



Rahul Gandhi's car attacked in Gujarat

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi's car was pelted with stones yesterday when he was visiting flood-hit Banaskantha district in Gujarat.

Rahul escaped unhurt in the attack which left the rear window panes of the car broken. Sitting in the front seat, he was travelling with elite Special Protection Guard commandos, some of whom were reportedly injured, said The Indian Express.

Neeraj Badgjar, Banaskantha SP, said a stone was thrown at the car in which Rahul was on his way to the helipad after meeting flood victims at Dhanera.



A picture taken yesterday shows displaced Syrian children, who fled from the Islamic State group's Syrian stronghold of Raqqa, receiving humanitarian aid delivered by Unicef at a temporary camp in the town of Tabqa, about 55 kilometres (35 miles) west of Raqqa. PHOTO: AFP

ANTI-MILITANT CRACKDOWN

Myanmar forces raid Rohingya village

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar security forces fired warning shots during a day-long sweep of a Rohingya village to arrest alleged militants, Aung San Suu Kyi's office said late yesterday, as violence again tremored through Rakhine State.

The northwestern area has been beset by unrest since late last year when Rohingya militants attacked police posts, prompting a months-long bloody military crackdown that the UN believes may amount to ethnic cleansing.

The major part of the military crackdown on the militants ended several months ago.

But the area remains locked down, with sporadic killings by troops and almost daily reports in state media of villagers being murdered and abducted by masked assassins.

Border police began an operation yesterday morning in Out Nan Yar village arresting "six criminals" accused of supporting the militants, according to a statement from the office of State Counsellor Suu Kyi.

Around two dozen officers were surrounded by a hundreds-strong "mob" of villagers armed with rudimentary weapons.

Four of the suspects were freed in the ensuing chaos.

"Police had to fire around 40-50 warning shots as the mob attacked with sling shots, sticks and knives," the statement said, adding military columns were moving into the village as night fell.

Violence in the hard to access wedge of Rakhine closest to Bangladesh has seen tens of thousands of Rohingya flee across the border.

NEWS IN brief

Iraq finds mass grave in former IS-held city

AFP, Habbaniyah

Iraqi troops found a mass grave in the western city of Ramadi containing the bodies of 40 men believed to have been executed by the Islamic State group, officials said yesterday. It is the latest of dozens of such grisly finds made by Iraqi forces since they drove the jihadists out of northern and western Iraq.

India's VP poll today, result in the evening

PTI, New Delhi

Ruling NDA's candidate M Venkaiah Naidu is tipped to be India's next vice president as members of Parliament gear up to cast their ballot today. The name of the next Indian VP will be known this evening after lawmakers cast their ballot during the day in Parliament House.

Australia police blame IS

Say two arrestees also planned poisonous gas plot in a public area

REUTERS, Sydney

An Australian man sent his unsuspecting brother to Sydney airport to catch an Etihad Airways flight carrying a home-made bomb disguised as a meat-mincer built at the direction of a senior Islamic State commander, police said yesterday.

Detailing one of Australia's "most sophisticated" militant plots, police said two men, who have been charged with terror-related offences, also planned to build a device to release poisonous gas in a public area.

High-grade military explosives used to build the bomb were sent by air cargo from Turkey as part of a plot "inspired and directed" by the militant Islamic State group, police Deputy Commissioner National Security Michael Phelan said.

The plot targeted an Etihad Airways flight on July 15 but the bomb never made it past airport security, he said. "This is one of the most sophisticated plots that has ever been attempted on Australian soil," Phelan said.

Police allege that one of the two men charged late on Thursday had

been introduced to Islamic State by his brother, who they said was a senior member of the group in Syria.

Communication between the accused man and Islamic State began around April, police said. Under the instruction of the unidentified Islamic State commander, the men built a "fully functioning IED" (improvised explosive device).

One of the brothers was unaware

FOILED PLANE BOMB PLOT

Home-made bomb disguised as a commercial meat-mincer

Sophisticated plot used high-end explosive

that he was carrying a bomb, disguised as a commercial meat mincer, in his luggage, and tried to check it in at the airport, police said.

"We'll be alleging that the person who was to carry the IED on the plane had no idea they were going to be carrying an IED," Phelan said.

Such a device would work like a large grenade, exploding with enough force to blow a hole in an airplane, even if it

went off in the cargo hold, said Professor Greg Barton, a security expert at Deakin University in Melbourne.

"I think the logic would be that you pack your explosives in and seal it up, and if someone does a quick physical inspection it just looks like what it is, a meat grinder, because it's not electrical or electronic, it's less likely to be suspicious."

Police said there was "a little bit of conjecture" about what happened next, but it appeared one of the accused then left the airport, taking the luggage with him. The man's brother boarded the plane and has not since returned to Australia.

"I want to make it quite clear - it never got near screening. I don't want anyone to suggest that it ... penetrated airport security layers ... because it did not. It didn't go anywhere near it," Phelan said.

Etihad said in a statement yesterday it had been working closely with the Australian investigation.

Police arrested four men last weekend in raids across Sydney, Australia's biggest city. One man has been released, while another is still being held without charge under special counter-terror laws.

Israeli PM suspected of bribery, fraud: police

His former aide turns state's witness in the probe

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's former chief of staff has agreed to give evidence against him on suspicions of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, local media reported yesterday.

"Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's former chief of staff Ari Harow has reached an agreement with the prosecution to turn state's witness in two corruption cases against Netanyahu," the Haaretz newspaper said on its website.

"Former chief of staff Ari Harow signed today a state's witness agreement," public radio said.

There was no official comment on the reports and any leaked details of the case are banned from publication by court order.

US-born Israeli immigrant Harow worked for Netanyahu from 2009-10 and 2014-15, when he stepped down over allegations of corruption.

He has been under investigation for more than two years on suspicion of bribery, breach of trust, conflict of interest and fraud, the media said.

Haaretz said Harow has already been giving investigators information on two of the ongoing investigations into Netanyahu.

One is based on suspicions that the premier unlawfully received gifts from wealthy supporters, including Australian billionaire James Packer and Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan, police said.

Also being probed is a suspicion that Netanyahu sought a secret deal with the publisher of top-selling daily Yediot Aharonot.

The proposed deal, which is not believed to have been finalised, would have seen Netanyahu receive positive coverage in return for him helping scale down the operations of Israel Hayom, Yediot's main competitor.

The investigations have stirred Israeli politics and led to speculation over whether Netanyahu will eventually be forced to step down.

In his 11 years of office, Netanyahu, who last won elections in 2015, has weathered several scandals and police inquiries.

Case 1,000 involves Netanyahu and family members receiving gifts on a regular basis from two businessmen.



Pak PM backs harassment probe against Imran Khan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's new prime minister yesterday backed a parliamentary investigation into allegations of sexual harassment leveled by a female lawmaker against firebrand opposition leader Imran Khan, in a scandal that has gripped the conservative country.

The scandal erupted after Ayesha Gulalai, a National Assembly member from conservative Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, accused Khan and other leaders of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party of sending obscene text messages and promoting a culture of sexism.

The accusations come days after Pakistan's top court disqualified Khan's long-time political nemesis Nawaz Sharif from the premiership on corruption charges, spurring public celebrations from the cricket-returned-politician and his supporters.

Newly-elected Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, seen as a Sharif loyalist,

yesterday backed moves to form a parliamentary committee to investigate the matter after a group of legislators raised the allegations in the house.

"This is an issue concerning the house's integrity -- I will suggest forming a closed-door, special committee to probe the allegations and present its findings in the house," Abbasi told parliament.

In a televised press conference earlier this week Gulalai accused Khan of harassing female leaders in the PTI and resigned from the party.

Gulalai has not released any of the alleged text messages, prompting many in Pakistan to

believe the case may be politically motivated.

Khan batted down the allegations, accusing Sharif's ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of using money to defame political rivals.

"I was astonished to hear that. I suspect that the (PML-N) has used her against me," Khan told broadcaster ARY.



Flames shoot up the sides of the Torch tower residential building in the Marina district, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, early yesterday. Authorities said no casualties were reported from the blaze which erupted in the middle to upper floors of the building, once the tallest residential development in the world. PHOTO: REUTERS

Trump admin goes on attack against leaks

REUTERS, Washington

US Attorney General Jeff Sessions, taking up an issue that has infuriated President Donald Trump, went on the attack against a "culture of leaking" yesterday, saying such leaks were hampering the government's ability to protect the country.

The Justice Department has tripled the number of investigations into unauthorized leaks of classified information and four people have already been charged, Sessions said.

"We are taking a stand," he told reporters as he announced administration efforts to battle what he called "the staggering number of leaks undermining the ability of our government to protect this country."

"This culture of leaking must stop," he said.

Sessions did not immediately give the identities of the four people charged, but said they had been charged with unlawfully disclosing classified information or concealing contacts with foreign intelligence officers. Trump has repeatedly voiced anger over a steady stream of leaks to the media about him and his administration since he took office in January. Some have been related to probes into Russian meddling in the 2016 US presidential election, others have concerned infighting in the White House.

In the latest high-profile leak, the Washington Post published transcripts on Thursday of phone calls that Trump had in the early days of his administration with Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

"No government can be effective when its leaders cannot discuss sensitive matters in confidence or to talk freely in confidence with foreign leaders," Sessions said of that case.

S Korea spies admit poll manipulation

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's spy agency has admitted that it had engaged in a far-reaching attempt to manipulate voters as it sought to help conservatives win parliamentary and presidential elections.

In-house investigators from the National Intelligence Service (NIS) confirmed that the agency's cyber warfare unit organised and operated up to 30 teams for more than two years in the run-up to the 2012 elections, the agency said in a statement late Thursday.

They hired internet-savvy civilians and sought to sway voter opinions through postings on portals and Twitter. "The teams were charged with spreading pro-government opinions and suppressing anti-government views, branding them as pro-North Korean forces' attempts to disturb state affairs", it said.

At the time the country was led by the conservative Lee Myung-Bak, and in the event the December 2012 presidential election was won by his now-disgraced colleague Park Geun-Hye, who defeated liberal Moon Jae-In.

Venezuela showdown looms

President Maduro set to install new assembly as opposition leader transferred to house arrest

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro was set to install a powerful new assembly packed with his allies yesterday, dismissing an international outcry and opposition protests saying he is burying democracy in his crisis-hit country.

The Constituent Assembly, elected last weekend in a vote marred by violence and allegations of fraud, will sit in a chamber in the Legislative Palace in Caracas, where the opposition-controlled legislature is located.

The inaugural session of its 500-plus members -- including Maduro's wife and son -- will take place under high security.

The opposition has called a mass march in the capital against the body, raising fears of violence that could add to a death toll of more than 125 over the past four months.

"Let there be no provocations, nor

should people fall into provocations," Maduro said late Thursday as he assured all was ready for the Constituent Assembly.

The United States, the European Union and major Latin American nations have said they will not recognize the assembly.

The Vatican yesterday urged that the new assembly be suspended, saying it was one of several initiatives that "foment a climate of tension." It also appealed for Venezuelan security forces to show restraint.

Meanwhile, Venezuela's intelligence service unexpectedly transferred a high-profile opposition figure, Caracas mayor Antonio Ledezma, from jail back to house arrest, his family said.

Ledezma and another opposition figure, Leopoldo Lopez, had been taken from their homes to military prison on Tuesday, reversing earlier home detentions.



CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

250 killed in Congo butchery: UN report

AFP, Geneva

The UN yesterday detailed more than 250 "extrajudicial or targeted killings" of civilians in the Democratic Republic of Congo's Kasai region from mid-March to mid-June, counting dozens of children among those massacred.

The findings, based on interviews with 96 refugees from the conflict-hit Kasai who had fled to Angola, blamed state agents for the murders of seven children.

The refugees gave harrowing accounts of the violence in the central region, which the UN warned had taken on "an increasing and disturbing ethnic dimension."

Victims recounted mutilations, including of a seven-year-old boy whose fingers were cut off, and an attack on a hospital in the village of Cinq where 90 people were killed, some because they were too injured to escape a raging fire.

Aside from government troops, the UN blamed a reportedly state-backed militia called the Bana Mura as well as the anti-government Kamuina Nsapu militia for a range of atrocities.

"Survivors have spoken of hearing the screams of people being burned alive, of seeing loved ones chased and cut down, of themselves fleeing in terror", the United Nations human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a statement.

A team of investigators has confirmed 251 executions between March 12 and June 19, the UN report said.