Maiduguri.

Both states have been at the epicentre of the militants' five-year insurgency but the attacks were another sign of rising violence as the group tries to carve out a separate Islamic state.

Boko Haram was meanwhile said to have launched two separate attacks in Borno in the wake of the failed Damaturu raid, which saw the authorities impose a 24-hour curfew.

The attack in Konduga left scores of militants dead, according to a military source and a civilian vigilante, while one resident said many civilians were

NIGERIA UNREST

Explosions and gunfire Monday in suspected Boko Haram attack



feared killed in the town of Lassa.

But there was no independent corroboration of the death tolls in either incident.

Abdullahi Bego, spokesman for the Yobe state governor Ibrahim Gaidam, told AFP the curfew was lifted "following the return to normalcy".

During the lockdown, rescue workers brought 115 bodies, all of them dressed in civilian clothing, to the Sani Abacha Specialist Hospital, a medical source said.

"Rescue teams are still looking in the bush around the city for more bodies. It's believed that people might have died from gunshot wounds while trying to flee," said the hospital worker.

Monday's raid came just hours before two female suicide bombers attacked a market in Maiduguri, less than a week after two other women hit the same location, killing more than 45.

The latest attacks followed an increasingly bloody pattern of mass casualty strikes, including one on Friday in which at least 120 were killed at the central mosque in the northern city of Kano.

Eat less meat to slow climate change: study

REUTERS, Rome

Meat and dairy consumption are rising rapidly across the developing world, and consumers are unaware that their appetite for animal products contributes as much to climate change as exhaust emissions from the transport sector, a new survey shows.

Climate-changing emissions from livestock are estimated to account for 14.5 percent of the global total, according to Chatham House, a UK-based thinktank.

A survey of 12,000 people in 12 countries released by Chatham House late on Tuesday showed that more than twice as many respondents saw transport exhaust emissions as a major contributor to climate change than saw emissions from meat and dairy output as important - 64 percent vs 29 percent.

Livestock consumption is set to

rise significantly over the next 40 years, particularly in large emerging markets including China, India, Brazil and South Africa, which were included in the survey.

"By 2050, we are looking at a 60-70 percent increase in meat consumption," Antony Froggatt, a senior research fellow at Chatham House, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Once consumers were aware of the implications for global warming of eating more meat, about 20 percent became more likely to express willingness to change their diet, according to the survey.

"It is unlikely dangerous climate change can be avoided unless (meat) consumption falls," Rob Bailey, lead author of the study, said in a statement. "Consumers need to change their behavior and this survey shows a substantial lack of awareness of this."

Ashton Carter likely next Pentagon chief

AFP, Washington

The former number-two ranking official at the Pentagon, Ashton Carter, will likely be named as the next US defense secretary, American media reported Tuesday.

President Barack Obama was poised to nominate Carter - a physicist turned national security policy wonk -- to replace outgoing Pentagon chief Chuck Hagel, "barring any last minute complications," CNN reported.

CNN cited several unnamed administration officials and The Washington Post also reported Obama would nominate Carter.

The White House declined to confirm or deny the reports but said Carter was on a "short list" of candidates and highlighted his qualifications for the post.

Hagel, the outgoing Pentagon chief, announced his resignation last week. Officials privately said he was forced out after losing the confidence of the White House, as the United States wages an air war against Islamic State jihadists in Iraq and Syria.

Carter, 60, has gained a reputation as an expert on hi-tech weapons and military budgets, portraying himself as a reformer intent on making the vast Pentagon bureaucracy more efficient.

A former professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, Carter served as the Pentagon's top weapons buyer from 2009 to 2011 and then as deputy defense secretary until 2013.



A car burns following a blast near the heavily fortified gates of the airport in Mogadishu, yesterday. At least four people were killed in Somalia's capital Mogadishu when a suicide bomber rammed a car packed with explosives into a UN convoy, police said.

PHOTO: AFP



Artificial intel could end mankind

Says Stephen Hawking
BBC ONLINE

Prof Stephen Hawking, one of world's pre-eminent scientists, has said that efforts to create thinking machines pose a threat to our very existence.

He told the BBC: "The development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race."

His warning came in response to a question about a revamp of the technology he uses to communicate, which involves a basic form of AI.

But others are less gloomy about AI's prospects.

The theoretical physicist, who has the motor neurone disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), is using a new system developed by Intel to speak.

Machine learning experts from the British company Swiftkey were also involved in its creation. Their technology, already employed as a smartphone keyboard app, learns how the professor thinks and suggests the words he might want to use next.

Prof Hawking says the primitive forms of artificial intelligence developed so far have already proved very useful, but he fears the consequences of creating something that can match or surpass humans.

"It would take off on its own, and re-design itself at an ever-increasing rate," he said.

Humans, who are limited by slow biological evolution, couldn't compete, and would be superseded."

TERRORISM LINK TO SARADHA MONEY Delhi contradicts Shah's claim

TNN, New Delhi

BJP chief Amit Shah's recent allegation that Saradha scam money was used to fund Burdwan blast has been contradicted by his own party's government at the Centre.

Indian PMO yesterday told Lok Sabha that investigations so far have not found any link between the two and money from Saradha scam has not crossed the border to fund terrorism.

The revelation was made on a question asked by BJP MPs Hari Manjhi and Prahlad Joshi.

They had asked whether the government had sought details of the probe into Saradha chit fund scam after reports indicated that part of the money was routed to Bangladesh to fund terror activities. They also asked whether CBI has come across such a transaction.

In reply, minister of state in the Prime Minister's Office Jitendra Singh said, "The investigation has so far not revealed any such transaction where money was routed to Bangladesh to fund terror activities."

As reported by this paper earlier, even NIA investigations into the Bardhaman

blast have not found any evidence to suggest what Shah alleged.

Amit Shah had on Sunday attacked Mamata government in a Kolkata rally and accused them of trying to shield the terrorists involved in the Burdwan blast. "TMC leaders are involved in this blast."

"Saradha chit fund's money was used in this blast, CBI is investigating this matter," Shah had said.

Accusing the Mamata government of protecting illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, Shah had said, "The people of West Bengal have elected you CM, not the infiltrators from Bangladesh. Stop giving them protection."

He also accused Mamata of trying to shield the accused in the Bardhaman blast case.

Addressing an Utthan Diwas (Day of Rising) function of the party, he accused Mamata of "toying with national security" for the sake of vote-bank and trying to block the National Investigation Agency (NIA) investigation into the case by raising questions of federalism.

The Trinamool Congress rubbished Shah's allegation.

2014 'hottest year on record'

AFP, Lima

This year may end as the hottest on record, the UN's weather agency said yesterday as it recounted a tale of rising seas, crippling droughts and floods since January.