

DEMOCRACY PROTEST 1600 arrested in Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police fired tear gas and water cannon and made over 1,600 arrests yesterday during clashes with protesters who defied government warnings to rally in the capital for electoral reform.

Leaders of opposition parties were among those detained during a massive security operation but it failed to thwart the outlawed demonstration which saw 50,000 people take to the streets of Kuala Lumpur, according to organisers.

With elections expected to be called early next year, demonstrators were demanding changes to the voting process including eradication of vote buying and prevention of irregularities which they say marred previous polls.

Opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim, who is currently on trial accused of sodomy, told AFP that he suffered bruising to his head and a cut on his leg after he was knocked down in the pandemonium when police fired tear gas.

Bersih, the broad coalition that organised the rare protest, wants to see the use of indelible ink to prevent multiple voting, equal access to the media for all parties and the cleaning-up of electoral rolls.

The opposition led by Anwar made major gains in 2008 elections against the ruling coalition but said it would have done better -- potentially threatening the Barisan Nasional's half-century rule -- if voting had been more fair.

Yesterday's rally was Malaysia's biggest street protest since 2007, when the opposition led a demonstration in the capital also demanding electoral reforms.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters shout slogans calling for electoral reform in front of Malaysia's iconic twin towers in Kuala Lumpur (L) and police fire water cannon to disperse protesters during a mass rally calling for electoral reform in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.



ETHNO-POLITICAL VIOLENCE Pakistan regains control Four days of unrest kills 95 in Karachi

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan announced yesterday its troops had taken back areas of Karachi occupied by armed groups and arrested more than 100 people after political violence across the vast port city claimed 95 lives.

Four days of unrest has been blamed on political and ethnic tensions, with gunmen firing on two buses in the early hours of Friday, killing 12 people including a six-year-old girl, according to security officials.

"Our paramilitary soldiers have secured the troubled localities and hills where armed terrorists were firing on innocent people, and have restored normal life," interior minister Rehman Malik told reporters.

"We'll treat anyone who disrupts Pakistan's financial capital as a supporter of Taliban and an enemy operating against our war on terror," he said.

A grenade attack in southern Bhimpura neighbourhood killed two men and injured three yesterday.

Home ministry spokesman Sharafuddin

Memon told AFP a 12-year-old boy hit by a stray bullet in Baldia neighbourhood early yesterday was also among the dead.

"More than 100 suspects, many of them with weapons, have been arrested," Memon said, putting the death toll at 95.

Authorities said they had asked residents to return home but few had responded.

Gunfire could be heard in western neighbourhoods and hospitals were still receiving casualties, witnesses said.

The violence has been blamed on loyalists of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), the dominant local party that represents migrants from India, and the Awami National Party (ANP) of Pashtuns from the northwest.

The latest bout of killings comes days after the MQM walked out of the federal government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

The worst affected areas are impoverished, heavily populated neighbourhoods in western Karachi, dotted with construction sites where armed men of different ethnicities have exchanged gunfire.

Indian cabinet reshuffle likely next week

AFP, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met Congress president Sonia Gandhi yesterday to discuss a likely cabinet reshuffle next week, party sources said. It was their third meeting in three weeks.

"The reshuffle is likely next week, may be as early as Monday," a Congress leader told IANS.

The two leaders are learnt to have discussed the reshuffle at Saturday's meeting.

With Dayanidhi Maran resigning Thursday as textiles minister, a cabinet reshuffle has become further necessary, the party sources said.

President Pratibha Patil returned to Delhi Friday after a week-long stay in Andhra Pradesh and the government can now effect the reshuffle any time.

Strategic defeat of al-Qaeda 'within reach': Panetta

AFP, Kabul

The "strategic defeat" of al-Qaeda is "within reach", US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said yesterday as he arrived on a surprise visit to Afghanistan as the US prepares a gradual drawdown of troops.

Panetta, who took office on July 1 to replace the outgoing Robert Gates, arrived in Kabul for a trip to include talks with President Hamid Karzai over the transition of some Nato-held areas to Afghan control starting mid-July.

Ahead of his arrival, Panetta told travelling media that since the May night raid by US forces in Pakistan that killed Osama Bin Laden, "10 to 20" key al-Qaeda targets had been identified between Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and north Africa.

"If we can go after them, I think we really can strategically defeat al-Qaeda," said Panetta, who leads the Pentagon after two



Leon Panetta

years as CIA chief.

"Obviously we made an important start with that with getting rid of bin Laden. I was convinced in my prior capacity and I'm convinced in this capacity that we're within reach of strategically defeating al-Qaeda."

"Now is the moment, following what happened with bin Laden, to put maximum pressure on them because I do believe that if we continue this effort that we can really cripple al-Qaeda," he said.

On arriving in Afghanistan, Panetta will meet Karzai and defence and interior ministers to discuss "our common objectives on transition, the drawdown, the build up of the ANSF (Afghan forces)," said a senior US official.

US President Barack Obama has announced that 10,000 US forces will leave Afghanistan this year and another 23,000 by the end of September in 2012.

Mexico bar attack kills 20

AFP, Monterrey

At least 20 people were killed late Friday when gunmen attacked a local bar in Monterrey in Mexico, authorities said.

The attackers, who came in two pick-up trucks and one car, stormed into the bar "El Sabino Gordo" and opened fire on the patrons, they said.

"Up to now, we have found 17 bodies inside the bar and three more outside," an official from the prosecutor's office told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The assailants numbered at least 15, according to one local resident.

Monterrey has been the site of a bloody confrontation among leading Mexican drug cartels feuding over lucrative narcotics supply routes leading to the United States.

Afghan spy agency guard kills 2 US troops

AFP, Kabul

An Afghan spy agency bodyguard shot dead two American soldiers and wounded a third yesterday before he was also killed in the roadside firefight that may have been triggered by a row.

The incident happened in the northern province of Panjsher, one of the most peaceful areas in Afghanistan, and is the latest example of Afghan forces turning on foreign troops.

"Two American soldiers were killed, one American soldier was wounded and the Afghan NDS employee was also killed in the exchange of fire," deputy provincial governor Abdul Rehman told AFP.

The NDS is the Afghan National Directorate for Security. Taliban insurgents claimed the attack and said they killed three PRT members and wounded another four in an ambush. The Taliban are known to exaggerate their claims.

But Rehman ruled out any insurgent or Taliban involvement in the incident.

He said the dead NDS employee, named only as Amanullah, was working as a bodyguard for a high-ranking Afghan NDS official and was on his way back to work after a weekend holiday to the province.

He said the clash may have been caused after a car accident or a row.

The American soldiers were working for Panjsher Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), said Rehman.

Nato's International Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan said they could only confirm an incident involving their troops but could not give further information immediately.



Georgian journalists stand blindfolded in front of the Interior ministry building in Tbilisi on Friday as they hold a symbolic protest against the arrest of four top news photographers. Russia yesterday charged the four with espionage for allegedly giving secret data to Russia.

PHOTO: AFP

Rahul Gandhi vows to protect farmers' rights

AFP, New Delhi

Rahul Gandhi, tipped as a future Indian premier, vowed at the weekend to protect farmers' rights against greedy land developers as he ended a march through the nation's dusty countryside.

Gandhi, who has pitched himself as champion of the India's poor, told a rally yesterday that the ruling Congress party to which he belongs, was committed to ensuring farmers receive fair compensation for their land.

"Farmers say if a rich person's land is taken, he is given the market rate, but when it comes to a poor farmer, he is fired upon and beaten," Gandhi, 41, told the gathering of thousands of farmers in Aligarh in northern India.

The rally capped a four-day trek by

Gandhi, scion of the famed Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty, and his supporters through a western region of the pivotal opposition-ruled state of Uttar Pradesh which is India's most populous.

Crucial assembly elections are set to be held next year in the state that will serve as a dress rehearsal for national elections due in 2014.

Stepping up his fight against Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati, Gandhi accused her government of acquiring farmers' lands for golf courses.

Analysts say how well the Congress party performs in the state polls will be viewed as a major test of Gandhi's potential national electoral appeal and for his prospects of being prime minister.

DEATH ANNIVERSARY WB Leaders demand museum on Jyoti Basu

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kolkata

The observance of the 97th birth anniversary of late Marxist leader Jyoti Basu on Friday heard a call for declaring his house here as a national property and converting it into a museum.

At a function to mark the occasion at Basu's residence, former Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath Chatterjee described the late leader as "immortal" and said a fitting tribute to his memory would be to declare his residence national property and convert it into a museum.

Jyoti Basu had been the chief minister of West Bengal for 23 years since 1977.

Mamata mulls proposal for renaming West Bengal

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

It hasn't been decided yet and intellectuals are also divided over the issue. But certainly the idea of renaming West Bengal is on the thinking table.

Sources close to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said the CM is seriously contemplating renaming the state.

"Since the name of the state starts with a W, our representatives get to speak only at the end of any function when most of the audience has left. To do away with the problem, the chief minister has suggested the name be changed," said state Commerce and Industry Minister Partha Chattopadhyay, a close aide to the CM.

"A proposal was moved in this regard during the state cabinet meeting recently and the chief secretary (Samar Ghosh) has been entrusted to collect all the views and suggestions," Chatterjee, who is the spokesperson of the cabinet, said.

However, "any decision will be taken only after considering the views of the political parties, assembly members as well as

experts from the field," he said, considering the sensitivity of the issue.

Interestingly the Left Front government had also made a move about a decade ago to change the name of the state but the proposal had to be dropped in view of widespread protests.

However, intellectuals of West Bengal appear divided on the issue.

Noted painter Shuvoprasanna has said there was no point in retaining the name West Bengal because the justification for it has ended with the abolition of East Bengal which was Bangladesh since 1971.

There is no significance of the name 'West Bengal' when 'East Bengal' does not exist," said renowned Bengali poet Shankha Ghosh. He suggested 'Bangla' as an alternative name.

Writer Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay said change in the name of the state was long due. He suggested 'bongor' as the state name.

Eminent writer Atin Bandyopadhyay, however, said there was no need to change the name as the name holds historic value and signifies that once Bengal was divided.

Nato tanker attacked in Pakistan

5 killed in tribal area

AFP, Peshawar

At least five people were killed when militants fired on two vehicles in northwest Pakistan yesterday, while the driver of a Nato oil tanker was shot dead in the southwest, officials said.

Five people died and 11 others were wounded when militants fired on the two vehicles in the northwestern Jawakai tribal area, a senior government official said.

Separately, in the southwestern province of Baluchistan, gunmen on motorcycles shot dead the driver of an oil tanker carrying fuel for Nato forces in neighbouring Afghanistan, home secretary Zafarullah Baloch told AFP.



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