

Indian Sikhs make historic pilgrimage to Pakistan

AFP, Kartarpur

Hundreds of Indian Sikhs made a historic pilgrimage to Pakistan yesterday, crossing through a white gate to reach one of their religion's holiest sites, after a landmark deal between the two countries separated by the 1947 partition of the subcontinent.

Cheering Sikhs walked joyfully along the road from Dera Baba Nanak in India towards the new immigration hall that would allow them to pass through a secure land corridor into Pakistan, in a rare example of cooperation between the nuclear-armed countries divided by decades of enmity.

Some fathers ran, carrying their children on their shoulders.

Buses were waiting on the Pakistani side to carry them along the corridor to the shrine to Sikhism's founder Guru Nanak, which lies in Kartarpur, a small town just four kilometres (2.5 miles) inside Pakistan where he is believed to have died.

"Generally people say that God is everywhere. But this walk feels like I'm going to directly seek blessings from Guru Nanak," Surjit Singh Bajwa told AFP as he walked towards the corridor, crying as he spoke.

At 78, he is older than India and Pakistan, who have fought three wars already and nearly ignited a fourth earlier this year.

For up to 30 million Sikhs around the world, the white-domed shrine is one of their holiest sites.



However for Indian Sikhs, it has remained tantalisingly close -- so close they could stand at the border and gaze at its four cupolas -- but out-of-reach for decades.

When Pakistan was carved out of colonial India at the end of British rule in 1947, Kartarpur ended up on the western side of the border, while most of the region's Sikhs remained on the other side.

Since then, the perennial state of enmity between India and Pakistan has been a constant barrier to those wanting to visit the temple, known in Sikhism as a gurdwara.

Among the first pilgrims was former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who told Pakistani state media that it was a "big moment".

The opening even inspired a singular message of gratitude from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to his Pakistani counterpart Imran Khan for "respecting the sentiments of India".

For his part, Khan said a day would come "when our relations with India will improve". "I am hopeful that this the beginning," he told the pilgrims at the shrine.

For years India had been asking Pakistan to grant Sikhs access to the shrine.

Many believe it has happened now because of the friendship between Khan, a World Cup winning cricketer-turned politician, and India's Navjot Singh Sidhu -- another cricketer-turned-politician.

Europe must defend 'democracy, freedom'

Says Merkel as Germany marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of Berlin Wall

AFP, Berlin

Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday urged Europe to defend democracy and freedom as Germany marked 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, warning that such gains must not be taken for granted.

At a solemn ceremony in a church standing on the former "death strip" that divided East and West, Merkel said the Berlin Wall reminds "us that we have to do our part for freedom and democracy".

"The values upon which Europe is founded... they are anything but self-evident. And they must always be lived out and defended anew," she told guests from across the continent.

On November 9, 1989, East German border guards, overwhelmed by large crowds, threw open the gates to West Berlin, allowing free passage for the first time since the Berlin Wall was built.

The momentous event would end up bringing the communist regime crashing down, and led to German reunification a year later.

But the euphoria for liberal democracy that characterised the epochal event then has somewhat dissipated three decades on, as the Western alliance that helped secure those achievements is riddled with divisions.

Cracks have appeared within the European Union as former eastern bloc countries like Hungary or Poland are accused by Brussels of challenging the rule of law.

Domestically, Germany is also struggling with a resurgent far-right, which has gained a strong foothold in its former communist states by championing a nationalist and anti-immigration message.

Merkel said the past must serve as a lesson, noting that the collapse of the Berlin Wall is "history and teaches us that no wall that keeps people out and limits freedom is so high or so wide that it cannot be broken through."



Japan celebrates Emperor Naruhito's enthronement

Tens of thousands of people gathered yesterday at a national festival to celebrate the enthronement of Japan's Emperor Naruhito with dancers and pop stars offering jubilant performances. Some 10,000 citizens who won hard-to-get tickets and 20,000 invited guests attended the evening festival at Tokyo's Imperial Palace Plaza, which was broadcast live across the nation. The festival came after Naruhito completed his ascension to the Chrysanthemum throne on October 22 in a ceremony steeped in the traditions and grandeur of a monarchy that claims 2,000 years of history. Today, the royal couple will parade in a convertible car along a 4.6-kilometre (2.9-mile) route from the palace to their residence in central Tokyo to mark the enthronement.

US identifies likely culprit of vaping illness outbreak

US health officials said Friday they had identified vitamin E acetate as the likely culprit behind a vaping-linked lung injury epidemic that has killed 39 people and sickened more than two thousand. Investigators have previously pointed to the oil, which is sometimes used as a thickening agent for vaping products that contain the psychoactive substance THC, as a possible cause of the outbreak. But they are more certain now after it was detected in all 29 patients selected for a lung fluid study carried out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Vitamin E acetate is found in many foods and is also used in supplements and in cosmetics products like skin cream, but interferes with lung function when inhaled. The announcement came as President Donald Trump said he supported raising the minimum age for the purchase of e-cigarettes from 18 to 21 as part of a plan to curtail a surge in youth vaping.

US wants UN to take up Dalai Lama succession

The United States wants the United Nations to take up the Dalai Lama's succession in an intensifying bid to stop China from trying to handpick his successor, an envoy said after meeting the Tibetan spiritual leader. Sam Brownback, the US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, said he spoke at length about the succession issue with the 84-year-old Dalai Lama last week in the monk's home-in-exile of Dharamsala, India. Brownback said he told the Dalai Lama that the United States would seek to build global support for the principle that the choice of the next spiritual chief "belongs to the Tibetan Buddhists and not the Chinese government." "I would hope that the UN would take the issue up," Brownback told AFP after returning to Washington.

Brazil's leftist icon Lula walks free from jail



Brazil's leftist icon Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva walked free from jail Friday after a year and a half behind bars for corruption following a court ruling that could release thousands of convicts. The former president, wearing a black T-shirt and suit jacket, pumped his fist in the air as he exited the federal police headquarters in the southern city of Curitiba and was quickly mobbed by hundreds of supporters and journalists. In an impassioned address, Lula vowed to "continue fighting" for ordinary Brazilians and expose the "lying side of the federal police." Late Thursday, the Supreme Court overturned a rule requiring convicted criminals to go to jail after losing their first appeal. Lula is one of several thousand convicts who could benefit from the decision. Those convicts would remain free until they had exhausted their rights to appeal -- a process critics say could take years in cases involving people able to afford expensive lawyers. SOURCE: AFP

Iran to enrich uranium to five percent

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said it is now enriching uranium to five percent, after a series of steps back from its commitments under a troubled 2015 accord with major powers.

The deal set a 3.67 percent limit for uranium enrichment but Iran announced it would no longer respect it after Washington unilaterally abandoned the agreement last year and reimposed crippling sanctions.

"Based on our needs and what we have been ordered, we are currently producing five percent," Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi told a press conference.

He said Iran has the "capacity to produce five percent, twenty percent, sixty percent, or any percentage" of enriched uranium, a claim often repeated by Tehran.

Uranium enrichment is the sensitive process that produces fuel for nuclear power plants but also, in highly extended form, the fissile core for a warhead.

The current five percent level exceeds the limit set by the accord but is less than the 20 percent Iran had previously operated and far less than the 90 percent level required for a warhead.

In its fourth step away from the agreement, Iran resumed enrichment at the Fordow plant south of Tehran on Thursday, with engineers feeding uranium hexafluoride gas (UF6) into the plant's mothballed enrichment centrifuges.

Iran was already enriching uranium at another plant in Natanz.

Tehran emphasises the measures it has taken are swiftly reversible if the remaining parties to the deal -- Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia -- find a way to get around US sanctions.



People light their mobile phones during a prayer rally in Hong Kong's Tamar Park yesterday, in memory of university student Alex Chow, 22, who succumbed November 8 to head injuries sustained during a fall as police skirmished with demonstrators last weekend.

PHOTO: AFP

Police in Bolivia join opposition as crisis mounts

AFP, La Paz

Police in three Bolivian cities joined anti-government protests Friday, in one case marching with demonstrators in La Paz, in the first sign security forces are withdrawing support from President Evo Morales after a disputed election that has triggered riots.

The defense minister said the government has for now ruled out a military operation against the rebellious police as the political crisis stemming from last month's vote escalated.

Morales took to Twitter to denounce the police rebellion as a coup. "Before the international community, we denounce this attack on the rule of law," Morales wrote. He called on Bolivians to protect their democracy and constitution.

Morales earlier convened an emergency meeting with some of his ministers. The scope of the police rebellion was not immediately clear.

Bolivia has been rocked by deadly violence over opposition claims that Morales rigged his re-election last month.

On Friday dozens of police joined demonstrators marching along Prado Avenue in the capital and shouting slogans against Morales, AFP observed.

Bolivian television broadcast footage of police shaking hands with demonstrators in downtown La Paz -- a stark contrast to the last three nights, when the two sides clashed.

In some La Paz neighborhoods, police retreated to their barracks rather than take on protesters who shouted: "Police, our friends, the people are with you."

Iraq: 6 killed, dozens wounded

Iraq forces clear protest sites as leaders reach deal to end rallies

AFP, Baghdad

Three protesters were killed yesterday in Baghdad, medics and police sources told AFP, as Iraqi security forces cleared streets around Tahrir Square, the heart of the month-long movement demanding regime change.

Two suffered bullet wounds and the third died when a tear gas canister pierced his skull, the sources said, adding that at least 80 more protesters were wounded.

And in the southern city of Basra, security forces cleared a protest camp outside the provincial government headquarters, leaving three dead and dozens wounded, according to medical sources.

The move came after political leaders agreed to stand by the current government by any means necessary, including force.

The fractured political class appears to have rallied around embattled Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi, whose government was threatened by the largest and deadliest grassroots protests in Iraq in decades.

Earlier, security forces wrested back

control of three bridges over the River Tigris in the heart of Baghdad that had been partially occupied by anti-government protesters.

They retook the Al-Sinek, Al-Shuhada and Al-Ahrar bridges that link the east bank, where the main protest camps are located, with west bank districts which are



home to government offices and foreign embassies.

Amid volleys of tear gas, security forces chased demonstrators back onto Al-Rasheed Street, one of Baghdad's oldest and most celebrated thoroughfares.

Protesters still occupy part of Al-Jumhuriyah (Republic) Bridge, the

southernmost of the capital's bridges and the closest to the focal point of the protests in Tahrir (Liberation) Square.

In the Shia holy city of Karbala, protesters' tents were reduced to ashes when security forces fired searing hot tear gas canisters at them.

The demonstrators had thrown molotov cocktails and lit fires on the concrete blast walls around the offices, before security forces used tear gas and live rounds to disperse them.

Amnesty International said the security forces have been using military-grade tear gas canisters made in Iran or Serbia that can be deadly if fired at point-blank range.

Nearly 300 people have died in protest-related violence since rallies erupted on October 1, spreading from Baghdad to cities across the south, according to an AFP toll.

The government has stopped issuing updated figures.

Public anger first focused on widespread corruption and a lack of jobs, then escalated into calls for the entire ruling system to be overturned.

BABRI MOSQUE-RAM TEMPLE CASE

Indian Supreme Court yesterday decided that the site in Ayodhya in northern India, where Hindu mobs destroyed a 460-year-old mosque in 1992, must be handed over to a trust to oversee the construction of a Hindu temple, subject to conditions. A separate piece of land in Ayodhya would be given over to Muslim groups. Muslims say they prayed at the medieval-era mosque for centuries while Hindus say their deity Ram was born at the site where the mosque stood before December 6, 1992. Here is a look at the key events surrounding the dispute.

5114 BC: According to devout Hindus, this was when the important warrior deity Lord Ram or Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu, is born in Ayodhya in northern India.

1528 AD: After more than a year's work, a mosque to honour first Mughal King Babur, who came from what is now Uzbekistan to conquer northern India, is completed.

1853: The first recorded sectarian clashes over the mosque erupt after Hindu devotees launch protests saying the mosque was built on the birthplace of Rama. Muslims stage their own march on Ayodhya and about 70 die in clashes. Two years later, another Muslim march on the city is fought back by British troops in clashes that leave up to 700 dead.

1934-1949: The mosque is damaged in a communal riot in 1934 after the killing of a cow, an animal many Hindus consider sacred. But it is soon after the subcontinent's 1947 partition into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-dominated Pakistan that Ayodhya becomes a battleground between the two faiths.

ON DECEMBER 22, 1949, dozens of people break into the mosque and set up idols of the

gods Ram and Sita. The next day, thousands of Hindus gather outside believing it was a miracle. Federal courts order the idols to be removed, but local courts refuse to enforce the action. The government declares Babri Mosque a "disputed property" and its gates are locked. No Muslim prayers offered at the mosque since then.

1950-61: Four civil suits filed in the court ranging from the rights to perform Hindu rituals at the site to a Muslim group seeking declaration and possession of the site.

1984: A committee is formed by Hindu groups, including the Vishnu Hindu Parishad party (VHP), to spearhead the construction of a Hindu temple.

1990: The leader of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) LK Advani leads a nationwide campaign to build a Ram temple in the place of the mosque. Some 30 Hindus are killed in clashes.

DECEMBER 6, 1992: A Hindu mob reduces the mosque to rubble. Riots break out across the country leading to the killing of about 2,000 people.

DECEMBER 16, 1992: Ten days after the demolition of the mosque, the central government forms the Liberhan Commission to



probe the incident.

2003: Archaeologists begin a court-directed survey to determine whether a Hindu temple existed at the site. The survey says there is evidence of a temple beneath the mosque, but many archaeologists and Muslims dispute the findings.

JUNE 2009: The Liberhan Commission submits its report, with senior BJP leaders, including Advani, facing trial for the demolition of the mosque.

SEPTEMBER 2010: Three judges rule that the disputed site should be shared by Hindus and Muslims. The High Court said two-thirds of the 2.77-acre (1.12-hectares) site belongs to Hindu groups (Nirmohi Akhara sect and Ramlalla Virajman) and the rest to the Muslim group (Sunni Central Wakf Board, UP).

MAY 2011: India's Supreme Court suspends the High Court ruling following appeals by Hindu and Muslim groups.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA ONLINE, AFP

We respect and accept verdict

Says Ajmer Dargah

PTI, Ajmer

The spiritual head of Ajmer dargah yesterday welcomed the decision of Supreme Court on Ayodhya case.

"The judiciary is supreme and everyone should respect the decision. It is the time to present a united face before the world because entire world is looking at India today," Dargah Deewan Zainul Abedin Ali Khan said.

"We respect and accept the verdict. I appeal to the people of the country to maintain harmony and peace. This is the victory of the judiciary and the message should be loud and clear that how much the judiciary is important for us and people of the country are peace loving," he told PTI.