

Bethlehem welcomes pilgrims for Christmas celebrations

AFP, Bethlehem

Pilgrims from around the world yesterday gathered in the biblical city of Bethlehem, revered by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus, to celebrate Christmas in the Holy Land.

Palestinians and foreigners began converging on the "little town" in the Israeli-occupied West Bank from early morning, with Christmas Eve festivities taking place in and around the Church of the Nativity.

Tourists queued to visit the grotto inside the church, believed to be the exact site where Jesus was born, with Ola, a Nigerian visitor, saying it was a "special day."

Outside in the winter sun, hundreds watched as Palestinian scouts paraded to the sound of drums.

"I feel really emotional to be here today, it's wonderful," said Germana, an Italian travelling with her husband and two children.

Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, apostolic administrator of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and the most senior Roman Catholic official in the Middle East, was due to travel from Jerusalem to Bethlehem yesterday morning.

He will lead midnight mass in the Church of the Nativity, with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas expected to attend.

Bethlehem is close to Jerusalem, but cut off from the holy city by Israel's separation barrier.

The first church was built on the site in the fourth century, though it was replaced after a fire in the sixth century.

This year celebrations were bolstered by the return of a wooden fragment believed to be from the manger of Jesus.

Sent as a gift to Pope Theodore I in 640, the piece had been in Europe for more than 1,300 years before being returned last month, Francesco Patton, chief custodian for the Holy Land, said.

Putin drives first

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of Saint Petersburg to the Crimean port city of Sevastopol covers a distance of 2,500 kilometres (1,550 miles).

Putin said the bridge would restore rail links to Crimea severed in 2014 when Moscow annexed the peninsula, sparking an ongoing separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine that has claimed more than 13,000 lives.

The company of Putin's close ally, billionaire businessman Arkady Rotenberg, won the construction contract for the bridge. He sold the company last month.

Putin told workers an anecdote about receiving an emotional call from "your main boss with the simple Russian surname Rotenberg," after the completion of a key stage of the project.

"He called me at night and spoke in such a voice that I asked him 'Have you been drinking?'" the Russian leader said.

The coverage of the project has been reminiscent of Soviet infrastructure projects, with a newsreader on state-controlled Rossiya 24 television channel calling the opening "without exaggeration historic."

Russia says it is the longest railway bridge in Europe.

Ukraine was unhappy about both the rail link and Putin's presence at the opening.

President Volodymyr Zelensky's representative office for Crimea said in a statement on Facebook that the rail link and Putin's visit to Crimea were "a gross breach by the Russian side of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

It showed "disregard by the Kremlin of the universally recognised principles and norms of international law," the statement said.

Two killed

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According to the officials, members of the elite force conducted raids in the two districts on information.

In both the cases, "criminals" opened fire on Rab members first, forcing them to retaliate.

During the "gunfights", both the "criminals" sustained bullet injuries and died.

In Cox's bazar, Rab members rushed Rubel to Cox's Bazar General Hospital where doctors declared him dead. In Pabna, Amin died on the spot of the "gunfight".

The bodies were sent to morgues for autopsies.

Rab in Cox's Bazar recovered 10,000 yaba pills, one locally made gun and three bullets while Rab in Pabna recovered one pistol and two sharp weapons from the scene.

Two cases were filed with Teknaf Police Station and Pabna Sadar Police Station in connection with the "gunfights".

Our correspondents in Cox's Bazar and Pabna contributed to this report



An Iraqi student shouts slogans during the ongoing anti-government protests in Basra yesterday. Protesters stepped up their demonstrations with the authorities in Baghdad increasingly paralysed as they seek a way out of a political impasse.

India okays funds for NPR

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September next year in all the states and federally-ruled territories except Assam, according to the website of the Office of the Registrar General, and Census Commissioner.

Assam has been excluded because the National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise has already been conducted in the state.

The NPR will be prepared at the local (village/sub-town), sub-district, district, state and national level under provisions of the Citizenship Act 1955 and the Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003. It is mandatory for every usual resident of India to register in the NPR, according to the officials.

"NPR will be used as NRC we have never said, never meant," Javadekar replied when a reporter pointed out that Union Minister Kiren Rijiju in July 2014 told parliament that the "government will create the NRC based on information from the NPR by verifying citizenship".

The NPR is a list of "usual residents" of the country. A "usual resident" is defined for the purpose of NPR as a person who has resided in a local area for the past six months or more or a person who intends to reside in that area for the next six months or more, home ministry officials said.

The data for NPR was last collected in 2010 along with the house-listing phase of Census of India 2011. The data was updated in 2015 by conducting door-to-door survey. The digitisation of the updated information has been completed.

Now it has been decided to update the NPR along with the house-listing phase of Census 2021 during April to

As anti-CAA protests continued to roil Kerala yesterday, two senior BJP leaders V Muraleedharan, India's Minister of State for External Affairs, and Karnataka Chief Minister B S Yeddyurappa were shown black flags by students.

Hundreds of people, under the banner of Muslim Coordination Committee, took out a protest march to the Raj Bhavan in Thiruvananthapuram, the official residence of the state governor.

Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi were stopped in the afternoon from entering Meerut by Uttar Pradesh police when they were on their way to meet the families of those killed in violence.

Anti-CAA protesters gathered near Mandi House in central Delhi defying Section 144 which restricts the gathering of more than four people ahead of a planned protest march to Jantar Mantar.

In Kolkata, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee led her fourth street march from Swami Vivekananda statue at Bidhan Sarani in north Kolkata to Gandhi Bhawan in Belegata in eastern part of the city.

On the other hand, BJP leader and former Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis led a pro-CAA rally in West Bengal's Siliguri.

Shouting slogans against CAA and waving black flags, students of Jadavpur University yesterday blocked its Chancellor and West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Thakur's entry into the campus for the annual convocation, prompting him to return and later denounce the incident as "total collapse of rule of law".

A note of dissent on CAA came from West Bengal BJP leader Chandra Kumar Bose, a great grand nephew of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. Chandra posted tweets questioning the law. India is a country "open to all religions and communities", said Bose.

Rabeeha Abdurehim, a student of the Pondicherry University who did her Masters course in Mass Communication, refused to accept the gold medal to express solidarity with students protesting against CAA.

Jakob Lindenthal, a German post-graduate student of Physics at Indian Institute of Technology in Chennai, was reportedly ordered to return home after he took part in street protests against CAA and NRC. He reportedly left for Amsterdam on Monday.

In Assam's Dibrugarh town, thousands turned up at a protest organized by All Assam Students Union against CAA.

This much we owe to our progeny

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In the full verdict, the apex court bench said, "We finally reiterate that the petitioners shall be fully compensated for their loss due to the cancellation of their leases, in accordance with the decision of the High Court Division".

The top court said there is no ambiguity about the notification issued on April 19, 1999, by which, among others, the sea beach from Cox's Bazar to Teknaf, including Jhilanja Mouza, was included in the ECA and that was done to protect the natural and ecological balance of the areas in question.

"However, we hope that in the days and years to come, the government will adhere to the policy of preservation of the ecological balance and protection of the natural resources of our country not only for our future generations, but also to ensure protection of the environment from degradation and the harmful effects of climate change. Certainly, this much we owe to our progeny."

"It would indeed be a travesty of justice if the petitioners having been deprived of their business opportunities, the plots are leased out to others for the purpose of construction and commercial development," the SC said in the full judgment.

Attorney General Mahbubey Alam told The Daily Star yesterday that the SC verdict would play an important role in helping the preservation and protection of the environment.

All the leases of plots in Jhilanja Mouza granted April 19, 1999, must be cancelled, and the structures built in the area must be demolished in line with the SC directive, he added.

On July 22, 2010, the HC declared valid a government decision cancelling leases of 55 plots in the mouza. It delivered the verdict after rejecting 39 writ petitions challenging legality of the government decision.

The previous Awami League

government declared the mouza on the seashore an ECA on April 19, 1999.

Ignoring the April 19, 1999, gazette notification in this regard, the BNP-Jamaat alliance government in 2005 leased out 59 plots of around 73 acres in the mouza.

Of the lessees, only four followed the terms of the lease, some sold off their leases, and the others constructed structures defying the lease terms.

On January 12, 2010, the AL-led government cancelled lease of 55 plots. Leaseholders filed 39 writ petitions with the HC in the same month.

Raushan may get

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General Noor us Sadik told The Daily Star.

Jatiya Party's central committee member Mohammad Zahir Uddin filed the writ petition.

Noor us Sadik said as per the constitution of the party, its office bearers would be appointed through a council, something which had not been done in Quader's appointment.

"Quader wants to solidify his grip on the party through the council. But Raushan madam can put up a stiff challenge," said a JP presidium member loyal to Raushan.

"That's why Quader bhai wants to put Raushan madam in a ceremonial post to make her happy," he added.

Regarding the amendment to the party charter, a JP leader said a presidium meeting would be held in a day or two to approve the matter.

At the council, JP might amend its charter in a bid to create a steering committee, sources said.

The JP chairman will take advice from the steering committee in times of emergencies, said party insiders.

Asked, JP presidium member Faysal Chisty said they were all set to hold the party's council at the Institution of Engineers in the capital.

He also said around 12,000 delegates, including 4,000 councillors from 74 organisational districts, are expected to participate in the council where the party's new leadership would be elected.

Meanwhile, JP sources said a section of leaders loyal to Raushan is trying to make her the chairperson for

their own interests.

They said they would raise the issue in the party's presidium meeting.

After the demise of HM Ershad on July 14, both Raushan and Quader were at loggerheads over who would become the JP chairman and leader of the opposition.

Later, Quader was declared as the JP chairman, an appointment opposed by Raushan's faction.

Factions of Raushan and GM Quader, after several meetings in September, came to an understanding that Quader would remain the chairperson, while Raushan would be the opposition leader.

Since then Quader, who had in April been announced as the chairperson by the late JP chairman HM Ershad, also his elder brother, has been holding the post unchallenged.

CHANGES IN THE POST OF SECRETARY GENERAL?

Jatiya Party insiders said Secretary General Moshir Rahman Ranga might lose his post due to his recent "derogatory" remarks on Shaheed Noor Hossain, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Party insiders said Ranga had lost the blessings of the ruling Awami League following his comments on Bangabandhu and Sheikh Hasina.

Names of Kazi Firoz Rashid, Ziauddin Ahmed, Ruhul Amin Howlader and Fakhru Imam are being discussed for the post of secretary general, said JP insiders.

Iran arrests family of young man killed in 'riots': report

AFP, Tehran

Iran has arrested the family of a young man killed in street violence that flared during last month's protests against fuel price hikes, Mehr news agency reported yesterday.

The family of Pouya Bakhtiari, who was "killed suspiciously during the recent riots", had been invited for talks with authorities, Mehr said, citing what it called an informed source.

They were found to have been "carrying out a counter-revolutionary project" and "anti-structural activities", said the agency, which is close to moderate conservatives in Iran.

"Consequently, these elements were arrested by a judicial order in order to protect the order and the security of the honourable people and others damaged by the rioters," it said without specifying which family members were taken into custody.

Bakhtiari was reportedly killed in Karaj city, west of Tehran, in street violence that erupted in mid-November during nationwide protests over a shock decision to hike petrol prices by as much as 200 percent. He was 27.

His Instagram account, which is now reportedly run by his father, announced a ceremony marking 40 days since his death would be held at Karaj cemetery on Thursday.

It was still active with more than 18,000 followers yesterday.

Officials in Iran have yet to issue an overall death toll for the unrest, but international human rights group Amnesty International has put the number at more than 300.

An Iranian security official rejected a foreign media report on Monday that the figure was as high as 1,500, saying it was based on "false propaganda".

"This way of news writing and making accusations is essentially nothing special," said Alireza Zarifan Yeganeh, head of the information and communications secretariat of Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

Quoted by the Tasnim news agency, he dismissed the reports as "a series of ludicrous claims".

"And when you would ask this media about its source, it would refer to some invisible creatures and there is no possibility of verification."

The days of unrest in Iran from November 15 saw police stations attacked, shops looted and banks and petrol stations torched as authorities imposed a week-long internet blackout.

Videos that have surfaced since purport to show scenes from the crackdown that followed, including footage of security forces firing at unarmed demonstrators or beating them with batons.

The United States, France and Germany have all condemned Iran over the bloodshed.

Prince Philip leaves hospital after four nights

AFP, London

Britain's Prince Philip left a London hospital yesterday after a four-night stay that renewed concern about the 98-year-old's health, in time to join the royal family for Christmas.

Queen Elizabeth II's husband, dressed in a suit, took a few steps before being helped into a dark green Land Rover parked by a side entrance of the King Edward VII hospital, where he was admitted on Friday, an AFP reporter said.

"The Duke of Edinburgh has today left hospital after being discharged by his doctor and is now back at Sandringham," where the royal family traditionally spends Christmas Day, Buckingham Palace said in a statement.

"His royal highness would like to thank everyone who sent their good wishes."

Buckingham Palace has released little information about the duke's health, saying only that he went in for "observation and treatment in relation to a pre-existing condition".

It stressed that it was a "precautionary measure".

The duke was reportedly flown there by helicopter from the royal Sandringham estate in eastern England, where he has been based since retiring from public duties in 2017.

The Sun tabloid reported that Philip has suffered a month of ill-health, including a "bad fall" which left him confined to bed for a couple of days.

In recent years, he has been admitted to hospital for abdominal surgery, bladder infections and a blocked coronary artery, while he is also reported to suffer from arthritis in his right wrist.

On this day

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these people (freedom fighters) would know when to hold weapons against the military and when to concentrate on constructive activities. They will be assigned to the national militia and other nation building activities. He also added that the advisory committee made with members from different political parties would remain as it is. That will not hamper the relation between the committee and the cabinet. The entire news has been covered by APB.

Special Indian envoy DP Dhar visits PM Tajuddin at Bangabhaban, APB reports.

A special flight of International Red Cross reaches Dhaka with emergency medicine and relief. This was the first relief-laden flight of the Red Cross that landed on independent Bangladesh.

Police directorate release another list of arrested collaborators: Maolana Mosleh Uddin, vice president of PDB, Dr Mustafizur Rahman of Dhaka University, Fakhruddin, former minister and president of Mymensingh Muslim League, Khorshed Ahmad Khan, secretary of Mymensingh Muslim League, Dr A Hamid, treasurer of Mymensingh Muslim League, Maolana Altaf Hossain, president of Mymensingh PDP, Maolana Fayzur Rahman, president of Mymensingh Nezam-e Islam and Israil, DSP.

2.94 lakh SIMs

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"On the spot we directed that two operators' representatives to block the signals," said an official of the inspection team.

The two operators complied at once, so no punishment was recommended for them in the final report on the test drive, which was handed in to the BTRC chairman yesterday.

When the regulator blocks the SIMs there is a possibility that some Bangladeshi users' might get barred as well. But the numbers will be reopened if the subscriber can authenticate their identities, said officials.

The expert team also detected reception of Myanmar's state-owned mobile operator MPT: they used an MPT SIM (09889042845) and got network few kilometres inside Bangladesh.

The team could not check whether the other Burmese mobile operators' SIMs work in Bangladesh too. Myanmar has three other mobile operators: Telenor, Ooredoo and Mytel.

Bangladesh's law enforcement agencies held Rohingya with MPT mobile connections many times before.

Subsequently, the government has decided to send a letter to Myanmar asking them to restrict their networks and at the same time inform the issue to the International Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, a United Nations body that handles issues pertaining to information and communications technology around the globe.

The government thought of installing jammers to block the Burmese SIMs.

But that will be highly costly and at the same time it will not be full proof, Jabbar said.

"And that's why we have decided to use the diplomatic channels to resolve the problems. Hope we will get a solution from this process."