



WASHINGTON, District of Columbia: File photo shows Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attends a plenary session during the 2016 Nuclear Security Summit at the Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC. — AFP

INDIA PM BLAMES 'ACT OF FRAUD' FOR DEADLY BRIDGE COLLAPSE

NEW DELHI: Indian leader Narendra Modi said yesterday a fatal flyover collapse in Kolkata was "an act of fraud" and accused West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of corruption at a state election rally. Modi, campaigning for his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), said the collapse was the result of corrupt practices under Banerjee's ruling Trinamool Congress state govern-

ment. "A huge bridge collapsed and what did these people say—an act of God. Didi (Banerjee), this is not an act of God but an act of fraud," Modi said at the rally in Birpara, a town in the state's far northeast.

Twenty-six people were killed when a portion of a flyover that was under construction collapsed onto a busy street crushing scores of pedestrians and cars on March 31. A top official

from the construction company IVRCL that was building the bridge drew ire for saying the collapse was "an act of God", although Banerjee herself is not known to have said this. Nine officials of the firm have been arrested on charges including murder as investigators probe negligence in the disaster, which came on the brink of a month-long state election expected to be closely fought.

Modi said it was a divine message to voters in the state to reject the chief minister's party in the polls over what he alleged was rampant corruption. "This business of money and death led to the collapse of the Vivekananda bridge," Modi said. "In a sense it is an act of God that it fell on election eve to expose your (Banerjee's) misgovernance," he said. The BJP, which has failed to gain ground in West Bengal and won just one seat in the previous election, is trying to put the ruling party on the back foot over the incident.

Derek O'Brien, a lawmaker and chief national spokesman for the Trinamool Congress, accused Modi in a social media post of "playing cheap politics over a tragedy". "These are not words befitting of the Prime Minister of India. They bring his high office to disrepute... The Trinamool Congress is far from being a corrupt party," he wrote on Facebook. Banerjee's party is facing a two-way challenge in the elections after previously ending the 34-year-rule of Leftist parties, which have entered into an alliance with the Indian National Congress. West Bengal is one of five Indian states holding elections this month and next and the results will be announced on May 19. — AFP

CLASHES IN KASHMIR AFTER INDIAN TROOPS KILL 2 LOCAL REBELS

SRINAGAR, India: Anti-India protesters attacked government forces with rocks and burned an armored vehicle yesterday as they participated in the funerals of two insurgents killed in a gunbattle in the disputed Kashmir region, an Indian official said. The clashes erupted as police fired tear gas to disperse thousands of people protesting the killing of the two by Indian forces in the southern Shopian area of the Indian portion of Kashmir, said senior paramilitary officer Nalin Prabhat.

Prabhat said the two, including Naseer Pandit, a former police constable who joined the militants last year, belonged to Kashmir's largest rebel group Hizbul Mujahideen. As the news of the killings spread, thousands of people gathered in the towns of Shopian and Pulwama to take part in their funerals, chanting slogans in favor of Pakistan and against Indian rule. Clashes erupted in Pulwama as police fired tear gas

to stop the protesters from marching on the main road. The protesters responded by throwing rocks at the police and by burning an armored vehicle, police said.

There were no reports of any injuries in the clashes. Funerals for militants usually draw thousands in Kashmir, where sentiments against Indian rule run deep. Rebels have been fighting since 1989 for Kashmir's independence or merger with Pakistan, which controls another portion of the territory in the west. More than 68,000 people have been killed in the militant uprising and Indian military crackdown. The rebel groups have largely been suppressed by Indian troops in recent years, and resistance is now principally expressed through street protests. India and Pakistan have fought two wars over control of Kashmir since they won independence from British colonialists in 1947. — AP

MALDIVES PRESIDENT LOOKS TO REBUILD TIES ON INDIA TRIP

NEW DELHI: Maldives President Abdulla Yameen will meet with Narendra Modi next week, New Delhi said yesterday, the pair's first tete-a-tete since the Indian premier controversially cancelled a visit to the island nation last year. Yameen, who will be accompanied by a high-level delegation, arrives in New Delhi for the two-day visit on Sunday and will have a meeting and lunch with the Hindu nationalist prime minister on Monday. Ties between traditional allies India and the Maldives took a hit last year due to a bitter internal power struggle in the Maldives which led to the jailing of former president Mohamed Nasheed.

The political turmoil prompted Modi to cancel a planned visit to the Maldives in March 2015 at the last minute, but a trip by Indian foreign minister Sushma Swaraj in October appears to have calmed tensions. "India and Maldives commemorated 50 years of diplomatic relations last year," said Vikas Swarup, the Indian foreign ministry spokesman, at a media briefing. "Both countries have historically had a close relationship both as neighbors and friends in the Indian Ocean region." India has been wary of China's growing interest in the far-flung archipelago, as Beijing builds a network of ports in the Indian Ocean dubbed the String of Pearls.

In 2012, the Maldives cancelled an airport expansion deal with an Indian infrastructure firm and later gave the contract to a Chinese company, ruffling feathers in New Delhi. On Wednesday, President Yameen inaugurated construction work on the \$800-million project in the capital Male, which he said would boost economic activities. The atoll nation of 400,000 people has generated headlines over a crackdown against political dissent which has dented its popular image as a holiday paradise. — AFP

RUNAWAY GROOM: CHINA NABS FRAUD SUSPECT AT AIRPORT

SHANGHAI: Chinese authorities have detained the head of a group of finance companies accused of defrauding more than 100,000 investors, as he sought to board a private plane allegedly hired to take him to Europe for his wedding, media reports and police said. Xu Qin, described as the "controller" of the Zhongjin-linked companies, was held at an airport in Shanghai as he attempted to fly to Italy for the ceremony with other executives, on an aircraft chartered for the purpose, media reports said.

He was among more than 20 managers of Zhongjin detained by police and accused of swindling investors through falsifying operations and inflating business performance, according to a police statement released on Wednesday. The Zhongjin stable of companies, headquartered in commercial hub Shanghai, pooled money from investors for a variety of funds and projects, with the promise of high returns.

Police gave no estimates for the size of the case, but reports said it involved more than 130,000 investors with the firm raising at least 34 billion yuan (\$5.3 billion) in funds. Authorities said Xu registered more than 50 subsidiaries and controlled over 100 linked companies.

The case is the latest financial fraud to emerge as China's economy slows, recording its lowest growth in a quarter of a century last year. In a recent scandal, peer-to-peer (P2P) lending firm Ezubao bilked 900,000 investors out of \$7.6 billion by offering high interest rates which it was unable to pay, in what one executive described in a televised confession as a "typical Ponzi scheme". A wealth management firm, Shanghai-based Jinlu Financial Advisors, has also struggled to pay back investors, China Business News said on its website. An associated company this week announced plans to make payments within two years. In the southwestern city of Kunming, private financing firm Yunnan Pan-Asia Folk Capital Registration Service Centre stopped making some payments to investors in November last year, sparking a public protest in February, an investor told AFP. — AFP