

ISRAEL ARRESTS AFTER PROTESTS AGAINST SOLDIER'S CONVICTION

JERUSALEM: Israeli police made seven arrests overnight following an unruly protest against the manslaughter conviction of a soldier for shooting dead a wounded Palestinian assailant, police said yesterday. Those detained are accused of public order offences during a demonstration outside the Jerusalem residence of President Reuven Rivlin following a reconciliation rally in Tel Aviv. An eighth person was arrested on charges of seeking to disrupt Saturday's rally in the commercial capital.

Another was detained on suspicion of taking part in a hate campaign against armed forces chief of staff Lieutenant General Gadi Eisenkot, who ordered the prosecution of Sergeant Elor Azaria that angered many on the Israeli right.

"During the night dozens of demonstrators arrived opposite the president's residence where they wanted to carry out an illegal protest in support of the soldier Elor Azaria," a police statement said. "Some of them blocked the road and refused to obey police instructions. Seven demonstrators were arrested for breach of public order."

Since a military court found Azaria guilty on Wednesday, there has been a wave of public protest and threats against officials involved in the prosecution of the 20-year-old French-Israeli infantryman. After the verdict was read out, protesters scuffled with police outside military headquarters in Tel Aviv. Radio and television channels broadcast recordings of the demonstrators chanting that the chief

staff should beware unless he wanted to share the fate of prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated by a Jewish extremist in 1995.

"Gadi, Gadi be careful, Rabin is looking for a friend," they shouted. Saturday's unity rally, convened after a moving Facebook appeal by reserve Captain Ziv Shilon, was held in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square. Azaria's conviction has deeply divided Israeli public opinion between those who believe he was wrongly tried and those who say the conviction was the right and proper consequence of his actions. Right-wing politicians including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have already called for Azaria to be pardoned, even though he has yet to be sentenced and his lawyers say he may appeal. He

faces up to 20 years in prison. Public radio said about 1,500 people gathered in Rabin Square following the appeal by Shilon, who was seriously wounded in 2012 by a Palestinian roadside bomb as he patrolled Israel's border with Gaza.

Unity rally marred

Shilon said he was appalled at the wave of hate unleashed in the wake of the verdict against Azaria, caught on video delivering a shot to the head of a Palestinian attacker as he lay wounded on the ground. But even the attempt at reconciliation was marred by a small but vocal group of Azaria supporters who screamed abuse at other participants they perceived as being insufficiently sympathetic. "You are the cancer of the country," they were heard

shouting in radio reports. "You have no right to exist."

Earlier in the week, police arrested two people in connection with online death threats against a military judge and other officials. Another two, both minors, were arrested on suspicion of daubing graffiti, including calls to kill Arabs and police officers. Israel's military has assigned bodyguards to all three judges who convicted Azaria. "I feel that our people are divided, hurting, hating, disappointed, desperate," Shilon posted on Thursday. "I who did not cry at moments that were so hard that I would not wish them on anyone today I just cried," he said. "I cried for the hands I left behind in Gaza and I asked myself, perhaps for the first time, was it worth fighting for a people that hates itself?"—AFP

IRAN'S ROUHANI CLASHES WITH JUDICIARY IN RUN-UP TO VOTE

TEHRAN: Iran's President Hassan Rouhani has clashed with the country's powerful and conservative judiciary, in a rare public row as tensions rise ahead of this year's presidential election. The moderate Rouhani, who is expected to stand for a second four-year term in the May vote, has targeted the judiciary in a series of public statements over the case of a billionaire businessman on death row for corruption.

Judiciary chief Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani has hit back with accusations of his own, and yesterday supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei made reference to the dispute. In a speech to thousands of people in the religious city of Qom, Khamenei alluded to "recent arguments" among powerful figures, adding: "This will be resolved with the help of God." Rouhani launched the first salvo in a speech late last month referring to the case of Babak Zanjani, sentenced to death for fraud and other financial crimes in March after a lengthy trial that saw him convicted of fraudulently pocketing \$2.8 billion.

Zanjani was arrested in 2013, three months after Rouhani took office pledging a crackdown on corruption. He rose to prominence after sanctions were imposed on Iran over its nuclear programme, boasting in media interviews of finding ways around banking restrictions to ensure Tehran continued to receive money for international oil sales.

Hunt for lost millions

In his speech, Rouhani appeared to suggest that the judiciary had not done enough against others potentially involved in the case or to recover funds embezzled by Zanjani. "How is it possible that a single man can pocket \$3 billion? Who has helped him? Who are his accomplices?" Rouhani asked. The death sentence against Zanjani was "very well", Rouhani said, "but what becomes of the money?"

Last week Larijani hit back, defending the judiciary's handling of the case and criticizing the government for not doing enough to help track down missing funds.

"It should not be implied that the judiciary has done little on this case," Larijani said, insisting it was working "to recover the misappropriated money." "The case remains open... we have summoned former ministers and the former director of the central bank," he said.

Larijani, brother of the moderately con-

servative parliament speaker Ali Larijani, said the government and foreign ministry were "not doing their duty of tracing the money taken abroad by Zanjani".

Iranian authorities have so far only been able to recover about \$600 million of the embezzled money from the seizure of Zanjani's assets in Iran. Larijani called on the foreign ministry to demand information on the funds from the governments of Malaysia, Turkey, Tajikistan and China. The ministry replied that it had given its "full cooperation" to the judiciary. Larijani also revealed claims made by Zanjani during his questioning that he had paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to presidential candidates in 2013.

Campaign funds probe

The judiciary chief provided no names but said it would begin to investigate the alleged payments. That claim appeared to raise the stakes in the dispute and prompted Rouhani to urge the judiciary disclose its own financial dealings. "The government is ready to shed light on its accounts and expects the judiciary to do the same," Rouhani said Tuesday on Twitter, in an apparent reference to recent criticism of judiciary bank accounts managed directly by its chief.

"The judiciary accounts are transparent and anyone can view them," judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejeie said in response to the tweet, demanding Rouhani "take action" for transparency. "They need to tell the public how much Mr. Rouhani spent on the (2013 presidential) campaign and where they money came from," Mohseni Ejeie said. Some critics have accused Rouhani of attacking the judiciary to appeal to his moderate base and divert attention from a lack of immediate economic results from the nuclear deal.

The 2015 agreement between Tehran and six world powers, which saw sanctions lifted in exchange for curbs on Iran's nuclear program, is expected to be a centerpiece of Rouhani's re-election campaign. In his speech yesterday, Khamenei appeared to urge the two sides to overcome their differences.

"The existence of an independent and courageous judiciary must be appreciated by everyone," he said. "What defeats the enemy in its objectives is to have a strong judiciary and a government that is both brave and can plan accurately."—AFP

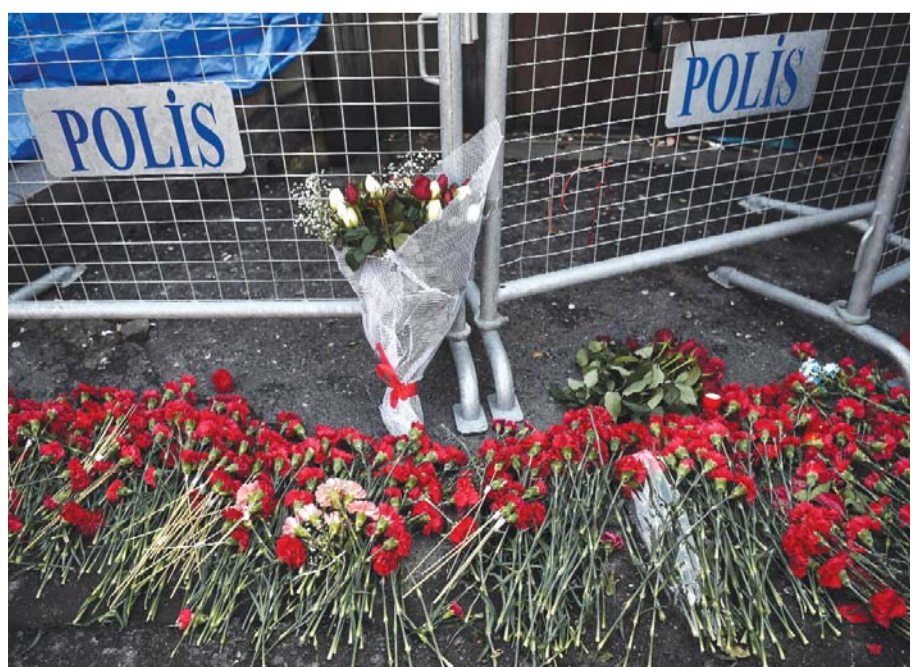
ISTANBUL NIGHTCLUB ATTACKER IDENTIFIED AS UZBEK JIHADIST

ISTANBUL: The attacker who shot dead 39 people on New Year's night at an Istanbul nightclub has been identified as an Uzbek jihadist who belongs to the extremist Islamic State (IS) group, Turkish press reports said. There had been confusion over the identity of the attacker who remains on the run with reports initially suggesting a Kyrgyz national and then a Uighur from China. But intelligence services and anti-terror police in Istanbul have now identified the man as a 34-year-old Uzbek who is part of a Central Asian IS cell, the Hurriyet daily and other Turkish newspapers reported.

It said he has the code name of Ebu Muhammed Horasani within the IS extremist group. There was no official confirmation of the report. The killer slipped into the night after killing 27 foreigners and 12 Turkish nationals at the Reina nightclub in Istanbul just 75 minutes into 2017. Despite

an intense manhunt, he remains on the run, with some reports saying that he is still believed to be in Istanbul. Turkish police had last week released images of the alleged killer, including a chilling silent video he purportedly took in central Istanbul with a selfie stick.

Uzbekistan clamped down on militant Islam after the fall of the Soviet Union under the secular rule of its long-standing leader Islam Karimov who died in 2016. IS militants from Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, as well as from Russia's Muslim regions of Dagestan and Chechnya are believed to have played a key role in the triple suicide bombings and gun attack at Istanbul's main airport in June. The IS extremist group claimed the Istanbul nightclub attack, the first time it has ever clearly claimed a major attack in the country despite being blamed for several strikes including the airport bombings.—AFP



ISTANBUL: This file photo shows flowers laid in front of the Reina night club, in Istanbul, one day after a gunman killed 39 people, including many foreigners, in a rampage at an up market nightclub in Istanbul where revelers were celebrating the New Year. — AFP



BOUAKE: A picture taken yesterday shows the market of Bouake where calm has returned as Ivory Coast's mutinous soldiers withdrew after the president announced a deal on their demands for bonuses, pay rises, housing and faster promotion. —AFP

I COAST SOLDIERS END MUTINY AFTER DEAL

'NO FIRING SINCE SATURDAY NIGHT'

BOUAKE, Ivory Coast: Ivory Coast soldiers yesterday ended a two-day mutiny in the second city Bouake and other key areas after reaching a deal on their demands for pay rises, housing and faster promotion. "There has been no firing since Saturday night," a local journalist in Bouake said. "Traffic has resumed this morning and the shops have reopened." One of the leaders of the mutiny in the world's top cocoa producer said he was "happy with the turn of events" after soldiers returned to their barracks. "All we are asking is for the president to be attentive to the living conditions of soldiers," he said on condition of anonymity.

The west African country was rocked by two days of unrest after soldiers seized control of Bouake's streets early Friday, firing rocket launchers and terrifying residents, in a mutiny that spread to other cities including the economic capital Abidjan. In Abidjan—a bustling seaport that is home to the presidency and parliament—national television reported that shots had been fired at the Akouedo barracks in the east of the city on Saturday. The soldiers had detained Defence Minister Alain Richard Donwahi for two hours on Saturday in a tense standoff over their demands, firing Kalashnikovs and heavy weapons around the home of a senior local official where Donwahi was meeting with the soldiers' representatives.

Yesterday, Abidjan's central Plateau area where several government offices and leading businesses are located, was calm. "Life is back to

normal," a resident said. The same was true for the northern city of Korhogo and Man in the west. A Man resident, who identified himself as Jean, said: "The soldiers have returned to their barracks." President Alassane Ouattara announced on Saturday evening that an agreement had been reached. In a brief televised address he said it took into account "the demands relating to bonuses and improving the living conditions of soldiers." "Having given my agreement, I ask all soldiers to go back to their barracks to allow decisions to be carried out calmly," he added, without giving details of the accord.

'Many problems to resolve'

Donwahi, who returned to Abidjan on Saturday night, said all bonus arrears would be paid. "We are aware that there are many problems to resolve... I can assure you that we will keep our commitments but they too should keep theirs," he said. Bouake, which is home to 1.5 million people, was the capital of a rebellion which erupted in 2002 in a failed attempt to oust then president Laurent Gbagbo. Twelve years later, a similar dispute over pay by rebel-turned-soldiers erupted in Bouake which spread to Abidjan and briefly brought the country to a standstill.

The government had then agreed to a deal that provided amnesty for the mutineers and a financial settlement. A Bouake resident said on Sunday he had had enough. "We no longer want

this situation in Bouake," said Adama Coulibaly, a teacher. "We are tired of these actions of the soldiers. I can't wait for President Ouattara to find a definitive solution to their problems." Added computer scientist Seraphin Kouadio: "We no longer want the sound of boots in Bouake."

Politically motivated?

Some analysts said the mutiny could be a pressure tactic on Ouattara and politically motivated. "One of the things to ascertain is whether there has been a political manipulation. We are waiting for the nomination of the vice president and the prime minister... are the former rebel leaders behind this?" one said. "At present everybody is thinking about Guillaume Soro," the expert said, referring to one of the leaders of the 2002 rebellion which sliced the former French colony into the rebel-held north and the government-controlled south and triggered years of unrest.

Rebel forces had then backed Ouattara, the current president who took office in April 2011 after a bloody post-electoral showdown with Gbagbo that left 3,000 people dead. But some soldiers denied that they had been manipulated, arguing that it was "a family matter." "You can equip the army but if the men are not motivated it won't serve any purpose," said one, adding that Ouattara was the troops' "spiritual father." A retired soldier said the problem was that senior officers earned disproportionately high salaries. —AFP

68 KILLED IN BATTLES NEAR YEMEN'S STRATEGIC STRAIT

ADEN: At least 68 fighters have been killed in two days of fierce battles between Yemeni forces and Shiite Huthi rebels near the strategic Bab al-Mandab strait, military officials said yesterday. Government forces launched on Saturday an assault to recapture the coastal Dhubab district, just 30 kilometers north of Bab al-Mandab which links the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Since then at least 55 Huthis have been killed in fighting and 72 others wounded, military and medical sources said.

Clashes since Saturday have also killed 13 loyalist forces, including an army general, Brigadier-General Abdul Aziz al-Majidi, a loyalist commander, said. Landmines planted by the rebels have slowed down the advance of government forces, military officials said. The

government and its allies in a Saudi-led coalition recaptured Bab al-Mandab strait in October 2015, pushing the Iran-backed rebels further north. But the rebels still control nearly all of Yemen's Red Sea coast to the north, posing what the coalition says is a threat to international shipping.

In September and October, two US warships and a United Arab Emirates vessel contracted to the coalition were targeted by missile fire from rebel-held territory. Pro-government troops seized Dhubab in early October 2015, but the rebels managed to recapture the area in February. The Yemeni conflict has killed more than 7,000 people since the coalition's military intervention began in March 2015, according to the United Nations.—AFP

IS SUSPECT SAYS TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS ARE DEAD

TRIPOLI: A suspected jihadist held in eastern Libya told a local television channel late Saturday that two Tunisian journalists who went missing in 2014 were killed by the Islamic State group. IS had claimed in January 2015 to have executed blogger Sofiene Chourabi and photographer Nadhir Ktari but later the same year the Tunisian government said it had evidence the pair were still alive.

The prisoner, identified as Libyan Abderrazek Nassef Abderrazek Ali, told the Al-Hadath Al-Libya channel that he had witnessed the pair being executed in a forest outside the eastern town of Derna, which was then under IS control. He said the two journalists had been captured at an IS roadblock between the towns of Ajdabiya and Labraq and then taken to Derna. He said an IS court had ordered them killed on the basis of testimony from Tunisian jihadists.

Some 3,000 Tunisians have joined the ranks of jihadist groups fighting in Libya, as well as in Syria and Iraq, according to Tunisian officials. The United Nations puts the figure at 5,000. Al-Hadath Al-Libya is close to eastern Libya's military strongman Marshal Khalifa Haftar. The channel said that the suspect, who was shown shaven-headed and wearing an orange jumpsuit, was being held by Haftar's forces. —AFP