

ATTACKS ON SHIAS, TROOPS Militants kill 41 in Pakistan

REUTERS, Peshwar

Pakistani militants, who have escalated attacks in recent weeks, killed at least 41 people in two separate incidents, officials said yesterday, challenging assertions that military offensives have broken the back of hard-line Islamist groups.

The United States has long pressured nuclear-armed ally Pakistan to crack down harder on both home-grown militants groups such as the Taliban and others which are based on its soil and attack Western forces in Afghanistan.

In the north, 21 men working for a government-backed paramilitary force were executed overnight after they were kidnapped last week, a provincial official said.

Twenty Shias pilgrims died and 24 were wounded, meanwhile, when a car bomb targeted their bus convoy as it headed toward the Iranian border in the southwest, a doctor said.

New York-based Human Rights Watch has noted more than 320 Shias killed this year in Pakistan and said attacks were on the rise. It said the government's failure to catch or prosecute attackers suggested it was "indifferent" to the killings.

Witnesses said a blast targeted their three buses as they were overtaking a car about 60 km west of Quetta, capital of sparsely populated Baluchistan province.

"The bus next to us caught on fire immediately," said pilgrim Hussein Ali, 60. "We tried to save our companions, but were driven back by the intensity of the heat."

Twenty people had been killed and 24 wounded, said an official at Mastung district hospital.

In the attack in the northwest, officials said they had found the bodies of 21 men kidnapped from their checkpoints outside the provincial capital of Peshawar on Thursday. The men were executed one by one.

"They were tied up and blindfolded," Naveed Anwar, a senior administration official, said by telephone.

"They were lined up and shot in the head," said Habibullah Arif, another local official, also by telephone.

One man was shot and seriously wounded but survived, the officials said. He was in critical condition and being treated at a local hospital. Another had escaped before the shootings.

Taliban spokesman Ihsanullah Ihsan claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Pakistan, seen as critical to US efforts to stabilise the region before Nato forces withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, denies allegations that it supports militant groups like the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network.

DELHI RAPE EPIDEMIC 1 conviction out of 635 cases this yr

PTI, New Delhi

There has been only one conviction out of over 600 cases of rape reported to Delhi Police this year even as crime against women has been on the rise in the national capital.

As many as 754 accused were arrested in the 635 cases reported to Delhi Police between January and November, the highest in past five years, home ministry data said.

Of these total accused, only one was convicted while 403 were facing trials, investigations were pending against 348 and two others were discharged.

A total of 572 rape cases were reported to Delhi Police last year as against 507 in 2010, 469 in 2009 and 466 in 2008.

The Delhi Police arrested 745 accused last year. Of these, 18 were convicted, 34 were acquitted, 597 were facing trials in different courts, 86 were still being investigated and 10 were discharged for the crime.

The national capital has also reported 624 cases of molestation of women between January and November and the police have arrested 768 accused. However, conviction was done in only one case. The trials were pending against 402 accused and investigations were pending against 356 others suspected to have molested women, it said.



Protesters take part in a candlelight march in Amritsar (1); Indian Bollywood actresses Shabana Azmi, left, and Sonali Bendre take part in a candlelight vigil in Mumbai (2); Indian protestors shout slogans (3) and scuffle with police (4) during a rally in New Delhi yesterday, following the cremation of a gangrape victim in the Indian capital.

PHOTO: AFP



Brahimi claims to have viable Syria plan

Hopes to end crisis; violence rages as death toll soars

AFP, Cairo

International envoy Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday warned the Syrian war was worsening "by the day" as he announced a peace plan he believed could find support from world powers, including key Syria ally Russia.

Brahimi's comments in Cairo after meeting Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi came as Russia despatched a third warship to its naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus in readiness for a possible evacuation of its nationals.

The situation in Syria "is very bad and getting worse by the day," Brahimi told reporters, a day after warning in Moscow that Damascus faced a choice between "hell or the political process."

He said he had crafted a ceasefire plan "that could be adopted by the international community."

"I have discussed this plan with Russia

and Syria... I think this proposal could be adopted by the international community," the UN and Arab League envoy said, without giving details.

"There is a proposal for a political solution based on the Geneva declaration foreseeing a ceasefire, forming a government with complete prerogatives and a plan for parliamentary and presidential elections," he said, referring to a peace initiative that world powers agreed to in Geneva in June.

Brahimi held talks in Moscow on Saturday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on his end-of-year bid to accelerate moves to halt the conflict that monitors say has killed 45,000 people.

At least 23 children were among 180 people killed in violence on Saturday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

And yesterday, the Britain-based watchdog gave a preliminary toll of 50 people killed, 29 of them civilians.



Lakhdar Brahimi

Egypt wants to resume talks on IMF loan: PM

AFP, Cairo

Prime Minister Hisham Qandil yesterday said that Egypt wants to resume talks with the International Monetary Fund in January on a \$4.8-billion loan frozen this month because of political tensions and unrest.

"We have invited (the IMF) to resume talks during January," Qandil told a news conference in Cairo.

He said the sum involved was "small," but "its value is in the sign of confidence it gives to the Egyptian economy," which he admitted was in difficulty although talk of bankruptcy was not in order.

The request for a loan, made last August, was suspended on December 11 for a month, with Cairo saying the postponement was "because of the political situation in the country."

The presidency of Mohamed Morsi is going through its worst crisis since his election in June, mainly over a referendum on a new Islamist-drafted constitution that was approved by 64 percent of voters but in which the secular opposition alleged fraud.

The likelihood of prolonged "elevated" political conflict despite the adoption of the constitution prompted the ratings agency Standard and Poor's to knock Egypt's long-term credit rating down a peg this week to "B-".

"The economic situation is difficult, there's no doubt about that," Qandil told reporters yesterday.

Ready to form unity govt with rebels

Says CAR president

REUTERS, Bangui

Central African Republic President Francois Bozize yesterday said he was ready to form a coalition government with the Seleka rebel alliance and would step down after his term ends in 2016.

"I am ready to form a government of national unity with Seleka to run the country together, because I am a democrat," Bozize told a news conference following a meeting with African Union Chairman Thomas Yayi Boni in Bangui.

He added that he was ready to attend peace talks being organised by regional leaders in Gabon, "without delay".

NYC SUBWAY HATE CRIME Woman accused of killing Indian

AFP, New York

A 31-year-old New York woman was scheduled to appear before a judge yesterday after being charged with murder as a hate crime for shoving a Hindu man to his death in front of an oncoming subway train.

Erika Menendez of the Bronx borough was motivated by hatred of Muslims and Hindus, according to the Queens District Attorney's Office.

"I pushed a Muslim off the train tracks because I hate Hindus and Muslims. Ever since 2001 when they put down the twin towers, I've been beating them up," she told police.

Menendez, who is awaiting arraignment in Queens Criminal Court, faces from 25 years to life in prison if convicted.

The victim, 46-year-old Sunando Sen, was born in India and raised Hindu, a roommate told The New York Times.

The incident took place late Thursday at a station on the number 7 line in Queens.

Menendez -- who was speaking to herself as she paced along the platform, according to witnesses -- pushed the man as the train was pulling into the station. He apparently had his back to Menendez and did not see her.

Police released surveillance camera video footage via Twitter showing a woman running from the scene.

Arabs urge more US role in Mideast

AFP, Ramallah

Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi on Saturday called on US President Barack Obama to be proactive in ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in his forthcoming term.

"We hope that the new American administration adopts a policy of conflict resolution rather than conflict management," Arabi said in West Bank.

Arabi said that in the four-hour meeting with Abbas they discussed the Arab League's promise to provide an economic "safety net" of \$100 million a month to alleviate Israeli sanctions imposed after last month's historic United Nations vote to raise the Palestinians' diplomatic standing.

Stop women repression

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 punishment of the perpetrators.

"Gender based violence takes a similar form in all South Asian countries. At the root of this violence is patriarchy which ensures men's control over women," says a declaration paper prepared by Sangat, a South Asian Network, and One Billion Rising, a global movement to end violence against women.

Fawzia Khondker, women's rights activist and one of the organisers of the event, said violence against women is a structural problem. "If we want to address this issue in a systematic way, we have to work collectively."

"We need to make South Asia a violence-free zone, where every woman's safety and security are ensured," said Shirin Akhtar, president of Karmojibi Nari.

Prominent women's rights activists, including Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF); Khushi Kabir, Coordinator of Nijera Kori; Shameem Akhtar, cultural activist and filmmaker, and Nasimun Ara Haque Minu, president of Bangladesh Nari Sangbadik Kendra, emphasised the need for concerted actions to end violence against women.

People from all walks of life, including students, joined the protest.

Representatives from 25 women's and human rights organisations, including ActionAid, Ain O Shalish Kendro, Ananya,

Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangha, BRAC, MJF, Nijera Kori, Plan International, Proshika and Steps Towards Development participated in the human chain.

"We always approach issues of violence in an emotional manner. It is time to translate this emotion into a constructive political agenda," said young feminist Nahid Sultana.

Men also joined women in calling for an end to the patriarchal system.

Violence against women was not just a women's issue, they said, adding the participation of men was crucial in the fight against patriarchy.

"Our rising together today will be the beginning of an end (to violence)," said Shameem Akhtar.

NEWS IN brief

Thatcher leaves hospital

AFP, London

Britain's former prime minister Margaret Thatcher has left hospital after successful bladder surgery, British media have reported.

The BBC and Sky News television said the 87-year-old was discharged on Saturday, citing sources close to the former premier, but her spokeswoman did not immediately return calls on Sunday seeking confirmation.

The former premier, who led Britain from 1979 to 1990, was admitted to hospital on December

US drone strike kills 3 in Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

A US drone strike has killed three suspected al-Qaeda militants in the central Yemen province of Al-Bayda, in the fourth such attack in a week, a local official said yesterday.

Among those who died was prominent local militant Saleh Mohammed al-Ameri, the official said, adding that two other militants were killed and two were wounded.

The Washington-based think tank New America Foundation said on Thursday that US drone attacks in Yemen have risen to 53 this year, compared to 18 last year.

HW Bush out of intensive care

AFP, Washington

Former US president George HW Bush is on the mend and has been released from intensive care, a spokesman said Saturday.

"President Bush's condition has improved, so he has been moved today from the intensive care unit to a regular patient room at The Methodist Hospital to continue his recovery," spokesman

Swine flu kills 9 Palestinians

AFP, Ramallah

Nine Palestinians have died in an outbreak of the H1N1 influenza strain known as swine flu, the office of Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad said yesterday.

"Latest figures and information...show that 187 cases have so far been recorded, the majority of which are in the northern West Bank," it said in a statement. "The number of recorded deaths...stands at nine until now."

The virus has affected Israel and the Palestinian territories in the past, killing dozens

Victim was to marry in February

AFP, New Delhi

She was due to marry her boyfriend in a matter of weeks, was the apple of her father's eye and her friends were convinced she would achieve great things after completing her medical studies.

While India has seen an outpouring of grief for the 23-year-old who suffered fatal injuries when she was gang-raped on December 16, those who actually knew her paint a portrait of a young woman who was both in love and much loved.

Although not formally engaged, it was well-known by her friends that she was planning to marry the boyfriend who also suffered serious injuries in the same attack that would ultimately lead to her death.

Meena Rai said that she had been shopping with the unnamed victim for wedding outfits and the contents of a wedding box.

"They had made all the wedding preparations and had planned a wedding party in Delhi," she told AFP.

The young couple had spent the evening together at a mall watching "The Life of Pi" before they boarded a bus they thought would take them home.

According to reports, the frenzied attack on the pair began when the boyfriend objected to taunts about why an unmarried woman was out so late.

The gang clubbed him with an iron rod before they then turned on her.

