

Asean silent on Rohingya crisis

AFP, Manila

Southeast Asian leaders kept silent over accusations of ethnic cleansing carried out by Myanmar's army in a statement yesterday, instead expressing support for the country's efforts to bring peace and harmony to northern Rakhine state.

Hundreds of thousands of Muslim Rohingya have fled mainly Buddhist Myanmar since a military crackdown was launched in Rakhine in August, which the United Nations and watchdogs have said amounts to ethnic cleansing.

Rights groups had urged the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) to take a strong stand on the crisis in its summit in Manila this week.

But a statement released by the bloc after the meeting failed to condemn the atrocities and merely said an unspecified number of leaders backed Myanmar's humanitarian relief programme in Rakhine.

"They expressed support to the Myanmar Government in its efforts to bring peace, stability, rule of law and to promote harmony and reconciliation between the various communities," it said.

Myanmar authorities insist the military campaign was aimed at rooting out Rohingya militants who attacked police posts on August 25. But the UN and rights groups have documented civilian accounts of murder, rape and arson at the hands of the army.

The Asean statement was issued hours after watchdogs released reports on "widespread and systematic attacks" on Rohingya civilians including troops gang-raping women and girls.



Indonesian farmers work in a field as Mounng Sinabung volcano spews thick smoke in the background in Karo, North Sumatra yesterday. Mount Sinabung roared back to life in 2010 for the first time in 400 years, after another period of inactivity it erupted once more in 2013, and has remained highly active since.

PHOTO: AFP

Qatar sets \$200 minimum wage

AFP, Doha

Qatar has set a temporary minimum wage for migrant workers worth some \$200 a month, the authorities said yesterday, a benchmark reform following criticism of its preparations for the 2022 World Cup.

Labour Minister Issa al-Nuaimi told AFP that the "temporary minimum wage of 750 riyals (\$195, 166 euro) per month will immediately come into effect", while officials work on setting a permanent rate.

In addition to the new salary, labourers will receive free accommodation, food and healthcare plans, covered by employers, he said.

Introducing a minimum wage was among a package of major labour changes announced last month by Qatar, which has come under continued global scrutiny and criticism for its treatment of some two million migrant workers.

Qatar has never had an official minimum wage policy, and officials said the 750 riyals figure could increase after a review.

"We will not approve any employment contract if the salary is below 750 Qatari riyals per month. All contracts must now be approved by the ministry (of labour)," Nuaimi said.

"If any change is made to the contract, we will apply the new procedures."

Since being controversially chosen to host the World Cup, Qatar -- which is spending \$500 million a week on the tournament -- has been routinely accused of forcing workers to toil in conditions critics have likened to modern-day slavery.

Among other key reforms on the books are a requirement to lodge job contracts with the government, preventing changes to contract terms after the arrival of workers in Qatar and ending the right of employers to stop staff from leaving the country or changing jobs.

The package was enough to satisfy the UN's International Labour Organization, which on November 8 said the reforms matched up to its expectations for labour rights.

Rights groups have also backed the changes but continue to question whether Qatar will live up to its promises.

'Death of democracy' Outcry as Cambodia SC bans main opposition party

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodia's Supreme Court dissolved the country's main opposition party yesterday and banned more than 100 of its politicians, in a ruling blasted by a rights groups as the "death" of the nation's democracy.

The verdict was widely expected from a justice system heavily warped by the influence of long-standing premier Hun Sen, who is accused of ruthlessly targeting rivals in the run-up to 2018 polls.

But it nevertheless delivered a crushing blow to what remained of the embattled Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), the only party with a fighting chance to break the authoritarian leader's 32-year grip on power.

Judge Dith Munt, himself a member of Hun Sen's ruling CPP party, said the court had also banned 118 CNRP politicians from office for five years, in what rights groups blasted as a mockery of judicial independence that turned Cambodia into a de facto one party state.

The judge said the CNRP, by boy-

cotting the trial, had effectively confessed to the government-levied accusation of conspiring with the United States and other foreign actors to plot a revolution.

The CNRP and Washington have rejected those charges as bogus.

In a statement the CNRP said it "still considers itself to be a legitimate party



Hun Sen

with a mandate from half of the Cambodian population", describing the court case as "politically motivated and made under pressure to follow the wish of the ruling party that is trying to rid CNRP from the political field".

In a televised address yesterday evening, Hun Sen called for calm and said 2018 elections would be held as

scheduled.

"The government supports the decision of the Supreme Court and its ruling will ensure peace," said the premier, who has staked his reputation on bringing stability and growth to Cambodia after decades of civil war.

Yet rights groups warned the verdict stripped stripped next year's election of any credibility and gravely imperiled the country's democratic aspirations.

"This is the death of democracy in Cambodia," said Phil Robertson from Human Rights Watch, calling on foreign partners to suspend any assistance for the 2018 poll.

The International Commission of Jurists said Cambodia had crossed a "red line," with CNRP's dissolution stripping millions of voters of a chance to freely choose their representatives.

The verdict is the culmination of a methodical strangling of dissent in Cambodia that began after the CNRP nearly unseated Hun Sen in the last national election in 2013, rattling the premier.

Four suicide bombers kill 12 in Nigeria

AFP, Maiduguri

Twelve people were killed Wednesday evening after four suicide bombers struck in the regional capital of Maiduguri in northeast Nigeria, officials told AFP.

Two men and two women blew themselves up in the Muna neighbourhood at around 1700 GMT, the chief security officer of Borno State's emergency response agency, Bello Dambatta, said.

"The total people who died in these four suicide bombings is 12, 16 including the bombers," he told AFP. "Twenty-two people were taken to the Borno State Specialist Hospital for treatment to various injuries."

The first suicide bomber blew himself up among people conducting an evening prayer, killing seven, Dambatta said.

A suicide bomber then entered a house before setting off explosives, killing a pregnant woman and her child. The other two suicide bombers blew themselves up before reaching their targets, he added.

The Islamist extremists of Boko Haram have carried out an eight-year campaign of violence in Nigeria's north-east killing at least 20,000 people.

Hariri 'free to leave' Says Saudi Arabia; France FM meets the Lebanese PM

AFP, Riyadh

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri is free to leave Saudi Arabia "when he pleases", the kingdom said yesterday, rejecting accusations from Beirut that he was being held in Riyadh following his shock resignation.

Hariri has been in the Saudi capital since announcing there on November 4 that he was stepping down.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun this week accused Saudi authorities of "detaining" the premier.

Aoun yesterday said that Hariri's decision to accept an invitation to travel to France could be the "start of a solution" to the crisis sparked by his resignation.

Speculation has swirled around the fate of Hariri, who is a dual Saudi citizen.

But Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir told reporters in Riyadh that Hariri was free to leave "when he pleases".

Jubeir is the highest ranking Saudi official to comment on the situation.

Aoun has refused to accept the prime minister's resignation from abroad. "We hope that the crisis is over and Hariri's acceptance of the invitation to go to France is the start of a solution," Aoun said on the official presidential Twitter account.

"I am awaiting the return of Prime Minister Hariri from Paris for us to decide the next step with regards to the government," Aoun added.

The announcement that Hariri had accepted an invitation to travel to France and meet President Emmanuel Macron came from French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian yesterday during a visit to Riyadh.

Hariri in an interview on Sunday had vowed to return to Lebanon in a matter of days.

Hariri also left open the possibility that he may withdraw his resignation if certain conditions are met -- in particular an end to the involvement of Lebanon's powerful Shiite militant group Hezbollah in regional conflicts.



People look on at a damaged vehicle after a suicide bomb attack in Kabul, Afghanistan, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

IS blast kills 14 in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

A suicide attacker blew himself up outside a political gathering in Kabul killing at least 14 people, officials said yesterday, highlighting the deepening divisions in the war-torn country.

The deadly attack, claimed by the Islamic State group in a brief message via its Amaq propaganda agency, was the latest to hit the Afghan capital, where insurgents have been stepping up assaults in a devastating show of force.

Supporters of Atta Mohammad Noor, the powerful governor of the northern province of Balkh and a vocal critic of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, had been holding an event inside a wedding hall at the time of the blast.

Noor was not at the gathering, one of his aides told AFP. Ghani issued a statement condemning the attack as a "criminal act".

The bomber tried to enter the building but was stopped at the security checkpoint where he detonated his device, Kabul police spokesman Abdul Basir Mujahid told AFP.

"A number of our police personnel are among the casualties," Mujahid said.

"As a result of today's suicide attack eight police and six civilians have been killed while a further 18 have been wounded."

An AFP photographer said the windows of the wedding hall had been shattered by the force of the blast and a vehicle parked outside was on fire.

Dozens of police and intelligence officers have swarmed the area and blocked access to the public.

Photos posted on Twitter purportedly from the attack showed multiple bodies of men lying on top of each other in a muddy street and in a drain, and people dragging away the wounded.

Noor, a senior leader of the Tajik-dominated Jamiat-e Islami party, has been an outspoken critic of Ghani and the National Unity Government.

It is not the first time that top officials in the Jamiat political group have been targeted by attackers.

Foreign Minister Salahuddin Rabbani, who heads Jamiat, survived an attack at a funeral in Kabul in June

where suicide bombers tore through a row of mourners. Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah also escaped unharmd.

Political and ethnic rivalries have been intensifying ahead of next year's long-delayed district and parliamentary elections, which would pave the way for the 2019 presidential ballot.

Noor has previously hinted that he may run for the country's highest office.

On Wednesday Ghani -- who is a Pashtun, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan -- sacked the Independent Election Commission chief Najibullah Ahmadzai after technical and political bungling, fuelling speculation the vote will not go ahead.

That came after the recent firing of Education Minister Asadullah Hanafi Balkhi, who was considered a close ally of Noor, and one of Ghani's advisers Ahmadullah Alizai.

Noor has recently called for the return of Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum, a powerful ethnic Uzbek warlord who fled to Turkey in May after he was accused of raping and torturing a political rival in 2016.



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