



## Lanka leader U-turns on war crimes probe

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president yesterday went back on pledges to investigate war-time atrocities, saying he did not want to "re-open old wounds" but sparked a rift with his cohabitation government.

Sri Lankan government troops were accused of killing at least 40,000 ethnic Tamil civilians in the final months of the island's 37-year guerrilla war that ended in May 2009.

President Maithripala Sirisena said he will formally ask the United Nations Human Rights Council to reconsider a 2015 resolution which called for credible investigations into alleged atrocities.

"It is a decade since we have established peace in this country," Sirisena told reporters at his official residence in Colombo. "I want to tell them (the UN) not to pressure us."

"What I want to tell them is don't dig the past and re-open old wounds. Let us forget the past and ensure that we all live in peace."

Within hours of his remarks, Sirisena's cohabitation government sought to distance itself from his stance and said the administration of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe will remain engaged with the UN on war crimes.

The foreign ministry, which is under the prime minister, said it will back a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council on March 20 seeking a further two-year extension for Sri Lanka to deliver on promises of accountability.

"A further extension of two years through a co-sponsored roll-over resolution accordingly needs to be viewed in this backdrop," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

# North rebuilds sat launch site

Say US think tanks analysing new images; Trump's advisor Bolton warns of more sanctions if Pyongyang doesn't budge

REUTERS, Washington

North Korea has restored part of a rocket test site it began to dismantle after pledging to do so in a first summit with US President Donald Trump last year, while Trump's national security advisor warned that new sanctions could be introduced if Pyongyang did not scrap its nuclear weapons program.

South Korea's Yonhap News Agency and two US think tanks reported on Tuesday that work was underway at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station at Tongchang-ri, even as Trump met with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at a second summit in Hanoi last week.

That summit broke down over differences on how far North Korea was willing to limit its nuclear program and the degree of US willingness to ease sanctions.

Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton, told Fox Business Network on Tuesday that following the Hanoi summit, Washington would see whether Pyongyang was committed to giving up its "nuclear weapons program and everything associated with it."

"If they're not willing to do it, then I think President Trump has been very clear ... they're not going to get relief from the crushing economic sanctions that have been imposed on them and we'll look at ramping those sanctions

up in fact," said Bolton, a hardliner who has advocated a tough approach to North Korea in the past.

Separately, two US senators sought to dial up pressure on North Korea by reintroducing a bill on Tuesday to impose sanctions on any bank that does business with its government.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Monday he was hopeful the United States would send a delegation to North Korea in the coming weeks, but Bolton's remarks and the apparent developments at the Sohae test site may cause new challenges for diplomats hoping to restart negotiations after the failed summit.

Satellite images seen by 38 North, a Washington-based North Korea project, showed that structures on the Sohae launch pad had been rebuilt sometime between February 16 and March 2, Jenny Town, managing editor at the project and an analyst at the Stimson Center think tank, told Reuters.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies released a report, also citing satellite imagery, that concluded North Korea is "pursuing a rapid rebuilding" at the site.

"Activity is evident at the vertical engine test stand and the launch pad's rail-mounted rocket transfer structure," the CSIS report said.

Asked to comment, the White House referred to the US State Department, which did not immediately respond.

### TENSIONS IN KOREAN PENINSULA



Fully-veiled women carry their children as hundreds of civilians, who streamed out of the Islamic State group's last Syrian stronghold, headed towards a screening point for new arrivals run by US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces outside Baghouz in the eastern Syrian Deir Ezzor province yesterday.

# No solution in sight

Says EU's Barnier as talks to break deadlock over Brexit make no progress

AFP, Brussels

EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier said yesterday "no solution" has been found so far to break the deadlock over Brexit, a spokesman reported after the latest negotiations in Brussels.

Briefing the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, Barnier said the talks "have been difficult", spokesman Margaritis Schinas said following the four hours of negotiations on Tuesday.

Barnier informed the commissioners that "no solution has been identified at this point that is consistent with the withdrawal agreement," which the EU agreed with Prime Minister Theresa May in November.

Barnier said the discussions have nonetheless taken place in a "constructive atmosphere," speaking the day after he held the latest round of talks with UK attorney general Geoffrey Cox and Brexit minister Stephen Barclay.

Barnier confirmed the two sides were still stuck on the so-called "backstop," aimed at keeping open the border between EU member Ireland and British Northern Ireland.

The EU sees the provision in the withdrawal agreement as vital to preserving the peace process in Northern Ireland but London fears it will tie Britain indefinitely to an EU customs union.

The EU-British talks are aimed at helping May's government get the November divorce deal through parliament and avoiding Britain crashing out of the bloc on March 29 without a deal.

Cox said he had put forward some "very reasonable proposals" during his talks in Brussels.

"Both sides have exchanged robust strong views and we're now facing the real discussions. Talks will be resuming soon," Cox told Sky News television from Brussels.

"These are very sensitive discussions, we're in to the meat of the matter now, we've put forward some proposals, very reasonable proposals," he said.

Cox's presence is seen as central as he will ultimately offer a legal opinion on the Brexit deal and the Irish backstop that could determine whether key pro-Brexit lawmakers will approve the withdrawal agreement.



# Promote human rights in Myanmar

UN urges social media, investors

REUTERS, Geneva

Social media firms and foreign investors must do more to ensure they support human rights in Myanmar, UN Special Rapporteur Yanghee Lee said on Tuesday, suggesting Facebook was failing to treat parties to the country's conflict even-handedly.

Myanmar has been trying to attract foreign investors and divert attention from 730,000 Rohingya Muslims who have fled the country since 2017. A UN inquiry blamed the exodus on a military campaign with "genocidal intent", which the government denies.

Facebook said this month it had banned four insurgent groups fighting Myanmar's military after it was criticised for not doing enough to block content fuelling the conflict. Lee said she was concerned that Facebook had not banned Myanmar's army and allied armed groups as well.

"Contrary to achieving the stated aim of decreasing tensions, this selective banning may contribute to feelings of inequality by ethnic minorities," Lee said in a report she will present to the UN Human Rights Council on March 11.

"Public institutions linked to the military, its supporters, extremist religious groups and members of the government continue to proliferate hate speech and misinformation on Facebook."

The company said it had taken steps to ban "hate figures, hate organisations and military officials" from Facebook in Myanmar. Its investigations were ongoing and not limited to the four groups it had blacklisted.

"We don't want anyone to use Facebook to incite or promote violence, no matter who they are," it said in a statement.



## S Korea's Moon starts 3-nation tour next week

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

South Korean President Moon Jae-in will begin a three-nation tour next week to improve his country's relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) members.

Accompanied by a high-level delegation, he will travel to Brunei, Malaysia and Cambodia from March 10 to March 16.

"...Asean members states will be the destination of my first overseas tour this year," Moon has written in an article ahead of his visit.

The South Korean president has already promised to visit the 10-member countries of Asean before his five-year term ends in 2022.

Diplomatic sources in Dhaka said the South Korean president will leave the country on March 10 for Brunei for a three-day bilateral visit and will hold meetings with Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah to discuss ways to successfully hold a special South Korea-Asean summit in Brunei.

The South Korean president will leave Brunei on March 12 and head for Malaysia, where he will hold a summit with Sultan Abdullah of Pahang. He will also hold talks with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, Korean media reported.

In Cambodia, Moon will hold a summit with Prime Minister Hun Sen to discuss ways to enhance bilateral cooperation and promote joint prosperity. He will conclude his visit in Phnom Penh on March 16.

### ALLEGED POLITICAL USE OF ARMED FORCES

# Opposition attacks Modi

AGENCIES

Indian opposition parties are launching a united attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi for what they see as his politicisation of the armed forces as he tries to ride a patriotic wave into a second term in office at a general election.

It is a high-risk bet that could backfire given the jingoistic fervour that has overtaken India since a suicide bomber from the Pakistan-based Islamist militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) killed 40 paramilitary police in Indian-controlled Kashmir on February 14.

Pollsters say opposition parties may be making a mistake by questioning Modi on national security instead of focusing on more basic issues, such as a shortage of jobs and farmers' distress. Voters concerned about those issues ousted Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in three state elections late last year.

But amid mounting doubts about the success of an Indian air strike on an alleged JeM camp in Pakistan's northeast on February 26, the opposition sees Modi as potentially vulnerable over both the government's claims and its behaviour.

"The opposition is coordinating this and talking to each

other every day," said Derek O'Brien, a lawmaker from the West Bengal-based All India Trinamool Congress, the third-biggest opposition party in the lower house of parliament.

"The strategy is to first keep exposing them and bringing out the fact that they are trying to appropriate the armed forces. And two, we show that this is being done purely for election purposes."

O'Brien was referring to Modi speaking at a rally with the pictures of the paramilitary police killed in the bombing in the background, as well as a BJP leader in Delhi attending a public event in army fatigues.

The BJP denies the accusations that it's misusing the armed forces for political benefit, reported Reuters.

Meanwhile, Pakistan yesterday for the first time named the pilots it says shot down two Indian warplanes last week, reported AFP.

"Two Indian planes were shot down by Pakistan air force on February 27," Pakistani foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told parliament yesterday.

He named them as Squadron Leader Hassan Siddiqui and Wing Commander Nauman Ali Khan, saying he wanted to "pay tribute" to them both.

Pollsters say criticism of Indian PM may backfire

Pakistan names pilots it says shot down Indian warplanes last week



# Rumours of rift between Saudi king and MBS

Report says father, son are at odds over Yemen war

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The relationship between Saudi King Salman and his son and heir, Mohammed bin Salman, has been increasingly strained as they disagree on a number of issues, including the war in Yemen, according to a Guardian report published on Tuesday.

Tensions are said to have come to a head during King Salman's visit to Egypt last month when his advisors warned of a potential move against him by the crown prince, the report said, citing an anonymous source.

The king's loyalists were reportedly so alarmed by the threat that his security detail during the trip was replaced by a team of 30 hand-picked loyalists.

Egyptian security guards were also dismissed, the source told the Guardian.

On King Salman's return, Prince Mohammed (also known as MBS) was not among the dignitaries who received the monarch.

The source said the pair disagreed over King Salman's hard line on protesters in Algeria and Sudan, as well as the treatment of Yemeni prisoners of war.

While MBS has consolidated power domestically by purging rivals within the royal family and repressing civil society activism, he has earned notoriety abroad for his aggressive foreign policy.

The murder of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul last October risked rupturing the decades-old alliance between Riyadh and Washington.

The journalist was murdered by a Saudi hit squad.



# Illegal US border crossings swell to 76,000 in February

AFP, Washington

The number of undocumented immigrants stopped at the US border with Mexico soared to more than 76,000 in February, the highest monthly level in years, US Customs and Border Protection said Tuesday.

The number of families and unaccompanied children also rose to nearly two-thirds of the total, often crossing in large groups and turning themselves in to authorities to request asylum, blunting the Trump administration's tactics aimed at curbing the flow.

At 76,103, the number of people stopped at the border or detained after crossing was up sharply from the roughly 61,000 average for the previous three months, a surprising surge for what is usually a downturn in the coldest month of the year.

It was also more than double the number of February 2018 and 3.2 times the number for February 2017, the first full month after President Donald Trump took office promising to take aim at illegal immigration.

"We are currently facing a humanitarian and national security crisis along our south-

west border," said CBP Commissioner Kevin McAleenan.

"The vast increases in families and children coming across our border, in larger groups and in more remote areas, presents a unique challenge to our operations and facilities, and those of our partners."

In late January, the government launched a new policy to send the asylum-seekers -- nearly all from Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador -- back across the border into Mexico to wait while their applications are reviewed.

But implementation of that program only began in one area of the border, at Tijuana, Mexico, and has not been put in place in other areas yet.

Meanwhile, more than 70 groups of over 100 migrants each crossed the porous border last month, handing themselves in to authorities immediately.

The February surge likely included many of those who joined caravans up from Central America, people whom Trump cited to justify shutting down the government for six weeks in December and January in a bid to obtain money from Congress.

## NEWSIN brief

### Rafale deal papers stolen: Indian govt

PTI, New Delhi

The Indian government yesterday told the Supreme Court that documents related to the Rafale aircraft deal have been stolen from the defence ministry and threatened The Hindu newspaper with the Official Secrets Act for publishing articles based on them. The SC has adjourned the hearing in the case to March 14.

### 16 killed in bomb, gun attack in Afghanistan

AFP, Jalalabad

At least 16 people were killed in a suicide attack on a construction company in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, officials said. The hours-long attack in Jalalabad began early in the morning when two suicide bombers detonated explosives at the gate of the compound, allowing three others to enter the area where they went on a killing spree.

### India rape victim kills attacker

AFP, Kolkata

An Indian woman who was raped and set on fire killed her attacker by dragging him into the flames, police said yesterday. The woman survived with burns to her face and hands while the man died in hospital from his injuries.

### BITS OF HISTORY (MARCH 06)

**1957:** Ghana became independent from Britain.

**1987:** The roll-on roll-off ferry Herald of Free Enterprise capsized on its way out of Zeebrugge harbour in Belgium, drowning 193 people.

**1999:** The last Khmer Rouge guerrilla leader still at large, Ta Mok, was arrested close to northern Cambodia's border with Thailand.