

International

Family denounces 'show trial' of German held in Iran

'They are scapegoating my dad who is innocent'

PARIS: The trial of an Iran-born German national jailed in Iran since 2020 is a sham, his family said yesterday, accusing Tehran of illegally abducting him abroad while he travelled in the Gulf region. The family of Jamshid Sharmahd, 66, says that he was abducted by the Iranian security services in 2020 while in transit in Dubai and vehemently denies the accusations against him.

He is one of over a dozen Western nationals—including American, Austrian, British, French and German citizens—still held in Iran as talks to revive the 2015 deal over Tehran's nuclear drive reach an acute phase. Sharmahd, dressed in a striped Iranian prison uniform, appeared in court on Sunday charged with spreading "corruption on earth", which carries the death penalty.

"This was pure propaganda, a show trial, a kangaroo court. It is very disturbing," his daughter Gazelle Sharmahd, who is based in the US, told AFP. "All of the charges are fabricated charges. They are scapegoating my dad who is innocent," she added. Iran accuses Jamshid Sharmahd of being involved in the April 12, 2008, bombing of a mosque in Shiraz in southern Iran, which killed 14 people.

"My dad has never seen his lawyer. The lawyer did not have the right to look at his file," said Gazelle Sharmahd. "This is a great violation of rights. How can you try someone without them letting them review the evidence against them?" she asked, adding that German representatives were not allowed inside the hearing.

This was pure propaganda

'Great lengths'

Sharmahd and his family moved to Germany after Iran's Islamic Revolution, and then on to Los Angeles in the United States after their children grew up. A software designer, he became involved with an anti-regime group known as Kingdom Assembly of Iran and designed their website, the family says. They say a software glitch a decade ago exposed his work in the group. This meant he could no longer stay anonymous and became the subject of Iranian propaganda, including on state TV, and was the target of an assassination plot in 2009.

"They have been going to great lengths to get my dad," said Gazelle Sharmahd. He travelled to Mumbai in India in March 2020 to search for business opportunities, but got stuck by border closures as the pandemic erupted. In June, India's borders re-opened and he sought to return to the US via Amsterdam, but was not allowed to board the plane as he was not a US resident. He travelled on to Germany, accumulating more debt.

He then planned to head back to Mumbai, taking a flight from Frankfurt to Dubai. He then had a video call with his wife on July 28, 2020, from his hotel room in Dubai, their last such communication.

'Complete shock'

"After that video call my dad stopped responding for three days. Radio silence," said his daughter. A location tracker showed his



TEHRAN: Jamshid Sharmahd (L front), who is accused by the Iranian government of being a leader of the US-based "Tondar terrorist group" behind a deadly attack in Iran in 2008, attends the first hearing of his trial in the capital Tehran. —AFP

wife he was moving towards Oman. "That freaked her out," his daughter Gazelle said. "On July 31 she got a text message from him saying 'I am OK, I will contact you'. That was unusual for him."

"The next day we were told by family members to watch YouTube. There was a clip-my dad was blindfolded and forced to confess to crimes that he did not commit." "This video was a complete shock. We found out he is in the hands of the Islamic regime."

There was then no news from him, and his family feared he could be dead but he then called for the first time from prison in September 2020. Iran announced his arrest in August 2020 in a "complex operation", without specifying how, where or when he was seized.

Activists accuse Iran of abducting regime opponents in a bid to put them on trial in Iran on charges that could see them sentenced to death, such as France-based Ruhollah Zam who was executed in December 2020. —AFP

Tunisian police blockade dissolved judicial watchdog

TUNIS: Tunisian police yesterday blocked access to the country's top judicial watchdog in a move its chief slammed as "illegal", two days after President Kais Saied dissolved the body. AFP journalists saw security forces blocking all roads to the Supreme Judicial Council (CSM) headquarters in Tunis.

"We don't know who issued these orders but we know that they have no legal basis," CSM president Youssef Bouzakher told AFP. Saied had dissolved the body on Sunday, months after sacking the government and seizing wide-reaching powers in Tunisia, often lauded as the only democracy to emerge from the 2011 Arab revolts. His supporters say his power grab on July 25 was necessary after a decade of misgovernance by corrupt political parties following revolt which sparked the Arab Spring uprisings. But critics say he has pushed the country down a dangerous route back towards autocracy.

Bouzakher said the closure of the CSM "proves that we have entered a phase where the executive is using force to seize control of all state institutions including the judiciary". Warning of threats to "rights and liberties", he said the CSM would continue to do its job.

Saied had said Sunday that the CSM was corrupt and had delayed politically sensitive investigations into the assassinations of left-wing opposition figures Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi. The CSM said he lacked the legal and constitutional authority to dissolve it. The body, created in 2016, consists of 45 magistrates with the power to appoint judges. Parliament appoints two thirds of its members who are then responsible for appointing the remainder. —AFP

Baby dies in Trinidad coast guard migrant interception

SCARBOROUGH: A baby died in her mother's arms after the Trinidad and Tobago coast guard fired on a boat carrying migrants from Venezuela, authorities said Sunday. The Caribbean nation's coast guard ship TTS Scarborough attempted to intercept a boat that illegally entered the country's territorial waters from Venezuela on Saturday a little before midnight, a coast guard statement said. The ship hailed the other vessel to make it stop and fired warning shots when it did not, the statement said, adding, "This measure also proved futile." The unknown vessel "continued with aggressive manoeuvres, first coming into contact with the ship's boat and then making attempts to ram it."

The statement said that coast guard personnel feared for their lives and fired on the engines of the boat to shut them down. When the boat did stop illegal migrants were discovered on board, the statement said, adding a woman on board holding a baby said she was bleeding. —AFP

Ex-leader ahead as Costa Ricans elect new president

SAN JOSE: Costa Ricans voted for a new president Sunday from a crowded field of candidates, with a center-left former leader ahead of the pack with about 60 percent of ballots counted in one of Latin America's stablest democracies.

Twelve hours of voting closed at 6 pm (midnight GMT) in what is frequently rated the region's "happiest" country, a tourist mecca and a leading green economy. However, polls show unemployment, corruption and creeping living costs topping the concerns of 3.5 million eligible voters in the country of five million people.

Jose Maria Figueres, 67, of the center-left National Liberation Party (PLN), had roughly 27 percent of the vote with 63 percent of ballots counted, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal said.

To win in the first round, one candidate must take 40 percent of the vote — otherwise the two leading contenders will face each other in an April 3 run-off. The eventual winner will be expected to tackle a worsening economy where unemployment has been steadily rising for more than a decade and reached 14.4 percent in 2021.

The poverty rate stood at 23 percent last year while the public debt was 70 percent of GDP. Costa Rica's problems have worsened with the coronavirus pandemic dealing a hard blow to its critical tourism sector.

On Sunday, Figueres, who led the country from 1994 to 1998, condemned the levels of poverty as well as housing shortages. "We have never experienced these things in this magnitude," he said. For Francisco Zeledon, the first voter in line at one polling station, "voting is the most important weapon we have to solve prob-

lems." "We have to solve poverty and create jobs for people," the 35-year-old said.

Polls have showed about a third of voters are undecided, faced with a choice of 25 presidential candidates. But one outcome looked likely: the ruling Citizens' Action Party (PAC) appeared set for a bruising defeat with anti-government sentiment sky-high.

Record unpopularity

"The ruling party is completely weakened and has no chance" after two successive terms in office, said political analyst Eugenia Aguirre.

"The presidential unpopularity figure of 72 percent is the highest since the number was first recorded in 2013," she added. This means the country's traditional political heavyweights — the PLN and the Social Christian Unity Party — could return to the fore after decades of a near political duopoly only recently broken by the PAC.

With results trickling in around 0600 GMT, second place remained closely contested between the economist Rodrigo Chaves (16 percent) and conservative evangelical preacher Fabricio Alvarado Munoz (15 percent). Munoz commands support from the evangelical community, which makes up about 20 percent of Costa Rica's population. Meanwhile, center-right Lineth Saborio of the PUSC garnered 12 percent. Presidents in Costa Rica cannot seek immediate re-election, leaving incumbent Carlos Alvarado Quesada out of the running.

Problems 'worsened'

Costa Rica is known for its eco-tourism and green policies, with its energy grid run entirely on renewable sources. Unlike many of its volatile Central American neighbors, Costa Rica has no army, has had no armed conflicts since 1948 and no dictator since 1919.

But the worsening economic situation has hit confidence in the political class. Voters under



SAN JOSE: Presidential candidate Jose Maria Figueres of the National Liberation Party (PLN) (C) and his wife Cinthia Berrocal Quiros (R) raise their hands with confidence as they leave his campaign headquarters where he gave a speech after the polls closed in San Jose, Costa Rica. —AFP

40 have only known "periods in which not only problems have not been resolved, but they have worsened," university student Edgardo Soto, an undecided voter, told AFP. Apathy and abstentionism are features of Costa Rican elections.

In 2018, 34 percent of voters stayed away, though participation is technically obligatory.

Eugenia Zamora, president of Costa Rica's electoral tribunal, said Sunday's vote kicked off with high turnout in the morning, and proceeded without incident. "This is a country with a robust democracy... It offers lessons for other countries," added Isabel de Saint Malo, head of the Organization of American States observer mission.

Outgoing president Alvarado said the vote was an affirmation of Costa Rica's place among "the world's strongest democracies." Costa Ricans also cast their vote Sunday for the 57-member Congress. "I hope that whoever wins really thinks of the people," said 77-year-old Mayra Sanchez after voting in Moravia, "and not of themselves." —AFP

Sudan security forces fire tear gas at protesters

KHARTOUM: Sudanese security forces fired tear gas yesterday at thousands of demonstrators calling for civilian rule and justice for protesters killed since last year's coup, witnesses and an AFP correspondent said. The tear gas was fired as demonstrators were heading toward the presidential palace in the capital Khartoum, in the latest rally against the October coup led by army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the correspondent said.

Mass protests have been regular in Sudan since the coup which derailed the country's rocky transition to civilian rule following the 2019 ouster of autocratic president Omar al-Bashir. At least 79 people have been killed and hundreds wounded in the crackdown on anti-coup demonstrations, according to an independent group of medics.

Yesterday's protests took place despite heavy security presence in Khartoum and its neighbouring cities of

Omdurman and Khartoum North. It came only two days after thousands of pro-military demonstrators rallied against recent UN talks that aimed to help Sudan resolve the political crisis since the coup.

Yesterday, anti-coup protesters in the city of Wad Madani, south of Khartoum, were seen waving the Sudanese flags and carrying posters of people killed in the crackdown. "No, no to military rule" and "blood for blood," they chanted, according to witnesses.

Hundreds also gathered in the Red Sea city of Port Sudan, residents there said. In Khartoum, some protesters also called for the dissolution of the powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces commanded by Burhan's deputy, Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, an AFP correspondent said.

"The Janjaweed should be dissolved," the protesters chanted, in reference to the RSF which grew out of the Janjaweed militias accused of atrocities in Darfur. Sudan, which was already in the grip of a dire economic crisis before the coup, has seen vital foreign aid cut as part of the international community's condemnation of the takeover. The United States, which suspended \$700 million in assistance to Sudan after the coup, has



KHARTOUM: Sudanese anti-coup protesters take part in a demonstration calling for civilian rule and justice for protesters killed since last year's coup, in al-Diyum neighbourhood of the capital Khartoum yesterday. —AFP

warned that a continued crackdown by the authorities would have "consequences". Sudanese authorities have repeatedly denied using live ammunition against demonstrators, reporting scores of security officers have been wounded and

a police general was stabbed to death. Yesterday, the Sudanese Professionals Association, which called for anti-coup protests, said the latest demonstrations were "a message to the dictatorship that authority lies with the people." —AFP