



Philippines prepares to evacuate workers in ME over rising tensions

Iranians report being stopped, facing delays at US border



KERMAN: An Iranian nurse cries after reuniting with her son (left) who was at the procession funeral of Iran's top military general Qasem Soleimani, following a stampede in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman which left 50 people dead yesterday. —AFP

Solemn ceremony in Iran turns tragic

Kerman hospital presents a scene of chaos and despair

KERMAN, Iran: "We'll give our lives for General Soleimani and we'll avenge him," said the survivor of a stampede that crushed to death dozens of mourners in the Iranian city of Kerman. Citizens thronged Qasem Soleimani's hometown yesterday, many of them baying for blood to avenge the US air strike that killed the Iranian military commander. But the solemn funeral procession turned tragic when crowds overwhelmed the streets, leading to a crush that claimed more than 50 lives and forced the postponement of the general's burial.

"People rushed at us so hard that I had to run away, but a bike went over my foot and broke it," Arsalan Farzamimoghadam, a 28-year-old survivor, told AFP at a Kerman hospital. "America can't do a damn thing, and we'll get our revenge," he added, seemingly undeterred about the deadly chaos as

he groaned in pain.

A hugely popular figure in Iran, Soleimani was killed Friday in a US drone strike in Baghdad. The assassination ordered by US President Donald Trump triggered a fresh spike in tensions between Tehran and Washington and raised fears of a new Middle East war. Outside Kerman's Bahonar hospital a woman wailed uncontrollably after losing a loved one, with her family trying to console her.

Nearby, a nurse cried with joy as her teenage son-presumed to be missing in the ceremony—was found by friends and returned to her.

'So many people'

An enormous sea of people dressed in black brought Kerman to a standstill, mirroring scenes already witnessed in Ahvaz,

Tehran, Qom and Mashhad. "No compromise, no submission, revenge!" they yelled as they tried to catch a glimpse of Soleimani's coffin. As the funeral cortege passed, mourners threw scarves on top of the truck carrying the casket to have them blessed by the blood of a "martyr". The crowd shifted slowly as the truck edged forward.

In a nearby alley, people were pushed back violently as the cortege passed, another survivor told AFP, with the crowd trampling on dozens of men, women and children. "Some held hands together, trying to open a path to Shariati Street (which was closed), and then pushed the people back into an alley," said Ali Salaji. "There were so many people in the alley, all thrown on top of each other, and killed."

Ali said he tried to protect a woman and her young daughter from the stampede by

shielding them, but they died under his body before medics arrived. The medics "couldn't do any more. When they finally lifted me I passed out", he said. Outside the hospital, a man put up lists with names of the dead and injured as worried families searched for loved ones.

'We are all Soleimani'

A war veteran on the sidelines of the procession paid tribute to the slain general.

"He was a great man. We can't all be like him... It's near impossible to replace him, but his flag won't fall," said Hemmat Dehghan. "We are all Soleimani," the 56-year-old war veteran told AFP. "Revenge, only revenge. Revenge however officials see fit. We've fallen from our horse but not from our principles." Chants in isolated areas suddenly turned to a chorus of "revenge, revenge!" as

drummers started beating to a rhythm usually played in mourning for Imam Hussein, the Shiite martyr.

Some took to rooftops to escape the tightly packed streets which were dotted with huge crimson flags, daubed with "severe revenge" in bold, black font. A huge poster adorning the side of a four-storey shopping mall similarly read "Severe revenge awaits" Soleimani's killers.

But not everyone called for a military conflict with the US. "War is certainly a last resort. Nobody supports war," said Dorani, a 45-year-old woman who gave only her surname. "This was America's ruse, to anger Iranians and drag us to war, but it won't work," she said, adding she would do whatever the supreme leader orders. "Today is the funeral of Iran and Islam's great general, and us Kermanis are immensely proud." —AFP

Allied with far-left, Spain's Sanchez stays on as PM

MADRID: Spain's parliament yesterday narrowly confirmed Socialist leader Pedro Sanchez as prime minister for another term, paving the way for the country's first-ever coalition government since its return to democracy in the 1970s. Sanchez, who has stayed on as a caretaker premier since inconclusive elections last year, won 167 votes in the 350-seat assembly compared to 165 against, with a decisive 18 abstentions by Catalan and Basque separatist lawmakers.

He plans to form a minority coalition government with hard-left party Podemos this time around, in what would be the first coalition government in Spain since the country returned to democracy following the death of longtime dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

Podemos' pony-tailed leader Pablo Iglesias broke into tears after the results of the vote were announced and his lawmakers chanted the party's slogan "Yes we can!". "A period of moderation, progress and hope opens up today," Sanchez tweeted shortly after the vote. On Sunday, Sanchez lost a first attempt after falling short of the required absolute majority of 176 seats in a first confidence vote in parliament.

Spain, the eurozone's fourth-largest economy, has been in political gridlock without a proper government for most of the past year after two inconclusive elections in April and November.

Catalan tensions

Sanchez's Socialists won the November 10 poll but were weakened, taking 120 seats — three fewer than in April — in an election which saw upstart far-right party Vox surge into third place. Sanchez quickly struck a deal with Podemos, which has never governed nationally, to form a coalition government despite having previously said that such a tie-up with the far-left party would keep him awake at night.

The two parties are pledging to lift the minimum wage, raise taxes on high earners and large businesses, and repeal elements of Spain's controversial 2012 labor market reforms that made it easier to fire workers — measures which business leaders warn will hurt job creation. With the two parties' combined total of 155 seats still falling short of a majority, Sanchez also secured the



MADRID: Spanish caretaker prime minister, socialist Pedro Sanchez, is congratulated by Spanish far-left Unidas Podemos coalition leader, Pablo Iglesias (right), after winning a parliamentary vote to elect a premier at the Spanish Congress (Las Cortes) in Madrid yesterday. —AFP

support of several smaller regional groups as well as the abstention of Catalan separatist party ERC's 13 lawmakers and those of Basque separatist party Bildu's five MPs. As part of his deal with the ERC, Sanchez agreed to open a formal dialogue with Catalonia's separatist regional government on the future of the wealthy north-eastern region, and to then submit the results of the talks to Catalan voters. The political situation in Catalonia remains in flux following a 2017 independence referendum which Madrid declared unconstitutional. The Catalan independence push triggered Spain's most serious political crisis post-Franco.

'Worst radicals'

Spain's center-right parties and Vox accused Sanchez of putting national unity at risk through his pact with the Catalan separatists. The leader of the main opposition conservative Popular Party (PP), Pablo Casado, warned ahead of the vote that Spain was set to have "the most radical" government. "Surrendering to the worst radicals may make you prime minister but

you will not be able to govern," Casado said during a rare weekend session of parliament called to debate Sanchez's bid to be reappointed premier.

Sanchez's narrow margin for victory led Podemos lawmaker Aina Vidal, who is in severe pain with cancer and had to miss the weekend vote, to turn up for yesterday's crucial session despite her illness.

"The political landscape remains tricky," ING analyst Steven Trypsteen said. "The new government (is)... a minority government, the Catalan tensions could flare up again... and the fiscal situation makes it difficult to increase spending a lot." Until 2015, Spain had essentially a two-party system pitting the Socialists against the PP but the rise of new parties has led to a more fragmented parliament that has made it harder to form a government.

Sanchez came to power in June 2018 after ousting his PP predecessor Mariano Rajoy in a no-confidence vote but he was forced to call elections in April after Catalan separatists including the ERC refused to back his draft budget. —AFP

Indian court orders bus rapists hanged on January 22

NEW DELHI: An Indian court yesterday ordered the execution on January 22 of four men convicted of the infamous 2012 gang rape and murder of a Delhi university student.

Six people were originally charged with taking part in the brutal attack aboard a city bus, but one was released after a brief detention as a juvenile, while another committed suicide while awaiting trial. On Tuesday Delhi court judge Satish Kumar issued a warrant ordering the four on death row to be executed on January 22 at 7:00 am. The condemned men still have one avenue of appeal remaining, and they can also petition the Indian president for mercy.

Jyoti Singh, 23, was attacked in December 2012 while returning home after visiting the cinema with a male friend. Her assailants took turns to rape and violate her with a metal rod as the bus drove around the capital, before dumping her and the beaten-up friend in a roadside ditch.

Singh died of her injuries nearly a fortnight after the attack in Singapore, where she had been flown for specialist treatment. Tens of thousands of Indians took to the streets in protest, and the case led to a major overhaul of laws surrounding sexual assault. It also spawned an award-winning documentary as well as a Netflix series. Singh's family said they were pleased with the ruling.

"This judgment will reinstate women's faith in the judiciary," Jyoti's mother Asha Devi told journalists. "My daughter will finally get justice." Her father Badrinath Singh described it as a "good decision for the entire country". "But our struggle will continue for many other daughters who are in a similar situation across India," he added. Indian media reports say Tihar prison, where the four are incarcerated, recently held a dummy execution to test the gallows. —AFP