

International

Sudan generals, protesters in crunch talks on ruling body

Army and protesters agree on three-year transition period

KHARTOUM: Army generals and protest leaders are yesterday expected to finalize the make-up of a new body to govern Sudan for three years, the thorniest issue in installing civilian rule. The protest movement that brought down president Omar Al-Bashir after 30 years of iron-fisted rule is demanding a civilian-led transition, which the generals have steadfastly resisted since bowing to their demands and toppling the autocrat. The latest breakthrough came despite the overall talks being marred by violence that left six people dead late on Monday in and around a sit-in held by protesters outside the army headquarters in Khartoum.

Yesterday's crucial negotiations are due to start at 9:00 pm (1900 GMT), said Khalid Omar Yousef, a leader from the protest movement the Alliance for Freedom and Change. "The announcement is expected after midnight," he told AFP. The current talks began on Monday and the two sides have since agreed on an overall civilian structure, including a three-year transitional period for the full transfer of power to a civilian administration.

They have also agreed that parliament be composed of 300 members for the transition, with 67 percent from the Alliance for Freedom and Change and the rest drawn from other political groups. The first six months of the transition would be devoted to reaching peace accords with rebels in war zones including Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan. But the composition of the new sovereign council has been the toughest part of the negotiations, with the two sides so far offering different make-ups of the body which is expected to take all key decisions concerning national issues.

The generals want it to be military-led, while the protesters insist on a majority civilian body. "We vow to our people that the agreement will be completed fully within 24 hours in a way that it meets the people's aspirations,"

General Yasser Al-Atta, one of the members of the current ruling military council, told reporters yesterday.

'All powers with cabinet'

The new council is expected to form a transitional civilian government, which in turn would prepare for the first post-Bashir election after the three-year changeover period ends. The protest leader Yousef downplayed the role of the proposed ruling council, insisting the country would have a powerful cabinet. "All powers will be in the cabinet's hand, which will be formed by the Alliance for Freedom and Change," he said. "Only the ministers of defense and interior are going to be with the military."

He also reiterated the protesters' demand that the "majority of the (sovereign) council members must be civilians". Tensions have soared this week as deadly violence erupted at the site of the long-running sit-in protest outside the army complex in Khartoum. The shootings that killed five protesters and an army major on Monday came a day after protesters blocked Nile Street, a key avenue in the capital, which the generals said was "totally unacceptable".

The United States blamed the army for the deaths. They "were clearly the result of the Transitional Military Council trying to impose its will on the protesters by attempting to remove roadblocks", the US embassy in Khartoum said in a statement on Facebook. "The decision for security forces to escalate the use of force, including the unnecessary use of tear gas, led directly to the unacceptable violence later in the day that the TMC was unable to control," it added.

'We are optimistic'

The United States has consistently called on the military council to transfer power to civilians, while Sudan's Arab allies Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and



KHARTOUM: Sudanese protesters celebrate after an agreement was reached with the military council to form a three-year transition period for transferring power to a full civilian administration yesterday. — AFP

Egypt have thrown their weight behind the generals. The protest movement, after initially blaming the militias of the former regime for the bloodshed, later accused the military council. "We put the whole responsibility on the military council for what happened yesterday because it's their direct responsibility to guard and protect the citizens," Mohamed Naji Al-Assam, a prominent figure in the movement, told reporters on Tuesday.

Thousands of protesters meanwhile remain camped outside the military complex in central Khartoum awaiting the outcome of the ongoing talks. The sit-in has become the focal point for the protest movement, overtaking the near daily protests that had been held across Sudan while Bashir remained in power. One of the protesters, Mohamed Adam, said he was happy about the way the negotiations have turned out so far. — AFP

News in brief

US suspends Nigeria waivers

LAGOS: The United States has suspended interview waivers for Nigerians wishing to renew their travel documents in an effort to "promote legitimate travel", its embassy said here. The US embassy said in a statement late Tuesday that Nigerian applicants seeking to renew a non-immigrant visa must apply online and would be required to appear in person to be interviewed like first-timers. The measure took effect on Tuesday. The embassy said it was "taking this step to provide more efficient customer service and promote legitimate travel, and will continue to facilitate applications of established travelers to the best of its ability." The suspension comes a month after reports that Washington was considering new visa restrictions on countries whose citizens have a track record of overstaying their visas - with Nigerians making up the third highest number of overstays last year. — AFP

McDonald's to help US citizens

VIENNA: Lost and hungry for help? American citizens who find themselves in distress in Austria can now seek support at an unusual address - McDonald's. Under a new partnership, outlets of the US fast food chain throughout Austria will help American citizens from yesterday to get in touch with their embassy, it said on Facebook. "Staff (at any McDonald's in Austria) will assist them in making contact with the US Embassy for consular services," the embassy wrote. Consular services include reporting a lost or stolen passport or seeking travel assistance, the post said. Facebook users commenting on the post wasted no time in coining terms such as "McVisa" and "McPassport". While some hailed the move as "awesome", others seemed less impressed. "Because apparently we are too incompetent to look up the us embassy online??" one user wrote. — AFP

Sellner admits emails with killer

VIENNA: The leader of an Austrian far-right group has confirmed a media report that he had more extensive contact with the suspect behind deadly mosque attacks in New Zealand than previously admitted. Austrian investigators have been probing the Identitarian Movement Austria (IBO) after it emerged that its figurehead Martin Sellner received a donation from alleged Christchurch gunman Brenton Tarrant. So far, Sellner - whose group is known for its anti-immigration stunts - had publicly denied having had contact with Tarrant other than sending him a "thank you" email for the \$1,500 donation received in Jan 2018. In reply to Sellner's "thank you" message, Tarrant said it had only been a small contribution in comparison to the work that Sellner was doing. In a further exchange, Sellner invited Tarrant for a beer or coffee if he was ever in Vienna. — AFP

Shut accounts, Airbnb users urged

RAMALLAH: Campaigners called on supporters of the Palestinian cause to at least temporarily deactivate their Airbnb accounts yesterday to protest its listings in settlements in the occupied West Bank. After Israeli pressure, the company last month reversed course and scrapped plans to ban homes in settlements from listing on the site. A range of organizations including Jewish Voice for Peace and the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy have backed a call for an at least temporary deactivation, with organizers saying thousands had pledged to do so. "Ultimately we would like Airbnb to reverse its decision but we know that won't be easy," Salem Barahmeh, executive director of PIPD, told AFP. "But I think what we ultimately want to do is end this culture of impunity where international companies are allowed to be complicit in supporting war crimes and Israeli settlements that have been responsible for displacing Palestinians." — AFP

Ghana cracks down on 'West Togoland' separatist dream

ACCRA: With his white hair and walking stick, Charles Kormi Kudzordzi does not look like the leader of a revolutionary separatist movement seeking to forge a new West African nation. Even his supporters call the frail 85-year-old "Papavi", or grandfather. But Ghana's security forces are not taking any chances. A joint police and military operation cracked down this month on a group that said it was preparing to declare its own nation in the eastern Volta region bordering Togo. Soldiers blocked roads and stormed houses, arresting 89 people across the region, most of them around the town of Ho, 150 km northeast of Ghana's capital Accra.

The separatists, members of the innocuous-sounding "Homeland Study Group Foundation", or HSGF, call their dream country "Western Togoland". "We are not leaving anything to chance," said Prince Dogbatse, Volta region police spokesman. "We're on high alert... to protect the territorial boundaries of Ghana." Police say the group not only has an anthem, constitution and flag, but is also training a militia force. The Volta region is also a stronghold of Ghana's main opposition party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC).

'Storm in a tea cup'

A video taken by a local journalist of the arrests shows Kudzordzi leaning heavily on a carved wooden stick, flanked by men in combat helmets and automatic rifles

Don't 'politicize' electricity, Iraq minister urges

BAGHDAD: With temperatures rising on both the weather and security fronts across the region, Iraq's freshman electricity minister is warning that politicizing his country's power sector could have ripple effects around the world. "Electricity is a national security issue," Luay Al-Khateeb told AFP in a wide-ranging interview at the ministry's headquarters in Baghdad. "In the end, any political, economic or security crisis in Iraq will affect the whole region - and the global economy will be open to threat. We're urging for this file not to be politicized."

Khateeb, a 51-year-old energy expert, was appointed minister in October with a mandate to revamp Iraq's grid, which was already ailing before it was further crippled by the Islamic State (IS) group. But he faces a pair of formidable political challenges to a typically dry, technical portfolio: the threat of renewed protests and escalating US pressure on energy-supplier Iran. Demonstrations erupted in 2018 across Iraq against poor services, including the measly few hours of state-provided electricity per day. This summer will be a de facto referendum on the government's progress.

Khateeb, optimistic, said his ministry had revived out-of-service stations, fixed transmission lines, and brought temporary generators to battered areas including Mosul

Sisi opens huge suspension bridge over the Nile

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi yesterday opened a suspension bridge over the Nile touted as the world's widest, one of a series of military-led, mega-projects designed to improve infrastructure and provide jobs. The bridge, which crosses the Nile just north of central Cairo, is a key link in a highway stretching from the Red Sea in the east to Egypt's northwestern Mediterranean coast, and is meant to help reduce congestion in the capital.

Traffic ground to a halt in parts of central Cairo yesterday morning as Sisi travelled to open the bridge with ministers and military generals. At its widest, the bridge has

leading him towards a military helicopter. The retired teacher pauses, as if out of breath, before getting in. Kudzordzi was flown to the confines of the high-security walls of Ghana's Bureau of National Investigations in Accra, accused, with seven other men, of being the group's leaders, and charged with treason. They risk the death penalty if found guilty.

Kudzordzi - who was granted bail but could not meet the conditions - will next appear in court on May 22 with his co-accused. A further 81 supporters have been released on bail on illegal gathering charges. Separatists say the Volta area has a unique history and culture and warrants being its own country, but reject accusations of planning violence to achieve their goal. "Our activities have always been in the open," the fugitive secretary of HSGF, George Nyakpo, told AFP. Local lawmaker Rockson-Nelson Dafeamekpor accused police of heavy-handedness. "We are in a democratic state, and you don't just arrest people because you think they have an intention to demonstrate," said Dafeamekpor. "It's a storm in a tea cup."

'Craftiness of Britain'

The region's problems are deeply rooted in divisions created by its colonial past. During the so-called "Scramble for Africa", Britain seized much of what is today Ghana, while Germany grabbed areas to the east, then Togoland. After Germany's defeat in World War One, Togoland was split west-east between Britain and France. When Britain abandoned its empire in 1956, Ghana was among the first African colonies to gain freedom. The people of British Togoland were given a choice between Ghana and Togo, and Britain said nearly two-thirds opted to incorporate their area into Ghana.

Separatists say that vote was rigged. "It was the craftiness of Britain... that deprived us of our self-rule and sovereignty," the HSGF said in a statement last year.

that IS held in the north. "On October 25, the week I took office, electricity generation sat at between 9.5 to 10 GW. It is now at 15 GW," Khateeb said. Most Iraqi provinces, he said, "will receive no less than 20 hours of electricity per day. This, to be honest, is a level of production the country hasn't seen in years."

In the medium term, the ministry is developing solar power, gas-capturing capabilities, and energy deals with neighbors. It signed contracts worth \$700 million (\$785 million) with Germany's Siemens last month, amid expectations of similar deals with American rival General Electric. Around a third of Iraq's electricity relies on Iran, through 28 million cu m of gas piped in to feed stations or the direct import of up to 1,300 megawatts of Iranian-produced electricity.

When Washington reimposed sanctions on Iran last year, it granted Iraq temporary exemptions until late June. Khateeb declined to say what would happen if the waiver was not again extended. "I'm not in the business of making predictions, but what I ask for from world powers is a little reasonableness so we can live in peace on this planet," he said.

Tensions have ramped up between Washington and Tehran, with Baghdad often caught in the middle. Iraqi government sources say the US is pressuring Baghdad to partner with American companies including General Electric, ExxonMobil and Honeywell as it weans off Iranian energy. Khateeb acknowledged foreign embassies were pushing for their interests in Iraq's power sector, but said Baghdad would try to steer clear of the politics. "The truth is we don't want to be a scapegoat in conflicts that will negatively affect regional security, and in turn the global economy," he said. — AFP

six traffic lanes in each direction and measures 67.3 m across. A regional director for the Guinness Book of World Records present at the opening said that makes it the world's widest suspension bridge.

Around one million cubic metres of concrete as well as 1,400 km of steel wire for 160 suspension cables were used in its construction, according to a presentation given at the formal opening. The bridge crosses the Nile's Warraq Island, which has an estimated 100,000 residents, some of whom have protested against planned demolitions on the island and plans to develop it into a "modern residential community".

On an inspection visit to the suspension bridge last month, Sisi denied reports the island could be sold to investors and said the state could not forcefully evict residents. Other prestige projects launched under Sisi include an expansion of the Suez Canal, completed in 2015, and the building of a new capital in the desert east of Cairo that is currently under construction. — Reuters

Bigger than Belgium

If Western Togoland were a country, it would be home to millions of people and possibly rich in oil and gold reserves. Multiple ethnic groups live in the area: Christians, Muslims, and followers of voodoo. Separatists say the territory is a strip 550 kilometres (340 miles) long and 60 km wide - stretching from the border with Burkina Faso in the north to the Gulf of Guinea, sandwiched between Ghana and Togo.

UN documents from 1955 estimate then-British Togoland at 33,776 sq km - slightly bigger than Belgium. But while the colonial-era area was landlocked, separatists today claim access to the sea. Historians reject a claim by separatists that in 1956 the people of Togoland were promised another referendum after 50 years. "It is not true," said Professor Wilson Yayoh, from Ghana's University of Cape Coast.

Long history

Backers of Western Togoland claim widespread support, but many in Volta seem suspicious. "Their mission is impossible," said trader Doris Mawusi. "Ghana is our homeland and we are here to stay." "We don't trust these HSGF people," said Joseph Doe, a 57-year-old fisherman. "They are pursuing their parochial interests. What track record do they have to rule over us?" The separatists began campaigning in 1972 as the "National Liberation Movement of Togoland", dominated by the Ewe tribal group. Their calls to renegotiate borders sparked tensions between Ghana and Togo, and in 1976, Accra banned the group. Back then, US diplomatic cables said the government was "unusually sensitive to Ewe separatist challenges, which may be real or imaginary". Today, the issue seems to cause no less twitchiness in the Ghanaian capital. — AFP

'Our role model': Palestinians mock Abbas booklet

RAMALLAH: A booklet promoted by the Palestinian education ministry hailing president Mahmud Abbas has received criticism and mockery online, prompting the government to stress it is not an official text. The booklet, titled "Our role model, Our president," has a picture of Abbas on its cover and was said to contain quotes and thoughts of the 84-year-old leader. A number of top Palestinian officials attended an event for its launch last week, and the education ministry had initially said it planned to distribute it to schools.

Critics mocked it and expressed fear it would become part of the Palestinian school curriculum. Officials have since insisted it was the work of pupils at a school in the occupied West Bank and would not be added to the curriculum. AFP was not able to obtain a copy of the booklet, despite requests to both the education ministry and the school where it was launched. The booklet gained prominence when pictures were widely circulated of Saeb Erekat, secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization and a longtime Abbas ally, presenting it.

Its cover includes a picture of Abbas giving a speech at the United Nations. In response Khaled al-Hroub, a Palestinian writer based in London, lined up a list of Palestinian literary figures and journalists opposed to the wider dissemination of the book. "The publication of a book with a title like this implies paternalism regardless of the content," he said on his Facebook page. "We want to build a society and a civil state based on freedom and the critical mind, not on paternalism."

Erekat said the criticism was unnecessary. "I ask all those who consider that the efforts made by 10th and 11th graders at Al-Bireh Girls School to issue a booklet deserved mockery that they read it before condemning it," he said in a statement. The education ministry said in a statement it was part of a wider project and would not be included in the curriculum. One social media comment sarcastically said the phrase "security coordination is sacred" would be taught in schools.

The Palestinian Authority's security services coordinate with their Israeli counterparts, despite it being highly unpopular among Palestinians. — AFP