

Militants attack Afghan ministry

Suicide blasts, shooting kill at least 3

AFP, Kabul

Suicide bombers and gunmen attacked the communications ministry in central Kabul on Saturday, officials said, in a deadly, hours-long assault that destroyed weeks of relative calm in the capital.

The Taliban said it had "nothing to do" with the attack, which left some 2,000 people stranded in the tall office building for hours at the start of the Afghan work week.

No other group claimed immediate responsibility, but the Afghan branch of the Islamic State group has previously carried out multiple deadly attacks in the capital.

"As a result of today's explosion/attack in Kabul city, two people have been martyred (killed) and 6 others are wounded," the health ministry spokesman wrote in a tweet, adding 3 of the injured were women.

In a statement, the interior ministry said four civilians and three soldiers had been killed, though unverified social media posts suggested the final toll could be higher.

AFP journalists heard one big blast around 11:40am (0710 GMT), followed by sporadic gunfire for hours afterwards.

"The information that we have is four attackers have placed themselves near the communication ministry and are engaged in gun battles with the Afghan security forces," Amanduddin Shariati, a security official in Kabul told AFP.

By about 5:00 pm (1230 GMT), the interior ministry declared the assault over.

"Operations finished. All suicide bombers killed & more than 2000 civilians staff rescued," the ministry said on Twitter.

ECI stops web series on Indian PM Modi

AFP, New Delhi

India's poll watchdog yesterday ordered producers to stop streaming a web series on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, weeks after it banned a Bollywood film and clamped down on a TV channel devoted to the right-wing premier.

The Election Commission of India -- an autonomous body tasked with overseeing the world's biggest democratic exercise -- said the online web series was in violation of its rules.

Under Indian election regulations, the publication of any content which is deemed as campaign material or propaganda is not allowed during the voting period.

Any political advertising must also be approved by the election authorities so that all spending is accounted for.

India's mammoth six-week vote began on April 11 and will run until May 19, with results due on May 23.

When it ordered a halt to the streaming of the online series, the commission said any biopic material which has the "potential to disturb the level playing field" should not be displayed until after the polls have closed.

The series, titled "Modi: Journey of a Common Man" is produced by Eros Now and traces Modi's journey from childhood to becoming the prime minister of the world's largest democracy.

Earlier this month, the commission banned the release of a flattering movie about Modi until after voting finishes. Days later it ordered a clampdown on NaMo TV, a channel showing 24-hour programmes on Modi rallies, speeches, and even rap songs and dance routines devoted to the leader.

The Hindu nationalist Modi, 68, is seeking a tough re-election after storming to power in 2014. He often uses his humble upbringing as a tea-seller's son to strike a chord with millions of poor voters.

A police community support officer talks to a climate change activist as demonstrators continue to block the road at Oxford Circus in London yesterday, on the sixth day of an environmental protest by the Extinction Rebellion group. Police have made 700 arrests so far.

PHOTO: AFP

IS, AL-QAEDA AFFILIATE ATTACKS ON REGIME POSTS

Jihadists kill 50 fighters

AFP, Beirut

Jihadists have killed almost 50 Syrian regime fighters in 48 hours, a monitor said Saturday, in some of the deadliest attacks on pro-Damascus forces in recent weeks.

Kurdish-led forces in March announced the defeat of the Islamic State group's "caliphate" in eastern Syria, but the jihadists have retained hideouts there and in other parts of the country as well as the ability to carry out deadly assaults.

Since Thursday, IS jihadists have killed 35 pro-Damascus fighters in regime-held parts of central and eastern Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman described those attacks as producing "the highest death toll among regime forces since the caliphate was declared defeated" in the eastern village of Baghouz last month.

Meanwhile, regime fighters also came under attack on another front of Syria's grinding eight-year war, the Britain-based monitor added.

Yesterday, jihadists linked to Syr-

ia's former Al-Qaeda affiliate attacked loyalist checkpoints and positions on the western edges of the northern city of Aleppo, killing 13 more pro-Assad fighters, it said.

It was the latest death tally in a civil war that has killed more than 370,000 people since starting in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests.

President Bashar al-Assad has managed to claw back around 60 percent of the country with Russian military backing since 2015, but several regions remain beyond its control.

These include a large swath of Syria and Iraq in 2014, declaring a cross-border "caliphate" in areas it controlled. At the height of its rule, the extremist group imposed its brutal ideology on millions in territory roughly the size of the United Kingdom.

Regime forces in theory control the vast desert that stretches from the capital Damascus to the Iraqi border, but IS is still present there.

Attacks by the jihadists have killed 27 troops and allied militiamen, including four senior Syrian army officers, in the desert east of Homs prov-

ince since Thursday, the Observatory said.

The propaganda arm of IS said its fighters carried out the operation.

The Observatory also said IS fighters killed another eight soldiers and militiamen, including two officers, in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor on Thursday night.

That attack targeted a desert village south of the city of Mayadeen on the Euphrates River, upstream from the village of Baghouz where IS made a desperate last stand in March.

IS swept across a large swath of Syria and Iraq in 2014, declaring a cross-border "caliphate" in areas it controlled. At the height of its rule, the extremist group imposed its brutal ideology on millions in territory roughly the size of the United Kingdom.

But after various military operations in both countries, IS lost the last shred of its proto-state on the eastern banks of the Euphrates last month.

The US-led coalition has however warned repeatedly that the jihadists' loss of their last piece of territory does not mean their elimination as a fighting force.

Trump speaks with Libya's warlord Haftar

The White House revealed Friday that President Donald Trump reached out personally to Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, as a push at the United Nations to broker a ceasefire hit trouble. Observers see Trump's words of praise for the strongman, at the expense of internationally-recognized leader Fayed al-Sarraj, as evidence of US support that explains Haftar's determination to pursue his offensive to seize Tripoli. A statement said that Trump "recognized Field Marshal Haftar's significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources," adding that "the two discussed a shared vision for Libya's transition to a stable, democratic political system." Meanwhile, forces loyal to Libya's unity government yesterday said they have launched a counter-attack against Haftar's fighters just south of the capital Tripoli. Haftar launched an offensive on April 4 against Tripoli, where the UN-recognised GNA is based.



Gunmen kill 13 at Mexican party

Thirteen people, including a child, were killed Friday when a group of unidentified gunmen opened fire on a party in the violence-wracked eastern Mexican state of Veracruz, officials said. The Secretariat of Public Safety said the gunmen arrived at a family reunion in Minatitlan asking to see someone named 'El Becky' -- the owner of a local bar -- before opening fire. It said seven men, five women, and a child were killed, and four others injured in the attack. There was no known motive for the shooting, but Veracruz is plagued with organised crime and bloody gun battles frequently erupt between rival drug gangs. Survivors described how the gunmen forced their victims to look them in the face before shooting them.

SOURCE: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Strike destroys Yemen rebels' drone cave

AFP, Riyadh

The Saudi-led coalition yesterday launched an air raid on a cave in the Yemeni capital Sanaa, used by Houthi rebels to stockpile drones, a spokesman said. The cave near the presidential palace in Houthi-held Sanaa contained drones to be used in "terrorist operations", Colonel Turki al-Maliki said.

Ebola worker shot dead at DRC hospital

AFP, Butembo

A health worker fighting an Ebola outbreak in DR Congo was shot dead Friday in an attack on a hospital in the eastern city of Butembo, the World Health Organization said. The WHO said that Dr Richard Valery Mouzoko Kiboung, an epidemiologist it had deployed to help rein in the Ebola outbreak, was killed in the attack on Butembo University Hospital. The motive behind the attack is not known yet.

13 killed in church collapse in S Africa

AFP, Johannesburg

Thirteen people were killed and 16 injured when part of a church collapsed on worshippers following a violent storm near the eastern South African city of Durban, officials said Friday. The accident happened late Thursday when a brick wall under a makeshift roof collapsed during a service at a Pentecostal church, a converted hangar, in the town of Ndlangubo, north of Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal province.



A protester lies on the ground wounded during clashes with police, as thousands of "Yellow Vest" (Gilets Jaunes) protesters took to the streets a 23rd week of anti-government marches. French police said they have arrested more than 100 demonstrators yesterday.

TWO PHASES OF POLLS IN WEST BENGAL

Mamata has lost her sleep: Modi

INDIAN EXPRESS ONLINE

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday slammed West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and said "speed breaker didi" has lost her sleep after the first two phases of the Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal.

Addressing an election rally in South Dinajpur district, the Prime Minister said, "Speedbreaker didi has lost her sleep after the reports that came in post the first and second phase of polling in the state."

Modi accused the CM of fooling people in the name of 'maa, mati and manush' (mother, land and people).

He further attacked her for allowing people from the "neighbouring country" to campaign for the TMC, and said, "It is shameful that people from the neighbouring country are campaigning for the TMC. This was done by the party to appease the minority community."

His 'neighbouring country' remark comes a few days after two Bangladeshi actors' visa was cancelled by the Ministry of Home Affairs after they were allegedly found campaigning for the TMC in West Bengal.

The PM attacked the opposition parties as well and said, "Be it TMC, Congress or the Left Front, they only know how to discriminate. Whereas Chowkida's government is working on the mantra of 'Sabka Sat, Sabka Vikas.'" He further added that the schemes of the Modi government are benefiting a large number of Dalits, the backward classes and the underprivileged.

North Korea slams Bolton for 'stupid' remarks: KCNA

AFP, Seoul

A senior North Korean official slammed US National Security Advisor John Bolton yesterday, accusing him of making "stupid" comments on stalled denuclearisation talks and warning "nothing good" would come of them.

Bolton is the second, top ranking US politician to be criticised by Pyongyang in recent days, after it labelled Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as "reckless" Thursday, demanding his removal from talks over the North's banned nuclear programme.

Those comments came hours after the isolated state claimed to have tested a new kind of weapon.

Pyongyang and Washington have been at loggerheads since the collapse of a summit between Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump earlier this year.

In an interview with Bloomberg pub-

lished Wednesday, Bolton urged Pyongyang to give a "real indication" it is willing to give up nuclear weapons.

In comments cited by North Korea's official KCNA news service, Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui said Bolton's remarks may have showed a "lack of understanding about the intentions of the two leaders".

But "they all sound uncharming and stupid to me", she said.

"Nothing good would come to you if such insensitive remarks persist."

In the Bloomberg interview, Bolton said that for a third Trump-Kim summit to take place, "a real indication from North Korea that they've made the strategic decision to give up nuclear weapons", would be needed.

He said US Trump was "fully prepared" for his next summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, adding the Trump administration was ready for "the big deal".

AFP, Riverside

A California couple were handed life sentences Friday after admitting to imprisoning and torturing 12 of their 13 children in a grisly "House of Horrors" case that shocked the world.

David Allen Turpin, 57, and his wife Louise Anna Turpin, 50, had pleaded guilty to 14 felony counts -- including cruelty, false imprisonment, child abuse and torture of their children aged three to 30 -- and will serve at least 25 years before they are eligible for parole.

In an emotionally wrenching hearing, several of the children professed continued love for their parents, who lived in the city of Perris, 70 miles southeast of Los Angeles.

The case came to light last year when one of the children, aged 17, escaped through a window from the couple's home and called the

emergency services.

Both Turpins fought back tears throughout the hearing, with Louise visually trembling as two of her own children came into court.

"My parents took my whole life from me, but now I'm taking my life

back," one of the couple's daughters said, while a son said he still loved his parents and had forgiven them.

According to excerpts of the initial emergency call released during court proceedings, the escaped girl told the dispatcher two of her siblings were chained to beds so tight

that their skin was bruised.

She told responding officers that the house was so dirty she couldn't breathe and that she and her siblings never took baths. An officer who interviewed the teen said she was so emaciated that he first thought she was a child.

He said the girl described being forced to sleep 20 hours a day and in the middle of the night eating a combination of lunch and dinner that most often consisted of peanut butter sandwiches, chips and microwaved food.

One of the older children also told investigators that the couple would lock him and his siblings in cages as punishment and beat them with paddles.

The Turpins moved from Texas to California in 2010. Investigators have said it is unclear what prompted the abuse.

