

Americans blamed as Chavez illness worsens

By Girish Gupta in Caracas

VENEZUELA'S vice-president yesterday accused the country's "historic enemies" of infecting Hugo Chavez with cancer after the government admitted a grave worsening of his condition.

Nicolas Maduro, the vice-president and Mr Chavez's chosen successor, appeared on television to say that the collapse of leader's health was due to an "attack" by outside forces.

Mr Maduro then accused the United States of trying to exploit the power vacuum caused by Mr Chavez's illness. The vice-president named one US air force

attaché at the American embassy in the capital, Caracas, accusing him of running "destabilisation projects" and giving him 24 hours to leave the country. Venezuela later announced the expulsion of a second US air force attaché for conspiracy.

"Special measures" were now in hand to prevent any "conspiracies" from succeeding, added Mr Maduro, who said Mr Chavez was undergoing his "most difficult hours" since he flew to Cuba for his fourth round of cancer-related surgery.

He spoke as generals, state governors and ministers gathered in Miraflores, the presidential palace in Caracas, apparently to prepare for further developments.

Earlier, a sombre communiqué had acknowledged the "worsening" state of Mr Chavez's health. Ernesto Villegas, the information minister, appeared on television to say that a new respiratory infection had complicated his cancer.

Mr Chavez returned to Venezuela from Cuba last month, but failed to make any public appearances, causing rumours of his death to sweep Caracas.

"The Comandante remains clinging to Christ and to life, conscious of the difficulties he faces," said Mr Villegas.

He said Mr Chavez was still following the treatment regime laid down by his doctors. The president's health has been

a closely guarded secret and the nature of his cancer has never been officially disclosed. However, the lack of any word from a leader who usually revels in the limelight suggests that Mr Chavez, 58, may no longer be capable of governing.

If he dies, the presidency would pass to Mr Maduro until a new election is held in 30 days. If Mr Chavez is alive but incapacitated, he could also choose to hand over to Mr Maduro, a close ally.

Yesterday, about 30 of the president's supporters gathered inside a chapel at the military hospital in Caracas where their leader now lies. Unusually for fervent fans of the "Comandante", they

were not wearing socialist red or waving placards. Instead, they were subdued and silent. "I had my own terrible cancer," said Domingo Vargas, a 62-year-old pastor who conducted a service to pray for Mr Chavez. "I had no money to pay for the chemotherapy or the treatment. The president paid for it all. Chavez is the heart of the people, the heart of the world."

If Venezuela stands on the brink of a transfer of power, Mr Maduro would probably face Henrique Capriles, the opposition leader, in the new elections that would follow next month. The 50-year-old vice-president is a loyal

"Chavista", but he lacks the charisma that allowed his mentor to win four elections in a row.

Mr Capriles has criticised the obsessive secrecy surrounding the president's condition, urging Mr Chavez either to demonstrate that he can govern or step aside. "If the president of the republic can sign decrees, I call on him to show himself, to talk to Venezuela," he said in January.

In 2002, Mr Chavez was toppled in a coup, before being restored. His allies believe the US was behind that episode. Constant attacks on America and claims that Washington seeks Mr Chavez's downfall have been themes of his rule.

'Ivan the Terrible' is arrested over acid attack on Bolshoi chief

By Tom Parfitt in Moscow

RUSSIAN police arrested three men including a leading dancer yesterday in connection with the acid attack on the artistic director of the Bolshoi Ballet.

Pavel Dmitrichenko, a soloist with the troupe, was one of the three arrested over the attack, in which a jar of sulphuric acid was thrown in the face of Sergei Filin, 42, by a single assailant near his home in Moscow on Jan 17.

It was not immediately clear what was the alleged role in the attack of Dmitrichenko, who has played the lead role in *Ivan the Terrible* and the Evil Gen-



Sergei Filin: suffered severe burns

ius in *Swan Lake* since joining the Bolshoi in 2002. He is known to be one of several dancers who had clashed with Filin over roles and the troupe's artistic direction.

The other two arrested men were Sergei Zarutsky, a 35-year-old, who was allegedly the one who threw the acid, and Andrei Lipatov, the driver who is thought to have delivered him to the scene.

A law enforcement source told the RIA Novosti news agency there was evidence to suggest that Dmitrichenko was the *zakazchik* – the word Russians use for the person who orders a contract hit or violent assault. "At the moment the investigation has evidence that the attack was

ordered by Dmitrichenko, the motives are being elaborated," said the source.

Filin suffered severe burns to his eyes and face after the assault and has had several operations. He is being treated at a clinic in Germany.

Earlier yesterday, police said they had arrested Lipatov in Stupino district south of Moscow. They also confirmed they had searched an apartment belonging to Dmitrichenko's mother, which is reportedly in the same building where Filin lives on Moscow's Troitskaya Street.

Towards the evening, events moved rapidly and police said they had also detained Zarutsky and Dmitrichenko.

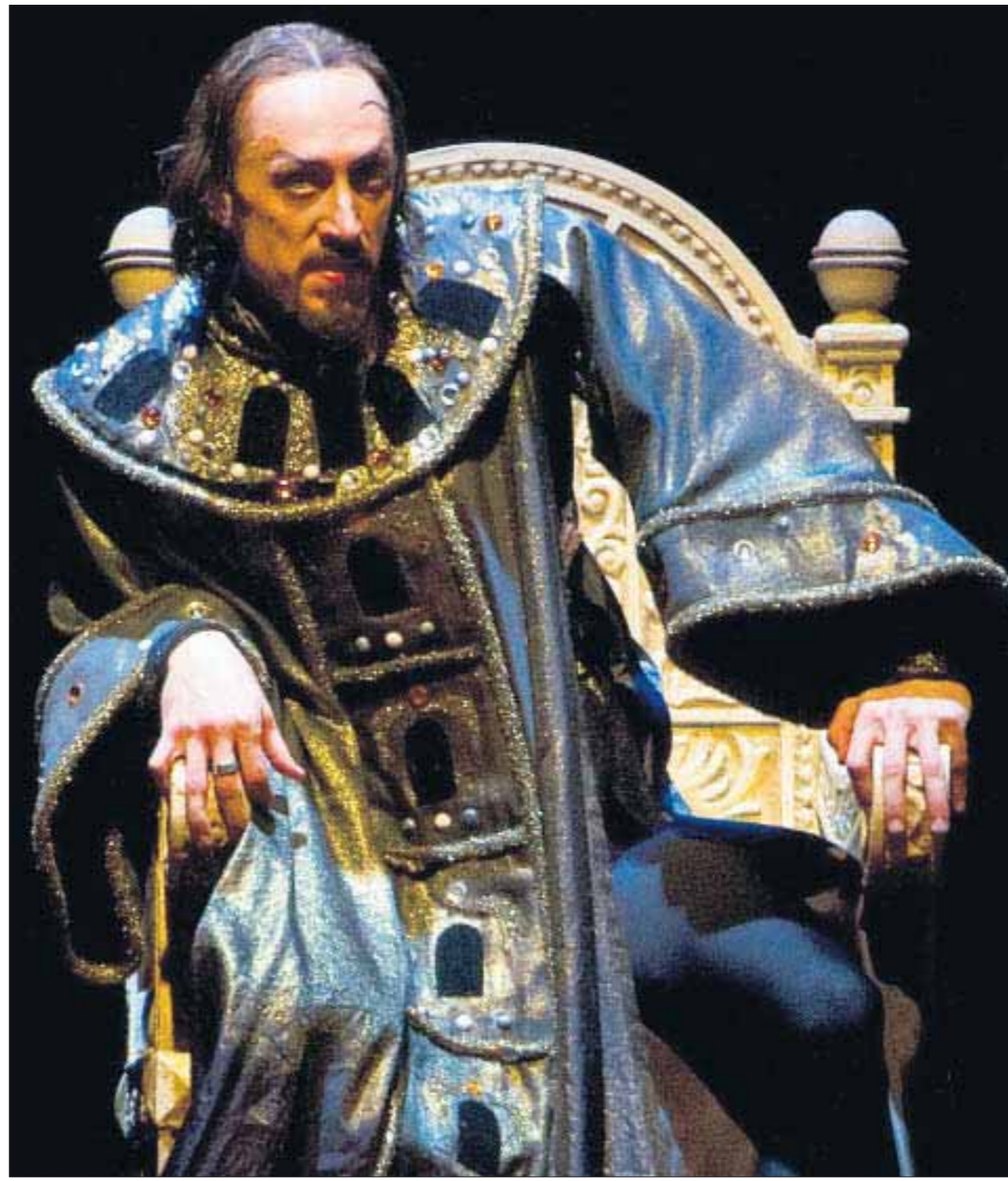
Asked if he knew who carried out the attack, Filin said last month: "My heart knows who did it, and in the depths of my soul I have an answer to that question." However, he admitted this was only "an idea" and refused to name the person publicly.

The Bolshoi Theatre has been at the heart of cultural life in Russia since the early 19th century, and is known for its passionate behind-the-scenes conflicts.

Police earlier questioned Filin's family and members of the ballet troupe. One of those interviewed was Nikolai Tsiskaridze, a principal dancer who had an abrasive relationship with Filin and who criticised the Bolshoi's management over the recent reconstruction of the theatre's main building saying it made it look like "a Turkish hotel".

The general director of the Bolshoi said last month that Tsiskaridze should shoulder some of the blame for what happened to Filin because of the antagonistic atmosphere he had created. The dancer denied involvement in the attack, which he called a tragedy, and said he was the victim of a campaign to discredit him.

Dmitrichenko had supported Tsiskaridze in some of his criticisms of the theatre's management. He was due to perform at the theatre in *Sleeping Beauty* on March 16.



Pavel Dmitrichenko playing Ivan the Terrible at the Bolshoi Theatre. He has been accused of involvement in the acid attack

Syrian rebels seize governor as northern province falls

By Ruth Sherlock in Beirut, Magdy Samaan and Richard Spencer

SYRIAN rebels have captured the governor of Raqqa province and overrun its capital city, further severing the north of the country from the control of President Bashar al-Assad's government.

Hassan Jallili is the "highest profile capture by rebels of a regime official", according to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Suleiman Suleiman, the head of the ruling Baath party for Raqqa province, was also taken prisoner.

Amateur video shows the two men sitting disconsolately among jubilant armed rebels. In another video, men claiming to be from the Jabhat al-Shura storm the governor's palace and rip down a large poster of Mr Assad.

Even as the city was falling, Mr Assad, speaking from Damascus, publicly claimed victory over the opposition. In comments published in the pro-regime Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhabar*, he said the "conspiracy" against Syria was nearing an end, and that his enemies, backed by foreign powers were "playing a game of survival".

There was little evidence of this on Tuesday, as rebel groups seized control of the political and state security buildings, which were the government's power centres in Raqqa city.

"As of this morning the city is completely liberated," Samer al-Abdullah, from the Sham News Network in Raqqa told *The Daily Telegraph*.

The city remained far from stable, with government Sukhoi planes running air strikes against rebel targets. Loyalist pockets continued to fight pitched battles against rebel groups, many of which come from surrounding provinces.

Raqqa had for almost a year been a haven for as many as 800,000 refugees who had fled the fighting in other areas.

On Tuesday tens of thousands of people were again forced to flee fighting and leave the city.

Soviet soldier is found alive in Afghanistan

By Ben Farmer in Lashkar Gah

A SOVIET soldier who disappeared in Afghanistan nearly 33 years ago has been found living as a nomad in the west of the country.

Bakhterdin Khakimov has adopted the name Sheikh Abdullah and was tracked down after a year-long search by a veter-

ans' organisation. He was wounded in battle in 1980, only months after the Soviet invasion, and was rescued by Afghans, the BBC reported, quoting Russia's RIA news agency.

Hundreds of Soviet soldiers remain missing in Afghanistan and several have been found living peacefully in the country in the past 20 years. Mr Khakimov is

an Uzbek from Samarkand who served in a motorised rifle unit.

He was found in the Shindand district of Herat province and practises herbal medicine. Alexander Lavrentyev, deputy chairman of Russia's official veterans committee, said Mr Khakimov had married in Afghanistan, but his wife had died and he had no children.

Egyptian 'eye sniper' is jailed for three years

By Richard Spencer in Cairo

AN EGYPTIAN policeman who blinded protesters on the edge of Tahrir Square by firing buckshot at their eyes has been jailed for three years.

It Mahmoud el-Shinawy became known as the "eye sniper" even before he was identified, after stories circulated of a police marksman deliberately blinding activists during protests against the interim military rulers of Egypt in November 2011.

Scores of protesters began reporting to hospitals with pellets in their eyes, several blinded for life.

The marksman responsible for at least some of those injuries was identified after a video posted on YouTube appeared to show an officer firing at head height and then being congratulated by a colleague, who said: "Nice one sir, you hit the guy's eye."

He was eventually recognised and named on social media. As the outcry grew, the military said he would be called in for questioning. He later gave himself up.

During the hearing in Cairo criminal court, his actions were described as "evil" by the prosecution, state media said.

His victims had said that they wanted to "tear his eyes out with their own hands" but the trial was overshadowed by the country's continuing violent confrontations.

Six people, including three policemen, have been killed since the weekend in clashes in Port Said, where the army has been called out to keep police and protesters apart.

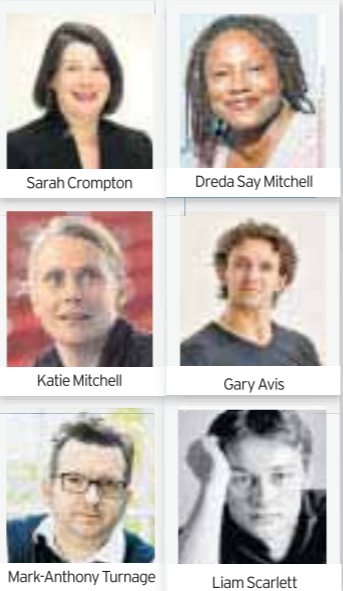
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