



A woman reacts after a minutes' silence at London Bridge in London on June 6, 2017, in memory of the victims of the June 3 terror attacks. After Britain's third terror assault in less than three months, Prime Minister Theresa May came under mounting pressure over security just two days ahead of elections. Story on page 16. PHOTO: AFP

No funeral prayer

130 British imams refuse to perform last rites of London Bridge terrorists

AGENCIES

A group of 130 imams and religious leaders have refused to perform the traditional Islamic funeral prayer for the London Bridge attackers.

The leaders said they would not carry out the ritual that is normally performed for every Muslim, regardless of their actions.

In a statement on social media, the group said: "Consequently, and in light of other such ethical principles which are quintessential to Islam, we will not perform the traditional Islamic funeral prayer over the perpetrators and we also urge fellow imams and religious authorities to withdraw such a privilege.

The statement added: "This is because such indefensible actions are completely at odds with the lofty teachings of Islam."

Religious leaders of all backgrounds have condemned the attack which killed seven and injured 47 on Saturday evening when three men rammed a rental van

into pedestrians then randomly stabbed revellers in bars and restaurants near Borough Market.

A panel of speakers at the East London Mosque said they would work to combat extremists' "twisted narrative and their perversion" of religion.

The statement from imams came as more heroics of the victims came forward. The third victim of the London Bridge terror attack has been named as Kirsty Boden, an Australian nurse who "ran towards danger" to help people during the deadly onslaught.

The 28-year-old is among the victims when three terrorists rammed a white van into people in the London Bridge area, before exiting the vehicle and stabbing people at random in Borough market.

Ms Boden worked at Guy's Hospital in London Bridge.

The three terrorists carrying out Saturday night's attack were shot dead by police within eight minutes of the alarm being raised.



Kirsty Boden

WAR ON IS IN SYRIA

Offensive to liberate Raqqa begins

AFP, Hazima

US-backed fighters broke into the city of Raqqa yesterday as they launched a final assault to drive the Islamic State group from its de facto Syrian capital.

The attack on the northern city at the heart of IS's Syrian territory has been seven months in the making and is backed by air support, military advisers and weapons deliveries from the US-led coalition.

Seized by the jihadists in early 2014, Raqqa became notorious as a hub for IS's operations in Syria, Iraq and beyond.

The city has been the scene of some of IS's worst atrocities, including gruesome executions, public displays of bodies and the trafficking of women.

It was one of the twin pivots of IS's so-called "caliphate," with Mosul in neighbouring Iraq -- where US-backed forces are also bearing down on the jihadists.

After months sealing off access routes to the city from the east, north and west, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces yesterday entered city limits for the first time.

"Our forces entered the city of Raqqa from the eastern district of Al-Meshleb," SDF commander Rojda Felat told AFP, adding that clashes were also raging on the city's northern outskirts.

"They are fighting street battles inside Raqqa now, and we have experience in urban warfare," she said.

The advance was backed by heavy air strikes by the US-led coalition, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The coalition began its air campaign against IS in Iraq in August 2014, expanding its operations to Syria the following month.

The coalition appears keen to expel IS from its last major urban bastions before the "caliphate" turns three years old later this month.

NEWS IN brief

US warns UN Rights Council over Israel

BBC ONLINE

The US yesterday said it is considering withdrawing from the UN body on human rights, highlighting what it calls a "biased" stance on Israel. UN ambassador Nikki Haley said the US was "looking carefully" at its role on the Human Rights Council. She said it was "hard to accept" the fact that five resolutions had been passed against Israel, a US ally, but none had been considered on Venezuela.



Arundhati Roy releases first novel in 20 years

AFP, New Delhi

Arundhati Roy's eagerly-awaited second novel goes on sale yesterday, two decades after her prize-winning debut "The God of Small Things". Penguin published "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness". Roy became the first Indian woman to win the prestigious Booker Prize with her 1997 work, which sold around 8 million copies and turned the young author into a star of the literary world.

Trump won't block Comey's testimony

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump will not invoke executive privilege to block former FBI Director James Comey's much-anticipated testimony before Congress this week, his first since Trump abruptly fired him early last month. Comey was leading a probe into alleged Russian meddling in last year's US presidential election and possible collusion by Trump's campaign when the president fired him last month.



Macron set for majority in polls: survey

AFP, Paris

Emmanuel Macron's newly formed party is set to win the biggest parliamentary majority for a French president since Charles de Gaulle's 1968 landslide, a survey of voter intentions for the coming legislative elections showed yesterday. With a solid lead with 29.5 percent of the vote in the June 11 first round, LREM would go on to win 385-415 seats out of 577 in the lower house of parliament in a June 18 second round of voting, the poll showed.

'This is the last chance'

Afghan leader issues ultimatum to Taliban as blast toll tops 150

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani issued an ultimatum to the Taliban yesterday, warning them to embrace peace or "face consequences" after announcing that the death toll from last week's devastating truck bombing had passed 150.

Ghani has come under mounting criticism over the bombing, the deadliest in Kabul since 2001, with protests and deadly street clashes roiling the Afghan capital as people incensed by spiralling insecurity call for his government's resignation.

The president made a strong plea for peace at an international conference on Afghanistan attended by around two dozen countries, which was held under tight security as armoured vehicles patrolled the streets and fighter jets roared over the capital.

"We are offering a chance for peace but this is not an open-ended offer," Ghani said. "Time is running out... this is the last chance: take it or face consequences."

The conference, labelled the "Kabul Process", aims to build international

support for ways to restore security in Afghanistan.

Kabul has been on edge since the massive truck bomb last Wednesday ripped through the city's highly fortified diplomatic quarter.

The death toll has jumped to more than 150 people, while over 300 wounded were brought to hospitals, many with burns and amputations, Ghani told the conference.



Rocket lands in Indian envoy's house in Kabul; all safe. Blast kills 7 outside mosque in Herat

"We are a nation of survivors. Terrorists can shed our blood but they cannot break our will," he said.

Ghani offered the Taliban the opportunity to open a representative office, adding that he was flexible about the location of future talks.

The insurgents responded to the conference by firing a rocket at what they claimed was Nato's headquarters. It landed inside the Indian ambassa-

dor's residence and no one was hurt.

Underscoring the growing insecurity, a motorcycle bomb exploded near the Grand Mosque in the western city of Herat, killing seven people and wounding 16 according to the interior ministry.

Ghani has faced growing calls to step down since four people were killed Friday when hundreds of protesters incensed by the truck bombing in Kabul clashed with police, prompting officials to respond with live rounds fired in the air.

The protesters, holding a sit-in for a fifth day yesterday near the bombing site, have also demanded the resignation of security chiefs including national security adviser Hanif Atmar.

The attacks have worsened tensions between rival ethnic groups and raised the prospect of a political crisis.

Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani, who heads the mainly ethnic Tajik Jamiat political group, also called for Atmar's dismissal on Monday. But Ghani, who like Atmar is from the majority Pashtun ethnic group, firmly rejected the demand.

PROTEST DEMANDING DEBT RELIEF

5 farmers shot dead in India

REUTERS, Mumbai

Five Indian farmers were shot dead yesterday at a protest in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, according to news reports, marking an escalation of violence as a rural strike demanding debt relief spread.

The outbreak of discontent in India's heartland farming states of Madhya Pradesh and neighbouring Maharashtra poses a challenge for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has promised to double farmers' incomes over the next five years.

The farmers were shot during a protest in the central city of Mandasaur. The spokesman of one farming union said police had fired on the protesters.

"Police started firing to disperse the crowd. Farmers were not carrying weapons," said Gajendra Tokas of the Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangh, or National Farm Workers' Union, which has called a state-wide strike today.

The state's home minister, Bhupendra Singh, said police had not shot at the protesters, adding: "Anti-social elements in the crowd fired bullets."

Farmers last week started a strike in the state and in western Maharashtra, dumping vegetables and milk on the roads to demand billions of dollars in debt forgiveness and better prices for produce. Farmers blocked highways in both states, which are ruled by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), preventing delivery trucks from reaching city markets.

Two-thirds of India's population of 1.3 billion depend on farming for their livelihood, but the sector accounts for just 14 percent of gross domestic product, reflecting a growing divide between the countryside and increasingly well-off cities.

DIPLOMATIC TENSION IN ME

Muslim Asia caught in the middle after Qatar row

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Non-Arab nations in Asia, such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan, are getting caught in the middle after Saudi Arabia led a clampdown on Qatar, accusing the tiny emirate of supporting pro-Iranian Islamist militants.

Malaysia had rolled out the red carpet for Saudi Arabia's King Salman at the end of February, the first by a Saudi king to Malaysia in more than a decade. Then, the following month, Kuala Lumpur signed a defence cooperation agreement with Qatar.

A source close to the Malaysian government said that the recent efforts to strengthen ties with Qatar, including a visit by the foreign minister last month, will probably now be put on the backburner.

Indonesia has sometimes tried to play a mediating role when inter-Arab tensions have flared. Jakarta's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi received a phone call from Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Monday who wanted to discuss the rift.

Indonesia has called for reconciliation and dialogue in the latest diplomatic clash.

Sunni-majority Pakistan maintains deep links with the establishment in Riyadh, which provided Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif with political asylum after he was ousted in a 1999 military coup.

But with a large Shia minority and a shared western border with Iran, Pakistan has a lot to lose from rising sectarian tensions. In 2015, Pakistan declined a Saudi call to join a Riyadh-led military intervention in Yemen to fight Iranian-allied insurgents.

Pakistan has maintained official silence about the latest rift in the Arab world, loathe to be seen taking sides between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pakistan also has close ties with Qatar itself.

"Pakistan has to act very carefully. In my opinion, there is only one option for Pakistan: to stay neutral," said retired army Brigadier Shaukat Qadir, now an independent risk and security analyst.



Smoke rises after aerial bombings by Philippine Air Force planes on Islamist militant positions in Marawi, on the southern island of Mindanao, yesterday. Inset, people fleeing fighting. Philippines troops found bundles of banknotes and cheques worth about \$1.6 million abandoned by Islamist militants holed up in Marawi City, a discovery the military said was evidence that the fighters were pulling back. PHOTO: AFP

Humankind originated in Mediterranean!

REUTERS, Chirpan

A team of excavators in Bulgaria has resumed a search for fossils of an ape-like creature which may be the oldest-known direct ancestor of man and whose discovery has challenged the central hypothesis that humankind originated in Africa.

The Graecopithecus freybergi, who lived 7.2 million years ago, is known only from a lower jawbone, unearthed in 1944 in Greece, and an isolated tooth, found in 2009 near the Bulgarian town of Chirpan, where excavations have now restarted.

"It would be great to find a whole skeleton but a thigh would also help us a lot," Professor Nikolai Spassov, head of Bulgaria's National Museum of Natural History, told Reuters.

The scientific consensus long has been that humanity's ape-like ancestors, known as hominins, originated in Africa. Until now, the oldest-known hominin was Sahelanthropus, which lived 6-7 million years ago in Chad.

But Spassov hopes new fossils will back up the theory that hominins originated in the Eastern Mediterranean.

"They have most probably migrated to Africa due to climate change," he said.

Top US diplomat in China quits over climate policy

AGENCIES

David Rank, the chargé d'affaires of the US Embassy in Beijing, has left the State Department over the Trump administration's decision to quit the 2015 Paris agreement to fight climate change, a senior US official said on Monday.

A State Department spokeswoman confirmed Rank's departure, but said she was unable to verify Twitter posts that said he resigned as he felt unable to deliver a formal notification to China of the US decision last week to quit the agreement.

Trump's announcement on Thursday that he would withdraw the United States from the Paris climate accord, saying it would undermine the US economy and cost jobs, drew anger and condemnation from world leaders and heads of industry.

India also hit back at Trump, after he accused the country of receiving "billions"

of dollars in return for signing the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

"First of all, there is absolutely no reality [in what Trump alleged]," India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj told reporters Monday. "India signed the Paris agreement not because of pressure from any country nor greed. We signed the agreement because of our commitment to protecting the environment."

Meanwhile, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg submitted a statement to the United Nations on Monday that over 1,000 US governors, mayors, businesses, universities and others will continue to meet the goals of the Paris climate agreement abandoned by Trump last week.

Signatories to the new initiative include 13 Democratic and Republican governors, 19 state attorneys general, over 200 mayors, and CEOs of Fortune 500 companies and small businesses.

FIRST UN OCEAN CONFERENCE

UN chief urges all to save oceans

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Monday urged countries to put aside national gain to save the oceans and avert a "global catastrophe" as he opened the first UN ocean conference.

The five-day meeting is the first bid by the United Nations to address the toughest problems facing our oceans, from coral bleaching and plastic pollution to overfishing and rising seas due to climate change.

"We must put aside short-term national gain, to prevent long-term global catastrophe," Guterres told the gathering at the UN General Assembly. "Conserving our oceans and using them sustainably is preserving life itself."

Guterres raised alarm over the state of the world's oceans, saying pollution, overfishing and climate change are causing severe damage and that "the situation is getting worse."

A recent study showed that plastic could outweigh fish in the seas by 2050 if nothing is done, he said.

Guterres called for concrete steps, from expanding marine protected areas to the management of fisheries, reducing pollution and cleaning up plastic waste.

UN member-states are working on a "call to action" from governments, civil society and businesses that commit to taking steps to clean up the oceans and work preserve what is arguably the Earth's most important resource.

TRUMP'S SNUB TO PARIS DEAL

India hits back at Trump in war of words

Bloomberg delivers US pledge to continue goals to UN