

Most Of Egypt's Judges Won't Oversee Vote

CAIRO (AP) — Egypt's judges Tuesday said that most of them would not oversee a nationwide referendum on a contentious draft constitution, as tens of thousands of opponents and supporters of the country's Islamist president staged rival rallies in Cairo, four days ahead of the vote.

The demonstrations and judges' boycott came hours after masked assailants set upon opposition protesters staging a sit-in at Tahrir Square, firing birdshot and swinging knives and sticks, according to security officials. They later said that five "hardened criminals" were arrested in connection with the attack.

Eleven protesters were wounded, the MENA state news agency said, citing a Health Ministry spokesman.

The violence served as a stark reminder of the stakes in Egypt's political battle over the disputed draft constitution, which goes to a nationwide referendum on Saturday. The charter has deeply polarized the nation and triggered some of the worst street violence since Morsi took office in June as Egypt's first freely elected president.

On one side of the divide, there is President Mohammed Morsi, his Muslim Brotherhood and ultraorthodox Salafis, while on the other side there is a collection of liberals, leftists and Christians who claim the draft charter restricts freedoms and gives Islamists vast influence over the running of the country.

GOP: Obama's Old Deficit Remarks Haunt Him

WASHINGTON (AP) — Some of the best Republican arguments against President Barack Obama's proposals to avoid a "fiscal cliff" come from the president himself, in comments he made months or years before his re-election.

Stung by the GOP's midterm election gains in 2010, Obama took stands that differ from his current positions on raising tax rates, adjusting Social Security and other topics now dominating Washington as a Dec. 31 deadline nears.

Sometimes gleefully, Republicans throw Obama's old words back at him. They portray him as inconsistent at best, insincere at worst.

The strategy has limits, however. Elections make a difference. Obama signaled last year he would give ground on income tax rates and entitlement programs, after his fellow Democrats suffered what he called a "shellacking" in November 2010. Republicans took over the House, and the GOP saw Obama as vulnerable in 2012.

Syrian Rebel Forces Capture Army Base

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian rebels including Islamic extremists took full control of a sprawling military base Tuesday after a bloody two-day battle that killed 35 soldiers, activists said. It was the latest gain by opposition forces bolstered by an al-Qaida-linked group that has provided skilled fighters but raised concerns in the West.

The Sheik Suleiman military base was the second major base captured in the north by the rebels, who also are making inroads farther south toward the capital, Damascus.

In other violence, dozens of people were reported injured or killed in Aqrab, a village in central Hama province, in a series of explosions. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported the bloodshed, citing activists in the area, but had no immediate death toll or details on who was to blame.

Fighters from jihadi groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, were among those doing battle in the rebel ranks as they took control of Sheik Suleiman base, near the northern city of Aleppo, according to the Observatory and other activists.

The presence of the jihadi groups has raised concerns in the U.S. and other nations that are supporting the opposition in Syria but do not want to see extremists gain power in the region. The U.S. this week blacklisted al-Nusra as a foreign terrorist organization and said the group was part of al-Qaida in Iraq.

Court Strikes Down Concealed Carry Ban In Ill.

CHICAGO (AP) — In a major victory for gun rights advocates, a federal appeals court on Tuesday struck down a ban on carrying concealed weapons in Illinois — the only remaining state where carrying concealed weapons is entirely illegal — and gave lawmakers 180 days to write a law that legalizes it.

In overturning a lower court decision, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the ban was unconstitutional and suggested a law legalizing concealed carry is long overdue in a state where gun advocates had vowed to challenge the ban on every front.

"There is no suggestion that some unique characteristic of criminal activity in Illinois justifies the state's taking a different approach from the other 49 states," Judge Richard Posner, who wrote the court's majority opinion. "If the Illinois approach were demonstrably superior, one would expect at least one or two other states to have emulated it."

Gun rights advocates were thrilled by the decision. They have long argued that the prohibition violates the U.S. Constitution's Second Amendment and what they see as Americans' right to carry guns for self-defense.

"Christmas came early for law-abiding gun owners," said state Rep. Brandon Phelps, a Democratic lawmaker from southern Illinois whose proposed legislation approving concealed carry narrowly lost in the Legislature last year. "It's a mandate."

North Korea Declares Rocket Launch A Success

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea fired a long-range rocket Wednesday morning in its second launch under its new leader, defying warnings from the U.N. and Washington only days before South Korean presidential elections.

North Korea declared the launch of a rocket and satellite a success, and state television planned a special broadcast about the launch at noon (0300 GMT).

South Korean and Japanese officials confirmed that liftoff took place shortly before 10 a.m. (0100 GMT), while the United States did not immediately comment on it. Each nation had been urging North Korea to refrain from a launch widely seen as a cover for a test of banned ballistic missile technology.

South Korean Defense Ministry spokesman Kim Min-seok told a nationally televised news conference that a South Korean Aegis-equipped destroyer deployed in the Yellow Sea detected the launch but South Korea still didn't know the launch was successful. North Korea had indicated technical problems with the rocket earlier and had extended its launch window to Dec. 29.

Japan said one part of the rocket fell into waters west of the Korean Peninsula and another part fell in the sea east of the Philippines. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak planned an emergency national security council meeting Wednesday, and Japan protested the rocket launch.

3 Dead, Including Gunman, In Mall Shooting

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — A gunman opened fire in a suburban Portland shopping mall Tuesday, killing two people and wounding another as people were doing their Christmas shopping, authorities said.

Witnesses described a scene of chaos and disbelief as a gunman wearing some sort of camouflage outfit and what looked like a hockey mask fired rounds fire from a military-style rifle near the food court at Clackamas Town Center.

Parents with children joined other shoppers rushing to stores' backrooms for safety as teams of police officers began entering the mall to find the shooter.

Clackamas County sheriff's Lt. James Rhodes said later that the gunman was dead, apparently from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. A shopper told KATU-TV he saw a man lying on the floor with a gun next to him.

Authorities went store-to-store to confirm that there was only one shooter and to escort hiding shoppers outside, Rhodes said. Austin Patty, 20, who works at Macy's, said he saw a man in a white mask carrying a rifle and wearing a bulletproof vest.

He heard the gunman say, "I am the shooter," as if announcing himself, Patty said. He then fired several shots paced seconds apart.

A series of rapid-fire shots in short succession followed. Patty said he ducked to the ground and then ran.

Mich. Lawmakers Approve Right-To-Work Bills

BY JOHN FLESHER
AND JEFF KAROUB
Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. — As the chants of angry protesters filled the Capitol, Michigan lawmakers gave final approval Tuesday to right-to-work legislation, dealing a devastating and once-unthinkable defeat to organized labor in a state that has been a cradle of the movement for generations.

The Republican-dominated House ignored Democrats' pleas to delay the passage and instead approved two bills with the same ruthless efficiency that the Senate showed last week. One measure dealt with private sector workers, the other with government employees. Republican Gov. Rick Snyder signed them both within hours.

"This is about freedom, fairness and equality," House Speaker Jase Bolger said during floor debate. "These are basic American rights — rights that should unite us."

After the vote, he said, Michigan's future "has never been brighter, because workers are free."

Once the laws are enacted,



ANDRE J. JACKSON/DETROIT FREE PRESS/MCT
Sue Jantschak, a union carpenter, from Milan chants as the protest against right-to-work legislation continues outside the Capitol in Lansing, Michigan, Tuesday.

the state where the United Auto Workers was founded and labor has long been a political titan will join 23 others with right-to-work laws, which ban requirements that nonunion employees pay unions for negotiating contracts and other services.

Supporters say the laws give workers more choice and support economic growth, but crit-

ics insist the real intent is to weaken organized labor by encouraging workers to "freeload" by withholding money unions need to bargain effectively.

Protesters in the gallery chanted "Shame on you!" as the measures were adopted. Union backers clogged the hallways and grounds shouting "No justice, no peace," and Democrats

warned that hard feelings over the legislation and Republicans' refusal to hold committee hearings or allow a statewide referendum would be long lasting.

U.S. Sen. Carl Levin and other Democrats in the state's congressional delegation met with Snyder on Monday and urged him to slow things down.

"For millions of Michigan workers, this is no ordinary debate," Levin said. "It's an assault on their right to have their elected bargaining agent negotiate their pay, benefits and working conditions, and to have all who benefit from such negotiations share in some way in the cost of obtaining them."

Although impassioned, the crowds were considerably smaller than those drawn by right-to-work legislation in Indiana earlier this year and in Wisconsin in 2011, during consideration of a law curtailing collective bargaining rights for most state employees. Those measures provoked weeks of intense debate, with Democrats boycotting sessions to delay action and tens of thousands of activists occupying statehouses.

U.S. Defends \$1.9B Deal With British Banking Giant

BY LARRY NEUMEISTER
AND CHRISTINA REXRODE
Associated Press

NEW YORK — American authorities on Tuesday cited "astounding" dysfunction at the British bank HSBC and said that it had helped Mexican drug traffickers, Iran, Libya and others under U.S. suspicion or sanction to move money around the world.

HSBC agreed to pay \$1.9 billion, the largest penalty ever imposed on a bank.

The U.S. stopped short of charging executives, citing the bank's immediate, full cooperation and the damage that an assault on the company might cause on economies and people, including thousands who would lose jobs if the bank collapsed.

Outside experts said it was evidence that a doctrine of "too big to fail," or at least "too big to prosecute," was alive and well four years after the financial crisis.

The settlement avoided a legal battle that could have further savaged the bank's reputation and undermined confidence in the banking system. HSBC does business in almost 80 countries, so many that it calls itself "the world's local bank."

Lanny A. Breuer, assistant attorney general of the Justice Department's criminal division, cited a "stunning, stunning failure" by the bank to monitor itself. He said that it enabled countries subject to U.S. sanction — Cuba, Iran, Libya, Myanmar and Sudan — to move about \$660 million in prohibited transactions through U.S. financial institutions, including HSBC, from the mid-1990s through September 2006.

Officials noted that HSBC officers in the United States had warned counterparts at the parent company that efforts to hide where financial transactions originated would expose the bank to sanctions, but the protests were ignored.

HSBC even instructed an Iranian bank in one instance how to format messages so that its financial transactions would not be blocked, Breuer said at a news conference announcing the settlement.

"The record of dysfunction that prevailed at HSBC for many years is simply astonishing," Breuer said.

For the government not to go a step further and prosecute was "beyond obscene," said Bill Black, a former U.S. regulator for the Office of Thrift Supervision who now teaches at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

"Regulators are telling us, 'Yes, they're felons, they're massive felons, they did it for years, they lied to us, and they made a lot of money ... and they got caught red-handed and they're gonna walk.'"

Black disputed the government's concern that indicting HSBC could take down the financial system.

"That's the logic that we get stability by leaving felons in charge of our largest banks," he said. "This is insane."

Breuer defended the government's agreement with HSBC. He said that U.S. employees in particular seemed duped by criminal enterprises taking advantage of HSBC oversight policies that over decades became increasingly lax.

Court documents showed that the bank let over \$200 trillion between 2006 and 2009 slip through relatively unmonitored, including more than \$670 billion in wire transfers from HSBC Mexico, making it a favorite of drug cartels and money launderers. HSBC Bank USA at the time rated Mexico in its lowest risk category.

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