

International

# Dozens of casualties as blast hits Afghan voter registration centre

## 7 Indian engineers kidnapped in Afghanistan

**KHOST:** A blast at a voter registration centre in Afghanistan's restive east yesterday killed or wounded at least 30 people, officials said, capping a bloody week in the war-torn country. The bomb had been placed in a tent being used to register voters on the grounds of a mosque, marking the latest attack on preparations for the long-delayed legislative elections. "A crowd of people who had come out of the mosque had gathered to register" when the blast took place, Khost provincial police chief Abdul Hanan Zadran said.

Zadran said the casualty toll stood at "about 30". But provincial deputy director of public health Gul Mohammad Mangal told AFP at least 12 people had been killed and 33 wounded in the explosion. Mangal warned the toll could rise, with several of the wounded in a critical condition. "Ambulances are still bringing more people," he added. It was the latest attack on election preparations and comes almost a week after 25 people were killed in a double bombing in the Afghan capital Kabul.

Nine journalists including AFP chief photographer Shah Marai were among the dead. BBC reporter Ahmad Shah was killed in a separate attack in Khost province. The latest assault on a voter registration centre is likely to deter more people from signing up for the long-delayed parliamentary and district council elections scheduled for October 20. On April 22 a suicide bomber blew himself up outside a voter registration centre in Kabul, killing 60 people and wounding more than 100. That was among a series of attacks across the country on places where people were signing up to vote.



**At least 30 people killed or wounded**

### Low turnout fears

The Taliban and IS have made clear their intentions to disrupt the elections. Officials are concerned that a low voter turnout will undermine the credibility of the poll. Just over 1.2 million adults had registered by Saturday, three weeks after the two-month long process began, data compiled by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) showed. The IEC, which is overseeing preparations for the vote, hopes to register up to 14 million adults at more than 7,000 polling centers. But if the current trend were to continue, fewer than three million people would be registered by the mid-June deadline. Authorities have deployed planes to drop leaflets in a number of provinces raising awareness about the elections, which are seen as a test run for next year's presidential poll.

A radio and television campaign is also under way and civil servants have been granted a day off to sign up. The IEC has placed many of the voter registration centers inside schools and mosques, triggering concerns that students and worshippers could be at risk. Another hurdle to voter registration is a sticker placed on national identification certificates showing the holder has signed up for the poll. There are concerns that the stickers could put voters in restive districts at risk of being targeted by Taliban or Islamic State militants.

### Engineers kidnapped

In another development, seven Indian engineers and an Afghan national working for a power plant in northern Baghlan province of Afghanistan were kidnapped yesterday,



**KHOST:** An Afghan wounded man lays on a trolley as others rush him to a hospital following blast at a voter registration centre in Khost Province yesterday. — AFP

officials said. Zabihullah Shuja, spokesman for Baghlan police, said the engineers were travelling to a government-run power station in a minibus when unknown gunmen abducted them and their Afghan driver. Two officials at the Indian embassy in Kabul confirmed the kidnapping of the engineers, all working for the Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS) that operates power generating stations.

A senior Indian embassy official said over 150 Indian engineers and technical experts are currently working across Afghanistan on large infrastructure projects. "We

are working out ways to ensure the release of our engineers," an official said. It is not known who is responsible for the kidnapping or whether a ransom has been sought for their release. Kidnapping of locals for extortions are common in Afghanistan. Rampant poverty and rising unemployment has worsened the situation. In 2016, an Indian aid worker was kidnapped in Kabul. She was released after 40 days. The Indian government regularly issues a security alert for Indians residing in Afghanistan and travelling to the war-torn country.—Agencies

## Crackdown shakes China 'Little Africa'

**GUANGZHOU:** The Ghanaian university student was roused after midnight by police shouting and pounding on his door in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, where a crackdown on illegal immigration has left many residents of its "Little Africa" neighborhood feeling scared and angry. After demanding to see his visa, the agents carefully checked his papers before leaving to knock on other doors.

The commercial hub has long been a magnet for fortune-seeking Africans, but traders and students say they face unfavourable visa rules and increasingly heavy policing. "They do this because Africans live here," the Ghanaian student told AFP as he stood on a pedestrian bridge in the bustling city, still upset over last summer's after-dark visit. "I was sick of being treated like a criminal. I had to move to another neighborhood," he said, gesturing at a nearby police station and lamenting that the omnipresent security had made life more complicated. Migration from Africa has risen in recent years as China has stepped up its diplomatic links and investments with the continent.

Guangzhou draws merchants who come to buy goods such as jewelry and electronics in bulk, which they ship back to their homelands. But in January, the official Xinhua news agency reported that the African population in Guangzhou had decreased as "police have tightened enforcement on illegal immigration". There are now 15,000 Africans living in the city compared to 20,000 in 2009, but "the real number, including illegal immigrants and overstayers, is believed to have been much higher," the report said. Estimates from Chinese researchers have put the actual number of residents at over 150,000, making Guangzhou home to the largest African community in Asia.

### 'Harsh treatment'

Police vans with flashing lights and officers astride motorcycles congregated after nightfall recently at a small public square in Xiaobei, a "Little Africa" neighbourhood with halal restaurants on narrow winding streets. A Nigerian merchant was returning home from a meeting with wholesalers earlier this year when officers handcuffed him and hauled him to a police station because he was not carrying identification. It was only after his Chinese landlord vouched for him over the phone that police allowed him to retrieve his passport in his apartment-under close watch.

The treatment seemed "wrong" for a routine document check, the merchant told AFP on condition of anonymity. Residents who faced police checks asked not to be identified over fears of being deported. Guangzhou's police and



**GUANGZHOU:** People gather on a street in the 'Little Africa' district in Guangzhou, the capital of southern China's Guangdong province. —AFP

exit-entry bureau did not return requests for comment. "Sure, there are some illegal activities like the drug trade and police should target this minority of people," said Ohene Opoku Agyemang, a doctoral student in international relations at Jinan University. "But the harsh treatment of law-abiding people negatively affects Africans' view of China and hurts efforts to build friendly relations with African countries," he said.

### Too much red tape

Long-time African residents of Guangzhou say they see their compatriots lapse into "illegal" status after struggling with onerous visa renewal requirements. Nigerians must submit criminal record checks for all work and student visas, and no African countries are eligible for 72-hour or 144-hour transit visa exemptions, unlike visitors from many other nations.

"My friend had to go home to give fingerprints for a criminal record check. A return flight cost \$2,000. By the time he got all his documents in order, his visa expired," said Akubakarr Sajor Barrie, director of an import-export company. "For a small business owner, this is really hard. People start to wonder if doing business in China is worth it and they go to countries like Turkey and Vietnam instead," Barrie said. In 2013, China amended its legislation governing foreign residents, the Exit-Entry Administration

he, like all of them, refused," Vaid said, confirming five rebels died in the firefight. A top commander of Hizbul Mujahideen, a key rebel group, was also among the dead. As news of the trapped militants spread, residents took to the streets across southern Kashmir shouting slogans demanding an end to Indian rule, witnesses and a police officer said.

Another police officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, said at least 30 people were injured in clashes with government forces who fired live ammunition, pellet guns and tear gas. A doctor at a hospital in Shopian said hundreds of injured needed treatment. "We have reached our full capacity. We have run out of essential medicines, there are no more ambulances," he said. On Saturday, three rebels and a civilian had died during a firefight in Srinagar—the latest in a string of gun battles in recent weeks across the territory disputed by India and Pakistan since they split in 1947.

A curfew was ordered in the capital on Sunday and mobile internet services were shut down in much of the Indian-administered region. Fighting in Kashmir this year has left 120 dead, according to officials, including 22 civilians, 67 militants and 28 security forces. India has deployed more than 500,000 soldiers in the restive region to tackle rising militancy as civilian support for the rebels grows. India accuses Pakistan of fuelling the insurgency, a charge Islamabad denies saying it only provides diplomatic support to Kashmiris' right to self-determination.—AFP

Law, adding higher penalties for illegal workers and overstayers without streamlining visa requirements, which vary widely between jurisdictions.

While the rules are for all foreigners, Africans lack institutional support in China and face considerable bureaucratic hurdles from their own countries, such as lacking online services for criminal record checks. "There is no chamber of commerce from the 55 African countries in Guangzhou to track what is really happening or advocate for African businesses as other chambers of commerce do," said Hannah Ryder, CEO of Development Reimagined, an international development consultancy specialising in Africa-China relations.

A severe lack of funds and information prevents African governments from working together to seek favorable visa policies, she added. The decrease of African residents in Guangzhou has taken a toll on Chinese businesses catering to them. "We do flight bookings for traders, so when they can't get visas to come and visit even for a short time, of course it affects our business," said Yoyo Chen of Yoyo Travel Services. But traders say some business conditions have improved. "The quality and variety of choice in products has improved dramatically in the seven years I've been coming to Guangzhou," said a shoe merchant from Lagos, while he examined a bejeweled black velvet loafer at a market. "And more Chinese can speak English."—AFP

## Malaysian election fuelling damaging ethnic 'brain drain'

**SINGAPORE:** Malaysia's racially divisive elections are fanning resentment among minorities, and risk escalating a "brain drain" of disillusioned ethnic Chinese and Indians in an exodus experts say is hurting the nation's economic ambitions. About 60 percent of Malaysia's 32 million people are Muslim Malays but the country is also home to large minorities, with about a quarter of the population ethnic Chinese and a substantial number ethnic Indian.

The Barisan Nasional coalition, which has been in power since independence from Britain in 1957, has long promoted affirmative-action policies that confer Malays and other indigenous groups with many advantages, including access to cheaper housing and priority in government jobs. The program, introduced in the 1970s after deadly race riots, was aimed at helping the poorer Malays catch up with the wealthier, more business-savvy Chinese and has been credited with creating a Muslim middle class and maintaining racial harmony. But it has also been blamed for fuelling resentment among ethnic minority groups and encouraging their better-educated members to move abroad.

Some young members of the Chinese and Indian communities say they feel like second-class citizens in their own country, and that staying in Malaysia would likely limit their career opportunities as they hit ethnic glass ceilings. Gabey Goh, a 34-year-old marketing executive, is one of many Malaysian Chinese who have headed to neighboring Singapore, which is predominantly ethnic Chinese, more affluent, and which she regards as having a more merit-based culture. "I was never very comfortable, and I never agreed and I don't agree, with the affirmative action policy," said Goh, who left Malaysia more than three years ago. "There's too much anger, too much of a divide."

In the run-up to Wednesday's general election, Prime Minister Najib Razak has been accused of amplifying racial tensions as he scrambles to shore up his Malay voter base with moves that may further alienate minorities. Analysts say electoral boundaries have been redrawn along racial lines, creating constituencies dominated by Malays. Najib has also warned that an opposition victory would be a "nightmare" for the country's Muslims. Speaking in December at the annual assembly of his ruling party, he said that if the opposition wins, "the bumiputras will be cast aside, insulted and damned, and left destitute in our own country". "Bumiputra", or "sons of the soil", is the term for Malays and other indigenous groups.

### Toxic atmosphere

While Najib is expected to win at the polls, he faces a tough opponent in veteran politician Mahathir Mohamad, a staunch Malay nationalist who led the country for 22 years and has come out of retirement to join forces with the opposition. A scandal surrounding state fund 1MDB—founded by Najib and allegedly looted by senior fund officials and their associates—and the challenge from Mahathir has only pushed the premier to further focus on his Muslim base.

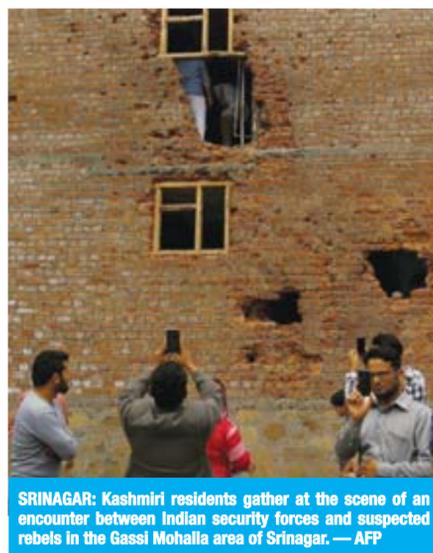
Tian Chua, vice-president of opposition group the People's Justice Party, said Najib's approach would worsen relations among Malaysia's different ethnic groups. "It is not helping people to feel they are part of larger society," he said. The World Bank has estimated that at least one million Malaysians have left to live abroad since independence, threatening the country's competitiveness. "The migration of talent across borders touches the core of Malaysia's aspiration to become a high-income nation. Human capital is the bedrock of the high-income economy," it said in a 2011 report.

"Brain drain does not appear to square with this objective: Malaysia needs talent, but talent seems to be leaving," said study which is still seen as the most authoritative on the subject. —AFP

## A rebel professor among ten killed in Indian Kashmir

**SRINAGAR:** Indian soldiers shot dead five Kashmir militants including a rebel university teacher in a gunfight yesterday that triggered violent protests in which five civilians were killed. Thousands took to the streets in south Kashmir to show support for the slain militants. Government forces opened fire to break up the protests, director general of police Shesh Paul Vaid said. Hundreds of people were injured in the protests, according to doctors. Government forces swooped on the village of Badigam, in Shopian district south of the capital Srinagar, following a tip-off about armed militants holed up inside a house. The rebels refused an offer to surrender, triggering a fierce gun battle, Vaid said.

A special appeal was made to Mohammad Rafi Bhat, a university sociology teacher who only went underground with the rebels on Friday. Kashmir University, where he taught, was ordered closed for two days, according to a university statement. "We brought his father from his home to persuade him to surrender, but



**SRINAGAR:** Kashmiri residents gather at the scene of an encounter between Indian security forces and suspected rebels in the Gassi Mohalla area of Srinagar. — AFP