



Sri Lanka's army soldier stands guard next to a damaged shop after a clash between two communities in Digana central district of Kandy, Sri Lanka March 8, 2018.

PHOTO: REUTERS

ANTI-MUSLIM RIOTS

Tensions running high

Fresh violence reported despite curfew, arrests

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan police said petrol bombs were hurled at a mosque on Thursday as hundreds of troops patrolled a troubled central district where anti-Muslim violence has left three people dead.

Muslim-owned businesses were set on fire and vandalised in several parts of Sri Lanka, police said, days after an island-wide state of emergency was imposed to curb riots in Kandy.

Police announced 85 people had been arrested for rioting in the hill district, including the leader of a radical Sinhalese Buddhist group known for agitating against Muslims.

"We have arrested 10 key suspects, including Amith Weerasinghe, who orchestrated and led these attacks," police spokesman Ruwan Gunasekera told reporters in Colombo, adding that another 75 were detained.

Armoured vehicles and heavily-armed troops guarded Kandy, the epicentre of the violence where internet services remain suspended and an evening curfew is in place.

The government ordered the internet black-out after police discovered mobs of Sinhalese rioters were using social media to coordinate attacks on Muslim establishments.

More than 200 homes, businesses and vehicles have been torched in three days of violence by mobs from the mainly Buddhist

Sinhalese majority.

A 24-hour curfew was imposed on Wednesday afternoon after a hand grenade exploded in the hands of an attacker, killing him and wounding 11 others, officials said.

The day-time curfew was eased following a calm night but schools were shuttered as tensions remain high in the tourist hotspot.

In Kuruvita, 125 kilometres south of Kandy, police said petrol bombs were lobbed at a mosque. Little damage was inflicted and three suspects are being pursued.

In Weligama, 240 kilometres south of Kandy, a Muslim-owned business was attacked, police said, while Muslim establishments were pelted with stones in at least two other locations outside Kandy.

President Maithripala Sirisena toured Kandy on Wednesday and ordered security forces to use the full force of the law against troublemakers.

Military officials said more reinforcements were sent to the area on Wednesday night to assist police who resorted to teargas to disperse rioters the previous evening.

The United Nations has condemned the violence and urged Colombo "to ensure that appropriate measures are swiftly taken to restore normalcy in affected areas".

GOODWILL GESTURE

India, Pakistan to repatriate elderly inmates

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India and Pakistan have agreed to release and repatriate elderly prisoners, women and those with special needs in an apparent bid to de-escalate tensions between them sparked by daily exchange of gunfire between the security forces along the border.

Spokesperson of India's External Affairs Ministry Ravesh Kumar said on Wednesday evening that External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj had suggested to the High Commissioner of Pakistan to India in October last year "that the two sides could progress on humanitarian issues related to elderly, women, children and mentally unsound prisoners. We note that today Pakistan has responded positively to EAM's suggestion..."

He said it has also been agreed to resume the visits of the Joint Judicial Committee which looks into the issues of fishermen and prisoners in each other's custody. The last visit of such a Committee had taken place in October 2013 to India. The committee comprises retired judges of the two countries.

The officials of the two countries would be working on the modalities to implement the understanding reached on these humanitarian issues, Kumar said.

In a statement on Wednesday evening, the Pakistan foreign office said they had accepted Indian proposals also on the revival of a judicial committee mechanism which would oversee the speedy release of each other's prisoners.

Pakistan also expressed a desire for a resumption of official dialogue with India stalled for the last two years since the terror attack on an Indian Air Force base in Indian state of Punjab in 2016.

'A long way' to go for talks

Says Tillerson; China urges US, North Korea to hold talks 'sooner than later'

AGENCIES

Washington's top diplomat Rex Tillerson yesterday said the United States was "a long way from negotiations" with North Korea, which this week made a shock offer to discuss denuclearisation.

Tillerson, who is in Ethiopia on his first-ever Africa tour, said the signals from Pyongyang may be positive but stressed negotiations with Kim Jong Un's regime were not going to happen soon.

"I think as President Trump has indicated, (there are) potentially positive signals coming from North Korea by way of their intra-Korean dialogue with South Korea," he told journalists.

But "in terms of direct talks... we're a long way from negotiations, we just need to be very clear-eyed and realistic about it," he said.

He said a first step would be "talks about talks" to see if "conditions are right to even begin thinking about negotiations."

Details are still sketchy, but South Korea announced Tuesday that the North had stated there was "no reason" to hold on to its nuclear weapons "if military threats towards the North are cleared and the security of its regime is guaranteed".

The North is open to "frank" talks with the United States on denuclearisation and would suspend missile and nuclear tests while dialogue was under way, the South's

national security adviser Chung Eui-yong said after returning from a meeting in Pyongyang with Kim.

President Donald Trump welcomed the offer as "very positive".

However his Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats told Congress he was "quite skeptical" and Vice President Mike Pence said the US position towards North Korea



Rex Tillerson



Wang Yi

would not change "until we see credible, verifiable, and concrete steps toward denuclearisation."

China yesterday urged the United States and North Korea to start negotiations as soon as possible, while Japan has warned it could be a ploy to play for time, and urged "concrete" steps from Pyongyang.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi cautiously welcomed

Seoul's announcement that Pyongyang had offered to hold denuclearisation talks with the United States in return for security guarantees.

The North also agreed to hold a historic summit between its leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in in late April.

But Wang issued a word of caution, noting that breakthroughs on the North Korean nuclear issue had collapsed in the past.

Wang's comments come as two South Korean envoys left for Washington to brief US officials on the North's offer, after their landmark visit to meet Kim in Pyongyang.

Envoy Chung Eui-yong, head of Seoul's National Security Office, will travel to China and Russia following his Washington trip.

Meanwhile, South and North Korea will not march together at the opening ceremony of the Winter Paralympics, as they did at the Olympics last month, because they cannot agree on a united flag that erases islands disputed with Japan, officials said.

Japan complained to South Korea about fans waving the Korean peninsula flag at a friendly women's ice hockey match in the Olympics between the combined North and South Korean team and Sweden.

The flag depicts a map of the undivided Korean peninsula, including the disputed islands - known as Dokdo in Korean and Takeshima in Japanese - in the Sea of Japan, known to Koreans as the East Sea.



Philippines' CJ vows to fight impeachment

AFP, Manila

The Philippine Supreme Court chief justice vowed to fight "bullying" and save judicial independence as President Rodrigo Duterte's congressional allies launched an impeachment process yesterday to remove her from office.

Voting 38-2, the House of Representatives justice committee said there was "probable cause" to impeach Maria Lourdes Sereno, in a move critics allege is part of wider efforts by Duterte to destroy foes and usher in one-man rule.

A US-style impeachment trial in the Senate will follow if the House adopts the committee report, focusing on allegations Sereno failed to pay about two million pesos (\$40,000) in taxes.

"All kinds of lies, threats, harassment and bullying have been thrown my way but I will not yield," Sereno, the country's first female chief justice, said at an International Women's Day event in Manila.

"I am fighting for our future as a freedom-loving nation," the 52-year-old said, framing the case against her as an issue of "judicial independence".

Aside from the impeachment case, the government's chief lawyer on Monday asked the Supreme Court itself to oust its chief justice, citing her alleged failure to disclose assets.

Justice committee chairman Reynaldo Umali said his panel will ask the lower house, dominated by Duterte allies, next week to send the case to the Senate for trial.

Vitamin D lowers risk of cancer: study

AFP, Paris

Higher levels of Vitamin D in the blood may be linked to a lower risk of developing certain cancers, a study in Japanese adults reported yesterday.

"These findings support the hypothesis that Vitamin D has protective effects against cancers at many sites," researchers reported in a study published in The BMJ medical journal.

Vitamin D is made by the skin in response to sunlight. By maintaining calcium levels in the body, it helps keep bones, teeth and muscles healthy.

While the benefits of Vitamin D on bone health are well known, there is some evidence that it may protect against chronic diseases as well, including some cancers.

Studies to date, however, have been carried out mainly in European and North American people.

As natural Vitamin D concentrations can vary by ethnicity, researchers from half-a-dozen Japanese medical schools and institutes set out to determine the potential for lowering cancer risk in Asians.

They analysed the public health records of 33,736 men and women aged 40 to 69.

After adjusting for well-known cancer risk factors -- age, weight, smoking and alcohol intake, for example -- the researchers found that, overall, higher Vitamin D levels was associated with a 20 percent lower cancer risk for both genders.

The risk of liver cancer dropped even more, by up to 50 percent, especially for men.



Demonstrators hold up a placard as they attend a protest during a one day strike to defend women's rights on International Women's Day in Madrid, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'LOVE JIHAD' CASE IN INDIA

SC sets aside Kerala order that annulled Hadiya's marriage

AGENCIES

The Indian Supreme Court yesterday said that Hadiya's marriage with her husband Shafin Jahan is legal and valid, and a relationship she has formed of her free will and consent.

In doing so, the apex court overturned an earlier order of Kerala HC, which had cancelled the marriage saying it wasn't legal as she entered into it out of coercion or was brainwashed into it.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Dipak Misra and Justices AM Khanwilkar and DY Chandrachud said it was restoring Hadiya and Jahan's marriage, as it had interacted with the former and found that she had exercised her consent in getting married.

With yesterday's order, the two will be deemed legally married and can live as a couple without being harassed by any state agency.

The SC, however, said that the National Investigation Agency (NIA) probe into the alleged 'love jihad' phenomenon would be taken to its logical conclusion by the agency in accordance with the law.

In its status report submitted to the SC, the NIA had said that a well-oiled system prevailed in Kerala to indoctrinate people to embrace Islam.

Earlier this week, Hadiya's father KM Asokan told the top court that his efforts prevented her from being transported to "extremist-controlled territories" of Syria to be used as a "sex slave or a human bomb".

Hadiya, however, told the court that she embraced Islam of her own free will and wanted to continue living as a Muslim. In an affidavit filed before the top court, she said that she had married Jahan of her own volition and sought the court's permission to "live as his wife".



US drone targets Pak Taliban in Afghanistan

21 suspected militants killed

AP, Dera Ismail Khan

Two missiles fired from a US drone hit a militant facility in neighboring Afghanistan, killing 21 insurgents, including the son of the head of the Pakistani Taliban, two Pakistani intelligence officials and local Taliban commanders said yesterday.

The strike, which according to the officials took place on Wednesday, targeted a compound frequented by Mullah Fazlullah, the leader of the Pakistani Taliban who is believed to be hiding in Afghanistan.

The intelligence officials said that Fazlullah was apparently not there, but his son was killed in the strike in Afghanistan's Kunar province, miles away from Pakistani border.

Three Pakistani Taliban commanders also confirmed the strike and militant casualties.

The United States made no comment on the strike. There was also no immediate comment from Nato, Afghan authorities or the Pakistani government.

Islamabad has for years has asked Washington and Kabul to take action against Fazlullah and other Pakistani Taliban, who are believed to be hiding in neighboring Afghanistan and who cross the porous Afghan-Pakistan border to launch attacks inside Pakistan.

S Korea to erase sex abuse accused from textbooks

AFP, Seoul

Three prominent South Korean writers and artists who have been accused of sex abuse will have their works and almost all mentions of their names removed from school textbooks, the government said yesterday, as the country's nascent #MeToo campaign spreads.

A growing number of women have spoken out about abuses they suffered at the hands of powerful figures in multiple fields, making headlines in a country that remains socially patriarchal despite economic and technological advances.

Those accused of sexual misconduct include Ko Un, a top poet regularly tipped for the Nobel prize for literature, prominent stage director Lee Yoon-taek and playwright Oh Tae-seok.

Seoul poet Choi Young-Mi accused Ko of sexually abusing many women in literary circles, after publishing a thinly veiled poem "Monster" in which she detailed her experiences at his hands.

Lee is under investigation for raping or sexually harassing more than 10 actresses at his theatre group, and Oh is also accused of harassing actresses and students.

The trio's works and almost all 40-odd references to them will be erased from school textbooks, Seoul's education ministry said, describing them as "figures who created social controversy."

Only a few passing mentions of their names will remain, the education ministry said without elaborating further.

Ko has denied the allegations against him in a statement to the Guardian, saying he did "nothing which might bring shame on my wife or myself".

Lee apologised for causing "harm" to actresses, saying he was willing to "take any punishment", but denied accusations of rape. Oh has refused to comment.

Women in South Korea have long been reluctant to come forward about sex abuse due to fears of relentless public shaming and bullying.