

International

18 killed as massive explosion rocks Indian wedding; 5 hurt

Gas cylinder explodes at hotel in the city of Beawar

AJMER: Rescuers discovered nine more bodies yesterday beneath the ruins of a Indian hotel, bringing the known death toll from an explosion which tore through a wedding party to 18, an official said. A gas cylinder exploded late Friday at the hotel in the city of Beawar, in the western state of Rajasthan, reducing the venue to ruins and sparking a huge fire.

By Saturday evening officials said nine bodies had been found. But the figure rose sharply yesterday as rescue teams, aided by the army, found nine more victims including women and children under rubble. "So far 18 bodies have been recovered," said Gaurav Goyal, a senior administrative official in Ajmer, the district where the blast occurred, about 200 kilometres from the state capital Jaipur.



Rescue teams sift through mangled heaps of concrete

"Five seriously injured people, with severe burn injuries, are being treated in hospital," he told AFP. Recovery teams were sifting through mangled heaps of concrete and steel, removing victims on stretchers covered with white sheets. The blast all but levelled the three-storey hotel where a wedding was underway. Eyewitnesses told local broadcaster NDTV the explosion occurred as a chef tried to refill a cooking canister.

Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje visited survivors in hospital late Saturday and announced compensation of 200,000 rupees (\$3,106) each for the families of the dead. "The cylinder blast at the wedding ceremony at Beawar is nothing less than a nightmare," she said on Twitter. Domestic gas cylinder explosions are common in India, where safety standards are relatively poor. Reports of fatal accidents from cylinder blasts are frequent but mass casualties are unusual.—AFP



BEAWAR: Indian Army, NDRF and SDRF personnel carry out rescue work after a building collapsed due to a gas cylinder blast during wedding party in Beawar, in the Indian state of Rajasthan yesterday. —AFP

Zimbabwe opposition risks split

HARARE: Zimbabwe's main opposition party is facing the threat of damaging splits just months before a historic election, as feuding erupts after the death on Wednesday of its leader Morgan Tsvangirai. Tsvangirai's final months were accompanied by increasingly public quarrelling between his three deputies over who would succeed him as head of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The party—which has a history of splintering—had been trying to reunite to fight the coming election, but the death of its widely-admired founder triggered renewed rivalry.

Fresh divisions could mean that President Emmerson Mnangagwa and the ruling ZANU-PF face little opposition at the election, which is expected by July. Voters will go to the polls for the first time since Robert Mugabe, who ruled Zimbabwe with an iron fist since 1980, was ousted in November after a military intervention. "We are going to see a major split in the MDC now that Tsvangirai, who was the glue that held the party together, is gone," Harare-based political analyst Alexander Rusero told AFP.

Competing claims

The latest bickering came to a head when one of the deputy leaders, Nelson Chamisa, called a meeting at MDC headquarters in Harare the day after Tsvangirai's death. Chamisa had supposedly been named as the interim MDC leader by Tsvangirai as he underwent cancer treatment in South Africa. Hundreds of party activists gathered outside the building to honour Tsvangirai—but without the party's other deputies, Thokozani Khupe and Elias Mudzuri. A furious Khupe lashed out at Chamisa. "Tsvangirai dies and you go on with a meeting to appoint yourself as leader. How shameful!" she told the local press. "You are power-hungry. You can't even wait for two days to have Tsvangirai buried."

Shortly before Tsvangirai's death, Mudzuri visited him in hospital in Johannesburg to establish his own claim to be the rightful heir. "It is myself and no one else," Mudzuri told South African television. "People must respect authority as given by my president and make sure they work towards... winning the 2018 elections." In turn, Chamisa has called for the party to unite and be disciplined. Chamisa is thought to have the largest number of supporters. Many analysts tip him to emerge as the MDC's next leader and say he could manage to head off a permanent split.

Opposing Mugabe

The MDC once posed a formidable challenge to ZANU-PF, even winning the first round of a presidential election in 2008 vote. Tsvangirai then pulled out of the run-off after a wave of deadly violence unleashed by Mugabe supporters, and the MDC entered into a troubled coalition government. Under relentless pressure from Mugabe's regime—and the threat of intimidation and violence—the MDC have suffered major splits since Tsvangirai founded the party in 1999. But Tsvangirai last year reunited with his former allies Tendai Biti and Welshman Ncube, who both left Tsvangirai's wing of the party, to run together in the 2018 elections. Now the party could struggle to launch a credible election challenge to ZANU-PF, which is often accused of decades of brutal repression and overseeing the collapse of Zimbabwe's economy.—AFP

Russia propaganda tools in US election

WASHINGTON: Fake social media accounts, rallies for and against Donald Trump, paid protesters: Russia managed a vast propaganda operation to support the Trump campaign in the 2016 presidential election, according to a court indictment. Special Counsel Robert Mueller, investigating possible collusion between the campaign and Russia along with other potential wrongdoing, on Friday charged 13 Russians for an alleged conspiracy to defraud the United States. The indictment details a wide-ranging multi-million-dollar enterprise to interfere with and "sow discord" in the American political system using social media. Here are facts about the alleged operation, as outlined in the indictment:

The instigators

The campaign began in 2014. It was managed by Internet Research Agency LLC, a company based in Saint

Canadian leader tours Taj Mahal

AGRA: Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau yesterday toured the Taj Mahal with his wife and children as he began a week-long visit to promote trade and investment with India. Trudeau, his wife Sophie Gregoire and their three children posed for a family portrait before marvelling at the legendary marble monument frequently visited by foreign leaders during roadshows to India.

It was Trudeau's first visit to India since taking office in 2015. He will meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and efforts to expand trade will dominate an agenda also covering energy, education and infrastructure. "Wheels up for India and a busy visit, focused on creating good jobs and strengthening the deep connection between the people of our two countries," Trudeau tweeted before embarking on the trip. Trade between Canada and India has doubled in the last decade to just over \$8 billion in 2016, a figure which India's foreign ministry says "does not reflect true potential".

Canada is home to more than 1.2 million Indians—more than three percent of its population—and Trudeau is joined by Sikh members of his cabinet for the visit. The delegation will walk a diplomatic tightrope in Punjab where Trudeau will visit the Golden Temple—the holiest site in Sikhism, and the scene of a bloody massacre of religious separatists in 1984. For decades Sikh separatists have been agitating for an independent state, and last year Punjab's chief minister accused Canadian defence minister Harjit Sajjan—who joins Trudeau on this trip—of being sympathetic to their cause.

The Canadian premier will meet Indian political leaders, civil society figures and corporate executives between ceremonial visits to religious sites and national

Prominent Islamic scholar facing rape charges hospitalised

PARIS: Prominent Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan, who was remanded in custody in France on rape charges earlier in the month, has been hospitalised due to multiple sclerosis, his support group said yesterday. The 55-year-old Oxford University professor, who will now undergo an independent medical evaluation to determine if he is to remain in jail before trial, was sent to hospital on Friday night, a source close to the case confirmed. "His state of health is getting worse, particularly since the judges refused to issue a visit permit to his wife and children yesterday," a source close to Ramadan said on Saturday.

Another source close to the case said he would remain in hospital at least until today. Ramadan's lawyers said that their client's condition was "not compatible with detention", based on an initial medical examination on Tuesday. Charged with rape and rape of a vulnerable person, Ramadan had been held at the Fleury-Merogis prison near Paris since February 2. A court ordered Ramadan be detained ahead of his trial, saying he was a possible flight risk and fearing potential pressure on women who testified anonymously. A Paris appeals court ordered the medical evaluation on Thursday and postponed its ruling on his detention until February 22 after Ramadan went to the hearing in an ambulance.

The arrest of the influential academic—a regular on TV debates with more than two million Facebook followers—has rocked the French Muslim community. Two Muslim women have accused Ramadan, a Swiss citizen whose grandfather

Petersburg, Russia, and financed by Yevgeniy Viktorovich Prigozhin, a close ally of President Vladimir Putin. Russian media had previously reported on the company and said it was believed to have ties to Russian intelligence. The Agency aimed, in part, to carry out "information warfare against the United States of America" through fake US identities on internet-based media and social media. Propagandists were told to create "political intensity through supporting radical groups, users dissatisfied with (the) social and economic situation and opposition social movements." Starting from the Republican and Democratic primaries, the Agency worked to favor Trump and denigrate his Democratic challenger Hillary Clinton, with a budget that by September 2016 exceeded \$1.2 million a month.

Fake accounts

The Agency created pages, which sometimes rivaled each other, on Facebook and Instagram about immigration, race relations and religion. Among the page names were: Secured Borders, Blacktivist, United Muslims of America and Army of Jesus. The company also controlled "numerous" Twitter accounts designed to appear as if they were operated by Americans. One even purported to belong to the Tennessee



AGRA: Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau, his wife Sophie Gregoire and his children pose for a photograph during their visit to Taj Mahal in Agra yesterday. —AFP

memorials. Trudeau is scheduled to visit Modi's home state of Gujarat today before jetting off to India's financial capital of Mumbai for talks with CEOs and business leaders the next day. After visiting Amritsar in Punjab on Wednesday, Trudeau will meet Modi and Foreign Minister

Sushma Swaraj in New Delhi following a welcome at the presidential palace and a wreath-laying at Mahatma Gandhi's memorial. Modi visited Canada in 2015 and addressed a crowd of 10,000 from the Indian diaspora in Toronto.—AFP



Swiss Islamologist Tariq Ramadan

founded Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood movement, of rape. They went public with the allegations late last year when women began sharing accounts of sexual harassment and assault as part of the "Me Too" and "Balance Ton Porc" (Expose your pig) campaign triggered by the revelations against Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. Ramadan, who took leave of absence from Oxford in November after the allegations surfaced, is the most high-profile figure to be held in France since the campaign began. Henda Ayari, a 41-year-old feminist activist who previously practised an ultra-conservative brand of Islam, claims Ramadan raped her in Paris in 2012. Another woman, a 40-year-old disabled Muslim convert going by the alias "Christelle", claimed he raped and beat her in the southeastern city of Lyon in 2009. The married father of four has rejected the accusations saying he is the victim of a smear campaign.—AFP

state Republican Party. It issued false information about an inquiry into electoral fraud during the Democratic primaries in North Carolina. There were election-related hashtags including #Trump2016 and #Hillary4Prison. Several days before the ballot, the Blacktivist Instagram account called on voters to back Jill Stein of the Green Party. At about the same time, United Muslims of America posted a message which said "most of the American Muslim voters refuse to vote for Hillary Clinton."

Ad purchases

The Agency and its staff, concealing their Russian identities, "began to produce, purchase, and post advertisements" on social media and elsewhere online "advocating for the election of then-candidate Trump or expressly opposing Clinton." To pay for the ads, they fraudulently opened US bank accounts with fake identity papers, and used PayPal and cryptocurrencies. US law forbids foreigners from buying political ads. They also "organized and coordinated political rallies," promoted through their fake social media accounts but also by reaching out to large social media groups focused on US politics.—AFP

Fire hits Jokhang monastery, one of Tibet most sacred

BEIJING: A fire broke out Saturday at one of the most sacred sites for Tibetan Buddhism, Lhasa's revered Jokhang temple, state media said, but no casualties were reported and the extent of the damage remained unclear. The official Xinhua news agency said the fire began at 6:40pm but was soon put out at UNESCO World Heritage Site, which has more than 1,300 years of history and lies at the heart of old Lhasa.

"The fire was quickly extinguished, there were no casualties and order is normal in the area," said the state-run Tibet Daily, adding that Tibet's top Communist party official Wu Yingjie had rushed to the scene. Images posted on social media of the blaze showed the eaved roof of a section of the building lit with roaring yellow flames and emitting a haze of smoke. But on Twitter, which is blocked in China, Tibetans abroad noted that photos and posts about the fire were quickly being censored. Robert Barnett, a London-based Tibetologist, tweeted that sources in Lhasa "claim police have threatened anyone distributing pictures or unofficial news about the fire." The blaze comes as Tibetans across the country are celebrating Losar, the traditional Tibetan New Year that began Friday, the same day as the Chinese lunar new year. The temple, an important pilgrimage site, had been closed to the public on Saturday, Xinhua reported, citing a schedule from local authorities from before the holiday began.

Jokhang houses one of Tibetan Buddhism's most venerated icons—the Jowo Shakyamuni, a statue believed to be one of just three crafted during the Buddha's actual lifetime, depicting him at age 12. It is also home to numerous other priceless cultural artifacts, including over 3,000 images of Buddhas, deities and historical figures as well as treasures and manuscripts, according to UNESCO. China has ruled Tibet since the 1950s, and has been accused of trying to eradicate its Buddhist-based culture through political and religious repression.

Beijing insists that Tibetans enjoy extensive freedoms and argues that it has brought economic growth to the region. Its officially atheist ruling Communist party views the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama as a dangerous "separatist" campaigning for independence. He says he seeks only greater autonomy. Foreign journalists are banned from visiting Tibet except on state-sponsored tours, as Beijing seeks to strictly control the narrative about the region, ranked the second least free territory in the world after Syria by US think tank Freedom House.

In 2008, demonstrations by Tibetan monks in Lhasa degenerated into deadly violence targeting Han and the Hui, China's Muslim minority. Later that year, dozens of monks burst into Jokhang temple to interrupt a state-run foreign media press tour intended to showcase the region's harmony and stability in wake of the protests, accusing the government of lying.—AFP