

No prisoner release, no talks

Say Taliban as Afghan govt rejects key US commitment to insurgents

REUTERS, Kabul

Taliban militants will not take part in intra-Afghan talks until about 5,000 of its prisoners are released, a spokesman said yesterday, presenting a major possible barrier to ending the war.

Under an accord between the United States and the Islamist Taliban signed on Saturday, the two sides are committed to working towards the release of combat and political prisoners as a confidence-building measure.

The agreement calls for up to 5,000 jailed Taliban prisoners to be released in exchange for up to 1,000 Afghan government captives by March 10.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, not involved in the talks, has since rejected that demand. Ghani said the issue of prisoner releases should be discussed as part of a comprehensive peace deal.

"We are fully ready for the intra-Afghan talks, but we are waiting for the release of our 5,000 prisoners," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told Reuters by phone.

"If our 5,000 prisoners - 100 or 200 more or less does not matter - do not get released there will be no intra-Afghan talks."

Zabihullah said the majority of prisoners on the list of 5,000 had been captured by American forces and were held in Afghan government prisons and that they had prioritised sick and older prisoners.

US-led forces ousted the hardline militants from power in 2001.



Police detains activists of the youth wing of India's main opposition Congress party during a protest demanding the resignation of Home Minister Amit Shah following last week's clashes between people demonstrating for and against a new citizenship law, in New Delhi, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWSIN brief

EU, UK launch post-Brexit talks

AFP, Brussels

British and EU trade negotiators embarked on high-stakes talks aimed at forging a new post-Brexit relationship yesterday. The negotiations began just over a month after Britain left the EU, and are meant to wrap up by the end of this year - an exceedingly tight timeframe that few see as feasible for anything but a bare-bones accord.

Myanmar seizes drugs worth \$27 million

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar soldiers swooped on several illicit drugs labs to seize nearly \$27 million of narcotics, chemicals and equipment, military newspaper The Myawady said yesterday, the biggest bust so far this year. Photos showed hundreds of barrels, bags and other containers recovered in the operation in what is believed to be the world's largest methamphetamine producing nation.

Nirbhaya killers won't be hanged today

NDTV ONLINE

The four men convicted in the rape and killing of a 23-year-old medical student in Delhi in 2012 will not be hanged tomorrow as scheduled, a judge in Delhi said on Monday, deferring their execution for the third time. The mercy petition of one of the convicts is pending with the president, so they have not exhausted all their legal options, the judge ruled. On December 16, 2012, the medical student, who came to be known as "Nirbhaya", was killed in a horrific way on a moving bus, triggering an unprecedented outpouring of public anger over crimes against women.

BJP trying to replicate 'Gujarat model of riots'

Accuses Mamata in Kolkata; opposition demands Amit Shah's resignation at parliament

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday alleged that the violence in north east Delhi was "state-sponsored genocide" and the BJP was trying to replicate the "Gujarat model of riots" across the country.

"I am deeply pained by the killing of innocent people in Delhi. I think it was genocide... the violence in Delhi was state-sponsored," Mamata said addressing a Trinamool Congress event at the Netaji Subhash Indoor Stadium in Kolkata.

Mamata claimed it was due to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that "so many people were killed" in the Delhi violence.

"The BJP is trying to replicate the Gujarat model of riots across India, including in West Bengal," the chief minister said, adding that the party should apologise.

Gujarat had witnessed protracted riots in 2002 that left at least 1,000 people dead following the

killing of 56 Hindu pilgrims when a train carrying them was returning from Ayodhya.

The issue of riots in north east Delhi which killed 42 people last week also set off an uproar in Indian parliament yesterday with opposition lawmakers demanding the resignation of Home Minister Amit Shah over the violence.

As parliament resumed its budget session yesterday after a three-week break, slogan-shouting opposition MPs demanded a discussion on the violence in the Lok Sabha.

Speaker Om Birla said the situation was "not appropriate" for such a discussion. "We will wait for the situation to improve and then allow a discussion," he said but finally had to adjourn the house as opposition members refused to relent.

In the Rajya Sabha, chairman M Venkaiah Naidu adjourned the House for the day amid repeated slogan shouting by opposition Congress, Left, Trinamool Congress, Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party lawmakers.

DELHI VIOLENCE



This picture taken from the Greek side of the Greece-Turkey border near Kastanies, shows migrants waiting on the Turkish side, yesterday.

North Korea fires 'ballistic missiles'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea fired what appeared to be two short-range ballistic missiles yesterday, the South's military said, weeks after Pyongyang threatened to demonstrate a "new strategic weapon" and its deadline for Washington to offer sanctions relief expired.

The launch was the nuclear-armed North's first for more than three months and came as nuclear negotiations with the United States remain at a standstill.

The two devices were fired eastwards over the sea from the Wonsan area on the east coast and flew 240 kilometres (150 miles) at a maximum altitude of 35 kilometres, the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

They were "believed to be short-range ballistic missiles," a JCS official said.

South Korea's security ministers expressed "strong concern" the North was "carrying out actions giving rise to military tensions", the presidential Blue House said.

Japan's defence ministry said there was no indication of anything coming down in its waters or exclusive economic zone, but added: "Recent repeated launches of ballistic and other missiles by North Korea are a serious issue."

The launch came as Pyongyang battles to prevent a coronavirus outbreak and days after the one-year anniversary of the collapsed Hanoi summit between leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump.

Negotiations have since been deadlocked over sanctions relief and what the North would be willing to give up in return, despite a high-profile June meeting in the Demilitarized Zone that divides the peninsula.

Israel votes for third time in 12 months

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel held its third election in less than a year yesterday seeking to break a grinding political deadlock, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu chasing re-election while facing criminal indictment.

The campaign, which included tit-for-tat mudslinging between Netanyahu's right-wing Likud and main challengers Blue and White, was condemned by President Reuven Rivlin as "awful and grubby."

Voicing the feelings of many ballot-weary Israelis after nearly a year of political stalemate and a caretaker government, Rivlin said the Jewish state does not "deserve this never-ending instability."

The vote comes just two weeks before Netanyahu, the longest-serving premier in Israeli history, stands trial after being formally charged in January with bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

But final polls indicated that Netanyahu, the first Israeli prime minister ever indicted in office, had not lost support since inconclusive elections in April and September.

Voting in the central town of Rosh Haayin, Blue and White leader Benny Gantz voiced hope that Israelis would finally "change the tune" after 11 years of the current Netanyahu tenure.

But Likud and the centrist Blue and White are both expected to fall well short of the 61 seats needed for a majority in Israel's parliament, the Knesset, and will have to strike deals with smaller parties to forge a stable coalition.

Blast at football match kills 3, wounds 11 in Afghanistan

A bombing at a football match yesterday killed three people and injured 11 others in eastern Afghanistan, a police official told AFP, as the Taliban announced an end to a partial truce in the country. "A motorcycle rigged with a bomb exploded during a football match," said Sayed Ahmad Babazai, police chief of eastern Khost province, giving details of the toll. Abdul Fatah Wakman, president of the Khost Football Federation, told AFP the three people killed were brothers. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. But on Monday the Taliban announced they would resume attacks against Afghan forces, only a day after President Ashraf Ghani committed to continuing the partial truce at least until talks between Kabul and the Taliban kick off, supposedly on March 10.

At least 50 killed in northern Nigeria 'bandit' attacks

At least 50 people were killed in multiple attacks by armed 'bandits' on villages in an area of northern Nigeria rife with cattle theft and kidnappings, local officials said yesterday. Sources said around 100 armed assailants stormed into the villages of Kerawa, Zareyawa and Minda in Kaduna state at dawn on Sunday, gunning down worshippers as they left a mosque for morning prayers before killing residents, burning and looting homes. Several people were injured in the attacks and were taken to nearby hospitals. The attacks were in retaliation for villagers allegedly assisting recent army operations against the so-called bandits in their forest hideouts, local councillor Dayyabu Kerawa told AFP.

Manila mall hostage-taker surrenders; no one hurt



A sacked security guard who shot one person and took about 30 others hostage at a Manila shopping mall on Monday surrendered to authorities, ending a day-long standoff that terrified shoppers and drew a massive police response. The guard walked out of the V-Mall, where he was allowed to speak briefly to the press before heavily armed officers tackled and arrested him. He complained about being mistreated by his employers. Hostages were also led out of the building. The drama started when the suspect shot a security guard, who was rushed to hospital in stable condition, said Francis Zamora, mayor of the San Juan City, which includes the mall. Zamora told reporters the hostage-taker was upset after losing his job.

SOURCE: AFP



Crisis deepens as Iraq PM-designate quits

AFP, Baghdad

Protest-torn Iraq faced more political gridlock yesterday after prime minister-designate Mohammed Allawi withdrew overnight, accusing lawmakers of obstructing his attempt to form a government.

Iraq has for five months been rocked by the biggest wave of anti-government demonstrations since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

The mostly youthful protesters demand the ouster of Iraq's entire political elite, which they accuse of being inept, corrupt and beholden to powerful neighbour Iran.

Allawi's departure plunges Iraq deeper into uncertainty and leaves President Barham Saleh 15 days to propose a new candidate -- likely intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kazimi, according to political sources.

Iraq has been in legal limbo since outgoing premier Adel Abdel Mahdi stepped down in December, as the constitution makes no provisions for such a resignation.

Iraq's bitterly divided parliament had on Sunday failed for a third time to convene a confidence vote on Allawi's proposed government. Allawi had been nominated as a consensus candidate among Iraq's divided political parties, and had emphasised that his cabinet would be made up of technocrats and independents.

Anti-government demonstrators had nonetheless rejected him as too closely connected to the political elite.

Top brands accused of using forced Uighur labour: report

Apple, BMW, Gap, Nike, Samsung, Sony are among the brands

AFP, Sydney

China is transferring tens of thousands of Uighur detainees out of internment camps and into factories that supply some of the world's leading brands, an Australian think tank said Monday.

Top global brands such as Apple, BMW and Sony have been accused of getting supplies from factories using the forced labour, an explosive allegation that could reverberate in boardrooms across the world.

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute said the Chinese government has transferred 80,000 or more Uighurs out of camps in Xinjiang and into factories across the country.

"Uighurs are working in factories that are in the supply chains of at least 83 well-known global brands in the technology, clothing and automotive sectors," the think tank said.

"Some factories across China are using forced Uighur labour under a state-sponsored labour transfer scheme that is tainting the global supply chain."

The brands, it added, included



"Apple, BMW, Gap, Huawei, Nike, Samsung, Sony and Volkswagen."

"Companies using forced Uighur labour in their supply chains could find themselves in breach of laws which prohibit the importation of goods made with forced labour or mandate disclosure of forced labour

supply chain risks," the report said.

China's foreign ministry on Monday slammed the ASPI report as having "no factual basis", and accused the institute of attempting to "smear China's efforts to oppose terrorism and fight extremism in Xinjiang."

An estimated one million mostly Muslim ethnic minorities have been held in internment camps in Xinjiang.

After initially denying their existence, Beijing cast the facilities as "vocational education centres" where "students" learn Mandarin and job skills in an effort to steer them away from religious extremism, terrorism and separatism.

Rights groups and witnesses accuse China of forcibly trying to draw Uighurs away from their Islamic customs and integrate them into the majority Han culture.

Erdogan warns Europe it will have to share migrant 'burden'

Hopes talks with Putin will defuse Syria crisis

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday vowed to keep the doors open for migrants heading for Europe, as he mounted pressure on Western countries to give Turkey more assistance with the Syrian conflict.

Erdogan also said he hoped to reach a deal on a ceasefire in Syria when he meets his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin later in the week following clashes in the last rebel hold-out of Idlib.

He warned Europe that it will have to shoulder its part of the migrant "burden".

"After we opened the doors, there were multiple calls saying 'close the doors,'" he said.

"I told them 'it's done. It's finished. The doors are now open. Now, you will have to take your share of the burden.'"

Some 13,000 migrants, including Afghans, Syrians and Iraqis, massed at Turkey's border with Greece over the

weekend after Erdogan announced that Turkey would no longer prevent them from leaving towards the European Union.

The decision came after 34 Turkish soldiers were killed in a Syrian air strike last week.

Clashes erupted as Greek police blocked thousands at the border, firing teargas at the refugees who responded by lobbing rocks.

Turkey hosts some four million refugees -- the majority of them Syrians -- but agreed in 2016 to prevent them leaving for Europe in exchange for billions of euros in assistance.

EU foreign ministers are due to meet this week at the request of Greece to discuss the situation, amid fears of a repeat of the refugee influx that poisoned European politics in 2015.

Erdogan's office confirmed he will hold a summit with Putin in Moscow on Thursday to discuss the escalating violence.

The Kremlin said cooperation with Turkey was a top priority.



PHOTO: REUTERS