

Netanyahu asks House for immunity

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday asked parliament for immunity, weeks after the embattled premier was indicted on a range of corruption charges.

Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving premier, is fighting for his political survival on two fronts -- the corruption allegations and stiff opposition from a new centrist party.

The immunity request is expected to delay the start of court proceedings for months, as lawmakers are not due to vote on the matter until after March 2 elections.

The request is "in line with the law... (and) with the goal of continuing to serve you, for the future of Israel," Netanyahu told reporters in Jerusalem.

His spokesman Ofer Golan later confirmed the request had been submitted to the speaker of Israel's parliament, the Knesset.

Netanyahu was charged by the attorney general in November with bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate corruption cases.



The leader of the right-wing Likud party denies the allegations and accuses prosecutors and the media of a witch hunt.

Reacting to the premier's announcement, his rival Benny Gantz, the leader of the centrist Blue and White party, said "Netanyahu knows that he is guilty."

Gantz said his own party will do everything it can to "prevent immunity".

"In Israel, nobody is above the law".

A sitting prime minister is only required to step down once convicted and after all avenues of appeal have been exhausted.



(From top, clockwise)
The photo shows burnt out properties in Sarsfield, Victoria; A kangaroo rushes past a burning house in Conjola, New South Wales (photo taken on New Year's Eve); a vast column of smoke rises into the sky in East Gippsland, Victoria; and cars line up to leave the town of Batemans Bay in New South Wales yesterday after an evacuation order.

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS, NEW YORK TIMES



RAGING BUSHFIRES IN AUSTRALIA

NSW declares state of emergency

Authorities order evacuation of fire-ravaged towns before another spell of heatwave

AGENCIES

The Australian state of New South Wales has declared a state of emergency and could begin forced evacuations from fire-stricken areas, as emergency crews battle deadly blazes and brace for a dangerous weekend ahead.

State Premier Gladys Berejiklian yesterday said that the emergency declaration would come into effect today morning as weather conditions are expected to deteriorate significantly tomorrow, raising the fire danger even further.

This is the third time NSW has declared a state of emergency in as many months -- the last two times, in November and December, were also for seven days, and granted extraordinary powers to the Rural Fire Service.

Berejiklian said residents could also be subject to forced evacuations,

road closures and any other means necessary to keep people safe.

Thousands of people were already fleeing the state's south coast yesterday, with the Rural Fire Service setting up a "tourist leave zone" from the town of Batemans Bay down to the Victoria border. All visitors were urged to evacuate before tomorrow, when temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit), dry conditions and ferocious winds are expected to heighten the risk of further blazes.

"These will be dangerous conditions," the fire service warned. "Do not be in this area on Saturday."

Similar hot, windy weather on Tuesday led to massive fires spreading out of control.

Seven people died from the fires within 24 hours. Tens of thousands of people are estimated to be in the

south coast region, home to seaside towns that swell in population during summer.

Residents yesterday were heeding the warning. Hundreds if not thousands of cars were backed up in small towns south of Nowra, on the southern coast, according to police. Roads away from the tourist area were packed with long lines of cars waiting to leave.

Experts say climate change has worsened the scale and impact of the fires, and many have accused the Prime Minister Scott Morrison administration of doing little to address the climate crisis.

Morrison faced heat from those living in the middle of the bushfire danger zone yesterday on what was supposed to be a visit with victims.

One woman said she would only shake his hand in order to get more

money for the Rural Fire Service while another group yelled out "you're an idiot" and "piss off" as he walked away from them while on a stop in the town of Cobargo.

The Australian fires have been burning for months now, and aren't likely to stop anytime soon -- Australia is still in the early months of summer, and temperatures typically peak in January and February.

A total of 17 people have died across the country so far, with the most damage concentrated in NSW. Across the state, nearly 1,300 homes have been destroyed and another 442 damaged, according to the Rural Fire Service. Fires have consumed entire towns and ripped through bushland; the strong winds frequently change directions, which fan the flames and carry embers far distances.

Thai retailers ban single-use plastic bags



Thai retailers kicked off 2020 with a ban on single-use plastic bags, joining the battle against throwaway carriers in the Southeast Asian nation where citizens go through an average of eight every day. The move, taken on Wednesday by several major mall operators and the ubiquitous 7/11 convenience stores, will see customers instead paying a small fee for a reusable bag made of a cloth-like fabric. Thailand is one of the largest contributors to ocean pollution. The European Commission estimates some 70 percent of plastic waste clogs the world's oceans, killing a range of species from turtles, seals, whales and seabirds to fish and shellfish.

SOURCE: AFP

Lebanon receives Interpol arrest warrant for Ghosn

REUTERS, Beirut/Tokyo

Lebanon yesterday received an Interpol arrest warrant for fugitive former Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn, while Turkey launched an investigation into his daring escape from Japan.

Ghosn has become an international fugitive after he revealed on Tuesday he had fled to Lebanon to escape what he called a "rigged" justice system in Japan.



The Interpol red notice, which calls on authorities to arrest a wanted person, was received by Lebanon's internal security forces and has yet to be referred to the judiciary, a judicial source told Reuters.

Lebanese government officials could not immediately be reached to say what - if any - action would be taken.

Ghosn, who holds French, Lebanese and Brazilian citizenship, was smuggled out of Tokyo by a private security company, a plan that was in the works for three months and involved transit through Turkey, Reuters has reported.

Turkish police yesterday detained seven people, including four pilots, as part of an investigation into Ghosn's passage through the country, a police spokeswoman said.

Flight tracking data suggests Ghosn used two different planes to fly to Istanbul and then to Lebanon.

Sources close to Ghosn said he decided to flee Japan after learning that the second of his two trials had been delayed until April 2021 and also because he had not been allowed to speak to his wife as part of strict bail conditions.

Lebanon has no extradition agreement with Japan and Ghosn enjoys widespread support in the country of his childhood, where he holds extensive investments in banking and real estate.

Japanese public broadcaster NHK said on Thursday Japanese authorities allowed Ghosn to carry a spare French passport in a locked case while out on bail, potentially shedding some light on how he managed to escape despite having passports held by Japanese lawyers.



This photo shows rescuers searching for survivors after a military Black Hawk helicopter smashed into mountains in Yilan county near Taipei, yesterday.

Taiwan military chief killed in chopper crash

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's military chief was killed in a helicopter crash yesterday, the defence ministry said, just days before the island goes to polls to elect a new president.

The chief of the general staff, Shen Yi-ming, was among eight senior officers -- including three major-generals -- who died when their Black Hawk helicopter smashed into mountains near Taipei.

The 62-year-old general and his entourage were on a routine mission to visit soldiers in northeast Yilan county for the upcoming Lunar New Year when the incident happened.

Flags at all military units will fly at half-mast for three days as Shen was the highest-ranking military official to die while on official duty, the government said.

Lieutenant-general Tsao Ching-ping, one of five survivors, told rescuers in footage broadcast on local TV: "I am okay... two others are injured and only I can walk."

"There is one more person who's more seriously wounded and two or three people in the cabin... while two more with no signs of life."

President Tsai Ing-wen's office said that she will cancel all campaign activities for three days after the tragedy. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party will also suspend campaigning for three days.

Tsai is seeking a second term against Kaohsiung city mayor Han Kuo-yu of the Kuomintang (KMT) party in the January 11 elections when Taiwan will also elect a new parliament. Han and the KMT also expressed condolences to the victims and announced that they will stop campaigning for two days.

Turkey enters Libya quagmire

House okays troops to support UN-backed govt in Tripoli

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's parliament yesterday passed a bill approving a military deployment to Libya, aimed at shoring up the UN-backed government in Tripoli.

The beleaguered Tripoli government has been under sustained attack since April by military强人 Khalifa Haftar, who is backed by Turkey's regional rivals -- Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's office confirmed last Friday that a request for military support had been received from the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA).

No details have been given on the scale of the potential deployment, and Vice-President Fuat Oktay told state news agency Anadolu that no date had yet been set.

The bill passed easily through Turkey's parliament, by 325 votes to 184.

A UN report in November said

several countries were violating the arms embargo on Libya in place since the overthrow of its long-time dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

Jordan and the UAE regularly supply Haftar's forces, it said, while Turkey supports the GNA. Turkish and Emirati drones were spotted in Libyan skies during clashes over the summer.

Turkey has used its alliance with the Tripoli government to advance other interests. It signed a military cooperation agreement with the GNA during a visit by its leader, Fayed al-Sarraj, to Istanbul in November.

But they also signed a maritime jurisdiction agreement giving Turkey rights to large swathes of the Mediterranean where gas reserves have recently been discovered.

Turkey's fierce rivalry with the military government in Egypt is seen as another motivating factor behind the planned deployment.

Egypt yesterday strongly condemned the vote. It said any such deployment could "negatively affect the stability of the Mediterranean region" and called on the international community to urgently respond to the move.

The Libyan conflict is expected to be a key topic of discussion when Russian President Vladimir Putin visits Turkey next Wednesday.

Erdogan has repeatedly accused Russia of sending private mercenaries to support Haftar's forces, though this has been denied by Moscow.

However, Turkey and Russia have managed to work closely on Syria despite supporting opposing sides in that conflict and are expected to seek a similar balancing act with regards to Libya.

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They'll likely regret it'

Pentagon chief warns pro-Iranian militias; elite Iraqi troops secure US embassy after attack

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon yesterday warned that the Iran-backed Kataeb Hezbollah group that stormed the US embassy in Baghdad would carry out more attacks on US facilities -- and would regret it.

"The provocative behavior has been out there for months... So do I think they may do something? Yes. And they will likely regret it," Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters.

"We are prepared to exercise self-defense, and we are prepared to deter further bad behavior from these groups, all of which are sponsored, directed and resourced by Iran."

Several thousand Iraqi protesters attacked the US embassy in Baghdad on Tuesday, breaching its outer wall and chanting "Death to America!" in anger over weekend air strikes that killed pro-Iranian fighters.

Elite Iraqi troops were deployed to secure the embassy yesterday.

The unprecedented attack on the

American mission in Baghdad -- in which intruders threw rocks, laid fires and graffiti-walls -- sparked fears of a wider proxy war between Iran and the United States, both of them close allies of Iraq.

Supporters of Iraq's powerful Hashed al-Shaabi military force laid siege to the embassy in outrage at US air strikes that killed 25 of their fighters, but pulled back on Wednesday after an order from the group.

The attack sparked comparisons with the 1979 hostage crisis at the US embassy in Tehran and the deadly 2012 attack on the US consulate in Libya's second city Benghazi.

The violence has also troubled Iraqis who have taken to the streets since October in massive rallies denouncing government corruption, a lack of jobs and poor public services.

The largest grassroots protests Iraq in decades has seen tens of thousands flooding the streets across the capital and Shi'ite-majority south. Nearly 460 people have been killed and around 25,000 wounded in protest-related violence.

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