

Quick Read Cyprus court finds British teen guilty of false rape claim

PARALIMNI: A court in Cyprus found a British teenager guilty of falsely claiming she was gang-raped by a group of Israeli tourists in a case that prompted allegations of police mistreatment. The 19-year-old was convicted of "public mischief", which carries a sentence of up to one year in prison and a fine of about €1,700. Sentencing was adjourned until Jan 7. The defendant, who pleaded not guilty, alleged that 12 Israelis raped her on Jul 17 at a hotel in Ayia Napa. But the Israelis, aged 15 to 18, were released without charge the same month after the woman was arrested on suspicion of "making a false statement about an imaginary crime". "The statements you have given were false," the judge told the woman at the Famagusta District Court in Paralimni in southeast Cyprus in remarks translated by an interpreter. She appeared frustrated by the delay to the sentencing, telling her lawyer: "He already made his decision! I thought we were asking for a fine." The defence said it would lodge an appeal with the Supreme Court. "We believe there have been many violations in the procedure and the rights of fair trial have been violated," the woman's lawyer, Nicoletta Charalambidou, said. Rights groups argued the teenager has suffered humiliation and been mistreated by the police and media. Women rights activists protested outside the court in Cyprus in support of the British woman. They have called for an investigation into police handling of the case and criticised the way rape cases and victims are treated in Cyprus. More than a dozen women from an association for the protection of women attended court wearing white scarves with an image of lips sewn shut printed on them. As the defendant was led from the court with her face blindfolded to shield her identity 20 protesters chanted: "We are with you" and "We believe you". "The way the case of this young lady was handled by the police and Cyprus government was wrong," said one of the demonstrators, Maria Mappouridou. Another protester, Helena Gonata, said "everyone will find a reason not to believe her. That's the case with rape - no one will believe you." "We're trying to encourage women to talk. Many women are afraid to come forward." The woman's lawyers had claimed she was pressured into signing a retraction written by a detective. But the judge said during the trial that police had acted properly at all times, with no pressure exerted to change the woman's mind about her initial rape claim. The defendant had said police were "hostile and negative" and asked her to sign a statement she had not seen. British legal aid group Justice Abroad, which is supporting the woman, said the defence would take the case to the European Court of Human Rights if necessary. "Despite the setback today, the teenager who has spent over a month in prison and six months where she has been unable to leave Cyprus is determined for justice to be done in her case as well as to help change the culture towards victims of sexual offences in Cyprus," Justice Abroad's Michael Polak said in a statement. —AFP

Ukraine rivals exchange 200 prisoners in swap

MAYPRSKE, UKRAINE: Ukraine and Russia-backed separatists in the country's war-torn east exchanged 200 prisoners swapping detained fighters for civilians and servicemen held captive in some cases for years in two break-away regions. "It's wonderful, I'm so happy," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told journalists after greeting former prisoners at Boryspil airport near Kiev. A plane carrying 76 captives, including 12 military personnel and 64 civilians, was met by a crowd of relatives, some holding flowers and balloons. Family members, some with children, rushed to embrace the former prisoners with tears and shouts of joy. "Most of all I want to relax after all this and forget as soon as possible what was happening there," Anatoly Semerenko, one of released civilians, told reporters. Among those swapped were Stanislav Aseyev and Oleg Galazyuk, two journalists who contributed to the Ukrainian service of the US-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Kiev also handed over to separatists five riot policemen suspected of killing protesters during a pro-

PUBLIC NOTICE

In the Court of Reconciliation Union Council No 33, Gujranwala
Dissolution of Marriage Case No 29/2019 under section 8, Muslim Family-1961 Shazia Aslam versus Shahid Iqbal alias Abasat s/o Muhammad Ramzan, caste Rehmani, r/o Rahwali Muhallah North, H # 1056-CD Cantt. Present residing in Mascut, Tehsil Samaryal, District Sialkot.
In this case the implementation is not being done properly and he is an absconder, therefore this ad is being issued for you, if you would not appear on 07-01-2020 at 9:00 am, then the action would be taken one-sided against you and after that no excuse or objection would be accepted. This ad is being issued with the signature and stamp of the court.

Western uprising in 2014 as part of the swap, sparking public outrage. Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron hailed the swap as "positive". The exchange came after Putin and his Ukrainian counterpart Zelensky held their first face-to-face talks in Paris on Dec 9 and agreed measures to de-escalate Europe's only active war. Earlier on Sunday prisoners filed off coaches at the Mayorsk checkpoint in the eastern Donetsk region, many carrying plastic bags stuffed with their belongings, as gun-toting uniformed soldiers and ambulances were on standby. 24-year old Victoria, who did not give her surname, said she had been held for three years after being convicted of "state

US strikes on pro-Iran group in Iraq kill 25, sparking anger

BAGHDAD: US air strikes against a pro-Iran group in Iraq killed at least 25 fighters, a paramilitary umbrella said, triggering anger in a country caught up in mounting tensions between Tehran and Washington.

The attacks on Sunday night saw US planes hit several bases belonging to the Hezbollah brigades, one of the most radical factions of Hashed al-Shaabi, a Tehran-backed Iraqi paramilitary coalition. The strikes "killed 25 and wounded 51, including commanders and fighters, and the toll could yet rise," according to the Hashed, which holds major sway in Iraq. It said it was still pulling victims from the rubble of bases near Al-Qaim, an Iraqi district bordering Syria, on Monday.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said the US had "shown its firm support for terrorism and its neglect for the independence and sovereignty of countries" by carrying out the attacks.

Washington - itself a key ally of Baghdad - must accept the consequences of its "illegal

act", Mousavi added.

US Defence Secretary Mark Esper described the attacks against the Hezbollah brigades - which hit three locations in Iraq and two in neighbouring Syria - as "successful", and did not rule out further military action against Iran-backed militias.

The strikes were retaliation for a series of rocket attacks since late October against US interests in Iraq, including a barrage of more than 30 fired on Friday against an Iraqi base in Kirkuk, which killed a US civilian contractor. US-Iran tensions have soared since Washington pulled out of a multilateral nuclear agreement with Tehran last year and imposed crippling sanctions.

Iraqi leaders fear their country could become a battleground between Tehran and Washington, in a context where they are also grappling with huge street protests against corruption and Iran's enormous political influence. The demonstrations forced prime minister Abel Abdel Mahdi to resign

last month, although he remains in a caretaker role. The protest movement, along with President Barham Saleh, have rejected Iran's favoured successor. US sources say that pro-Iran armed factions now pose a greater threat than the Islamic State, an extremist group whose rise saw the US freshly deploy troops on Iraqi soil.

But significant elements of the Iraqi political class view the 5,200 US troops in the country as a "threat", with Sunday night's strikes reviving calls for them to leave the country. Abdel Mahdi's military spokesman decried "a violation of Iraqi sovereignty", while the Hezbollah brigades are demanding the "withdrawal of the American enemy".

Another powerful pro-Iran faction, Assaib Ahl al-Haq - whose leaders were recently hit with US sanctions - also called for Americans to withdraw from Iraq. "The American military presence has become a burden for the Iraqi state and a source of threat against our forces," it said in a statement.

"It is therefore imperative for all of us to do everything to expel them by all legitimate means." Iraqi Shiite fighters from the Iran-backed Hezbollah brigades take part in a military parade to mark Parliament's deputy speaker, part of influential Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr's bloc, called on the Iraqi state to "take all necessary measures" in the face of the US attacks.

The Badr organisation, another key pro-Iran group, took a similar line. Several lawmakers have castigated afresh an agreement permitting American soldiers to deploy in-country, arguing the strikes amount to a violation that renders the pact obsolete. Since Oct 28, at least 11 attacks have targeted Iraqi military bases where US soldiers or diplomats are deployed. While earlier attacks killed an Iraqi soldier and wounded others, the one on Friday was the first to kill an American, targeting a meeting between Iraqi police commanders and the international coalition that fought IS. —AFP



BAGHDAD: A plethora of Iran backed armed groups in Iraq, against a backdrop of heightened tensions between Tehran and Washington, have made it increasingly difficult for Baghdad to balance the demands of these key allies.

Bushfires reach Melbourne as heatwave fans Australia blazes

SYDNEY: About 100,000 people were urged to flee five Melbourne suburbs evening as Australia's spiralling bushfire crisis killed a volunteer firefighter battling a separate blaze in the countryside. Authorities in the country's second-biggest city downgraded an earlier bushfire emergency warning but said residents should steer clear of the blaze, which has burned through 40 hectares of grassland.

In Bundoora - just 16km north of the city centre and home to two major Australian university campuses - the fire's spread toward houses had been halted for now but it was yet to be brought under control, said Victoria Emergency.

Local media showed images of water bombers flying over neighbourhoods, and families hosing down their homes in the hope of halting the fire's spread. A volunteer firefighter died in New South Wales state and two others suffered burns while working on a blaze more than five hours south-west of Sydney, the Rural Fire Service said.

"It's believed that the truck rolled when hit by extreme winds," the agency said in a tweet. Ten others, including two volunteer firefighters, have been killed so far this fire season. A firefighter dampens down a fire after a bushfire encroached on the outer suburbs of Melbourne.

The crisis has focused attention

on climate change - which scientists say is creating a longer and more intense bushfire season - and sparked street protests calling for immediate action to tackle global warming. While conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison belatedly acknowledged a link between the fires and climate change, he has continued his staunch support of Australia's lucrative coal mining industry and ruled out further action to reduce emissions.

The blazes have also destroyed more than 1,000 homes and scorched more than three million hectares - an area bigger than Belgium. A heatwave sweeping the country Monday fuelled the latest destruction in Australia's devastating summer fire season, which has been turbocharged by a prolonged drought and climate change.

Conditions worsened on Friday with high winds and temperatures soaring across the country - reaching 47 degrees Celsius in Western Australia and topping 40 degrees in every region - including the usually temperate island of Tasmania.

More than a dozen blazes are also raging in Victoria's East Gippsland countryside, where authorities said "quite a number" of the 30,000 tourists visiting the usually picturesque region had heeded calls to evacuate. Some of the fires were burning so intensely that hundreds of firefighters were pulled back be-

yond a front estimated to stretch 1,000km. It was deemed "unsafe" for them to remain in bushland areas, Gippsland fire incident controller Ben Rankin said, describing



the situation as "very intense".

Authorities had warned tourists enjoying Australia's summer holidays in East Gippsland that the fires would cut off the last major road still open. Victoria Emergency Management commissioner Andrew Crisp said residents and holiday makers still in the area faced being stranded as it was now "too late to leave", with his agency warning it was "not possible" to provide aid to all visitors in the area. Neighbouring South Australia is also experiencing "catastrophic" fire conditions.

The Country Fire Service's Brenton Eden said it would be a "very dangerous" day for people in the

state, with "dry" thunderstorms - which produce thunder and lightning but no rain - already sparking a number of fires, including an emergency-level blaze on Kangaroo Island. "Winds are gusting and unfortunately this is a dry lightning front that is going to move rapidly across South Australia," he told national broadcaster ABC.

Conditions were also expected to deteriorate in worst-hit New South Wales, where 100 fires were burning Monday morning including more than 40 uncontained.

An aerial view of a bushfire in Ellerslie Sydney and other major cities have been shrouded in toxic bushfire smoke haze for weeks, forcing children to play indoors and causing professional sporting events to be cancelled.

The capital Canberra has cancelled its New Year's Eve fireworks display due to a total fire ban in the Australia Capital Territory, while several regional towns have also followed suit. A petition to cancel Sydney's famous New Year's Eve fireworks and use the money to fight bushfires ringing the city has topped 270,000 signatures, but officials say the show will go on.

Sydney has spent A\$6.5 million (US\$4.5 million) on this year's fireworks display - funds that the Change.org petition argues would be better spent on supporting volunteer

Churchgoers kill gunman who shot two during Texas service

HOUSTON: Worshipers in the US state of Texas shot dead a gunman who opened fire during a Sunday service, ending an attack that killed one parishioner and wounded another, police said. The latest US shooting at a house of worship took place in the suburban Fort Worth community of White Settlement on Sunday (Dec 29) morning when the gunman entered West Freeway Church of Christ, officials said.

"A couple of members of the church returned fire, striking the suspect who died at the scene," White Settlement Police Chief JP Bevering told reporters.



He praised the "heroic actions of those parishioners" for ending the threat, although he said one of the suspect's victims died at a local hospital and a second has life-threatening injuries. The FBI said it was working to find a motive for the attack. "Places of worship are meant to be sacred, and I am grateful for the church members who acted quickly to take down the shooter and help prevent further loss of life," Texas Governor Greg Abbott said in a statement.

"Our hearts go out to the victims and families of those killed in the evil act of violence that occurred at the West Freeway Church of Christ," he added. Guns kill about 36,000 people a year in the United States - one of the most heavily armed countries in the world - through suicides, homicides, police-involved shootings and accidents.

The country has lived through a sharp rise in mass shootings in recent years, alarming the public and triggering new debate on how to control this epidemic of violence.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has said he will only bring a gun bill to the floor if it has presidential backing, but President Donald Trump has given no clear preference. In November 2017 a gunman shot dead 26 worshippers during a service at a Baptist church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, outside San Antonio. Almost a year later, in October 2018, an anti-Semitic shooter killed 11 people at a Pittsburgh synagogue. —AFP

Taliban say have 'no ceasefire plans' in Afghanistan

KABUL: The Taliban denied agreeing to any ceasefire in Afghanistan after rumours swirled of a potential deal that would see a reduction in fighting after more than 18 years of war.

The statement from the insurgents comes as local and international forces brace for another bloody winter amid renewed US-Taliban talks, after President Donald Trump called off the negotiations earlier this year over insurgent attacks. "In the past few days, some media have been releasing untrue reports about a ceasefire... The fact is that, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has no ceasefire plans," the Taliban said.

The US and the Afghan government in Kabul have long called for a ceasefire with the Taliban, including during the year of negotiations between Washington and the Taliban that were abruptly called off by Trump in September.

However, the militants have repeatedly stated that any potential truce will



only be ironed out after American troops withdraw from the country.

The US-Taliban talks, held mainly in Doha, were aimed at allowing Washington to begin withdrawing troops in return for various security guarantees.

They were on the brink of a deal when Trump abandoned the effort in September, citing Taliban violence. Negotiations have since restarted in Doha, but were earlier this month put on a "pause".

Trump is looking to slash the troop presence in Afghanistan, potentially even before a deal between Washington and the Taliban is cemented. Meanwhile deadly bouts of fighting continue, with tens of thousands of Afghan security forces killed since they inherited combat operations from NATO at the end of 2014. Every day Afghans also continue to bear the brunt of the bloody conflict.

Last week the UN said the country had passed a grim milestone this year,

with more than 100,000 Afghan civilians killed or wounded over the past decade.

A UN tally found that last year was the deadliest on record, with at least 3,804 civilian deaths caused by the war - including 927 children.

Afghanistan is also struggling with an ongoing political dispute after officials announced preliminary results in the latest presidential elections that put President Ashraf Ghani on track to secure a second term.

Elections authorities have yet to declare the results as final after receiving more than 16,000 complaints about the polls, with the ultimate tally expected in the coming weeks.

The Taliban have long viewed Ghani as an American stooge and have refused to negotiate with his government, leading many to fear that fighting against Afghan forces will continue even if the US secures an eventual deal with the