

## International

# Turkish court jails over 300 for life in a mass coup trial

## Multiple life sentences issued to 27 disgruntled pilots

**ANKARA:** A Turkish court jailed more than 300 former pilots and other suspects for life in a mass trial stemming from a bloody 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Fethullah Gulen, a US-based Muslim preacher who was once an Erdogan ally, is accused of ordering the failed putsch. His movement has been proscribed as a terrorist group by Ankara, but the 79-year-old denies all charges.

A total of 251 people died and more than 2,000 were injured in what has turned into the defining moment of Erdogan's rule and contemporary Turkish politics. The chaotic attempt was swiftly followed by a fierce government crackdown spanning years and resulting in tens of thousands of arrests. Turkey's largest courtroom was packed with dozens of security personnel and the presiding judge ordered one protesting defendant to "Sit down!" several times before reading the verdict.

He issued multiple life sentences to 27 disgruntled air force pilots who bombed the capital Ankara and civilians who orchestrated the coup attempt from inside the Akinci military base near the capital. Court documents subsequently obtained by AFP showed 337 defendants handed life sentences for murder, violating the constitutional order and attempting to assassinate Erdogan. Sixty suspects were given jail sentences of various lengths while 75 were acquitted.

### 'Justice has been served'

"Justice has been served," Ufuk Yegin, who represents a victims' families association, told AFP. "It was a very important trial for the Turkish judicial system and for the country," added Muaz Ergezen, another lawyer for the victims. "It is a trial that will go down in history." The then chief of staff general Hulusi Akar—now the defense minister—and other

top commanders were held hostage at the military base overnight before their rescue on the morning of July 16, 2016. F-16 fighter jets struck the parliament building, the road near the presidential palace and the headquarters of the special forces and the Ankara police.

Erdogan was on vacation in southern Turkey at the time. The bombs killed 68 people in the capital and injured more than 200. Nine civilians also died trying to stop the plotters at the entrance to the base. Gulen, Adil Oksuz—a theology lecturer who officials claim was a key coordinator of what was happening on the ground—and four others are being tried in absentia. Oksuz was detained shortly after the coup bid but released later and is now on the run. Yesterday's verdict culminates a trial that began in August 2017 involving nearly 500 suspects. Businessman Kemal Batmaz, accused of assisting Oksuz, was among dozens of defendants handed multiple aggravated life sentences for playing leading roles in Erdogan's attempted overthrow. An aggravated life sentence has tougher terms of detention and replaced the death penalty after it was abolished in 2004 as part of Turkey's drive to join the European Union. The putsch bid was stamped out quickly, but its legacy still haunts Turkey. A fierce government crackdown that followed has muzzled the media and seen tens of thousands arrested in nationwide raids. More than 100,000 public sector employees, including teachers and judges, were sacked or suspended because of their suspected links to Gulen. These arrests continue, although they are less sweeping. Despite the large number of suspects, a separate coup-related trial is even bigger, focusing on the presidential guard's activities and involving 521 suspects. Ten of a total 289 trials into the failed overthrow of Erdogan are still under way, state news agency Anadolu reported. —AFP



**ANKARA:** Families wait to enter the Sincan Penal Institution at the 4th Heavy Penal Court near Ankara yesterday. A Turkish court handed down verdicts to nearly 500 suspects in one of the main trials stemming from the bloody 2016 coup attempt against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. — AFP

## Woman charged with hiding money transfers to Syria-based militants

**WASHINGTON:** US federal prosecutors have charged a New Jersey woman with concealing multiple efforts to transfer money to Islamist militants in Syria connected to the Nusra Front, a onetime al Qaeda affiliate based in Syria's Idlib province. Maria Bell, 53, of Hopatcong, New Jersey, was accused in a criminal complaint of knowingly concealing her involvement in providing material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization, namely al-Nusra. Bell was scheduled to appear by video conference on Wednesday afternoon before a US Magistrate Judge in Newark. Rahul Sharma, a public defender expected to represent her, declined to comment.

The US Attorney's office in Newark alleges in court filings that starting around February 2017, Bell used mobile phone apps to communicate with, advise and facilitate money transfers, to al-Nusra, also known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). An affidavit signed by FBI agent Matthew Hohmann says Bell also used encrypted apps to provide information to al-Nusra which could "support acts of terrorism." This included advice on operational security, communications and gun purchases.

When offering the militant group assistance, Hohmann alleged, Bell cited her own professional experience, including specialized firearms training she underwent while serving on active duty in the US Army and the Army National Guard. The FBI affidavit alleged that Bell regularly used encrypted apps to communicate with a Nusra member with whom she had an online relationship. It said she allegedly exchanged "thousands of encrypted communications" with the alleged Nusra member. The FBI said that she planned to meet him in Turkey and sent at least 18 payments totaling \$3,150 to his associates via wire transfer. If convicted, Bell faces up to 10 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000. — Reuters

## Australian-British lecturer freed in Iran prisoner swap

**SYDNEY:** An Australian-British academic jailed for spying by Iran has been released after two "traumatic" years behind bars, in a swap for three Iranians linked to a botched Bangkok bomb plot. Middle East scholar Kylie Moore-Gilbert said Thursday that departing Iran was "bittersweet" despite "injustices" endured during more than 800 days detained in the country's toughest prisons. "I came to Iran as a friend and with friendly intentions," she said, praising the "warm-hearted, generous and brave" Iranian people, despite what she called a "long and traumatic ordeal".

The 33-year-old was arrested by Iran's hardline Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in 2018, after attending an academic conference in the holy city of Qom in central Iran. She was later charged with espionage and sentenced to ten years in jail. Her release was secured as part of a prisoner swap for three men: Masoud Sedaghatzadeh, Mohammad Khazaei and wheelchair-bound Saeid Moradi, who blew off his own legs with homemade explosives.

All three were linked to a failed plot to assassinate Israeli diplomats in Thailand in 2012. Thai corrections authorities on Thursday confirmed that Sedaghatzadeh and Moradi were transferred back to Iran as prisoners, while Khazaei was granted a royal pardon in August. The first images of a freed Moore-Gilbert emerged from Iranian state television late Wednesday, sparking elation from friends and family who had campaigned for her freedom and maintain her innocence.

"We are relieved and ecstatic," the family said in a statement. "We cannot convey the overwhelming happiness that each of us feel at this incredible news." In footage broadcast by Iran's Irib news agency from Tehran airport, Moore-Gilbert was seen wearing a headscarf and a face mask, accompanied by the Australian ambassador. Seemingly aware of the camera, she removed the mask to confirm her identity. Irib also showed footage of three men—one of them in a wheelchair—draped in Iranian flags and being greeted as heroes by officials, including the deputy foreign minister.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he had spoken to Moore-Gilbert and confirmed she would receive health and psychological support on her return to Australia, which has been complicated by COVID-19 restrictions and 14-day mandatory quarantine. "She is an amazing Australian who has gone through an ordeal that we can only imagine and it will be a tough transition for her," he said at a virtual press conference. The University of Melbourne Islamic studies lecturer herself said in a statement she faced a "challenging period of adjustment" at home in Australia. Letters smuggled out of prison told of Moore-Gilbert's deep psychological and legal struggles. She wrote that the first 10 months she spent in a wing of Tehran's notorious Evin prison had "gravely damaged" her mental health. —AFP