

NEWSIN

brief

'Infiltration': US citizen sentenced to 10 years

AFP, Tehran

A United States citizen accused of "infiltration" in Iran has been sentenced to 10 years in prison, a spokesman for the judiciary said yesterday. The individual, whose name was not provided, has appealed the sentence. The foreigner holds dual nationality of the United States and another country, an official said, promising to give more details once the appeals court confirms the sentence. US yesterday called on Iran to immediately release the US citizens and other foreigners detained on "fabricated" national security charges.

Border attack from Pak kills 2 Iranians

AFP, Tehran

Two Iranian civilians were killed in a cross-border attack by Pakistani insurgents, the Revolutionary Guards said. The insurgent group was not identified, but for years the region has been the site of frequent attacks by the Jaish al-Adl jihadist group, which Tehran says has links to Al-Qaeda and is based in the restive Pakistani province of Balochistan.

22 killed in China house fire; 1 held

AFP, Beijing

A man was arrested for allegedly setting ablaze a two-storey house in eastern China on Sunday, killing 22 people and injuring three, state media said. The suspect, named Jiang, is in police custody, the official Xinhua news agency reported. The fire broke out at around 4:30 am (2030 GMT) in Yushan Town north-west of Shanghai in Jiangsu province, before it was extinguished an hour later. Local police gave no further information on the suspect, Xinhua said. The three injured do not face life-threatening injuries, the agency added.



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan addresses his supporters during a ceremony marking the first anniversary of the attempted coup at the Presidential Palace in Ankara, Turkey, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Presidential surprise for mobile users

AFP, Istanbul

When making a social phone call, you don't expect to hear the voice of the head of state.

But mobile phone users in Turkey were surprised to hear a voice message by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan when placing a call around midnight on the anniversary of the failed July 15 coup.

After dialling a number, instead of hearing a dialtone users heard a voice message from Erdogan congratulating them on the national holiday of "democracy and unity" that marks the coup's defeat. Only after Erdogan's message did the dialtone begin.

"As president, I send congratulations on the July 15 National Day of Democracy and Unity and wish the martyrs mercy and the heroes (of the defeat of the coup) health and wellbeing," said the message read by Erdogan.

The message could be heard on Turkey's largest network Turkcell, AFP correspondents said. The Hurriyet daily said it was also heard on the Vodafone network.

"People who wanted to chat on the telephone got an Erdogan surprise..." said Hurriyet.

Turkcell had already sent text messages to clients promising them a free extra gigabyte of data from July 15 in celebration of the coup's defeat.

Users had in the wake of the coup bid received text messages from Erdogan. But this is believed to be the first time a voice message has been employed.

Al-Aqsa mosque reopens

Israel okays bill seeking to safeguard control of Jerusalem; Palestinian gunman shot dead amid rising tensions

AGENCIES

Israel yesterday reopened an ultra-sensitive holy site closed after an attack that killed two policemen, but Muslim worshippers were refusing to enter due to new security measures including metal detectors and cameras.

Crowds chanted "Allahu Akbar" (God is Greatest) as a number of initial visitors entered Jerusalem's Haram al-Sharif compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount. The flashpoint holy site includes the Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

But midday Muslim prayers were held outside the site due to the new security measures.

"We reject the changes imposed by the Israeli government," Sheikh Omar Kiswani, Al-Aqsa director, told reporters outside.

Three Arab Israeli assailants opened fire on Israeli police Friday in Jerusalem's Old City before fleeing to the compound.

Israel took the highly unusual decision to close the Al-Aqsa mosque compound for Friday prayers, triggering anger from Muslims and Jordan, the holy site's custodian.

Meanwhile, Israeli ministers yesterday gave initial approval to a bill aimed at making it more difficult for the government to hand the Palestinians parts of Jerusalem as part of a future peace deal.

The bill, proposed by Shuli Moalem-Refaeli of the far-right Jewish Home, determines that any ceding of lands

considered by Israel to be part of Jerusalem would necessitate a two-thirds majority vote in parliament.

Members of the ministerial committee for legislation approved the bill ahead of a series of discussions and votes in parliament.

Moalem-Refaeli said in the bill's explanatory notes that it sought to "fortify Jerusalem's unified status, safeguard its future and protect the security of its residents".

Israel occupied east Jerusalem and the West Bank in 1967. It later annexed east Jerusalem in a move never recognised by the international community.

It claims all of Jerusalem as its united capital, while the Palestinians see the eastern sector as the capital of their future state.

The issue is among the most contentious in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israeli soldiers and police on an arrest mission in the town of Nabi Salah in the occupied West Bank shot dead a Palestinian who attempted to open fire at them early yesterday, the army said.

Another Palestinian suspect was lightly wounded and arrested, the statement from the military read.

On Saturday, a gunman targeted a vehicle near an Israeli settlement north of Ramallah and wounded a foreign national of Palestinian descent who is residing in a Palestinian village. In a separate incident, gunshots hit a military post near Nabi Salah.



Erdogan threatens to behead 'traitors' on coup anniversary

AFP, Ankara

Turkey on Saturday marked one year since the defeat of the failed coup bid with mass nationwide rallies seeking to showcase national unity and a stern warning by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to "chop off the heads" of traitors.

The authorities declared July 15 an annual national holiday of "democracy and unity", billing the foiling of the putsch as a historic victory of Turkish democracy.

In an intense programme aiming to hammer home the anniversary's importance, Erdogan attended a special session of parliament in Ankara, spoke to a mass rally in Istanbul and then flew back to the capital for a rally outside parliament and a special event at the presidential palace in the early hours of the morning.

Speaking to hundreds of thousands by the bridge across the Bosphorus in Istanbul that was a fighting flashpoint, Erdogan warned Turkey could reintroduce capital punishment.

"First of all we will chop off the heads of those traitors," Erdogan said, reaffirming he would sign any passed by parliament bill on

resuming executions.

Two hundred and forty nine people, not including the plotters, were killed when a disgruntled faction of the army sent tanks into the streets and war planes into the sky in a bid to overthrow Erdogan after one-and-a-half decades in power.

But they were thwarted within hours as the authorities regrouped and people poured into the streets in support of Erdogan, who blamed followers of his ally-turned-nemesis, the US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen.

In the wake of the failed coup bid, authorities embarked on the biggest purge in Turkey's history, arresting 50,000 people and sacking almost three times as many. Erdogan also shored up his position by winning a referendum on enhancing his powers earlier this year.

In the latest dismissals, another 7,563 police, soldiers and other state employees were fired late Friday under the state of emergency that has been in place since July 20 last year.

Erdogan said a decision would be made on Monday over whether to recommend extending the emergency by another three months.



TRAGEDY IN SENEGAL

8 killed in football stadium crush

AFP, Dakar

Eight people were killed during Senegal's football league cup final in Dakar on Saturday, the sports minister told AFP, as a wall collapsed onto clashing supporters triggering a panicked stampede.

Sports minister Matar Ba said a young girl was among the dead, while around 60 injured fans had been taken to health facilities in Dakar.

He vowed "strong measures so that such an event will never be repeated in Senegal," speaking to AFP by phone.

A mass deployment of firefighters and ambulances remained at the scene late Saturday.

An AFP journalist who attended the match described a stadium full of bursting with people for the long-awaited clash between local teams US Ouakam and Stade de Mbour.

At 2-1 during extra time, US Ouakam supporters began throwing stones at Stade de Mbour fans, causing spectators to begin vacating their seats in a rush, the journalist said.

Part of a wall supporting bleachers seating fans from both sides then collapsed, while police had begun firing tear gas and panic spread in the stadium leading to a crush.

Campaigning for Senegal's legislative elections due on July 30 would on Sunday be suspended in respect for the victims, said a spokesman for President Macky Sall.



Jockeys compete in Chonburi's annual buffalo race festival, in Chonburi province, Thailand, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

16 pilgrims killed in J&K bus crash

AFP, Srinagar

At least 16 Hindu pilgrims were killed and many more injured yesterday in a bus crash in northern India, police said, just days after gunmen shot dead eight worshippers making the same holy visit.

The bus plunged into a gorge in Jammu and Kashmir, the state where hundreds of Hindus make the annual pilgrimage to Amarnath, a Himalayan cave revered as the abode of the god Shiva.

"16 people are now confirmed dead, 19 with serious injuries and eight others with minor injuries," the state's police force said in a statement Sunday.

Some of the worst injured are being airlifted to hospital, while others were taken to local clinics for treatment, police said.

For the second time in a week, Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered his condolences to the pilgrims who died making the holy journey.

The tragedy came as another Hindu pilgrim died Sunday from injuries sustained six days ago when unidentified gunmen opened fire on a bus full of worshippers.

Her death takes the toll from Monday's attack to eight, with seven women and one man killed in the late-night assault. Most of the victims were from the western state of Gujarat.

It was the worst such attack in the divided Himalayan region since 2000 when gunmen fired on a group of Hindu pilgrims, killing 32 people including two police officers.

Indian leaders and Kashmiri separatists united in their condemnation of this latest attack. No group has yet claimed responsibility.

France sees Brexit as tool to weaken City of London!

AFP, London

France is seeking to use Brexit to weaken the City of London, the British finance sector's EU pointman warned in a leaked report published yesterday.

"They are crystal clear about their underlying objective: the weakening of Britain, the ongoing degradation of the City of London," Jeremy Browne, a former government minister who is now the City's Brexit envoy, said in a memo.

The leaked report, published by the Mail on Sunday tabloid, was written as a summary to ministers of a trip made by Browne to France in early July.

"The meeting with the French Central Bank was the worst I have had anywhere in the EU. They are in favour of the hardest Brexit. They want disruption," he said.

Browne acknowledged there may be political benefits to France of playing "bad cop" in the negotiations on Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, which began last month and are due to resume in Brussels today.

But "we should nevertheless have our eyes open that France sees Britain and the City of London as adversaries, not partners".

This approach was not confined to a few officials, but was a "whole-of-France collective endeavour, made both more giddy and more assertive by the election of (Emmanuel) Macron" as president in May, according to Browne.

Egypt says 9 militants killed in Sinai

AFP, Cairo

Security forces have killed nine militants in the Sinai Peninsula and also destroyed 15 vehicles transporting weapons into Egypt across its western border, the military said in statements yesterday.

The "extremists" were killed in two separate incidents in the middle Sinai, but the military did not say when they took place.

Egypt's military is battling a local affiliate of IS which has waged a deadly insurgency in the northern Sinai that has killed hundreds of members of the security forces.

Since December, IS has also targeted Christians in other parts of the country, including in Cairo, killing dozens.

Venezuelans cast ballots in opposition referendum

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelans go to the polls yesterday in a vote organized by the opposition aimed at gauging public support for Maduro's plan to rewrite the constitution, against a backdrop of worsening political violence.

With authorities refusing to greenlight a vote presented as an act of civil disobedience and supporters of President Nicolas Maduro boycotting it, voters seemed set to reject the president's controversial scheme.

The symbolic "plebiscite" comes two weeks ahead of a Maduro-backed vote to elect a citizens' body that would revise the constitution. The opposition has told its supporters to stay away.

The cross-purpose initiatives have given rise to international worries -- voiced by the Catholic Church and the head of the UN, Antonio Guterres -- that the chances of bringing both sides together for dialogue has become more remote.

That, in turn, is stoking fears of more protests and running street battles with police, which have been persistent for the past three and a half months. Nearly 100 people have died in the unrest since the beginning of April.

While Maduro is deeply unpopular -- with 80 percent of Venezuelans criticizing his rule, according to the Datanalisis survey firm -- he enjoys backing from some, mostly poor, parts of the population and, most importantly, from the military.

The opposition, which accuses Maduro of trying to gather dictatorial powers with the constitutional rewrite and other steps, said all was prepared for Sunday's vote.

But Maduro, giving a national radio and TV broadcast, portrayed the vote as merely an "internal consultation by the opposition parties" with no electoral legitimacy.