

International

China's former justice minister faces life in prison for bribery

High-profile sentencing part of a sweeping anti-graft campaign

BEIJING: China's former justice minister faces life in prison after a court handed him a suspended death sentence on Thursday for taking bribes and "bending the law". Fu Zhenghua's death sentence will be commuted to life imprisonment after a two-year reprieve, the Intermediate People's Court in the city of Changchun said in a statement.

The high-profile sentencing-part of a sweeping anti-graft campaign-comes just three weeks before a key political meeting where President Xi Jinping is expected to secure an unprecedented third term.

The court said former politician Fu had abused his power while in a range of senior positions from 2005 to 2021. "He is deprived of political rights for life and all personal property should be confiscated," it added.

Fu, 67, had accepted bribes worth over 117 million yuan (\$16.5 million), the court said.

Between 2014 and 2015, when Fu was head of the Beijing Public Security Bureau, the court said he hid evidence of suspected crimes committed by his brother, Fu Weihua, and failed to handle the case in accordance with the law.

Anti-corruption drive

During his tenure as Beijing's top cop, Fu is thought to have led the corruption investigation into Zhou Yongkang, the former security chief who was jailed in 2015 in one of the anti-graft campaign's most high-profile cases. Fu was a member of the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission and the minister of justice before entering semi-retirement in May 2020.

He was serving as the deputy director of the social and legal affairs committee on the standing committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) — a largely ceremonial advisory body-when anti-graft authorities launched an investigation into his dealings last October.

More than a million officials have been punished under the anti-corruption campaign, which critics say has also served as a means to remove Xi's political enemies since he came to power in 2013.

The Chinese leader has accelerated the pace of the anti-graft campaign in the run-up to the party congress in mid-October. Separately on Thursday,

the former head of Jiangsu province's Political and Legal Committee was handed a suspended death sentence for taking bribes worth more than 440 million yuan (\$62 million), CCTV reported.

The court also convicted Wang Like of bribing disgraced former vice-minister of public security Sun Lijun, who pleaded guilty to accepting more than 646 million yuan (\$91.2 million) in bribes in July. Sun has yet to be sentenced. Three former police chiefs were given harsh sentences for corruption on Wednesday, accused of being part of Sun Lijun's "political clique".

Gong Daoan, former police chief of Shanghai; Deng Huilin, former police chief of Chongqing; and Liu Xinyun, former police chief of coal-rich Shanxi province, were sentenced in separate courts in Hebei province. Gong, former deputy mayor and director of the Shanghai Public Security Bureau, was given a life sentence for accepting bribes worth 73.43 million yuan (\$10.4 million), state broadcaster CCTV reported.

Deng, the former director of the Chongqing Public Security Bureau, was jailed for 15 years for



Former Chinese Justice Minister Fu Zhenghua

taking 42.67 million yuan (\$6 million) in bribes, CCTV said. Liu, the former top cop in Shanxi, was imprisoned for 14 years for taking bribes worth 13.33 million (\$1.9 million), CCTV reported. —AFP

HK arrests doctors, patients for vaccine exemption 'fraud'

HONG KONG: Several Hong Kong doctors and more than 20 patients have been arrested over allegedly fraudulent vaccine exemption certificates, police announced Thursday.

Coronavirus vaccines are not mandatory in Hong Kong but the Chinese city uses a QR healthcode system that denies unvaccinated people access to most public premises. Only those with an exemption certificate issued by a doctor can still access such venues.

Police announced that five doctors, three assistants and 22 patients were arrested this month on charges of "conspiracy to defraud" after tip-offs. The offence carries up to 14 years in jail.

The five doctors are accused of having issued nearly 24,000 exemptions, with prices ranging from HK\$350 to over HK\$5,000 (\$44-\$640). Police said the doctors had issued a suspiciously large number of certificates and allegedly ignored guidelines for who could be exempted.

"Citizens who avoid vaccination by making false statements are endangering public security and public health," acting senior superintendent Cheung Man-Chun told reporters. Hong Kong has pursued a version of China's zero-Covid model throughout the pandemic with strict social distancing curbs and mandatory quarantine, even as rivals reopen. The fully vaccinated rate is around 90 percent but the government has had less success persuading the elderly-the most at-risk demographic-to inoculate themselves.

The coronavirus curbs have been accompanied by an expansion of digital surveillance technology, similar to that used on the authoritarian mainland.

They also come as authorities crack down on dissent following huge democracy protests three years ago. Peter, a father of two, said his family decided not to get vaccinated after they were all infected with the coronavirus earlier this year, and because of underlying health conditions.

They managed to obtain exemptions but only after going to multiple doctors.

"We have been wearing masks all the time for three summers here, scrubbing our hands and being denied dining-in experience for a long time," he told AFP, asking to use a pseudonym.

"If one is still reluctant to get vaccinated after all



HONG KONG: The five doctors are accused of having issued nearly 24,000 exemptions, with prices ranging from HK\$350 to over HK\$5,000 (\$44-\$640).

this, there must be some reason," he added.

But superintendent Cheung said police had to investigate those exemptions granted without proper medical reasons. "They would increase the risk of infection in our community and undermine the effect of the fight against the coronavirus," he told reporters. —AFP

Former Pakistan PM Khan apologizes to avert court case

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan has apologized for criticizing a magistrate, his lawyer said Thursday, likely averting a court case that could have seen him barred from standing for election.

Khan, an international cricket star turned politician, was ousted through a no-confidence vote in April but has been plotting his return, harrying the fragile new coalition government with vastly popular protests calling for early elections.

He became embroiled in a contempt of court case after criticizing a magistrate over the detention of a close aide, and on Thursday risked being indicted. But on appearing in court Khan apologized and the case is now "most likely to be dropped", his lawyer Faisal Chaudhry told AFP.

"Everybody should respect the court and that's what he's shown today," Chaudhry said. "If he has crossed some red line, he apologizes for that." Pakistan's courts are often used to tie up lawmakers in tedious and long-winding proceedings that rights monitors have criticized for stifling political opposition.

Khan's lawyers said the case still remained technically active and that he would submit a formal "affidavit of apology". If he were convicted of contempt of court, Pakistan's constitution could dis-



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan (right) arrives to appear before the High Court in Islamabad on September 22, 2022. — AFP

qualify Khan from holding office for the next five years-with general elections due by the end of 2023. The byzantine case against the former leader stems from his remarks over the police detention of aide Shahbaz Gill, who himself was arrested over comments about the army.

Khan had also faced prosecution in an anti-terror court over the same remarks, but the case was dropped earlier this month. Khan was kicked out of

power as the economy crumbled and he lost the support of Pakistan's powerful military leaders, regarded as behind-the-scenes kingmakers in the country's chaotic politics.

Pakistan has been hit by devastating floods this monsoon season, with a third of country affected and the government's flood relief centre estimating the provisional cost of the catastrophe could reach \$30 billion. —AFP

Khmer Rouge court upholds conviction in final ruling

PHNOM PENH: Cambodia's UN-backed Khmer Rouge war crimes court gave its final verdict Thursday, upholding the genocide conviction and life sentence imposed on the regime's last surviving leader. The tribunal was ruling on an appeal by Khieu Samphan, head of state for the murderous communist regime which wiped out a quarter of the Cambodian population in less than four years in the 1970s.

Survivors welcomed the verdict, the last that will be issued by the tribunal, which has cost more than \$330 million and prosecuted only five Khmer Rouge leaders, two of whom died during proceedings. "The Supreme Court chamber finds no merit in Khieu Samphan's arguments regarding genocide and rejects them," Chief Judge Kong Srim said in the lengthy ruling.

The court also upheld the 2018 convictions against the 91-year-old for multiple crimes against humanity-including murder, torture and enslavement — on the basis of a "joint criminal enterprise", even if he did not personally take part in all crimes. It backed the earlier ruling that Khieu Samphan had "direct contemporaneous knowledge

of the commission of crimes and shared the intent for their commission".

But it reversed convictions on murder and persecution charges relating to two specific locations. Around 500 people packed into the courtroom to hear the verdict, including Buddhist monks, diplomats, government officials and Khmer Rouge survivors. Chum Mey, 91, one of only a handful of people to survive the S-21 torture prison, where around 18,000 were butchered, welcomed the verdict. "I am happy, the sentence is reasonable, it gives me justice," he said. Lim Ching, who lost more than 20 relatives, including her mother, told AFP that "the sentence is the right one-the Pol Pot regime did bad things and killed people."

'Heinous' crimes

The hybrid court, with both Cambodian and international judges, was set up to try the senior leaders of the genocidal regime, which wiped out about two million people through starvation, torture, forced labor and mass executions during its 1975-79 rule. Regime chief Pol Pot, known as "Brother Number One", never faced justice, dying in 1998 before the court was set up. The genocide conviction relates to the persecution of ethnic-minority Vietnamese, seen by the Khmer Rouge as treacherous enemies within.

Judge Kong Srim said the charges related to "some of the most heinous events" during the Khmer Rouge's blood-soaked rule. The frail Khieu Samphan



Ex-Khmer Rouge head of state Khieu Samphan

sat hunched in a wheelchair in the dock, listening intently to the lengthy ruling through headphones. His argument that the Khmer Rouge was simply a political movement, aimed at improving the lives of Cambodians, was rejected by the court. "By no stretch of the imagination could it be seriously stated that the CPK revolution was implemented in a benevolent or altruistic manner," the ruling said, using an abbreviation for the Communist Party of Kampuchea, the Khmer Rouge's official name. —AFP

Man found in 'miracle' rescue 17 days after China quake

BEIJING: A Chinese worker who tended to his injured colleagues following a deadly earthquake and then got lost in the mountains has been rescued 17 days later. The 6.6-magnitude quake struck southwestern Sichuan province earlier this month, killing at least 93 people and forcing thousands to be resettled into temporary camps.

Gan Yu, an employee at Sichuan's Wandong hydropower plant, was found alive but injured on Wednesday by a local villager, state-owned China National Radio (CNR) said, calling the rescue a "miracle of life". Gan was on duty with his co-worker Luo Yong on September 5 when the quake hit, and the pair stayed behind to give first aid to injured colleagues and prevent flooding by releasing water from the dam.

They attempted to leave the remote power station, walking for around 20 kilometers (12 miles).

But Gan-who is severely short-sighted-had lost his glasses during the quake and struggled to navigate the mountainous terrain, CNR said. The two men tried desperately to signal distant rescuers for help. "We took our clothes off, strung them on tree branches and waved them around," Luo told CNR.

They eventually decided that Gan should stay put while Luo went looking for assistance.

Luo helped make Gan a bed of moss and bamboo leaves and left him some wild fruit and bamboo shoots to eat before the two men separated. Luo was found by rescuers on September 8 after using a fire to attract a helicopter's attention, but by the time Gan's temporary shelter was discovered on September 11, he had disappeared. Finding only discarded clothing and footprints, the rescuers feared Gan had succumbed to hypothermia. —AFP

Strong quake shakes Mexico, leaving two dead

MEXICO CITY: A strong earthquake jolted Mexico on Thursday, leaving at least two people dead as residents rushed into the streets of the capital in the middle of the night days after another powerful tremor. A woman died in Mexico City after falling down some stairs and hitting her head when the quake triggered early warning alarms, while a second victim in the capital suffered a heart attack, authorities said.

The epicenter of the 6.9-magnitude earthquake was near the Pacific coast, 84 kilometers (52 miles) south of Coalcoman in the western state of Michoacan, the national seismological agency reported.

The US Geological Survey (USGS) estimated the magnitude at 6.8. It was the strongest of more than 1,200 aftershocks from a magnitude 7.7 quake that struck the same area on Monday, the national seismological agency said. That tremor left two people dead in western Mexico, damaged several thousand buildings and sparked panic more than 400 kilometers away in Mexico City.

The latest quake again triggered alarms in the capital shortly after 1:00 am (0600 GMT) and caused buildings to shake and sway. Many people quickly evacuated their homes when the alarms sounded, some still dressed in pajamas and carrying their pet dogs.

"We had a 6.9 magnitude aftershock with an epicenter in Coalcoman," President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said on Twitter. "Unfortunately, two people lost their lives in Mexico City," he said, adding that there were no reports of victims in the western states of Michoacan, Colima and Jalisco.

Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum said official helicopters had flown over the capital and that there were no initial reports of destruction. "So far there is no damage in the city after the earthquake," she tweeted. —AFP