

**ANTI-MUSLIM RIOTS**

# Police probe fresh attack in Sri Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Vandals yesterday attacked a Muslim-owned restaurant in Sri Lanka in an alleged "hate crime", police said, as tensions remain high across the island following a week of violent riots.

The restaurant in Anamaduwa -- 130 kilometres (81 miles) north of the capital Colombo -- was targeted despite police being on high alert after a spate of anti-Muslim attacks.

The government declared a state of emergency last week as 11 mosques were torched and 200 Muslim-owned businesses destroyed in riots by Sinhalese mobs that left at least three people dead and around 20 wounded.

A curfew was lifted in the central district of Kandy, the epicentre of the violence, but soldiers remained on the streets, equipped with emergency powers to detain people to maintain law and order.

Some social media networks including Facebook remain blocked across Sri Lanka. Officials say this was done to prevent the spread of hate speech against Muslims.

A senior police official said disciplinary action would be taken against officers in the Anamaduwa area for failing to prevent the restaurant attack.

"We are treating this as a hate crime. An investigation is on to identify those responsible," he told AFP on condition of anonymity.

President Maithripala Sirisena announced Saturday that he will appoint a three-member panel of retired judges to investigate the unrest that drew concern from rights groups and the international community.

Police were deployed to mosques across Sri Lanka on Friday to guard worshippers from the island's minority Muslim community during weekly prayers. There were no reports of violence.



Chinese President Xi Jinping drops his ballot during a vote on a constitutional amendment lifting presidential term limits, at the third plenary session of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Cuba holds vote as post-Castro era looms

AFP, Havana

Cubans yesterday voted to ratify a new National Assembly, a key step in a process leading to the election of a new president, the first in nearly 60 years from outside the Castro family.

The new members of the National Assembly will be tasked with choosing a successor to 86-year-old President Raul Castro when he steps down next month.

As voting was about to begin, however, the foreign ministry issued a statement insisting that even without Castro as president the Cuban revolution they led will endure into the next generation.

"Some hear siren songs and announce the end of the 'Castro era,'" it said on Twitter. "The next president will not have that surname. But without a doubt, it will be a son of the Revolution."

Raul took over in 2006 from his ailing brother Fidel, who had governed since seizing power during the 1959 revolution.

Eight million Cubans are expected to turn out to ratify 605 candidates for an equal number of seats in the Assembly, a process shorn of suspense and unique to the Communist-run Caribbean island nation.

"They're the most important elections of recent years, because we are going to vote for new people who will govern from then on," day-care center guardian Ramon Perez told AFP.

Yesterday's general election was the first since the death in 2016 of Fidel Castro, and marks the beginning of major change at the top in Cuba.

Candidates may be either members of the Cuban Communist Party or not, and may also belong to trade unions or be students.

"The designation of candidates is based on merit, abilities and the commitment of the people," Raul Castro said when he announced the elections last year.

# Bodies pile up in Ghouta

Regime forces bomb splintered enclave as delegation of rebel groups mulls evacuation deal; death toll tops 1,102

AFP, Hammurieh

New air strikes and barrel bombs pounded Syria's Eastern Ghouta yesterday as government forces pressed a three-week advance that splintered the rebel enclave and trapped dozens under collapsed buildings.

Defying global calls for a ceasefire, Syria's government has pursued a ferocious Russian-backed air campaign and ground offensive to capture the region, the last rebel bastion on the capital's doorstep.

In three weeks of fighting, it has overrun more than half the area and split the remainder into three pockets, isolating the urban hub of Douma from the rest of the enclave.

Yesterday, government troops battered the edges of each pocket with air raids, barrel bombs, and rockets, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

"The clashes are focused now around the town of Meideira, which lies at the centre of the three zones and where rebels are putting up fierce resistance," said

Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman. Bombing runs hit several other towns including Arbin, where at least three civilians were killed.

The deaths bring the total toll from the offensive to at least 1,102 civilians, according to the monitor.

They include dozens of decomposing bodies still trapped under pulverised residential blocks in the towns of Hammurieh, Saqba, and Misraba.

In Hammurieh, AFP's correspondent saw a young man scrambling frantically over the rubble of a collapsed building in search of his loved ones.

His father, mother, and three siblings were killed in an air raid, but rescue workers have been unable to pull them out.

A delegation from Eastern Ghouta was yesterday considering a partial evacuation deal to halt a fierce government offensive, a negotiator and monitor told AFP.

Meanwhile, US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis said it would be "very unwise" for the Syrian regime to use gas as a weapon against the people of Eastern Ghouta and elsewhere.



**SYRIA CONFLICT**

# More trouble for Israeli PM

Coalition members accuse him of stoking fake crisis to force early elections

AFP, Jerusalem

Members of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition yesterday accused the embattled premier of perpetuating a "fake crisis" over a political dispute to potentially force early elections.

The dispute comes as Netanyahu faces a possible indictment on bribery charges in the coming months.

Polls suggest he could remain prime minister and his Likud party could win the most seats in fresh elections despite police investigations into his affairs.

Victory could bolster his political standing ahead of the attorney general's decision on indictments.

Netanyahu has said he wants his coalition to last its entire term, which expires in November 2019 -- something he repeated yesterday.

But others in his right-wing coalition suggested he had other motives.

The coalition is at loggerheads over legislation that would exempt young ultra-Orthodox men from military service, a dispute that has threatened to pull the gov-

ernment apart.

"Over the past week we've baked a good solution for the draft crisis. I can say that there's no draft crisis. It's a fake crisis," Education Minister Naftali Bennett, head of the Jewish Home party, told reporters ahead of yesterday's cabinet meeting.

He added that "it could be that there's someone who for personal reasons wants to generate a crisis and lead the state to elections... In the end it's all up to one person who has to decide whether he wants elections or not, and that's the prime minister."

Yaakov Margi of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party implied that compromises had been made to allow for a resolution, saying that "the feeling is that the prime minister has fallen in love with this fake crisis."

"Once the heads of the ultra-Orthodox parties announced they'd agree to a solution, the draft crisis was solved," he wrote on Twitter. "All the rest is a fake crisis."

The ultra-Orthodox parties are refusing to approve the state budget unless the conscription bill passes. The bill is bitterly opposed by Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman.



## Pak student hurls shoe at former PM

AFP, Lahore

An Islamic seminary student hurled a shoe at Pakistan's former prime minister yesterday, an act considered a major insult in the Muslim country.

Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted last year over graft charges, appeared visibly shocked as the shoe hit his shoulder while he was addressing a gathering at a seminary in Lahore.

The incident came a day after an individual hurled ink at Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif, a member of the ruling party and a close Sharif aide, while he was speaking at a party rally in eastern Pakistan.

The shoe hurling was broadcast live on Pakistani TV channels. In the Muslim world, such a gesture is considered particularly insulting.

The perpetrator then jumped on stage where Sharif was standing and began chanting before he was overpowered by the crowd and handed over to the police.

According to police officials, the man is a student at the seminary.

Minutes later, Imran Khan, leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf opposition party and an arch rival of Sharif who has frequently criticised the former prime minister, condemned the incident.

"This is not the way to express yourself and I condemn whoever did it," Khan said.



Residents fly dove-shaped balloons to mourn victims of the 2011 tsunami and earthquake disaster at Natori in Miyagi prefecture yesterday. Japan marked the seventh anniversary of the deadly earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster which devastated its northeastern coast and left about 18,500 people dead or missing.

## 44 pro-IS militants killed in Philippine

REUTERS, Manila

At least 44 pro-Islamic State militants were killed and 26 more were wounded when Philippine soldiers shelled positions held by the rebels in southern Maguindanao province, the army said yesterday.

The fighting, initially with about 50 members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), broke out in a remote village in Datu Saudi Ampatuan town from Thursday morning and lasted the following day, said Lt Col Geny Besana.

A soldier was slightly wounded, the army said in a separate statement.

The number of BIFF members killed and wounded was based on intelligence information, Besana said. The military did not recover any enemy bodies, he said.

Besana said the military launched artillery attacks with air support as the number of BIFF fighters had risen to about one hundred during the fighting.

The military classifies the BIFF, which it said has about 300 members, as a terrorist organisation, along with the Abu Sayyaf and Maute groups.

"Seventy were killed and injured (on the BIFF side), we are still pursuing about 200 more," Besana said, adding that the clash had displaced about 500 families.

The militants in southern Philippines were regrouping, retraining and recruiting new members for another attack elsewhere after occupying the southern city of Marawi for five months last year, according to the army.

## NEWS IN brief

### 16 jihadists killed in Sinai operation

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's military said yesterday 16 jihadists, an officer and a soldier were killed in the past four days during a major military operation against Islamic State group jihadists in Sinai. The army launched a sweeping campaign after Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi, who is standing in elections for his second term this month, gave them a three-month deadline to crush IS in Sinai.

### 250 migrants rescued off Libya coast: navy

AFP, Tripoli

The Libyan navy on Saturday rescued 252 migrants seeking to reach Europe, in two separate operations off the country's western coast. "We were alerted... to the position of a migrant boat" around 30 kilometres (20 miles) off Zawiya, west of Tripoli, navy captain Rami al-Hadi Ghomed said. He said the 140 migrants on board, including 14 women and four children, were brought back to Tripoli's navy.

### 16 dead as lightning strikes Rwanda church

AFP, Kigali

At least 16 people were killed and dozens more injured after lightning struck a Seventh-Day Adventist church in Rwanda, a local official said yesterday. Fourteen victims were killed on the spot as lightning hit the church in the Nyaruguru district in the Southern Province on Saturday, local mayor Habitegeko Francois told AFP over the phone. Two others died later from their injuries, he said.

# Have forgiven killers of Rajiv Gandhi: Rahul

TNN, New Delhi

Congress president Rahul Gandhi on Saturday said that he and his sister Priyanka had "forgiven" the killers of their father, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

"We have forgiven our father's killers. Whatever the reason, I do not condone any kind of violence," said Rahul during an interaction with alumni of the Indian Institutes of Management in Singapore.

"We were very upset and hurt and for many years we were quite angry. But, somehow, completely... in fact, completely (forgiven)," PTI quoted him as saying.

Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by a female suicide bomber of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam on May 21, 1991 at an election rally in Tamil Nadu.

Rahul went on to say that his family "knew" that his father and grandmother, former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, were "going to die" by virtue of being in politics and trying to bring about change.

"In politics, when you mess with the wrong forces, and if you stand for something, you will die," he said.

Rahul also sought to dispel the notion that he had lived a privileged life.

"I was 14 when my grandmother was assassinated. My father was killed. So you live in a particular environment, surrounded by 15 guys, morning, noon and night. I don't think that's a privilege," the Congress chief remarked.

He also spoke about the assassination of his grandmother Indira Gandhi, stressing that it was a price that the family knew they had to pay for taking a stand.



# 'Have you gone mad?'

Russian president tells journalist he will never give Crimea back to Ukraine

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said that under no circumstances would he give Crimea back to Ukraine, speaking in a new documentary released yesterday ahead of his expected re-election in next week's poll.

"What, have you gone mad?" he told a journalist who asked him if there were any circumstances under which the Russian leader would be ready to give up Crimea.

"There are no such circumstances and never will be," he said in the new two-hour documentary "Putin".

It was published on the social media accounts of notorious pro-Kremlin TV host Dmitry Kiselev ahead of a presidential election on March 18.

Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and supported Russian-speaking insurgents in the east of the ex-Soviet country after a Western-backed popular uprising ousted a Kremlin-backed regime from power in Kiev.

The peninsula's annexation led to European and US sanctions against Moscow amid the most serious crisis

in ties with the West since the end of the Cold War.

The documentary -- produced by journalist Andrei Kondrashov, who is a spokesman for Putin's campaign -- features interviews with a number of the Russian leader's allies including former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and childhood friend cellist Sergei Roldugin.

The secretive chief executive of oil giant Rosneft, Igor Sechin, said he had served under Putin in various capacities for nearly 30 years and that the president was "a very careful person".

"Honestly speaking, I don't know a single mistake he has made over these years," Sechin said in rare public comments. "He is very careful at making decisions."

Speaking on everything from his family to childhood to love and happiness, Putin said he was capable of forgiving.

"But not everything," he quickly added, noting he could not forgive a betrayal.

"Generally speaking, I cannot complain that I've come across any serious events that could be called a betrayal," Putin said.

