

HK PROTESTS

44 charged with rioting

Police say dozens of Hong Kong protesters detained during recent clashes will be charged with rioting -- an offence that carries a jail term of up to ten years -- as the finance hub's embattled pro-Beijing leaders crack down on weeks of demonstrations.

Hong Kong has been hit by seven weeks of mass protest rallies -- some of which have ended in violence -- triggered by a controversial bill which would have allowed extraditions to mainland China.

They have evolved into calls for wider democratic reforms and a halt to sliding freedoms in the most significant challenge to Beijing's rule since the city's 1997 handover.

Recent weeks have seen a dramatic surge in the level of violence used by both protesters and police who have repeatedly fired rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse projectile-throwing crowds.

In the latest clashes on



Sunday, protesters fought running battles with riot officers in a well-heeled residential suburb on the main island with 49 arrests made.

A senior police source yesterday said that 44 of those arrested were being charged with rioting and are expected to appear in court on Wednesday morning.

Rioting is one of the most serious public order offences on Hong Kong's statute books and carries a sentence of up to a decade in jail.

The move to charge the 44 protesters comes a day after Beijing publicly threw its weight behind Hong Kong's unelected leader Carrie Lam and the police, saying violent protesters must be swiftly punished.



Iraqi Kurds mourn at the site of a mass grave of victims likely killed during the reign of ex-dictator Saddam Hussein in Tal al-Sheikhia in the southern province of Mutahanna, about 300 kilometres south of the capital, yesterday. Inset, Two women mourn at the site. Mutahanna province is also home to the notorious Nigrat Salman prison camp. Many Kurds and political opponents of the previous regime were held there, and survivors shared tales of humiliation, rape and detention of minors as part of Saddam's 2006 trial.

PHOTO: AFP

Bill on 'Triple Talaq' clears Rajya Sabha

NDTV ONLINE

The contentious bill to ban 'Triple Talaq', which failed the India's upper house of parliament, the Rajya Sabha, test last time, sailed through the opposition-dominated upper house yesterday aided by a series of walkouts and abstentions.

The bill, which sought to end the practice of Muslim men instantly divorcing their wives by uttering "talaq" thrice, saw stiff opposition when it was presented in the Lok Sabha.

But several of the parties that opposed it - including Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal United, AIADMK and K Chandrashekar Rao's Telangana Rashtra Samithi -- ended up aiding the bill's passage.

While the AIADMK and Nitish Kumar's party walked out, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi abstained from voting, bringing down the majority mark. Several opposition lawmakers also gave the vote a miss. The list of absentees included Sharad Pawar, Praful Patel, four lawmakers from the Congress and two from the Samajwadi Party.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, after the bill was passed in Rajya Sabha, tweeted that it was a victory of gender justice.

"An archaic and medieval practice has finally been confined to the dustbin of history! Parliament abolishes Triple Talaq and corrects a historical wrong done to Muslim women. This is a victory of gender justice and will further equality in society. India rejoices today!" Modi tweeted.

The bill was passed, with 99 votes in its favour and 84 against.

Trump wants forces reduced in Afghanistan by next US polls

Says Pompeo; forces killing more civilians than Taliban: UN

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump wants combat forces reduced in Afghanistan by the next US presidential election, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Monday, in comments that underlined the growing pressure from Washington to cut troop numbers there.

Trump's South Asia strategy, unveiled in August 2017, called for an open-ended deployment of US forces with the goal of compelling the Taliban to negotiate peace with the Kabul government to end nearly 18 years of war.

However, Pompeo's comments underscored a shift that has apparently taken place since talks with the Taliban opened last year.

"That's my directive from the president of the United States," Pompeo told The Economic Club of Washington DC when asked whether he expects the United States to reduce troops in Afghanistan before the next election in November 2020.

"He's been unambiguous: end the endless wars, draw down, reduce. It won't just be us," he said, referring to Trump's directive. "We hope that overall the need for combat forces in the region is reduced."

Pompeo's comments come at a delicate

moment, as Afghanistan prepares for a presidential election of its own in September and the United States prepares to engage in another round talks with the insurgents. Disclosing Trump's goal of withdrawing forces could weaken the US negotiating position if the Taliban believe Trump wants to get out, no matter what.

Meanwhile, the United Nations yesterday denounced the "shocking and unacceptable" level of civilian deaths in Afghanistan's war despite a push to end the 18-year-old conflict.

The latest information from the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) shows a 27 percent drop in casualties for the first half of 2019 compared to the same period last year -- which was a record -- but nonetheless, 1,366 civilians were killed and another 2,446 injured.

UNAMA also said that for the second quarter running, US and pro-government forces caused more civilian deaths than the Taliban and other insurgent groups. During the first half of 2019 pro-government forces, including the US, killed 717 civilians, an increase of 31 percent from a year earlier.

Most of the deaths came from US and Afghan air strikes, often in support of national forces on the ground.

164 land, environmental activists murdered in 2018

At least 164 land and environmental activists were murdered last year for defending their homes, lands and natural resources from exploitation by mining, food and logging firms, Global Witness said yesterday. The charity watchdog's annual land defenders report found "countless" more people were silenced through violence, intimidation and the use and misuse of anti-protest laws across the world. By far the most dangerous place for activists and indigenous communities was the Philippines, which saw 30 murders in 2018, the report said. Colombia and India saw 24 and 23 deaths linked to environmental activism in 2018, while Guatemala was the deadliest nation for land defenders per head of population with 16 confirmed killings. The biggest single massacre documented by the group in 2018 occurred in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, with 13 people murdered after protesting the environmental impact of a copper mine.

Muslims rejoin Lanka govt

Sri Lanka's Muslim ministers who resigned en-masse in the wake of the deadly Easter Sunday bombings have rejoined the government, officials said yesterday, after police cleared them of any involvement with Islamists. Nearly 100 people linked to a local jihadist group were arrested after the April 21 attacks on three churches and three luxury hotels that killed 258 people. Nine government legislators, several of them cabinet ministers, resigned in early June after a Buddhist lawmaker demanded their sacking and accused them of terror links. "The ministers, state ministers and deputy ministers who resigned recently were sworn in before the president last night," a statement from the president's office said. A spokesman for the lawmakers said they decided to accept their old portfolios after police cleared them of any links with Islamists involved with the bombings.

Malaysia installs new king



Pahang's Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin, was installed as Malaysia's 16th Malaysian King yesterday in a ceremony steeped in royal customs and tradition. The installation came six months after the surprise abdication of his predecessor, Sultan Muhammad V of Kelantan. The ceremony was attended by members of Malaysia's nine royal houses and local political leaders including Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Foreign royals, including the Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Hassanall Bolikiah and his consort Raja Isteri Pengiran Anak Hajah Saleha, as well as the Crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, were also present. Malaysia's kings are elected by the rulers of the country's nine states, who take turns in serving five-year terms.

SOURCE: AFP, THE STRAIT TIMES

No physical checks on Irish border after Brexit

Johnson promises Varadkar, urges EU to compromise

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday promised Ireland's Leo Varadkar there would be no physical checks on the border between their two countries after Brexit, a spokeswoman said.

But in their first phone call since he took office, Johnson repeated that the current "backstop" plan to keep the frontier open, which is included in the EU's draft divorce deal, was unacceptable.

"On Brexit, the prime minister made clear that the UK will be leaving the EU on October 31, no matter what," a Downing Street spokeswoman said.

"He said that in all scenarios, the government will be steadfast in its commitment to the Belfast Agreement and will never put physical checks or physical infrastructure on the border."

The Belfast or Good Friday Agreement brought peace to Northern Ireland after



years of violence over British control which left 3,500 people dead.

Removing checks on the border with Ireland was considered a key factor in reducing tensions. But after Brexit, that border will become part of the EU's external frontier and should therefore be policed accordingly.

Johnson approached Brexit taking "in a spirit of friendship, and that his clear preference is to leave the EU with a deal, but it must be one that abolishes the backstop", the spokeswoman added.

The British PM on Monday urged EU leaders to drop their opposition to renegotiating Brexit.

"The withdrawal agreement is dead," Johnson told reporters during his first visit to Scotland as premier.

"I am confident we will get a deal but it is also right we prepare for no deal," the Conservative leader said.

However, EU leaders have said they will not renegotiate the deal they struck with Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May.



Activists from India's main opposition Congress party try to cross a police barricade during a protest demanding investigation in a highway collision in which a woman who is fighting a rape case against a legislator of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was critically injured, in Lucknow, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Brazil prison riot kills 57

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

At least 57 inmates were killed during a prison riot in northern Brazil on Monday as rival gang factions fought each other, an official said.

Sixteen of the dead were decapitated in the second major eruption of violence to rock the country's severely overpopulated and deadly prison system in as many months.

Fighting broke out in the Altamira Regional Recovery Center at around 7:00 am (1000 GMT), an official from the Para state government's penitentiary department told AFP.

Two guards were taken hostage during the hours-long clashes, which were brought under control at around midday. The guards were eventually freed.

Brazilian TV stations showed footage of thick black smoke rising from the prison compound and people sitting on the roof of a building.

Other images showed flames inside a building that almost reached the ceiling and people, apparently prisoners, sitting



Some of the bodies had not yet been recovered due to the heat inside some of the prison structures.

The Ministry of Justice and Public Security said ringleaders of the violence would be transferred to federal jails, which are more secure. About 311 prisoners were being held at the jail, which the department said

was not overcrowded. It reportedly has a capacity for 200 inmates.

Brazil has the world's third-largest prison population after the United States and China, with 726,354 inmates as of June 2017, according to the latest official statistics released this month. The population is way above the capacity of the nation's jails, which in the same year was estimated to be 423,242 inmates.

The federal government had been expected to add another 115,000 inmates by the end of 2018, Human Rights Watch said in a recent report.

Around 33 percent of the prison population is made up of pretrial detainees.

Along with severe overcrowding and gang violence, riots and breakout attempts in Brazil's prisons are not uncommon.

Experts estimate hundreds of people are killed in prison violence every year in Brazil. Conditions have been described as inhuman, with most inmates poor, black and with little formal education.

India outlaws Muslim 'instant divorce'

AFP, New Delhi

India's parliament passed yesterday a law against the Muslim practice of "instant divorce", making it a criminal offence punishable by up to three years in prison.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist government pushed through the bill despite stiff resistance from several opposition parties and a previous failed attempt to move the bill in the upper house.

"An archaic and medieval practice has finally been confined to the dustbin of history," Modi tweeted after the bill finally cleared the upper house.

"Parliament abolishes Triple Talaq and corrects a historical wrong done to Muslim women. This is a victory of gender justice and will further equality in society. India rejoices today!" Instant divorce, or "triple talaq," is when a Muslim man ends his marriage by simply saying "talaq" -- which means "you are divorced" in Arabic -- three times in succession.

The Supreme Court declared the practice

unconstitutional in 2017 and asked the government to legislate against it.

Modi held a sizable lower house majority in his first term when he first attempted to outlaw it, but did not have sufficient upper house support to pass the law.

Following his resounding victory in general elections in May, his government sought to pass the contentious legislation against a significantly weakened and dispirited opposition, even as several opposition parliamentarians argued against making divorce a criminal act.

The law, which was passed by the lower house last week, will come into effect after receiving a formal nod from the president.

Besides a jail term and a fine, the law will require Muslim men to support their wives, who will also get children's custody.

The 2017 high court ruling came after several Muslim women petitioned the top court, arguing that the unilateral power of Muslim men to end marriages violated India's constitution by infringing on their fundamental right to equality.

XINJIANG CAMPS

'Most' inmates are out, found jobs: China

AFP, Beijing

Chinese officials yesterday said "most" individuals held in re-education camps in its northwest Xinjiang region have left the centres and found jobs -- though they did not provide any figures.

In Xinjiang, experts and human rights groups say more than one million Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities are held in a network of camps where they endure political indoctrination.

But Alken Tuniaz, vice chairman of Xinjiang, told reporters at a press briefing that "most personnel who have received educational training have already returned to society and have returned home."

"Right now, most have already completed their studies and obtained employment," he said.

After initially denying their existence, Beijing has gone on a public relations blitz to defend what it calls "vocational education centres" as a necessary measure to counter religious extremism.

At a press conference in Beijing, officials from Xinjiang called the centres "effective."

"After these past one to two years of effort, most of the people at the training centres who return to society -- you could say more than 90 percent -- have found work that they like and find suitable," Shohrat Zakir, chairman of Xinjiang, told reporters.

He also said the centres aim to teach inmates three topics: Chinese law, Mandarin, and "the true meaning of religion."

A Kazakh businessman, who spent nearly two months in a camp, told AFP the facilities only had one goal: to strip detainees of their religious belief.