

## International

# France claims death of the top jihadist leader in Mali

## Mali's army has been struggling to contain the Islamist insurgency

**ABOARD A FRENCH GOVERNMENT PLANE:** France on Tuesday announced the death of a top jihadist leader in Mali as it sought to reassure the West African nation of European support in the fight against militant bloodshed. French troops killed Moroccan Ali Maychou of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) in Mali last month, Defense Minister Florence Parly told AFP aboard a government plane as she returned from an official visit to the region.

He was "the second most-wanted terrorist in the Sahel, including by the Americans", after GSIM's number one Iyad Ag Ghaly, she said. Comprising several jihadist groups linked to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the GSIM has claimed responsibility for the biggest attacks in the Sahel since its official launch in 2017. Ag Ghaly is a Tuareg Malian who has been involved in militancy for nearly three decades.

Mali's army has been struggling to contain the Islamist insurgency despite help from France, African neighbors and the United Nations. A string of deadly assaults has underscored the fragility of a region where jihadist violence has claimed hundreds of lives. In the latest attack, claimed by Islamic State-allied militants, gunmen on Friday shot dead 49 Malian troops at an army base near the border with Niger.

Over the weekend, two more Malian soldiers and a French soldier were killed. France, whose 4,500-strong Barkhane force has been in the Sahel since 2014, has been trying to convince European partners to boost military assistance. Earlier Tuesday, Parly acknowledged the security situation was "clearly difficult" but said France was nearing a breakthrough in the talks. "By 2020, special forces from European countries will

be deployed in Mali alongside the French special forces to pass on exceptional know-how" to Mali's army, Parly said during a visit to the northern city of Gao.

She added that around a dozen countries had been approached to join the unit — to be named "Takuba", which means "sabre" in the Tuareg language — and had received encouraging replies. Participation is conditional on votes in national parliaments but Parly said she was "optimistic". Efforts to boost the European security presence in the region comes as continuing attacks have raised questions over the ability of the Malian army and its foreign backers to take control of the situation, as well as protests against international forces.

### Instability and protest

Ali Maychou was killed during the night of October 8 with the help of Malian troops and US support, Parly said. He joined AQIM in 2012 before co-founding GSIM with Iyad Ag Ghaly and masterminding its expansion in the Sahel. "It's very important to profoundly disorganize these movements but that doesn't mean that these movements will self-destruct," Parly said. Northern Mali fell into the hands of jihadists in 2012 before the militants were forced out by a French-led military intervention.

But the jihadists have regrouped to carry out hit-and-run strikes in violence that has spread to central Mali. A month ago, some 40 troops were killed near the Burkina Faso border. Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita has said Friday's attack shows the help of foreign forces is "necessary more than ever". MINUSMA, the 13,000-strong UN peacekeeping mission in Mali,



**PARIS:** The hearse transporting the coffin of French Brigadier Ronan Pointeau of the French Army 1st Spahi Regiment in Valence crosses the Alexandre III bridge in Paris on his way to the Invalides (Hotel des Invalides), for a military tribute. — AFP

helped the army build the Indelimane base last year, along with French soldiers.

The G5 Sahel, a five-nation joint taskforce set up in 2014 to tackle the jihadist threat, is also active in the region. It comprises troops from Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. But the ongoing instability

has stirred protests. In mid-October, hundreds of demonstrators set fire to tyres and ransacked UN supply containers outside a MINUSMA military camp in Sevare, near the central Malian city of Mopti. There have also been several protests against foreign troops in Niger since the beginning of the year. — AFP

## Crops in the clouds: Rooftop farming in space-starved HK

**HONG KONG:** At the top of a three-storey building in Hong Kong, with car horns blasting on the streets below, Jim Fung teaches a dozen students how to thin out choi sum vegetables. "Always use the resources you have," the instructor said as he placed shredded office paper into soil-filled plastic crates and wound string around bamboo sticks to make support frames.

Fung was coaching the first cohort of students in an academy run by social enterprise Rooftop Republic to teach a new generation of urban farmers as demand for their skills soars. The organization is spearheading a movement to turn Hong Kong's idle rooftops and urban spaces into farms to help residents reconnect with nature and make the finance hub more liveable. Once a cluster of fishing and farming villages, Hong Kong is now one of the most densely packed cities on Earth, with 7.4 million people living on a quarter of its 1,100 square km of land.

The rest is mainly country parks and rural areas, but living in skyscrapers and working long hours has caused Hong Kongers to lose touch with the nature around them, say students at the academy. "We've become detached from the history of the sea and land that Hong Kong had," said Jessica Cheng, a Rooftop Republic student who works for a philanthropic organization. Andrew Tsui, one of Rooftop Republic's three co-founders, said he wants the academy to be "Le Cordon Bleu" (a famous cookery school) of urban farming.

To him, that means a place where graduates become masters of the practice and at the same time become "stewards of our planet, our wellbeing, and our communities", he said. Founded in 2015, Rooftop Republic has set up more than 50 urban farms so far. It launched its academy in March, starting with events and workshops. The organization's first urban farming course, which began last month, teaches students botany, organic farming and how to manage soil, pests, weeds and water resources.

Their classroom sits atop the headquarters of Hong Kong's Business Environment Council, a non-profit promoting sustainability in the world's second most-expensive city for property after Monaco, according to global realtor Knight Frank. Since 2008 more than 60 rooftop farms have sprouted up around Hong Kong, covering 15,000 square meters, said Mathew Pryor, who heads the University of Hong Kong's landscape architecture division. He estimates another six square km of rooftop space could be available — about half the size of Hong Kong's airport and just less than the seven square km of agricultural land in the city.

Hoping to expand that potential, Tsui told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that Rooftop Republic has been working with developers to include rooftop farms in their design blueprints. One day, he predicted, rooftop farmers will be as necessary as facility managers who look after clubhouses and pools. His organization will train about 150 urban farmers over the next year, he added. "We have the power to shape the future city we live in ... through demonstrating how adopting an urban farm lifestyle helps the end consumer become aware of ecology, biodiversity, nature, wellbeing and a circular food system," Tsui said. — AFP

## UK PM's election campaign launch marred by gaffe

**LONDON:** British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's election campaign launch was marred by the resignation of one of his ministers, a gaffe about the victims of a deadly tower blaze and a doctored video of an opponent released by his party. Johnson called a snap Dec 12 election in a bid to break the Brexit deadlock that he says has paralyzed Britain for more than three years and had started to undermine confidence in the world's fifth largest economy.

But just an hour after meeting Queen Elizabeth to formally begin the election campaign, Johnson's minister for Wales, Alun Cairns, resigned after being accused of lying about his knowledge about an aide who allegedly sabotaged a rape trial. At the start of the campaign, Johnson's Conservatives enjoy a lead over the opposition Labour Party of between 7 and 17 percentage points, though pollsters warn that their models are wilying beside the Brexit furnace.

"Let's get Brexit done," Johnson, 55, said outside his Downing Street official residence, adding that Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn would bring yet more turmoil with fresh referendums on EU membership and Scottish independence. "Come with us, get Brexit done and take this country forward, or, and this is the alternative next year, spend the whole of 2020 in a horror

show of yet more dither and delay," he said.

Johnson said Corbyn hated wealth and was thus like Soviet leader Josef Stalin — who sent millions to their deaths in labor camps. Corbyn said such remarks were "nonsense" that the super-rich came up with to avoid paying more tax. Earlier, Conservative Party Chairman James Cleverly spent the morning defending distributing a doctored video clip of a rival Labour Party politician instead of touting Johnson's election campaign launch. Another prominent Conservative, Jacob Rees-Mogg, apologized on Tuesday after he suggested that victims of the blaze at London's Grenfell Tower should have used common sense to ignore firefighters' instructions to stay in the burning building.

### Election gamble

Johnson, 55, hopes he will win a big enough majority in parliament to get the Brexit deal he agreed with Brussels last month ratified and lead Britain out of the EU at the end of December or in January. After failing to deliver Brexit on Oct 31, Johnson said his party offered the only way to deliver Brexit and painted Labour's Corbyn as a socialist wrecker determined to bring in yet more political crisis.

"They pretend that their hatred is directed only at certain billionaires — and they point their fingers at individuals with a relish and a vindictiveness not seen since Stalin persecuted the kulaks," Johnson wrote in an article for the Daily Telegraph newspaper. "They would destroy the very basis of this country's prosperity."

Millions of people were executed under Stalin and many more perished from abuse and disease in a vast network of prison camps, known as the Gulags. Relatively affluent farmers, known as kulaks, were



**LONDON:** Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaks outside number 10 Downing Street in central London. — AFP

among the groups targeted. Speaking at a campaign event in the English town of Telford on Wednesday, Corbyn said Labour would deliver real change and share power and wealth with people who "don't have friends in high places".

"They quite shamefully think the victims of Grenfell fire died because they didn't have the common sense to save themselves," Corbyn said. "I'll tell you what's common sense — don't put flammable cladding on people's homes." He also cautioned against believing the consensus view that Johnson was assured victory, citing the 2017 election when Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May, bet on calling a snap election when also far ahead in the polls but lost her majority. "In the 2017 election, there were queues of experts ... lining up at the beginning of the campaign to write off the Labour Party, and what happened then?" Corbyn said. — Reuters

## Sudan rebels insist new parliament be formed only after peace deal

**KHARTOUM:** Sudanese rebel groups engaged in peace talks with Khartoum insisted yesterday that the country's new parliament be formed only after an agreement is reached to end long-running conflicts in three border regions. A power-sharing deal signed on August 17 between protest leaders and the generals who ruled Sudan after the April overthrow of longtime president Omar al-Bashir stipulates that a 300-member parliament be formed within three months.

Since the signing of the so-called "Constitutional Declaration", the transitional government, led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, has engaged in talks with three rebel groups to reach a peace deal to end the wars in Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan. Rebel groups said that during talks in the South Sudanese capital of Juba, the two sides had agreed to delay the formation of a new parliament until a peace deal has been reached.

The groups said they would not give up their demand despite the protest movement's insistence on the original November 17 deadline stipulated by the so-called "Constitutional Declaration". "The Sudanese Revolutionary Front rejects any unilateral attempt to violate the Juba declaration that aims to build confidence measures," the rebel alliance said in a statement. The SRF called on Khartoum to "stick to what has been agreed on" in Juba.

It urged Khartoum not to set off any "upheaval that might disturb the atmosphere and create a state of mistrust that will delay the reaching of peace, which our country is in desperate need of". Hamdok's government has made reaching a peace deal to end conflict in the country's three war zones a priority. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and millions displaced in the rebellions by ethnic minority groups in the three conflict zones that met with an iron fist from Bashir's ousted regime.

Bashir himself is wanted by the Hague-based



**Sudanese soldiers take part in an army exercise on the outskirts of the capital Khartoum. — AFP**

International Criminal Court for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity for his alleged role in the war in Darfur. He denies the charges. Veteran Sudanese journalist Khalid Tijani said the forming of parliament by November 17 was now difficult. "The time left is not enough as there is still no agreement on the mechanism of appointing the lawmakers within the protest movement itself," Tijani told AFP.

"The military too is of the opinion that forming a parliament at this stage might lead to more complications as these lawmakers would be appointed and not elected," Tijani said the near-term developments in Sudan are expected to be influenced by what happens with the peace negotiations. "If a peace deal is reached, it will lead to restructuring of the government and possibly even the sovereign council," he said, referring to the 11-member ruling body that is currently governing the northeast African country. "And if peace is not achieved, then it will affect the entire transitional period."

Protest leader Sateia Al-Haj acknowledged that there were "obstacles" in forming of parliament before November 17. "The armed movements must have a fair representation in parliament and this can be done only after a peace agreement is reached," he told AFP. The protest movement Forces of Freedom and Change is expected to discuss the issue later on Wednesday or Thursday, Haj said. "If there is an urgent need to postpone the formation of parliament, then that is what is likely to happen." In September, Sudan declared a permanent ceasefire in the three war zones in a bid to boost the peace talks. — AFP

## Spanish prosecutor to seek tougher rape verdicts

**MADRID:** Spanish prosecutors will appeal a court ruling which found five men who assaulted a 14-year-old girl guilty of sexual abuse rather than the graver crime of rape, a source at the prosecutor's office said yesterday. The ruling, which has sparked days of protests by women activists, has revived memories of the so-called Wolfpack case which led to mass rallies across Spain last year over chauvinism and sexual abuse.

Last Thursday, Barcelona's High Court sentenced the five men to 10-12 years in prison. It ruled that their 2016 assault was not rape because the victim, who was drunk and unconscious, could neither "agree to (nor) oppose the sexual relations". In its appeal, the Barcelona prosecutor's office said it wanted the men instead to be charged with rape, which carries prison sentences of 15 to 20 years. Women activists have branded last week's verdict a "disgrace" and have demanded that the government reform the penal code to allow for a broader definition of rape and tougher sentences.

Spanish law currently does not legally recognize rape unless physical violence or intimidation is employed. The Socialist government, which is facing a national election on Sunday, has appointed a panel to review relevant parts of the penal code. Many European countries have revised sexual violence laws to recognize the importance of explicit consent and take non-physical forms of coercion and abuse of power into account. In the Wolfpack case a lower court ruled in 2016 that five men who gang-raped a teenager at a bull-running festival were guilty of sexual abuse. Following the mass protests and an appeal, Spain's Supreme Court ruled in June this year that they were guilty of rape and increased their sentences to 15 years from nine. — AFP