

EASTER SUNDAY ATTACK PROBE

Lanka cop testifies, defying president

A Sri Lankan police officer yesterday defied President Maithripala Sirisena and testified before a parliamentary investigation into the Easter Sunday suicide bombings that killed 258 people. Sirisena has come in for major criticism after ordering top brass not to allow police, military or intelligence personnel to take part in hearings into the attacks being held by a parliamentary committee. The president, who has said the hearings could reveal classified information, is accused by critics of presiding over a security and intelligence apparatus which ignored warnings that could have prevented the attack on three churches and luxury hotels. Yesterday, the committee heard evidence -- much of it in camera -- from Inspector N. B. Kasthuriarachchi, who had been in charge of an area where the bombing mastermind was based before he went underground in the months prior to the attack. Deputy parliamentary speaker Ananda Kumarasiri opened the hearing with a warning to public servants that refusing to cooperate with the committee could lead to a 10-year jail term. "Anyone who refuses to appear... or withholds any evidence, will be violating the parliamentary privileges act and will be liable to punishment," he said. The state telecommunication service provider, which previously broadcast live proceedings of the hearing on cable TV, stopped doing so after a presidential order two weeks ago. They can still be followed, however, on the parliament website as well as private news channels broadcasting proceedings on social media platforms such as Facebook. Two weeks ago Sirisena sacked national intelligence chief Sisira Mendis after he testified that the attacks could have been prevented.



Rescue workers search for survivors in the rubble after earthquakes hit Changning county in Yibin, Sichuan province, China yesterday. Inset, an injured woman reacts near earthquake-damaged buildings in Yibin. The death toll from two strong earthquakes in China rose to 12 with 122 people injured, state media said.

India sacks 15 senior tax officials over corruption

India yesterday sacked 15 senior tax officials facing probes in corruption cases, sending across a tough message to bureaucrats taking kickbacks for facilitating tax evasion by companies, a government statement said. The list is headed by Principal Commissioner Anup Srivastava, who has two cases against him filed by the Central Bureau of Investigation. The charges involve criminal conspiracy and bribery. Besides, he is accused of harassment, extortion, non-vacation of government flats and disproportionate assets. Commissioner Atul Dikshit is also facing two CBI cases of fraud and disproportionate assets against him. Last week, the government had dismissed 12 income tax officials who were mainly facing corruption charges.



NZ man jailed for sharing video of mass shooting

A New Zealand man was jailed for 21 months yesterday for distributing a video of a mass shooting at the Christchurch mosque attacks that killed 51 Muslim worshippers, local media reported. Philip Arps, 44, was arrested in Christchurch four days after alleged gunman Brenton Tarrant's March 15 rampage at two mosques in the South Island city resulted in the worst massacre in modern New Zealand history. Arps pleaded guilty to two charges of distributing objectionable material for sharing footage that was livestreamed to social media during the attack. Christchurch District Court heard Arps distributed the raw footage to about 30 people and had another version that was modified to include crosshairs and a "kill count", the New Zealand Herald reported.

Iran won't wage war

Says Rouhani as US sends more troops to ME; Russia, China tell Washington to stop stoking tensions

Tehran, which has denied involvement in the tanker attacks last week and in May, has urged other signatories to take action to save the nuclear pact or see Iran turn its back on the deal. On Monday Iran warned it would soon breach limits on how much enriched uranium it can stockpile under a 2015 nuclear deal, which had sought to limit its nuclear capabilities. The growing standoff drew calls for restraint from Russia and China. China's top diplomat warned that the world should not open a "Pandora's Box" in the Middle East, as he denounced US pressure on Iran and called on it not to drop out of the landmark nuclear deal. Russia told the US to cease actions that looked like a conscious attempt to provoke war with Iran, and urged restraint on all sides, reported Reuters. Acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan on Monday announced the deployment of about 1,000 more troops to the Middle East for what he said were defensive purposes, citing concerns about a threat from Iran. Rouhani said Iran did not seek conflict and dismissed US efforts to isolate Iran and suggested the Trump administration was inexperienced in international affairs. Iran said yesterday it has dismantled a new espionage network linked to the US Central Intelligence Agency and arrested a number of spies, reported AFP. Meanwhile, Saudi air defences intercepted two drones fired by Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi group, one of them targeting a residential area in the southern Saudi city of Abha, Saudi media said yesterday.



CIA's spy network dismantled: Iran Saudi defence forces intercept two Yemeni rebel drones

HK leader sorry

Signals end to extradition bill after protests, but refuses to step down

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam yesterday apologised for the political unrest that has shaken Hong Kong, but the pro-Beijing chief executive refused to bow to demands for her resignation. The semi-autonomous territory has been plunged into its biggest crisis in decades, with millions of people taking to the streets to demand the withdrawal of proposed legislation that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China. Lam suspended the bill on Saturday after two massive rallies that saw isolated bouts of violence between the police and some protesters. But that failed to quell public anger, and an even bigger rally Sunday drew over two million people, organisers said -- more than a quarter of the population. "I personally have to shoulder much of the responsibility. This has led to controversies, disputes and anxieties in society," Lam told a press conference. "For this I offer my most sincere apology to all people of Hong Kong." Activists have demanded the bill be withdrawn fully, for Lam to step down, and for police to be investigated for using tear gas and rubber bullets against protesters. They have also asked for all charges to be dropped against anyone detained during the protests. But Lam gave no indication she was prepared to step down, saying instead she wanted to "continue to work very hard... to meet the aspirations of the Hong Kong people".

China harvesting organs from detainees: tribunal

China continues to kill prisoners of conscience for organ transplants, a panel of lawyers and experts claimed on Monday. The China Tribunal, an independent panel set up by a campaign group, said there was clear evidence that forced and deadly organ harvesting had been taking place over at least 20 years. Beijing has repeatedly denied accusations by human rights researchers and scholars that it forcibly removes organs from prisoners of conscience. The UK-based panel said it was "satisfied" that forced organ harvesting was still taking place after hearing evidence that members of the Falun Gong group continue to be killed in the process of having their organs extracted.

NEWS IN brief

UN calls for probe into death of Morsi. The UN yesterday called for an "independent inquiry" into the death of former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, who died in state custody. "Any sudden death in custody must be followed by a prompt, impartial, thorough and transparent investigation carried out by an independent body to clarify the cause of death," said Rupert Colville, spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Russia says victim of US cyberattacks 'for years'.



Protesters hold placards at a rally near Indonesia's constitutional court during a hearing on the opposition challenge to April's presidential election result in Jakarta, Indonesia yesterday.

Trump vows removals of 'millions of illegal aliens'

Slashes aid to three Central American states. President Donald Trump said on Monday that US authorities would begin next week removing millions of immigrants who are in the United States illegally. "Next week ICE will begin the process of removing the millions of illegal aliens who have illicitly found their way into the United States," Trump tweeted, referring to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. "They will be removed as fast as they come in," he said. He did not offer specifics. There are an estimated 12 million immigrants who are in the United States illegally, mainly from Mexico and Central America. Under a deal reached earlier this month, Mexico has agreed to take Central American immigrants seeking asylum in the United States until their cases are heard in US courts. The agreement, which included Mexico pledging to deploy National Guard troops to stop Central American immigrants from reaching the US border, averted a Trump threat to hit Mexican imports with tariffs. Trump also said in the tweet that Guatemala "is getting ready to sign a Safe-Third Agreement." US Vice President Mike Pence suggested last week that Guatemala could receive asylum seekers from its neighbours as a so-called safe third country. Details of the plan have not been made public, and Guatemala has not publicly confirmed talks that the US State Department said were taking place in Guatemala on Friday. Trump's administration on Monday cut hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, after Trump blasted the three countries because thousands of their citizens had sought asylum at the US border with Mexico.



'It remains our brand'

Ukraine president faces furious backlash from activists over beautiful women comment

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has described beautiful women as part of the country's "brand", prompting a furious backlash from activists and on social media yesterday. "Tourists have always said that Ukraine is very beautiful, the food there is very tasty and the people are very beautiful, especially the women," the recently elected leader said during an official visit to Paris Monday. "Yes, that's correct and it remains our brand," the former comedian said. But Tetyana Pechonchyk, head of Ukraine's Human Rights Information Centre NGO, said following the comments that Ukraine's "true brand" is sexism. "Presidents are changing, sexism remains," she wrote on her Facebook page, recalling an incident when ex-leader Viktor Yanukovich made a joke about undressing Ukrainian women during a speech to the Davos economic forum. Zelensky's predecessor Petro Poroshenko also called on a female reporter as "my darling" during a press conference, Pechonchyk wrote. "A woman is a person, not a brand. Women's rights are human rights!" the Insight LGBTQ organisation said. Meanwhile the hashtags #Iamnotyourbrand and #Iamnotyourtourismbrand were trending on Ukrainian social media. Activist Dana Yarovaya noted that Ukrainian women were "not just a beautiful national brand", but also taking part in Kiev's bloody conflict with Russian-backed separatists in the country's east. "Ukrainian women... have treated the wounded, dragged the wounded out from under shelling and supplied the army," the former army volunteer said.



Four Indian troops killed in J&K clashes

Indian troops yesterday fought a gun battle with Kashmir rebels after a car bomb attack and other clashes left four soldiers and three militants dead in 24 hours, military officials said. A soldier and two suspected rebels were killed in the latest shootout in the Anantnag area of India-administered Kashmir, army spokesman Colonel Rajesh Kalia said in a statement. Another two soldiers were killed and many more wounded when a car bomb hit an Indian military truck late Monday in Pulwama district. The remote-control bomb was set off in the same district as where a suicide bomber in February killed 40 paramilitaries.

Urbanisation, farms threaten Asia's forests

Sprawling urban areas and expanding plantations are placing greater pressure on forests and resources in Asia-Pacific, hurting rural communities and exacerbating the effects of climate change, the United Nations food agency said on Tuesday. The region has the world's lowest per capita forest area of 19% compared to the global average of 32%, even as the total forest area increased by nearly 18 million hectares (44 million acres) between 1990 and 2015, a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said. While some Asian countries have introduced policies to conserve forests and give more rights to indigenous people, the area of planted forest nearly doubled between 1990 and 2015 at the expense of more critical primary forests, it said. "We are worried about the lack of forest quality in our region -- as primary forests are rich in biodiversity -- and once that's gone it's gone," said Kundhavi Kadiresan, FAO assistant director-general and regional representative in Bangkok. "Unfortunately, conservation of forests in one country often just shifts deforestation to another," she said. Forests have been recognised as key to climate-change mitigation and adaptation, yet expanding populations and increasing demand for minerals and other resources are placing greater stress on them, according to conservationists. Governments control more than two-thirds of global forest area, much of which is claimed by local communities, according to an advocacy group Rights and Resources Initiative. The area of planted forests, which included plantations, almost doubled in the region between 1990 and 2015, and made up 17% of total forest area, compared to the global average of 7%, according to the FAO. Meanwhile, the area designated for or owned by indigenous people and local communities grew by about 17 million hectares between 2002 and 2017, the FAO said.

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