

NEWSIN brief

Indian group calls for ban on the veil

REUTERS, New Delhi

An Indian Hindu nationalist group allied with Prime Minister Narendra Modi called on Wednesday for a ban on veils after Sri Lanka prohibited the garments worn by some Muslim women following militant bomb attacks there. Sri Lanka imposed its ban on Monday to help security forces identify people after Easter Sunday suicide bomb attacks.

Coalition hits Yemen rebel drone site

AFP, Riyadh

The Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen raided a drone facility used by Huthi rebels at an airbase in the capital Sanaa, a spokesman said. The coalition has ramped up attacks on such sites after the Iran-aligned rebels warned last month they could launch attacks against the capitals of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which lead the military coalition against them.

Tunisia arrest of UN expert sparks row

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's arrest of an expert investigating possible violations of an arms embargo on war-torn Libya has sparked a diplomatic standoff between the North African country and the United Nations. Moncef Kartas, a member of a UN panel of experts, has been held for five weeks on suspicion of spying for unnamed "foreign parties" -- charges that could carry the death sentence.

BITS OF HISTORY (MAY 2)

1982: In the Falklands war, the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano was sunk by the British submarine Conqueror; over 350 men were killed.

1994: President FW de Klerk conceded victory to Nelson Mandela in South Africa's historic first all-race elections.

Monster storm targets India

Nearly 800,000 evacuated from coastal areas in east; emergency personnel deployed

REUTERS, Bhubaneswar

India has evacuated more than 300,000 people along its northeast coastline by boat, bus and train ahead of a severe cyclone due to make landfall today, with many villagers piling household possessions on to trucks before fleeing their homes.

Severe cyclonic storm Fani was churning up the Bay of Bengal about 320 km (198 miles) south-southwest of the Hindu temple town of Puri where special trains were put on to evacuate tourists and the beaches were empty.

In total, about 1.2 million people are expected to be evacuated from low-lying areas of 15 districts in the eastern state of Odisha to cyclone shelters, schools and other buildings, authorities said.

"We are maximising efforts at all levels for evacuation," Odisha's Special Relief Commissioner Bishnupada Sethi told Reuters.

Special trains were put on to evacuate tourists

Operations at two major ports -- Visakhapatnam and Paradip -- shut down



PHOTO: AFP

Indian fishermen pull a boat to higher ground on a beach in Puri in the eastern Indian state of Odisha yesterday as Cyclone Fani approached the Indian coastline.

Fani was generating maximum sustained winds of 170-180 km (105-111 miles) per hour, the state-run India Meteorological Department (IMD) said. Cyclone tracker Tropical Storm Risk rated Fani a mid-range category 3 storm.

The cyclone will make landfall by this afternoon, the IMD said.

The navy has deployed seven warships and has six planes and seven helicopters on standby along with divers, rubber boats, medical teams and relief materials.

Authorities have also shut down operations at two major ports - Paradip and Visakhapatnam - and ships have been ordered to move out to avoid damage.

In Paradip, television footage showed residents piling bicycles, sewing machines and gas cylinders on to small trucks and leaving for any of nearly 900 shelters supplied with food, water and medicines.

Odisha state government has deployed hundreds of disaster management personnel, closed schools and colleges

and asked doctors and other health officials not to go on leave until May 15.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday chaired a high-level meeting to review preparedness on the ground ahead of Cyclone Fani.

India's cyclone season can last from April to December, when severe storms batter coastal cities and cause widespread deaths and damage to crops and property in both India and neighbouring Bangladesh.

Technological advancements have helped meteorologists to predict weather patterns well in advance, giving authorities more time to prepare.

In 1999, a super-cyclone battered the coast of Odisha for 30 hours, killing 10,000 people. A mass evacuation of nearly a million people saved thousands of lives in 2013.

Indian Oil Corp, the country's top refiner, said its 300,000 barrels per day (bpd) Paradip refinery in Odisha state did not need to shut down for now.

An executive at Reliance Industries Ltd, which operates an oil and gas block off the east coast, said its operations had not been affected. India's National Aluminium Co Ltd said there was no need to halt operations.



Abe ready to meet Kim 'unconditionally': media

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has offered to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un "unconditionally" in a bid to restore diplomatic ties between the two historic foes, a daily said yesterday. Abe, seen as a foreign policy hawk, has recently softened his rhetoric towards Pyongyang, calling for a summit with Kim to resolve an emotional row over past kidnappings of Japanese nationals by Pyongyang agents. In an interview with the Sankei Shimbun on Wednesday, Abe said: "I want to meet Chairman Kim Jong Un unconditionally and talk with him frankly with an open mind. It is more than important for our country to be proactive in tackling the issue." "We can't break the shell of mutual distrust between Japan and North Korea unless I directly face Mr Kim," he said.

Myanmar troops kill 6, detain scores in Rakhine

Myanmar security forces shot dead at least six people in the troubled western state of Rakhine yesterday, after soldiers and police detained hundreds of people at a school, a military spokesman said. The soldiers had rounded up about 275 people during a search for members of the rebel Arakan Army, said Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun from the military's True News Information Team. There were conflicting accounts of events leading up to the shooting, which took place in an area off-limits to reporters and most aid agencies. Zaw Min Tun said some of the detainees attempted to seize weapons in the early hours of the morning, forcing security forces to fire into a crowd.



Cyprus justice minister resigns over serial killings

Cyprus Justice Minister Ionas Nicolaou said he resigned yesterday after a public outcry over the botched response to the serial killing of seven foreign women and girls. Nicolaou said he tendered his resignation to President Nicos Anastasiades for reasons of "principle and conscience", while adding he had no personal involvement in the case that went undetected for nearly three years. A suspect identified in Cypriot media as 35-year-old Greek Cypriot army officer Nicos Metaxas has confessed to the seven murders that have been dubbed the Mediterranean holiday island's first serial killings. The suspect reportedly met the women through online dating site Badoo before dumping their bodies.

Zakir Naik's TV channel blocked in Sri Lanka

Two of Sri Lanka's major cable TV operators have dropped controversial preacher Zakir Naik's Peace TV from their list of channels, media reports said, after the Easter Sunday blasts that killed over 250 people. India and Bangladesh have already banned his TV channel, which has allegedly been used by ISIS recruiters for indoctrination and brainwashing the youth. Sri Lanka's two of the largest cable operators "Dialogue" and "SLT" have stopped airing Zakir Naik's Peace TV. However, an official announcement on this yet to be made, Colombo Gazette reported. However, the Sri Lankan government has not banned the controversial Peace TV.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS, NDTV ONLINE

Sri Lanka mass cancelled over specific attack threat

Police name suicide bombers; death toll rises to 257

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Catholic Church has cancelled plans to resume Sunday services following a "specific threat" of fresh bomb attacks against at least two places of worship, a spokesman said.

The archbishop of Colombo, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, had wanted to resume regular mass from May 5, but the new information made them put it off indefinitely, his spokesman told AFP yesterday. "On the advice of the security forces, we have decided not to have Sunday masses in any of the churches," the spokesman said. "There is a specific threat against two locations."

The Church had planned to resume Sunday public services for the first time since the Easter Sunday attacks that killed 257 people.

Last Sunday the cardinal conducted a private memorial mass that was broadcast

live on television after cancelling all public services.

On Tuesday, he said he was closely monitoring investigations into the April 21 suicide attacks against three churches and three luxury hotels and wanted to be sure of the security situation before returning to regular services.

The services were cancelled a day after all political parties scrapped May Day rallies amid fears of bomb blasts.

The death toll from the Easter suicide bomb attacks in Sri Lanka has risen to 257, authorities said yesterday.

Police on Wednesday named nine people who staged Easter Sunday suicide bombings and said the attackers' assets will be confiscated in line with anti-terror laws.

Police spokesman Ruwan Gunasekera confirmed that two of the luxury hotels were bombed by two brothers from a wealthy Colombo family involved in spice exports.

All parties scrapped May Day rallies amid fears of bomb blasts

US, Taliban peace summit wraps up

Afghans call for ceasefire

AFP, Kabul

Afghan officials yesterday called for a ceasefire as a huge peace summit wound down in Kabul after thousands of delegates spent days discussing possible conditions for a peace deal with the Taliban.

This week's "loya jirga", or grand assembly, saw more than 3,000 religious and tribal leaders, politicians and representatives from across the country gather under tight security to discuss the possibility of peace.

The Taliban, who were not at the talks, are this week separately meeting in Doha with US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad in a bid to make a deal with Washington that could see the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan.

While the full results of the summit may not be announced until today, several committee leaders said they wanted to see an immediate pause in violence, which has continued apace across Afghanistan even with various peace summits taking place.

"Every day, Afghans are being killed without any reason. An unconditional ceasefire must be announced," said Mohammad Qureshi, head of one of the jirga's many committees.

Modi gets polls boost

UN adds Pak militant chief to terror list; India calls for Pak's blacklisting by FATF

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's re-election bid received a big fillip on Wednesday after a UN Security Council committee blacklisted Masood Azhar, the head of a Pakistan-based militant group, a decade after New Delhi first demanded such an action.

Azhar's Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb attack in Indian-administered Kashmir in February that killed 40 Indian paramilitary police. JeM was also blamed for a high-profile attack on India's parliament in 2001, and local media often calls Azhar the country's "enemy No. 1".

In response to the suicide attack in Kashmir, which is also claimed by Pakistan, Modi sent warplanes into the nuclear-armed neighbour to bomb what New Delhi called a militant camp.

Modi has since made national security

the main plank in the country's 39-day general election that began on April 11. Results will be out on May 23, and political analysts said the news on Azhar will further energise the massive cadre of Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"The world can't anymore ignore the voice of 1.3 billion Indians," Modi said at an election rally, calling the UN decision a great diplomatic victory for the country. "This is only a beginning."

Beijing said on Wednesday it had no objections to Azhar's listing after studying revised proposals at UN.

Meanwhile, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said yesterday India will ask Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to put Pakistan on a blacklist of countries that fail to meet international standards in stopping financial crime.



India working on robot soldiers

First prototype to be build by December 2019

TOI, Bengaluru

As part of enhancing India's defence capabilities, scientists have been quietly working on all-terrain artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled robots that may eventually patrol the country's borders.

Scientists from defence PSU Bharat Electronics Limited's (BEL) Central Research Laboratory (CRL) in Bengaluru, who began work on this first responder robot in December 2018, are confident of having the first prototype by December 2019. BEL CMD Gowthama MV told TOI: "AI will change how some critical operations are conducted by the armed forces, and our robot will even be able to patrol the borders."

Although Ajay Kumar, secretary, defence production, has said the prototype of this robot, along with a few other AI-enabled products from BEL will be ready this year, there has been no specific requirements from the armed forces sent to BEL so far.

"Like Steve Jobs said, users don't know what they want until you show it to them. As a company committed to R&D, we want to be able to show capabilities that can become useful

for armed forces, this is one such project," Gowthama said.

He said BEL has started putting together preliminary requirements for design and implementation of the project and has already conducted training programmes to build competency in AI.

Globally, companies like Irobot Corporation, Northrop Grumman Corporation, Mitsubishi, Thales Group, BAE Systems, General Dynamics Corporation, et al, have been working on first responder border patrol robots. Korea has been building completely different kind of robots--some reports describe them as machines inspired by the Avatar movie.

Experts TOI spoke with--security observers, former military commanders and members of think-tanks--say India is likely to take at least a decade, if not more, to have a functional robot that can perform this task.

"Future wars will not be fought on conventional basis...AI-enabled products will aid decision-making. Robots can save lives of soldiers deployed for border surveillance. The Centre is making efforts to ensure that martyr families are provided a compensation of not less than Rs 1 crore. AI-enabled robots can also help in saving precious lives," Gowthama said.



BORDER PATROL



Students take to street on the 17th Friday of strike action, organised by 'Youth For Climate', urging pupils to skip classes to protest a lack of climate awareness and action by governments in Brussels, Belgium yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP