



Russia-led troops begin pullback from Kazakhstan

British PM's lockdown party shame inflames Tory tensions



KOBLENZ, Germany: Women demonstrate outside the courthouse where former Syrian intelligence officer Anwar Raslan (right) stood on trial in Koblenz, western Germany, yesterday as the verdict was spoken on charges for crimes against humanity. —AFP

Syrian ex-colonel convicted in torture trial

In a historic verdict, German court sentences Raslan to life in jail

KOBLENZ, Germany: A German court yesterday sentenced a former Syrian colonel to life in jail for crimes against humanity in a "historic" verdict marking the end of the first global trial over state-sponsored torture in Syria. Anwar Raslan, 58, was found guilty of overseeing the murder of 27 people at the Al-Khatib detention center in Damascus, also known as "Branch 251", in 2011 and 2012.

He sought refuge in Germany after deserting the Syrian regime in 2012.

Prosecutors had accused him of overseeing the murder of 58 people and the torture of 4,000 others at the center, but not all of the deaths could be proven. Presiding judge Anne Kerber said the Syrian regime had resorted to "violence" and "the heavy use of munitions" to suppress protests that erupted in March 2011.

Victims held in the regime's detention centers were not only "tortured but also starved and deprived of air" in unsanitary, crowded cells where they could not sit or lie down, she said.

Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch, which provided some of the evidence used in the trial, told reporters in Geneva the verdict was "really historic".

'Systematic torture'

"The court... clearly and formally established inhumane detention conditions, systematic torture, sexual violence and killings in Syria," said Markus N. Beeko, head of Amnesty International in Germany. More than 80 witnesses, including 12 regime deserters and many Syrian men and women now living across Europe, took the stand to testify during the trial, with around a dozen also attending the verdict.

Judge Kerber said they deserved "full respect". Syrian activists gathered outside the court yesterday holding banners and posters with slogans such as "Where are they?" referring to their relatives who have disappeared in Syrian detention centers. Raslan was put on trial in April 2020 along with another lower-ranking defendant, Eyad al-Gharib, who was accused of helping to arrest protesters

and deliver them to the detention center.

Gharib was sentenced to four and a half years in prison last year for complicity in crimes against humanity, in the first verdict worldwide over torture by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government. The case against the two men was brought using the legal principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows offences to be prosecuted even if they were committed in a different country.

Other such cases have also sprung up in Germany, France and Sweden, as Syrians who have sought refuge in Europe turn to the only legal means currently available to them.

In another prominent case in Germany, the trial of a former Syrian doctor charged with crimes against humanity is due to open next week. Amnesty International's Beeko said he expected "further trials in Germany and other states to build on these findings in accordance with the principle of universal jurisdiction". Raslan remained emotionless as his sentence was read out in court, wearing a green winter jacket and listening to the verdict through headphones.

'Fists, wires and whips'

Prosecutors say he oversaw rape and sexual abuse, "electric shocks", beatings with "fists, wires and whips" and "sleep deprivation" at the prison. Witnesses reported flogging, electric shocks, cigarette burns and blows to the genitals. Some say they were hung by the wrists, with only the tips of their feet still touching the ground.

One man testified about mass graves that he was responsible for cataloguing.

"I hope we were able to give a voice to those who are deprived of it" in Syria, Wassim Mukdad, a former detainee who testified in the trial, told AFP ahead of the verdict.

Images of dead Syrians smuggled out of the country by "Caesar", a defector who had worked as a photographer for the Syrian military police, were also used as evidence in the trial. Raslan has never attempted to hide his past and told police about his time in Syria in February 2015 when he sought police protection in Berlin. —AFP

France to ease UK travel restrictions

PARIS: France will today ease coronavirus travel restrictions for travellers from Britain, enabling vaccinated tourists to visit if they have a negative test, the government announced. A blanket ban on non-essential travel announced on December 16 caused major disruptions over the Christmas and New Year holidays, but was justified by the French government as needed to keep the spread of the Omicron variant at bay.

"The wide circulation today of the variant in both countries has led the government to make the following changes," a statement from Jean Castex's office said. From Friday, all vaccinated travellers entering France from the UK will only have to show a negative PCR or antigen test taken 24 hours before their departure. The unvaccinated will have to provide a "compelling reason" to travel such as a family emergency, however, and have to quarantine for 10 days upon arrival in France at an address that must be registered with security forces.

The opening of the border will allow thousands of winter-sports enthusiasts to head to the French Alps, which are popular with British skiers who had to cancel holidays booked over the Christmas and New Year period. "We're very relieved and very happy to get operational again, starting this weekend," Alex Sykes, flight operations manager at the UK-based Mark Warner travel operator, told AFP. "We're hoping this is the last of the disruptions this winter season." The curbs over Christmas meant all of the company's French ski holidays were cancelled and "a big business period was lost," he added. "It's been a rollercoaster ride for nearly two years now."

'Excellent news'

The restrictions also dealt an economic blow to French Alpine ski resorts, which were closed last winter because of COVID restrictions in France. French Tourism Minister Jean-Baptiste Lemoine said last week that stays in the Savoie and Haut-Savoie areas, where most resorts are located, had been down by 10-20 percent over the Christmas and New Year period compared with 2019.

Lemoine said yesterday that Britons accounted for 15 percent of all visitors to French ski resorts, and even more in some of the biggest high-altitude resorts. "The decision this morning will enable them to recoup some of their losses, I hope," he told the TV5



MARSEILLE: Teachers and schools personnel march during a demonstration called by teachers' unions to denounce "an indescribable mess" because of the new government's measures against COVID-19, in Marseille southern France yesterday. —AFP

Monde channel.

The head of the National Association of Ski Resort Mayors Jean-Luc Boch told the Dauphine Libere newspaper that the changes were "excellent news for sales, for visitor numbers and above all for British people. "They are certainly the most loyal customers in our resorts," added the mayor of La

Plagne, a large ski station.

The French travel rules came at a time when relations between the British and French governments were at historic lows over a host of disagreements related to Brexit, as well as cross-Channel migration and a poached submarine contract with Australia. —AFP

Ray of hope peeks through Turkey's Armenia border

ANKARA: The tracks have been abandoned to birds and stray dogs at the last Turkish train stop before the Armenian border, shuttered for three decades by a history of bloody feuds. But a rare ray of hope is shining across the snow-capped mountains towering over Turkey's northeastern edge. The first direct contacts in years between the rivals' envoys will take place in Moscow on Friday. For the economically starved locals of the Turkish frontier town of Akyaka, these talks could not have come soon enough.

"Since the border was shut in 1993, our region has become the country's blind spot, locked on all sides," said Engin Yildirim, director of the Akyaka traders' association. "The border is our only window to the world." The Soviet Union's chaotic breakup in 1991 set off a wave of regional conflicts, sparking an all-out war between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia's victory prompted Turkey - its relations with Yerevan already poisoned by Ankara's refusal to recognize the genocide of Armenians by the Ottomans during World War I - to seal the border in 1993 in support of its Muslim allies in Baku. Locals now refer to the Akyaka train stop, built out of black basalt, as the "station of nostalgia" - a memory of the days when trains criss-crossed in both directions, bringing the scenic region tourism and trade.

'No obstacle'

"In 1991, people would flock to both sides of the border to meet up," Vedat Akcayoz, a local historian, recalled of the days the Soviet Union fell. "For two years, it was all the rage." Since then, a second war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 saw Azerbaijan reverse most of its losses and Armenia agree to a Russian-brokered truce. The mood music has been improving ever since. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in October last year that he saw "no obstacle" to normalizing ties with Armenia if Yerevan also maintained "goodwill" with Baku. Ankara and Armenia then appointed special envoys for the talks. Last month, Yerevan decided to lift an embargo on Turkish goods it imposed over the second Karabakh war. Yildirim said the locals are closely following the diplomatic moves. "Our government is in favor of reopening the border and I believe the Armenians are too," he said. "We have no problem with the Armenians, and they have no problem with us."

'Time to live in peace'

The remote region's shop owners recall a time when Armenians would come across the border and gobble up their goods. "We did a brisk business with the Armenians," said Hussein Kanik, a shop owner in the nearby province of Kars, which specializes in various types of cheese. In the Soviet era, "they would arrive with furs and samovars and returned with our products... We are soon going back to those days," he said with joyful hope.

In front of his 19th-century hotel, which once housed the elite of tsarist Russia, Gaffar Demir also bet on peace, saying the current state of affairs made no sense. —AFP

Violence as Sudan coup opponents keep up protests

KHARTOUM: Sudanese security forces fired tear gas yesterday at thousands of protesters marching on the presidential palace in Khartoum, witnesses said, the latest in unabated protests since a military coup in October.

The rally which converged from several parts of Khartoum came amid tepid support for a United Nations bid to facilitate talks between rival Sudanese factions. The push was aimed at resolving the crisis since the October 25 military coup led by General Abdel Fattah el-Burhan, and the resignation of the civilian prime minister Abdalla Hamdok earlier this month.

Demonstrators also took to the streets in the capital's twin city of Omdurman as well as in Port Sudan in eastern Sudan, according to witnesses. Protesters in Khartoum chanted: "With all our power, we are heading to the palace" as they converged on the city center.

Others hollered: "Burhan is dirty, brought to (power) by the Islamists," who were dominant under the three-decade rule of general-turned-president Omar al-Bashir, ousted in April 2019 following months of mass protests. Following the same pattern as in the stream of demonstrations over the past two months, security forces fired volleys of tear gas to disperse the protesters in Khartoum and Omdurman, witnesses said.

Online footage of the protests appeared to show demonstrators hurling stones and unexploded canisters of tear gas at security forces near the presidential palace. Pro-democracy activists have organized regular demonstrations against the military takeover, which derailed a transition to civilian



KHARTOUM, Sudan: A Sudanese demonstrator waves a national flag during a protest against the October 2021 military coup, in the capital Khartoum, yesterday. —AFP

rule following Bashir's ouster. The protests have been met by a bloody crackdown that has left at least 63 people dead and hundreds wounded, according to medics.

UN push

On Monday, UN special representative Volker Perthes said he was launching "consultations" with political and social actors along with armed and civil society groups. "We don't accept this initiative at all," 62-year-old protester Awad Saleh said. "It's not clear what points it constitutes and so for us it is deficient." The latest UN push has received a mixed response. The Sudanese Professionals Association, an independent trade union confederation instrumental in organizing the protests, said it completely rejects the UN initiative. The mainstream faction of the Forces for Freedom and Change, the leading civilian pro-democracy group, said it will "discuss" the invitation internally before announcing its stand. —AFP

6 dead as scaffolding collapses at Iraq pilgrimage site

HILLA: Six people were killed as scaffolding collapsed at a Muslim mausoleum near the central Iraqi town of Hilla yesterday, officials said. The accident struck at the shrine of Imam Hamza, connected to the family of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). "Scaffolding being used for renovation work collapsed inside the mausoleum, killing six men aged between 20 and 35," an official of the pilgrimage site said, asking not to be named. Medical and security sources confirmed the toll, with the latter adding that a woman and three-year-old child were injured.

A security source, also on condition of anonymity, said an investigation had been opened and that the accident was suspected to have been "the result of negligence on the part of people in charge of installing the renovation structures". Corruption and lack of finances in both Iraq's private and public sectors often lead to the use of and poorly equipped and under-qualified maintenance crews in buildings and on infrastructure used by the general public, with safety procedures flouted. —AFP