

IS ATTACK IN AFGHANISTAN

Blasts, gun battle kill 15; 42 injured

REUTERS, Jalalabad

Afghan security forces battled for hours against a group of attackers who stormed a government building in the eastern city of Jalalabad yesterday after a coordinated assault that killed at least 15 people and wounded 42, local officials said.

A car bomb was detonated at the entrance to the state accounts office before a group of about six attackers armed with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades rushed the building, the officials said. There were multiple blasts as they fought off security forces in a gun battle that lasted much of the day.

Islamic State has claimed responsibility for the attack, the Islamist militant group's Amaq news agency said without providing any evidence.

The attack took place in a busy area of the city with many other official buildings nearby, including a school in which about 1,000 girls were trapped as the fighting raged.

It was the latest in a series of high-profile attacks that have killed and wounded hundreds of civilians in Afghanistan this year and put heavy pressure on the Western-backed government of President Ashraf Ghani.

Most have been in capital city Kabul, but in January IS gunmen attacked an office of aid group Save the Children in Jalalabad, killing at least five people and wounding 25.

After several hours of fighting that sent plumes of smoke rising into the sky above the accounts office, Attahullah Khogyani, a spokesman for the provincial governor, said that yesterday's clash had ended with all the gunmen killed.



(From left, clockwise) Motorcycles burn following a blast at the Pentecost Church Central Surabaya (GPPS), in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia, yesterday. Police assist a woman looking for family members near the site of a blast at the church; and Indonesia President Joko Widodo visits the burned church location.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Row flares over cabinet

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim tried to ease a rift within the ruling alliance yesterday after differences erupted between their supporters over cabinet positions.

The four-party alliance scored a historic victory in Wednesday's general election over the long-ruling Barisan Nasional government, but the emergence of a rift so soon is raising questions about the unity of what was always an unlikely coalition.

In a statement from his hospital bed, Anwar said he had told members of his People's Justice Party (PKR) to ensure that Mahathir's government "remains strong and stable".

But he also said that, in a conversation with Mahathir, he had raised PKR's demand for "more inclusive negotiation", a reference to the formation of the cabinet.

Mahathir said in a telecast on state TV that "at the beginning, we shouldn't look at proportion" in the cabinet.

"It will be made up when we make up the rest of the cabinet," he

said. "Surely there will be some conflict in need and wants of each party. This will be determined by the prime minister."

Mahathir is the alliance leader and Anwar's PKR has the majority of seats in parliament won by the group. The volatile relationship between the two, from friends to foes to allies, has dominated

POST POLLS MALAYSIA

Mahathir, Anwar step in after differences between their supporters

New govt to review 'fake news' law, not abolish it

Malaysia's political landscape for over three decades and is central to the future of the alliance.

Mahathir announced just three ministers on Saturday, to join himself and Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Anwar's wife, in the cabinet. He was to announce 10, and sources within the alliance said there was no agreement on the others.

Wan Azizah did not attend the news conference to announce the new ministers because of the disagreements, said one source in the alliance.

Mahathir then visited Anwar in the hospital where he is recovering from a shoulder operation and the atmosphere was frosty, said another source who was present. The source said Mahathir and Anwar are scheduled to meet again on Sunday to patch up differences over the cabinet positions.

"Even the three appointed (is not final) because the decision was made without our participation," Rafizi Ramli, a senior member of PKR, was quoted as saying by the Malaysiakini website.

Mahathir yesterday said that an anti-fake news law brought by the previous administration will be given "proper" definition, making it clear to the media and the public what is fake.

Abolishing the anti-fake news law was one of the Mahathir's campaign promises, but his latest comments point to a re-defining of the controversial law, rather than removing it altogether.

PM'S CABINET PICKS

FINANCE MINISTER LIM GUAN ENG, 57



A fierce critic of former PM Najib Razak, Lim Guan Eng has been chief minister of Penang since 2008 and is the leader of Chinese-majority Democratic Action Party (DAP). It was only the third time in the country's six decades since independence that the post has gone to a person from the ethnic Chinese minority. Lim was a bitter foe of Mahathir during his earlier 22-year stint as PM and was thrown in jail twice.

DEFENCE MINISTER MOHAMAD SABU, 63



The president of Parti Amanah Negara began his political career at the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement in 1975, before joining the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) in 1981. He held various posts in PAS, including as PAS deputy president from 2013 to 2015, before breaking away to form PAS-splitter party Amanah.

HOME MINISTER MUHYIDDIN YASSIN, 70



The president of Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia was sacked from the Malaysian Cabinet in 2015 after disagreements with then PM Najib Razak over the fund misappropriation scandal at 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

IRAQ VOTE COUNTING

PM Abadi ahead, Sadr going strong

REUTERS, Baghdad

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's list appears to be leading in Iraq's parliamentary election, followed by influential Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's alliance, an election commission source and a security official told Reuters yesterday.

The sources cited unofficial initial results. Iraqis voted on Saturday in the first election since the defeat of Islamic State militants inside the country. Final results are expected on Monday.

Turnout was 44.52 percent with 92 percent of votes counted, the Independent High Electoral Commission said -- significantly lower than in previous elections. Results are due to be officially announced today.

Abadi, a rare ally of both the United States and Iran, was mainly concerned with fending off Shia Muslim groups other than Sadr's alliance, which are seeking to pull the country closer to Tehran.

Those rivals were his predecessor as prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, and the leader of the main Shia paramilitary group, Hadi al-Amiri, both closer than he is to Iran, which has wide sway in Iraq as the primary Shia power in the region.

Unofficial results compiled by Reuters reporters in southern provinces also indicated that Sadr, a firebrand cleric who led a violent uprising against US troops from 2003-2011, appeared to be making a strong showing.

If the Sadr list finished second, that would mark a surprise comeback by the cleric. Sadr has a zealous following among the young, poor and dispossessed but has been sidelined by influential Iranian-backed figures such as Amiri. Sadr has kept Tehran at a distance.

Iranian interests must be assured
Iranian FM, in China, seeks guarantee to save nuke deal

AGENCIES

Iran's foreign minister yesterday said he was hopeful of forging a "clear future design" for the nuclear deal facing collapse after Washington's withdrawal, at the start of a diplomatic tour aimed at rescuing the agreement.

"If the nuclear deal is to continue, the interests of the people of Iran must be assured," Mohammad Javad Zarif told reporters after talks in Beijing with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi.

Zarif will later fly to Moscow and Brussels to consult the remaining signatories to the 2015 agreement denounced by US President Donald Trump.

Zarif and Wang hailed the "comprehensive strategic partnership" between their countries, with the Chinese minister saying: "I hope and believe that these visits to multiple countries will... help protect Iran's legitimate national interests and peace and stability in the region."

Washington's decision to withdraw from the deal and reimpose sanctions angered its European allies as well as China and Russia.

Meanwhile casting more shadows on the future of the deal, US National Security Adviser John Bolton yesterday said sanctions on European companies that do business with Iran after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal are "possible".

"It's possible. It depends on the conduct of other governments," Bolton said on CNN's "State of the Union."

Tehran's chief diplomat embarked on the tour as regional tensions spiked just days after unprecedented

US says sanctions 'possible' on European companies
Iran, China hail 'comprehensive strategic partnership'
Rouhani signals willingness to remain in nuke deal

Israeli strikes in Syria which a monitor said killed at least 11 Iranian fighters, triggering fears of a broader conflict between the two arch-enemies.

Before the tour Zarif reiterated that Iran was preparing to resume "industrial scale" uranium enrichment "without any restrictions" unless Europe provided solid guarantees it could maintain trade ties despite renewed US sanctions.

Trump hit back Saturday evening, tweeting that the accord had failed to contain Iran's militarism.

"Iran's Military Budget is up more than 40 percent since the Obama negotiated Nuclear Deal was reached... just another indicator that it was all a big lie," he wrote.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said last week he was highly doubtful that Europe would provide the "real guarantees" needed for Iran to stay in the nuclear deal. The head of the elite Revolutionary Guards also warned against relying on foreign powers to guarantee Iran's interests.

But analysts said Iran was determined to maintain the moral high ground in the coming weeks.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday said that, if its interests were protected, Tehran would remain committed to its 2015 nuclear deal.



China's first domestically manufactured aircraft carrier, known only as "Type 001A", leaves port in the north-east city of Dalian early yesterday. The aircraft carrier started sea trials yesterday, state media said, a landmark in Beijing's ambitious plans to modernise its navy. Expected to be commissioned by 2020, the ship will give China a second aircraft carrier as it asserts its claims in the South China Sea and seeks to deter any independence movements in Taiwan.

PHOTO: REUTERS

DEADLY CLASHES BETWEEN MYANMAR FORCES, REBELS

Beijing urges ceasefire

AFP, Yangon

China yesterday condemned fighting on its border between Myanmar forces and ethnic rebels that has left 19 dead, mostly civilians, in some of the worst bloodshed on the remote frontier in recent years.

The fighting erupted on Saturday when ethnic minority insurgent groups, who are locked in a long-running battle with the Myanmar state, attacked security posts around Muse, a border town and trade hub in northeastern Shan state.

A local resident told AFP she heard gunfire through the night until early morning yesterday, with fear gripping a town that lives at the mercy of both government militias and ethnic armies fighting for more autonomy.

Saturday's carnage, which also left at least 27 wounded, was one of the bloodiest days in recent years of a conflict that has hampered Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi's attempts to forge nationwide peace.

SOURCE: AFP

The insurgency in the northeast -- which is separate from the Rohingya crisis to the west -- is one of some two dozen ethnic minority rebellions that have roiled Myanmar's border regions since independence in 1948.

Observers believe Beijing holds significant sway over the rebels near its border with Myanmar and is a key player in Suu Kyi's faltering peace process.

On Sunday the Chinese embassy in Yangon condemned the clashes and said it had urged "relevant parties" to reach an immediate ceasefire.

Clashes in the border region in early 2017 sent more than 20,000 Myanmar refugees scrambling across the border into China's Yunnan province, raising tensions between the neighbours.

Saturday's attacks were blamed on the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), which claimed responsibility for the operation and apologised for the civilian deaths.

US EMBASSY TO OPEN IN JERUSALEM TODAY

AFP, Jerusalem

Israelis basked in national pride and prepared for a Jerusalem march expected to draw tens of thousands yesterday, a day ahead of the controversial US embassy move to the disputed city.

Palestinians meanwhile readied for their own protests today over the embassy's inauguration, including another mass demonstration in the Gaza Strip near the border with Israel.

The Jerusalem march begins a week of high tension between Israelis and Palestinians, highlighted by the embassy inauguration to be attended by a Washington delegation including US President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka and her husband, senior White House adviser Jared Kushner.

Both arrived in Israel yesterday.

The embassy move will take place on the 70th anniversary of Israel's founding, while the following day Palestinians will mark the Nakba, or "catastrophe," commemorating the more than 700,000 Palestinians who fled or were expelled in the 1948 war that ended Israel's creation.

Palestinian protests are also planned for tomorrow.



There were already tensions in the weeks before the embassy move.

Fifty-four Palestinians have been killed in protests and clashes since March 30 along the Gaza Strip's border with Israel. No Israelis have been wounded and the military has faced criticism over the use of live fire.

Meanwhile, Israel's government yesterday gave the green light to a controversial cable car project planned to run between West Jerusalem and the Old City in annexed east Jerusalem.