

Jailed Thai ex-PM Thaksin freed early

Country's PM says
AFP, Bangkok

Jailed former Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra will be freed today, the kingdom's prime minister has said, just six months after returning from 15 years of self-imposed exile.

The controversial billionaire, twice elected prime minister and ousted in a 2006 military coup, was jailed for eight years on graft and abuse-of-power charges upon his return to Thailand in August, but within days had his sentence cut to one year by King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

Speaking to reporters yesterday before boarding a flight, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin said Thaksin's release would be "on the 18th" and handled "according to the rule of law".

The exact details of Thaksin's release are not clear, but he may be subject to monitoring -- possibly with an ankle tag -- and restrictions on his right to travel.



Police officers detain a woman during a gathering in memory of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny near the Wall of Grief monument to the victims of political repressions in Moscow, Russia yesterday. Inset, people lay flowers at the Wall of Grief monument.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Arms shortage helping Putin

Says Zelenskiy in Munich; Ukrainian troops withdraw from Avdiivka

REUTERS, Munich

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy urged allies at a global security conference yesterday to plug an "artificial" shortage of weapons that is giving Russia's forces the upper hand on the battlefield. Addressing the gathering of politicians, diplomats and military officials from around the world, who gave him a standing ovation, Zelenskiy mixed gratitude for the support shown by Western countries with urging them for more. He spoke at a critical juncture of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, now nearly in its third year, with his troops forced to withdraw from the devastated eastern town of Avdiivka. Ukraine faces acute shortages of ammunition, and US military aid has been delayed for months in Congress. "Unfortunately keeping Ukraine in an artificial deficit of weapons, particularly in deficit of artillery and long-range capabilities, allows Putin to adapt to the current intensity of the war," he said. He said that sending additional packages of weapons and air defences to Ukraine was the most important thing its allies could do. "If your artillery (range) is 20 km (12 miles), but Russia's is 40km, there is your answer," Zelenskiy said. Earlier at the same conference, dubbed the "Davos of Defence", German Chancellor Olaf Scholz had side-stepped questions on whether to give long-range Taurus missiles to Kyiv.

10 killed in Tamil Nadu factory blast

AFP, New Delhi

Ten people were killed and 15 more injured in an explosion at a fireworks factory in India yesterday, police said.

The explosion was caused by a fire inside the factory in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, police officer Feroze Khan Abdullah told AFP.

He said the cause of the fire was not immediately known.

"Ten workers died in the blast that followed a fire incident in the factory, and five of the 15 injured have been hospitalised," Abdullah said.

He said the fire was soon brought under control.

Factory accidents are common across India, with owners often ignoring basic safety requirements and operating without permits.

Eleven labourers were killed in India's capital New Delhi on Friday when a huge fire ripped through a paint factory, following a blast that shook the neighbourhood.

Another eight people were killed and 80 injured in central Madhya Pradesh state this month when a blast at another fireworks factory sparked a giant fire.

More than 40 people died in a blaze in a factory making school bags and shoes in Delhi in 2019.

Israel arrests 100 people from raided hospital

Fears grow for patients; fresh strikes across Gaza kills 100

AFP, Palestinian territories

Israel said it had taken 100 people into custody after troops raided the facility, with fears mounting for patients and staff trapped inside.

The deadly bombardment of Gaza continued overnight with another 100 people killed in Israeli strikes, according to the Hamas-run health ministry.

At least 120 patients and five medical teams are stuck without water, food and electricity in the Nasser hospital in Gaza's main southern city of Khan Yunis, according to the health ministry.

Israel has for weeks concentrated its military operations in Khan Yunis, the hometown of Hamas's Gaza leader Yahya Sinwar, the alleged architect of the October 7 attack.

Intense fighting has raged around the Nasser hospital -- one of the Palestinian territory's last major medical facilities that remains even partly operational.

The power was cut and the generators stopped after the raid, leading to the deaths of six patients due to a lack of oxygen, according to Gaza's health ministry.

"New-born children are at a risk of dying in the next few hours," the ministry warned yesterday.

Israel's army said troops entered the hospital on Thursday, acting on what it said was "credible intelligence" that hostages seized in the October 7 attack had been held there and that the bodies of some may still be inside.

It said it has detained 100 people from the hospital suspected of "terrorist activity", seized weapons and retrieved "medications with the names of Israeli hostages" in the hospital.

But the raid has been criticised by medics

and the United Nations. The army has insisted it made every effort to keep the hospital supplied with power, including bringing in an alternative generator.

A witness, who declined to be named for safety reasons, told AFP the Israeli forces had shot "at anyone who moved inside the hospital".

Israel's assault on Gaza has killed at least 28,858 people so far, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry.



High-level negotiations to pause the war were held this week in Cairo, but their outcome is still unclear.

A day after US President Joe Biden called for a "temporary truce" to secure the release of hostages, Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh yesterday reiterated the group's demands, including a complete pause in fighting, the release of Hamas prisoners, and withdrawal of Israeli troops.

Qatar-based Haniyeh said Hamas would "not agree to anything less".

Biden has also urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu not to launch an offensive in Rafah without a plan to keep civilians safe --

but Netanyahu insisted he would push ahead with a "powerful" operation there to defeat Hamas.

Around 1.4 million displaced civilians are trapped in Rafah after taking refuge in a makeshift encampment by the Egyptian border, with dwindling supplies.

"We are dying slowly due to the scarcity of resources and the lack of medications and treatments," said displaced Palestinian Mohammad Yaghi.

In northern Gaza, many are so desperate for food they are grinding up animal feed.

"We need food now," said Mohammed Nassar, 50, from Jabalia in northern Gaza.

"We're going to die from hunger, not by bombs or missiles."

With the UN warning that Gazans are close to famine, the head of its agency for Palestinian refugees accused Israel of waging a campaign to "destroy" it entirely.

Israel has called for UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini to resign following claims a Hamas tunnel was discovered under its Gaza City headquarters.

Lazzarini told Swiss media Tamedia that the tunnel was 20 metres underground, and UNRWA didn't have the capabilities to search below ground in Gaza. More than 150 UNRWA installations have been hit during the war, he said.

Hamas's armed wing has warned hostages in Gaza are also "struggling to stay alive" as conditions deteriorate due to relentless Israeli bombardments.

The Wall Street Journal reported this week that Egypt was building a walled camp near the border to accommodate Palestinians displaced from Gaza, citing Egyptian officials and security analysts.

Satellite images obtained by AFP show machinery building a wall along the highly secure frontier.

FRAUD TRIAL

Trump fined \$355m, banned from NY business

AFP, New York

A New York judge ordered Donald Trump to pay USD355 million over fraud allegations and banned him from running companies in the state for three years Friday in a major blow to his business empire and financial standing. Trump -- almost certain to be the Republican presidential nominee this



November -- was found liable for unlawfully inflating his wealth and manipulating the value of properties to obtain favorable bank loans or insurance terms. Trump accused President Joe Biden of driving the case, calling it "weaponisation against a political opponent who's up a lot in the polls",

and vowed to appeal. As the case was civil, not criminal, there was no threat of imprisonment. But Trump said ahead of the ruling that a ban on conducting business in New York state would be akin to a "corporate death penalty." Trump, facing 91 criminal counts in other cases, has seized on his legal woes to fire up supporters and denounce his likely opponent Biden, claiming that court cases are "just a way of hurting me in the election." However, Judge Arthur Engoron said the financially shattering penalties are justified by Trump's behavior. "Their complete lack of contrition and remorse borders on pathological," Engoron said of Trump and his two sons, who were also defendants, in his scathing ruling. "They are accused only of inflating asset values to make more money... Donald Trump is not Bernard Madoff. Yet, defendants are incapable of admitting the error of their ways," he added, referring to the perpetrator of a massive Ponzi scheme.

CRACKDOWN ON AI DEEPFAKES Meta, Microsoft, TikTok sign pact

AFP, Munich

Tech giants including Meta, Microsoft, and TikTok signed a pledge Friday to crack down on AI content intended to deceive voters ahead of crucial elections around the world this year.

The accord commits the companies including Google and OpenAI to develop ways to identify, label and control AI-generated images, videos and audio that aim to mislead voters.

"I think you need all the players from the source of the generation to the actual consumption by the user involved and that's why I think having everybody, 20 companies sign up to this is so impactful," Nick Clegg, president of global affairs at Meta, told AFP.

Among the 20 signatories of the deal, presented on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in Germany, were also X, formerly known as Twitter, as well as Snap, Adobe, LinkedIn, Amazon and IBM.

Under the agreement, AI-generated content could be given a watermark or tagged in the metadata at source, although the signatories acknowledged that "all such solutions have limitations".

The tech companies also said they would also work together to develop ways to "detect and address" deceptive election material on their platforms.

Such content could, for example, be annotated to make it clear it is AI generated.

Meta, Google and OpenAI have already agreed to use a common watermarking standard that would tag images generated by their AI applications, such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, Microsoft's Copilot or Google's Gemini (formerly Bard).



Supporters of former prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party protest against the alleged skewing in Pakistan's national election results, in Peshawar yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Man guns down 12 relatives in Iran

REUTERS

A 30-year-old man killed 12 relatives in Iran, official media reported yesterday, in a rare mass shooting in the country.

The relatives include his father and brother, according to the reports.

They said the man, who was not identified, used a Kalashnikov assault rifle.

He was later shot and killed by security forces in the south-central province of Kerman.

They said the cause of the shooting, in a remote rural village, was a family dispute. They did not elaborate.

Mass killings are rare in Iran, where hunting rifles are the only weapons people are allowed to possess.

Two years ago, a dismissed employee of a state institution in western Iran shot and killed three people and injured five before killing himself.