



# Top separatist leader flees in India jail break

AFP, New Delhi

At least 10 armed men disguised as policemen attacked a high security prison yesterday and freed a top Sikh militant commander and four others in India's Punjab state, officials said.

The attackers travelled in cars and stormed Nabha Jail after stabbing a guard at the main gate and firing rounds of live ammunition before fleeing with the inmates. Two more guards were injured in the attack in Patiala district.

Police identified one of the fugitives as Harminder Singh Mintoo, chief of the Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF), a militant group fighting for a separate Sikh homeland in Punjab.

Mintoo was arrested in 2014 and is on trial for "terror attacks and funding". The four others are part of a local criminal gang and were on trial for murder.

Unconfirmed local media reports said the attackers numbered around 20 and that six prisoners had escaped in the attack.

A senior police officer said the swift assault took guards by surprise as the attackers moved quickly through the complex, indicating they knew the jail layout.

Four officials, including the Punjab prison chief and jail superintendent, have either been suspended or sacked because of the jailbreak, authorities said.

A reward of 2.5 million rupees (\$36,000) has been offered for information on the escaped prisoners.

Punjab was in the grip of insurgency for almost three decades since the 1970s after several Sikh groups launched an armed campaign for an independent Sikh country.

# Hundreds flee amid Aleppo blitz

## Reports say civilians flock into govt-held areas as regime intensifies assault

AFP, Aleppo

Thousands of civilians have fled rebel-held east Aleppo after government forces, determined to retake all of Syria's second city, seized its largest rebel-controlled district and advanced into two other areas.

The capture on Saturday of Masaken Hanano -- which had been the biggest rebel-held district of Aleppo -- was a major breakthrough in a 13-day regime offensive to retake the entire city.

Yesterday, regime forces also took control of two neighbouring areas, Jabal Badra and Baadeen, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights said.

The regime gains came as its aircraft pounded rebel positions and amid heavy clashes between the opposition and forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.

Masaken Hanano was the first district the rebels took in the summer of 2012 in a move that divided the city into a rebel-held east and a regime-controlled west.

Around 250,000 civilians trapped under government siege for months in the east have faced serious food and fuel shortages.

The Syrian Observatory said nearly 1,700 civilians had fled over the past 24 hours to government-

held parts of western Aleppo and another 2,500 to the Kurdish-controlled northern district of Sheikh Maksoud.

Rebels are consolidating their positions in Sakhur. Sakhur lies on a stretch of just 1.5 kilometres (less than a mile) between west Aleppo



and Masaken Hanano, now both controlled by the regime.

If the regime did manage to take control of Sakhur, east Aleppo would be split in two from north to south, dealing a further blow to the armed opposition.

The latest regime push comes after

days of intense bombardment on the east, which has been pounded with air strikes, shells and barrel bombs.

On Saturday, dozens of families fled Sakhur and Haidariya as regime raids and artillery fire killed at least 18 civilians in several districts, the Britain-based Observatory said. That

ians and wounding dozens, the Observatory said. Such attacks have killed a total of 27 civilians since the offensive began, among them 11 children.

On Sunday, the Turkish army said that 22 pro-Ankara Syrian rebels were hit by a chemical gas attack from Islamic State group jihadists in northern Syria.

Meanwhile, Israeli forces killed four gunmen linked to the Islamic State group after they fired on soldiers yesterday, the military said, in the first such attack on the occupied Golan Heights.

The Israeli soldiers were targeted with machinegun fire and mortars and they shot back, before the air force bombed the vehicle carrying the gunmen identified as members of "Shuhada al-Yarmouk, an IS affiliate", said spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Peter Lerner.

Syria's war has killed more than 300,000 people and displaced more than half the population.

## SYRIA WAR

### Turkey says rebels hit by IS chemical attack

### Israel kills 4 IS-linked gunmen after Golan attack

## WAR CRIMES ALLEGATIONS

# Lanka seeks Trump's help to drop charges

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena has asked Donald Trump to pressure the UN Human Rights Council to drop war crimes allegations against the country's troops.

Sirisena's office yesterday said he had sent a "special message" to president-elect Trump seeking US intervention at the council, where Sri Lanka faces censure for wartime atrocities.

"I sent a special message to Donald Trump asking him to support us at the (council)," the President said. "I am asking him to help completely clear my country (of war crimes allegations) and allow us to start afresh."

Sirisena said he was making a similar appeal to the incoming UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

However, during a visit by outgoing Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to Sri Lanka last month, Sirisena had asked for more time to investigate war crimes, a sensitive political issue in the majority-Sinhalese country.

Sri Lanka has said it will set up special courts to address issues of accountability, but the promised judicial mechanisms have yet to be established.

There have been allegations that troops killed up to 40,000 minority Tamils during the final battle against separatist Tamil Tiger rebels in 2009, a period when Sirisena's predecessor and strongman leader Mahinda Rajapakse was in power.

Sirisena said he had been able to "tone down" a US-initiated censure resolution soon after defeating Rajapakse and coming to power in January 2015. But he was keen to secure Trump's help to have the allegations against Sri Lanka dropped.

The rights council has asked Sri Lanka to ensure credible investigations into war crimes, pay reparations to victims and their families and ensure reconciliation after 37 years of ethnic war which claimed at least 100,000 lives.

## FOILED IS-LINKED ATTACK ON MALAYSIAN EMBASSY

# Indonesia nabs 3 suspects

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian police arrested a third Islamic State-linked militant yesterday accused of plotting to bomb the Myanmar embassy in Jakarta, as anger grows at a violent military crackdown on Rohingya Muslims.

The militants -- all from a domestic cell affiliated with the Syria-based jihadist group -- had amassed enough explosives to create bombs more powerful than those used in the 2002 Bali bombings, which killed 202 people, police say.

"They were helping plan a bomb attack against parliament, the national police headquarters, the embassy of Myanmar and several television stations," national police spokesman Rikwanto said in a text message.

Anger is growing in Indonesia and other parts of Muslim world over what has been described as the "ethnic cleansing" of Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine state.

Refugees fleeing into Bangladesh say Myanmar's military has been leading a campaign of rape and murder against the homeless ethnic group.

Thousands of Muslims rallied in capitals across Asia on Friday demanding an end to

the violence.

In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, protesters urged their government to cut diplomatic ties with Yangon.

Indonesia's anti-terror unit Wednesday nabbed suspected bomb maker Rio Priatna Wibowo and seized a significant quantity of high-grade explosives from a laboratory west of the capital Jakarta.

His arrest led to the capture of two other suspected militants in different parts of the country, Rikwanto said Sunday.

Bahrain Agam was detained Saturday for allegedly purchasing the explosives while Saiful Bahri was arrested Sunday accused of helping assemble the bombs, said Rikwanto, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

Indonesian police say it remains unclear when exactly the militants planned to carry out their assault, but that they had enough explosives to detonate a blast more than double that which levelled nightclubs in Bali in a fiery inferno.

All three were members of Jemaah Ansar Daulah, a local extremist outfit that has sworn allegiance to IS, Rikwanto said.

# Castro and end of apartheid

AFP, Johannesburg

Southern African leaders paid glowing tributes to the late revolutionary icon Fidel Castro, but if one country will forever be heavily indebted to his leadership of Cuba, it is Angola.

Castro sent tens of thousands of troops when oil-giant Angola became embroiled in a proxy war between the United States and Russia who were vying for Cold War supremacy.

Having gained independence from Portuguese colonial rule in 1975, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) government faced a civil war against the rival National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). Castro supported the MPLA, which was fighting US- and apartheid-backed UNITA.

It culminated in the 1988 Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, in southern Angola, an epic confrontation that sounded the death knell for South Africa's apartheid regime and indirectly led to the independence of Namibia.

He was "an extraordinary figure of transcendent historical importance," Angolan leader Jose Eduardo dos

Santos said of the late Cuban leader.

In a manner similar to Libya, Cuba provided military and ideological support to national liberation movements across the African continent -- around 56,000 of the nearly 400,000 troops Castro sent to Cold War hot spots were in Angola.

The highlight of that deployment



was Cuito Cuanavale, which "was the watershed moment in southern African liberation," said Namibia's President Hage Geingob.

Castro, 14,000 kilometres away in Havana, reportedly gave commands via telephone to his generals on the ground.

While Cuba provided troops, the Soviet Union was responsible for military hardware.

By the time the war ended Angola owed Moscow \$5-billion, but nothing to Cuba. Castro believed "revolution was not something you paid for," said Paula Roque, a University of Oxford specialist researcher on Angola.

Even African countries with lesser links to Cuba, such as South Sudan, had liberation movement leaders trained in Havana.

"Southern Africa freedom is inextricably intertwined with the history of Cuba," said Mac Maharaj, an ANC veteran and fellow inmate of Nelson Mandela, South Africa's late anti-apartheid icon.

After Namibia won independence from South Africa in 1990, shortly after Cuito Cuanavale, apartheid would fall and the African National Congress (ANC), led by the freed Mandela, won its first free elections in 1994.

"Fidel became a huge inspiration. There in an unbreakable bond between Cuba and the southern African struggle," said Maharaj.

It was Castro who received the "loudest applause" from the audience at the inauguration of Mandela as president, according to the late former president's friend in the struggle against apartheid, Ahmed Kathrada.



Supporters of Paraguay's Communist Party gather in Asuncion to pay tribute to Fidel Castro; a woman reacts during a homage ceremony in Venezuela; and students light candles in honour of him in Honduras, a day after his death in Havana.



PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS

# FIDEL CASTRO

## A life in six snapshots

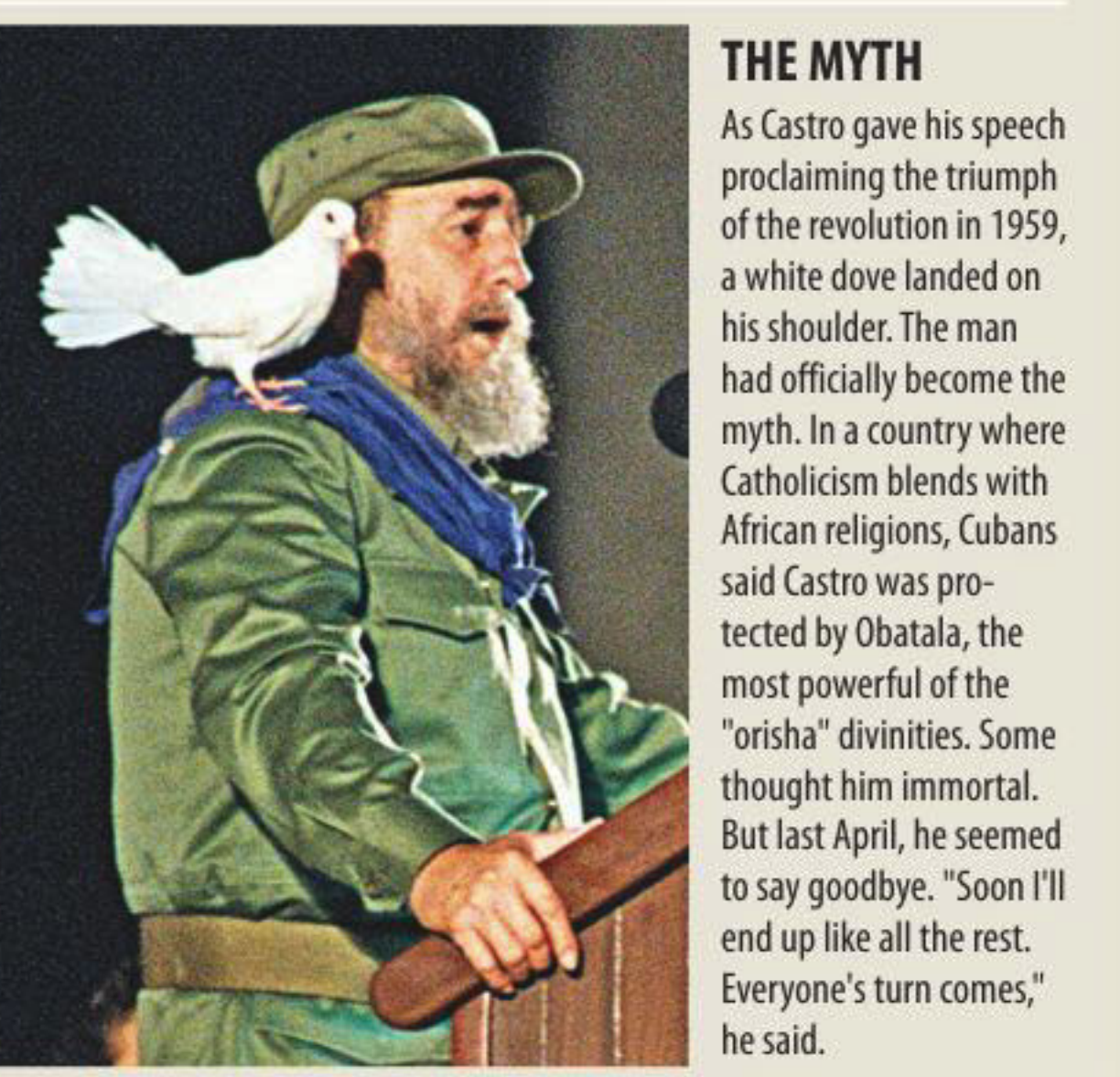
After surviving more than 600 assassination attempts, defying 11 US presidents and shaping half a century of history, Fidel Castro has died at age 90. Here are six snapshots of this magnetic giant of the 20th century, who beat the odds to hang on well into the 21st.

### THE SURVIVOR

No one could have predicted his place in history when he launched his revolutionary career with a botched attack on Cuba's Moncada military barracks in 1953. The 26-year-old lawyer was captured and jailed for the plot, which ended with dozens of rebels killed or executed by dictator Fulgencio Batista's forces. Fast forward six years, and Castro was triumphantly rolling into Havana, having returned from exile to lead a guerrilla army that once numbered just 12 men to defeat Batista and his military of 80,000. The unlikely victory brought the "red menace" of Communism to the United States' doorstep at the height of the Cold War. Alarmed, the US Central Intelligence Agency and Cuban exiles tried to assassinate Castro 634 times, his ex-intelligence chief, Fabian Escalante, has estimated. Castro once confided he nearly always carried his Browning pistol just in case. But he denied reports he wore a bullet-proof vest. "I have a moral vest. It's strong. It has always protected me," he told journalists in 1979, baring his chest to prove the point.

### THE ENEMY

Castro defined himself in opposition to the American "empire," and the resentment lingered to the end. You don't want to be on Castro's bad side. He began his half-century of iron-fisted rule in 1959 by jailing one of his own guerrilla commanders, Huber Matos, for 20 years when he criticized the new regime's turn toward Communism. Many more crackdowns would follow. Human Rights Watch sharply criticized Castro's "highly effective machinery of repression" across the decades: Basic civil and political rights were outlawed, and dissidents were jailed, tortured, executed or forced into exile.



### THE MYTH

As Castro gave his speech proclaiming the triumph of the revolution in 1959, a white dove landed on his shoulder. The man had officially become the myth. In a country where Catholicism blends with African religions, Cubans said Castro was protected by Obatala, the most powerful of the "orisha" divinities. Some thought him immortal. But last April, he seemed to say goodbye. "Soon I'll end up like all the rest. Everyone's turn comes," he said.

### THE SEDUCER

"I was so impressed! I could only look at his face and say, 'I love him,'" says Mercedes Gonzalez, a Cuban admirer who saw him twice in the flesh. With his rugged rebel look and imposing persona, Castro has long fascinated people, and women in particular. Officially, Castro was married twice and fathered seven children by three women. Rumors of secret affairs and more children abounded. But he kept his private life to himself. "Private life, in my opinion, should not be an instrument for publicity or politics," he said in 1992.

### THE UNDERDOG

Castro had a penchant for trying to pull off the seemingly impossible. In 1961, he all but eradicated illiteracy with an ambitious rural education campaign. When an exodus of Cuban exiles left the country with just 3,000 remaining doctors, he vowed to make the island a "medical superpower." Today it has 88,000 doctors and one of the most respected health systems in the world. Other projects were less successful. In 1970, with Cuba's economy strangled by a US embargo, he ordered a nationwide campaign to harvest a record-shattering 10 million tons of sugar. Despite mobilizing Cubans en masse to work the fields, the campaign failed. Cubans are all too used to "Fidel Plans" that never quite pan out, like the ones to raise buffalo or turn Cuba into a world-class cheese producer despite a shortage of cows.

### THE ICON

Castro was a hero to revolutionary movements and independence struggles worldwide. He sent 386,000 troops to fight in spots where the Cold War turned hot: Angola, Ethiopia, the Congo, Algeria and Syria. And he backed leftist guerrillas across Latin America. The military results were mixed. But the symbolism was

powerful. "He's the most important personality of the 20th century in the Western hemisphere," said Ivan Marquez, second-in-command of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Castro's revolution ignited "the desire to struggle, to take to the mountains, to grab a rifle and try to change things," Marquez told AFP in an interview before Castro's death.

SOURCE: AFP

# Poaching: African elephants being born without tusks

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

An increasing number of African elephants are now born tuskless because poachers have consistently targeted animals with the best ivory over decades, fundamentally altering the gene pool.

In some areas 98 per cent of female elephants now have no tusks, researchers have said, compared to between two and six per cent born tuskless on average in the past.

Almost a third of Africa's elephants have been illegally slaughtered by poachers in the past years to meet demand for ivory in Asia, where there is still a booming trade in the material, particularly in China. About 144,000 elephants were killed between 2007 and 2014, leaving the species at risk of extinction in some areas. Meanwhile those African elephant populations that do survive could become virtually tuskless, like their Asian cousins, researchers have warned. Joyce Poole is head of the charity Elephant Voices and has been tracking developments

in the species for more than 30 years. She told The Times she had seen a direct correlation between the intensity of poaching and the percentage of females born without tusks in some of the herds she monitored.

In Gorongosa National Park in Mozambique, 90 per cent of elephants were slaughtered between 1977 and 1992, during the country's civil war. Dr Poole said that because poachers disproportionately targeted tusked animals, almost half the females over 35 years of age have no tusks, and although poaching is now under control and the population is recovering well, they are passing the tuskless gene down to their daughters: 30 per cent of female elephants born since the end of the war also do not have tusks.

The most striking example is in the Addo Elephant National Park in South Africa, where 98 per cent of female elephants have no ivory. Big game hunters there had killed all but 11 elephants by the time the park was created in 1931. Four of the eight surviving females were tuskless.



# Clashes kill 55 in Uganda; king held

AFP, Kampala

Ugandan police stormed the palace of a tribal king and arrested him yesterday after fierce clashes between security forces and a separatist militia they believe is linked to him killed 55, police said.

Heavy fighting broke out Saturday in the western town of Kasese, home to King Charles Wesley Mumbere of the Rwenzururu kingdom, when his royal guards attacked patrolling security forces, killing 14 police officers and 41 militants, said police spokesman Andrew Felix Kaweesi.

President Yoweri Museveni phoned the king yesterday morning and ordered him to disband the guards, who are believed to be part of a militia agitating for the creation of an independent republic straddling Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

"We took time to talk to the king to get those people out but the king was non-compliant. The only option was to storm the palace and get those people out and get him out for his own security and safety," Kaweesi told AFP.

"He has to explain his involvement in these incidents. He will be charged with inciting violence and brought to Kampala."

Violence has been simmering in the region all week, with four militants killed when they attacked a police post on Thursday, a police spokeswoman told AFP.

The Rwenzururu kingdom is a traditional monarchy based near the Rwenzori mountains which straddle Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, of the Bakonzo people -- with supporters among those who share the same culture and language in the DRC.