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northwest Syria

Af, Beirut

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Earthquake rattles  
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Af, New Delhi

A 5.9-magnitude earthquake struck India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh early yesterday and was felt in neighbouring Tibet. There were no reports of casualties or damage.

Egyptians vote for  
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Af, Cairo

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Af, Johannesburg

Devastating floods in South Africa have left 51 dead and forced more than a thousand people from their homes, according to an updated toll issued Wednesday as President Cyril Ramaphosa flew to the deluged region. Heavy rains have lashed the southeast of the country, tearing down homes and ravaging infrastructure in KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape provinces.

## KSA executes 37

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The men were executed on Tuesday after being convicted of terrorism, according to the official Saudi Press Agency.

"Thirty-three we know for sure are Shias," HRW researcher Adam Cooley told AFP.

The interior ministry said some of those executed were accused of "inciting sectarian strife", a charge often used in Saudi Arabia against Shia activists.

Rights group Amnesty International also said most of those executed were Shia men.

They were "convicted after sham trials that violated international fair trial standards (and) which relied on confessions extracted through torture", it said in a statement.

The executions were "yet another gruesome indication of how the death penalty is being used as a political tool to crush dissent" from within the Shia minority, said Amnesty's Middle East research director Lynn Maalouf.

The rights watchdog said 11 of those executed were convicted of spying for Iran, while at least 14 others were sentenced in connection with anti-government protests in the Eastern Province between 2011 and 2012.

The UN rights chief also condemned the mass executions carried out by Saudi Arabia.

## JUSTICE FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT ZONES

## UN backs weak resolution

Af, United Nations

Nobel Peace Prize laureates Nadia Murad and Denis Mukwege called Tuesday for justice for victims of sexual violence in conflict zones, as the UN Security Council approved a watered-down resolution largely stripped of substance by the United States and Russia.

The vote on the German-drafted resolution was held after intense last minute negotiations and additional changes in wording. Thirteen countries voted in favor while Russia and China abstained.

Both those countries said they opposed sexual violence in conflicts, but denounced "fax interpretations" in the text and a "manipulated" struggle to create new UN structures and "override" mandates already approved.

France vehemently criticized the United States for threatening to use its veto over a reference in the text to reproductive rights.



Kumari Fernando, who lost her husband, Dulip Fernando, and two children, Dulakghi and Vimukthi, at the bombing at St Sebastian's Church on Sunday, grieves during a mass burial for victims at a cemetery near the church in Negombo, Sri Lanka yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Terror attack plots  
ongoing in Lanka  
Says US, denies possessing  
advance intel on attacks

Reute Rs, Colombo

The United States had no prior knowledge of the Easter Sunday suicide bombing attacks on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka, but now believes there is ongoing terrorism plotting in the country, Washington's ambassador to Colombo said yesterday.

"We had no prior knowledge of these attacks," Ambassador Alaina Teplitz told reporters in Colombo. "We believe there are ongoing terrorist plots. Terrorists can strike without warning. Typical venues are large gatherings, public spaces."

"If you look at the scale of the attacks, the level of coordination, the sophistication of them, it's not implausible to think there are foreign linkages," Teplitz said.

"Exploring potential linkages is going to be part of (investigations)," she said.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation and military were supporting the investigation, she said, adding that Britain was also sending a team to help Sri Lanka.

Teplitz's comments came as Sri Lanka's junior defence minister, Ruwan Wijewardene, conceded that there had been a significant intelligence failure before the attacks, with reports of warnings of strikes not acted on and feuds at the highest levels of government.

"It is a major lapse in the sharing of intelligence information," Wijewardene told a separate news conference. "We have to take responsibility."

## The mastermind behind blasts

Af, Colombo

For years, Sri Lanka's Muslim community warned authorities about a firebrand cleric. Now it seems Zahran Hashim may have played a key role in one of the worst attacks in the country's history.

A video released by the Islamic State group after it claimed responsibility for bombs that killed 359 people, appears to prominently feature Hashim. The round-faced cleric is the only one of the eight figures whose face is uncovered.

Dressed in a black tunic and headscarf, and carrying a rifle, Hashim is seen in the IS video leading seven people in a pledge of allegiance to the group's chief Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

Sri Lanka's government has accused Hashim indirectly, saying the Islamist group he was believed to lead -- the National Thowheeth Jama'ath -- carried out the attacks.

Hashim was a virtual unknown before the onslaught -- even inside Sri Lanka. He had attracted several thousand followers on social media sites, including YouTube and Facebook, where he posted incendiary sermons.

Hilmy Ahamed, vice-president of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, said he had gone to local authorities with concerns about Hashim three years ago.

"This person was a loner and he had radicalised young people in the guise of conducting Quran classes," he told AFP. "But nobody thought these people were capable of carrying out an attack of such magnitude."

Ahamed said Hashim, who has also gone by the names Mohamed Zahran and Moulavi Hashim, was around 40 years old and from the east coast region of Batticaloa. The only one of the attacks on Sunday to hit outside of the Colombo area was at the Zion Church in Batticaloa.

He was considered a menace by the local Muslim community and caused trouble at Kattankudy's Thowheeth mosque.

Local media said Hashim formed the NTJ in Kattankudy in 2014. Sri Lankan officials are still investigating to what degree IS may have helped the attackers, but Ahamed said Hashim was known by the community to have international ties.

"All his videos have been uploaded from India. He uses boats of smugglers to travel back and forth from southern India," he said.

"I don't know if he is dead or alive," added Ahamed.

And neither do police, who want to know if Hashim was among the suicide bombers.

On Wednesday they were carrying out DNA tests on the bodies of some of the bombers, particularly one who set off explosives at the Shangri-La hotel.



IS released this photo of the attackers on Tuesday.

of ethnicities and religions, dominated by the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. Muslims account for 10 percent of the population and are the second-largest minority after Hindus. Around seven percent of Sri Lankans are Christians.

Ethnic and religious tensions abound in the country, which suffered through a decades-long Tamil insurgency and more recently has seen outbreaks of sectarian violence.

Muslims have been on the receiving end of sporadic violence and hate attacks since the civil war ended in 2009. Hardline Buddhist monks have led campaigns against the community, and in 2013 and 2018, Muslim businesses came under attack.

Rumours were even spread that Sinhalese could become sterile if they wore underwear bought from Muslim shops, and that food sold by Muslims would cause infertility.

In the wake of the attacks, Sri Lankan leaders including Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have urged calm and solidarity.

But at the Jumma mosque there was an atmosphere of anxiety. Hilmy Ahamed, vice-president of the influential Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, said the community was braced for a backlash, with emotions running high.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un walks upon arrival at the railway station in the far-eastern Russian port of Vladivostok, yesterday.



HK democracy leaders jailed

Four prominent leaders of Hong Kong's democracy movement were jailed yesterday for their role in organising mass protests in 2014 that paralysed the city for months and infuriated Beijing. The prison terms are the latest hammer blow to the city's beleaguered democracy movement which has seen key figures jailed or banned from standing as legislators since their demonstrations shook the city but failed to win any concessions. Nine activists were all convicted earlier in April of at least one charge in a prosecution that deployed rarely used colonial-era public nuisance laws over their participation in the Umbrella Movement protests, which called for free elections to appoint the city's leader. Their trial renewed alarm over shrinking freedoms under an assertive China which has rejected demands by Hong Kongers for a greater say in how the financial hub is run.

## Mosque massacre: NZ offers residency to victims' families

New Zealand yesterday opened a two-year window for people directly affected by the Christchurch terror attacks to apply to stay permanently in the country. The special visa category "recognises the impact of the tragedy on the lives of those most affected, and gives people currently on temporary and resident visas some certainty" about their status, Immigration New Zealand said in a statement. People living in New Zealand who were present at one of the mosques and their immediate family based in New Zealand qualify for the visa. The definition of "immediate family" has been expanded to include a wide circle of family members including partner's family and the grandparents of children under 25. A self-styled white supremacist opened fire on Muslims at prayer in two Christchurch mosques on March 15 killing 50 people.



CBI, intel chiefs summoned over harassment of CJL

The Indian Supreme Court yesterday signaled its determination to get to the bottom of the claims by a lawyer who alleged there was a larger conspiracy to force Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi to resign and threaten every top court judge. "We shall enquire and enquire till we get to the root of the issue," a three-judge bench said yesterday afternoon. The judges had taken up lawyer Utsav Bains' affidavit -- which claimed more incriminating evidence about the conspiracy -- early in the day. The bench expressed its concern at the nature of the allegations and summoned chiefs of the intelligence bureau, probe agency CBI and Delhi Police for a meeting in their chambers at 12:30 pm.

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Mideast plan  
to come after  
Ramadan  
Says Kushner  
Af, New York

US President Donald Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor Jared Kushner said Tuesday he would present his long-awaited Middle East peace proposal around June and that it would include a "robust business plan" for the Palestinians.

Kushner's plan has already been met with deep skepticism from the Palestinians, who say Trump cannot be an honest broker after he took the landmark step of recognizing bitterly disputed Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

But Kushner, whose own role has been questioned due to his longstanding family ties with Netanyahu, said he remained hopeful that his "unconventional approach" would bear fruit.

## UN REPORT ON AFGHAN CIVILIAN DEATH TOLL

US, govt forces killed  
more than insurgents

Af, Kabul

Afghan civilians are for the first time being killed in greater numbers by US and pro-government forces than by the Taliban and other insurgent groups, a UN report released yesterday revealed.

The bloody milestone comes as the US steps up its air campaign in Afghanistan while pushing for a peace deal with the Taliban, who now control or influence more parts of the country than at any time since they were ousted in 2001.

During the first three months of 2019, international and pro-government forces were responsible for the deaths of 305 civilians, whereas insurgent groups killed 227 people, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said in a quarterly report.

The majority of the deaths resulted from US air strikes or from

search operations on the ground, primarily conducted by US-backed Afghan forces, some of which UNAMA said "appear to act with impunity".

UNAMA urges both the Afghan national security forces and international military forces to conduct investigations into allegations of civilian casualties, to publish the results of their findings, and to provide compensation to victims as appropriate," the report states.

UNAMA started compiling civilian casualty data in 2009 amid deteriorating security conditions in Afghanistan.

It is the first tally since records began that shows pro-government forces have killed more civilians than insurgents have, though insurgents were responsible for more than twice as many injuries as were pro-government forces.

NEWS IN  
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