



Demonstrators hold placards and flags of Palestine during a rally in Rabat yesterday, protesting the killing of Palestinian group Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. PHOTO: AFP

US scraps plea deal with 9/11 mastermind

AFP, Washington

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Friday scrapped a plea agreement with 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, just two days after the announcement of a deal that reportedly would have taken the death penalty off the table.

Deals with Mohammed and two alleged accomplices announced Wednesday had appeared to have moved their long-running cases toward resolution – but sparked anger among some relatives of those killed on September 11, 2001, as well as criticism from leading Republican politicians.

“I have determined that, in light of the significance of the decision to enter into pre-trial agreements with the accused... responsibility for such a decision should rest with me,” Austin said in a memorandum addressed to Susan Escallier, who oversaw the case.

“I hereby withdraw from the three pre-trial agreements that you signed on July 31, 2024 in the above referenced case,” the memo said.

The cases against the 9/11 defendants have been bogged down in pre-trial maneuverings for years, while the accused remained held at the Guantanamo Bay military base in Cuba.

The New York Times reported this week that Mohammed, Walid bin Attash and Mustafa al-Hawsawi had agreed to plead guilty to conspiracy in exchange for a life sentence, instead of facing a trial that could lead to their executions.

Much of the legal jousting surrounding the men's cases has focused on whether they could be tried fairly after having undergone methodical torture at the hands of the CIA in the years after 9/11.

The plea agreements would have avoided that thorny issue, but they also sparked sharp criticism from political opponents of President Joe Biden's administration.

Republican lawmaker Mike Rogers, the chairman of the House Armed Services



Committee, sent a letter to Austin that said the deals were “unconscionable,” while House Speaker Mike Johnson said they were a “slap in the face” to the families of the nearly 3,000 people killed in the September 11 attacks.

And Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's running mate, JD Vance, described the agreements as a “sweetheart deal with 9/11 terrorists,” saying during a campaign rally: “We need a president who kills terrorists, not negotiates with them.”

Mohammed was regarded as one of Al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden's most trusted and intelligent lieutenants before his March 2003 capture in Pakistan. He then spent three years in secret CIA prisons before arriving at Guantanamo in 2006.

The trained engineer – who has said he masterminded the 9/11 attacks “from A to Z” – was involved in a string of major plots against the United States, where he had attended university.

Bin Attash, a Saudi of Yemeni origin, allegedly trained two of the hijackers who carried out the September 11 attacks, and his US interrogators also said he confessed to buying the explosives and recruiting members of the team that killed 17 sailors in an attack on the USS Cole.

Extreme heat breaks records in east China

AFP, Beijing

Swathes of eastern China baked under a scorching heat wave yesterday, with temperatures in some areas reaching record highs, weather authorities said.

China is enduring a summer of extreme weather, with unseasonable heat searing parts of the north and east while torrential rains have triggered floods and landslides in central and southern regions.

The country is the world's largest emitter of the greenhouse gases that scientists say drive global warming and make extreme weather more frequent and intense.

All of the 10 hottest cities in China early Saturday afternoon were located in Zhejiang, with the city of Zhuji logging a daily high of 42.3C, the weather service said.

MOGADISHU BEACH ATTACK

Al-Shabaab kills 32, scores wounded

AFP, Mogadishu

An Al-Shabaab suicide bomber and gunmen attacked a busy beach in the Somali capital Mogadishu killing at least 32 people and wounding scores more, police said yesterday, in one of the deadliest strikes in the East African country in months.

The al-Qaeda-linked jihadists have been waging an insurgency against the internationally backed federal government for more than 17 years and have previously targeted the Lido beach area, popular with business people and officials.

Unverified videos shared online in the immediate aftermath of the attack late Friday showed people scattering along a street, with a number of clips purporting showing bloodied bodies lying on the beachfront.

“More than 32 civilians died in this attack and about 63 others were wounded, some of them critically,” police spokesman Abdifatah Adan Hassan told reporters during a press conference.

“Targeting and blasting to kill 32 members from the civilian population means these Kharijites are not going to target only government centres, soldiers and officials,” he said, using the term Somali officials adopt to describe Al-Shabaab.

The assault, for which Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility in a post on a pro-Shabaab website, began when a suicide bomber detonated a device and gunmen stormed the area.



Officer Mohamed Omar told AFP members of the group had “shot civilians randomly.”

He said security forces had ended the attack and killed five gunmen, while a sixth member of the group “blew himself (up) at the beach.”

Witnesses said there were many people at the popular location when the explosion occurred, describing how gunmen then stormed the area.

Hawo Mohamed, who lives near the scene, said at least seven people he knew had died in the attack.

“The devastation is immense and there is blood, and severed pieces of human flesh strewn in the scene,” he told AFP.

Witness Abdilatif Ali was at the beach when the attackers struck and described the chaos and fear that unfolded late at night.

“Everybody was panicked and it was hard to know what was happening because shooting started soon after the blast,” he told AFP.

“I saw many people strewn (on the ground) and some of them were dead and others wounded,” he said.

Hospitals appealed for blood donations following the influx of wounded, local media reported.



Opponents of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro take part in a demonstration called by opposition leader Maria Corina Machado over the presidential election disputed results, in Caracas yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Venezuela set for new protests after Maduro win ratified

AFP, CARACAS

Venezuela braced for fresh protests Saturday, after President Nicolas Maduro's disputed election victory was ratified – and a growing number of nations recognized his opposition rival as the true winner.

Both Maduro and the opposition, led by Maria Corina Machado and her presidential candidate Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia, have called on their supporters to demonstrate this weekend, in the wake of Sunday's controversial vote.

The South American country's CNE election authority, which is loyal to Maduro, on Friday proclaimed him the winner with 52 percent of the vote and said Gonzalez Urrutia had garnered 43 percent of ballots.

But Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama and Uruguay recognized opposition Gonzalez Urrutia as the true president-elect, joining the United States and Peru in rejecting the official results.

For his part, the 61-year-old Maduro – who has reacted fiercely to criticism of his victory – described allegations of vote fraud as a “trap” orchestrated by Washington to justify “a coup.”

He also has threatened Machado and Gonzalez Urrutia, saying they “should be behind bars.”

Maduro has led the oil-rich, cash-poor country since 2013, presiding over a GDP drop of 80 percent that pushed more than seven million of once-wealthy Venezuela's 30 million citizens to emigrate.

Experts blame economic mismanagement and US sanctions for the collapse.

Gonzalez Urrutia did not show up to a hearing at the Supreme Court after Maduro requested the tribunal investigate and certify the election result.

Gaza burns cases surge as medical supplies dwindle

AFP, Jerusalem

In Gaza City's Al-Ahli Hospital, five-year-old Amir Habib al-Habel screams out in pain from the burns he suffered from an Israeli air strike on his home in Shujaiya a fortnight earlier.

He occupies a bed far from his mother, who also suffered burns, and who cannot move to be by her son's side.

Instead, her brother cares for him, the only available guardian after his “father was martyred”, as the tearful child says, struggling to remove one of many IV tubes.



“We receive daily cases of second- and third-degree burns as a result of rocket attacks and the use of internationally banned weapons by the Israeli army,” Amjad Elewa, an emergency doctor at the hospital, told AFP.

“Most of the cases that come to us are children and women. We don't have any capacity to deal with these burns,” he said, explaining that they could not access any of the medical supplies needed to treat burns and had to resort instead to whatever was available in private warehouses and pharmacies.

“We are in dire need of medical and logistical support and medicine to deal with these cases and save them.”

Medical facilities have in the past weeks reported increasing numbers of burn victims.

Julie Faucon, a medical coordinator at Doctors Without Borders (MSF), told AFP some of the charity's specialists have been working for two months in Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Yunis, “supporting what we call the trauma auto burn unit”.

In that time, they have received

“more than 69 cases with burns. One case out of five is related to explosions”, the burns specialist said.

“Three out of four” of the patients they have received are children, she said, adding that 10 of the patients have had burns on more than 20 percent of their bodies.

According to Muhammad al-Mughayyir, of Gaza's civil defence agency, Israeli forces have been using “new weapons that cause increased ignition and burning”.

Contacted by AFP, the Israeli military did reply to a request for comment.

Mughayyir said the weapons reach extremely high temperatures and are “capable of melting bodies”.

They often target “tent areas made up of nylon containing primitive materials such as wood and plastic, all of which directly affects the speed and rate of ignition”, he added.

“These burns have a direct impact on people's lives and appearances. They affect skin layers and burn nerves, and there are people who become disabled as a result of that.”

The World Health Organization has said that out of 36 hospitals in the territory, only 15 are partially

functional, adding that medical facilities have been targeted more than 1,000 times since war broke out on October 7.

Mohammed Zaqout, the head of hospitals in the Gaza Strip, said “there is only Nasser Hospital in the southern areas, with 12 operating rooms, all of which are overcrowded”.

“There are 16 beds in the intensive care units, all of which are occupied, and we have added a capacity of 24 beds but they are now full,” he said.

“We try to distribute these cases to field hospitals, but the occupation's massacres against unarmed civilians occur on a daily and hourly basis, and no one in the world intervenes.”

Access to treatment abroad has been blocked as most Palestinians cannot leave the besieged territory, as has the entry of most medical supplies, particularly since Israeli forces seized the Palestinian side of the Rafah border crossing with Egypt since early May.

Faucon similarly highlighted the urgent need for medical supplies, pointing to surging demand among extremely meagre stocks.