

## PAKISTAN ARRESTS IMAM AFTER BOY CUTS HAND OFF IN BLASPHEMY ERROR

**ISLAMABAD:** Pakistani police have arrested the imam of a mosque for inciting violence after a 15-year old boy who was told by the cleric that he was a blasphemer went home and cut off his own hand. Shabbir Ahmed was delivering a sermon at a village in the east of Punjab province when he asked the gathering if

anyone did not love the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH).

Mishearing the question, the 15-year old boy raised his hand. Ahmed quickly singled him out and called him a "blasphemer" in front of the congregation, Noshir Ali, the head of the local police station, told Reuters yesterday.

After returning home, the boy cut his hand off, an act welcomed by the boy's father who told police he was proud of his son and did not want the cleric arrested. Police filed anti-terrorism charges against Ahmed and arrested him on Saturday, police chief Ali said. "Such illiterate imams of mosques

should not be allowed to deliver speeches. His arrest is under the National Action Plan that hate speeches inciting violence are no longer allowed in this country," Ali said.

Blasphemy is a highly controversial issue in Pakistan, and angry mobs have killed many people accused of insulting

Islam in the majority Muslim country. The law does not define blasphemy but stipulates that the penalty is death, although a death sentence has never been carried out. Human rights activists say accusations of blasphemy are sky rocketing because the law is often abused to settle personal grudges.—Reuters



**OUAGADOUGOU:** A policeman stands guard in front of the Splendid hotel yesterday following a jihadist attack by Al-Qaeda linked gunmen late on January 15.—AFP

## SECURITY FORCES HUNT DOWN POSSIBLE SURVIVING BURKINA HOTEL ATTACKERS

### REGIONAL JIHADISTS EXPANDING IN WEST AFRICA

**OUAGADOUGOU:** Security forces were hunting yesterday for any possible surviving gunmen from an attack on a top hotel in Burkina Faso that left at least 29 people dead and showed the expanding reach of regional jihadists in West Africa. The drama saw Burkinabe troops, backed

by French Special Forces, battle militants who stormed the four-star Splendid Hotel, which is popular with foreigners and United Nations staff.

At least 13 foreigners are among the dead, according to a government toll. Burkina Faso has declared three days of national mourning follow-

ing the onslaught, which echoed another Al-Qaeda attack last year on a luxury hotel in neighboring Mali where 20 people were killed, mostly foreigners.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed the latest attack on behalf of an affiliate, saying the gunmen were from the Al-Murabitoun group of notorious one-eyed Algerian extremist Mokhtar Belmokhtar. It is still not clear how many attackers took part in the onslaught—the bodies of three have been identified, but some witnesses reported seeing more.

Burkina Faso's Interior Minister Simon Compaore said search security forces were carrying out careful searches, while at the scene of the attack a security cordon was widened yesterday. Investigators wearing white protective gloves were seen in the streets around the Splendid and the Cappuccino cafe, which was also attacked. "People are afraid. Anyone who's not afraid isn't normal—this is guys with guns," said Souleymane Ouedraogo, who lives near the scene of the violence.

#### Violence spreading

Until recently Burkina Faso had largely escaped the tide of Islamist violence spreading in the restive Sahel region and the hotel assault will heighten fears that jihadist groups are casting their net wider in search of targets in West Africa. President Roch Marc Christian Kabore, who took office just last month, said Saturday that the country was in shock.

"For the first time in its history, our country has fallen victim to a series of barbaric terrorist attacks," he said, adding that the people of Burkina would nevertheless "emerge victorious". The attack began around 7:45 pm on Friday when an unknown number of attackers stormed the 147-room Splendid Hotel in the heart of Ouagadougou.

The hotel and surrounding area became a battleground as Burkina Faso troops, backed by French forces based in the city under a regional counterterrorism initiative, launched an attempt to retake the hotel around 2:00 am.

Among those killed were six Canadians, two French nationals, two Swiss, an American, a Portuguese and a Dutch person, according to the prosecutor's office. Interior minister Compaore said the bodies of three "very young" jihadists had been identified, all of them men. Several guests managed to escape from the hotel through side entrances, including labor minister Clement Sawadogo, who emerged unscathed. "It was horrible... there was blood everywhere. They were firing at people at close range," Yannick Sawadogo, one of those who escaped said.

#### Australians kidnapped

Highlighting the fragile security situation in Burkina Faso, an elderly Australian couple was kidnapped on Friday in the northern Baraboule region, near the border with Niger and Mali. Malian militant group Ansar Dine told AFP the couple was being held by jihadists from the Al-Qaeda-linked "Emirate of the Sahara".

The pair had been running a surgical clinic in the north of the country since 1972, and no reason has been given for their kidnapping, a statement from their family said. The hotel attack was the first of its kind in Ouagadougou and came as people were tentatively enjoying a return to stability after November elections which ended a shaky transitional period since veteran leader Blaise Compaore's 2014 ouster, including a failed coup. Al-Murabitoun had already begun to move into the impoverished country of around 17 million. In April, it claimed the abduction of the Romanian security chief of a mine in the country's north.—AFP

## JAKARTA ATTACK TOLL RISES TO 8: POLICE

**JAKARTA:** The death toll in the Jakarta extremist attack has risen to eight, including four civilian victims and four militants, after a wounded Indonesian bystander died overnight, police said yesterday. Police had earlier put the toll of victims from Thursday's assault at two, but raised it with the latest death and confirmation that an Indonesian man originally suspected of being a militant was actually a civilian.

The coordinated bomb and gun attack along the capital's central thoroughfare has been claimed by the Islamic State (IS) group. Indonesian authorities blame it on an IS faction made up primarily of Malay-speaking Indonesians and Malaysians involved in the extremist group's ruthless fight for a self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

The Jakarta attack also left two dozen people injured—including some foreigners—several of them in serious condition. "Another victim who was in a coma since the beginning died last night," Jakarta

police spokesman Muhammad Iqbal told AFP, confirming the latest death. He named him as Rais Karna, 37, an Indonesian who worked at a nearby bank and who died from severe gunshot wounds to the head.

The fourth victim, who was initially thought to be an attacker, was identified as Sugito. Many Indonesians go by a single name. Police previously confirmed a Canadian citizen was among the dead. All the others were Indonesian. Authorities in Southeast Asian countries with significant Muslim populations say hundreds of their citizens have gone to join the IS jihad in the Middle East, and have repeatedly warned that extremist violence could boomerang back home. Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. Police said Saturday they had arrested 12 people in raids across Indonesia, including a man they believe handled financing for the Jakarta attacks, money that authorities allege came from the Islamic State group.—AFP

## MERKEL'S MIGRANT ISSUES FLARE BUT CHANCELLOR STANDS FIRM

**BERLIN:** Chancellor Angela Merkel's migrant troubles have reignited in the New Year but the German leader is sticking to her guns, insisting her country will manage the challenge and that diplomacy can bring solutions. Germany registered nearly 1.1 million asylum-seekers last year, and 2,000 to 3,000 are still arriving daily even in mid-winter.

A surge of robberies and sexual assaults on New Year's Eve in Cologne - and the fact that some of the suspects were asylum-seekers - have highlighted the difficulty of integrating so many newcomers. With pressure mounting for the government to manage the influx, Merkel's Bavarian allies are once again pushing for a cap on asylum-seekers.

Public opinion toward refugees has been souring for months in Germany, although polls suggest political support for Merkel's conservatives is down only slightly. While Germany doesn't hold a national election until late 2017, smaller votes this year - starting with three state elections in March - will offer a test of the mood.

"The events of New Year's Eve have again shone a spotlight on the challenges we face, made them clear from a new side we had not viewed so far," Merkel acknowledged. Within days, her government proposed legislation to make it easier to deport criminal foreigners.

On the refugee influx itself, however, Merkel is standing firm - sticking to her much-criticized mantra that "we will manage it." The woman chosen as Time's person of the year insists that the solution is not to unilaterally close borders, but to work with reluctant European partners, Turkey and others to secure Europe's frontiers and share the burden of hosting refugees. That has been the central plank of her approach even as the government has tightened policy at home - taking steps to make it easier to send migrants from Balkan nations home and making clear that not all Afghans will be allowed to stay.

Whether Merkel will have any more success in Europe in 2016 than last year is questionable. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, an outspoken opponent of compulsory refugee quotas, said after the Cologne assaults that migrants can't be integrated and "we don't want what happened in Germany to happen here."

#### Specific limit

Merkel has pledged to reduce the influx but resisted calls to set a specific limit on the number of refugees Germany can take. She rallied her conservative party behind her stance a month ago, heading off calls for a cap by conceding that an unabated influx would "overburden" the country in the long run. But after a few weeks' peace, her allies in the Bavaria-based Christian Social Union - her most prominent domes-

tic critics over recent months - renewed their drive for tougher border controls and for a cap. The party's leader, governor Horst Seehofer, suggested an annual figure of 200,000 asylum-seekers, and grumbling has resurfaced in Merkel's own party.

Yet Merkel isn't budging and won't say by when she aims to get the numbers down. "It wouldn't be right to name the exact day," she said. "We are working at high pressure on a sustainable reduction." Her finance minister, Wolfgang Schauble, said Europe has only "finite" time to secure its external borders but wouldn't give a date. The daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* argued in an editorial that if things don't change by midyear, Merkel will have to declare a partial, temporary halt to admitting migrants.

The first electoral test since the refugee crisis escalated last summer comes on March 13. In principle, there's much to gain for Merkel's party in three state elections. It aims to win back a traditional stronghold, the southwestern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, after five years under a liberal government. In neighboring Rhineland-Palatinate, it hopes to end the center-left Social Democrats' 25 years at the helm; and in eastern Saxony-Anhalt, it looks well-placed to keep the governor's office.

Still, lackluster conservative results or a strong performance by the upstart Alternative for Germany party could increase the pressure on Merkel. Alternative for Germany appeared to be fading last summer after its founding leader was ousted amid a switch from a euro-skeptic to an anti-immigration stance. It has since been bolstered by the huge migrant influx.

#### 'We will manage it'

"While Merkel lulls the population with the empty phrase 'we will manage it,' it is now clear that she is not even able to protect women from attacks in public places," deputy leader Alexander Gauland said. The direct impact on opinion polls of the Cologne assaults appears so far to be limited, though one survey showed Merkel's popularity sliding again. National polls in the past week have put support for Alternative for Germany between 9 and 11 percent, at most a point or two higher than late last year, with Merkel's Union bloc at 37 or 38 percent - its losses so far within the margin of error. Still, Carsten Linnemann, a lawmaker with Merkel's Christian Democratic Union who has been critical of her open-ended approach, says "the mood among the grassroots is dreadful." A telephone survey of 1,203 people conducted Jan. 12-14 for ZDF television found that 33 percent said the assaults had significantly changed their attitudes toward asylum and refugee issues, while 66 percent said they hadn't.—AP

## SUICIDE BOMBER KILLS 14 IN EASTERN AFGHAN CITY

**KABUL:** A suicide bomber targeting a gathering in a volatile eastern province of Afghanistan killed 14 people, including seven members of a prominent pro-government clan, Afghan officials said. Another 14 people were wounded in the attack on the home of Obaidullah Shinwari, a scion of the clan and member of the Nangarhar provincial council who was not harmed in the attack, the officials said.

The attack came a day before a second round of international talks aimed at reviving the peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. A Taliban spokesman tweeted that his group was not involved. The head of the council, Ahmad Ali Hazrat, told The Associated Press that the bomber mingled with a crowd at the family event in the provincial capital of Jalalabad before setting off his payload.

Malik Osman, the head of the family and a respected community elder in the Shinwar district near the Pakistan border was wounded and flown to Kabul for treatment, Hazrat said. The family has strongly supported President Ashraf Ghani's efforts to bring peace to the country after almost 40 years of war and 15 years of Taliban insurgency.

The family and guests had gathered to mark the release of another of Osman's sons, Samiullah, eight months after he was kidnapped and held by the Taliban. Samiullah was wounded in the attack, but not seriously, according to Zabiullah Zamaray, another provincial council member. The day before the attack, hundreds of residents of Achin district - where Shinwari's nephew Nasim is governor - held a demonstration calling on authorities to rid the region of insurgents, including a newly formed Islamic State affiliate that recently seized parts of the province after a summer of fierce fighting with the Taliban.

An attack last week on the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad, which is close to Shinwari's home, was claimed by the IS affiliate, which refers to itself as Khorasan Province and was recently listed as a terror group by the US government. Ghani condemned the attack, saying in a statement that as "terrorists lose their ability to fight Afghan forces on the battlefield, now they are carrying out terror attacks on residential areas."

Representatives of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China are due to meet in Kabul on Monday for the second time this month to formulate a roadmap for peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban. The Taliban are not taking part in the talks. An official in Kabul from one of the countries involved in the talks said that another two rounds of "preparatory meetings" were likely to take place as they worked out the details of a future dialogue.

"There are different opinions about the methodologies and approaches in resuming these talks," he said. The roadmap would include "who do they want to talk to, on what timetable, what incentives are to be offered, and what kind of action will be taken with those people who want to talk and those who do not want to talk," the official said.

The official was not authorized to speak with reporters about the talks so spoke on condition of anonymity. The first meeting of the four-nation group took place in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, on Jan 11. The meetings seek to revive a process that was derailed last July after the first and only face-to-face meeting between Afghan government and Taliban representatives in Islamabad. That initiative collapsed after Kabul announced that the insurgent group's leader had died in a Pakistani hospital more than two years earlier.—AP



**JALALABAD:** Afghan men inspect the site of a suicide bombing at the home of a prominent politician.—AFP



**BERLIN:** In this Jan. 23, 2014 file picture German Chancellor Angela Merkel arrives for a press conference after a cabinet meeting at the Meseberg palace.—AP