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## Nine Bangladesh's opposition members sentenced to death

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XINJIANG: Photo shows buildings at the Artux City Vocational Skills Education Training Service Center, believed to be a re-education camp where mostly Muslim ethnic minorities are detained, north of Kashgar in China's northwestern Xinjiang region. —AFP

# China slams 'baseless' US, German accusations

## People live happily in Xinjiang, Erdogan says

BEIJING: China accused the United States and Germany yesterday of making "baseless accusations" about its crackdown in Xinjiang during a closed-door meeting of the UN Security Council. Beijing has come under growing international criticism for placing an estimated one million ethnic Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities in internment camps in the northwest region.

China defends the facilities as "vocational education centres" aimed at teaching Mandarin and job skills to steer people away from religious extremism following a spate of deadly ethnic unrest in recent years. Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang confirmed a report that the United States and Germany raised the issue during a meeting related to Central Asia at the 15-member UN Security Council on Tuesday.

"The US and Germany deviated from the theme of this meeting, and made baseless accusations about China's Xinjiang policies. China is firmly opposed to this," Geng said at a regular press briefing yesterday. "China's ambassador to the UN, Ma Zhaoxu, severely refuted the wrong remarks of the US and Germany on the spot," Geng said. The spokesman said China will not allow "external forces" to interfere in its internal affairs, adding that the Security Council "should not become a political stage for certain countries."

### Living happily in Xinjiang

Meanwhile, Chinese state media said Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told President Xi Jinping that ethnic minorities live happily in Xinjiang, in what would be a stark reversal of Ankara's past criticism of Beijing's crackdown in the region. Erdogan met Xi at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Tuesday, four months after the Turkish foreign ministry called the treatment of mostly Muslim Turkic-speaking Uighurs "a great embarrassment for humanity."

China has come under growing criticism over its security clampdown in the northwest region, where more than one million Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities are believed to be held in a network of internment camps. Beijing denies forcibly holding people in what it describes as "vocational education centres" where "trainees" learn Mandarin and job skills in an effort to steer them away from religious extremism.

Muslim countries had been largely silent about China's

treatment of Uighurs until Turkey's statement in February, but the official Xinhua news agency reported nicer words from Erdogan on Tuesday. "Turkey stays committed to the one-China policy, Erdogan said, stressing that residents of various ethnicities living happily in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region thanks to China's prosperity is a hard fact, and Turkey will not allow anyone to drive a wedge in its relations with China," Xinhua reported. "He also expressed the readiness to deepen political mutual trust and strengthen security cooperation with China in opposing extremism," it added.



### Don't count on US, China warns 'naive' Canada

#### China warns 'naive' Canada

In another development, China yesterday warned Canada not to be "naive" and believe that US pressure could help resolve thorny issues plaguing relations between Ottawa and Beijing. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Tuesday he was "confident" US President Donald Trump had brought up the cases of Canadians detained in China during weekend talks with President Xi Jinping at the G20 in Japan.

"Don't be naive and mistakenly think that mustering a certain so-called ally to put pressure on China will have an impact," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a regular press briefing. Ottawa "should not naively think its so-called ally will really exert itself on Canada's behalf," he said. "At most the (Americans) will move their lips a bit, because in reality this is an issue between China and Canada," Geng said at a regular press briefing. Relations deteriorated between China and Canada following the December arrest in Vancouver of Meng Wanzhou, a top executive at Chinese telecom giant Huawei, who is wanted by the United States for allegedly circumventing sanctions on Iran.

In moves widely seen as retaliation, Chinese authorities arrested two Canadians on national security grounds and blocked imports of Canadian agricultural products. Trudeau said he had spoken to Xi about ex-diplomat Michael Kovrig and consultant Michael Spavor during brief, informal exchanges on the sidelines of the G20 summit last week. Geng blamed Ottawa for the fraught relations. "Canada knows clearly what the crux of the issue is between the two countries," he said. "We hope that Canada will take measures to put China-Canada bilateral relations back on track as soon as possible," Geng said. —Agencies

## 200 corpses found in Raqa mass grave

BEIRUT: Two hundred corpses, including those of people believed to have been executed by the Islamic State group, were found near the Syrian city of Raqa, a local official and a war monitor said yesterday. The mass grave contained the bodies of five middle-aged men in orange jumpsuits of the kind typically worn by IS hostages, Yasser al-Khamees and the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. "They were shackled and shot in the head," said Khamees, who heads a team of first responders.

They were believed to have been killed more than two years ago, he said, adding that his team was not immediately able to identify them. The grave also included the bodies of three women who were believed to have been stoned to death, Khamees and the Observatory said. "Their skulls were

severely fractured and displayed signs of stoning," the local official added. The digger said his team first discovered the mass grave early last month on the southern edges of Raqa, IS's former Syria capital.

As many as 800 people could be buried there in total, he said. Its discovery could help identify even more of the several thousand people whose fates remain unknown, including foreigners imprisoned by IS. IS took full control of the city of Raqa in early 2014 and made it the de facto Syrian capital of its infamous cross-border "caliphate". US-backed forces ousted IS from the devastated city in October 2017, leaving the Raqa Civil Council (RCC) to run it.

The RCC has been retrieving bodies from the rubble across Raqa, left in ruins by the months-long assault to oust IS. In February, an exhumation team uncovered a mass grave holding an estimated 3,500 people in Raqa's Al-Fukheikha agricultural suburb—the largest to date. Several other mass graves have already been identified around the city, including one in the neighbourhood known as "Panorama," from which more than 900 bodies were exhumed. —AFP



RAQA: Members of Raqa Civil Council (RCC)'s first responders team work at the site of a mass grave in the northern Syrian city's Al-Fukheikha agricultural suburb. —AFP

## Iran TV blasted over report on secret oil sales

TEHRAN: Iranian officials slammed the country's state television yesterday for airing a programme on oil sales to China that contravene US sanctions, saying the report went "against national interests". Washington abandoned a landmark 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers last year and reimposed sanctions on the Islamic republic's crucial oil sales as well as other parts of the economy. The "Hello, Good Morning" talk show featured on Tuesday a programme on the Salina, an Iranian-flagged tanker under US sanctions that reportedly had delivered 1 million barrels of crude oil to China's Jinzhou port in late June.

China-along with Britain, France, Germany and Russia—is one of the partners in the nuclear deal and has rejected US President Donald Trump's administration's efforts to cut Iranian oil exports to zero. "This shows that sanctions are ineffective and Iran's path to sell its oil is not blocked," the programme's host said, showing what he claimed were satellite photos of the tanker berthed at the Chinese port. The state broadcaster immediately came under fire from local media who called the programme "suspicious", with officials weighing in the next day.

"This will hurt (Iran's) national interests," semi-official ISNA news agency quoted Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif as saying. "Thank God I don't watch TV." Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh said that the programme "has undone what the ministry set out to do". He had said previously that Iran was keeping up oil sales through "unconventional" means kept secret to skirt US sanctions. State television responded by saying the information was already public, pointing to a Financial Times report published last week.

"If the Americans were going to track the tanker, they would have last week and did not need Hello, Good Morning to remind them in Farsi", it said in a statement. Zanganeh said republishing reports by foreign media—some of which are Iran's "enemies"—is "inappropriate" and state television should only report "news on oil export confirmed by the oil ministry", ISNA reported. As part of its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, Washington has vowed to reduce Iran's foreign currency earnings via blocking its oil, petrochemical and metal exports. —AFP

## The Gandhi dynasty's first failure

NEW DELHI: Being born a Gandhi is traditionally a guaranteed ticket to the Indian prime minister's office, but the magic ran out for Rahul, the latest scion of the country's most famous and powerful family. The 49-year-old son, grandson and great-grandson of Indian prime ministers, resigned as head of Congress, the main opposition party, yesterday acknowledging a humiliating defeat by Narendra Modi, India's new powerbroker.

Congress has appeared increasingly tired in the past decade while Gandhi has struggled to overcome the expectations of being the latest flag-bearer for India's equivalent of the Kennedy clan in the United States. He has never overcome an image as a footloose princeling and political lightweight.

No relation to independence hero Mahatma Gandhi, Rahul was born in 1970

when his grandmother Indira Gandhi — daughter of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru — was premier. In 1984, Indira was shot dead by her Sikh bodyguards and she was succeeded by her son Rajiv Gandhi, Rahul's father. Rajiv was assassinated in 1991 by a Tamil suicide bomber when Rahul was 20.

Rahul was enrolled at Harvard but dropped out after a year, following his father's death. He later graduated from Rollins College, Florida and in 1994 earned a master's degree from Cambridge. While in his 20s, he lived in London, where he worked at a management consultancy for a time. His Italian-born mother Sonia Gandhi, widow of Rajiv, took charge of the Congress party in 1998 before handing over to her eldest child in 2017.

### 'Empty suit'

Ten years earlier, in 2007, leaked US diplomatic cables described Rahul as an "empty suit" and "lightweight", with little known about his political beliefs. But by 2009, the US assessment was that Gandhi sounded like a "practiced politician who knew how to get his message across and...

was comfortable with the nuts and bolts of party organization and vote counting".

"He was precise and articulate and demonstrated a mastery that belied the image some have of Gandhi as a dilettante," a leaked cable by senior US diplomat Peter Burleigh said. While Sonia remained party leader, Rahul Gandhi was mastermind of the 2014 election campaign in which Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) crushed Congress. Afterwards he sought to revive the party.

### 'Not foolish'

At the end of a widely praised speech in parliament last year, Gandhi walked over to give an uncomfortable-looking Modi a surprise hug. Gandhi tried to reach out to minority Muslim voters who felt alienated by Modi, and stressed his secular credentials. Congress won three key state elections in December and it looked like Gandhi was a serious contender. Election adverts show him hugging an emaciated peasant woman, while Gandhi's leftist manifesto pledges to end abject poverty by 2030 and give cash transfers to 50 million families.

But the BJP leader openly mocked

Gandhi's privileged upbringing as a "shahzada" (crown prince) at rallies across the country, comparing it to his own rise from being "a son of soil". Modi's mud stuck, while Gandhi's attack on Modi's poor record on helping farmers, creating jobs or his supposed close ties to business tycoons had no impact.

Modi won their social media war, while Gandhi's attempts to score points over allegations of dodgy dealings related to India's purchase of Rafale jets from France also failed. In his resignation letter Gandhi said he had no "hatred" for the BJP but "every living cell in my body instinctively resists their idea of India."

He said Modi's party had taken over and turned "the entire machinery of the Indian state" against the opposition. While some analysts said Gandhi could yet return for a new try to get the key to the prime minister's office, not everyone agreed with his view of the election. Gandhi "appears to be clinging to the socialist ideas of his grandmother and doesn't realise that people have changed, that even the poor have changed", Parsa Venkateshwar Rao, a veteran journalist and political commentator said. —AFP