

SPANISH TOURIST
RAPED3 arrested
in India's
Jharkhand

AFP, Mumbai

Three men were arrested yesterday after the gang rape of a Spanish tourist on a motorbike trip through India's remote east with her husband, local media reports said.

The attack took place on Friday night in the Dumka district of the eastern state of Jharkhand, where the couple had stopped to camp the night in a tent.

The woman was able to reach a police patrol van at around 11:00pm and was taken to hospital for treatment, police officer Pitamber Singh Kherwar told The Times of India newspaper. Kherwar said police had detained three people in connection with the attack and were on the hunt for more suspects.

The Spanish woman is being treated at a local hospital in Dumka and an investigation is underway.



A young boy reacts as a child receives medical attention at the Kuwaiti hospital for wounds sustained in an Israeli bombardment that hit a camp sheltering displaced Palestinians near the Emirati hospital, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'SYMBOL OF HOPE'
Russians lay
flowers at
Navalny grave

REUTERS, Moscow

Russians queued yesterday to place flowers on the grave of late opposition politician Alexei Navalny, with mourners hailing him as a symbol of hope and perseverance the day after he was laid to rest in Moscow. Navalny's mother Lyudmila was among the mourners, visiting her son's grave for the second day, accompanied by the mother of Alexei's widow Yulia. Both women, dressed in black, stood quietly at the grave, before leaving. Navalny, who was President Vladimir Putin's fiercest critic inside Russia, died at the age of 47 in an Arctic penal colony on February 16. Supporters said he had been murdered. The Kremlin has denied any state involvement in his death. Thousands of people attended a farewell ceremony for Navalny on Friday, with some chanting his name and saying they would not forgive the Russian authorities for his death. By yesterday, the grave in a Moscow cemetery not far from where he once lived was covered with flowers left by thousands of mourners. Police looked on but did not interfere as mourners lay flowers at Navalny's grave yesterday. Rights group OVD Info reported that 91 mourners had been detained on Friday in 12 towns and cities, including Moscow.

US makes its first
Gaza aid airdrop

REUTERS, Cairo/Washington

The United States military carried out its first airdrop of humanitarian aid into Gaza yesterday, US officials said, and aid agencies warned of a growing humanitarian disaster in the Palestinian enclave as Israel pressed on with its offensive.

Three C-130 planes delivered more than 35,000 meals into a territory where the United Nations says one quarter of the population is one step from famine, and Palestinians posted videos on social media showing boxes of aid being dropped.

The White House has said the airdrops will be a sustained effort, and that Israel is supportive of the operation.

US President Joe Biden has said he hopes a ceasefire will be in place by the time of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which starts on March 10. Speaking to reporters on Friday, he said: "We're not there yet." Plans for the US airdrop were announced by Biden on Friday, a day after the deaths of Palestinians queuing for aid drew renewed attention to the humanitarian catastrophe.

Biden said the US airdrop would take place in the coming days but offered no further specifics. Other countries, including Jordan and France, have already carried out airdrops of aid into Gaza.

"We need to do more and the United States will do more," Biden told reporters, adding that "aid flowing to Gaza is nowhere nearly enough."

At the White House, spokesperson John Kirby stressed that airdrops would become "a sustained effort." He added that the first airdrop would be likely to be military MREs, or "meals ready-to-eat."

"This isn't going to be one and done," Kirby said.

Biden told reporters that the US was also looking at the possibility of a maritime corridor to deliver large amounts of aid into Gaza.

At least 576,000 people in the Gaza Strip - one quarter of the enclave's population - are one step away from famine, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

With people eating animal feed and even cactuses to survive, and with medics saying children are dying in hospitals from malnutrition and dehydration, the UN has said it faces "overwhelming obstacles" getting in aid.

While it is unclear which type of aircraft will be used, the C-17 and C-130 are best suited for the job.

David Deptula, a retired US Air Force three-star general who once commanded the no-fly zone over northern Iraq, said airdrops are something the US military can effectively execute.

"It is something that's right up their mission alley," Deptula told Reuters.

"There are a lot of detailed challenges. But there's nothing insurmountable."

A US official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the airdrops would have only a limited impact on the suffering of those in

Gaza. "It doesn't deal with the root cause," the official said, adding that ultimately only opening up land borders could deal with the issue in a serious manner.

Another issue, the official added, was that the US could not ensure that the aid simply didn't end up in Hamas' hands, given that the United States did not have troops on the ground.

"Humanitarian workers always complain that airdrops are good photo opportunities but a lousy way to deliver aid," Richard Gowan, the International Crisis Group's UN Director, said. Gowan said that the only way to get enough aid was through aid convoys which would follow a trace.

"It is arguable that the situation in Gaza is now so bad that any additional supplies will at least alleviate some suffering. But this at best a temporary band aid measure," Gowan added.

Under pressure at home and abroad, another US official said the Biden administration was looking at shipping aid by sea from Cyprus, some 210 nautical miles off Gaza's Mediterranean coast.

At the White House, Kirby acknowledged that the airdrops into Gaza were "extremely difficult" because of the dense population and ongoing conflict.

The US for months has been calling for Israel to allow more aid into Gaza, something Israel has resisted.

Kirby noted that Israel had tried to airdrop supplies into Gaza and it was supportive of the US airdropping aid.

IRAN PARLIAMENTARY POLLS

Turnout
hits 'historic
low': reports

REUTERS

Turnout for Iran's parliamentary election, seen as a test of the clerical establishment's legitimacy, appears to have hit a historic low of around 40 percent, according to unofficial reports in Iranian media yesterday. Heavyweight moderates and conservatives stayed away from Friday's election and reformists called it unfair and unfair as it was mainly a contest between hardliners and low-key conservatives loyal to Islamic revolutionary ideals. Mohammad Khatami, Iran's first reformist president, was among the critics who did not vote on Friday. Imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate Narges Mohammadi, a women's rights advocate, in a statement shared by her family with Reuters, called the election a "sham". The Hamshahri and Kayhan newspapers both reported that turnout was estimated at about 40 percent, in line with official surveys ahead of the poll estimating about 41 percent of eligible Iranians would vote. The Hamshahri called the turnout "a 25 million slap" to calls for an election boycott, in a front-page headline next to a depiction of a ballot paper smacking US President Joe Biden in the face. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused Iran's "enemies" - a term he normally uses for the United States and Israel - of trying to create despair among Iranian voters.

Chad junta
chief to run for
presidency

AFP, N'Djamena

Chad junta chief Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno said yesterday he would contest a May 6 presidential election, just three days after his chief rival was killed in murky circumstances.

Deby Itno took power in 2021 after his father, veteran leader Idriss Deby Itno, died while fighting rebels. The iron-fisted ruler had led the Sahel country for more than three decades.

"I, Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno, am a candidate for the 2024 presidential election under the banner of the For a United Chad coalition," he said in a speech.

Deby Itno had been proclaimed transitional president by the junta and had promised a return to civilian rule and elections within 18 months. But he subsequently extended the transition by two years.

The date of the presidential elections was announced on Tuesday, barely two months before the vote.

Deby Itno, 39, is almost certain to win, given that his main challenger has been assassinated and the opposition has been muzzled and repressed.

On Wednesday, Deby Itno's cousin and main political rival, opposition leader Yaya Dillo Djerou, was killed after troops surrounded the office of his Socialist Party Without Borders in the capital N'Djamena.

His party accused soldiers of shooting Dillo dead at point-blank range in an "execution" before the presidential election, in which he planned to challenge Deby. The government has rejected the accusations, saying Dillo "opposed his arrest" and fired on security forces.

Speaking yesterday from the foreign ministry headquarters and surrounded by troops, Deby Itno claimed that when he seized power in 2021 the army had "saved the country from the abyss and from chaos". Dressed all in white, he was cheered by hundreds of representatives of the political groups that make up the For a United Chad coalition. The coalition claims it comprises "221 parties".

Manager of building, 3 others placed on remand

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manager, and Joynuddin Jisan, manager of "Kachchi Bhai".

Police filed a case against Amin Mohammad Group, three people and "unnamed others" over the fire incident. Shahidul Islam, sub-inspector of Ramna Police Station filed the case on Friday night, charging the accused of causing death by negligence and attempted murder.

In the case statement, the SI said that the Green Cozy Cottage is owned by Amin Mohammad Group, and managed by Hamimul.

The owner and manager of the building rented out the facility to several restaurants and shops without proper approval from the concerned authorities. The accused and other restaurant owners and managers have been operating their business illegally by "managing the shop inspectors of Rajuk," it said.

These restaurants used gas cylinders and stoves for cooking without proper safety measures, said the statement.

With the connivance of the building owner and the manager, the proprietors of 14 restaurants within the building have been storing a large number of gas cylinders on the ground floor and have

been using these gas cylinders and gas stoves in a negligent, reckless, careless and dangerous manner without regard for public safety, the case statement said.

The statement said one such gas cylinder, stored in the kitchen of "Chumuk" restaurant, exploded, triggering the fire that engulfed the building, causing deaths and injuries through burns and suffocation to individuals in restaurants and shops on various floors.

The statement said the building was constructed as a residential building. Later, the accused, along with other businesses on different floors, managed to obtain commercial certificates from relevant authorities for conducting business within the structure.

The restaurant owners didn't have permission from the fire service office to use gas cylinders, and stoves for cooking. Moreover, the absence of sufficient fire extinguishers, firefighting equipment, and fire exit stairs further exacerbated the situation, it added.

The negligence, recklessness, and carelessness of the building owner and the accused led to the tragic deaths of 46 people, with many others sustaining severe

burns and smoke-related injuries, added the case statement.

Contacted, Gazi Ahmed Ullah, head of the public relations department at Amin Mohammad Group, told this paper that the developer company does not currently own the building.

"According to the contract, after the construction, the landowner was given her share of floors. And floors obtained by the developer company were sold off. Currently, the building has a separate owners' association," Gazi said.

Asked about the case, he said steps would be taken as per law.

So far, the bodies of 44 victims have been handed over to their families. Officials said DNA tests will be required to identify the two other bodies.

Meanwhile, Health Minister Samanta Lal Sen said yesterday that five patients admitted at Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery were in critical condition.

FBCCI DEMANDS PUNISHMENT
The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) yesterday demanded exemplary punishment for those responsible for neglecting

safety measures.

Speaking to reporters after visiting the damaged building in the morning, Amin Helaly, senior vice president of the apex trade body, said various government agencies have been blaming each other since the incident, which will not lead to a solution.

"We want a proper investigation into the incident. At the end of the investigation, those responsible should be punished - be they a person or an organisation," he said.

He said the private sector in Bangladesh has contributed to economic growth and advancement, adding, "But business establishments are still lagging in terms of full compliance with rules."

Before the fire broke out, a government agency had already issued notices declaring the building dangerous, he added.

"They cannot avoid their responsibility by simply giving notices. They had the opportunity to take legal action. Instead, they were indifferent. Now, businesses are being blamed," he said.

Helaly said government agencies should thoroughly analyse and examine the safety aspects of a building before issuing compliance certificates to commercial buildings.

CEC urges EC,
judiciary, JS to
use authority

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Habibul expressed deep shock and sorrow over the death of journalist Obhishrutti Shastri, who used to cover EC beat, and others in the Bailey Road fire incident that claimed at least 46 lives.

Those present at the discussion observed a minute of silence for the deceased.

Election commissioners Brig Gen (ret'd) Ahsan Habib Khan, Rashida Sultana and Md Alamgir also spoke at the discussion.

Earlier while inaugurating the day's programmes, Habibul announced that the country now has 12,18,50,160 eligible voters. Of them, 6,21,44,587 are male, 5,97,04,641 are female, and 932 voters are hijras, he said.

According to the EC's factsheet, about 26.99 lakh new voters were enlisted in the country's voter list since March 2, 2023.

The voter growth was 2.26 percent over the last year.

Withdraw

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Complete strikes were observed throughout Bangladesh in response to Bangabandhu's call.

Spontaneous processions were brought out by general people.

Several people were killed as the army opened fire on protesters. In Rangpur, as fights broke out between Pakistani army men and civilians, a 24-hour curfew was imposed from 2:30pm.

A curfew was also imposed in Sylhet.

YAHYA'S ROUNDTABLE INVITATION

In the evening, there was a radio announcement proposing a roundtable conference of political leaders to be convened by President Yahya Khan in Dhaka on March 10, 1971.

This was an effort to find a political solution to the situation in East Pakistan after the sine die postponement of the National Assembly.

Yahya took the decision in consultation with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto at a meeting held on March 2.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rejected Yahya's invitation to the meeting, terming it a "cruel joke" since it followed the "widespread killing of the unarmed civilian population".

MYANMAR SITUATION

Thailand holds
seminar despite
junta objection

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand's parliament opened a seminar yesterday on the political situation in Myanmar, including opponents of the neighbouring country's military government, despite the junta's objection.

"What we are doing today is the first step in bringing a variety of stakeholders to talk to each other," said lawmaker Rangsiman Rome, head of the house committee organising the two-day event. "It will pave the way for a political solution for Myanmar that is peaceful and sustainable."

Speakers include senior figures in Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government and ethnic armed organisations, but no representative from the Myanmar government.

Myanmar's foreign ministry said in a letter seen by Reuters that it "strongly objects" to parliament hosting the seminar, saying it "creates negative impacts" on bilateral relations. It asked the Thai government to tell parliament not to hold "any activity that could hinder the ongoing cordial ties".

Thai Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara was to deliver a keynote address at the seminar but cancelled at the last minute without any explanation.

The Myanmar military spokesman did not respond to a call seeking comment. The Thai foreign ministry declined to comment. Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military seized power from an elected government in a 2021 coup.