

RUSSIA STEPS UP PROBE IN ATTACK CLAIMED BY IS

MOSCOW: Russia said yesterday that a stabbing which injured seven people and was claimed by the Islamic State group is being probed by top investigators in Moscow, as new details emerged. IS claimed responsibility for the attack in the remote city of Surgut along with the attacks in Spain that killed 14 through its Amaq propaganda agency, calling the attacker "a soldier of the Islamic State."

A black-clad attacker in a balaclava ranged through central streets of the city around 2,100 kilometres (1,330 miles) northeast of Moscow on

Saturday morning, stabbing people apparently at random before being shot by police. Russia, which initially said the theory of terrorism was "not the main one" being considered, has opened a criminal probe into attempted murder and has not reacted officially to the IS claim.

The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said in a statement on Sunday that "due to the wide public reaction," its chief Alexander Bastrykin has put the case directly under control of its central apparatus in Moscow. Investigators said they had carried out searches of

the attacker's home and were establishing the circumstances and the "motive for the attacker's actions."

The attacker was born in 1998, the Investigative Committee said, while previously it had said he was born in 1994. Unconfirmed media reports on Saturday had described the attacker as a 19-year-old whose father originates from Dagestan in Russia's mainly-Muslim North Caucasus region. Video posted by Izvestia newspaper on its website on Sunday showed the attacker, a slim young man, lying on the ground dressed all in black with a red

object taped round his waist.

NTV television aired witness video of a policeman chasing the attacker through streets and firing apparently at his head, after which the attacker falls to the ground. Earlier investigators said that they were looking into the attacker's "possible psychiatric disorders." One of the stabbing victims remained in a serious condition while the others were stable, investigators said. Late Saturday, the governor of the region Natalya Komarova visited the wounded in hospital. She said one victim was fighting for his life. — AFP



MARONDERA: This file photo taken on June 2, 2017 shows Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe (L) with his wife Grace Mugabe (R) raising their fists in a vehicle before meeting delegates during a Zimbabwe ruling party Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) youth rally at Rudhaka Stadium. — AFP

MUGABE RETURNS HOME DESPITE ASSAULT CLAIM

'SHE IS TARNISHING OUR IMAGE AS A NATION'

HARARE: Zimbabwe's first lady Grace Mugabe flew home from South Africa yesterday, state media said, ending a week of confusion over her whereabouts after she allegedly assaulted a model. Mugabe, who has sought diplomatic immunity but is sought by police for allegedly attacking the 20-year-old model at a Johannesburg hotel, flew home with her husband in the early hours yesterday, public broadcaster ZBC reported.

"President Comrade Robert Mugabe returned home... accompanied by the First Lady Dr Grace Mugabe... in the early hours of this morning aboard an Air Zimbabwe plane," the broadcaster said. The president had flown to South Africa on Wednesday to attend a two-day regional leaders' summit in Pretoria that began Saturday which police said she had been expected to attend. Grace Mugabe has not been seen since the allegations were made and failed to appear at the summit.

Anticipating her arrival, a group of protesters had gathered outside, some waving signs reading "Grace is a disgrace." The 93-year-old president appeared to cut short his visit to fly home early, skipping the second day of talks among leaders of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). South African police had

said they were on high alert to make sure Mugabe's 52-year-old wife did not leave the country with officials reportedly weighing up whether to issue an arrest warrant.

Hot-tempered

The first lady is alleged to have assaulted Gabriella Engels with an electrical extension cable on August 13 at the hotel where the model was staying with Mugabe's two sons who have a reputation for partying. Engels said she suffered deep cuts to her forehead and the back of her head and has opened a police case alleging assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm.

On Wednesday, Mugabe applied for diplomatic immunity although South African officials were not immediately available on Saturday to say whether or not her request had been granted. Seen as a potential successor to her husband, Grace Mugabe is known for her temper. In 2009, she successfully claimed immunity in Hong Kong after repeatedly punching a British photographer for taking pictures of her at a luxury hotel.

Political headache

The alleged assault is a political headache for South Africa and Zimbabwe which are close

neighbors with deep economic and historical ties. Zimbabwean officials have declined to comment on the allegations against the first lady or her immunity claim. Yesterday, Zimbabwe's state media made its first mention of the alleged assault, hitting out at the "media frenzy" and saying there was "nothing meaningful being said."

But a spokesman for Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) said Mugabe should not be granted immunity, describing her as "a thug and violent person who committed a heinous assault on an innocent young woman." "Whatever is legally possible should be done to ensure that she faces the full wrath of the law. There should be no impunity," MDC spokesman Obert Gutu told AFP. "She is a disgrace and she owes us an apology for tarnishing our image as a nation."

And AfriForum, a pro-Afrikaner civil rights organization which helps victims of crime and has vowed to help Engels seek justice, also denounced what it said was a regional "culture of impunity." "We have corrupt government people (...) who are protecting one another," said Willie Spies, a lawyer for AfriForum, suggesting the authorities had turned a blind eye to her departure. "She has left the country. The whole thing was done secretly." — AFP

DEPUTY PM BAA-NABY'S N ZEALAND WOES CREATE CHAOS IN CANBERRA

SYDNEY: Australia's top court will this week examine a constitutional crisis threatening to topple the conservative government, after parliament's attempts to deal with it ended in sheep jokes and conspiracy theories. At least three senior government figures, including Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce, have been snared by a previously obscure constitutional provision that bars dual citizens from sitting in parliament.

With the government's one-seat majority on the line, Joyce has refused to stand down, arguing he previously had no idea he automatically inherited New Zealand citizenship from his Dunedin-born father. The Australian-born deputy leader's case will go to the High Court on Thursday, along with four other politicians who have unwittingly found themselves on the wrong side of the law.

A sixth lawmaker, National Party senator Fiona Nash, is also set to join the court case after discovering late last week she was a dual Australian-British citizen. Professor Don Rothwell, a constitutional expert from the Australian National University, said the stakes in the case were high. "One possibility, albeit remote as it stands at the moment, is that the government of the day could fall... in which case we could see an election called," he told AFP.

The dual citizenship provision was inserted in the 1901 constitution to ensure parliamentarians had no "adherence to a foreign power". Rothwell said it was framed at a time when Australians still believed their primary loyalty was to the British crown, and appeared increasingly archaic in an immigrant nation such as Australia. "It has this time-warped understanding of what foreign powers were from 1901," he said. "A much more liberal approach is taken (in the community) towards dual citizenship these days."

Tinfoil hats, treason!

Much will rest on whether the High Court adopts the same approach or takes a narrower view of the constitution's section 44(i). Regardless, the court will certainly give the issue more sober consideration than Australia's politicians, who turned Canberra into a sideshow after Joyce dropped the bombshell Monday

that he was a Kiwi citizen. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull seized upon the fact that a member of New Zealand's Labour Party asked questions about the citizenship issue the previous week to allege a grand plot to bring him down. Opposition leader Bill Shorten of the Australian Labor party was attempting "to steal government by entering into a conspiracy with a foreign power," Turnbull thundered.

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop accused Shorten of "treacherous behavior" and said she would find it hard to trust New Zealand Labour if it won the country's elections next month.

"(It) is not only highly improper but is in direct breach of the international obligation for non-interference. Labor have now been well and truly caught out," Bishop said.

Labor's Penny Wong accused Bishop of running "a Kiwis under-the-bed scare campaign", invoking anti-communist "Reds under the beds" fears of the Cold War. Her colleague Rob Mitchell turned up in parliament holding a tinfoil hat, which he said was for Bishop. "Sounds like Julie's on the phone now," he told reporters as his mobile went off with the ringtone playing the theme to "The Twilight Zone" television show.

"She's been on to NASA and Area 51 at Roswell claiming that it's all our fault about Barnaby Joyce," he told reporters. Meanwhile, Joyce's status as an accidental Kiwi led to inevitable sheep jokes, never far from the surface when Australians discuss their trans-Tasman cousins. Joyce endured taunts of "Baa-naby" from the opposition benches, while Bishop was told "you've just jumped the sheep!" after outlining her Kiwi conspiracy.

Rothwell said the High Court was likely to expedite its judgment on the citizenship saga due to its potential impacts. But he said a ruling in the case, due to start at a preliminary hearing on Thursday, was likely to be weeks away. In the meantime, Australians can look forward to their representatives in Canberra continuing to snipe at each other as they scramble to check they have no citizenship skeletons in the closet. As the Kiwis would say when expressing approval over something "choice, bro". — AFP



Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen Joseph Dunford works in his private cabin aboard his plane, Saturday, Aug 19, 2017, while traveling to Andrews Air Force Base, Md. — AP

US REACH DECISION ON AFGHAN STRATEGY

AMMAN: US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis confirmed yesterday that the Trump administration had decided on a new strategy for Afghanistan after "rigorous" debate, but said President Donald Trump would be the one to announce it. Mattis refused to hint at any details of the decision, which came after months of speculation over whether Trump, frustrated with a stalemate after 16 years in Afghanistan, would allow the Pentagon to boost troop numbers on the ground in the country.

However Mattis appeared satisfied after what he described as an in-depth review of the policy by much of the president's cabinet and top security officials at Camp David on Friday. "I'm very comfortable that the strategic process was sufficiently rigorous, and did not go in with a preset condition in terms of what questions could be asked and what decisions could be made," he said. "Everyone who had equity was heard," he said, including budget officials responsible for funding the effort.

Trump had several options on the table, that ranged from backing away from the country to stepping up US efforts to defeat the Taliban. In June he gave Mattis the power to increase troop numbers above

the estimated 8,400 that have been in the country—close to 4,000 more, according to reports. But Mattis said he was loathe to move before he had a true picture of the numbers, which he said were actually higher than 8,400, and before Trump had his say on the broader strategy.

"The president had to make strategic decisions," Mattis said. "He delegated to me, when he came in, the tactical and operational decision. He did not delegate one ounce of the strategic decision." "He really did come in with very different courses of action, and I think he now needs the weekend to collect his thoughts about how he's going to explain it to the American people."

Mattis arrived in Jordan yesterday on the first day of a five-day swing through the Middle East and Eastern Europe. In Jordan he will meet with King Abdullah on regional security matters. In Turkey he will hold discussions with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and top military officials focused on the Syria conflict and the fight against the Islamic State group. In Ukraine he will discuss US support for the country's military fighting pro-Moscow rebels and attend celebrations for the country's national day. — AFP

THOUSANDS MARCH IN BOSTON AT ANTI-RACISM DEMONSTRATIONS

BOSTON: Thousands of anti-racism demonstrators flooded the streets of Boston Saturday, dwarfing a gathering of white nationalists in the city and triggering scuffles with police but avoiding the serious violence that marred a similar event a week earlier in Virginia. A so-called "free speech" rally by far-right groups had been scheduled to run until 2 pm (1800 GMT), but a half-hour before that police escorted its participants—whose numbers appeared to be in the dozens—to safety past a throng of anti-racism protesters.

Officials estimated turnout of about 40,000 demonstrators. Authorities said there were 27 arrests, mostly for assault and battery against the police, and disorderly conduct. Aerial photos showed counter-protesters filling one of Boston's main streets for several blocks, in a huge outpouring of anti-racist sentiment in this strongly Democratic northeastern city. While Boston saw no repeat of the violence that erupted last weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia, isolated scuffles between police and protesters prompted President Donald Trump to weigh in, with a tweet intoning against the "many anti-police agitators in Boston."

But as protesters began departing central Boston without major incident later Saturday, he followed up with a more positive tone. "I want to applaud the many protestors in Boston who are speaking out against bigotry and hate," he tweeted. "Our country will soon come together as one!" Boston Police Commissioner William Evans told a press conference that while there were people "who came here to cause problems," authorities were able to maintain order and keep the two sides apart. He credited a unit specially trained for crowd control.

"I thought they did a good job of moving

that crowd," Evans said. "Sometimes it doesn't look pretty, but that's what they're trained for." The demonstration was held at a time of anguished national debate over racial relations, which was fanned when Trump defended some participants in last week's white nationalist and neo-Nazi rally in Virginia as "very fine people." Trump's daughter Ivanka, who is Jewish, tweeted Saturday night: "It was beautiful to see thousands of people across the USA come together today to peacefully denounce bigotry, racism & anti-Semitism. We must continue to come together, united as Americans!"



BOSTON: A counter-protester, part of a small group who remained on the street hours after a "Free Speech" rally was staged by conservative activists, scuffles with a security guard and police. — AP