

International

Sudan talks recommence after shootings cloud breakthrough

Army major, five protesters killed by unidentified gunmen

KHARTOUM: Protest leaders resumed talks with Sudan's military rulers yesterday seeking to build on a political breakthrough overshadowed by deadly shootings at a long-running protest sit-in outside army headquarters. The protest movement is demanding a civilian-led transition after 30 years of ironfisted rule by president Omar Al-Bashir but the generals who toppled him have been pushing for a continuing leadership role.

An army major and five protesters were killed by unidentified gunmen at the Khartoum sit-in late on Monday just hours after the two sides announced they had reached agreement on the structure and powers of the bodies that will oversee the transition. The Alliance for Freedom and Change—the protest movement umbrella group that has been negotiating with the military council—said the shootings were an attempt to “disturb the breakthrough” and blamed militias still loyal to Bashir's regime.

The military council said that it had “noticed some armed infiltrators among the protesters” at the sit-in, but did not specify who they were. Protest leaders resumed their talks with military council representatives in early afternoon, one of the protest leaders told AFP. They were expected to discuss the all-important composition of the transitional bodies. The protest movement has been demanding that they be led by civilians and have civilian majorities with military represen-

tation. The military is ready to accept a mainly civilian cabinet but has been demanding a military majority in a proposed sovereign council that will have the final say in matters of state. Also on agenda is the duration of the transition, with the military calling for a two-year timeframe while the protesters want four years to allow time for the array of preparatory reforms they say are necessary. The renewed talks between the two sides that opened on Monday come after a break in negotiations that saw protest leaders threaten “escalatory measures” to secure their central demand of civilian rule.

The issue has kept protesters camped outside army headquarters around the clock ever since Bashir's overthrow. The sit-in has become the focal point for the protest movement in place of the near daily protests that had been held around the country while the veteran president remained in power. But yesterday, following the previous night's violence at the Khartoum sit-in, protesters vented their anger on the streets of capital's twin city Omdurman.

Protesters gathered in the Abbassiya and Al-Arbaa districts, just across the Nile from the capital, with many chanting slogans against the military council, witnesses told AFP. “Protect your homeland or prepare to die!” the protesters chanted. In Arbaa, some blocked roads with burning tyres, a witness

said, adding that troops deployed to the area. In Khartoum, the square outside the army complex was calm after the previous night's violence, AFP correspondents reported.

Graffiti artists had sprayed portraits of the killed on the makeshift barriers thrown up around the sit-in. “What happened yesterday was the dirty work of the ousted regime,” said protester Hisham Al-Sayed. “They are playing the game of dividing the people in order to control the situation. We have to ensure that the barricades are not removed.” Protester About Hassan, 45, blamed paramilitaries from the Rapid Support Forces for the shootings. “I accuse the RSF of yesterday's assault because they are illegal forces,” he said. “We are not trusting those guys anymore. They are supposed to guard the protesters.”

The RSF is made up of former militiamen but comes under the ambit of the army. Its irregulars are routinely seen deployed at key junctions in pickups mounted with machine guns and their commander Mohamed Hamadan Dagolo, widely known as Hmeidi, is now deputy chairman of the military council. Doctors, who along with other professionals have played a major part in organising the protests, have set up field clinics at the sit-in where they treated the wounded from Monday's shootings. “So far all cases are stable, and those unstable have been transferred to hospital,” a duty doctor said. — AFP



KHARTOUM: Sudanese protesters chant slogans as they march beneath the shade of a giant national flag at the protest outside the army headquarters yesterday. — AFP

Row as France remembers troops slain in hostage raid

PARIS: France paid its emotional final respects yesterday to two commandos killed during a raid to rescue four hostages in the Sahel region of Africa last week that has sparked a row over the risks taken by the freed tourists. French special forces Cedric de Pierrepont, 33, and Alain Bertoncello, 28, who died in the operation in Burkina Faso, were honored at a ceremony at the Invalides military complex in Paris led by President Emmanuel Macron.

Crowds joined soldiers, firefighters and veterans in lining the bridge leading up to the imposing 17th-century building as the motorcade carrying their coffins made its solemn procession through a sun-lit Paris. “France is a country that does not abandon its children, no matter the circumstances,” a visibly emotional Macron said in his speech during a 45-minute ceremony attended by tearful family members and masked fellow special forces.

“We're here today, before these coffins draped in the colors of the country, to honor the suffering of your families,” Macron continued. “We're here to affirm, with all the force this anger and sadness gives us, that we will never retreat from the fights for which you committed yourself and gave your lives.”

Warning to tourists

The raid last week freed French hostages Patrick Picque and Laurent Lassimouillas, who were seized on May 1 while on a safari trip in a nature park in Benin close to the border with Burkina Faso. An American citizen and South Korean tourist - both women whose presence was a total surprise to the French forces - were also sprung from captivity in the operation overnight on Thursday-Friday. The kidnapping has shone a spotlight on the rising instability in the vast Sahel region that lies south of the Sahara desert, where Islamist groups aligned to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State have been gathering in strength.

There has been an outpouring of grief in France over the sacrifice of the two soldiers, but also criticism of the French tourists who were vis-



PARIS: Slain special forces soldiers Cedric de Pierrepont and Alain Bertoncello are posthumously awarded with the medal of Commander in the Legion of Honor by French President Emmanuel Macron (left) as he stands in front of their flag-draped coffins during a national ceremony at the Hotel Invalides yesterday. — AFP

iting an area subject to a travel warning by the foreign ministry. Leading French daily Le Figaro in an editorial Monday said the freeing of the tourists had “left a bitter taste”. “This tragic event should serve as a warning to our tourists. Our forces are in Africa for a hard and long war and not to pay the price of carelessness,” it wrote.

On Saturday, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian reprimanded the freed men, aged 51 and 46, for taking “significant risks” by visiting an area that was considered a “red” no-go zone under travel advice issued by his ministry. French far-right leader Marine Le Pen also criticized Macron over the weekend for going to a military airport south of Paris to meet the tourists off the plane when they arrived back from Burkina Faso. “The president shouldn't have gone to greet them almost as if they were heroes,” Le Pen told the BFM news channel in an interview.

Essential travel?

French officials have argued that the raid came in a key window of opportunity as the hostage-takers were planning to transfer their victims to Islamist groups in Mali aligned to either Al-Qaeda or Islamic State. Lassimouillas admitted that he

and Picque should have taken into account the foreign ministry advisories, in a statement read out as the men arrived back in France. France's special forces units were in attendance for their fallen brothers in arms yesterday, prompting warnings to broadcasters not to show any faces that could jeopardize their safety.

Relatives of the slain soldiers held photos of the men as a visibly moved Macron spoke with their tearful partners and parents in the vast cobbled courtyard of the Invalides complex, accompanied by his wife Brigitte. The hostages were snatched by an armed group while visiting the Pendjari National Park in Benin which borders Burkina Faso. The border area was considered a red “no-go” zone, while the whole of the park was classed in the intermediate “orange” category by the French foreign ministry, meaning only essential travel was recommended.

The deaths were a reminder of the risks encountered in the region by French forces, who have been deployed in the Sahel since 2013 when France intervened to drive back jihadist groups who had taken control of northern Mali. A total of 26 French soldiers have died in the deployment including de Pierrepont and Bertoncello. — AFP

Egypt teaches about love, marriage to curb divorce

CAIRO: During a recent class at Cairo University, students laughed as they watched a skit acted out by their peers about a married couple. The husband came home from work and asked his wife, who was sweeping the floor, why dinner wasn't ready. “I pick up the kids and I go to work ... Am I neglecting something because the food is still on the stove?” the wife asked, to which the husband responded: “The apartment looks like a rubbish dump.”

The skit was part of a new government project called Mawadda, which offers lessons to university students about how to pick the right partner and how to handle conflicts in marriage. The goal is to prevent divorce after the number of divorces reached more than 198,000 in 2017, a 3.2 percent increase from the year before. Mawadda, meaning affection, is still in a trial phase, but the goal is to target 800,000 young people yearly starting 2020 and to eventually make it mandatory for university students to take a class before graduating.

After watching the skit, some students and the teacher pointed out that the husband should carry out more household tasks. “It's not her obligation to do all that,” said Salah Ahmed, the teacher, adding that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) helped his wife with all tasks and his example should be followed. But he also said the wife should have been more understanding and tried to look good for her husband instead of welcoming him while sweeping the floor.

Julia Gosef, a 23-year-old student who attended the class with her fiancé, said she worries that Egypt's economic hardships could harm her marriage. The couple will not be able to rely on one income so she would be forced to work, which could lead to arguments similar to the one in the skit, she said.

“I think I won't be able to take care of our home well enough,” she said. Mawadda's lessons will be accompanied by YouTube videos, a radio program and educational plays. The church and Egypt's top Sunni Muslim authority, Al-Azhar, are partners.

“If we want to solve the problem from the root we need to target people before they get married,” said Amr Othman, manager of Mawadda at the Social Solidarity Ministry. He added that there's a correlation in Egypt between divorce and problems such as child homelessness and drug addiction. At a youth conference in July, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said divorce and separation meant that millions of Egyptian children were living without one of their parents.

Islam allows men to end their marriages verbally, only by telling their wives they are divorcing them. Sisi has said he wants to see an end to this practice in Egypt because the divorce rate is too high. The Mawadda project was launched in response to Sisi's concerns, officials said. It typifies some of Sisi's efforts to drive social change. “He is patriarchal and speaks to Egyptians as if he was their father,” Barak Barfi, research fellow at New America, a think tank based in Washington, said of Sisi. “It (Mawadda) reflects his belief that transformation can be instituted from the top rather than from below at the grass roots level.”

Adhab Al-Hosseiny, 26, who played the role of the husband in the skit, said he hoped to get married in the near future. He also worries financial difficulties might lead to arguments between him and his future wife. “What might cause problems after I marry is external pressure,” he said. “If there are money issues in terms of affording school fees and food... all that affects my mental state.” — Reuters

French first lady to return to classroom

PARIS: French first lady Brigitte Macron, a career-long teacher, is set to return to the classroom in a new chain of adult training colleges that she is helping set up. Macron, a French and drama teacher until 2015, has accepted a supervisory and teaching role for two schools being built, one in a suburb of Paris and another in a rural area of southeast France. On Monday, she visited the first of the schools by the “Institut des Vocations”, which is also backed rap star Ben J and celebrity chef Thierry Marx and is being financed by French luxury giant LVMH.

The school in the poverty-wracked Clichy-sous-Bois suburb in northeast Paris will open its doors in September along with another facility near Valence in southeast France, offering courses to around 50 school dropouts aged 25-30 every year. “It won't be like the lessons that I gave to pupils before, but more in the Anglo-Saxon style, interactive,” the 66-year-old, who taught at prestigious private schools in her home town of Amiens as well as in Paris, told reporters.

She said the school aimed to give its students, who will be paid 1,000 (\$1,100) a month, “the foundations to be able to enter the workplace. We know they need to know the four operations in maths, to know how to write French, to express themselves, to construct arguments in a written text. I want to give them a taste for literature,” she added.

Brigitte met Emmanuel Macron, 41, while he was a student in her school in Amiens and began a relationship with him while he was still a teenager, causing a minor scandal locally and anger in their families. — AFP

Erdogan accuses Syria regime of undermining deal

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused the Syrian regime of “seeking to sabotage” Ankara's relationship with Russia through its latest offensive in the northwest of the war-torn country. Clashes in Idlib province in northwestern Syria have killed at least 42 fighters in 24 hours, a monitor said Monday, and the regime bombardment on the region has devastated health services. Idlib's three million inhabitants are supposed to be protected by a buffer zone deal signed last September by Russia and Turkey.


Erdogan told his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, during a phone call late on Monday that the offensive by President Bashar Al-Assad's forces “sought to sabotage Turkish-Russian cooperation,” according to Fahrettin Altun, communications director at the Turkish presidency, on Twitter. The readout of the phone call made no mention of the fact that Russian forces are involved in the Syrian government's offensive.

Russia and Turkey are on opposing sides of the conflict, with Moscow strongly

supporting Assad, while Ankara has called for his ouster and supported Syrian rebels in the civil war since it began in 2011. But Turkey and Russia have worked closely, along with Iran, to find a political solution to the conflict. Erdogan lamented that “the regime's ceasefire violations targeting the Idlib de-escalation zone over the last two weeks have reached an alarming dimension.” He said it was impossible to explain it as a counter-terror effort given the number of casualties and damage to health services.

The Turkish leader also warned that the attacks risked undermining the fate of the political process in Syria. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar also spoke by phone with his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu yesterday to discuss “measures to de-escalate tensions” in Idlib, the state-run Anadolu news agency reported. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, controls most of Idlib province as well as parts of neighboring Aleppo, Hama and Latakia provinces.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 16 loyalists and 19 jihadists died between Sunday and Monday in clashes in the area of Jabal Al-Akrad in Latakia province, which lies on the bastion's northwestern edge. Russian and regime aircraft bombarded the area on Monday, while they also hit southern parts of the jihadist stronghold, said the Britain-based war monitor. — AFP



Condolences

The Management and Staff of
EQUATE Petrochemical Company
wish to offer their heartfelt
condolences to

Sakthivel Dorairajan

Utilities Department
On the sad demise of his
Mother

May her soul rest in peace and may
God grant comfort and strength to the
bereaved family members during this time