

International

'Most hated man' gets 7 years in jail for defrauding investors

It was difficult to find an impartial jury for the trial

NEW YORK: Martin Shkreli, once dubbed the most hated man in America for ratcheting up the price of an HIV drug, was sentenced to seven years in prison Friday on charges of defrauding investors. The disgraced former pharmaceutical executive and hedge fund manager was convicted in August of conspiracy to commit securities fraud and two counts of securities fraud.

Shkreli, who once led Turing Pharmaceuticals, became known as "Pharma Bro" and is infamous for suddenly raising the price of the drug Daraprim in 2015 by 5,000 percent from \$13.50 a pill to \$750. He smirked through a congressional hearing that scrutinized his actions and has since earned a reputation for an extravagant, self-publicizing lifestyle. Although the drug controversy had nothing to do with his trial before a federal court in New York, so great was the 34-year-old's notoriety that it was initially difficult to find an impartial jury for the trial.

Arrested in December 2015, his bail was revoked in September after he offered a reward for anyone who would grab a strand of former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's hair. Shkreli insisted it was a joke. His high-profile lawyer, Ben Brafman, described Shkreli as a mildly autistic, self-taught genius and asked US District Judge

Kiyo Matsumoto to limit the prison sentence to a maximum of 18 months. But even Brafman acknowledged "there are times when I want to punch him in the face" because his client's behavior complicated the defense, according to reporters who were in the courtroom. Prosecutors were seeking 15 years' prison, arguing that

"I want to punch him in the face"

Shkreli showed no remorse for his actions and pointing to his provocative and bizarre statements posted on social media.

'I was a fool'

"He wants everyone to believe he is a genius, a whiz kid, a self-taught biotech wonder," said prosecutor Jacquelyn Kasulis. "He can't be just an average person who fails, like the rest of us." In a letter sent last week to

the judge, Shkreli pleaded for leniency and for the first time admitted he had erred. "I made serious mistakes but I still believe that I am a good person with much potential. I was a fool," he said, expressing a wish to work "for the betterment of humanity."

With a choking voice, he reiterated in court his remorse at the "shameful actions" that led to his downfall. On top of six months of good behavior already spent behind bars, and after charity donations he made before his arrest, the repentance helped to lower his sentence far below what the prosecution requested. On Monday, Matsumoto ordered Shkreli to pay back \$7.36 million to federal authorities, an amount they can recover by seizing his assets.

These include a Picasso painting and his unique copy of an album by rappers Wu-Tang Clan. In 2015, he purchased for \$2 million the sole edition of the ensemble's "Once Upon a Time in Shaolin," which he put up for sale on eBay in September—while also threatening to "break this album in frustration." The winning bid was a little more than \$1 million but by then Shkreli was already in jail after his bail revocation, throwing the deal in doubt.

Shkreli had been convicted of securities fraud and conspiracy a month earlier. The jury, however, cleared him of more than half



WASHINGTON: In this file photo taken on February 4, 2016 Entrepreneur and pharmaceutical executive Martin Shkreli leaves after invoking his Fifth Amendment rights during a hearing of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on Capitol Hill.—AFP

the charges for allegedly stealing \$11 million in stock from his first pharmaceutical company Retrophin to pay off investors who

lost money in two of his hedge funds. The verdict left Brafman suggesting that Shkreli might even avoid jail time.—AFP

Turkey releases more journalists in newspaper trial

SILIVRI: Two Turkish journalists walked free from prison on Friday after over a year behind bars in the trial on terror-related charges of staff from the opposition Cumhuriyet newspaper, seen as a test of press freedom under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Cumhuriyet's editor-in-chief Murat Sabuncu and investigative reporter Ahmet Sik were ordered to be freed by the judge after a marathon day-long hearing and later walked free from jail.

However, they remain under charge and on trial. One more detained suspect, the paper's chairman Akin Atalay, was ordered to stay in jail. The three were the last remaining suspects in the case to be held behind bars ahead of a final verdict, leaving Atalay the sole suspect still behind bars. A total of 17 staff from Cumhuriyet (Republic) face terror charges in the trial, which opened on July 24. Others have been gradually freed over the last year. It is still not clear when the final verdict will be announced.

The next hearing in the trial was set for March 16 and the suspects still face up to 43 years in prison if convicted. Sabuncu and Atalay have spent the last 495 days in jail and Sik, who was detained a little after the initial wave of arrests, 434 days. The decision to release Sabuncu and Sik, delivered in the courthouse in Silivri outside Istanbul—part of a complex that also contains the prison where they are held—was greeted with cheers from supporters in the courtroom. Sik could be seen weeping with emotion. Also present were the defendants who were released last year after long stints in jail but also remain charged, including cartoonist Musa Kart and columnist Kadri Gurel.

'Not a day to be happy'

Sik, a staunch critic of Erdogan, said after walking free from Silivri jail there could be no celebration as Atalay remained in jail.

"I prefer you to be frustrated because frustration will help us stand tall ... today is not a day to be happy." Taking aim at the government, he added: "I assure you that day will come when this Mafia sultanate comes to an end." Sabuncu added: "Turkey's problems are not resolved just because we are set free. "As journalists,



ISTANBUL: Freed journalists, editor-in-chief of Cumhuriyet Turkish daily newspaper, Murat Sabuncu (C), and Turkish journalist Ahmet Sik (R), are seen surrounded by fellow colleagues.—AFP

our mission is to do our job fearlessly as we did before." Amnesty International's Europe Director, Gauri van Gulik said the releases were "long-overdue" and provided a "glimmer of hope" in a country she described as the "biggest jailer of journalists in the world".

The latest hearing came a day after an Istanbul court sentenced 25 journalists to prison terms of up to seven and a half years over links to the group of US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen who is blamed by Turkey for the 2016 failed coup against Erdogan. Dozens of journalists have been detained in the wake of the coup bid, causing international concern.

The Cumhuriyet staff are charged with supporting through their coverage three organisations Turkey views as terror groups—the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the ultra-left Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C), and the Gulen movement. In court various witnesses gave statements, including former Cumhuriyet journalist Altan Oymen who was once

briefly a leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and rubbished any idea the paper had backed Gulen. "The allegations are unimaginable," he said, adding it was Cumhuriyet which had properly reported on the activities of Gulen.

Supporters say the charges are absurd, noting that the outlawed groups cited in the indictment are themselves at odds with each other. Indeed, Sik is seen as one of Turkey's most incisive critics of the Gulen movement and in 2011 wrote an explosive book "The Imam's Army" exposing the grip the group had on key Turkish institutions. In a separate development, Turkey's top appeals court quashed the verdict of Cumhuriyet's former editor-in-chief Can Dundar who was sentenced to five years and 10 months in jail on charges of revealing state secrets in 2016. It ruled he should face an even more serious charge of espionage in a new trial and risk a longer prison term of up to 20 years. Dundar has fled Turkey and is now based in Germany.—AFP

Premier underlines reform and people's livelihood

BEIJING: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang called for joint efforts to advance reform and opening-up, promote innovation, sustain economic growth and improve people's livelihood at the ongoing national legislative session Tuesday. Joining deputies to the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) from southern Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, Li stressed following the guide of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

Li said as this year marks the 40th anniversary of China's reform and opening-up drive, local governments should not only fully implement national reform policies, but launch tailored measures of their own to create a business-friendly environment for the benefit of enterprises and the public. Local governments were also told to practise frugality but increase spending on programs for people's livelihood and focus on poverty alleviation.

Senior leaders including Wang Yang, Wang Huning and Han Zheng, all members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, also joined panel discussions of political advisors and NPC deputies Tuesday. Joining political advisors from ethnic minority groups, Wang Yang called for concrete efforts to secure victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects in areas with large ethnic minority populations. He asked them to focus on targeted poverty reduction and environment protection.

While attending discussions of NPC deputies from Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions, Wang Huning stressed implementation of the spirit of the 19th CPC National Congress on work related to the two regions, urging efforts to act in strict compliance with China's Constitution and the basic laws of the two special administrative regions, support the governments and chief executives of both regions in exercising law-based governance. Speaking to NPC deputies from Shaanxi Province, Han Zheng encouraged people to strive to achieve more efficient, fairer, and more sustainable development with better quality by following the philosophy of innovative, coordinated, green, and open development that is for everyone.—(article provided by the Embassy of China)

Sri Lanka to probe anti-Muslim riots

COLOMBO: An investigation into anti-Muslim riots that spread in central Sri Lanka prompting the authorities to declare a nationwide state of emergency was announced yesterday by President Maithripala Sirisena. A panel of three retired judges will probe the breakdown in law and order in the picturesque hill resort of Kandy, Sirisena's office said in a statement.

Three people died, 20 others were wounded and more than 200 Muslim-owned businesses and homes were destroyed in four days of rioting that died down on Thursday. Eleven mosques were also damaged or completely destroyed by Sinhalese mobs, according to police who say the situation has been brought under control after a heavy military deployment. A curfew in the district, which is 115 kilometres (72 miles) east of the capital Colombo, was lifted at dawn Saturday but army soldiers continued to patrol alongside police, officials said.

Sri Lanka's Muslim minority held their Friday prayers under military protection across the island amid fears of fresh attacks. However, the weekly religious activity went off without incident, authorities said. Hundreds of Buddhist monks and activists staged demonstrations in Colombo on Friday denouncing the anti-Muslim attacks and urging authorities to take strong action against the perpetrators. Police said nearly 150 people, including the main instigator, have been arrested over the unrest.

They named the main suspect as Amith Weerasinghe, a man from the mainly Buddhist Sinhalese majority known for anti-Muslim activism and outspoken social



COLOMBO: A Sri Lankan policeman guards a mosque in Sri Lanka's capital Colombo on March 9, 2018, amid fears that anti-Muslim riots in the central region of Kandy could spread to other areas of the island.—AFP

media posts, and said he was taken into custody on Thursday. The government declared a state of emergency on Tuesday as the unrest escalated when a

Muslim man was found dead in a burnt-out building, a day after a Sinhalese man died of injuries sustained in an attack carried out by Muslim men.—AFP

Death row Iran spiritual leader gets jail term

TEHRAN: The leader of an Iranian spiritual movement, whose repeated death sentences drew UN and US condemnation, has been given a five-year jail term after a second retrial, his lawyer said yesterday. In June 2015 and again in September last year, the courts found Mohammad Ali Taheri guilty of "corruption on earth"—the gravest crime in the Islamic republic. But on each occasion the supreme court overturned the death sentence and ordered a retrial.

After the latest retrial, the court convicted Taheri of the lesser charge of "non-aggravated corruption" and sentenced him to five years in prison, his lawyer Mahmoud Alizadeh Tabatabaie said. But Tabatabaie said he would appeal the conviction as it was made on the basis of a 2013 law that the court was applying retroactively and his client had already served a five-year jail sentence and longer in prison awaiting retrial.

Taheri founded his Erfan Kayhani ("Cosmic Mysticism") movement in the early 2000s and quickly became a well-known spiritual leader, appearing on state television and giving classes at Tehran University. He promoted alternative medicine and followed what he said were messages from spirits. But as his popularity grew, he fell foul of Iran's clerical establishment and the conservative-dominated judiciary launched a crackdown on what they dubbed his "satanic" sect. He was first detained for a short period in 2010 and was then rearrested in May 2011 and held in solitary confinement before being charged with "insulting Islamic sanctities" and "corruption on earth". In July, August and September, authorities arrested at least 25 of his followers, some of them for organizing protests against his death sentence, Iranian media reported.—AFP