

International

EU, activists express outrage over police brutality, arrests in Russia

Nearly 1,600 protesters including opposition leader detained

MOSCOW: Foreign governments and rights activists yesterday expressed outrage over mass arrests in Russia and the brutality with which protests were broken up on the eve of Vladimir Putin's inauguration. The European Union slammed "police brutality and mass arrests" after nearly 1,600 protesters including opposition leader Alexei Navalny were on Saturday detained in 27 Russian cities during nationwide rallies ahead of Putin's swearing-in ceremony for a fourth Kremlin term today.

Thousands had taken to the streets heeding a call from Navalny, a charismatic 41-year-old opposition politician, who was barred from challenging Putin in March's presidential election and called on Russians to stage rallies under the catchy slogan "Not our Tsar". In Moscow, Saint Petersburg and a number of Russian cities the rallies were not authorized and police used force to break up the protests, beating demonstrators with truncheons and dragging them along the ground. In a new development that shocked many, police in Moscow were helped by pro-Putin activists dressed as Cossacks, a paramilitary class who served as tsarist cavalrmen in imperial Russia.



Putin to swear-in for a fourth term

Several dozen injured

Amnesty International said its representatives saw the "Cossacks" pummel protesters with whips and fists as police looked on. Pavel Chikov, head of the Agora rights association, told AFP that several dozen people received injuries, mostly haematomas, and several of them turned to his group for help. The youngest protester who turned to Agora, was 13 years old, he said. In Moscow alone some 700 people-including journalists

and minors-were detained and more than 200 people were held in Russia's second city Saint Petersburg, said OVD-Info, an independent monitor that tracks arrests.

The European Union expressed its dismay over the violence, saying it threatened the fundamental freedoms of expression and media. "Even if some of the demonstrations were not authorized in the location where they took place, this cannot justify police brutality and mass arrests," said EU spokeswoman Maja Kocijancic on Saturday. In Ukraine-where a popular uprising ousted a Kremlin-backed regime in 2012 - the foreign ministry said yesterday it was "especially outraged" by the illegal detention of young people and minors in Russia.

Violence by proxy
Pictures of riot police detaining minors-some apparently in their early teens-went viral on the Russian internet. Maxim Shevchenko, a member of the Kremlin's rights council, said those who pitted the paramilitary activists against the protesters should be held responsible. "It is an emergency event," he told Echo of Moscow

radio station. "Let those officials who decided to use them say their names and answer to Muscovites for what essentially is bringing paramilitary armed units into the city." Political observer and writer Viktor Shenderovich said that by using paramilitary groups to break up the Moscow rally the Russian authorities were testing a new tool-violence by proxy. "Pitting one part of society against another one means that the authorities are looking at-and are already testing-civil war as an instrument of political manipulation," he wrote. "This is very, very serious."



MOSCOW: Russian police officers detain a participant of an unauthorized anti-Putin rally called by opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Moscow, ahead of Vladimir Putin's inauguration for a fourth Kremlin term.—AFP

Up to 30 days in jail

Navalny, who was grabbed by police and carried away by his arms and legs shortly after he appeared in Moscow's packed Pushkin Square, was released shortly after midnight and now faces up to 30 days in prison, his lawyer said. "It appears they received an order 'do not put him behind bars before the inauguration,'" Navalny said on Twitter, referring to the Moscow authorities. He added that he was accused of organising an unsanc-

tioned rally and resisting police. Navalny's lawyer Veronika Polyakova told AFP that a Moscow court would convene next Friday to hear his case. In May 2012, tens of thousands took to the streets to protest Putin's inauguration for a third Kremlin term, with rallies descending into clashes with police. Criminal charges were brought against around 30 demonstrators and many of them were sentenced to prison terms of between 2.5 years and 4.5 years.—AFP

News in brief

Coal mine blast kills 23

QUETTA: The death toll from Saturday's coal mine blast and landslides in southwest Pakistan climbed to 23 yesterday, officials said, after ending their rescue operation. At least 16 miners died on Saturday and more than a dozen were trapped after an explosion in a mine in the Marwar coalfields in Baluchistan province. Director of Disaster Management Attaullah Khan said. A methane gas build-up inside the mine caused the blast, Khan said. Chief inspector of mines Ifkhar Ahmad said the rescue operation overnight pulled out 11 injured miners. He said two laborers died in a landslide on Saturday in another mine in Surrang coalfields. It was not immediately clear if that was caused by the explosion. "Rescuers retrieved five more bodies from this mine," he said. Another official, Mohammad Atif, said authorities had opened an investigation after sealing both mines.—Reuters

Rape suspect arrested

NEW DELHI: Indian police said yesterday they have arrested the main suspect in the latest gang rape-murder to shock the country as protests took place over a separate high-profile sexual assault case. The rape of a 16-year-old who was later burned alive in the eastern state of Jharkhand is just the latest to have shone a spotlight on how India handles sexual violence cases. The accused Dhanu Bhuiyan was found at a relative's house where he was hiding after he and accomplices allegedly burned the girl alive Friday. The local village chief was also among 15 people detained in the case while the teenaged victim's family have been given special police protection. Police said Bhuiyan became enraged after the local village council ordered him to do 100 sit-ups and pay a 50,000 rupee (\$750) fine following the rape.—AFP

People-smuggling ship

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia has arrested more than a dozen members of an alleged people trafficking syndicate after intercepting a ship carrying 127 Sri Lankan migrants believed to be bound for Australia and New Zealand, authorities have said. Maritime authorities on Tuesday halted a modified tanker named "Etra" in Malaysian territorial waters off southern Johor state, national police chief Mohamad Fuzi Harun said. Nearly 100 Sri Lankan men, 24 women and nine children were aboard the ship, which was making its way to international waters when it was stopped. The police chief said in a statement Saturday that authorities arrested 16 people involved in an "international network" of people smugglers, including three Indonesians and four Malaysians aboard a fishing vessel used to transport the migrants from the Johor coast to the tanker.—AFP

Israel hits Hamas post

GAZA: Israel struck a facility of the Gaza Strip's Hamas rulers overnight, the movement's military wing said yesterday, with the Israeli army saying it was reacting to kite-borne fire bombings. A military spokeswoman said it was a direct response to a new Palestinian tactic of flying kites with firebombs attached across the Gaza border into Israel to set farmers' fields alight. "Last night an aircraft struck a terror post belonging to the Hamas terror organization adjacent to the security fence in the northern Gaza Strip," a spokeswoman said, without describing the target. Hamas's Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigades military wing said in a statement that it was a border observation post and that nobody was injured in the attack.—AFP

Putin the Russian post-Soviet tsar

MOSCOW: A KGB officer turned world leader, Vladimir Putin has stamped his total authority on Russia, silencing opposition and reasserting Moscow's lost might abroad while building a strongman image through macho stunts. Putin, 65, who will be inaugurated as president for the fourth time today, has reimposed the Kremlin's grip on society since taking power 18 years ago after a lawless but relatively free decade following the demise of the USSR. On the international stage, he has dealt with three US presidents, thrust Moscow into a new rivalry with the West by snatching Crimea from Ukraine and launched a pivotal intervention in Syria.

Named the world's most powerful person by Forbes for the past four years running, the judo black belt has carefully nurtured his image as a powerful leader with photo opportunities showing him riding topless on horseback in the Siberian wilderness and darting an endangered tiger. Supporters laud him as a savior who restored pride and traditional values to a humiliated nation. To foes, however, Putin has dragged his homeland further from democracy, presided over a seizure of the state by a new elite of former secret police cronies and stoked nationalism in a bid to restore Moscow's lost empire.

'Hit first'

Putin was born into a working-class family in Leningrad-now Saint Petersburg-on October 7, 1952 and cut his teeth in the city's rough-and-tumble neighborhoods. "The Leningrad streets taught me one thing: if a fight is unavoidable, you have to hit first," Putin said in 2015. He fulfilled a childhood dream by joining the KGB intelligence service, with a posting in 1985-1990 in Dresden-then East Germany-just as Soviet power was crumbling. His political rise began after he returned to work at Saint Petersburg city hall under his mentor, liberal mayor Anatoly Sobchak.

By 1996, he was called to Moscow to work in the Kremlin under Russia's first democratically elected president Boris Yeltsin, who in 1998 made little-known Putin head of the KGB's successor, the FSB. Battling health and drinking problems, frail Yeltsin in August 1999 named Putin prime minister and his popularity shot



SAINT PETERSBURG: Opposition supporters attend an unauthorized anti-Putin rally called by opposition leader Alexei Navalny in Saint Petersburg.—AFP

up as he oversaw the launch of a second war to crush rebels in the Chechnya region. When Yeltsin sensationally resigned on New Year's Eve 1999, Putin took over as president of the biggest country on Earth.

A tsar is born

Buoyed by an influx of petrodollars that saw living standards soar, the Kremlin under Putin forged its own "sovereign democracy" in which the trappings of pluralism-such as political opposition and

civil society-were subverted. He has guarded his private life jealously and once famously told journalists to keep their "snotty noses" out of his business. After three decades of marriage, he divorced his wife Lyudmila in 2013 but rumors of new romance-including with a former Olympic gymnast-have not been confirmed. In line with the constitution, when Putin ended his second term in 2008, he handed power to protege Dmitry Medvedev and moved to become prime minister-but few doubted who was really in charge. In 2012, he returned as president in the face of huge street protests.—AFP

Anger in France, UK over Trump's gun law speech

PARIS: US President Donald Trump caused anger in France and Britain by suggesting looser gun laws could have helped prevent deadly attacks in Paris in 2015 and linking knife crime in London to a handgun ban. In a speech to the National Rifle Association (NRA) on Friday, Trump mimicked the shooting of victims in the Paris rampage and said if civilians had been armed "it would have been a whole different story."

The French government issued its strongest criticism of Trump since he took office and one minister urged the leader to apologize, at a time when President Emmanuel Macron has been reinforcing bilateral ties following a state visit. "France expresses its firm disapproval of President Trump's comments about the Paris attacks on Nov. 13, 2015 and demands that the memory of the victims be respected," the foreign office said in a statement. "France is proud to be a country where acquiring and carrying firearms is strictly regulated." French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said he hoped Trump "would come back on his words and express regret."

"His comments are shocking and not worthy of the president of the world's greatest superpower," Le Maire told BFM television yesterday. Other French politicians, including the mayor of Paris, took issue with Trump's comments, after he acted out the scene of the massacre by Islamists assailants at Paris' Bataclan concert hall, where 90 of the 130 victims of the attacks died. "They took their time and gunned them down one by one. Boom! Come over here. Boom! Come over here.



TEXAS: A custom "Trump 45" handgun is displayed during the NRA Annual Meeting & Exhibits at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center on May 5, 2018 in Dallas, Texas.—AFP

Boom!" Trump said, using his hands in a gun gesture. Francois Hollande, who was French president at the time, said on Twitter Trump's remarks were "shameful" and "obscene".

'Knives, knives, knives, knives'

Trauma surgeons in London, meanwhile, said Trump had missed the point when, in the same speech, he linked knife crime there to an absence of guns. Comments by Trump have caused upset before in Britain. Relations with Prime Minister Theresa May cooled last year after she criticized him for retweeting anti-Islam videos by a British far-right group. Trump, who is due to visit Britain on July 13, told NRA members that a "once very prestigious" London hospital, which he did not name, had become overwhelmed with knife attack victims.—Reuters

Turkey's opposition candidate demands more media coverage

ANKARA: The presidential candidate for Turkey's main opposition has hit out at a lack of mainstream media coverage for opposition parties and candidates before elections in June. Muharrem Ince, the main opposition Republican People's Party's (CHP) candidate to challenge President Tayyip Erdogan in the June 24 snap elections, said a "media embargo" had been placed on opposition parties upon Erdogan's request.

"Television channels, which even broadcast the AK Party's provincial congresses live, did not show our rally in Yalova live. We will go on by fighting with this media structure," Ince said on Twitter yesterday. "If the media embargo ordered by the Palace continues, we will hold our rallies in front of TV stations," he said, referring to the 1,000 room presidential palace built by Erdogan in Ankara.

Neither Erdogan nor the AKP have responded directly to claims that coverage of the opposition is being curbed. Turkish media is saturated with coverage of Erdogan and his ministers, with the president's daily routine of two or three speeches being broadcast on all major channels, while opposition parties get little to no coverage. Rallies by the CHP, pro-Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) and the fledgling Iyi (Good) Party, led by former interior minister Meral Aksener, are rarely shown by the main broadcasters.—Reuters