

MOSQUE ATTACK Saudi identifies bomber as ISIS collaborator

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday confirmed the suicide bomber who killed 21 worshippers at a Shia mosque had links with the Islamic State group (ISIS), in what the interior ministry called an attempt to promote sectarian strife.

It was the deadliest attack in years to strike the Sunni-dominated kingdom, and marked the first time ISIS officially claimed an attack in Saudi Arabia.

"His name was Salih bin Abdulrahman Salih al-Ghishaami, a Saudi national," the interior ministry said in a statement.

"He was wanted by security services for belonging to a terrorist cell receiving directions from Daesh (ISIS) abroad," it said. "The cell was discovered last month, and so far 26 of its members, all Saudi nationals, have been arrested," it added.



US actress Susan Sarandon (L) speaks with Nepalese resident Sali Tamang as she visits an area damaged in an earthquake at Ramkot on the outskirts of Kathmandu, yesterday. Nearly 8,500 people have now been confirmed dead in two earthquakes which destroyed more than half a million homes and left huge numbers of people without shelter with just weeks to go until the monsoon rains. PHOTO: AFP

Landslide blocks river in Nepal

Thousand flee fearing flash floods

AFP, Kathmandu

Thousands of panic-stricken villagers fled their homes fearing flash floods after an overnight landslide blocked a river in quake-hit Nepal's mountainous north-west, officials said yesterday.

The landslide, which occurred at around midnight, sent mud and rocks surging into the Kali Gandaki river in Myagdi district, causing water levels to rise by 150 metres (490 feet), local official Yam Bahadur Chokhal said.

An army helicopter carrying soldiers and geologists has reached the site, according to home ministry spokesman Laxmi Prasad Dhakal.

"The chopper has landed and our experts are now assessing the situation to find the best way to open the blockage and drain the two-kilometre-long artificial lake created by the landslide," Dhakal told AFP.

Fresh, smaller landslides have occurred through the morning and are continuing to send debris into the river, hampering efforts to clear the blockage, according to police and district officials.

No one was hurt or killed in the landslide, according to officials. Police have issued an alert for villagers living along the river, which begins near the Nepal-China border and flows into northern India, eventually joining the Ganges.

The snow-fed waters are also the site of Nepal's largest hydroelectric project that generates 144 megawatts of power, located south of the landslide-blocked area.

Twin quakes have devastated Nepal in recent weeks, killing more than 8,600 people, while leaving thousands in desperate need of food, clean water and shelter.

HEATWAVE IN INDIA Death toll hits 335

TNN, New Delhi

The blazing summer sun continued to scorch cities across India yesterday, with even hill stations like Mussoorie, which is 6,580 feet above sea level, sweltering at 36 degrees Celsius.

In the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the heat was even more brutal, killing 135 people on Saturday. Heat-related deaths have now gone up to 335 in the last three days. While 75 died in Andhra, the toll was 60 in Telangana as temperatures were five to seven degrees above normal.

At 48 degrees, Khammam in Telangana broke its previous record of 47.2 set in 1947.

In UP, Allahabad, at a sweltering 47 degrees topped the heat chart.

Worse, the met department has warned that it's going to get hotter. Heat wave conditions will continue in Madhya Pradesh, Vidarbha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Bihar and Jharkhand for the next couple of days.

Militants kill 400 in Palmyra

AGENCIES

Islamic State fighters have killed at least 400 people in Syria's ancient city of Palmyra, most of them women and children, Syrian state television said yesterday.

It said it was quoting residents inside the city, which is known as Tadmur in Arabic and is home to renowned Roman-era ruins including well-preserved temples, colonnades and a theatre.

Opposition activists have said on social media that hundreds of bodies were in the streets of the city after it was seized by the ultra hardline group on Wednesday. They said they were believed to be government loyalists.

Meanwhile, ISIS took full control of a border crossing between Iraq and Syria yesterday, tightening its grip on the heart of its self-proclaimed caliphate.

The move gave ISIS control of the two main roads between Syria and Iraq's province of Anbar, as the jihadists pressed their most devastating offensive in months.

The latest success came a week after ISIS captured the Iraqi city of Ramadi and days after it destroyed the historic Syrian city of Palmyra, two of the group's most significant military victories in almost a year.

The jihadists seized Al-Walid border post early yesterday when Iraqi government forces pulled back to a nearby crossing with Jordan. IS had taken the

bid to contain the rampant jihadists.

Pentagon chief Ashton Carter yesterday said that Iraqi forces "failed to fight" in Ramadi.

Carter said the city fell to the militants because Iraqi forces -- despite strength in numbers -- did not have the will to fight.

"We can give them training and we can give them equipment and we can't obviously give them the will to fight," he said.

Swift action was seen as essential to prevent ISIS from laying booby traps across Ramadi, which would make any advance in the city more risky and complicated.

Meanwhile, General John F Campbell the commander of Nato in Afghanistan yesterday said ISIS is recruiting fighters in Afghanistan but they are not yet operational in the country.

There have been fears of ISIS group making inroads in Afghanistan since US-led Nato forces ended their combat mission late last year, after 13 years of fighting insurgents.

WAR ON ISIS

Iraq forces do not have the will to fight, says Pentagon chief

Jihadists firm up control of Iraq-Syria border



Pushing boundary for peace

AFP, Paju

An international group of women peace activists, led by American feminist Gloria Steinem, yesterday made a rare crossing of one of the world's most militarised borders between North and South Korea.

The group of 30 activists rode by bus through the demilitarised zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas in what Steinem described as a "triumph" for peace and reconciliation.

Despite its name, the DMZ is one of the world's most heavily militarised frontiers, bristling with watchtowers and landmines, and crossings through the land border are extremely rare.

With this year marking the 70th anniversary of the division of the Korean peninsula, the women said they wanted to draw attention to the need for a permanent peace treaty to replace the armistice that halted -- but technically never ended -- the 1950-1953 Korean War.

The group, which includes Nobel peace laureates Leymah Gbowee and Mairead Maguire, has also highlighted the anguish of divided families who have had little or no contact since the separation into North and South.



Rohingya crisis highlights toothless nature of Asean

AP, Bangkok

Pope urges help for stranded migrants

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis yesterday called on the international community to help migrants crossing the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, thousands of whom have been stranded on boats with dwindling supplies.

"I continue to follow with profound worry and pain in my heart the stories of many refugees in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea," Francis said to crowds who had gathered for his Pentecost Sunday address in St. Peter's Square in the Vatican.

A migrant crisis has flared up in Southeast Asia as Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Myanmar and Bangladesh trying to escape poverty at home become prey to human traffickers.

After Thailand cracked down on the practice, traffickers began abandoning overloaded boats on the open sea rather than trying to smuggle the people through Thailand. The United Nations refugee agency said on Friday some 3,500 are stranded.

Francis said he appreciated the efforts of countries that have agreed to take in people who are facing "severe suffering and danger", but encouraged "the international community to offer them humanitarian assistance".

Malaysia and Indonesia offered to allow the migrants to come on shore temporarily but Thailand has said it would not follow suit.

The Southeast Asian grouping known as Asean has made a point of not pressuring member nations over internal issues such as rights abuses, and in the case of Myanmar's persecuted Rohingya minority, the policy has come back to haunt it.

Three other Asean nations Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand now must contend with a humanitarian crisis involving thousands of Rohingya and Bangladeshis stranded off their shores. After years of ignoring the issue, their chances of using diplomacy to achieve any change in Myanmar's behavior appear bleak.

The crisis is among the 10-nation group's biggest tests since the Vietnam War, both in whether it can protect migrants' lives and to what extent the group can confront one of its members in this case Myanmar. The stakes for Asean are high, given the global attention the crisis is getting and the possibility that many migrants could die if no country takes them in.

"This is a test for Asean, for Asean's sustainability. Its legitimacy will depend on this, and how it is resolved," said Charles Santiago, a Malaysian parliamentarian who is chairman of a regional lawmakers' group pressing for human rights.

Some cracks in the group's bedrock principle of non-interference have appeared.

Malaysian deputy prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin said over the weekend that Myanmar should take responsibility for resolving ethnic tensions with the Rohingya to prevent other members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations from being burdened, according to national news agency Bernama.

Rohingya in Myanmar have been persecuted for years, and only more so since 2011, when a long-ruling junta gave way to a nominally elected government. More than 120,000 Rohingya have fled the country since 2012, as Buddhist mobs killed up to 280 of them and drove tens of thousands from their homes. Those displaced are forced to live in camps



where they can't work, get an adequate education or receive medical care.

In Thailand, leaders have said the migrant crisis isn't their problem but needs to be addressed by the "origin country" without being more specific. Myanmar refuses to even use the word "Rohingya," saying the group illegally immigrated from Bangladesh, though Rohingya have lived in Myanmar for generations.

Myanmar denies it is the source of the crisis.

Foreign ministers from Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, countries where about 3,000 migrants washed ashore in crowded boats in recent weeks have held a meeting last Wednesday in Kuala Lumpur.

But even before the meeting, experts were doubtful the ministers will be too critical of Myanmar, which could serve to only underline Asean's toothless reputation. Most likely, the immediate focus will be on managing the crisis and not getting to the root causes.

Founded in 1967 as an anti-communist bloc in the Cold War era, Asean has taken few steps to address human rights concerns in the vast region of 600 million people. In a charter adopted in 2007, Asean countries committed to uphold international law and human rights but insisted they would not interfere in each other's internal affairs, a loophole that critics say helps member states commit abuses without conse-

quence

Though Rohingya asylum-seekers generally go to other Asean countries particularly Malaysia, Myanmar's neighbors have long tolerated the exodus.

Myanmar is particularly unlikely to respond to any Asean pressure at the moment because it is focused on November elections, said Bridget Welsh, a senior research associate at the Center for East Asia Democratic Studies of National Taiwan University.

"Right now, the politics of Myanmar are domestic, not international," she said. "They're in a holding pattern until elections happen."

Asean Parliamentarians for Human Rights, the group chaired by Santiago, the Malaysian lawmaker, has demanded that Asean abandon its non-interference policy, and last week released a statement saying Myanmar's government must be held accountable for the persecution of the Rohingya.

Santiago believes that Myanmar would be more responsive to pressure from China, the US and other major investors in the country regarding its policies toward the Rohingya.

"It appears that so far, Asean is unable to respond to a humanitarian crisis involving its own people," he said. "But to be fair, let's see what happens over the next two or three days. My only fear is that before a decision can be made, more people will die."

All is fair in love and war

Frenchman makes false bomb alert to delay girlfriend's plane

AFP, Bordeaux

French police have arrested a man who called in a false bomb alert to an airport to delay his girlfriend's flight because she was in danger of missing it, prosecutors said yesterday.

The 33-year-old called the regional airport of Bordeaux-Mérignac in southwestern France on Thursday and told authorities "there is a bomb."

Police immediately sealed off part of the airport to conduct searches. The man was arrested some 20 kilometres away from Bordeaux and taken into custody.

Under police questioning, he admitted calling in the bomb alert and explained he wanted to delay his girlfriend's flight because she was stuck in traffic.

The act of love could be costly, however. Prosecutors told AFP he risks up to two years in prison and a 30,000-euro (\$33,000) fine. He is due to appear in court in Bordeaux.



'Beautiful Mind' John Nash killed in car crash

AFP, New York

Nobel prize-winning US mathematician John Nash, who inspired the film "A Beautiful Mind," was killed with his wife in New Jersey in a car crash, police said yesterday.

Nash, 86, and his 82-year-old wife Alicia were riding in a taxi on Saturday when the accident took place, police Sergeant Gregory Williams told AFP.

The Princeton University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) mathematician is best known for his contribution to game theory -- the study of decision-making -- which won him the Nobel economics prize in 1994.

His life story formed the basis of the Oscar-winning 2001 film "A Beautiful Mind" in which actor Russell Crowe played the genius, who struggled with mental illness.

"Stunned...my heart goes out to John & Alicia & family. An amazing partnership. Beautiful minds, beautiful hearts," Crowe said on Twitter.

NEWSIN brief

Floods kill 35 in China

AFP, Shanghai

Heavy rain which caused mudslides and flooding in southern and central China has left at least 35 people dead and another 13 missing, the official Xinhua news agency reported yesterday. Torrential rain -- the worst for 40 years in some parts of the country -- has hit at least six provinces, according to state

UK opposition to back EU referendum bill

AFP, London

Britain's centre-left opposition Labour party will support Prime Minister David Cameron's proposal for a referendum on European Union membership but will make the case to stay, party leaders told the Sunday Times. Cameron has called for a referendum to be held by 2017 and the plan is due to be

Putin bans 'undesirable' NGOs

BBC ONLINE

The Russian President Vladimir Putin has signed a bill which allows foreign organisations to be banned from operating in the country. The law allows the authorities to prosecute foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or firms designated as "undesirable" on national security grounds. Individuals working for NGOs could face fines or up to six years in prison.

Critics say it is a Kremlin move aimed at stifling dissent. The definition of "undesirable" is open to interpretation, but the Interfax news agency said it would apply to organisations deemed to pose a threat to the "foundations of Russia's constitutional order, defensive capacity