

## International

# Global network nuclear sensors went offline after mystery blast

## Nuclear analysts see possible tampering by Russia

**VIENNA:** The operator of a global network of radioactivity sensors said yesterday its two Russian sites closest to a mysterious explosion on Aug 8 went offline two days after the blast, raising concern about possible tampering by Russia. The Russian Defense Ministry, which operates the two stations, did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

Russia's state nuclear agency Rosatom has acknowledged that nuclear workers were killed in the explosion, which occurred during a rocket engine test near the White Sea in far northern Russia. The explosion also caused a spike in radiation in a nearby city and prompted a local run on iodine, which is used to reduce the effects of radiation exposure. Russian authorities have given no official explanation for why the blast triggered the rise in radiation. US-based nuclear experts have said they suspect Russia was testing a nuclear-powered cruise missile vaulted by President Vladimir Putin last year.

"We're ... addressing w/ station operators technical problems experienced at two neighboring stations," Lassina Zerbo, head of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), said on Twitter overnight. The CTBTO's International Monitoring System includes atmospheric sensors that pick up so-called radionuclide particles wafting through the air. Zerbo said data from stations on or near the path of a potential plume of gas from the explosion were still being analyzed.

### 'Communication, network issues'

The two Russian monitoring stations nearest the explo-

sion, Dubna and Kirov, stopped transmitting on Aug. 10, and Russian officials told the CTBTO they were having "communication and network issues", a CTBTO spokeswoman said yesterday. "We're awaiting further reports on when the stations and/or the communication system will be restored to full functionality." While the CTBTO's IMS



## No comment from Russian Defense

network is global and its stations report data back to CTBTO headquarters in Vienna, those stations are operated by the countries in which they are located.

It is not clear what caused the outage or whether the stations might have been tampered with by Russia, analysts said. "About 48 hours after the incident in Russia on Aug. 8 these stations stopped transmitting data. I find that to be a curious coincidence," Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, a Washington-based think tank. He and other analysts said any Russian tampering with IMS stations would be a serious matter but



**ARKHANGELSK:** A picture shows buildings at a military base in the small town of Nyonoska in Arkhangelsk region. Russia's nuclear agency chief confirmed that five scientists killed last week were developing new weapons and vowed to continue testing despite the explosion. — AFP

it was also likely to be futile as other IMS or national stations could also pick up telltale particles.

"There is no point in what Russia seems to have tried to do. The network of international sensors is too dense for one country withholding data to hide an event," said Jeffrey Lewis, director of the East Asia Non-Proliferation

Program at the Middlebury Institute in California. The CTBTO's Zerbo also posted a simulation of the explosion's possible plume, showing it reaching Dubna and Kirov on Aug. 10 and Aug 11, two and three days after the explosion. Rosatom has said the accident, which killed five of its staff, involved "isotope power sources". — Reuters

## India land laws that give special rights to people and places

**BANGKOK:** India has revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir state in a bid to fully integrate its only Muslim-majority region with the rest of the country. Article 370 of the constitution allowed the state's permanent residents rights to property, state government jobs and college places. As real estate developers brace for what they say will be a rush by businesses and wealthy individuals to snap up scenic locales in the state, here is a look at seven other land laws in India that give special rights to people and places.

The fifth schedule of the constitution covers areas in 10 states that have large indigenous populations. It gives them power to govern their land and resources, a right which authorities have sought to dilute, saying land is needed to develop industry to generate jobs and incomes in impoverished areas. The sixth schedule of the constitution covers four northeastern states that have large indigenous populations, and grants them rights over their land and resources.

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court ruled that indigenous people in Meghalaya state - which is covered by the law - have full rights over the land and all its resources, and that only they can grant permission for mining. A clause of Article 371 of the constitution applies to the northeastern state of Nagaland, and protects the customary laws and practices of the indigenous Naga people, as well as their right to ownership and transfer of land and resources. A separate clause extends similar protections to the Mizo people of Mizoram state.

The 1996 Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) gives power over land and resources to village councils in the 10 Indian states covered by the fifth sched-



**ALLAHABAD:** Flood affected residents of a low income area move their belongings as the water level of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers raised during monsoon rains, in Allahabad yesterday. — AFP

ule, and recognizes customary laws and practices. Consent of village councils is mandatory for land acquisitions by the state, mining licences and other development projects. The northern state of Himachal Pradesh restricts the sale and transfer of farming land to non-farmers without the permission of state authorities, in a bid to conserve the scarce resource in the hilly terrain.

A colonial-era law in the central state of Jharkhand protects indigenous land from being sold or transferred to

non-tribal people. Recent attempts by the state to amend the law led to violent protests. The "Disturbed Areas Act" (1991) of Gujarat state covers more than half a dozen cities, and restricts the sale or transfer of property without permission from local authorities. While aimed at preventing distress sales in places affected by civil unrest, critics say it has led to ghettoisation of minority communities. The law was amended last month to give authorities greater power, including to prevent clustering of communities. — Reuters

## India turns tables on traffickers with child-friendly courts

**BEED:** Radha was just 13 when she had to testify in open court against the people who trafficked her into prostitution in India, as a defense lawyer bombarded her with questions - why didn't she try to kill herself? Or run away? Frightened, Radha attempted to reply, but the judge quickly shut the lawyer down. "I was getting scared with the questions. I was trying to reply when the judge intervened," said Radha, whose full name the Thomson Reuters Foundation has withheld.

"The judge told the lawyer his questions were inappropriate, that I was a small girl. She told me to speak without fear. I felt better after that. I was no longer scared." Trafficking victims in India have long faced similar ordeals - if their case gets to court at all. But Radha's case, which ended in conviction and a 10-year sentence for her traffickers, was unusual. It was tried in one of India's first child-friendly courts in Beed, in the western state of Maharashtra, set up as part of a push to reduce the trauma victims face during trials.

The court is cosy, with sofas arranged in a square around a coffee table and a television on the wall, with an adjoining room with brightly painted walls, toys, chocolates and a bed where victims can rest. A series of orders by India's Supreme Court, a 2015 government directive to make it easier for victims to bring cases and a 2012 child protection law have all helped make the legal system more victim-friendly. Ravi Kant of Delhi-based anti-trafficking charity Shakti Vahini said there had been a "visible change" in the way courts handled cases, though progress was patchy.

"Earlier, victims were asked intimate details of what happened. The questioning lasted long hours when the defense lawyers would raise their voice," he said. "The victims would then give contradictory answers to questions asked to confuse them such as the trafficker's shirt colour. We saw more acquittals than convictions." In recent years, courts have handed rare life sentences to traffickers, denied them bail, recorded victim testimonies on video conference and in some cases ordered compensation for victims even before the trial was over.

Courts in Hyderabad and Delhi have made infrastructure changes to ensure victims do not face the accused in court, while defense lawyers are not allowed to make victims uncomfortable during questioning. In Mumbai - Maharashtra's capital - courts trying cases of sex crimes against children now have a separate cubicle where the victim's testimony is recorded. — Reuters



**BANGKOK:** Motorists wait for a traffic light to change at an intersection in Bangkok. — AFP

## Thailand proposes centers against 'fake news' in Southeast

**BANGKOK:** Thailand is proposing that tech companies set up centers in each of the 10 Southeast Asian countries to curb the flow of "fake news" and fake accounts, the country's telecoms regulator said yesterday. Such centers would also work as a shortcut for governments to flag misinformation more easily to providers of over-the-top (OTT) service - any digital service done through the internet, including social media - so that they could comply by taking it down faster, said the Thai regulator.

"Thailand has proposed that OTT companies set up a centre to verify news," said Takorn Tantassith, secretary-general of Thailand's National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission. "We asked if it was possible that the companies authorize each country to oversee such centers and in so doing co-operate directly with them," Takorn said after a meeting with tech companies earlier yesterday, adding that the companies would have to finance such operations. The proposal came as telecoms regulators from the 10-member Association of Southeast

Asian Nations (ASEAN) were meeting this week in Bangkok with an aim to come up with regional guidelines to regulate OTT platforms, including taxation policies. The meeting with Takorn yesterday was attended by tech giants including Facebook, messaging app operator Line Corp, Amazon and Netflix, he said. The proposal would be discussed further during the ASEAN Telecommunications Regulators' Council (ATRC) this week, he added.

Takorn said the "coordination and verification centers" would also support a plan by Thailand's new digital minister to prioritize anti-fake news efforts and regulate various kinds of content on websites and social media. Digital Minister Puttipong Punnakanta said in a Facebook post last month that he would set up a "fake news centers" to take down online content from child pornography to insults against the country's monarchy, in addition to tackling "fake news" and "fake accounts". In another Facebook post, Puttipong said he "volunteered to purge content harmful to Thais. Digital media should be clean".

Other Southeast Asian governments have also recently made efforts to exert more control over online content and taken a tough stance against misinformation. Singapore passed an anti-fake news bill in May, forcing online media platforms to correct or remove content the government considers to be false. Vietnam said its cybersecurity law, which was passed last year and banned posting anti-government information online, would guard against fake news. — Reuters

### News in brief

#### 19 killed in fuel truck blast

**KAMPALA:** Nineteen people died when a fuel truck barreled into other vehicles in a busy town in western Uganda and exploded, police said yesterday. The blast occurred Sunday evening in the Kyambura trading centre, a mountainous area near the Queen Elizabeth National Park. "Ten people died instantly when the fuel truck lost control and hit three other vehicles, leading to multiple explosions that also burned 25 small shops," said regional police spokesman Martial Tumusiime. "Of the people that were rushed to the hospital, nine of them have also died as a result of wounds," he added. In 2002, 70 people were killed when an oil truck rammed into a bus in Rutoto, less than 50 kilometers from Kyambura. And in 2013, 33 people died in an explosion after a fuel truck overturned - many having rushed to the scene to siphon fuel. — AFP

#### Jihadists kill 4 Nigeria troops

**KANO:** Four Nigerian troops were killed Sunday in an ambush by fighters suspected to be from an IS-affiliated jihadist faction in the country's restive northeast, two military sources said. Attackers believed to be from the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) group opened fire on a military patrol in Mogula village close to the border with Cameroon, killing four soldiers and seizing two machine guns, one of the military officers said. "Our troops came under attack by ISWAP terrorists in Mogula in an ambush in which we lost four soldiers," the first source said. "The attack happened around 11:00 hours when the team was on routine patrol in the area," the officer said. The second officer gave the same toll and said the jihadists seized two military pickups but were forced to abandon them as they slowed their escape due to the poor state of the road. — AFP

#### Canary fire out of control

**MONTANA ALTA:** A wildfire raged out of control on the Spanish island of Gran Canaria yesterday, forcing more evacuations as flames in some parts rose so high even water-dropping planes were unable to operate, authorities said. The fire, which is devouring the mountainous centre of the holiday island popular for its breathtaking views, has forced the evacuation of several villages, which according to the census have a combined population of 8,000, a spokeswoman for emergency services said. The exact number of evacuees was unclear. No fatalities have been reported. So fierce is the fire in what is a UNESCO biosphere reserve that in some areas, it "is beyond our extinction capacities," Federico Grillo, head of emergency services in Gran Canaria, said late Sunday. On the northwestern flank of the blaze, flames have risen as high as 50 meters, preventing ground crew from getting near or water-dropping aircraft from flying above. — AFP

#### Northern Ireland police targeted

**BELFAST:** Police in Northern Ireland said a device that exploded near the border with Ireland yesterday was designed to lure in and kill officers examining a nearby hoax who were lucky to escape with their lives. Police on both sides of the open border fear if checkpoints return after Brexit they could become a target for militant groups opposed to peace in the region. Prime Minister Boris Johnson says Britain will leave the European Union with or without a transition deal on Oct 31. The border between Northern Ireland and Ireland will become Britain's only land frontier with the EU. How to avoid border checks that existed before a 1998 peace accord ended three decades of violence in Northern Ireland has become the most contentious part of Brexit negotiations. The explosion yesterday occurred near a busy road in an area of County Fermanagh just a few kilometers from the Irish border. — Reuters