

International

Turkey sentences 34 to life in jail over Erdogan death plot

Judge finds 43 soldiers guilty of trying to kill President

MUGLA: A Turkish court yesterday found 43 former soldiers guilty of attempting to kill President Tayyip Erdogan during last year's failed coup, and handed most of them life sentences in the highest profile case related to the attempted putsch so far. Judge Emirsah Bastog read out guilty verdicts for 43 of the 47 defendants, according to a Reuters reporter at the court in Mugla, southwestern Turkey. Mugla is near the luxury resort where Erdogan and his family narrowly escaped a team of rogue soldiers who stormed his hotel during the night of the coup.

The trial, which started in February, is part of a sweeping crackdown that followed the July 2016 failed putsch and is the biggest such case to reach a verdict so far. "I hope the verdict today is beneficial to everyone," Bastog said, as he sentenced 34 of the accused to "aggravated" life sentences, the harshest punishment possible under Turkish law because it lengthens the minimum sentence required for parole.

Another seven defendants were given life sentences while two others were given lesser sentences. "(Several) defendants have been found guilty on the charge of attempting to assassinate the president," Bastog told the packed courtroom. One was acquitted. No verdict was given for the three who were tried in absentia, including US-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, whom Ankara blames for orchestrating the coup. The court heard final statements from the defendants just before Bastog delivered his verdict. Some of the accused said they did not believe the court could deliver a

fair verdict and had been under political pressure. "From the moment I was arrested at the air base on July 16, I was treated like a criminal," Ergun Sabin, a former air force lieutenant, told the court. Pictures released in the aftermath of the coup showed some suspected coup plotters - including high-ranking military officers - stripped to their underpants, handcuffed and their faces bruised. "Words don't mean anything here as we didn't have chance to a fair trial," said another defendant, Gokhan Sen. "We are just the grass that elephants trampled on during their fight."

More than 240 people were killed on the night of July 15 last year, when putschists commandeered tanks, warplanes and helicopters, attacking parliament and attempting to overthrow the government. The government blames the network of Gulen, a former ally of Erdogan. Gulen, who has lived in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania since 1999, has denied involvement and condemned the coup. A total of 47 defendants

4 Turkish troops killed in an attack blamed on rebels

were on trial, 43 of whom have been held in detention during the 7-1/2 month hearing. Gulen was being tried in absentia. Most of the defendants were soldiers.

In another development, four Turkish soldiers were killed yesterday in a bombing blamed on Kurdish militants in the restive southeast, the local governor's office said. Another four soldiers were injured when a hand-made bomb detonated as an armored vehicle drove past in the Yuksekova district of Hakkari province, the gover-



ANKARA: Relatives grieve during the funeral held for a killed Turkish soldier Mustafa Erdal, who died during fighting against members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the Cizre district of Sirnak. — AFP

norate said in a statement. It blamed a "separatist terrorist organization"-the official term for the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK has waged an insurgency in Turkey since 1984, during which over 40,000 people have been killed. The group is blacklisted

as a terrorist organization by Ankara, the United States and the European Union. After the collapse of a two-year ceasefire in 2015, Turkish military operations intensified while there are frequent PKK attacks on soldiers in the southeast. — Agencies



Hamas, Fatah reconciliation?

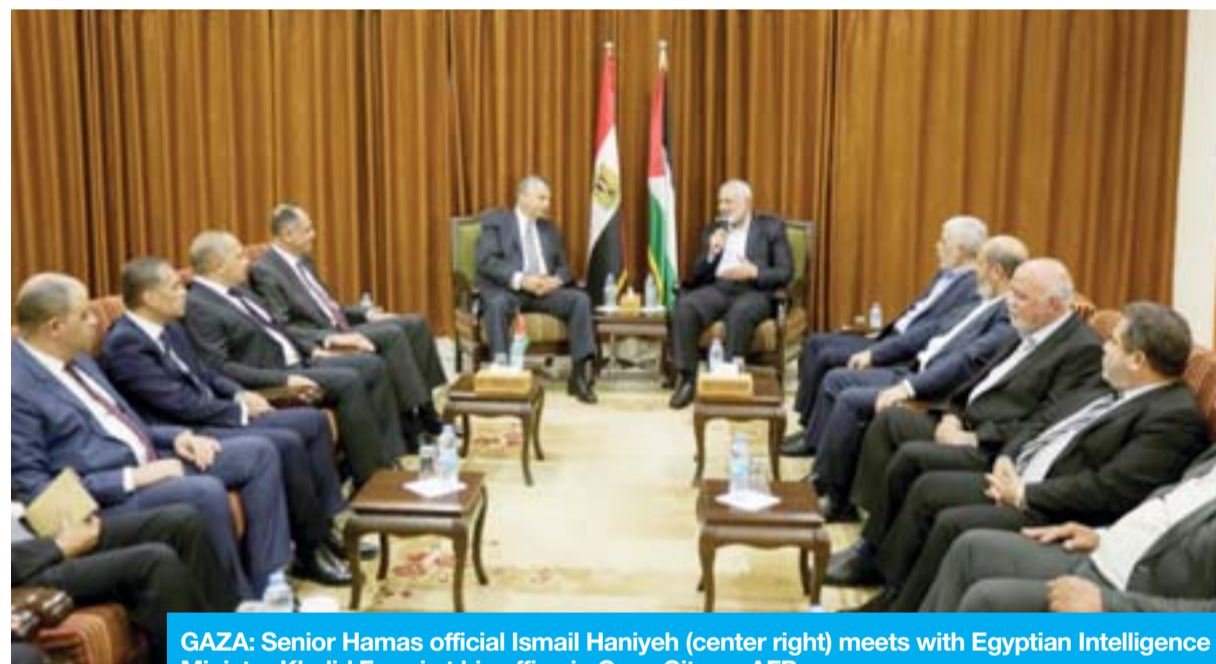
GAZA: For three days it was all smiles as the Palestinian prime minister held talks in Gaza with Hamas but as the symbolic visit draws to a close the real work for reconciliation is just beginning. The two sides will meet again for in-depth negotiations next week. After a decade of division, are there reasons to believe the rival Palestinian factions might finally come together?

What happened?

On Monday, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah arrived in Gaza for the first time since 2015, describing it as a "historic" moment. He met with the leaders of Hamas Ismail Haniya, as well with the head of Egyptian intelligence, while also convening his cabinet in Gaza for the first time in nearly three years. Hamas has ruled the territory since 2007, when it seized it from the PA in a near civil war and multiple previous reconciliation attempts have failed. But after Egyptian mediation, last month the Islamists of Hamas agreed to hand over civil power to the internationally recognised PA, which is based in the West Bank.

What is at stake?

The most immediate issue is the suffering of the two million Gazans, who have faced three devastating wars with Israel since 2008, as well as crippling blockades by both Israel and Egypt. They suffer from desperate shortages of electricity and high unemployment. The decade-long division has also been a key obstacle to peace talks with Israel. Gaza and the West Bank are supposed to form a future independent state but internationally recognized president Mahmud Abbas, long the negotiating partner for Israel, has been undermined by Hamas' control of Gaza. "The division cripples the Palestinians from being able to move forward in a constructive manner in achieving the goal of returning back to negotiations and imple-



GAZA: Senior Hamas official Ismail Haniyeh (center right) meets with Egyptian Intelligence Minister Khalid Fawzi at his office in Gaza City. — AFP

menting a two-state solution," UN Middle East envoy Nickolay Mladenov said.

Reasons for belief?

Past failures have inevitably sparked skepticism about the latest reconciliation effort. But on Monday, Hamdallah's ministers took the keys to government offices in Gaza. Nour Odeh, a political analyst based in the West Bank, contrasted this with the previous reconciliation attempt in 2014, when ministers of a unity government were often not allowed to leave their hotels by Hamas. "This is the first time the ministers of this government have assumed their roles in their own ministries. It is a completely different dynamic on the ground," she said. "These things are important-they help to create an atmosphere that is a snowball that can continue rolling." Palestinian media were

broadly supportive of the reconciliation effort, although few concrete measures were publicly announced.

What now?

If this week's visit was about symbolism, next week the details begin. The two sides will meet in Cairo on Tuesday to start in-depth negotiations that could take months. A key stumbling block is control of security in Gaza. Hamas has an armed wing with an estimated 25,000 members and is loath to give up control. Senior Hamas officials have already said it is out of the question, but Abbas has insisted the Palestinian Authority must have full control. Hamas could not "copy or clone Hezbollah's experience in Lebanon," he warned on Monday, referring to a situation where an independent armed group exerts major influence on national politics. — AFP

News in brief

Giraffe helps man propose

SPRINGFIELD: A man in southwest Missouri proposed to his girlfriend with the help of a very, very tall friend. Zookeepers at the Dickerson Park Zoo on Sunday attached Cody Hall's engagement ring to a lanyard and hung it around the neck of a giraffe at the zoo on Sunday, the Springfield News-Leader reported. Hall's girlfriend, Makayla Blakey, thought she was getting a behind-the-scenes tour of the zoo when the couple approached the giraffe enclosure. "They gave us this spiel about how we are going to feed the giraffe and help participate in a training exercise," Hall said. "They showed us the training exercise, getting Mili (the giraffe) to point at a big tennis ball with her nose."

Prisoners to serve judges

ROME: Jailbirds in northern Italy will soon be able to offer judges a sweetener-though serving up an extra smooth cappuccino is unlikely to be enough to get time off their sentences. The coffee shop in the courthouse of Turin is seeking unusual barristas: prisoners or former prisoners looking for a way to pay their debt to society or start afresh. The city council signed off Wednesday on the plan for the cafe, which serves some 900 court employees as well as hundreds of magistrates, lawyers and members of the public. The bar, currently closed for management issues, will re-open in a few months, council spokesperson Michele Chicco said. "This is part of efforts to humanize the detention of prisoners: having a job during the day, being in contact with clients, helps reintegrate offenders at the end of their sentences," he said.

Robbers tunnel into bank

SAO PAULO: Brazilian robbers tunneled nearly 2,000 feet in a daring attempt to rob a bank in Sao Paulo where they hoped to nab millions of dollars, police said. After a three-month operation, police nabbed 16 suspects late Monday. They swooped just before the alleged gang was able to use its impressively equipped tunnel to enter the safe at a Banco do Brasil branch in the country's financial capital. According to the authorities, the men said they were after one billion reais, or about \$317 million. "It would have been the world's biggest heist," said police chief Fabio Pinheiro Lopes on Globo television. Police said work on the tunnel began four months ago, starting from a house several blocks from the bank. It had sophisticated supports, fans and light.

Woman kills boyfriend

CAMDEN: A New Jersey woman accused of using two metal frying pans to fatally beat her boyfriend at a convenience store has been charged with murder. Camden County prosecutors say federal marshals arrested Maleia Cole on Monday in Camden, two days after the charge was filed. It wasn't known Tuesday if the 33-year-old Camden resident has retained an attorney who could comment on the accusations. Prosecutors say the attack occurred Sept 2 in Woodlynne. Police found 35-year-old Jason Lewis bleeding from head and facial injuries. They say Lewis told them Cole - who lives near the store - had followed him across the street and into the store while beating him repeatedly with the pans. Lewis was hospitalized and underwent emergency surgery. He died from his injuries on Sept 26. Authorities haven't said what spurred the attack.

Iraq forces push into Islamic State bastion Hawija

HAWIJA: Iraqi forces pushed into the Islamic State group stronghold of Hawija yesterday, commanders said, stepping up their assault against one of the jihadists' last enclaves in the country. Government and allied forces backed by a US-led coalition launched an offensive last month to oust IS from Hawija, a longtime insurgent bastion. The town is among the final holdouts from the territory seized by the jihadists in 2014 and its recapture would leave only a handful of remote outposts in IS hands.

The Hawija operation's commander, Lieutenant General Abdel Amir Yarallah, said the army, federal police and rapid response force had begun a major operation "to liberate the centre of Hawija and the neighboring town of Riyadh". Federal police chief Raed Shakir Jawdat said in a statement that elite units had entered the city from the northwest amid artillery and missile bombardments of jihadist positions.

"They are advancing and the goal is to take seven neighborhoods of Hawija and 12 vital objectives," he said, without providing more details. The operation involves the army, the federal police, elite units, as well as tribal volunteers and the Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary force, mainly made up of Iran-trained Shiite militia. The Hashed said its engineers were demining the route into Hawija and that IS fighters had retreated to the town centre after "their defenses were breached".

12,500 flee offensive

The militia said it had evacuated several dozen families from villages close to Hawija after they escaped jihadist



HAWIJAH, Iraq: Iraqi forces, backed by fighters from the Hashed Al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization units), advance towards the Islamic State (IS) group's stronghold of Hawija yesterday. — AFP

attempts to use them as human shields. The United Nations announced on Tuesday that an estimated 12,500 people had fled the town since the launch of the offensive to retake Hawija and surrounding areas last month. The UN's humanitarian affairs office (OCHA) said the number of people still in the town was unknown but could be as high 78,000.

It said humanitarian agencies have set up checkpoints, camps and emergency sites in the area capable of receiving more than 70,000 people who could flee. Hawija, 230 kilometers north of Baghdad, is one of just two areas of Iraq still held by IS, along with a stretch of the Euphrates Valley near the Syrian border which is also under attack. Hawija has been an insurgent bastion since soon after the US-led invasion of 2003, earning it the nickname of "Kandahar in Iraq"

for the ferocious resistance it put up similar to that in the Taliban militia's citadel in Afghanistan. The town's mainly Sunni Arab population is deeply hostile both to the Shiite-led government in Baghdad and to the Kurds who form the historic majority in adjacent areas. The town lies between the two main routes north from Baghdad to second city Mosul, recaptured from IS in July, and to the city of Kirkuk and the autonomous Kurdish region. IS has been forced out of most of the territory it seized in Iraq and Syria during a lightning offensive in the summer of 2014 that was followed by its declaration of a cross-border "caliphate". The US-led coalition is also backing an Arab-Kurdish alliance, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), that is battling to oust IS from its de facto Syrian capital Raqa. — AFP