

NEWSIN brief

15 killed in blast in northwest Syria

Ap, Beirut

Fifteen people, all but two civilians, were killed in an explosion near a market in the jihadist-held region of Idlib in northwest Syria yesterday, a war monitor said. The cause of the blast in the town of Jisr al-Shughur was not immediately clear, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. No one claimed responsibility of the blast.

Earthquake rattles northeast India, Tibet

Ap, 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 extending Sisi's rule

Ap, Cairo

Egyptian voters have overwhelmingly backed constitutional changes that could see President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's rule extended to 2030, the electoral board said Tuesday. National Election Authority head Lashin Ibrahim told a Cairo press conference that 88.83 percent voted "yes" in a referendum on the amendments, with 11.17 percent voting "no".

51 killed by floods in South Africa

Ap, 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.



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

'Not your enemies'

Sri Lanka Muslims fear backlash after blasts

Ap, Colombo

Mohamed Hasan has barely left his home in Colombo since a string of deadly blasts hit Sri Lanka on Sunday, afraid he could be attacked because he is Muslim.

He has a job at a printing press, but the 41-year-old's family have begged him to stay home.

"They are worried that if I go out, will I be able to come back alive?" he told AFP outside the Jumma mosque in Dematagoda, where he had ventured briefly to pray.

More than 350 people were killed in the carnage unleashed by the Easter attacks against churches and hotels, which have been claimed by the Islamic State group.

The deaths have horrified Sri Lankans and been condemned by Muslim groups, but many in the community have been left feeling vulnerable.

Zareena Begum, 60, said she had barely slept since the weekend.

"I know people are angry at Muslims," she said in tears outside the mosque. "I never imagined such hatred being there in the hearts of these people (who attacked). Hatred must not sow more hatred."

Sri Lanka's population of 21 million is a patchwork

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.



IS released this photo of the attackers on Tuesday.

The mastermind behind blasts

Ap, 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.

KSA executes 37

HRW says almost all of them were Shias; UN condemns

Ap, Dubai

At least 33 of the 37 Saudis executed by the kingdom in a single day belonged to the Sunni-dominated country's Shia minority, Human Rights Watch said yesterday.

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 Coogole 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.



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

PHOTO: AFP



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 CJI

The Indian Supreme Court yesterday signalled 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, 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.

SOURCE: AFP, HINDUSTAN TIMES

JUSTICE FOR SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT ZONES

UN backs weak resolution

Ap, 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 "lax 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,

seen by Washington as an encouragement of abortion.

Speaking before the vote, Murad and Mukwege decried the international community's failure to act.

"Not a single person has been charged for sexual slavery," said Murad, speaking at the United Nations about massacres of her Yazidi community by the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria.

"We give speeches at the UN but no real measures have been taken (in terms of obtaining justice) and nothing has been done."

The German text initially sought to establish a formal working group, set up a mechanism to help bring to justice those responsible and develop victims' protection by giving formal recognition to their sexual and reproductive rights.

China, Russia and the United States opposed the mechanism, the working group was scrapped and Washington threatened a veto if the text spoke of reproductive rights.



Mideast plan to come after Ramadan

Says Kushner

Ap, 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

Ap, 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.