

South Asia protests over anti-Muslim remarks

AGENCIES

Thousands of Muslims have rallied across the South Asia nations of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan over derogatory remarks on Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by two officials from India's ruling party that has triggered a diplomatic backlash against New Delhi.

Protests were reported from various Indian cities, including capital New Delhi, yesterday as Muslims marched after the afternoon congregation prayers, raising slogans against the government and calling for the arrest of the members belonging to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Several parts of Indian-administered Kashmir observed a spontaneous shutdown to protest the derogatory remarks. Protests after the Friday prayers were also reported



Demonstrators raise Palestinian flags, as Palestinian, left-wing Israeli and foreign activists gather to protest near the West Bank Israeli settlement of Mitzpe Yair in the southern district of Hebron, against a High Court decision to evict Palestinian communities from Fire Zone 918, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

FACE-TO-FACE TALKS IN SINGAPORE China, US defence chiefs stay firm on Taiwan

REUTERS, Singapore

The defence chiefs of China and the United States held face-to-face talks for the first time yesterday, with both sides standing firm on their opposing views over Taiwan's right to rule itself.

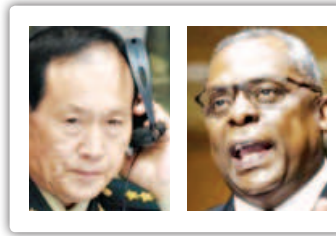
US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe met on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue security summit in Singapore for nearly an hour, double the time initially allotted.

Austin and Wei's first face-to-face meeting comes as US President Joe Biden is seeking to spend more time on Asian security issues after months of focus on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The two defence chiefs spoke by phone in April.

Although both sides say they want to better manage their relationship, Beijing and Washington remain polarised over several volatile security situations, from Taiwan's

sovereignty to China's military activity in the South China Sea and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

After the meeting, Chinese and US officials highlighted the cordiality of proceedings in a sign it could help open the door to more communication between the two militaries.



However, there was no evidence of any breakthrough on settling long-running security disputes.

Wei said the talks "went smoothly". A Chinese defence ministry spokesman later said Wei reiterated Beijing's firm stance on Taiwan, which is that it is part of China.

"The PLA (People's Liberation Army) would have no choice but to fight at any cost and crush any attempt of Taiwan independence, safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity," the spokesman said.

Austin called on China to "refrain from further destabilising actions" on Taiwan, a US statement issued after the talks said.

A US official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the bulk of the meeting focused on Taiwan and Austin reiterated that Washington's position on Taiwan was unchanged, while criticising China's military aggression.

"The United States has major concerns about increasing PLA behaviour, particularly unsafe, aggressive, unprofessional behaviour and is concerned that the PLA may be attempting to change the status quo through its operational behaviour," the official said after the meeting.

La Nina climate cycle could last into 2023: UN

AFP, Geneva

The weather phenomenon La Nina, which has affected global temperatures and worsened drought and flooding, will likely continue for months, and possibly even into 2023, the UN warned yesterday.

La Nina refers to the large-scale cooling of surface temperatures in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean, occurring every two to seven years.

The UN's World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said there was a 70 percent chance that the protracted La Nina event -- which has held the globe in its clutches almost uninterrupted since September 2020 -- will continue until at least August. "Some long-lead predictions even suggest that it might persist into 2023," it said.

US CAPITOL RIOT PROBE Trump accused of 'attempted coup'

AFP, Washington

A congressional panel investigating last year's mob assault on the US Capitol laid out its case Thursday that Donald Trump and his claims of a stolen election were at the heart of what amounted to an "attempted coup" to remain in power. In a prime-time presentation of its findings from a year-long probe, the special



committee sought to persuade a divided country of the existence of a deep-rooted and ongoing plot -- orchestrated by the former president -- to overturn the result of the 2020 election won by Joe Biden. "President Trump summoned the

mob, assembled the mob and lit the flame of this attack," the Republican vice chairwoman of the panel, Liz Cheney, said in her opening remarks at the first in a series of hotly anticipated summer hearings. Minutes earlier, Democratic committee chief Bennie Thompson accused Trump of being "at the center of this conspiracy." "January 6 was the culmination of an attempted coup -- a brazen attempt, as one rioter put it shortly after January 6 -- to overthrow the government. The violence was no accident," he said.

Lanka could face dire humanitarian crisis: UN

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations warned yesterday that cash-strapped Sri Lanka's unprecedented economic crisis could develop into a dire humanitarian crisis, with millions already in need of aid. "We are concerned that this could develop into a full-blown humanitarian emergency, and we are taking action to address that concern," Jens Laerke, spokesman for the UN humanitarian

agency OCHA, told reporters. The UN and its partners are appealing for \$47 million to address the immediate needs of the 1.7 million of the most vulnerable people and those most affected by the crisis, he said. Months of daily blackouts, long queues for petrol and record inflation have made daily life a misery in the South Asian island nation of 22 million people. The government has already defaulted on its \$51 billion foreign debt, and a critical shortage of foreign currency has left traders unable to import adequate supplies of food, fuel and other essential goods. Sri Lanka's worst economic crisis since independence in 1948 was already taking a heavy toll, he said, pointing out that agriculture and livelihoods had been severely affected. Many people are now "going without adequate food", Laerke said, also warning that "families' access to health services, protection and children's education is at stake."

from several districts in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

In Bangladesh, thousands of people protested outside Dhaka's main mosque, Baitul Mukarram, after the Friday prayers, chanting slogans such as "Boycott Indian products".

In Pakistan, a radical religious party known for frequently paralysing the country with its anti-blasphemy rallies held a march in its stronghold of Lahore after Friday prayers, reports Al Jazeera Online.

And in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, about 50 protesters staged a rally in front of the Indian embassy in Jakarta.

"The Indian government must apologise to Muslims and they must take strict action against the politicians who made the remarks," a protest coordinator told AFP.

UN slams scrapping

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It added that the group had published "misleading information" about extrajudicial killings and disappearances.

"We are concerned," UN rights office spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani told reporters in Geneva.

"We urge the government to immediately reconsider this decision, and to ensure that Odhikar has the ability to seek full judicial review of any such determination."

She also cautioned that the decision could "have a chilling effect on the ability of civil society organisations to report serious human rights violations to UN human rights mechanisms".

Odhikar has for years worked closely with UN

bodies and recorded extrajudicial killings by security forces as well as enforced disappearances allegedly perpetrated by the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab).

Shamdasani said that the UN rights office and independent rights experts had since 2013 documented intimidation and reprisals against the organisation.

She added that the UN secretary general "has also raised concerns about reprisals against Odhikar over the past decade for cooperating with the UN".

The intimidation and reprisals, she said, "appear to have intensified, with accusations levelled against the organisation for anti-state and anti-government

activities".

The organisation had been operating in regulatory limbo since it sought to renew its 10-year licence in 2014. Its bank account has also been frozen since then.

Shamdasani called on the Bangladesh government to shift course. "Restrictions to the right of freedom of association which do not respect the principles of necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination contravene international law," she pointed out.

She urged the government to "foster an enabling environment for civil society to undertake their work without fear of reprisals, particularly in the lead-up to the next elections."

11-19 million

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years, the FAO said.

Amid soaring input prices, weather concerns and increased market uncertainties stemming from the Ukraine war, the forecasts "point to a likely tightening of food markets and food import bills reaching a new record high", said FAO economist Upali Galketi Aratchilage.

15 killed in South Africa bus collision

AFP, Johannesburg

Fifteen people were killed and 37 injured yesterday when a bus and a truck collided on a South African highway near the capital Pretoria, an emergency services spokesman told AFP.

"The death toll is now 15 dead, and 37 people have been injured, some of them critically," spokesman Thabo Charles Mabaso said.

The accident happened before dawn, and rescue workers were called at 5:05 am.

"Emergency services arrived on scene to find a bus and truck that collided head-on, with multiple patients lying around and some still trapped inside both vehicles," emergency services said in a statement.

Eight women and seven men died at the scene, while 37 others were taken to hospital. Seven were in critical condition, the statement said.

The road was closed throughout the morning. An investigation into the accident's cause has been launched.

Musa to be grilled along

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arrested in the case, would be remanded in phases to glean information whether there was anyone else behind the crime.

Tipu, 55, former general secretary of Motijheel AL, came under a gun attack on March 24 when his microbus was at a traffic light in the capital's Shahjahanpur. College student Samia Afnan Jamal Prity, 22, who happened to

be in a rickshaw next to the vehicle, also got shot.

The two were declared dead after being taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Although Musa's name has come up as the coordinator of the murder, Tipu's wife has long been alleging that he is a petty criminal and someone else was behind the killing.

Asked about it, Hafiz Akhter said they would

take her statement into consideration as Tipu was a political leader.

Musa escaped the country on March 12, two weeks before the killings. Police informed the Interpol about him after his arrest in Oman on May 12.

A three-member police team brought him back home in a Biman flight on Thursday.

"The Ryugu sample has the most primitive characteristics of any natural sample available to mankind, including meteorites," the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said in a statement.

It is believed that part of the material was created about five million years after the birth of the solar system and has not been heated above 100 degrees Celsius (210 degrees Fahrenheit).

Another study published in the US-based journal "Science" said the material has "a chemical composition that more closely resembles the Sun's photosphere than other natural samples".

Kensei Kobayashi, an astrophysics expert and professor emeritus at Yokohama National University, hailed the discovery.

"Scientists have been questioning how organic matter -- including amino acids -- was created or where it came from, and the fact that amino acids were discovered in the sample offers a reason to think that amino acids were brought to Earth from outer space," he told AFP.

Besides, State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid last week hinted at hiking the fuel prices while talking to this correspondent. "Now we are worried about the hike in fuel prices in the international market," he said.

Philippines protests China 'swarming' around disputed reef

AFP, Manila

The Philippines has protested the "illegal" presence of over a hundred Chinese boats around a disputed reef in the flashpoint South China Sea, describing it as a source of regional instability, the government said.

Authorities spotted the boats around the boomerang-shaped Whitsun Reef in April -- a year after a similar "swarming" incident caused a diplomatic row -- but the foreign office waited till Thursday to disclose it had launched a formal complaint with the

Chinese embassy in Manila. Manila and Beijing have long been locked in a dispute over parts of the South China Sea, almost all of which China insists it has exclusive rights to, rejecting a 2016 international tribunal ruling that its historical claims were without basis.

"The lingering unauthorised presence of Chinese fishing and maritime vessels is not only illegal, but is also a source of instability in the region," the Department of Foreign Affairs said.

"The Philippines calls on China to comply with its obligations under

international law, cease and desist from displaying illegal and irresponsible behaviour, avoid further escalating tensions at sea and immediately withdraw all of its vessels from Philippine maritime zones."

The department did not disclose whether there had been a Chinese government response and whether the boats were still in the area.

China's embassy in Manila did not respond to requests for comment. The foreign department said 210 Chinese vessels 'swarmed' around Whitsun from March 7 last year, lingering in the area for weeks.