

Nigeria Transfers Sheikh Zakzaky, Wife to Old Prison



Protesters demand the release of Nigerian cleric Ibrahim Zakzaky in Abuja.

ABUJA (Dispatches) -- Nigerian authorities transfer top Shia cleric, Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, and his wife to a dilapidated prison, where many detainees have so far died due to lack of medical attention.

A High Court ordered the Department of State Services on Thursday to transfer the cleric and his wife, Zinat, to the Correctional Center in Kaduna state, northwest of the country. Sheikh Zakzaky, who is in his mid-sixties, lost the sight of his left eye in a 2015 raid by security forces, that left more than 300 of his followers and three of his sons dead. His wife

also sustained serious injuries during the raid.

He has been kept in custody along with his wife and a large number of his followers ever since.

Members of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) said on Thursday that any attempt to take the couple anywhere other than a hospital will put them in further jeopardy.

The IMN described the move as a "mischievous" attempt by the government to humiliate "our leader, Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, and subjecting him to further hardships."

The IMN said the facilities at the Kaduna Central Prison are dilapi-

dated. The group said it is the same prison where some survivors of the December 2015 raid perished due to a lack of medical attention.

"It can therefore never be a substitute for appropriately furnished medical facility that can take care of their urgent medical needs," the group said in a statement.

It said that by sending them to this prison, the government had "chosen a path of dishonor and shame in charging the Sheikh and his wife for aiding and abetting alleged offences they couldn't prove in the same court against hundreds of his supporters."

"They refused to diligently pursue the case, but rather use one flimsy excuse or the other to delay making any progress in the case because of their knowledge that they don't have a case against them," the IMN added.

Earlier this year, the IMN accused the Nigerian government of having poisoned Zakzaky in jail after "large and dangerous quantities of lead and cadmium have been found in his blood."

Back in August, the couple was transferred to India to receive medical care. Days later, however, they had to return to Nigeria after they had "lost all faith" in the prospect of receiving proper treatment there, according to the Islamic group.

Tens of Thousands Rally in Algeria Ahead of Election



Demonstrators chant slogans during a protest to demand that a presidential election next month be cancelled until the old ruling guard steps aside and the army quit politics in Algiers, November 29, 2019.

ALGIERS (Reuters) -- Tens of thousands of Algerians took to the streets on Friday, making a show of strength of their last weekly protest before a presidential election next week that they have rejected as meaningless.

The protesters have been demonstrating twice a week since February to demand that the shadowy ruling elite that has controlled Algeria since independence in 1962 quits power.

On Friday, they chanted "We will not vote" and held aloft banners reading "No need to prepare the polling stations" and "The people are fed up" as they paraded through central Algiers.

The army, the major force within the Algerian state, sees the Dec.

12 election of a new president as the only way to restore normality after nine months of demonstrations which in April ousted the veteran leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Protesters say any election is pointless if the ruling hierarchy, including the army, continues to wield power, and want it put off until more top officials step aside and the military quits politics.

"We will stick to our position. We don't care about next Thursday. We need change," said post office employee Aissa Baha'i, 32.

Later on Friday the former senior officials running for president will take part in a televised debate, Algeria's first, but the protesters dismissed it as political theater.

"We are used to hearing promises.

I don't trust them," said Djamilia Chabi, 37, referring to the debate.

Though the protest movement, which during the spring was regularly bringing hundreds of thousands of people to the streets, has so far been peaceful, there have been signs of growing tensions as the election nears.

Earlier this year the authorities detained dozens of protesters for waving flags with Berber symbols as it began to put more pressure on the marches, and later sentenced many of them to year-long prison terms for undermining national unity.

Late on Thursday, the security services accused a Berber separatist movement of planning to disrupt the election by using agents provocateurs among the protesters to incite police violence, saying a student in the banned group had confessed.

The government has also arrested several opposition figures and journalists, charging some with attacking army morale.

In recent weeks, protesters have marched more frequently and have also challenged the coming election by demonstrating against campaigning candidates and hanging bags of garbage in public spaces reserved for electioneering.

Meanwhile the government has sought to appease protester anger over corruption, arresting dozens of senior officials and former officials and businessmen, many of them associated with Bouteflika, and sentencing some to long prison terms.

Hong Kong Police Alarmed by Homemade Explosives

HONG KONG (Dispatches) — Hong Kong's police force provided a rare behind-the-scenes look Friday at its bomb disposal squad to show the potentially deadly destructive force of homemade explosives seized during months of riots that have shaken the semi-autonomous Chinese territory.

In a demonstration for media cameras, the bomb squad set off a series of controlled explosions in a disused quarry overlooking the city's high-rise skyline, blowing up a watermelon and shredding the front of a minivan.

In July, police announced the seizure of about 2 kilograms (4.4 pounds) of TATP, which has been used in militant attacks worldwide. Other recent seizures in Hong Kong involved far smaller amounts, just 1 gram, of TATP, or tri-acetone tri-peroxide.

"Obviously, I'm concerned that they are making TATP or are in possession of TATP," said Alick McWhirter, the squad's senior bomb disposal officer.

Just 1 gram of the unstable explosive, equivalent to the weight of a candy, could cause serious injuries, he said.

A demonstration blast of 1 gram of high explosive at the quarry above the bomb squad's fenced-off headquarters caused a loud bang. A blast involving 50 grams, which would fit into a cigarette packet, sent shrapnel flying from the shattered front of the minivan.

The squad used explosives with a destructive force equivalent to TATP but not TATP itself, because the substance is dangerous to handle and is susceptible to bumps, heat and friction.

"Because I like having 10 fingers, I am not going to use TATP," McWhirter said.

In October, police said a homemade remote-controlled bomb intended to "kill or to harm" riot control officers was detonated as they deployed against protests. Causing a loud thud but no injuries, the small blast was the first known use of an explosive device during the protests that started in June over a contested extradition bill and snowballed into an anti-government, anti-police and anti-China movement.

The bomb squad has also disposed of thousands of gasoline bombs prepared by protesters on university campuses.

McWhirter, an officer in Hong Kong for 30 years, expressed dismay that relations have soured so dramatically between the police force, long regarded as Asia's finest, and citizens it claims to serve and protect.

"I watched the officers day after day, night after night, month after month, going out and holding the line," he said. "They are being attacked with knives, with explosives and petrol bombs, and they hold the line and use remarkable self-control in the face of incredible violence."

Five Blazes Merge North of Sydney



Fire front at Kulnara, near Mangrove mountain in New South Wales on December 6, 2019.

SYDNEY (Reuters) -- Bushfires fanned by winds combined into a single giant blaze north of Sydney late on Friday, blanketing Australia's biggest city in hazardous smoke, causing weekend sports games to be canceled and prompting calls for outdoor workers to stay home.

Wildfire has killed at least four people and destroyed more than 680 homes across eastern Australia since the start of November, months earlier than the usual summer bushfire season, with the authorities blaming an extended drought, strong wind and suspected arson.

Smoke and flying ash has lingered over Sydney for most of the past week, turning the daytime sky orange, obscuring visibility and prompting commuters to wear breathing masks. Satellite images spread on social media showed the smoke spreading across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand, 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles) away.

"The massive #NSW fires are in some cases just too big to put out at the moment," wrote the Australian Bureau of Meteorology in a post on its official Twitter account.

Sydney is the capital city in New South Wales state.

The New South Wales Rural Fire Service (RFS) said in a tweet that "a number

of fires in the Hawkesbury, Hunter and Central Coast areas have now joined". The tweet included a map showing 10 separate fires connecting about 50 kilometers north of metropolitan Sydney.

The total area burnt by those fires was around 335,000 hectares, or 830,000 acres, the RFS added.

RFS Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said authorities were particularly concerned the fires may spread east.

"They have the potential or are expected to spread further east, which unfortunately is getting into more populated areas, villages, communities, isolated rural areas, and other farming practices and businesses throughout the region," Fitzsimmons told reporters in Sydney.

About 500 homes in coastal communities around 350 kilometers south of Sydney had lost electricity to fire and repair workers were unable to start restoring power until the area was declared safe, energy provider Endeavour Energy said in a tweet. "Affected customers should consider alternative accommodation until their power is back."

Australia's worst bushfires on record destroyed thousands of homes in Victoria state in February 2009, killing 173 people and injuring 414 more.

Indians Celebrate Police Killing OF Rape Suspects



Several hundred people flocked to the scene of the men's deaths to celebrate and shower police with flower petals.

SHADNAGAR, India (AFP) -- Indian police on Friday shot dead four gang-rapists and murder suspects, prompting celebrations but also accusations that they were extrajudicial executions.

The men, who had been in custody for a week over the latest rape case to shock India, were shot in the early hours during a re-enactment of the crime organized by police in Shadnagar, outside the southern city of Hyderabad.

"The police brought the accused to the crime spot as part of the investigation. The accused then started attacking the police with stones and sticks and then snatched the weapons and started firing," police commissioner V.C. Sajjanar said.

"The police warned them and asked them to surrender but they continued to fire. Then we opened fire and they were killed in the encounter," he told reporters at the scene, adding that the men had confessed to the crime during interrogation.

Television images showed the shoeless bodies of the suspects still lying in an open field on Friday afternoon, with guns in the hands of two of them.

The four men were accused of gang-raping and murdering a 27-year-old veterinary doctor before setting fire to her body underneath an isolated bridge late on November 27.

Like in the infamous 2012 rape and

murder of a woman on a Delhi bus, the case sparked demonstrations and calls for swift and tough justice.

Shortly after their arrest hundreds of protesters also tried to storm the police station where they were held.

At one demonstration in Delhi, some women wielded swords while one lawmaker called for the men to be "lynched" and another for rapists to be castrated.

Police are often accused of using extrajudicial killings to bypass the legal process to cover-up botched investigations or to pacify public anger.

A huge backlog of cases in the slow Indian criminal justice means that many rape victims wait years for justice.

Several hundred people flocked to the scene of the men's deaths on Friday, setting off firecrackers to celebrate and showering police with flower petals and hoisting them on their shoulders.

"I am happy the four accused have been killed in an encounter. This incident will set an example. I thank the police and media for their support," the victim's sister told a local television station.

Women distributed sweets and tied Hindu ritual threads on the wrists of policemen to thank them.

Further celebrations were held elsewhere in the country, including in the western state of Gujarat.

News in Brief

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia is ready to extend the New START nuclear arms control treaty by the end of this year without any more conditions or discussion, President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday, appearing to drop Moscow's earlier defiant tone. The New START accord, signed in 2010, limits the number of strategic nuclear warheads that Washington and Moscow can deploy. Its fate has been in the spotlight since Washington pulled out of another key arms accord in August, citing violations by Russia that Moscow denies. "Russia is not interested in starting an arms race and deploying missiles where they are not present now," Putin told officials in a meeting. "Russia is ready to immediately, as soon as possible, by the end of this year, without any preconditions, extend the START Treaty so that there would be no further double or triple interpretation of our position," Putin said.

ATHENS (Reuters) -- Greece said on Friday it was expelling the Libyan ambassador, angered by an accord between Libya and Turkey signed on Nov. 27 that maps out a sea boundary between the two countries close to the Greek island of Crete. Libya called the move unacceptable. Turkey dismissed it as outrageous. Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said the Turkey-Libya accord was a "blatant violation of international law", telling a news briefing that the ambassador, Mohamed Younis AB Menfi, had 72 hours to leave the country. The move did not mean Greece was severing diplomatic relations with Libya, Dendias said. Another foreign ministry official said Libya had "deceived" Greece. "This is a legally invalid document," Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis told parliament.

NAIROBI (Reuters) -- At least three people were killed and 27 injured on Friday when a residential building collapsed in the Kenyan capital Nairobi, police said, as rescue workers struggled to free a woman who was screaming from under the rubble. Scores of people were clustered around, held back by a cordon, waiting to find news of their family and friends as police and a mechanical digger worked through the wreckage. The Kenya Red Cross said 11 people had been rescued by late afternoon, about five hours after the six-storey building collapsed. It was not immediately clear how many people had been inside. "Three people have died, and 27 others have been rushed to hospital. One was seriously injured," Reuben Ndolo, the Nairobi regional police commander, told Reuters. The East African nation has seen similar tragedies in the past. Forty-nine people died in 2016 when another building collapsed during a heavy night-time downpour in a poor neighborhood.

ST. CLOUD, Minn. (AP) — Three soldiers from the Minnesota National Guard were killed Thursday when the Black Hawk helicopter they were riding in for a routine maintenance test flight crashed in a farm field in central Minnesota, Gov. Tim Walz confirmed. The identities of the soldiers were not immediately released, pending notification of family. The crash was being investigated and preliminary information on the cause was not released. "My heart breaks for the families, the friends and fellow soldiers," Walz said at a news conference. "The coming days will be dark and difficult." He said Minnesota stands ready to assist the families of the soldiers who were killed. Maj. Gen. Jon Jensen, the adjutant general of the Minnesota National Guard, said in a tweet: "Our Minnesota National Guard family is devastated by the deaths of these soldiers. Our priority right now is ensuring that our families are taken care of."

SEOUL (Reuters) -- North Korea plans to branch out into medical tourism next year, offering foreign visitors, most likely from China, treatments including cataract surgery, dental implants and therapy for tumors. The ruling party's Rodong Sinmun newspaper reported on Friday the recent launch of the "Treatment Tourism Exchange Corporation", aimed at capitalizing on the "rising demand for tourism, including medical care, in line with an international trend". The new state entity will operate health clinics near hot springs, whose mineral waters are said to help treat neuralgia and arthritis, as well as heart and skin ailments. Private tourism is one of the few remaining areas of business not blocked by sanctions imposed upon North Korea over its nuclear and missile programs. As many as 350,000 Chinese tourists have visited North Korea this year, potentially netting the authorities up to \$175 million, according to some analysts.

MANILA (AFP) -- The Philippines' north has been hit by some of its worst flooding in decades, with torrents of muddy runoff forcing 66,000 from their homes and prompting rescues of trapped locals, authorities said Friday. Luzon island, the nation's largest, has been hit by a string of storms that have battered its northern tip while monsoon rains were intensified by the passage of Typhoon Kammuri this week. Large swaths of lush green land were inundated after rivers burst their banks, leaving only tree-tops visible above the waterline. Landslides have cut off roads to some isolated towns and some bridges are covered by the flooding. However, authorities said they have not confirmed any deaths caused by the high water. "This is one of the biggest floods in decades," Rogelio Sending, information officer for Cagayan province in the northeast of Luzon, told AFP.