

Pakistan FM to attend SCO meet in India

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's foreign minister will attend a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in India next month, his ministry said yesterday, in what will be the first visit by a top Pakistani government official to India in nearly a decade.

Relations between the nuclear-armed neighbours have been fraught for years and they have fought three wars, two of them over the Muslim-majority Himalayan region of Kashmir, which they both claim in full but rule in part.

Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari will attend a meeting of foreign ministers from the SCO in the Indian state of Goa on May 4-5, the ministry said.

It will be the first visit to India by a top Pakistani since then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif attended Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's swearing-in in 2014.



Protesters carry a replica of a coffin draped with a cloth and the word 'democracy' as they wait for the arrival of the French President, a month after his government pushed an unpopular pensions reform act through parliament, in Ganges, southern France yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

COVID CURBS 67m children missed out on vaccines: UN

AFP, United Nations

Some 67 million children partially or fully missed routine vaccine globally between 2019 and 2021 because of lockdowns and health care disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the United Nations said Wednesday.

"More than a decade of hard-earned gains in routine childhood immunization have been eroded," read a new report from the UN's children's agency, Unicef, adding that getting back on track "will be challenging."

Of the 67 million children whose vaccinations were "severely disrupted," 48 million missed out on routine vaccines entirely, Unicef said, flagging concerns about potential polio and measles outbreaks.

Vaccine coverage among children declined in 112 countries and the percent of children vaccinated worldwide slipped 5 points to 81 percent -- a low not seen since 2008. Africa and South Asia were particularly hard hit.

"Worryingly, the backsliding during the pandemic came at the end of a decade when, in broad terms, growth in childhood immunization had stagnated," the report said.

2002 GUJARAT RIOTS India court acquits 69 Hindus of murder of 11 Muslims

REUTERS, New Delhi

An Indian court yesterday acquitted 69 Hindus, including a former minister from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), of the murder of 11 Muslims during communal riots in the western state of Gujarat in 2002.

The killings occurred in Ahmedabad on February 28, 2002, a day after a suspected Muslim mob set fire to a train carrying Hindu pilgrims, setting off one of independent India's worst outbreaks of religious bloodshed.

A total of 86 Hindus were accused of the killings in the Naroda Gam district of Ahmedabad, 17 of whom died during trial. All the accused were free on bail.

"We have been saying from the first day that they were framed," defence lawyer Chetan Shah, who represented 82 of the accused, said. "Some of the accused were not present at the scene on the day of the incident."

Shamshad Pathan, who represented the victims, said they would challenge the court's decision in a higher court.

"Justice has eluded the victims once again. We will study the grounds on which the court has acquitted the accused persons," Pathan said.

Those acquitted include Maya Kodnani, a former minister of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP, who was a lawmaker at the time of the riots, former Bajrang Dal leader Babu Bajrang, and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader Jaydeep Patel.

Bajrang Dal and VHP are Hindu nationalist groups and have close links to the BJP.

New fighting rattles Sudan's capital

Death toll rises to 300; residents stream from city, some stopped at checkpoints

AGENCIES

Residents of Sudan's capital yesterday reported renewed heavy gunfire over central Khartoum and some other areas as many tried to flee the city on the eve of the Eid holiday marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

Over 300 people have been killed since the fighting erupted Saturday between forces loyal to Sudan's army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his deputy, Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, who commands the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), reports AFP. Early yesterday, smoke and fires that had risen from the city in previous days had abated, live TV feeds over Khartoum showed, before the fighting erupted once again.

Gunfire was heard in Bahri and residents reported violent clashes west of Omdurman where they said the army had moved to block the arrival of RSF reinforcements.

Both sides said earlier they would respect a 24-hour ceasefire that was due to come into effect at 6:00 pm local time on Wednesday, but was quickly broken by renewed fighting.

The RSF issued a statement about the breakdown in the truce, saying it came under attack in Omdurman and inflicted losses on the army in response, including shooting down two helicopters.

Reuters could not independently verify the RSF's

claims.

Some of the most intense fighting has been focussed around the compound housing the army HQ and the residence of Sudan's military ruler, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

The army controls access to Khartoum and appeared to be trying to cut off supply routes to RSF fighters, residents and witnesses said.



International powers, struggling to evacuate citizens after the airport and several districts housing embassies were caught up in the violence, have been pushing repeatedly for truces, to little effect.

More people have been leaving the capital with most able to pass but some stopped at checkpoints, according to residents and social media posts.

"There's no food, supermarkets are empty, the situation isn't safe, honestly, so people are leaving," said Khartoum resident who gave only his first name, Abdelmalek.

The fighting has been raging since Saturday morning, cutting

power and water supplies in many places during the final days of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk.

The power struggle between Burhan and RSF leader General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, widely known as Hemedti, was triggered by an internationally-backed plan to form a new civilian government and integrate Hemedti's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) into the regular military.

Sudanese medics have warned of a catastrophic health care situation, especially in Khartoum where many hospitals were apparently caught in the crossfire.

As many as 70 percent of the hospitals in Khartoum and neighbouring states have been rendered "out of service" due to fighting, the doctors' union said.

The union has warned the death toll was likely to be far higher, with many wounded unable to reach hospitals.

Many countries have started to make plans to evacuate thousands of foreigners, but their efforts have been put on hold by the ongoing violence.

The Sudanese army said 177 Egyptian soldiers were evacuated from the northern city of Meroe back to Egypt, which also confirmed their arrival. The RSF said later it handed over another 27 Egyptian soldiers to the Sudanese Red Cross and Cairo confirmed their arrival at the Egyptian embassy in Khartoum.

Iran 'forced' US submarine to the surface in Gulf

AFP, Tehran

Iran said yesterday it had "forced" a US submarine to surface as it was crossing the strategic Strait of Hormuz in the Gulf, a claim the Americans promptly denied.

Admiral Shahram Irani, the commander of Iran's navy, told state TV the USS Florida nuclear submarine was "approaching and passing in complete silence" when it partly entered Iranian waters.

An Iranian submarine then forced it to "surface and cross the strait", he said, adding that Tehran would raise the matter with "international authorities".

In a Twitter statement, the US Navy's Bahrain-based 5th Fleet said the claim was "absolutely false" and "represents more Iranian disinformation".

The "US 5th Fleet continues to operate wherever international law allows", it added.

Last June, the US Navy said three Iranian vessels had "interacted in an unsafe and unprofessional manner" as its ships transited the strait.

Washington-Tehran ties soured after Iran's 1979 revolution toppled shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and brought about Islamic rule under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

WAR IN UKRAINE Russia expands recruitment drive

REUTERS, Moscow

The Russian military has launched a video campaign to lure more professional soldiers to fight in Ukraine which challenges those interested to show they are "a real man" and swap what it casts as hum-drum civilian life for the battlefield.

The ad, set to stirring music, follows a report from British military intelligence and Russian media reports that suggest Moscow is seeking to recruit up to 400,000 professional soldiers - on a volunteer basis - to bolster its forces in Ukraine. The ad has so far been released on major Russian social networking sites.

Russia, which says it is prosecuting what it calls "a special military operation," does not disclose full casualty figures. But up to 43,000 Russians have been killed in the war so far, according to a recently leaked estimate from the US Defence Intelligence Agency.

It estimated up to 17,500 Ukrainians had been killed too.

The ad, which invites men to sign a contract with the Russian Defence Ministry for a salary starting at 204,000 roubles (\$2,495) a month, shows a man in supermarket dressed in military uniform holding a heavy machine gun. He is then shown in the uniform of a security guard with the question:

Meanwhile, Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg visited Kyiv yesterday and said Ukraine's future lies in Nato.

"And over time, our support will help you to make this possible," Stoltenberg told reporters during a joint press conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. He pledged continued military support for Ukraine.

FUNDING VIOLATIONS CBI searches at Oxfam India

NDTV ONLINE

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has registered a case against Oxfam India and its office-bearers for allegedly violating the provisions of India's foreign funding rules and carried out searches at the offices of the non-governmental organisation, officials said on Wednesday. According to the complaint filed with the agency by the Home Ministry, Oxfam India received around ₹ 1.5 crore directly into its Foreign Contribution Utilisation account instead of the designated bank account between 2013 and 2016. It also alleged that Oxfam India routed ₹ 12.71 lakh to the CPR in the financial year 2019-20.

BOAT SINKS OFF GREECE One migrant dead, 47 rescued

AFP, Athens

One man died and 47 people were rescued after a boat carrying migrants sank off southern Greece, the coast guard said yesterday. A rescue operation was launched early yesterday and the coast guard found "a dead man, aged 45,

and 47 surviving migrants" off the Peloponnese peninsula, an official told AFP. She said four children and three women were taken to hospital in Sparta, the main city in Laconia. Thousands of would-be migrants seek to reach the European Union via Greece, making a perilous crossing over the Mediterranean, often in flimsy, overcrowded boats. The migrants' boat had hit a rock, the coast guard said.



An Indian security personnel searches the bag of a pedestrian during a random search in Srinagar, J&K yesterday. Five soldiers died after a military truck caught fire likely due to a grenade attack by terrorists in J&K's Poonch, the Indian army said yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Indian climber rescued from Nepal peak

AFP, Kathmandu

An Indian climber was rescued alive yesterday from one of the world's most treacherous mountains in Nepal, three days after he went missing down a crevasse.

Anurag Maloo, 34, was descending from a camp on Annapurna on Monday when he fell down a deep crevasse at an altitude of around 5,600 metres.

Chhang Dawa Sherpa of Seven Summit Treks told AFP that Maloo had fallen 300 metres down a crevasse on the 8,091-metre (26,545-foot) mountain and had been lifted out by a team of eight people.

"His condition was critical and he has been airlifted to a Pokhara hospital for treatment," he added, referring to a nearby city.

Annapurna, the world's tenth highest mountain, is an avalanche-prone, technically difficult and has a higher death rate than Everest.