

Court acquits Mubarak-era ministers of graft

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian court acquitted a former prime minister and an ex-interior minister of corruption charges in a retrial yesterday, the latest reversal of verdicts against officials who served under strongman Hosni Mubarak. Ex-premier Ahmed Nazif and former interior minister Habib al-Adly were sentenced to jail after Mubarak's 2011 overthrow for a deal to import licence plates from German company Utsch at an exorbitant price.

Yemen president retracts resignation

AFP, Aden

Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi has retracted his resignation after escaping house arrest in the militia-controlled capital, an aide said yesterday. The embattled leader had tendered his resignation last month after the Shiite militia, known as Huthis, seized the presidential palace and besieged his residence in Sanaa.

France to stiffen hate speech penalties

AFP, Paris

French President Francois Hollande vowed Monday to introduce tougher penalties for "racist, anti-Semitic or homophobic" remarks in the wake of last month's militant attacks in Paris. Speaking at an annual dinner hosted by the country's Jewish community, Hollande called for "faster, more effective sanctions" against hate speech and added: "I want such speech to come under criminal law rather than press laws."

Drones spotted flying over Paris landmarks

AFP, Paris

At least five drones were spotted flying over central Paris landmarks during the night and police were unable to catch the operators, sources close to the probe said yesterday. The country has been hit by a series of mysterious drone overflights at nuclear plants and more recently over the presidential palace, and the fresh sightings come at a time of heightened security following last month's jihadist attacks that left 17 people dead.

Indian Corporate spying: Ministry employee arrested

TNN, New Delhi

After TOI broke the story of the leaks scandal extending to ministry of defence and one of its staffer being questioned, the crime branch arrested him yesterday morning. The police had interrogated the employee, Virender, for more than six hours on Monday.

Turkey says Britain 'too late' to raise ISIS alarm

AFP, Ankara

Turkey accused Britain of being too late to inform the Turkish authorities over the departure to its territory of three teenage British girls feared to be on their way to Syria. Turkey has repeatedly been accused by its Western allies of failing to do enough to stop the transfer of jihadists, as well as their female companions, across its territory on their way to Syria.

Israeli troops kill Palestinian near Bethlehem

AFP, Bethlehem

Israeli troops have shot dead a 19-year-old Palestinian man during unrest at a refugee camp near the West Bank town of Bethlehem, Palestinian medics said yesterday. Jihad al-Jafari, a supporter of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah movement, was killed in an overnight confrontation at the Dheishah camp, the medics said.



A Pakistani civil society worker carries a photograph of Pakistan's army chief General Raheel Sharif during a peace rally in Islamabad yesterday. The country has stepped up its fight against militants since Taliban gunmen massacred more than 150 people, most of them children, at a school in Peshawar in December. Following the massacre, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif ended a six-year moratorium on the death penalty and has since hung a number of convicted terrorists, angering the militant groups.

PHOTO: AFP

Nasheed's arrest sparks int'l concern

Maldives ex-leader refused bail, denied legal access

AFP, Male

The United States and regional power India have voiced concern after former Maldives president Mohamed Nasheed was forcibly dragged into court to face terrorism charges and denied legal access and medical treatment.

Nasheed, who was ousted three years ago, was denied bail at a brief hearing on Monday after being arrested on what critics have labelled trumped-up charges.

The dramatic arrest came amid growing opposition to the government of President Abdulla Yameen, whose spokesman yesterday denied that the move was politically motivated.

"Everything is (happening) according to the law," spokesman Ibrahim Muaz Ali told AFP, rejecting international criticism over the handling of the case.

"This is an internal matter for the Maldives. We are an independent country since 1965."

Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party has said that what it called the "trumped-up charges of terrorism" are aimed at cracking down on the opposition before a planned protest rally on Friday.

The Maldives is a major tourist attraction, but political unrest has dented its image as a peaceful island paradise in recent years.

Ali's comments came after regional power India expressed concern over the "arrest and manhandling" of the country's first democratically elected leader.

India's foreign ministry said both sides should "resolve their differences within the constitutional and legal framework of Maldives".

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Nisha Biswal also voiced concern at Nasheed's arrest when she spoke to the Maldivian foreign minister at the weekend, a State Department spokeswoman said.

"She (Biswal) urged the government to take steps to restore confidence in... their commitment to democracy, judicial independence, and rule of law, including respect for the right to peaceful protest and respect for due process," spokeswoman Jen Psaki said.

The Commonwealth has also expressed concern, while Canada's Foreign Minister Rob Nicholson said the allegation of terrorism was "politically charged" and "abhorrent".



Bosnian women stand next to a makeshift memorial for legendary shoe-cleaner "uncle" Miso on a main street in Sarajevo on January 7, 2014. Sarajevans paid tribute to its legendary shoe-cleaner "uncle" Miso who died at the age of 83 after more than 60 years working on the streets, even during the 1992-1995 war. An empty wooden chair, covered with roses, stood in front of a fast-food restaurant in the main Sarajevo Tito avenue with a large photo portrait of the man who has become a symbol of the Bosnian capital.



PHOTO: AFP

WAR PLANE DEAL French defence minister in India

AFP, New Delhi

France's defence minister yesterday held talks with his Indian counterpart in a fresh attempt to seal a troubled deal to sell 126 Rafale fighter jets.

Jean-Yves Le Drian met his counterpart Manohar Parrikar behind closed doors during a brief visit to New Delhi aimed at preventing the collapse of the sale, which has been snagged for three years and now faces new questions over cost.

France is hoping to salvage the deal ahead of a visit to Paris by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in April, but neither side would immediately be drawn on whether any progress was made in Tuesday's talks.

French company Dassault Aviation won the right in January 2012 to enter exclusive negotiations with India to supply 126 Rafale fighters, with experts saying a final deal could be worth \$12 billion.

The idea is for Dassault to supply 18 of the twin-engine fighters later this year while the remaining 108 would be made by state-run Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd under technology transfer agreements with India.

But negotiations have proved fraught, both under Modi's government and its Congress predecessor, while a committee looking into the deal has reportedly found that it was not the cheapest option.

Le Drian's visit comes a week after France signed an agreement with Egypt for the first foreign sale of its Rafale fighters, which it hopes will prompt others to snap up its premier combat jet.

Paris is also eyeing possible deals with Qatar and Malaysia, although the Rafale has lost out to foreign competitors in South Korea, Singapore, Morocco, Switzerland and Brazil.

All out war with unlikely Says Putin; Foreign ministers urge 'total Ukraine ceasefire'

AFP, Paris

Foreign ministers from Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France yesterday called for a total ceasefire in eastern Ukraine as Russian President Vladimir Putin ruled out the "apocalyptic scenario" of all-out war.

Top diplomats from the four countries, whose leaders hammered out the initial peace plan in the Belarussian capital Minsk 12 days ago, met in Paris, with Kiev accusing Moscow and pro-Russian rebels on the ground of torpedoing the truce.

"We call for the strict implementation of all provisions of the Minsk accords starting with a total ceasefire and complete withdrawal of heavy weapons," French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said after three hours of talks.

The meeting honed in on the situation in the strategic transport hub of Debaltseve, which seized by pro-Russian rebels last week in defiance of the ceasefire -- meant to start February 15 -- as well as fresh rebel attacks on the port city of Mariupol.

"Unfortunately there was no political agreement on how to condemn what happened in Debaltseve," said Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin.

Fighting has dropped off significantly

since the rebel assault on Debaltseve but clashes still continue around strategic flashpoints in Ukraine's industrial east.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said the situation was "extremely fragile" after repeated violations of the ceasefire.

Ukraine's military said one soldier was killed and seven injured in the past 24 hours and that rebels had again tried to storm the village of Shyrokyne which lies east of Mariupol.

A rebel commander close to the village told AFP that three of his fighters were killed by Ukrainian bombardments Monday and that there was "daily fighting".

The continuing clashes have delayed a pull-back of heavy weapons that was due to start a week ago under the peace plan.

Kiev refuses to withdraw its big guns from the frontline until the shooting stops definitively.

The rebels have claimed several times that they have started to withdraw arms but this has not been confirmed by monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Steinmeier said starting to pull out heavy weapons would be a small step towards rebuilding shattered trust between the parties.



Govt firm on anti-terror

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Terming the armed forces a symbol of independence and sovereignty of the country, the PM said the government would do whatever was necessary for its development and welfare.

During her first tenure in office, she said, she took initiatives to expand the armed forces, and established a number of units following the Defence Policy 1974 framed by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Bangladesh's resources are limited, but its intention is to build up a strong, efficient and modern armed force within the available resources, the PM said, adding, "We need to put emphasis on advanced training and exercise to attain our aim."

Hasina, also chief of the ruling Awami League, expressed her hope that every institution would be

modernised to keep pace with the entire world. "We are hopeful that we would be able to achieve the goal," she told her audience.

The PM also said the main objective of her government was to boost living standards of people through establishing good governance at every sphere of national life.

Bangladesh believes in peaceful resolution of all bilateral, regional and international disputes in all corners of the world. "The basic principle of our foreign policy is: 'Friendship with all and malice towards none on the basis of equality'," she told the ceremony.

Alongside discharging the noble responsibility of protecting the country, the members of patriotic armed forces are also making significant contributions to the fields of tackling natural disasters and

other nation-building activities, Hasina said.

"Not only inside the country, members of our armed forces have also earned name and fame in foreign lands by their honesty, dedication and professional efficiency," she said.

The members of Bangladesh Armed Forces are contributing significantly to restore democracy in various countries under the emblem of UN mission. "Their success has brightened the image of Bangladesh," she noted.

With the passage of time, she said, Defence Services Command and Staff College has been acclaimed in the international arena as a unique military educational institution.

DSCSC Commandant Major General Sajjadul Haque delivered the welcome address at the function.

'IRAN A YEAR AWAY FROM NUKE BOMB' Leaks oppose Israel PM's claim

AFP, London

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's claim that Iran was a year away from making a nuclear bomb was contradicted by his secret services, according to reports Monday citing leaked documents.

The inconsistency was revealed in a cache of communications between South African intelligence services and their global partners -- including Israel's Mossad and America's CIA -- that were leaked to Qatar-based news network Al-Jazeera and Britain's The Guardian daily.

In 2012 Netanyahu told world leaders at the United Nations that Iran could create a nuclear weapon within a year, brandishing a diagram in the form of a lit bomb to indicate the advanced state of Tehran's development effort.

He warned the world that unless Iran was stopped, as of mid-2013 it would only need "a few months, or even a few weeks" of additional uranium enrichment activity to develop a bomb.

But weeks after the speech, Mossad shared a report with South African intelligence which concluded Iran was "not per-



forming the activity necessary to produce weapons," according to the Guardian.

The discrepancy, the paper said, "highlights the gulf between the public claims and rhetoric of top Israeli politicians and the assessments of Israel's military and intelligence establishment."

The revelations come at a politically sensitive moment as the United States, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany face a March 31 deadline to reach a deal with Iran to limit its nuclear programme in return for an easing of economic sanctions.



Conversion was Mother Teresa's real aim

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat says

TNN, Alwar

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat on Monday said that the prime motive behind Mother Teresa's service to the destitute was converting them to Christianity at a function in a village in Bharatpur, adding that her selfish aim devalued the virtues of a noble cause.

"It's good to work for a cause with selfless intentions. But Mother Teresa's work had ulterior motive, which was to convert the person who was being served to Christianity," said Bhagwat. "In the name of service, religious conversions were made. This was followed by other institutes, too," he said.

Bhagwat was overseeing the functioning of an NGO, Apna Ghar, and inaugurated a 'Mahila Sadan' and 'Sishu Bal Grah' for helpless women and children. He applauded their work and maintained that it was dedicated to the service of the poor and helpless.

At the function, former DGP of Border Security Force Prakash Singh, too, criticized Mother Teresa.

"There are many other organizations that have done far more good work than her. But Christians with the help of media were able to publicize their work," said Singh. He also mentioned that during his posting in the Northeast, he had witnessed forced conversion of tribal by Roman Catholics.

Mother Teresa's organization, 'Missionaries of Charity' works for the homeless and ailing across the country. The comments follow a series of attacks on Christian places of worship in Delhi and elsewhere.

US, Iran see 'progress' in nuke talks

AFP, Geneva

The United States and Iran said Monday they had made progress in the latest round of talks on Tehran's nuclear programme, but warned there was still a long way to go to seal a final deal.

Negotiators for Iran and six world powers had been meeting in Geneva since Friday, and plan further talks in Switzerland next week, a senior US administration official said.

"These were serious, useful and constructive discussions," the official said after US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif wrapped up two days of meetings in the lakeside city.

Zarif agreed. "Some progress was made on certain subjects, but there is still a long road ahead to reach a final agreement," Iranian media quoted him as saying.

As a March 31 deadline looms for reaching a political framework for a deal, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters in Washington that Kerry "could certainly participate at some point" in next week's negotiations, but she had nothing concrete to announce.

"These talks have been productive, there's still more work to do," Psaki insisted.

The so-called P5+1 group of Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States and Germany are trying to strike an accord that would prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear bomb.

In return, the West would ease punishing sanctions imposed on Tehran over its nuclear programme, which Iran insists is purely civilian in nature.