



Israeli security forces search a car at a checkpoint outside the village of Bruqin near Nablus in the occupied West Bank yesterday, following an attack that killed an Israeli and wounded two others near the Ariel junction southwest of Nablus. The attacks come at a sensitive time ahead of Israel's April 9 elections, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to apprehend the "terrorists" behind it. Hamas, the Islamist movement that runs the Gaza Strip, welcomed the attack, but did not claim responsibility for it.

PHOTO: AFP

Venezuela's Guaido starts domestic tour to stir support

AFP, Valencia

Venezuela's self-proclaimed interim leader Juan Guaido began a tour of his country Saturday aimed at sparking a citizen's movement to pry President Nicolas Maduro from power.

As Guaido, 35, kicked off his "operation freedom" in the northern city of Valencia, the pro-Maduro military staged the latest in a series of exercises.

The drill focused on defending hydroelectric infrastructure from attack -- a reaction to a weeklong national blackout that Maduro blamed on US "sabotage" but experts said was more likely the result of years of neglect.

Guaido, the head of the opposition-ruled National Assembly whose claim to be caretaker president is recognized by the US, Canada and much of Latin America and Europe, vowed he would "very soon" take up office in Miraflores, the presidential palace.

He has been pushing for nearly two months against Maduro after declaring himself acting president during street rallies by tens of thousands, following Maduro's swearing-in for a second term despite elections widely dismissed as a sham.

"We are going to reclaim what belongs to the people," Guaido told thousands of supporters on Saturday.

Maduro, he said, "believes that a thieving gang or a palace makes him president. It's only the support of our people that makes someone president of a nation and he doesn't have that. And not much longer will he be in that palace."

Guaido offered no timeline for the mobilization across Venezuela, which he said will culminate with a march on the presidential palace in Caracas.

"I'm ready to head over to Miraflores right now, wherever my future president Juan Guaido asks me to go," said one of his supporters, Milagros Lima, 50, a lawyer. She told AFP that her "whole family" are among

the millions who have fled the country's dire shortages of food and medicine.

"If it weren't for them, we'd be starving to death," she said.

Accompanying Guaido on his tour are opposition lawmakers tasked with creating citizen assemblies -- "freedom cells" -- across the country. The opposition said that, by Saturday, around 50 had already been set up in half of Venezuela's 23 states.

"Whatever happens, we must be united, mobilized in the streets," Guaido said, adding that he has not ruled out asking the National Assembly to activate a constitutional clause allowing foreign military intervention -- though such a move "depended on others."

That was taken as a reference to US military action, which US President Donald Trump has repeatedly refused to rule out, even though there is no sign such an operation is being mounted and US allies in Latin America oppose the idea.

On Saturday, pro-Maduro demonstrators gathered in front of Trump's White House in Washington to protest any US-led intervention in Venezuela, while anti-Maduro protesters held their own rally nearby.

Washington has so far concentrated on ratcheting up sanctions on Venezuela. That has made an already dire economic situation in the country worse, while increasing pressure on Maduro.

On April 28, a US embargo on Venezuelan oil exports will go into effect, dealing a heavy blow to Venezuela's diminished finances, as America accounts for half of the oil exported.

A major barrier to Guaido's plan to wrest control of the country is the military, which has so far remained loyal to Maduro, who has put generals in charge of lucrative civilian agencies and institutions.

Scientists revive Ridesharing

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Kei Miyamoto, a member of the team at Kindai University in western Japan who conducted the experiment, told AFP: "This suggests that, despite the years that have passed, cell activity can still happen and parts of it can be recreated."

"Until now many studies have focused on analysing fossil DNA and not whether they still function."

Whole-genome sequencing techniques confirmed Yuka's extracted tissue samples were genuine and viable for the experiment.

The nuclei were able to create cellular structures that are often a precursor to cell division.

The researchers cautioned that the research doesn't provide much hope for Jurassic Park-style resurrection of long-extinct species just yet.

"We have also learned that damage to cells was very profound," he said. "We are yet to see even cell divisions. I have to say we are very far from recreating a mammoth."

The university has worked with other Japanese and Russian institutes to study and possibly clone the mammoth.

It also plans to study alternative methods to bring the prehistoric giant back to life.

"We need new technology, we want to try various approaches," Dr Miyamoto said.

Writing in the paper, published in the journal Scientific Reports, read: "Our work provides a platform to evaluate the biological activities of nuclei in extinct animal species."

"Ancient species carry invaluable information about the genetic basis of adaptive evolution and factors related to extinction."

2 workers die

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Known if proper workplace safety measures were taken for the workers in the particular area of the project.

So far five workers have been killed in separate accidents at the Rampal thermal power plant.

So-called

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people in East Pakistan still in the dark about what is going on in the name of talks.

Although the talks between the military regime and the Awami League continued, very few were convinced about any positive outcome from the meetings. They rather demanded that Bangabandhu declare independence of Bangladesh immediately.

On this day, Sheikh Mujib declines to accept the probe body set up by the Martial Law Administrator Zone B, Tikka Khan, "to go into the circumstances which led to the calling of the army in aid of civil power in various parts of East Pakistan between March 2 and March 9".

Bangabandhu clearly felt that an inquiry by the army itself would not be fair and as such the people would not accept such a commission.

Sheikh Mujib, rather, sent an Awami League delegation that included Captain Mansur Ali to make an on-the-spot enquiry into the recent shootings and other incidents there.

[Sources: The Daily Star archive and Bangladesh Genocide Archive]

Prof Moazzem Hossain, a transportation and traffic engineering expert from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), said the app-based ridesharing is a very efficient and accessible means of transport. Drivers and passengers can save a lot of time, he said.

"The vehicles don't need to park. The passengers can find the nearest vehicle in a short time. This is win-win for both parties," he said.

The occupancy rate of the vehicles goes up, he told The Daily Star. Such services also created thousands of jobs.

Saiful Islam, 21, needed a job to fund his studies but the marketing executive job he got in early 2018 took him to Keraniganj even though he needed to be in Dhaka for his studies.

"I quit the job and bought a bicycle and started working for Pathao food delivery service. I have an income of around Tk 10,000 a month. It is helping me stay in Dhaka and study," he said.

CHALLENGES

While the ridesharing companies have great positive impacts, there are some challenges too. One of them, experts said, is poor driving skills.

"This raises the risks of accidents," said Prof Moazzem. He suggested a government regulatory mechanism to ensure that the drivers were competent.

Prof Mizanur Rahman, director at the Accident Research Institute at Buet, said a large number of motorbikes of the ridesharing companies and often their arbitrary driving were factors in the higher accident rates.

Motorbike sales in 2017 more than doubled to 3.60 lakh from 1.43 lakh in 2015, according to the review of IDLC, a non-banking financial institution.

Prof Mizanur said many of the drivers were new and did not know much about the capital's streets.

He also said the app-based services were expensive and were not accessible to all. The BRTA could deploy experts to make calculations and set a reasonable fare, he said.

Mansura said some drivers' attitude towards female passengers was not decent, something the ridesharing companies need to look into.

Banker Abida Sultana, a frequent user, said some male drivers behave in such a way as if the female passengers were their relatives.

"Companies should train them properly," she said.

Mansura said apps of some companies were not user-friendly, especially in the provisions for filing complaint. This has to be improved, she said.

Prof Mizanur said while ridesharing companies are helpful, the government focus should be improving public transport system, which is accessible to all.

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Thousands of Catalan separatist supporters protest in Madrid

REUTERS, Madrid

Thousands of supporters of Catalan independence marched through central Madrid on Saturday in protest at the ongoing trial of 12 separatist leaders who face years in prison for their role in organising a failed independence bid from Spain in 2017.

Demonstrators, many who made the journey from the northwestern Catalonia region for the protest, waved Catalan flags and carried signs reading "Self-determination is not a crime".

Protest organisers put the turnout at 120,000 while police gave a figure of 18,000.

Tensions between Madrid and Barcelona have thawed somewhat since the political crisis triggered by Catalonia's independence declaration in late 2017 but the trial of 12 separatist leaders for their role in the secession bid and events leading up to it has been one of several sticking points to derail negotiations.

The 12 are on trial in Madrid on charges ranging from rebellion to misuse of funds, which they deny.

The Catalan crisis is set to play a major role in April 28 elections, with three right-leaning parties, the conservative People's Party (PP), centre-right Ciudadanos and the relatively new far-right Vox party all calling for Spain to take a tougher position with separatists.

Polls show the support of Catalan parties may prove decisive if Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez is to form a government after the vote. Most polls indicate Sanchez's Socialists winning the most seats but falling short of a parliamentary majority.

Sanchez came to power by winning a confidence motion last year with the support of Catalan separatist parties but was unable to secure their backing for his budget, effectively dooming the project and leading him to call an early election.

Pak crackdown on militants fails to convince sceptics

AFP, Islamabad

At a mosque on a quiet Islamabad street, any reference to the UN-listed terror group which runs it has been removed as Pakistan -- once again -- comes under pressure to demonstrate its sincerity about eliminating militancy.

The first wave of militant detentions was announced by Islamabad on March 5, as tensions were still cooling between India and Pakistan after their latest confrontation over the disputed Kashmir region.

New Delhi has long accused Islamabad of harbouring militant groups, which it says are used by Pakistan intelligence agencies to attack India.

The February 14 suicide blast in Indian-administered Kashmir -- claimed by Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed -- is the latest example, and the attack which ignited the recent crisis between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

Since March 5, Pakistani authorities have arrested hundreds of suspected Islamist militants and shuttered more than 700 madrassas, mosques, and clinics linked to banned groups.

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US intervention

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dogfight over Kashmir on February 27, a day after a raid by Indian jet fighters on what it said was a militant camp in Pakistan. Islamabad denied any militant camp exists in the area and said the Indian bombs exploded on an empty hillside.

In their first such clash since the last war between the two nations in 1971, Pakistan downed an Indian plane and captured its pilot after he ejected in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

Hours later, videos of the bloodied Indian pilot, handcuffed and blindfolded, appeared on social media, identifying himself to Pakistani interrogators, deepening anger in New Delhi.

With Prime Minister Narendra Modi facing a general election in April-May, the government was under pressure to respond.

'NO GOING BACK'

That evening, Indian National Security Adviser Ajit Doval spoke over a secure line to the head of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), Asim Munir, to tell him India was not going to back off its new campaign of "counter terrorism" even after the pilot's capture, an Indian government source and a Western diplomat with knowledge of the conversations told Reuters in New Delhi.

Doval told Munir that India's fight was with the militant groups that freely operated from Pakistani soil and it was prepared to escalate, said the government source.

A Pakistani government minister and a Western diplomat in Islamabad separately confirmed a specific Indian threat to use six missiles on targets inside Pakistan. They did not specify who delivered the threat or who received it, but the minister said Indian and Pakistani intelligence agencies "were communicating with each other during the fight, and even now they are communicating with each other".

Pakistan said it would counter any Indian missile attacks with many more launches of its own, the minister told Reuters, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Doval's office did not respond to a request for comment. India was not aware of any missile threat issued to Pakistan, a government official said in reply to a Reuters request for comment.

TRUMP-KIM TALKS

The crisis unfolded as US President Donald Trump was trying to hammer out an agreement with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Hanoi over its nuclear programme.

US security advisor Bolton was on the phone with Doval on the night of February 27 itself, and into the early hours of February 28, the second day of the Trump-Kim talks, in an attempt to defuse the situation, the Western

diplomat in New Delhi and the Indian official said.

Later, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who was also in Hanoi, also called both sides to seek a way out of the crisis.

"Secretary Pompeo led diplomatic engagement directly, and that played an essential role in de-escalating the tensions between the two sides," State Department deputy spokesperson Robert Palladino said in a briefing in Washington on March 5.

Pompeo spoke to Doval, the Indian and Pakistani Foreign Ministers Sushma Swaraj and Shah Mahmood Qureshi, respectively, Palladino said.

US Indo-Pacific Command Admiral Phil Davidson told reporters in Singapore last week that he had separately been in touch with the Indian navy chief, Sunil Lanba, throughout the crisis. There was no immediate response from Lanba's office to a question on the nature of the conversations.

US efforts were focused on securing the quick release of the Indian pilot by Pakistan and winning an assurance from India it would pull back from the threat to fire rockets, the Western diplomat in New Delhi and officials in Washington said.

The Pakistani minister said China and the United Arab Emirates also intervened. India has not given details, but has said it was in touch with major powers during the conflict.

On the morning of February 28, Trump told reporters in Hanoi that he expected the crisis to end soon.

"They have been going at it and we have been involved in trying to have them stop. Hopefully that is going to be coming to an end."

Later that afternoon, Khan announced in Pakistan's parliament that the Indian pilot would be released, and he was sent back the next day.

Kidnapped

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before leaving, police also said. In the morning, when the family members were carrying out searches for Abdullah, a call came from Sohag's number. The caller asked a ransom of Tk10 lakh to have their child back.

Later on the day, Sohag filed a case with Morrelganj Police Station accusing a number of unidentified criminals.

During primary interrogation, Hridoy admitted of asphyxiating the child before dumping the body into the tank, police added.

KM Azizul Islam, officer-in-charge of Morrelganj Police Station, said they had arrested six people in this connection and they had been sent to the court.