

International

Abe sweeps to resounding victory in Japan's election

Small new liberal CDPJ vying for top opposition spot

TOKYO: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's ruling bloc was headed for a big win in yesterday's election, exit polls showed, bolstering his clout and potentially reenergizing a push towards his cherished goal of revising the post-war, pacifist constitution. Abe's Liberal Democratic Party-led (LDP) coalition was set to win 311 seats, keeping its two-thirds "super majority" in the 465-member lower house, an exit poll by TBS television showed. Public broadcaster NHK also said the ruling bloc was closing in on a two-thirds majority, although some other broadcasters had the ruling bloc slightly below the two-thirds mark.

A hefty win raises the likelihood that Abe, who took office in December 2012, will have a third three-year term as LDP leader next September and go on to become Japan's longest-serving premier. It also means his "Abenomics" growth strategy centered on the hyper-easy monetary policy will likely continue. Final official results are expected today. The US-drafted constitution's Article 9, if taken literally, bans the maintenance of armed forces. But Japanese governments have interpreted it to allow a military exclusively for self-defence.

Backers of Abe's proposal say it would just codify the status quo. Critics fear it would allow an expanded role overseas for the military. The LDP's junior partner, the Komeito, is cautious about changing the constitution, drawn up after Japan's loss in World War Two. Several opposition parties favor changes, but don't agree on details. Amendments must be approved by two-thirds of each chamber of parliament and then by a majority in a public referendum. "Nothing about the

process (of revising the constitution) will be easy," said Tobias Harris, an analyst at Washington-based consultancy Teneo Intelligence. "But we'll be hearing a lot about it."

'National crisis'

Abe had said he needed a new mandate to tackle a "national crisis" from North Korea's missile and nuclear threats and a fast-aging population, and to approve his idea of diverting revenue from a planned sales tax hike to education and child care from public debt repayment. He called the

poll amid confusion in the opposition camp and an uptick in his ratings, dented earlier in the year by suspected cronyism scandals. Abe has backed US President Donald Trump's tough stance towards North Korea that all options, including military action, are on the table. Trump is to visit Japan Nov 5-7 to reaffirm the leaders' tight ties. Abe's move had seemed risky after Tokyo

Governor Yuriko Koike, often floated as a possible first Japanese female premier, launched her conservative Party of Hope.

The Party of Hope absorbed a big chunk of the failed main opposition Democratic Party. But voter enthusiasm soon waned despite its calls for popular policies such as an exit from nuclear power and a freeze on the planned sales tax rise. Koike did not run for a lower house seat herself - she was in Paris for a climate change event yesterday - and failed to say whom her party would back for prime minister. "It's an extremely tough election result," Koike said on NHK public TV. "We had sought to put policies first. But we ended up with a very tough outcome, so I deeply apologize for that."



TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister and ruling Liberal Democratic Party leader Shinzo Abe puts rosettes by successful general election candidates' names on a board at the party headquarters in Tokyo yesterday. —AFP

A new Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), formed by liberal former DP members, was vying with Koike's party for the top opposition spot - the TBS exit polls

had the CDPJ beating out the Party of Hope - although both will have just a sliver of the LDP's presence if forecasts prove accurate. —Reuters



Trump to visit Japan Nov 5-7

'Braid-chopping' cases add panic to trauma in Kashmir

SRINAGAR: A wave of brutal, deadly panic has swept Indian-administered Kashmir after more than 100 women said they were victims of attackers who chopped off their hair. Despite suggestions the cases may have been fabricated or fuelled by hysteria, the consequences have been all too real. One 70-year-old man has been killed by vigilantes since the alleged incidents started a month ago, and there are near-daily reports of groups attacking suspected so-called "braid-choppers".

Authorities have avoided confirming or denying the accounts of women from across the Himalayan region, which bears deep mental scars from a decades-old uprising against Indian rule. Groups armed with iron rods and knives patrol the capital Srinagar and other towns after dark looking for suspects. Five people were wounded Wednesday when Indian soldiers opened fire on a stone-throwing crowd who thought troops were protecting a braid-chopper.

On Friday, police said they rescued a "mentally challenged" man accused by a mob that was trying to set him ablaze and run him over with a tractor. At least a dozen police and soldiers have been beaten up. Police initially said the hair-chopping was self-inflicted. Now they are offering a 600,000 rupee (\$9,250) reward for information leading to the capture of suspects, but they also want the victims to take lie-detector tests. In Muslim-majority Kashmir most women have long hair kept under a scarf when in public.

The details of the alleged attacks are often mysterious and difficult to verify, while witnesses are hard to find. Tasleema told how she was going to fetch vegetables in storage when she was attacked. Her husband, Mohammad Rauf Wani, heard a scream and found his wife unconscious on the floor with six inches of her hair spread out next to her. "I don't understand how it happened," Wani told AFP, holding his wife's severed braid. "Just as I turned after opening the door someone tried to strangle me from behind. I saw his face covered by a black mask, I saw his eyes. Then I don't know what happened," Tasleema said.

Void increases panic

Most of the women were alone and have told relatives they suspect a spray was used to knock them unconscious before their braids were cut. Most were under 18 and come from poor families, according to police. In a region where



SRINAGAR: Kashmiri resident Tasleema (right), and the victim of a 'braid chopping', reacts as a man displays her hair, which was chopped off in an attack, in the Batamloo area of Srinagar. —AFP

any incident can become highly politicized, the vigilantes have seized on the void created by the lack of an official explanation or the arrest of suspects. Videos of angry relatives accusing police and soldiers while brandishing cut braids have been widely shared on social media.

Doctors at Kashmir's only psychiatric hospital said they have not been called in to study the cases. "Some people are making it out as mass hysteria, but in my experience, given the manner in which it is happening I don't think this is so," said Mohammad Maqbool Dar, head of psychiatry at Srinagar's government medical college. He said it was possible there were "odd cases" of hysteria. Some separatist leaders and residents have accused "government agents" of staging the attacks to spread fear and divert attention from the campaign for an independent Kashmir or merger with Pakistan.

Senior police worry that the hair-chopping allegations could cause wider unrest in the region, which is suffering deep trauma from the separatist insurgency and the Indian counter-insurgency campaign that have left tens of thousands dead. According to a 2015 study by the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) group, about 1.8 million adults - 45 percent of Kashmir's adult population, and mostly

women-suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health problems. Outside Tasleema's house, scores of residents protested, shouting anti-government and anti-police slogans after news spread of her braid-chopping. Some residents accuse police of staging hair-chopping as psychological operations-or "psy-ops"-to prevent political protests.

"We have so much human intelligence that I don't need any psy-ops," Kashmir's inspector general of police, Munir Ahmed Khan said. Similar braid-cutting assaults were reported in the northern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and around New Delhi in July.

Authorities there treated the incidents as crimes but brought in psychiatrists as well to investigate. "Here the situation is different," police chief Khan said. "There are forces who will exploit it (braid-chopping) to the hilt. Pakistan will use this situation, that is my worry," Khan said. The under-pressure Kashmir government says only that the "motives behind these attacks" are being investigated. Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti said in recent Twitter comments that braid-chopping was an attempt "to create mass hysteria and undermine the dignity of the women in the state."—AFP

Indonesia fumes as head of military denied US entry

JAKARTA: Indonesia intends to send a diplomatic note to the US secretary of state and summon Washington's deputy ambassador in Jakarta to explain why the head of its military was denied entry to the United States, Indonesian officials said yesterday. Armed Forces Commander General Gatot Nurmantyo was about to board a flight on Saturday when the airline informed him that the US Customs and Border Protection had denied him entry, military spokesman Wuryanto told a news conference in Jakarta.

Nurmantyo was going to the United States at the invitation of General Joseph F Dunford Jr, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, to attend a Chiefs of Defense Conference on Countering Violent Extremism being held in Washington on Oct 23-24, Wuryanto said. It was not clear

why he was stopped from entering the United States, Wuryanto said, adding that the general did not have any problem during his visit to the United States in February 2016.

"We've asked for clarification to the US, to the Department of State as well as the embassy in Jakarta and until now we're still waiting for that clarification," Indonesia's Foreign Affairs Minister Retno Marsudi said. The ministry's spokesman Armanatha Nasir earlier said Indonesia's embassy in Washington was to send a diplomatic note to the US secretary of state demanding explanation for the incident.

The ministry will also summon the US deputy ambassador in Jakarta today to seek explanation, Nasir said, adding that the ambassador is presently not in Indonesia. The US embassy in Jakarta said

in a statement it was in touch with Nurmantyo's staff to facilitate his travel, but did not explain further. "US Ambassador Joseph Donovan has apologized to Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi for any inconvenience to General Gatot," the embassy wrote. "We remain committed to our Strategic Partnership with Indonesia as a way to deliver security and prosperity to both our nations and peoples."

Nurmantyo has frequently courted controversy in Indonesia because of his actions and what analysts perceive as his political ambitions. The general promotes the notion that Indonesia is besieged by "proxy wars" involving foreign states and even a renewed communist threat. Indonesian President Joko Widodo said this month that the armed forces should stay out of politics and ensure their loyalty is only to the state and the government. Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim-majority country, generally enjoys good ties with the United States although in the past ties between the two countries' armed forces have been strained by alleged rights abuses involving Indonesia's military. —Reuters



Indonesia's Military Chief General Gatot Nurmantyo

Taleban attacks 'a show of strength'

KABUL: A spate of deadly Taleban attacks targeting Afghan forces this week was a show of strength against Donald Trump's new strategy, and signaled a push to strike security bases rather than cities, analysts said. In three of the four ambushes since Tuesday, militants used bomb-laden Humvees to blast their way into targets, seeking to demoralize war-weary security forces, and steal weapons and vehicles to fuel their insurgency.

It marks a change in focus from recent years when the Taleban fought to control and hold provincial capitals, such as the northern city of Kunduz, which briefly fell to the militants twice in the past 24 months. "(The Taleban) want to be showing their potency after the summer unveiling of the Trump policy of staying on with larger forces," said Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

"They haven't tried to hold provincial capitals... they are not wasting their assets on that." Militants have launched several devastating assaults on security forces already this year, including an attack on a base in northern Mazar-i-Sharif in the spring in which at least 144 people were killed. But this week stands apart for the number of attacks on security forces in such a short time-five in as many days with around 150 military, police and civilians killed-and coming after the US and Afghan forces have stepped up their own offensives.

Two separate attacks on mosques-one of which was claimed by the Islamic State group-took the overall death toll to around 200 for the week. In August, Trump announced that American forces would stay in Afghanistan indefinitely, increasing attacks on insurgents and deploying more troops. Following his announcement the US has dramatically ramped up airstrikes, with more bombs and missiles dropped in September than in any month since October 2010. A recent flurry of drone strikes in the lawless region near the border with Pakistan's tribal areas has also seen dozens of militants killed.

This week's attacks are the Taleban's response, a spokesman said, calling it "a clear message... The enemy who thought they had scared us with the new Trump strategy have now been given a lesson". The attacks also came after talks between Afghanistan, Pakistan, the United States and China at the start of the week seeking ways to end the Taleban's 16-year insurgency. "I think the Taleban wanted to send a very strong message that it prefers to fight rather than talk and that it has the ability to fight very well," said analyst Michael Kugelman, of the Wilson Center in Washington.

Loss of morale

The message has proved devastating: hundreds killed and wounded over a bloody few days that left military bases and police headquarters destroyed or severely damaged. The deadliest attack was on a police compound in the city of Gardez, where Taleban militants detonated three explosive-packed vehicles including a Humvee. At least 60 people were killed in the blasts and ensuing battle, officials said. The militants also attacked a police headquarters in Ghazni twice, and detonated a suicide bomb on Afghan police trainees in Kabul that killed 15. Attacking security targets kills three birds with one stone: it allows the Taleban to deflect criticism over civilian casualties, devastate Afghan forces, and steal equipment.

The Taleban has acquired "dozens" of armored Humvees and pickup trucks in recent years, defense ministry spokesman Mohammad Radmanesh said. "The Humvees and other military vehicles are stronger than ordinary ones and you can load a lot of explosives in it," General Abdul Wahid Taqat, a former intelligence chief said. "I would think that could be pretty demoralizing for Afghan forces knowing that their own weaponry is being used against them by the enemy," Kugelman said. Such erosion of morale can be lethal, as officials have previously pointed out. —AFP