



An Afghan policeman helps his wounded comrade during gunfire near the Indian consulate in Jalalabad yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Militants attack Indian consulate in Jalalabad

Afghan forces kill all four attackers

AFP, Jalalabad

Gunfire and an explosion echoed yesterday as militants attacked India's consulate in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad, killing three people in the latest in a string of assaults on Indian installations in the country.

No group has so far claimed the brazen attack, which coincided with a Nato change-of-command ceremony that saw US army general John Nicholson take charge of international troops in Afghanistan.

Indian diplomats were not hurt, the foreign ministry in New Delhi said, after a suicide bomber blew himself up at the consulate's entrance and four other attackers breached the compound.

"All four of them were killed by our security forces," government spokesman Attaullah Khogyani told AFP after the two-hour assault ended.

"Three others -- two civilians and one policeman -- were killed and 19 other people were left wounded."

The powerful explosion sent a column of smoke rising in the sky and blew out windows of nearby buildings, as Afghan troops hauled away bodies from the area littered with charred debris.

The attack highlights the worsening security situation in Afghanistan as Taliban insurgents step up nationwide attacks and Islamic State jihadists make inroads in the volatile east.

"There is still much work to be done. We now find ourselves at an inflection point in our campaign," outgoing Nato commander General John Campbell told reporters in Kabul.

"(Afghan security forces) have come far but they still need our help. (Their) desire to improve and their resilience warrants our continued support in the critical years ahead."

Yesterday's assault was reminiscent of a 25-hour gun and bomb siege near the Indian consulate in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif in January.

Meanwhile, a faction of the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility yesterday for a roadside bombing that killed two Pakistani employees of a US consulate.

The Jamaat-ur-Ahrar said it detonated the remote-controlled explosive device on Tuesday in the Mohmand agency of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), about 170 km (105 miles) from the capital, Islamabad.

RACE TO WHITE HOUSE Lessons learned from Super Tuesday

AFP, Washington

The "Super Tuesday" contests showed Clinton reclaiming her mojo against Bernie Sanders. It was a big night for Donald Trump, too, but what will the establishment do about it? Here are four lessons learned from the events of "Super Tuesday."

TRUMP MAY BE UNSTOPPABLE

The billionaire businessman at the center of the Republican race cleaned up Tuesday night, winning seven of the 11 states at stake for his party, including the key swing state of Virginia.

"It's awfully close to inevitable" for Trump winning the nomination, said professor Dante Scala at the University of New Hampshire.

The longer the race goes, the more difficult it will be to oust Trump. If he obtains 1,237 out of the total 2,472 delegates, he clinches the nomination.

RUBIO FAILS TO SHINE

Republican leaders may have thrown their weight behind Senator Marco Rubio as the antidote to Trump, but Tuesday's results confirmed what millions of voters felt in their gut: it was too little, too late.

After spending the past week brutally attacking Trump, scooping up major endorsements, and presenting his case as the mainstream candidate, Rubio finished a disappointing third-place on the night, behind Trump and Cruz.

The last state to report its voting results, Alaska way out west, went to Cruz, for his third win of the day. Many have laid the debacle at the foot of the Grand Old Party.

BLOCKING THE DONALD

The Republican Party has been scrambling to prevent a Trump nomination, but nothing has worked. Now it's crunch time.

Some Republicans, notably Senator Ben Sasse, have suggested either a third party or independent run against Trump. Others point to party operatives potentially altering the rules of the convention in order to prevent a Trump takeover.

"There's a danger here. If Republicans go after him, they're destroying their own nomination," strategist Frank Luntz told CBS.

CLINTON REGAINS PRE-EMINENCE

"By the end of tonight, we are going to win many hundreds of delegates," Senator Bernie Sanders told his supporters, noting there were still another 35 states to vote after Super Tuesday.

Even though he won four states Tuesday, the message from Sanders, who has based his campaign on ending economic inequality, fell flat among a crucial Democratic bloc: minority voters.

More than 80 percent of African-Americans voted for Hillary in southern states, exit polls showed. And in Texas, two-thirds of Hispanic Democrats voted for her.

Clinton also handily won among women, who represent more than half of the Democratic electorate. Altogether, Clinton has won 11 of the 16 primary races to date and holds a substantial delegate lead.

Powerful quake hits Indonesia

Tsunami warning issued

AFP, Padang

A powerful and shallow earthquake yesterday struck off Indonesia's Sumatra island, sending panicked residents rushing from their homes in a region hit hard by quakes and tsunamis in the past.

Local authorities issued a tsunami warning but said it was unlikely to be severe. The 7.8 magnitude under-sea quake struck at a depth of 10 kilometres at about 6:50 pm, the US Geological Survey said.

The epicentre was several hundred kilometres from the Mentawai Islands, a small island chain southwest of the country's main western island of Sumatra.

There was panic in some areas, but officials said there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage.

The closest major city was Padang. An AFP journalist there said people ran from their homes and fled to higher ground by motorbike, car or on foot.

Traffic ground to a halt and there was a sense of panic on the streets, the journalist said.

The local BMKG quake-monitoring agency issued a tsunami alert for parts of Sumatra, including West Sumatra, North Sumatra, Aceh, Bengkulu and Lampung.

The small Mentawai archipelago is regularly hit by quakes and in 2010 was devastated by a quake-triggered tsunami that left hundreds dead.

And Aceh on the tip of Sumatra was devastated by a quake-triggered tsunami in 2004. The tsunami killed more than 170,000 people in Indonesia and tens of thousands more in other countries around the Indian Ocean.

BMKG head Andi Eka Sakya said that so far there had been no reports of major damage and the potential for a major tsunami was low.

Huge aid plan for Greece

Macedonia lets in 200 refugees, 10,000 still stranded; Russia, Syria 'weaponising' migration: Nato commander

AGENCIES

The EU yesterday unveiled a 700-million-euro emergency aid plan for Greece and other states hit by the migrant crisis, in what would be the first time humanitarian cash has been used within Europe instead of outside the bloc.

The United Nations has warned of a looming humanitarian crisis as thousands of refugees are stuck in wintry misery at the Greece-Macedonia border after a domino effect of Balkan border closures.

Greece is the main entry point for the 1.13 million migrants who have landed since the start of 2015 in the European Union, which has been divided and weakened by the biggest wave of refugees since World War II, reports AFP.

"No time can be lost in deploying all means possible to prevent humanitarian suffering within our own borders," EU Humanitarian Aid Commissioner Christos Stylianides said as he announced the aid plan.

The funds would be allocated over three years, with 300 million euros (\$325 million) in 2016, and 200 million euros in each of the following years under the plan, which must be approved by member states and the European Parliament.

Meanwhile, the stench of burning plastic hung over the "Jungle" migrant camp yesterday as dozens of riot police moved in for a third day to demolish the shantytown in northern France.

Police, who arrived in about 30 vehicles, set up lines to push back activists, charity workers and the press, but were clearly under orders to go easy on the refugees in the glare of the world's media.

Macedonia yesterday allowed some 200 refugees to cross its border with Greece as 10,000 more were left waiting at the border under miserable conditions, Greek officials said.

It was the first group of Syrians and Iraqis permitted to continue their desperate journey to Europe since dawn on Monday, when another 300 were let through before the frontier was closed.

The senior Nato commander in Europe has said Russia and Syria are deliberately using migration as an aggressive strategy towards Europe. US Gen Philip Breedlove said they were "weaponising" migration to destabilise and undermine the continent, reports BBC.

He also suggested that criminals, extremists and fighters were hiding in the flow of migrants.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) said nearly 129,500 migrants had arrived by sea so far in 2016, plus another 1,545 by land. It said 418 had drowned or were missing.

MIGRANT CRISIS



US astronaut Scott Kelly (R) and Russian cosmonauts Sergei Volkov (C) and Mikhail Korniyenko, surrounded by ground personnel, rest shortly after landing near the town of Dzhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, yesterday. Kelly and Korniyenko have touched down on Earth after almost a year in space. Their 340-day mission aboard the International Space Station is twice the length of a normal stay. Their extended tour is part of an effort to study the effects of long-duration spaceflight on the body. PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN brief

UNSC adopts tough N Korea sanctions

REUTERS, United Nations

The United Nations Security Council yesterday unanimously adopted a resolution that dramatically expands existing UN sanctions on North Korea in response to its Jan 6 nuclear test, a measure that was largely negotiated by Washington and Beijing. Under the new sanctions, all cargo going to and from North Korea must be inspected and N Korean trade representatives to be added to a UN blacklist.

Israeli army shoot, kill 2 Palestinian attackers

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli forces shot and killed two Palestinian assailants who infiltrated into a West Bank settlement and attacked an Israeli, the military said yesterday. Witnesses said the Palestinians were armed with a knife and clubs and forced their way into a home in the Eli settlement. The military said the forces opened fire "upon the significant threat to the people of the commu-

JNU row: 'Two of seven videos manipulated'

THE HINDU ONLINE

Forensic probe of a set of video clippings of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) event, ordered by the Delhi government, has found that two videos were "manipulated" where voices of persons not present in the clips were added. Out of the seven videos sent by the Delhi government to the Hyderabad-based Truth Labs, two were found to be tampered, sources said.

Rohingya left behind by election gains: UN

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's persecuted Rohingya continue to languish in "dreadful conditions" with children dying because they are refused healthcare, the UN has warned, adding that the Muslim minority risked being forgotten in the afterglow of recent elections. The comments were made by a senior UN official following a visit to western Rakhine state.

Two Tibetans set themselves on fire

AFP, Beijing

Two Tibetans -- a monk in China and a teenager in India -- set themselves on fire on the same day to protest Beijing's ironclad control of the Himalayan region, a rights group and reports said yesterday. Kalsang Wangdu self-immolated in front of his monastery in a Tibetan area of Sichuan province on Monday, reported Radio Free Asia (RFA), which is funded by the US government.

Release of journos is 'defeat' for Erdogan

Says editor-in-chief of Turkish newspaper

REUTERS, Istanbul

The release of two prominent Turkish journalists following a ruling by Turkey's top court that their rights had been violated is a "clear defeat" for President Tayyip Erdogan, one of them said yesterday.

Can Dundar, the editor-in-chief of opposition newspaper Cumhuriyet, and his colleague Erdem Gul were freed on Friday after a ruling from the constitutional court.

Erdogan has said he does not respect the court's decision.

The two journalists, who still face trial and potential life sentences, were arrested in November and charged with intentionally aiding an armed terrorist organisation and publishing material in violation of state security.

Their detention drew international condemnation and raised concerns about media freedom in Turkey, which aspires to join the European Union.

Cumhuriyet infuriated Erdogan last year after it published photos, videos and a report it said showed intelligence officials trucking arms to Syria in 2014.

Erdogan cast the newspaper's coverage as part of an attempt to undermine Turkey's global standing and has said the case is not about press freedom but about espionage.

"Erdogan is having trouble accepting the ruling because this was a clear defeat for him. We have a president who is not accustomed to defeat," Dundar said at a news conference.

Meanwhile, Turkey's Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said yesterday it would be wrong to let the constitutional court's decision to free two journalists, who are facing life in prison on charges of aiding a terrorist organisation, affect their trial.



Pakistan rules out change in nuke policy

PTI, Washington

Pakistan yesterday ruled out any change in its "dynamic" policy of increasing its nuclear weapons, as it dismissed the US' request in this regard, citing India's military modernisation.

A day after Secretary of State John Kerry asked Pakistan to review its policy of increasing its nuclear weapons stockpile, Sartaj Aziz, foreign affairs advisor to the Prime Minister, conceded that the nuclear issue was one of the areas of differences between the US and Pakistan.

"Globally, all the international agencies and the US have acknowledged that Pakistan has developed a very good system for the safety for export control, and command and control system," Aziz said during an interaction at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Syria ceasefire at stake

Regime forces open new battle with rebels

AGENCIES

Syrian government forces launched an attack yesterday to capture a rebel-held hill in north-western Syria, a rebel official and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported, an expansion of operations that have continued in that area despite a deal to cease fighting.

Rebels said the assault on Kabani hill in the province of Latakia was supported by Russian air strikes. Both the government and rebels have accused each other of violating the truce, which came into effect on Saturday. The agreement does not include Islamic State or the Nusra Front, an al Qaeda-linked group that has a wide presence in northwestern Syria.

The hill overlooks the rebel-held town of Jisr al-Shughour in neighbouring Idlib province, and the Ghab Plain, where rebel advances last year were seen as a growing threat to President Bashar al-Assad.

"The regime and militias are trying to storm (the hill) under very fierce Russian air cover and artillery fire," said Fadi Ahmad, spokesman for the First Coastal Division, a group fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said yesterday a ceasefire agreement in Syria has been violated 31 times over the past three days. She did not say who had broken the tentative truce between Syrian government forces and opposition rebels, reports Reuters.

A senior Syrian opposition official said yesterday dates for a resumption of United Nations-backed Syria peace talks remained hypothetical as long as the current truce does not fulfil its humanitarian demands.

Jordan's security services said yesterday they had thwarted a plot by IS militants to blow up civilian and military targets, in one of the US ally's largest sweeps in years against hardline sleeper cells. The security services located the militants, who were carrying suicide belts, in a hideout in the northern city of Irbid near the Syrian border, they said

DEVELOPMENTS

- Truce violated 31 times in past 3 days: Russia
- Syria opposition terms dates for peace talks as "hypothetical"
- Jordan operation near border foils IS attacks