



India ejects second European 'for protesting'

AFP, New Delhi
A Norwegian tourist yesterday said authorities had ordered her to leave India after taking part in protests against a new citizenship law, becoming the second European to be ejected over the demonstrations.

Janne-Mette Johansson, 71, told AFP that police gave her "verbal assurances" that she could take part in peaceful demonstrations against the law that critics say discriminates against India's Muslims.

"Yesterday (Thursday), Indian immigration officials came to my hotel for questioning and I was mentally tortured. Today, they again showed up at my hotel asking me to leave the country or they will take a legal action and deport me," she said.

The woman, who had posted photos from the demonstration in the southern state of Kerala on Facebook, added that she would leave India for Dubai on Friday evening and then fly to Sweden.

The Press Trust of India news agency quoted an official from the Foreigners Regional Registration Office as saying that Johansson "violated visa norms."

Earlier this week a German studying physics in the southern Indian city of Chennai was also asked to leave after taking part in a protest and comparing the law to anti-Jewish Nazi legislation, PTI reported.

Photos on social media purportedly of the student, named as Jakob Lindenthal, showed him carrying a placard saying "1933-1945 We have been there."

The government says that the law easing citizenship rules for religious minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan excludes Muslims because they face no persecution in those countries.

But coupled with a mooted citizens register, it has stoked fears including in Washington and the UN rights office about the marginalisation of Muslims who make up 14 percent of India's 1.3 billion people.



CAA PROTESTS IN INDIA

Protesters march against India's new citizenship law in Mumbai; A protester displays a placard the demonstration; police detain a protester in New Delhi; and supporters of the new citizenship law rally in Mumbai. All photos were taken yesterday. Thousands protested in rival demonstrations in India yesterday as tensions deepen over the contentious citizenship law seen as anti-Muslim.

PHOTO: AFP



2019: a year of anti-establishment rage

AFP, Paris

Angry citizens have swelled the streets of cities across the globe this year, pushing back against a disparate range of policies but often expressing a common grievance -- the establishment's failure to heed their demands for a more equitable future.

While street protests are nothing new, experts say the intense 2019 flare-ups reflect a growing sentiment that the social contract between governments and citizens has broken down, with voters paying the price but unable to affect meaningful change.

"What unites the protests is that all are responding to a sense of exclusion, pessimism about the future, and a feeling of having lost control to unaccountable elites," said Jake Werner, a historian at the University of Chicago.

The financial crisis of 2007-08 in particular, he said, exposed systemic failings and induced

years of austerity and insecurity for millions of people.

It also produced an acute sense of unfairness, in particular among young people who see their prospects of earning a decent living slipping away with every price hike or benefit cut.

"What was previously experienced as proper or natural is now increasingly experienced as a form of domination and injustice," Werner told AFP.

As a result, it often takes only a small move to spark a protest -- in Chile it was a metro ticket increase, in Iran and France it was higher fuel costs, in Lebanon a "WhatsApp tax" -- that balloons into a wider revolt demanding better living standards.

Elsewhere, as in Hong Kong, Algeria and India, calls for greater political freedom have become a potent rallying force.

In Iraq, fury over corruption and unemployment boiled over

into fiery clashes which have left hundreds of people dead and forced the prime minister to resign.

"The belief in democracy's capacity to change people's lives is undoubtedly eroding," said Erik Neveu, a sociologist at the Sciences Po political science university in Rennes, western France.

The impression that big companies and the wealthy seem to get a free pass -- despite calls to force multinationals to pay more taxes -- only further inflames the sense that the game is rigged.

"Society is fed up with paying and paying. They've squeezed us like a lemon," Marcela Paz, a 51-year-old teacher, said during a protest in Santiago, Chile in October.

And if the traditional rungs for climbing the social ladder are out of reach, experts say more people will feel that protests, and potentially violence, are the only recourse.

Even if governments give in to certain demands, they risk facing more protests unless they address the anger that sent people to the streets in the first place.

These are not only "Facebook revolutions", says Geoffrey Pleyers, a sociology professor in Belgium and France. These are profound movements where young people often take the lead, but then become intergenerational, he adds.

The "horizontal" organisation makes it harder for authorities to single out someone to negotiate with, or to arrest, in a bid to quell protesters' anger.

"It's not that the nature of authority changed -- elites are just as unaccountable today as they were ten years ago," Werner said.

"What changed is that elite unaccountability has been exposed, because popular forces are no longer aligned with elites as they once were."

Iran, China, Russia start naval drills

AFP, Tehran

Iran, China and Russia started four days of joint naval drills in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman yesterday, the commander of Iran's flotilla announced.

The exercise comes at a time of heightened tensions since the United States withdrew from a landmark 2015 nuclear deal with Iran in May last year.

"The message of this exercise is peace, friendship and lasting security through cooperation and unity ... and its effect will be to show that Iran cannot be isolated," Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani said on state television.

The United States reimposed crippling sanctions on Iran after quitting the nuclear deal last year, prompting Tehran to hit back with countermeasures by dropping nuclear commitments.

In June, US President Donald Trump authorised a military strike after Iran shot down a US drone, only to call off the retaliation at the last moment. The crisis deepened with September 14 attacks on Saudi oilfields, which halved the kingdom's crude output.

Yemen's Huthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attack but Washington accused Tehran, a charge it has strongly denied. Washington has responded with a military build-up in the Gulf and has launched an operation with its allies to protect navigation in Gulf waters.

Russia's first hypersonic missiles enter service

AFP, Moscow

Russia's defence minister yesterday told President Vladimir Putin the first Avangard hypersonic missiles had been put into service, in a move hailed as a major coup for Moscow.

Analysts say Russia is the first country to put into combat service intercontinental ballistic missiles armed with hypersonic weapons that Putin said can travel 20 times faster than the speed of sound.

"The first missile regiment equipped with latest strategic missiles with the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle entered service at 10 am Moscow time on December 27", Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu told a meeting in televised remarks.

He congratulated the military on what he said was a "landmark event for the country and the armed forces."

Shoigu reported to Putin when the missiles entered service, a defence ministry official told AFP.

Defence officials have earlier said that the first Avangard regiment was placed in the Orenburg region in the Urals.

Putin unveiled the new weapon during his state of the nation address in 2018, saying it would defeat all existing missile defence systems.

He said at the time the missile was highly manoeuvrable and flew at 20 times the speed of sound.

Senior officials later said the intercontinental projectile was considerably faster.

Officials said the missile during tests reached the speed of Mach 27, or roughly 33,000 kilometres (20,500 miles) per hour.

Mach 1 is a unit of measurement equivalent to the speed of sound.



A man dressed as Santa Claus visits displaced children from Ras al-Ain in a camp for internally displaced persons in the mainly Kurdish northeastern Syrian province of Hasakeh, yesterday. The gesture is part of the "We are with you" campaign organised by Kurdish Syrian youths living abroad who decided to send gifts to displaced children as a result of the eight-year-old conflict in Syria.

PHOTO: AFP

Locust invasion destroys crops in northwest India

A massive locust invasion has destroyed thousands of hectares of crops in northwest India, authorities said, with some experts yesterday terming it the worst such attack in 25 years. While officials have attempted to tackle the swarm with pesticides, farmers have deployed drums to drive away the insects, with videos showing schoolgirls banging on steel plates -- due to local beliefs that loud noise repels locusts. The invasion has damaged crops in half a dozen districts in the northwestern state of Gujarat, local government official Punamchand Parmar said Thursday. More than 5,000 hectares have been devastated in one district alone, Parmar said. The state's agriculture minister R C Faldu said that from Friday onwards, 100 tractors carrying pesticides would be sent to the affected villages to get rid of the insects.

EU chief doubts securing post-Brexit trade deal in 2020

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen has expressed "serious concern" over whether the bloc could conclude a post-Brexit trade deal with Britain within the 2020 deadline. Britain is due to leave the European Union on January 31, but will remain in a transitional arrangement until the end of next year while negotiators debate future trade ties. Under the withdrawal agreement which Prime Minister Boris Johnson has agreed with Europe but not yet pushed through parliament, the UK could ask for a one or two year extension. But Johnson insists he will not ask for more time and is preparing legislation to forbid such a move. In this case, negotiators will only have 11 months to conclude a trade agreement.

Musharraf challenges death sentence

Former Pakistan president and army chief Pervez Musharraf has submitted a petition in Lahore High Court challenging the death sentence handed to him in a treason case earlier this month. According to local media, the petition highlighted that the "judgement contained a mix of anomalies and contradictory statements" and that the special court "rapidly and hurriedly wrapped up the trial which was far from conclusion". A special court convicted Musharraf and sentenced him to death on December 17 on charges of high treason and subverting the constitution -- an unprecedented verdict in a country that has been ruled by its powerful military for roughly half of its 72-year history.

SOURCE: AFP

Netanyahu sweeps party primary in re-election boost

AFP, Jerusalem

Embattled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday told supporters he would win a March general election after scoring a landslide victory in the leadership primary of his right-wing Likud party.

Israel's longest-serving premier, who faces a corruption indictment as well as a third general election in 12 months, was expected to beat rival Gideon Saar in the leadership primary.

But the convincing margin of victory -- by 72.5 to 27.5 percent -- strengthens his position in the party he has dominated for 20 years.

Netanyahu, 70, called it a "huge win" and pledged to emerge victorious in the March 2 general election.

the Likud and the right in the election," Netanyahu told a press conference.

"Most of the people support the right and support me to lead the government."

In what appeared to be a general election campaign



speech, Netanyahu did not mention the defeated Saar once.

Likud and the centrist Blue and White party were deadlocked after elections in both April and September, with neither able to command a parliamentary majority under Israel's system of proportional representation.

Last month, Israel's attorney general indicted the prime minister for fraud, bribery and breach of trust over a series of corruption allegations he denies.

Blue and White leader Benny Gantz also used yesterday's primary result as a rallying call for the general election.

He said Netanyahu's victory showed Likud members had "elected a leader facing three indictments, who is seeking to unravel the rule of law and secure personal immunity."

"These elections demand that we place a mirror in front of 'the Netanyahu party' and make the choice for unity, dignity and internal reconciliation."

Early polls indicate that the March 2020 election could again result in stalemate. Saar pledged to support Netanyahu in the coming campaign.

More than 235,000 flee Syria flare-up: UN

AFP, Beirut

More than 235,000 people have fled the Idlib region over the past two weeks, the UN said yesterday, amid heightened regime and Russian attacks on Syria's last major opposition bastion.

The mass displacement between 12 and 25 December has left the violence-plagued Maaret al-Numan region in southern Idlib "almost empty," according to the UN humanitarian agency OCHA.

AFP correspondents in the area have seen people fleeing in droves in recent days.

The main highway connecting southern Idlib to the province's north has been bustling with pick-up trucks ferrying civilians out of the flashpoint region.

Since mid-December, Russian-backed regime forces have pressed with an assault on jihadists in southern Idlib, despite an August ceasefire deal and calls for a de-escalation from Turkey, France and the United Nations.

The increased air strikes came as Damascus loyalists advance on the ground. They have since December 19 seized

dozens of towns and villages from jihadists amid clashes that have killed hundreds on both sides.

The advances have brought them less than four kilometres (two miles) away from Maaret al-Numan, one of Idlib's largest urban centres.

According to OCHA, ongoing battles have amplified displacement from the area and the nearby town of Saraqeb.

"People from Saraqeb and its eastern countryside are now fleeing in anticipation of fighting directly affecting their communities next," it said.

Idlib is dominated by the country's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, whose chief this week urged jihadists and allied rebels to head to the frontlines and battle "the Russian occupiers" and the regime.

The region hosts some three million people, including many displaced by years of violence in other parts of Syria.

The Damascus regime, which now controls 70 percent of Syria, has repeatedly vowed to take back the area.