

MIDDLE EAST TENSIONS

Philippines allows its citizens to stay in Iran

REUTERS, Manila

The Philippines will no longer require its citizens to leave Iran and Lebanon as worries of a broader conflict in the Middle East eased, but the mandatory evacuation order for workers in Iraq remains in force, officials said yesterday.

Environment Secretary Roy Cimatu, a retired general named by President Rodrigo Duterte as special envoy to the Middle East, left for Qatar yesterday to oversee the evacuation effort.

"The situation is unpredictable, sometimes there are some instances of a very surprise missile attack," he told reporters. "They have the option to press the trigger. We have to be ready in case there will be some incidents along the way."

More than 2 million Philippine citizens live and work in the Middle East, sending home billions of dollars in annual remittances that could be dented by a full-scale conflict.

More than 30,000 of these are in Lebanon, and more than 1,000 in Iran, excluding undocumented labourers.

The United States and Iran have backed away from the brink of further conflict in the Middle East.

US President Donald Trump responded overnight to an Iranian attack on US forces with sanctions, not violence. Iran offered no immediate signal it would retaliate further over a January 3 US strike that killed one of its senior military commanders.

Eduardo Menez, a spokesman at the Department of Foreign Affairs, said the government is prepared to respond to any changes in the situation in the region and will assist citizens who wish to return home.

"Alert levels are constantly reviewed and adjusted as needed," Menez told reporters.



A demonstrator shouts slogans as she, along with other demonstrators, attends a sit-in protest against a new citizenship law, at Park Circus Maidan in Kolkata, India yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

PETITION ON INDIA'S CITIZENSHIP LAW

Top court refuses urgent hearing

Says country going through difficult times

PTI, New Delhi

Chief Justice of India S A Bobde yesterday observed that the country is going through difficult times and there is so much violence going on as the Supreme Court refused urgent hearing on a plea seeking to declare the Citizenship Amendment Act as constitutional.

A bench headed by CJI Bobde expressed surprise over the petition and said this is the first time that someone is seeking that an Act be declared as constitutional.

"There is so much of violence going on. The country is going through difficult times and the endeavour should be for peace... This court's job is to determine validity of a law and not declare it as constitutional," the CJI said.

The bench also comprising Justices B R Gavai and Surya Kant said it will hear the petitions challenging validity of CAA when the violence stops.

The observation came after advocate Vineet Dhandas sought urgent listing of his plea to declare CAA as constitutional and a direction to all states for implementation of the Act.

The plea has also sought action against activists, students and media houses for "spreading rumours".

The law seeks to grant citizenship to non-Muslim migrants belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, Jain and Parsi communities who came to the country from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan on or before December 31, 2014.

'I will fight alone'

Says Mamata on CAA, NRC, leaves opposition a divided House

PTI, Kolkata

"If needed, I will fight alone," a livid Mamata Banerjee declared yesterday in the West Bengal assembly where she said she will boycott a meeting called by Congress interim president Sonia Gandhi on January 13 over campus violence and the CAA, exposing the opposition faultlines on the issues.

Mamata, also the TMC president, was angry over incidents of violence in her state during a trade union strike called by organisations affiliated to the Left and the Congress over "anti-people" policies, including economic measures and livewire issues like the new citizenship law and a pan-India NRC.

"I have decided to boycott the meeting convened by Sonia Gandhi on January 13 in New Delhi as I do not support the violence that the Left and Congress unleashed in West Bengal on Wednesday," she announced on the floor of the House when the opposition insisted that the House pass a resolution against the CAA.

She said since the House had already adopted a resolution against a pan-India National Register of Citizens (NRC) in September last year which denounced Indian citizenship to minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan on the basis of religion, there was no need for a fresh resolution.

As opposition MLAs insisted on a fresh resolution, the tempestuous leader launched into a harangue, defending her stance and declaring she will not attend the meeting called by Gandhi.

"You people follow one policy in West Bengal and a totally contradictory policy in Delhi. I don't want to be on the same page with you. If needed, I will fight alone," she declared, as she mounted an onslaught on the Congress and Left members.

Mamata was angry over incidents of violence in her state during trade union strike called by the Left and Congress



West Bengal was rocked by incidents of violence and arson during the strike called by trade unions linked to the Left and the Congress on Wednesday.

Those supporting the strike had clashed with police and vandalised public property.

Mamata had said though she empathised with the strikers and supported their cause, she was against a shutdown as it inconvenienced common people and adversely affected economic development.

The meeting called by Gandhi is being seen as an attempt to bring together all opposition parties against the Modi government, which is facing unmitigated fire from the opposition over Sunday night violence at the JNU.

The opposition has blamed the Akhil Bhartiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student front of the RSS, for the violence.

EU envoys spurn 'guided tour' of Indian Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

The European Union refused to take part in a rare diplomatic visit to Indian Kashmir that started yesterday because they will not be allowed to meet detained local politicians, reports said.

The two-day foreign diplomatic trip is the first since New Delhi stripped the restive Himalayan region of its autonomy and sent in tens of thousands of extra troops in August.

The security lockdown and communications blackout, still only partially lifted, has drawn international criticism including in Brussels and Washington.

"EU envoys don't want a guided tour of Kashmir. We want to meet people freely of our own choosing," the NDTV news channel quoted one European diplomatic source as saying.

In particular they wanted to meet three former chief ministers, Farooq and Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti, who are still locked up, daily newspaper The Hindu

reported. The three have been under house arrest or kept at a government residence since August.

Critics said that visit was a government's attempt to give the impression that life has returned to normal.

The foreign ministry said that envoys from 15 countries -- including the United States, South Korea, Nigeria and Argentina -- would take part in the visit to the region, which is also claimed by Pakistan.

A diplomatic source told AFP that the EU, which has been pressing for months to access to some of those detained, was still keen to go at a

later date.

"The EU is interested in going and continues to be engaged with the MEA (ministry of external affairs) on timing and elements of the trip," the source said.

Other Indian newspapers quoted government sources as saying that the EU balked because the visit was at short notice and since it was not possible for all the bloc's ambassadors to take part.

The envoys wanted to meet three ex-CMs

Visit was a govt attempt to give impression that life has returned to normal

Help find Rohingyas

Thailand asks Malaysia after 19 trafficking victims escaped detention centre in Songkhla

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand has asked Malaysia to help find a group of Rohingya Muslim trafficking victims who absconded from a detention centre in the south of the country, Thai police said yesterday.

Nineteen Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar escaped from the detention centre in Thailand's southern Songkhla province, around 5 km (3 miles) from the Thai-Malaysian border, early on Wednesday, using a piece of cloth to climb down from a third floor window, police said.

They were part of some 40 Rohingya Muslims, identified as victims of human traffickers, who were intercepted by Thai authorities on their way to Malaysia and had been detained at the centre to await repatriation to Myanmar, police said. Two were found later on Wednesday, police said.

"We've coordinated with Malaysian authorities to help find the remaining 17 who might have escaped into the border areas," Piraat Pookcharoen, deputy commander of an immigration police unit in the south, told Reuters.

Thailand has long been a destination and transit country for men, women and children smuggled and trafficked from poorer, neighbouring countries, including Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. The United States and rights groups have criticised Thai authorities for not doing enough to protect victims of trafficking.

Myanmar regards the Rohingya as illegal migrants, though many trace their roots in the country back for generations, and has confined tens of thousands to sprawling camps in Rakhine state in the west, segregated from the Buddhist Rakhine population since violence swept the area in 2012.

The unrest prompted tens of thousands of Rohingya to flee Myanmar by sea, an exodus that peaked in 2015 when an estimated 25,000 people crossed the Andaman Sea for Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, many drowning in unsafe and overloaded boats.

More than 700,000 Rohingya have fled to Bangladesh since a 2017 crackdown by the Myanmar army, according to UN agencies.



Members of a Palestinian family warm themselves by a fire during a cold weather spell in an impoverished neighbourhood on the outskirts in Gaza City yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NIRBHAYA RAPE CASE

Convict files curative plea in India's top court

ANI, New Delhi

One of the convicts in the Nirbhaya rape case, Vinay Kumar Sharma, filed a curative petition before the Supreme Court yesterday, days after a Delhi court fixed the date for hanging the four convicts.

A Delhi court had issued a death warrant against four convicts on January 7 and they are scheduled to be executed on January 22 at 7:00 am in the Tihar Jail premises.

Besides Vinay, other convicts Pawan, Akshay, and Mukesh Singh are facing the gallows. The court after issuing a black warrant in their name gave them two weeks' time to file both the curative and mercy petition.

A curative petition is the last judicial resort available for redressal of grievances. It is decided by the judges in-chamber.

The mercy petition, on the other hand, is filed before the President who has the power to commute it to life imprisonment.

The case pertains to the gang-rape of a woman by six persons on a moving bus in the national capital on the night of December 16, 2012.

Her assailants took turns to rape and violate her with a metal rod as the bus drove around the capital, before dumping her and the beaten-up friend in a roadside ditch.

The victim, who was later given the name Nirbhaya, died at a hospital in Singapore where she had been airlifted for medical treatment.

Tens of thousands of Indians took to the streets in protest, and the case led to a major overhaul of laws surrounding sexual assault.

It also spawned an award-winning documentary as well as a Netflix series.

New virus behind outbreak

Claim WHO, Beijing as 15 positive results detected

AFP, Beijing

China and WHO believe a mysterious pneumonia outbreak that struck 59 people is caused by a new strain of virus from the same family as SARS, which killed hundreds of people more than a decade ago.

Lead scientist Xu Jinguo told the official Xinhua news agency that experts had "preliminarily determined" a new type of coronavirus was behind the outbreak, first confirmed on December 31 in Wuhan, a central Chinese city with a population of over 11 million.

It initially sparked fears of a resurgence of highly contagious Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome, and prompted authorities in Hong Kong -- badly hit by SARS in 2002-2003 -- to take precautions, including stepping up the disinfection of trains and aeroplanes, and checks of passengers.

China has since ruled out a fresh outbreak of SARS, which killed 349 people in mainland China and another 299 in Hong Kong.

"A total of 15 positive results of the new type of

coronavirus had been detected" in the lab, through tests on infected blood samples and throat swabs, Xu said.

The World Health Organization (WHO) confirmed the preliminary discovery of a new coronavirus in a statement.

"Further investigations are also required to determine the source, modes of transmission, extent of infection and countermeasures implemented," said Gauden Galea, the WHO Representative to China.

Wuhan's health commission said on Sunday seven of the 59 patients were seriously ill, but none had died. All received treatment in quarantine.

Eight patients have recovered and were discharged from hospital on Wednesday, according to Xinhua.

The commission said the infection broke out between December 12 and 29, with some of the patients employed at a city seafood market since closed for disinfection.

No obvious evidence of human-to-human transmission has been reported so far.



CHINA PNEUMONIA

Don't read too much into polls results: Taiwan tells China

REUTERS, Taipei

Beijing should not see Taiwan's elections as representing a win or loss for China, Taiwan's foreign minister said yesterday, days ahead of a vote overshadowed by Chinese efforts to get the island to accept its rule.

Taiwan holds presidential and parliamentary elections tomorrow. Its elections are always closely watched by China, which claims the island as its territory.

Taiwan says it is an independent country called the Republic of China, its formal name, and the government has warned of Beijing's efforts to sway the vote in favour of the opposition.

"I just don't think China should read Taiwan's election as its own victory or defeat," Foreign Minister Joseph Wu told reporters in Taipei.

"If China reads too much into our election... there might be a likely scenario that China will engage in military intimidation or diplomatic isolation or using economic measures as punishment against Taiwan."

President Tsai Ing-wen, who is seeking re-election, has repeatedly warned Taiwan's people to

be wary of Chinese attempts to sway the election through disinformation or military intimidation, an accusation China denies.

Wu drew attention to China's sailing of its new aircraft carrier into the sensitive Taiwan Strait late last year, calling the voyage "clear" evidence of Beijing's attempts to intimidate voters.

"This is our own election. This is not China's election. It is Taiwanese people who go to the voting booth to make a judgment on which candidate or political party is better for them," Wu said.

"If China wants to play with democracies in other countries so much, maybe they can try with their own elections at some point."

The issue of China has taken centre stage in the campaign, especially after its president, Xi Jinping, warned last year it could attack Taiwan, though said he'd prefer a peaceful "one country, two systems" formula to rule the island.

Taiwan-China ties have soured since Tsai took office in 2016, with China cutting off formal dialogue, flying bomber patrols around Taiwan, and whittling away at its diplomatic allies.

Taiwan holds presidential and parliamentary polls tomorrow

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