

Erdogan rebuffs criticism over Hagia Sophia conversion

Turkish President says first Muslim prayers in Hagia Sophia will be on July 24

AFP | Istanbul

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday rejected worldwide condemnation over Turkey's decision to convert the Byzantine-era monument Hagia Sophia back into a mosque, saying it represented his country's will to use its "sovereign rights".

Erdogan, who is accused by critics of chipping away at the Muslim-majority country's secular pillars, announced Friday that Muslim prayers would begin on July 24 at the UNESCO World Heritage site.

In the past, he has repeatedly called for the stunning building to be renamed as a mosque.

"Those who do not take a step against Islamophobia in their own countries... attack Turkey's will to use its sovereign rights," Erdogan said during a ceremony he attended via video-conference.

A magnet for tourists worldwide, the Hagia Sophia was first constructed as a cathedral in the Christian Byzantine Empire but was converted into a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

Erdogan's announcement came after the cancellation by a top court of a 1934 cabinet decision under modern Turkey's secularising founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk to preserve the church-turned-mosque as a museum.

"We made this decision not looking at what others say but looking what our right is and what our nation wants, just like



A general view of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul

what we have done in Syria, in Libya and elsewhere," the Turkish leader said yesterday.

'A blow to global Christianity'

Erdogan went ahead with the plan despite an open appeal from the NATO ally the United States as well as Russia, with which Ankara has forged close relations in recent years.

Greece swiftly condemned the move as a provocation, France deplored it while the United States also expressed disappointment.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko, said: "We regret" the decision, speaking to Interfax news agency yesterday.

"The cathedral is on Turkey's territory, but it is without question everybody's heritage," he said.

"We would like to hope that



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(Turkey) will fully honour all of the commitments having to do with the World Heritage status of the cathedral, in terms of its

management, protection, and access."

The influential bishop Hilarion, who heads the Russian Orthodox Church's department for external church relations, expressed sorrow, speaking to state TV Rossiya24 aired late Friday.

"We had hoped till the end that Turkish leadership would overturn the decision and it brings great sorrow and great pain that the decision was taken.

"It is a blow to global Christianity... For us (Hagia Sophia) remains a cathedral dedicated to the Saviour."

But Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara director of the German Marshall Fund, told AFP the move would win hearts and minds as most Turks "would favour such a decision for religious or nationalist sentiments.

News in brief

◆ **Bosnian Muslims marked the 25th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre yesterday, the worst atrocity on European soil since World War II, with the memorial ceremony sharply reduced as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.** Many mourners braved the tighter restrictions put in place to stem the spread of COVID-19 to attend the commemorations which culminated in a ceremony laying to rest the remains of nine victims identified over the past year.



◆ **A US court halted Friday what would have been the first federal execution in 17 years, yielding to a request from victims' relatives worried about traveling during the pandemic to watch the inmate die.** Daniel Lee, a 47-year-old white supremacist, was convicted in 1999 of killing a gun dealer, his wife and her eight-year-old daughter in Arkansas.

US judge delays federal execution, citing pandemic

California to release 8,000 prisoners to slow pandemic

◆ **California will release up to 8,000 inmates early from state prisons to slow the spread of COVID-19 inside facilities, state authorities said.** Several California prisons have suffered large coronavirus outbreaks and the state corrections department said inmates could be eligible for release by the end of August. The release marks the biggest move yet by California to "decompress" prison populations and reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission by creating more space for social distancing and quarantines.

◆ **A French bus driver who was badly beaten by passengers after asking them to wear face masks in line with coronavirus rules**



has died, his family said, sparking tributes from political leaders who condemned his "cowardly" attackers.

French bus driver dies after attack over mask-wearing rules

Philippe Monguillot, 59, was left brain dead by the attack in the southwestern town of Bayonne last weekend and died in hospital on Friday, his daughter Marie said, after his family decided to switch off his life-support system.

◆ **At least 10,000 protesters marched through the eastern Russian city of Khabarovsk yesterday in support of a popular local governor arrested this week for allegedly ordering several murders.** A court in Moscow on Friday ruled to hold 50-year-old Sergei Furgal for two months pending trial for the murders of several businessmen 15 years ago. He vehemently denied any involvement.

Giant protests in Russia after popular governor's arrest



Floods, landslides kill 40 in Nepal, many missing

Reuters | Kathmandu

Heavy rains triggered flash floods and landslides that killed at least 40 people and displaced thousands in western Nepal, officials said yesterday.

Twenty people were killed and at least 13 others were missing in Myagdi district, 200 km (125 miles) northwest of the capital Kathmandu, where several houses were destroyed on Friday, district administrator Gyan Nath Dhakal said.

"Rescuers are looking for those who are still missing in Myagdi," Dhakal said, adding that 50 people had been plucked to safety using helicopters. "Eleven people who were injured in the landslides have been moved to nearby hospitals," he said.

In neighbouring Kaski district, seven people were killed, said a second government official in the tourist town of Pokhara.

Another seven were killed in Jajarkot district in the far west.

"We are searching for eight people who are still missing," said Kishore Shrestha, a senior police official, said.

Egypt grounds kites for 'safety', 'national security'



Egyptian youths fly kites in the Saft el-Laban district of the Egyptian capital Cairo's twin city of Giza

AFP | Cairo

Egyptian police have seized kites from people flying them after a ban by a northern governorate for "safety" reasons and a lawmaker's warning they posed a "national security threat".

Police seized 369 kites in Cairo on Friday, Al-Ahram reported, while Akhbar Al-Youm, another state newspaper, said police confiscated 99 kites and fined five people in the northern region of Alexandria.

The ban was brought in "to ensure the safety of citizens after a number of accidents" involving kites, Alexandria's governorate said this week on its Facebook page.

Fines imposed for kite-flying in the Mediterranean city can reach up to

1,000 pounds (about \$60).

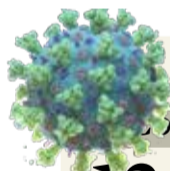
Egypt's skies have been filled with thousands of colourful paper kites flown by youths from rooftops and on corniches, as the hobby took off during night-time curfews to limit the spread of coronavirus.

But they have also raised complaints, including from an MP.

Khaled Abu Taleb, a member of parliament's Defence and National Security Committee, said last month he wanted the prime minister briefed on the dangers of flying kites because they posed "a national security threat".

The kites might be equipped with surveillance cameras, he said.

Abu Taleb was roundly ridiculed on social media in Egypt, where operating a drone is only authorised with a special permit.



Global

COVID-19 Cases: **12,745,298**

Deaths

565,261

Recovered:

7,441,955

New cases

+128,720

New deaths

+3,222

Countries worst affected

| Country | Total cases | New deaths | Total Deaths |
|--------------|-------------|------------|--------------|
| USA | 3,329,621 | +503 | 137,174 |
| Brazil | 1,810,691 | +99 | 70,623 |
| India | 849,823 | +543 | 22,687 |
| Russia | 720,547 | +188 | 11,205 |
| Peru | 319,646 | | 11,500 |
| Chile | 312,029 | +100 | 6,881 |
| Spain | 300,988 | | 28,403 |
| Mexico | 289,174 | +665 | 34,191 |
| UK | 288,953 | +148 | 44,798 |
| Iran | 255,117 | +188 | 12,635 |
| South Africa | 250,687 | | 3,860 |
| Pakistan | 246,351 | +65 | 5,123 |
| Italy | 242,827 | +7 | 34,945 |
| Saudi Arabia | 229,480 | +30 | 2,181 |

Figures as of closing

Middle East

| Country | Total cases | new cases | Total deaths | New Deaths | Total recovered | Active cases | Serious, Critical | Tot cases/1m pop |
|--------------|-------------|-----------|--------------|------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Saudi Arabia | 229,480 | +2,994 | 2,181 | +30 | 165,396 | 61,903 | 2,230 | 6,589 |
| UAE | 54,453 | +403 | 331 | +1 | 44,648 | 9,474 | 1 | 5,504 |
| Kuwait | 54,058 | +478 | 386 | +3 | 43,961 | 9,711 | 150 | 12,654 |
| Oman | 54,697 | +1,083 | 248 | +4 | 35,255 | 19,194 | 133 | 10,706 |
| Egypt | 80,235 | | 3,702 | | 23,274 | 53,259 | 41 | 784 |
| Qatar | 103,128 | +498 | 146 | | 98,934 | 4,048 | 141 | 36,729 |