



(Clockwise from left) US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman sits next to White House Senior Advisor Jared Kushner as he speaks during the dedication ceremony of the new US embassy in Jerusalem yesterday. An Israeli soldier aims his weapon at Palestinian demonstrators during a protest against US embassy move to Jerusalem and ahead of the 70th anniversary of Nakba, near Israeli Qalandia checkpoint. A wounded Palestinian is evacuated during the protest.

PHOTO: REUTERS



WEST BENGAL PANCHAYAT POLLS

12 dead in clashes between rival groups

AFP, Kolkata

Twelve people were killed yesterday in clashes between rival political groups vying for village council seats in eastern India, police said.

Ballot boxes were set ablaze and gunshots fired in West Bengal state, which has a history of fractious politics and polling violence.

Anuj Sharma, a senior state police officer, said violence began almost as soon as voting got underway in the "panchayat" elections, the most local tier of governance in India.

"Crude bombs were found near several polling booths in the districts," Sharma said.

Twelve people were killed, he said, while five local journalists were injured trying to cover the melee.

A media vehicle was damaged in clashes in Bhangan, South 24 Parganas district. The police had to use tear gas to control the mob. There were reports from firing in the area.

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party blamed West Bengal's ruling Trinamool Congress Party for the deadly clashes.

The Trinamool party, led by firebrand Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, sought to play down the violence.

"Every death is a tragedy," Derek O'Brien, a Trinamool leader, wrote on Twitter.

"Yes, few dozen incidents. Say, 40 out of 58000 booths. What's the percentage?"

More than 60,000 security personnel from West Bengal and neighbouring states were deployed to oversee security for the polls.

The panchayat polls are the last major elections to be witnessed by the state before Lok Sabha elections in 2019.

Fiery cleric on course to win Iraq elections

REUTERS, Baghdad

Nationalist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, a long-time adversary of the United States, led in Iraq's parliamentary election with more than half the votes counted yesterday, the electoral commission said, in a surprise turn of fortune for the Shia leader.

In the first election since Islamic State was defeated in the country, Shia militia chief Hadi al-Amiri's bloc, which is backed by Iran, was in second place, while Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, once seen as the front-runner, trailed in third position.

The preliminary results were based on a count of more than 95 percent of the votes cast in 10 of Iraq's 18 provinces.

Unlike Abadi, a rare ally of both the United States and Iran, Sadr is an opponent of both of the countries which have wielded influence in Iraq since a US-led invasion toppled Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein and ushered the Shia majority to power.

Sadr has led two uprisings against US forces in Iraq.

Potraying himself as an Iraqi nationalist, Sadr has a zealous following among the young poor and dispossessed, but he had been sidelined by influential Iranian-backed figures.



Middle East war and annexed it in a move not recognized internationally.

In 1980 the Israeli parliament passed a law declaring the "complete and united" city of Jerusalem to be the capital of Israel.

OTHER EMBASSIES

Guatemala will move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on May 16 and Paraguay later this month. Netanyahu said in April "at least half a dozen" countries were now "seriously discussing" following the US lead. In December, 128 countries voted in a non-binding UN General Assembly resolution calling on the United States to drop its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Nine voted against, 35 abstained and 21 did not cast a vote.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

Since the announcement there has been tension, with Palestinian protests in Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank. More than 40 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli troops in Gaza. That protest culminates on May 15, a day Palestinians traditionally lament homes and land lost as Israel was created in 1948, given extra significance this year because it falls on the day after the US Embassy move.

US EMBASSY OPENING IN JERUSALEM

Why is there a furor?

REUTERS, Jerusalem

The United States opened its embassy in Jerusalem yesterday, a move that has delighted Israel and infuriated Palestinians.

WHY TRUMP DID IT

There has long been pressure from pro-Israel politicians in Washington to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and US President Donald Trump made it a promise of his 2016 election campaign.

Vice-President Mike Pence and David Friedman, the ambassador to Israel appointed by Trump, are thought to have pushed hard for both recognition and embassy relocation. The decision was popular with many conservative and evangelical Christians who voted for Trump and Pence.

Trump acted under a 1995 law that requires the United States to move its embassy to Jerusalem. But Bill Clinton, George W Bush and Barack Obama consistently signed waivers.

Announcing his decision on December 6, Trump cited the Jerusalem Embassy Act and suggested his predecessors had

lacked courage.

ROLE OF JERUSALEM

Religion, politics and history. Jerusalem is a city sacred to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and each religion has sites of great significance there. Jerusalem has been fought over for millennia by its inhabitants, and by regional powers and invaders including the Egyptians, Babylonians, Romans, early Muslim rulers, Crusaders, Ottomans, the British Empire and by the modern states of Israel and its Arab neighbours.

Israel's government regards Jerusalem as the eternal and indivisible capital of the country, although that is not recognised internationally. Palestinians say

East Jerusalem must be the capital of a future Palestinian state.

CURRENT STATUS

In 1947, the United Nations General Assembly decided the then British-ruled Palestine should be partitioned into an Arab state and a Jewish state. But it recognised that Jerusalem had special status and proposed international rule for the city, along with nearby Bethlehem, as a 'corpus separatum' to be administered by the United Nations.

That never happened. When British rule ended in 1948, Jordanian forces occupied the Old City and Arab East Jerusalem. Israel captured East Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967

Suicide blast rocks Indonesia again

AFP, Surabaya

A family of five, including a child, carried out the suicide bombing of a police headquarters in Indonesia's second city Surabaya yesterday, police said, a day after a deadly wave of attacks on churches staged by another family.

The spate of bombings has rocked Indonesia, with the Islamic State group claiming the church attacks and raising fears about its influence in Southeast Asia as its dreams of a Middle Eastern caliphate fade.

Indonesia, which is set to host the Asian Games in just three months, has long struggled with Islamist militancy, including the 2002 Bali bombings that killed over 200 people -- mostly foreign tourists -- in the country's worst-ever terror attack.

Security forces have arrested hundreds of militants during a sustained crackdown that smashed some networks, and most recent attacks have been low-level and targeted domestic security forces.

But that changed Sunday as a family of six -- including girls aged nine and 12 -- staged suicide bombings of three churches during morning services in Surabaya, killing 18 including the bombers.

Yesterday, members of another family blew themselves up at a police station in the city, wounding 10.

"There were five people on two motorbikes. One of them was a little kid," national police chief Tito Karnavian said. "This is one family," he added.

Iran seeks assurances

FM visits Russia, gets support to defend 2015 nuke deal

AFP, Moscow

Iran's foreign minister said on a visit to Moscow yesterday he was seeking "assurances" from the backers of the country's nuclear deal after the US pulled out.

Russia is trying to keep the landmark 2015 accord alive in the wake of US President Donald Trump's decision, pushing it into rare cooperation with Europe.

"The final aim of these negotiations is to seek assurances that the interests of the Iranian nation will be defended," Mohammad Javad Zarif said at the start of a meeting with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

After the talks, Zarif praised the "excellent cooperation" between Moscow and Tehran and said Lavrov had promised him to "defend and keep the agreement".

Lavrov, for his part, said Russia and Europe had a duty to "jointly defend their legal interests" in terms of the deal.

Zarif's diplomatic tour took him to Beijing at the weekend and will see



him visit Brussels later in the week, as the international backers of the agreement scramble to save it.

After meeting his Chinese counterpart on Sunday, Zarif said he was hopeful of forging a "clear future design" for the accord.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has already spoken with Germany's Angela Merkel and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan about the efforts, after voicing his "deep concern" over

Trump's decision.

Trump's move to ditch the nuclear deal has infuriated Washington's allies in Europe as well as China and Russia.

"(European) cooperation with Russia, which until recently seemed impossible because of the Skripal (spy poisoning) case, with the expulsion of diplomats and the reduction of contact, is now receiving a fresh boost," consultant Andrei Baklitski of the PIR Center NGO said.

NEWS IN brief

Torra appointed new leader of Catalonia

AFP, Barcelona

Quim Torra, a newcomer to politics who has campaigned fiercely for Catalonia's independence, was appointed regional president yesterday vowing to keep fighting for a break from Spain. Torra's election by the regional parliament paves the way for a new government in Catalonia after months of political limbo. Analysts warn the road ahead will be rocky as he faces rifts within the separatist camp and Catalans remain deeply split over leaving Spain.

Hawaii volcano threat of explosion rises

CNN ONLINE

Two new fissures opened on Hawaii's Big Island over the weekend, spewing lava and fumes and forcing more residents to evacuate. Hawaii's Civil Defense Agency announced the latest crack in the ground Sunday evening. It's the 18th fissure to open on the island since the Kilauea volcano erupted May 3. Fissure 18 emerged near Haleakalana Loop Road -- where fissure 17 erupted early Sunday, splattering lava tens of feet into the air.

US Senate to vote on CIA pick Wednesday

REUTERS, Washington

The US Senate Intelligence Committee will vote on Wednesday morning on President Donald Trump's nominee to be the new director of the CIA, Gina Haspel, a committee aide said yesterday. The vote will take place behind closed doors. Haspel was grilled by lawmakers at her confirmation hearing last week over her role in the agency's interrogation system.

India MP charged over wife's death

AFP, New Delhi

A charismatic Indian opposition figure and former top UN official was yesterday charged over the death of his wife, reigniting a mystery that shook the country's establishment. Shashi Tharoor, 62, is accused of cruelty toward his wife Sunanda Pushkar and abetting her suicide in a five-star hotel room in 2014.

Delhi police said on Twitter they had now amassed enough forensic and other evidence to pursue the high-profile Congress party politician in court.

Tharoor has denied any involvement in Pushkar's death, calling the charges "preposterous" and vowing to fight "vigorously" against the allegations.

Pushkar was found dead two days after publicly accusing Tharoor, who served as under-secretary-general to Kofi Annan at the UN, of having an affair with a Pakistani journalist.

She had been taking medication for various illnesses and early autopsy results suggested she may have overdosed on antidepressants and sleeping pills.

But a year later police said new medical reports had led investigators to treat the case as a murder, without naming any suspects.

Mahathir vows to probe toppled government

AGENCIES

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad yesterday vowed to investigate faults that may have been committed by the government toppled in last week's general election, and said all ministries had been instructed not to destroy any documents.

Mahathir announced that he would appoint a new anti-corruption commission chief and replace the attorney-general who had cleared former Prime Minister Najib Razak of wrongdoing in a multi-billion-dollar scandal linked to the 1MDB state fund.

He also told a news conference that his government had a rough idea of the whereabouts of Malaysian financier Low Taek Jho, who is accused of links to a plot to siphon billions of dollars from the fund, 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

Najib set up 1MDB in 2009 and previously served as chairman of its advisory board. He and the fund have denied wrong-

doing, reported Reuters.

Asked about other possible crimes, Mahathir said: "We cannot do everything at the same time at once."

"We have to take time. There are many faults committed by the previous government, but we cannot do everything in one day, so you have to be patient."

Najib Razak was yesterday accused by a former top graft fighter of blocking probes into the massive financial scandal.

Abdul Razak Idris -- former intelligence and investigations director of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission -- lodged reports with the body alleging Najib tried to stop the probe into losses at 1MDB, reported AFP.

Mahathir, who was Malaysia's prime minister from 1981 to 2003, led his four-party alliance to victory against Barisan Nasional in last week's general election, ousting a coalition that had ruled the Southeast Asian nation for six decades.

MUMBAI ATTACKS INTERVIEW

Ex-Pak PM Sharif defends remarks

AFP, Islamabad

Former Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif has sparked a firestorm at home and in India after suggesting Pakistani militants were behind the 2008 Mumbai attacks, with the National Security Council slamming his remarks yesterday.

The former premier approached what is seen as a red line in the country by touching on criticism of Pakistan's armed forces, especially their alleged use of proxies in India, in the interview with Dawn newspaper published over the weekend.

"Militant organisations are active. Call them non-state actors, should we allow them to cross the border and kill 150 people in Mumbai? Explain it to me. Why can't we complete the trial?" Sharif told Pakistan's leading English daily, referring to stalled court cases against several suspects.

The Mumbai attacks left 166 people dead and brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war.

The carnage played out on live television around the world as commandos battled the heavily armed gunmen, who over three days detonated explosives and gunned down civilians across the port city.