

Peru

Foes take to streets

Kuczynski pardons 'ex-leader' Fujimori

LIMA, Dec 25, (RTRS): Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski pardoned former authoritarian leader Alberto Fujimori late on Sunday, triggering Christmas Eve street clashes as protesters denounced the decision as part of a crude political deal.

The decision clears Fujimori of convictions for human rights crimes and graft when his right-wing government was in power from 1990 to 2000, and could define Kuczynski's legacy and rewrite political alliances.

At least two ministers in Kuczynski's cabinet who objected to the pardon told him they wanted to resign, and Kuczynski might reshuffle the cabinet as early as this week, a government source said.

Two ruling party lawmakers quit his party as his political group planned next steps.

Kuczynski, a former Wall Street banker who vowed as a candidate not to pardon Fujimori, based his decision on a medical review that found Fujimori suffered from "a progressive, degenerative and incurable disease", according to a statement from the president's office.

Fujimori



Prison

Late on Sunday, Fujimori was taken to hospital from prison by ambulance to treat a drop in blood pressure and abnormal heart beat.

But many in Peru saw the pardon as part of a quid pro quo. Three days earlier, Fujimori's loyalists - led by his lawmaker son Kenji - unexpectedly saved Kuczynski from a vote in Congress that nearly removed him from office.

In a video Kenji shared on social media, a gray-haired Fujimori, connected to tubes in hospital, was seen smiling after reading Kuczynski's announcement of the pardon on a cellphone with Kenji.

"To save his own skin he cut a deal with Fujimori's supporters to infamously pardon a corrupt killer," said Veronika Mendoza, a leftist leader who competed against Kuczynski in last year's presidential election.

Kuczynski's center-right government has repeatedly denied that a pardon for Fujimori was part of political negotiations.

Fujimori is a deeply divisive figure in Peru. While many consider him a corrupt dictator, others credit him with ending an economic crisis and bloody leftist insurgency when in power.

"He's the best president Peru ever had," said Maria Luisa Cuculiza, a friend and former minister of Fujimori, adding that he no longer had any political ambitions.



Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir (right), and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan show a diploma after al-Bashir presented the Turkish leader with his country's highest medal during a ceremony in Khartoum on Dec 24. Erdogan is in Sudan for a two-day State visit. (AP)

Lat/Am

**Venezuela frees 36:** The Venezuelan government has released fewer than half of the 80 jailed political opponents it promised to free over Christmas as a goodwill gesture, human rights observers said on Sunday.

"Thirty-six political prisoners have been released since yesterday," Alfredo Romero of the rights group Foro Penal said on Twitter.

**Bely Rodriguez**, president of the Constituent Assembly and head of its Truth Commission investigating protests against President **Nicolas Maduro's** government, said on Saturday that Christmas was "a moment of reconciliation" and promised to free 80 inmates.

Those jailed had been arrested during demonstrations demanding that Maduro step down. Mass street protest began in 2014, when 43 people were killed in clashes, and have continued sporadically ever since with 125 dead earlier this year.

Among those freed was Alfredo Ramos, mayor of the northwestern municipality of Iribarren, who was arrested in late July and handed a 15-month sentence.

"I feel happy for my freedom," Ramos told journalists upon his release. "It was a hard test, quite difficult."

But he also lashed out at his sentence. "It was an arbitrary, unjust detention - I committed no crime," he added.

Opposition forces accuse Maduro of dismantling democratic institutions and setting up the Constituent Assembly to rubber-stamp his policies.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan landed in Khartoum on Sunday and met his Sudanese counterpart Omar al-Bashir at the start of a three-country African tour.

Twelve accords were signed at the outset of his two-day visit to Khartoum, including economic and military deals as well as on the creation of a strategic cooperation council, Erdogan told a news conference.

He said the two Muslim countries aimed at boost two-way trade from the current level of \$500 million a year to \$1 billion in an initial stage and then \$10 billion.

Bashir hailed the trip by Erdogan, who is to travel on to Chad and Tunisia, as a "historic" first visit to Sudan by a Turkish president.

Sudan's leader, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and war crimes in the strife-torn Darfur region, earlier this month attended a summit in Istanbul of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

Erdogan called on those at the summit to condemn US President Donald Trump's recognition on Dec 6 of the disputed city of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. (AFP)

One non-governmental group has put the number of "political prisoners" at 268. The government has disputed that label, insisting that all are being held for acts of violence, conspiracy or treason. (AFP)



Maduro



Rodriguez

Africa

**Liberia votes in run-off:** Liberians choose a new leader Tuesday in a run-off between Vice President Joseph Boakai and footballing icon **George Weah**, a vote that will mark the country's first democratic transition since 1944.

After seven weeks of delays caused by legal complaints lodged by Boakai's ruling Unity Party against the electoral commission, polling stations are due to open at 8:00 am (0800 GMT) and close at 6:00 pm for Liberia's 2.1 million registered voters.



Weah

Weah's Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) has urged voters not to drink too much on Christmas Day and to get up early on the 26th to cast their ballots in what National Elections Commission (NEC) chairman Francis Korkoya has said is "one sacrifice for the good of our democracy and country."

They will choose a successor to President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who is due to step down in January after 12 years at the helm, resurrecting the West African nation from the ashes of civil war (1989-2003) and overseeing the response to the Ebola crisis (2014-16).

In the first round of voting on October 10, Weah topped the poll with 38.4 percent while Boakai came second with 28.8 percent, triggering a run-off as neither made it past the 50 percent needed to win outright. (AFP)

**Toure back in Bamako:** Mali's ousted former president Amadou Toumani Toure returned to the country on Sunday for the first time since a coup deposed him in 2012.

Toure flew into the capital, Bamako, the scene of his downfall on March 22, 2012, when mutinous soldiers overthrew the government and detained him.

The coup led by army captain Amadou Sanogo toppled what had been heralded as one of the region's most stable democracies, before the country's northern territory was overrun by Islamist rebels allied with al-Qaeda.

Toure, who arrived with his family on board the presidential plane, travelled to the personal residence of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, with whom he is due to have lunch. He was welcomed by the prime minister and security minister, along with hundreds of supporters at around midday (1200 GMT).

Keita said on Friday the moment had arrived "for us to tell our brother Amadou Toumani Toure to return to Mali," while Toure told AFP from the Senegal capital, Dakar, that he was "not there to do politics". (AFP)

**Ecuador blast kills 1:** A child died and ten people were injured on Christmas Eve following an explosion at a restaurant in Ecuador's capital Quito, authorities said Monday.

The blast, which occurred at 11:11 pm on Sunday (0411 GMT Monday), was thought to have been the result of a gas tank exploding at the restaurant located in the north of the city.

Those impacted were inside the restaurant at the time of the explosion and were transferred to hospital, authorities said in a statement.

Officials added the "number of people injured may rise," but confirmed that nobody is trapped in the building, which partially collapsed.

The conditions of those injured remain unknown. (AFP)

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