

Egypt hands 75 death sentences over 2013 sit-in

CAIRO: An Egyptian court said yesterday it would transfer the cases of 75 people convicted of security-related offences, including senior Muslim Brotherhood figures, to Egypt's top religious authority to decide whether they should be sentenced to death. They are among more than 700 people accused or convicted of illegal protest or murder over a 2013 sit-in that ended in the deaths of hundreds of Brotherhood supporters and dozens of police when security forces broke it up violently. Those convicted face potential sentences ranging up to life in prison and execution.

Since President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi took power in 2014, authorities have justified a crackdown on dissent and freedoms as being directed at terrorists and saboteurs trying to undermine the state. Death sentences have been handed down to hundreds on charges such as belonging to an illegal organization or planning to carry out an attack. The dispersal of the sit-in at Rabaa Adawiya square in Aug 2013 came weeks after Sisi, as military chief, ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi after protests against Brotherhood rule.

Rights groups have criticized the trial of so many people in the same case, saying they include journalists and many peaceful protesters. Egyptian law requires any capital sentence to be referred to Grand Mufti Shawqi Allam, Egypt's highest Islamic legal official, for an opinion before executions can take place. The 75 cases referred to the mufti include those of senior Brotherhood leaders Essam Al-Erian and Mohamed Beltagi and prominent Islamist preachers Safwat Higazi and Wagdi Ghoneim, judicial sources said. Forty-four of the accused are in prison awaiting their sentence, and 31 have been tried in absentia. Also on trial was prominent photojournalist Mahmoud Abu Zeid, widely known as Shawkan, who in May received UNESCO's Press Freedom Prize. The court postponed a verdict on his and other cases.

The mufti's decision is not legally binding, but is rarely ignored by the courts. In 2014 the mufti rejected a death sentence proposed for the leader of the outlawed Brotherhood, Mohamed Badie, who is part of the same case. Badie has since been sentenced to life in prison. Amnesty International said yesterday the trial was unfair, and that the accused had been denied the right to present an adequate defense. "Egyptian authorities have never questioned or prosecuted any of the security



CAIRO: Egyptian photojournalist Mahmoud Abdel Shakour Abouzied, also known as Shawkan, makes a gesture mimicking taking a photograph from inside a soundproof glass dock during his trial yesterday. —AFP

force personnel who took part in the massacre," it said in a statement. Amnesty says more than 800 protesters were killed. The government has said many protesters were armed, and that 43 police were killed.

The final sentencing in the case is expected on Sept 8, after the mufti has given his ruling, judicial sources said. Many death sentences issued under

Sisi have not yet been carried out, but local rights groups say the number of executions has risen in recent years. Sisi's supporters say harsh measures are needed to ensure the stability needed to revive Egypt's battered economy after the turmoil unleashed by the 2011 uprising that toppled long-time leader Hosni Mubarak.

"We (Egyptians) need to get out of the rut we are in ... I want to do that for you," Sisi said at a youth conference at Cairo University yesterday as he promoted his new defense minister, Mohamed Zaki, to the rank of general. Sisi said he was "saddened" by a recent but limited social media campaign calling for his departure. — Reuters

Trump eyeing 'Arab NATO'...

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Potentially a big obstacle to the planned alliance is a 13-month-old rift pitting Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar, home to the largest US air base in the region. Other Arab nations have accused Qatar of supporting terrorism, which it denies. While one source said the administration is concerned the quarrel could be an obstacle to the initiative, he and an Arab official both said Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had assured Washington the rift would not pose a problem to the alliance. The NSC spokesperson denied the rift was a hurdle.

As Trump pursues his "America First" policy, the

White House is eager to have US allies worldwide shoulder more of the burden in confronting regional security threats. The UAE is ready to deploy more troops across the Middle East to counter its foes as it believes it can no longer rely on Western allies like the United States and Britain, UAE minister Anwar Gargash said on Thursday.

Setting up a regional anti-missile defense shield, which the United States and Gulf countries have discussed for years without result, would be a goal for the alliance, a source familiar with the plan said, as well as training to upgrade the countries' militaries. Tension with Iran has increased since Trump announced in May that the United States was pulling out of a 2015 international deal to limit Tehran's nuclear ambitions. On Monday, Iran dismissed a warning from Trump that it risked dire consequences "the likes of which few throughout history have suffered before" if it made threats against the United States. — Reuters

Century's longest blood moon eclipse...

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Earth's shadow from 1714 to 2328 GMT - six hours and 14 minutes in all. The period of complete eclipse - known as "totality", when the moon appears darkest - lasted from 1930 to 2113 GMT. At the same time, Mars hovered near the moon in the night sky, easily visible to the naked eye.

Amateur astronomers in the southern hemisphere were best-placed to witness the rare sight, especially in southern Africa, Australia, and Madagascar, though it was also visible in Europe, South Asia and South America. More than 2,000 people including many children armed with binoculars gathered in the Tunisian capital of Tunis. "I hope this eclipse will bring us happiness and peace," said Karima, 46, without taking her eyes off the sky.

However, bad weather thwarted the cosmic display in several parts of the world. Widespread monsoon rainstorms and thick clouds hid the moon across much of India and its neighbors, which should have had a prime view. Similarly, eager observers who had assembled on cliffs and beaches in the English county of Dorset were left in the dark due to an overcast sky. "It's disappointing," Tish Adams, 67, told AFP. "I took a few photos but there was nothing but a streak of pink in the sky."

Meanwhile frustrated crowds of would-be moon admirers gathered on a hill in cloudy north London consoled themselves by breaking into a rendition of Welsh singer Bonnie Tyler's 1983 hit "Total eclipse of the heart". Those in Brazil's Rio de Janeiro had more luck, snapping the red moon in the clear night sky with their phones and cameras. "I thought it was very pretty and I liked the planet Mars even more, which you could see right next to the moon," said Talita Oliveira, 34.

Mars appeared unusually large and bright, a mere 57.7 million km from Earth on its elliptical orbit around the sun. A total lunar eclipse happens when Earth takes position in a straight line between the moon and sun, blotting out the direct sunlight that normally makes our satellite glow whitish-yellow. The moon travels to a similar position every month, but the tilt of its orbit means it normally passes above or below the Earth's shadow - so most months we have a full moon without an eclipse.

When the three celestial bodies are perfectly lined up, however, the Earth's atmosphere scatters blue light from the sun while refracting or bending red light onto the moon, usually giving it a rosy blush. This is what gives the phenomenon the name "blood moon", though Mark Bailey of the Armagh Observatory in Northern Ireland said the color can vary greatly. It depends partly on "how cloudy or transparent those parts of the Earth's atmosphere are which enable sunlight to reach the moon", he told AFP. "During a very dark eclipse the moon may be almost invisible."

The long duration of this eclipse was partly because the moon made a near-central passage through Earth's umbra - the darkest, most central part of the shadow. "For those alive today, it's a unique event," said Sven Melchert, head of a local society of astronomy enthusiasts in Heppenheim, western Germany, cited by the DPA news agency. The moon was also at the farthest point on its orbit from Earth, making its movement across the sky slower from our perspective, thus spending longer in the dark.

NASA, meanwhile, called out social media hoaxers claiming that Mars would appear as big as the moon during the eclipse. "If that were true, we'd be in big trouble given the gravitational pulls on Earth, Mars, and our moon!" the NASA website stated. Mars instead appeared as a very bright star. "In the middle of a lunar eclipse it can look as if a red planet has taken up residence near the Earth - they are both eerie and beautiful," said Robert Massey of the Royal Astronomical Society in London. — AFP

"We have confirmed 33 deaths and only one person managed to survive the bus crash. Our team is trying to recover the bodies," Anupam Srivastava, commander of India's National Disaster Relief Force, told AFP. "The surviving passenger managed to alert officials about the deaths and the crash," he added. Police said the slippery mountain terrain where the latest accident took place made the road a danger.

Accidents on India's notorious roads claim the lives of more than 150,000 people each year. Most accidents are blamed on poor roads, badly-maintained vehicles and reckless driving. Earlier this month, 48 people were killed and many others badly injured in northern India when an overcrowded bus hurtled into a gorge in the Himalayan foothills. — Agencies

Mongolia thwarts 'kidnapping' of Turkish teacher

ULAANBAATAR: A Turkish teacher targeted in a suspected kidnap attempt thwarted by Mongolian authorities yesterday thanked his supporters as he left hospital after a checkup following his ordeal. When asked who had attempted to abduct him, Veysel Akcay simply said "I don't know." The drama unfolded Friday as Mongolian authorities grounded a suspected Turkish air force jet after witnesses said assailants snatched a Turkish man associated with a religious group Ankara has branded as terrorists.

In recent weeks, Turkey's intelligence agency has conducted operations abroad against associates of US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen - who Ankara says was behind a 2016 failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. As many as five men grabbed Akcay from outside his home in Mongolia's capital Ulaanbaatar Friday morning and threw him into a minibus, according to friends and eyewitnesses. The 50-year-old is director of a school in Mongolia that is alleged to be associated with Gulen, although teachers there denied the connection in response to questions by AFP. When he failed to show up for work, concerned family and friends notified the police.

Meanwhile, Akcay's abductors had taken him to Genghis Khan international airport, where a small passenger jet landed around 1:00 pm (0500 GMT). The plane - with call sign TT4010 - is operated by the Turkish air force, according to data on flight tracking site flightradar24.com. It was the beginning of a more than eight-hour standoff between the captors and Mongolian authorities, who refused to allow the plane to leave the runway.

As authorities summoned Turkish officials from their embassy in Mongolia, parliamentarians and hundreds of protesters clutching signs demanding Akcay's release gathered at the airport. As the standoff dragged on, Mongolian vice foreign minister Battsetseg Batmunkh warned Turkish embassy officials that any attempt to

abduct a person from Mongolia's territory would constitute "a serious violation of Mongolia's independence and sovereignty".

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu denied the accusations during a telephone call to his Mongolian counterpart Tsogtbaatar Damdin, according to the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But officials were not convinced: "We are an independent nation. Do you think anyone can do abductions in our country?" parliamentarian Baasankhuu Oktaybri wrote on Twitter. The plane took off at 9:25 pm Friday without Akcay, who was taken for questioning by police and later sent to a hospital for medical checks. "I thank you all," he told his supporters as he left hospital.

Sandwiched between China and Russia, Mongolia was once described by former US Secretary of State John Kerry as an "oasis of democracy". However the incident "might turn into a full diplomatic crisis between Mongolia and Turkey, a relationship that has been active and vibrant for some years," said Julian Dierkes, an expert on Mongolian politics at the University of British Columbia. The Turkish aid agency "has undertaken many projects in Mongolia, many Mongolian students have studied at Turkish universities", a relationship that could be "damaged", he said.

Since the failed coup in July 2016, Turkey has been relentlessly tracking down those it suspects of being supporters of Gulen, who denies being behind the attempted overthrow of Erdogan. Gulen's movement built up significant influence in Turkey and overseas, particularly in Central Asia, Africa and the Balkans, especially via its education network. Ankara has outlawed the movement as a terror organization but followers insist they promote peace and moderate Islam.

Turkey has carried out a series of overseas operations against suspected members of the movement in places such as Kosovo, Gabon and more recently Ukraine. Last week a Turkish blogger accused of links to Gulen was deported from Ukraine as part of an operation by MIT while another individual was detained in Azerbaijan recently and sent back to Turkey. In Turkey more than 77,000 people were arrested over alleged links to the movement during a two-year state of emergency imposed after the coup bid in a crackdown criticized by Ankara's Western allies. — AFP



ULAANBAATAR: Students hold up banners in support of their teacher, Turkish school director Veysel Akcay, at the airport on Friday. —sAFP

Rainstorms kill 49 in northern...

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Meanwhile, a bus carrying university workers plunged off a mountain road into a valley in western India yesterday, killing 33 people, police said. Only one passenger is believed to have survived the accident in Raigad district of Maharashtra state. The bus was taking staff of Dapoli Agriculture University to the popular hill station of Mahabaleshwar for a picnic, a senior Raigad district administrator, Vijay Suryawanshi, told AFP.