

India's Rahul begins march to boost opposition

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's main opposition leader Rahul Gandhi yesterday began a new cross-country march from a troubled northeastern state, aiming to generate political momentum to take on Prime Minister Narendra Modi in general elections due by May.

The "Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra", or Unite India Justice March, comes weeks after Gandhi's Congress party suffered shock defeats in elections in three states, puncturing the mood of the opposition which intends to challenge Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Gandhi walked for 3,500-km (2,200 miles) from the southern tip of India to Kashmir in the north, ending a 135-day march in January 2023 in a move to help revive the Congress and his popularity.

Pak SC strips ex-PM Khan's party of polls symbol

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's Supreme Court on Saturday rejected an attempt by former prime minister Imran Khan's party to retain its traditional electoral symbol of a cricket bat, in the latest setback for the jailed leader ahead of a general election.

Khan's party, at odds with army generals, has been grappling with a military-backed crackdown that has gathered pace ahead of the February 8 vote. The party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), alleges the military is attempting to keep it out of the election race, a charge the army denies.

A party's electoral symbol on ballot papers is significant for voters to be able to identify its candidates in the South Asian nation of 241 million people, where the majority of constituencies are in rural areas with low literacy.

Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa announced the ruling in a live late night telecast of the proceedings on the top court's website.

Stripped of the bat, PTI candidates will need to contest on individual symbols, which could confuse its voters.

"This, by far, is the worst decision impacting million of voters," the party said in a statement.

NZ's ex-PM Ardern marries partner

REUTERS, Wellington

New Zealand's former prime minister Jacinda Ardern married her longtime partner Clarke Gayford in a private ceremony on Saturday, finally tying the knot after cancelling ceremonies during strict Covid-19 controls she imposed on the country.

Ardern, 43, and Gayford, 47, got engaged in May 2019 and were meant to be married in early 2022, but the ceremony was cancelled due to her "go hard, go early" approach to the pandemic, which allowed New Zealand to keep deaths from the virus low.

She became a global icon for left-leaning politics and women in leadership as prime minister from 2017 to January last year. Ardern, one of just two women to have a baby as national leaders, took her daughter to a United Nations meeting.

The wedding took place in Hawke's Bay at Craggy Range Winery on the east coast of New Zealand's North Island, about 310 km (190 miles) north of the capital Wellington, an Ardern spokesperson said by email.

Official photos showed a smiling Ardern wearing a white halter neck dress, while Gayford wore a black suit. They tied the knot in front of some 50 to 75 guests, news site Stuff reported. Among the guests was Ardern's successor as prime minister Chris Hipkins, the current opposition leader, the New Zealand Herald said.



Peace activists shout slogans during a protest at the gates of RAF Akrotiri, the British base on Cyprus which has been used as a launchpad for strikes against the Houthi militia in Yemen, near the city of Limassol, Cyprus yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Gaza offensive 'staining our shared humanity'

UN warns an entire generation of children being 'traumatised'

AGENCIES

A top UN official said that Israeli offensive in Gaza was staining humanity, as the conflict has created a dire humanitarian crisis for 2.4 million people in the Palestinian enclave.

"The massive death, destruction, displacement, hunger, loss and grief of the last 100 days are staining our shared humanity," the head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, Philippe Lazzarini, said in a statement on Saturday as he visited the Gaza Strip.

"It's been 100 days of ordeal and anxiety for hostages and their families," Lazzarini said.

Israel has pounded Gaza since October 7, killing at least 23,843 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry.

Lazzarini said an entire generation of children were being "traumatised" and would take years to heal.

"People live in inhumane conditions, where diseases are spreading, including among children," he said.

"They live through the unlivable, with the clock ticking fast towards famine."

At Rafah's Al-Najjar hospital yesterday, mourners prayed near the bodies of slain relatives, reports AFP.

One man, Bassem Araf, held up a photo of a child and said: "She died hungry ... This is the resistance they are targeting in Gaza, just children."

The Gaza Strip's people suffer acute shortages of food, water, medicine and fuel, and the health system is collapsing.

Winter rains have exacerbated the dire conditions for 1.9 million Palestinian displaced by the violence,

according to UN estimates.

Telecommunications have been partially restored in southern Gaza, an AFP reporter in Rafah said, after operator Paltel reported a complete outage on Friday.

Paltel said an Israeli strike killed two of its employees in Khan Yunis while they were repairing the network.

Arab-Israeli lawmaker Ahmad Tibi said on social media three of his relatives had been killed in a strike on central Gaza's Nuseirat refugee camp.

At Nasser Hospital, a handful of doctors said they were struggling in a now "collapsed" healthcare system.

Reuters footage showed patients lying on stretchers on the floor inside corridors and doctors using their phone flashlights to examine patients' eyes.

"Most of the medical supplies in the ICU are missing," said doctor Mohammad Al Qidra.

"We don't have empty beds, no treatments. Most of the medicines inside the emergency room are not enough for patients. We are trying to find alternatives."

Hospital wards are being shared by many of the displaced.

"When we ask for medicine, they tell us they don't have it, and the situation is bad. We are here in cold and windy weather," said Mahmoud Jaber, who has been displaced from his home in Gaza City.

In the occupied West Bank, where violence had already been on the rise before October 7 and has increased since, three Palestinians who were armed with knives, a rifle and an axe tried to break into a Jewish settlement and were killed, the Israeli military said.



Steps towards independence will be harshly punished

China warns Taiwan

AFP, Beijing

China's top diplomat warned yesterday any steps towards Taiwan's independence would be "harshly punished", after the self-ruled island defied Beijing's warnings and chose pro-sovereignty candidate Lai Ching-te as president.

Voters spurned Beijing's repeated calls not to vote for Lai, delivering a comfortable victory for a man China's ruling Communist Party sees as a dangerous separatist.

Beijing, which claims Taiwan as its territory and has never renounced force to bring it under its control, responded to Lai's victory by saying it would not change the "inevitable trend of China's reunification".

"If anyone on the island of Taiwan thinks of going for independence, they will be trying to split apart China's territory, and will certainly be harshly punished by both history and the law," Wang Yi said in a joint press conference with his Egyptian counterpart in Cairo.

"This is a dead end," he added. "No matter what the results of the election are ... Taiwan is a part of it," Wang said yesterday.

What's next for Taiwan after the election?

AFP, Taipei

President-elect Lai Ching-te may have won the top job in Taiwan's elections, but he must now chart an uneasy path on the doorstep of an increasingly assertive China. Despite Beijing's warnings that Lai's win would bring "war and decline" to Taiwan, he won comfortably with more than 40 percent of the vote Saturday. In the face of China's rhetoric on Lai, here is what experts are saying is to come:

MILITARY PRESSURES

Ahead of the poll, Beijing warned voters to make the "correct" choice, blasting Lai as a "severe danger" who would threaten peace by following the "evil path" of Taiwan independence.

In a stinging repudiation of China's threats, Lai and his running mate Hsiao Bi-khim received a clear vote of confidence from more than 40 percent of the 14 million who voted.

"Beijing needs to carefully calibrate its action plans," said Alexander Huang, a military expert at Tamkang University in Taipei.

"Harsh military pressure may not be immediate given the current US-China relations and the American election cycle... However, Beijing will escalate pressures other than war toward Taiwan."

ECONOMIC SQUEEZES

Taiwan is home to the world's leading semiconductor industry, producing tiny chips used in everything from Bluetooth headphones to missile systems. These silicon wafers are the lifeblood of the modern global economy, placing great responsibility on Lai to maintain a careful balance on tensions as the United States and China tussle over technology exports.

Speaking to reporters after his victory Saturday, Lai said his incoming administration would provide "strong support for the semiconductor industry" to facilitate the development of "a more complete industry link".

China leans on Taiwanese semiconductor imports, while the mainland remains the island's largest export market. Huang said Beijing could apply an economic squeeze on Taiwan, which would "set the terms of interaction for the next four years of cross-strait relations".

'OBSTRUCTIONIST' LEGISLATURE

Voters may have chosen Lai as president, but the vote for legislature positions saw his party lose its majority. DPP now has one less seat in Taiwan's legislature than main opposition group Kuomintang (KMT) — which makes the small Taiwan People's Party "the kingmaker", said Raymond Kuo, Taiwan Policy Initiative director at RAND Corporation.

But for big ticket issues — like bolstering national defence — "there is burgeoning consensus among the Taiwan public" for it. "Being obstructionist in those issues will hurt (the opposition camps)", he said. Any legislation regarding cross-strait relations would be difficult to pass, said Sarah Liu of the University of Edinburgh.

PRESERVING STATUS QUO

With Lai's win, the DPP secured an unprecedented third consecutive term in power, signifying that the majority of Taiwanese stand behind the party's values of preserving democracy. Taiwanese "are voting regardless of this sense of crisis... put up by the opposition parties", said Ivy Kwek of International Crisis Group.

With younger generations no longer identifying with being Chinese, preserving the status quo in the flashpoint region "has become harder".

"What we are seeing is that Taiwanese are increasingly having a very distinctive identity different from the mainland China, and... we are seeing a Beijing that is increasingly more powerful," Kwek said.



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Five migrants die trying to cross Channel

REUTERS, Paris

Five migrants trying to cross the Channel to Britain died in French waters in the early hours of yesterday, French local authorities said.

The small boat overturned as it attempted to launch from a beach in Wimereux, south of Calais, an official told Reuters, adding that one person in critical condition had been taken to hospital in Boulogne, northern France.

Dozens were pulled from the cold water but the overnight rescue effort was complicated as the waters were too shallow for the French navy's boats that came to help, the local prefecture said in a statement.

Sea temperature was around 9 degrees Celsius (48 degrees Fahrenheit), it said. Those dead are believed to be Iraqi and Syrian, local newspaper La Voix du Nord said.



Emergency personnel use diggers to fill in the last hole in a protective wall trying to prevent flowing lava to reach the centre of the southwestern Icelandic town of Grindavik after a volcanic eruption yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP