

DEADLY THAI SHRINE BLAST
WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR



AFP, Bangkok

Thai police are searching for a man they believe left a backpack bomb at a Bangkok shrine that exploded amid a crowd of worshippers, killing 20 people and wounding more than 100 others. No one has claimed responsibility for Monday's attack, which occurred at the Erawan shrine in one of the Thai capital's popular tourism and upscale shopping districts.

The suspected bomber
The first glimpse came a day after the blast when police disclosed grainy security footage of a man casually walking into the shrine with a backpack on. He sits on a bench close to some iron railings that surround the shrine, puts the rucksack under a bench and slowly walks away while apparently looking at his smartphone. Three minutes later a bomb explodes in that exact spot. Yesterday the authorities released a detailed digital sketch of the suspect gleaned from higher quality CCTV footage which has not been released. A court Wednesday issued an arrest warrant for an unnamed 'foreign man'.



Was he acting alone?
Police are increasingly confident the man seen on Monday night must have had accomplices, both to build the devices and plan the attack. "It's a network," national police chief General Somyot Poompanmonong told reporters yesterday. "We believe there must be people helping him, Thai people." Police believes "at least three people" were involved in the plot.

Who to blame for the attack?
Many groups have been discussed as potential culprits, but security experts say there are strong reasons to discount each and are baffled over who is responsible.

Political rivals: Thailand is amidst a political crisis. But experts say neither side, either the military backed elites or ousted Thai Peu party, had much to gain by launching an attack of Monday's scale, risking opprobrium from the Thai public.
Local Muslim insurgents: Insurgents are fighting for greater autonomy in the country's three Muslim-majority states bordering Malaysia annexed by Thailand a century ago. More than 6,400 people -- mostly civilians -- have died in the last

decade of conflict there. But there are no indications Muslim rebels have suddenly taken their localised fight beyond southern Thailand.

Uighurs: Some Thai media outlets have pointed a finger of suspicion at militants from China's Uighur minority. Last month Thailand forcibly repatriated more than 100 Uighur refugees to China. But Uighur groups are not known to have ever carried out an attack outside China.

The Islamic State group: ISIS networks usually claim credit swiftly for their attacks. So far they have made no claims.

What about the second attack?
On Tuesday, shortly after 1:00 pm, one or more people threw an explosive device from a bridge into a canal near the busy Saphan Taksin Skytrain station. No one was harmed. Police have yet to decide whether the two incidents are linked. Colonel Kamthorn Ouichareon, head of Bangkok's bomb squad, told reporters both devices were "exactly the same".

Lanka PM warns against return to divisive politics

AFP, Colombo

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe yesterday urged Sri Lanka's parties to work together as he began forming a new government backed by minority Tamils after a surge in support for his reform-driven agenda in parliamentary elections.

Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) more than doubled its seats in parliament in Monday's polls, easily beating the party of Mahinda Rajapakse and dashing the former president's hopes of returning to power.

Speaking to reporters yesterday, Wickremesinghe called for unity in a country still riven by the scars of a decades-long civil war that pitted Tamil separatists against the army.

"I want everyone to come together now, think of the country, think of the people," he said on the lawns of his official residence in Colombo.

"We can achieve unity in this country... I don't think anyone can opt out. No one can go back to divisive politics. We will not allow that."

He will be sworn in as prime minister this

week after his UNP won 106 seats in the 225-member house, up from about 40 in the previous election.

The number falls short of a majority, but a pledge of "issue-based" support from the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which holds the balance of power with 16 seats, will allow the party to carry out promised political and economic reforms.

Wickremesinghe wants to establish independent commissions to run the police, the public service and the judiciary and transfer much of his executive powers to parliament.

Rajapakse, whose United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) came second in Monday's poll with 95 seats, will sit on the opposition benches after conceding Tuesday that his "dream of becoming prime minister has faded away".

Wickremesinghe's UNP has said it will investigate allegations that some 40,000 Tamils were killed by government forces under Rajapakse's command in 2009 during the final stages of the war against Tamil separatists.



UN chief urges restraint after Kashmir clashes

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Tuesday urged India and Pakistan to show restraint following clashes in the disputed region of Kashmir that have caused deaths on both sides.

Ban said an upcoming meeting of security chiefs on August 23-24 could help bolster dialogue between the two countries, which have fought three wars, two of them over Kashmir.

Ban expressed "serious concern about the recent escalation of violence" and urged both India and Pakistan "to exercise maximum restraint and take all feasible steps to ensure the protection of civilians."

India and Pakistan often accuse each other of violating a 2003 ceasefire agreement. Kashmir has been claimed in full by both, since the two countries gained independence from UK in 1947.

HOW DID MOSUL FALL TO ISIS?
Probe finds gross mismanagement

AFP, Baghdad

Top Iraqi officials ignored ample warnings of an impending attack on the second city of Mosul and grossly mismanaged the ensuing crisis that saw jihadists seize it, a parliamentary report obtained by AFP says.

The Islamic State group's capture of Mosul in June 2014 could have been avoided if senior officers and officials had acted competently and paid attention to multiple detailed intelligence reports warning of the attack, the inquiry found.

The report names a number of top officials, including ex-premier and now-vice president Nuri al-Maliki, as responsible for the fall of the city in Nineveh province.

"Those who were informed about the security situation in the province knew... that this situation would surely happen," said the report, the product of a parliamentary inquiry that has been referred to the judiciary for possible legal action.

"All the information clearly indicated that," said the report, which has not been publicly released. "The only surprise was the speed with which the military units collapsed."

Maliki did not have an accurate assessment of the danger in Nineveh because he relied on "misleading reports" he did not bother to confirm, and left it up to commanders to



A man prepares to throw a burning tire as farmers protest in front of the prefecture in Saint-Lo, northwestern France early yesterday. The farmers say their livelihoods are threatened by low prices of their produces.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Suicide bomber kills 16 in Syria

AFP, Beirut

A suicide bomber killed at least 16 people on Wednesday in an attack on Kurdish security forces in northeastern Syria claimed by the Islamic State jihadist group, a monitor said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the blast in the city of Qamishli killed 10 members of the Kurdish forces, called the Asayish, and six civilians.

Bodies recovered from Papua plane crash site

AFP, Jayapura

The first bodies of 54 people killed when a plane went down in eastern Indonesia were carried from the remote crash site yesterday after bad weather hampered efforts to airlift them. The 17 bodies arrived at the settlement of Oksibil, the intended destination of the ATR 42-300 plane, after a gruelling, hours-long journey.

US regulators okay 'female Viagra'

AFP, Washington

US regulators Tuesday approved the first "female Viagra," a drug known as Addyi that works on the brain to boost younger women's libido if they have lost interest in sex. Made by North Carolina-based Sprout Pharmaceuticals, Addyi, also known as flibanserin, received the nod from the US Food and Drug Administration, on the condition that extra care is taken to ensure women do not take it with alcohol due to the risk of serious side effects.

US, Britain push for UN sanctions on S Sudan

AFP, United Nations

The United States and Britain pushed for UN sanctions against South Sudan's government Tuesday, over its failure to sign a peace deal to end a brutal two-year civil war. South Sudan rebel chief Riek Machar met a Monday deadline to sign the power-sharing agreement, but President Salva Kiir is yet to sign it. Sudan government on Tuesday called the deal a 'sellout' peace proposal.

Japan should refrain from saying sorry

AFP, Tokyo

Japan should stop apologising for its war record, according to a majority of voters surveyed in a poll published yesterday. The poll published by Yomiuri newspaper found 63 percent of those surveyed agreed that Japan should refrain from saying sorry in future, while 27 percent said it should continue.



ISIS beheads Palmyra archaeologist

AFP, Beirut

The Islamic State group has beheaded the 82-year-old retired chief archaeologist of Palmyra, who refused to leave the ancient city when the jihadists captured it, Syria's antiquities chief said. A Unesco World Heritage site famed for well-preserved Greco-Roman ruins, Palmyra was seized from government forces in May amid fears ISIS might destroy its priceless heritage as it had done in other parts of Syria and Iraq.

Syrian antiquities chief Maamoun Abdul Karim told AFP he had urged Khaled al-Asaad to leave Palmyra, but he had refused.

Abdul Karim said Asaad was executed Tuesday afternoon in Palmyra, in central Homs province.

"He was the head of antiquities in Palmyra for 50 years and had been retired for 13 years," Abdul Karim said. He hailed Asaad as a leading expert on the ancient history of the city, which grew from a caravan oasis first mentioned in the second millennium BC.

Photos purporting to show Asaad's body tied to a post in Palmyra were circulated online by ISIS supporters. It accused him of being an apostate and a regime loyalist for representing Syria in conferences abroad with "infidels", as well as being director of Palmyra's "idols". Karim said Asaad's body had been hung in the city's ancient ruins after being beheaded.

\$100 for a nat'l ID!

Pakistan probes claims that officials issued IDs to militants for money

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani authorities are investigating officials at the national identity database for allegedly issuing ID cards to militants, including some linked to al-Qaeda, in return for bribes as small as \$100.

The country's main spy service, ISI, uncovered the alleged corrupt practices at the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) during ongoing anti-terrorism operations, according to official documents.

"It has been found that many NADRA officials are involved in facilitating miscreants and terrorists in obtaining fake identity," said ISI correspondence seen by AFP.

Adnan El Shukrijumah, a senior al-Qaeda leader wanted by the US over a 2009 plot to attack the New York subway system, was among those who obtained a Pakistani ID card by bribing officials, the documents said.

The intelligence probe has named about 40 NADRA officials involved in issuing the fake paperwork in Karachi, including a retired army brigadier and a retired colonel.

Several dozen Chinese nationals and Malaysians were also issued Pakistani ID cards, with NADRA officials taking bribes of 10,000 to 20,000 rupees (\$100-200) in return.

Sources said that NADRA offices in other cities had also issued ID cards corruptly, including Lahore, in the east, and Dera Ismail Khan, near the Afghan border.

Gunfire, blast hit Turkey tourist site

AFP, Istanbul

Gunfire and a percussion bomb blast were heard outside the Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul, one of Turkey's main tourist attractions which also houses offices of the prime minister, reports said yesterday.

Two suspects carrying long range weapons and a bomb were later caught by police in the vicinity of the German consulate nearby, sources reported. There were no reports of fatalities or injuries and no group claimed responsibility so far.

Meanwhile, 8 Turkish soldiers were killed yesterday in a bomb attack on their vehicle in the south-east blamed on the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the army said.

'Fighting climate change religious duty to Muslims'

Islamic scholars urge leaders to cut use of fossil fuel

BBC ONLINE

The Islamic Climate Declaration says that the world's 1.6bn Muslims have a religious duty to fight climate change.

It urges politicians to agree a new treaty to limit global warming to 2C, "or preferably 1.5 degrees."

The Declaration asks Muslims, in the words of the Quran, "not to strut arrogantly on the Earth".

Drafted at an international symposium in Istanbul, the Declaration calls for "all people, leaders and businesses ...to commit to 100% renewable energy".

It also argues for increased financial support for communities vulnerable to climate change.

The Declaration calls on the rich countries, to recognise their "moral obligation to reduce consumption so that the poor may benefit from what is left of the Earth's non-renewable resources".

The call has been supported by religious leaders including the Grand Muftis of Uganda and Lebanon, the president of Indonesia's major body of religious scholars as well as environmental groups and government officials from Morocco and Turkey. But critics have argued that the Declaration is not truly representative of Islam with some of the biggest Islamic nations not taking an active part in supporting the call.

The Declaration comes in the wake of Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment and climate change, which was seen as a significant call for Catholics to engage on the issue of global warming.

The authors of the Declaration say that it will be available in mosques and madrassas around the world.

They hope that it will influence political leaders in Muslim countries to become more fully involved in global attempts to deliver a new treaty on climate change, expected to be signed in Paris in December.

Putin takes a plunge

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin burnished his action man image on Tuesday by diving down in a mini-submarine to explore a shipwreck off the coast of the Crimea peninsula that Moscow seized from Ukraine last year.

Putin, wearing a beige pantsuit, plunged down to a depth of 83 metres seated alongside the pilot in the glass-bubble cabin of the Dutch-made vessel.

"83 metres is a pretty substantial depth," Putin told journalists in televised comments after the dive. "It was interesting."

The Kremlin strongman went underwater to view the Byzantine-era wreck-age in the Black Sea off Crimea that included a trove of 10th century pottery.

The remains were discovered off the coast of Sevastopol by Russian divers earlier this year.

Putin has become known for his eye-catching stunts during his 15 years in charge of Russia, that have included flying with cranes, riding topless on horseback and darting an endangered tiger.

In 2009 he dove down around 1,400 metres to the bottom of the world's deepest lake Baikal in another mini-submarine. Putin also hopped into another miniature submersible in 2013 to take in a 19th century naval frigate shipwreck on



'BOMBS MIGHT HAVE BEEN BETTER THAN THIS'

Refugees contemplate at Kos, Greece after evading death at home, crossing a treacherous sea

CNN ONLINE

As dawn breaks on the Greek holiday island of Kos, new visitors arrive in their hundreds; but they aren't stepping down onto the tarmac from a freshly-landed plane, instead they're tumbling out of tiny inflatable dinghies, directly onto the beach.

These are not tourists, but refugees. And instead of looking forward to enjoying a fortnight in the sun, they're preparing to camp out in parks and on the sand, as they wait for the papers that will allow them to continue their journeys away from war, or out of poverty.

More than 7,000 migrants arrived on Kos in July, according to Doctors Without Borders, and tens of thousands more landed elsewhere in Greece in the same month, stretching the capacity of its cash-strapped government to cope, the UN refugee agency said.

Ibrahim Najjar told CNN he had little choice but to flee his homeland: "There is nothing left for us in Syria. Only destruction."

He wants to travel on to Germany, where he hopes to find work as a waiter: "My younger brother and I made it to Turkey, then we only had money to bring me to Europe, so I had to leave him behind."

Manar, 27, and also from Syria made the hazardous journey to Greece while six months pregnant; she is hoping to be reunited with her

husband in time for the birth of her baby. "My husband made it to Sweden a few months ago. We finally got the money for me to be able to escape Syria too. The journey will be hard but we will be a family there, happy and free. There is no freedom in Syria, only bombs".

Back in June, when fortune seekers came at a 100 per day, the locals were sympathetic, and many are still helping the new arrivals with food, water and toys for the children, but patience is wearing thin.



"I feel sorry for them, how can I not?" said a restaurant owner. "But now no-one comes to my restaurant, why would any tourists come here? The square is crowded, dirty and it smells of urine. It is August, it is high season and I already had to sack a cook and two waiters."

The situations the migrants fled were desperate, but many have been surprised, having survived the sea journey -- what they thought would be the toughest part of their journey -- by

how difficult life on Kos is. Many of them are sleeping rough in areas ill-equipped to deal with the huge numbers of new arrivals.

A spokeswoman for Doctors without Borders told CNN the migrants have no food or water, no shelter, and no proper toilets.

"They have been fleeing their country because of war, because of the bombs, and now they cannot even have a proper toilet. They are saying that maybe the bombs have been better than staying in these conditions."

Everyone on Kos says they feel pity for the migrants, insisting it is system, and not the people who are the problem.

Last week, Kos's mayor, Yiorgos Kirtsis, called on the European Union to provide emergency financial aid to Greece to help it handle the influx.

The Greek government has tried to alleviate the crisis by sending a cruise ship to Kos, on which all new arrivals will be temporarily housed until they can be registered and move on.

Greek authorities say the ship can shelter 2,500 people; but after just a day in the harbour, it is already home to more than 1,000 migrants. And with up to hundreds of new arrivals landing on the island's shores every night, it is unclear how much this solution will do to ease Kos's ongoing crisis.