

## International

# India's Modi launches grand redevelopment of New Delhi

## PM's decision to perform a Hindu ceremony drew fire

**NEW DELHI:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the groundbreaking ceremony yesterday for a huge new Indian parliament, the centrepiece of a grand but contentious redevelopment of New Delhi's colonial-era core. Critics say the 200 billion rupees (\$2.7 billion) that the Hindu nationalist government is reportedly spending on the vast project could be better directed to fighting COVID-19 and repairing the pandemic-battered economy. Modi performed Hindu rites to Sanskrit chants in a ceremony that was largely symbolic as India's top court has banned any construction work until a raft of legal petitions against the mega-project are dealt with.

The prime minister's decision to perform a Hindu ceremony drew fire from some critics as India's parliament is meant to safeguard the officially secular traditions of the multi-faith democracy of 1.3 billion people. It also came as tens of thousands of farmers angry at new agricultural laws blockade the capital, in a major challenge to the authority of Modi and his reform agenda. Due for completion in 2022 when India marks 75 years of independence, the much larger new parliament will replace an old building that Modi said yesterday "needs rest".

Designed by British architect Edwin Lutyens in the early 20th century as the commanding centrepiece of the Raj, the area also comprises the grand Rajpath boulevard, the president's residence, government offices, the national museum and the India Gate war memorial. Modi's root-and-branch overhaul of the sweeping, tree-lined and lawned vista will see it enclosed by rows of imposing new government buildings and the prime minister's office shifted and enlarged.

Some of the old parliament will be "retrofitted" and continue to be used for government business, while other buildings will reportedly be turned into museums. Some will be demolished. "Today is a historic day. It is a milestone in India's democratic journey," Modi, 70, said in a speech. "The old parliament building has seen India's journey from colonial times to an independent nation... It is our responsibility to give 21st-century India a new parliament building."

But there has been a chorus of criticism, not just against the price tag, which is expected to be 9.7 billion rupees (\$130 million) for the triangular parliament complex alone. Tikender Singh Panwar, an opposition politician and an expert on urbanisation, told AFP the redevelopment was a "big scandal in the making". "Curiously, for



**NEW DELHI:** A general view of the illuminated Presidential Palace (left) and Parliament building is pictured in New Delhi ahead of India's Republic Day celebrations. — AFP

a project of this significance, size and cost, the details are sketchy... I see this as a fascist leader wanting to leave an imprint of his glory on Delhi," he said.

### 'One man's dream'

Political commentator Arati Jerath said the redevelopment signalled the "making of a new India that will bear Modi's imprint". "This money could have been well spent on healing and repairing the economy (and) creating jobs but instead of which it is being spent on fulfilling one man's grandiose

dreams of what a new India should look like." There have also been allegations the new parliament's architect was chosen because he is a close friend of Modi, accusations the government denies. Some opposition parties criticized Modi's participation in a Hindu ceremony, flanked by saffron-robed priests chanting in Sanskrit, the classical language that his government wants to revive. Hindus form the majority of India's population and many religious minorities, in particular the 200 million Muslims, fear that Modi wants to remould India as a Hindu nation. — AFP

## Lebanese PM Diab and ex-ministers indicted over blast

**BEIRUT:** Lebanon's lead investigator into the catastrophic Beirut port explosion charged outgoing premier Hassan Diab and three ex-ministers with negligence yesterday, a judicial source said. They are the first politicians to be indicted over the devastating August 4 blast that killed more than 200 people, disfigured the heart of the capital and stoked a wave of public anger against Lebanon's ruling elite. The four were charged with "negligence and causing death to hundreds and injuries to thousands more" in the first such official indictment against a prime minister in office in Lebanese history, the judicial source said.

After the blast, it emerged top security officials and politicians had known for years about hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate fertilizer stored haphazardly at the Beirut port but had failed to take precautionary measures. The decision by judge Fadi Sawan came after the investigation confirmed the suspects had received "several written notices warning them against postponing the disposal of ammonium nitrate fertiliser," the source said.

"They also did not take the necessary measures to avoid the devastating explosion and its enormous damage," added the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorised to speak on the issue. Diab's office said the outgoing pre-

mier's conscience was clear. "He is confident that his hands are clean and that he has handled the Beirut Port blast file in a responsible and transparent manner," it said in a statement. "This surprising targeting goes beyond the person to the position per se, and Hassan Diab will not allow the Premiership to be targeted by any party."

### Judge to question suspects

The other senior officials charged are former finance minister Ali Hasan Khalil and the ex-ministers of public works Yusef Fenianos and Ghazi Zaiter. The United States in September slapped sanctions on Khalil and Fenianos, for alleged corruption and support of the powerful Shiite Muslim Hezbollah movement. In a letter to parliament late last month, judge Sawan asked lawmakers to investigate several outgoing and former ministers over the explosion. These included Khalil, Fenianos and Zaiter. The letter came after Sawan's own investigations raised "certain suspicions about the responsibility of those ministers and their failure towards addressing the presence of the ammonium nitrate at the port".

The judicial source yesterday said parliament had not responded to Sawan's request, prompting him to press charges unilaterally. Sawan will begin questioning the suspects from Monday, the source said. The investigation has so far triggered the arrest of 25 people, including top port and customs officials. Lebanese officials have rejected an international probe, despite demands both at home and abroad for an impartial investigation. Experts from France and the US Federal Bureau of Investigation took part in the preliminary investigation. — AFP

## YouTube bans new videos claiming US election fraud

**SAN FRANCISCO:** YouTube on Wednesday banned new videos with bogus claims of election fraud, saying enough states have certified Joe Biden as the next US president to make it official. Meanwhile, YouTube parent Google said it will lift a moratorium on election-related advertising on Thursday given the outcome in the US has been decided.

Google, as well as Facebook, temporarily stopped taking election-related ads to prevent being used to spread misinformation or confusion among US voters. "To protect users, we regularly pause ads for a discrete period over unpredictable, 'sensitive' events when ads can be used to exploit the event or amplify misleading information," Google said in reply to an AFP inquiry.

"While we no longer consider this post-election period to be a sensitive event, we will continue to rigorously enforce our ads policies, which strictly prohibit demonstrably false information that could significantly undermine trust in elections or the democratic process." Google-owned YouTube, however, has been hammered with criticism for continuing to host videos spreading misinformation aimed at undermining the results of the election.

The position changed on Wednesday with a ban being rolled out at the leading video-sharing platform. A "safe harbor deadline" for the election passed on Tuesday, with enough states certifying election results to make former vice president Biden the winner, the platform said. "Given that, we will start removing any piece of content uploaded today (or anytime after) that misleads people by alleging that widespread fraud or errors changed the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election," YouTube said in a blog post.

The move is in keeping with YouTube practice during previous US elections, according to YouTube. Videos removed will include those with claims of software glitches or counting errors affecting the outcome of the vote. "As always, news coverage and commentary on these issues can remain on our site if there's sufficient education, documentary, scientific or artistic context," YouTube said. Only a small portion of YouTube viewing has been election-related content, with the bulk of that generated by authoritative news sources, according to the company.

The US Supreme Court dealt the latest blow Tuesday to Donald Trump's effort to overturn his election loss when it denied his allies' attempt to block the certification of votes in key state Pennsylvania. More than a month since the November 3 election, Trump still refuses to concede to Democrat Biden — who has a seven million-vote lead — and continues to make baseless claims of fraud. — AFP