SRI LANKA TERROR ATTACK

India warned Lanka after detaining IS suspects

India warned Sri Lanka of possible suicide bombings weeks before the Easter attacks, based on "threatening" Islamic State-influenced material seized from suspects in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, a source with knowledge of the investigation told AFP yesterday. A major dispute has erupted in Sri Lanka over why security services did not act over the warnings The Sri Lankan police chief issued an alert on April 11 but it did not reach a top minister. India's evidence, which included videos, was initially seized in raids in 2018 in which seven men were detained in the city of Coimbatore, media reports said. The seven are now under investigation on charges of links with the Islamic State group."The videos showed a radical leader in Sri Lanka making threatening comments that indicated suicide attacks were possible," the source said.

Father of two bombers suspected of helping sons

One of the Sri Lanka suicide bombers was previously arrested by police and then released, a senior government official told CNN yesterday. Ilham Ahmed Ibrahim -- one of two sons of a spice tycoon who blew themselves up in Sunday's attacks -- detonated a device at the Cinnamon Grand hotel in Colombo, the official told CNN."It was the suicide bomber of the Cinnamon Grand bomb attack who was released earlier," the official said. Ilham Ahmed Ibrahim and his brother Imsath Ahmed Ibrahim were previously identified as two of the suicide bombers in Sunday's attacks, which left at least 359 people dead across the country. Police have confirmed to CNN that they are holding the brothers' father, Mohamed Yusuf Ibrahim, a wealthy spice trader, on suspicion of



Sri Lanka halts low season visa-free plan after blasts

Sri Lanka's government said yesterday it was suspending plans to grant citizens of 39 countries visa-free entry during the country's tourism low season after deadly Easter bombings that killed hundreds. "Although arrangements were in place to issue visas on arrival for citizens of 39 countries, we have now decided to hold it for the time being in consideration of the current security situation,"Tourism Minister John Amaratunga said in a statement. "Investigations have revealed foreign links to the (Easter) attacks and we don't want this programme to be abused." Sri Lanka had announced last month a plan to allow visa-free entry to tourists from 39 countries, including EU members, Australia and the United States, during the low season, from May 1. The scheme did not include China and India, from where many of Sri Lanka's visitors come.

Israel tells citizens to leave Sri Lanka

Israel yesterday urged its citizens travelling in Sri Lanka to leave the country, citing an "elevated concrete threat" following deadly Easter bombings there. The recommendation from Israel's counter-terrorism bureau said the travel warning was issued after consultations with security and foreign ministry officials. It said it was issuing the warning "in view of the deterioration in the security situation and the fear that the events have not yet ended or that there is a chance of their recurrence in the near future".lsraeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has offered aid to Sri Lankan authorities in the wake of the attacks which saw suicide bombers blow themselves up in luxury hotels and churches packed with Easter Sunday worshippers, killing nearly 360 people.

SOURCE: AFP, CNN



People attend the funeral of Dhami Brindya, 13, a victim of a string of suicide bomb attacks on churches and luxury hotels on Easter Sunday, in Negombo, Sri Lanka yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

No Priyanka vs Modi

INDIA POLLS

Congress again fields Ajay Rai from Varanasi

TNN, New Delhi

The Congress yesterday fielded local leader Ajay Rai from Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, ending weeks of speculation that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra could contest from the seat against Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Congress also fielded Madhusudan Tiwari from Gorakhpur against BJP's actor-turned politician Ravi Kishan.

Priyanka had earlier said that she will be happy to contest from Varanasi if asked by her brother and Congress president Rahul Gandhi. The Congress had fielded

Rai against Modi in 2014 as well. He finished third in the contest, after Modi and Aam Aadmi Party's Arvind Kejriwal. Last week, in response to a

question on whether he planned to field his sister against PM Modi, party chief Rahul Gandhi had said, "I will leave you in suspense. Suspense is not always a bad thing."

Priyanka herself triggered speculation that she might contest from the temple town when, in response to a question last month if she will make her electoral debut from her mother Sonia's constituency Rae Bareli, she quipped "why not Varanasi?"

Varanasi will vote in the last phase of Lok Sabha elections on May 19. The caste equation in Varanasi is broadly divided

approximately between Vaishyas (3 lakh), Kurmis (2.5 lakh), Brahmins (2.5 lakh), Bhumihars (1.3 lakh) and Rajputs (1 lakh) followed by Muslims (3 lakh), Yadavs (1.5 lakh) and Dalits (1 lakh). The 2014 election had witnessed AAP convenor

Arvind Kejriwal jump into the fray against Modi in

which he polled over 2 lakh votes ahead of Ajay Rai (75,614 votes) but lost to Modi by 3,71,784 votes. Upper castes have been faithful voters of BJP and the party has held the seat since 1991 with one exception - Congress' Rajesh Mishra defeated threetime BJP MP Shankar Prasad Jaiswal in the 2004 elections.

If Priyanka had thrown her hat into the ring from Varanasi,

Congress would be banking heavily on SP-BSP combine to withdraw their candidate. This would have effectively made the fight a direct contest between Modi and Priyanka. The 2014 total tally for SP, BSP, INC and AAP was 3,90,722 votes which would still be way behind Narendra Modi's 581022 votes. Apart from the caste arithmetic, Modi's record as an MP is outstanding.

BJP contesting more seats than Congress

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New

In a first, the Bharatiya Janata Party is contesting more seats than its chief rival the Congress in the ongoing Indian parliamentary election. The BJP has so far

declared 437 candidates for this year's polls to the 543-member Lok Sabha, the highest number of constituencies the saffron party has ever contested since it made its debut in national poll in 1980. On the other hand,

the Congress has fielded 423 candidates in this year's election and may announce a few more.

Ever since the BJP came to power in May 2014, the party has been winning a series of state assembly elections many of them at the expense of the Congress.

POLITICAL INFIGHTING

Lanka paying deadly price

Crucial intelligence that could have prevented Sri Lanka's Easter attacks went ignored in part because of feuding between the country's leaders, experts say.

The government has admitted "major" lapses in its failure to act on intelligence warnings, and analysts say a longstanding political crisis is to blame.

The warnings were clear: On April 11, Sri Lanka's police chief issued an alert saying that radical Islamist group National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ) planned suicide bombings of "prominent churches", citing alerts from a foreign intelligence agency.

The document was addressed to several top officials, but neither the prime minister nor the deputy defence minister were among the recipients.

That comes as little surprise to experts familiar with Sri Lanka's messy political scene, which has been dominated by wrangling between Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and President Maithripala Sirisena.

With elections due this year, the government is under mounting pressure.

'CRIMINAL NEGLIGENCE'

The attempt to shut out Wickremesinghe follows efforts by Sirisena to sack the premier last year. Although the prime minister was eventually reinstated after a court ruling, the bad blood between the two men persists. **NEWS ANALYSIS**

Govt admits "major" lapses

in its failure to act on intel

warnings

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Hours after the Easter

bombings Sunday that killed 359 people, Wickremesinghe called an urgent meeting of the armed forces chiefs. But Sirisena was still

out of the country on pressure holiday and the military leadership initially refused to attend, saying they answered solely to the president, official sources told AFP.

They only agreed to the request after Wickremesinghe turned up at their headquarters in the defence ministry,

the sources added. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, head of the Colombobased Centre for Policy Alternatives, said, "The leaders are there to protect the people and that they have failed to do and... (people) have paid with their lives. This is criminal

negligence." 'LOOKING FOR LEADERSHIP'

But bickering alone does not explain why Sri Lanka's security apparatus -- populated by officers with years of experience fighting a decades-long Tamil insurgency -ignored warnings of an attack. Political commentator Kusal Perera said the police were

familiar with the NTJ and its potential to carry out attacks, referring to a raid in January at a training camp that turned up explosives and detonators. "Is it only their responsibility to collect intelligence, not

question suspects? During the civil war they never waited for the president and prime minister to instruct them before rounding up suspects and interrogating people," Perera said. ICG analyst Keenan told AFP that "Sri Lankans have an

absolute right to be very angry but the problem is there is no way to hold anyone to account." "What you have is a fearful, brokenhearted public who

are looking for leadership and not finding it."

SOURCE: AFP

'Rich are playing with fire'

Indian SC hints at plot to malign judiciary after alleged conspiracy to discredit CJ

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday said it was anguished over the "systematic attack" on the judiciary and said time has come to tell the rich and powerful of this country that they are "playing with fire" and this must stop.

The apex court also ordered a probe headed by retired judge Justice A K Patnaik into an alleged conspiracy to discredit Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi. The court made it clear that the

inquiry by Justice Patnaik would not affect the Supreme Court's inhouse probe by a panel of three senior judges of the apex court into the allegations against the Chief Justice.

The panel is led by justice S A Bobde. This is the first time in the nearly sevendecade history of India's top court that a sexual harassment complaint against the Chief Justice of India will be probed by a

committee of three judges. A special bench, headed by Justice Arun

Mishra, expressed anguish with the way the judiciary has been treated for the past 3-4 years.

"The way this institution is treated in the last few years, we must say that we will not survive if this will happen," the bench, also comprising Justices R F Nariman and Deepak Gupta, said.

"There is a systematic attack, systematic game to malign this institution," the bench added.

The bench's remarks and order came on an affidavit filed by lawyer Utsav Bains claiming a conspiracy to frame Chief Justice Gogoi with sexual harassment allegations levelled by a sacked junior assistant of the court.

The bench said the allegations of "bench fixing are so serious that it requires investigation.

"The day has come when we have to rise and tell the powerful and rich people - you can't run the institution," said the bench adding "whenever big persons are involved these things are happening."



This handout picture released by the New Zealand Internal Affairs office yesterday shows Britain's Prince William (R) and New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (2nd R) attending Anzac Day services at the Auckland War Memorial Museum. Prince William paid tribute to Australian and New Zealand troops during the emotional Anzac Day ceremony, six weeks after the Christchurch mosques massacre.

PHOTO: AFP

Iran denounces US talks with Taliban

AFP, New York Iran on Wednesday criticised US talks with the Taliban on ending the Afghanistan war, saying Washington was

elevating the role of the militants. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif acknowledged that Iran had also opened dialogue with the Taliban but said that the US push for a deal with the extremists was "seriously wrong."

"An attempt to exclude everybody and just talk to the Taliban has alienated the government, has alienated the region, has alienated everybody else and it achieved nothing, as you've seen from the statement that came from the Taliban," Zarif said, apparently referring to the militants' announcement of a new spring offensive.

"I was the first to say that in any peace in Afghanistan, the Taliban cannot be set aside or isolated," Zarif said at the Asia Society in New York, which he was visiting to take part in a UN session. "But you cannot negotiate the future of Afghanistan

Afghan society, not all of it," he said. President Donald Trump has voiced impatience at

ending the longest-ever US war, launched after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad is set shortly to hold a

with the Taliban. The Taliban only represent a segment of

fresh round of talks in Qatar with the Taliban, with early indications saying Washington will agree to pull troops.

No screen time for babies

UN report suggests only 1 hour for kids under five

AP, London

The World Health Organization has issued its first-ever guidance for how much screen time children under 5 should get: not very much, and none at all for those under 1.

The UN health agency said Wednesday that kids under 5 should not spend more than one hour watching screens every day and that less is better.

The guidelines are somewhat similar to advice from the American Academy of Pediatrics. That group recommends children younger than 18 months should avoid screens other than video chats. It says parents of young children under two should choose "high-quality programming" with educational value and that can be watched with a parent to help kids understand what

they're seeing. Some groups said WHO's screen time guidelines failed to consider the potential benefits of digital media.

focuses on quantity of screen time and

of use," said Andrew Przybylski, director of research at the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford. "Not all screen time is created equal." Britain's Royal College of Paediatrics and

weak to allow its experts to set any thresholds for the appropriate level of screen time.

"Our research has shown that currently there is not strong enough evidence to

Child Health said the data available were too

support the setting of screen time limits," said Dr Max Davie, the college's Officer for Health Improvement. "The restricted screen time limits suggested by WHO do not seem proportionate to the potential harm," he said. WHO did not specifically detail

the potential harm caused by too much screen time, but said

the guidelines - which also included recommendations for physical activity and sleep - were needed to address the increasing amount of sedentary behavior in the general population. It noted that WHO's screen time advice "overly physical inactivity is a leading risk factor for death and a contributor to the rise in fails to consider the content and context obesity.

CHINA-LINKED CYBER ATTACK

Hong Kong office hit: Amnesty

AFP, Hong Kong

Amnesty International's Hong Kong office has been hit by a years-long cyberattack from hackers with known links to the Chinese government, the rights group said yesterday.

The attack comes at a time of growing concern in Hong Kong over shrinking freedoms as Beijing flexes its muscles and western nations fret about the global dominance of China in telecommunications networks. Amnesty said it first detected its systems had been

compromised on March 15 when its Hong Kong office migrated its IT infrastructure to the rights group's more secure international network as part of a scheduled upgrade. The group brought in a team of experts to investigate. "Cyber forensic experts were able to establish links

previously reported APT campaigns associated with the Chinese government," the group said in a statement. Advanced persistent threats (APTs) are the most complex and effective hacks that deploy significant know how and resources -- and they are usually carried out by,

between the infrastructure used in this attack and

or on behalf of, a state. China has long been accused by western governments, businesses and cyber analysts of using APT groups to carry out corporate and political espionage as well as pursue critics and opponents overseas, allegations it denies.

Gunmen kill polio vaccinator in Pak

REUTERS, Quetta

Gunmen shot and killed a female polio vaccinator yesterday, the fourth this week in the latest surge of violence against efforts to rid the world of the crippling childhood disease, an official said. Polio workers have come under attack in some parts of the word including Pakistan where hardline clerics and militants say the polio vaccine is a foreign ploy to sterilize Muslims and campaign workers are Western spies.

S Africa floods toll 'around 70'

AFP, Durban

Around 70 people have been killed in devastating floods in South Africa, an official said yesterday, while 1,000 people have been forced from their homes. Heavy rains have lashed the southeast of the country, tearing down ravaging homes and infrastructure in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Eastern Cape provinces.

Two children killed in Yemen fighting

Two children were killed fighting yesterday between proresumed government militias in Yemen's southwestern city of Taez, local officials and medical sources said. The clashes left a number of others wounded including civilians, the sources said. Fighting in the city has pitted militiamen from the Muslim Brotherhoodlinked Al-Islah party against fighters with the Salafist movement.