

International

Defense chiefs condemn bloodiest day since Myanmar's military coup

Children among 90 killed as troops fire on protesters

YANGON: Defense chiefs from a dozen countries yesterday jointly condemned the bloodbath in Myanmar a day earlier, when at least 90 people—including several children—were killed after security forces opened fire on anti-coup protesters.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the generals ousted and detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, triggering mass protests demanding a return to democracy. The junta on Saturday staged a major show of might for its annual Armed Forces Day as the death toll since the February 1 coup climbed to at least 423, according to a local monitoring group. The defense ministers of 12 countries including the United States, Britain, Japan and Australia condemned the Myanmar military's use of lethal force against civilians. "A professional military follows international standards for conduct and is responsible for protecting—not harming—the people it serves," the rare joint statement said.

"We urge the Myanmar Armed Forces to cease violence and work to restore respect and credibility with the people of Myanmar that it has lost through its actions." Funerals were held Sunday for some of the victims, after the bloodiest day since the putsch.

In Mandalay, the family of Aye Ko, a father-of-four, commemorated his life at a service after he was killed overnight. "We are told by the neighbors that Aye Ko was shot and thrown into the fire," a relative told AFP. "He was the only one who fed the family, losing him is a great loss for the family." Despite the dangers, protesters hit the streets again in the cities of Bago and Monywa, and in the small town of Moe Kaung in Kachin State, according to local media. A day earlier, violence erupted across the country with the military using live rounds in nine regions, including the largest city Yangon, local monitoring group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) said.

By sunset, AAPP said at least 90 people had been killed. Local media, however, put the death toll higher at 114. "Junta forces shot machine guns into residential areas, resulting in many civilians, including six children between ten and sixteen years old, killed," AAPP said.

"The fact the illegitimate military regime is targeting children is a grave act of inhumanity." Rebels in eastern Myanmar's Karen state said they had been targeted in air strikes late Saturday, hours after the ethnic armed group seized a military base. Hsa Moo, an ethnic Karen



MONYWA: This photo taken and received from an anonymous source via Facebook yesterday shows protesters taking part in a demonstration against the military coup in Monywa, Sagaing region. — AFP

and human right activist said three people were killed and at least eight were injured.

It was the first air assault in years in the state, and targeted the Fifth Brigade of the Karen National Union (KNU) — one of the country's largest armed groups—which says it represents the ethnic Karen people. The junta did not immediately comment, and there was no official confirmation of any casualties.

'Harmful to state tranquility'

There was a grand parade of troops and military vehicles in the capital Naypyidaw on Saturday where junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing defended the coup and pledged to yield power after new elections. But he also issued a threat to the anti-coup movement, warning that acts of "terrorism which can be harmful to state tranquility and security" were unacceptable.

Armed Forces Day commemorates the start of local resistance to the Japanese occupation during World War II, and usually features a military parade attended by foreign military officers and diplomats. The junta

announced that eight international delegations attended Saturday's event, including those of China and Russia—with a state media broadcast showing Russian deputy defense minister Alexander Fomin in the audience.

The US embassy in Yangon urged American citizens to limit their movements yesterday. "If you must travel move cautiously and ensure you have the ability to communicate with loved ones while travelling." American Citizen Services tweeted. The warning came a day after the US cultural center in Yangon had shots fired at it Saturday. Overnight, at the Miss Grand International beauty pageant in Bangkok, a tearful Myanmar contender, Han Lay, pleaded for peace. "I deeply feel sorry for all the people who have lost their lives on the streets," she said in an emotional address, before singing Michael Jackson's "Heal the World". "Please help Myanmar, we need your urgent international help right now." The Myanmar embassy in London on Sunday confirmed the ambassador met with Suu Kyi's youngest son Kim, 44, last week, who reiterated a request to speak to his mother by telephone. — AFP

China sanctions US, Canadian citizens in Xinjiang dispute

BEIJING: China announced sanctions against two Americans, a Canadian and a rights advocacy body Saturday over their criticism of Beijing's treatment of Uyghurs, but Washington said the tit-for-tat measure would only intensify the spotlight on Xinjiang. At least one million Uyghurs and people from other mostly Muslim groups have been held in camps in the north-western region, according to rights groups, who accuse authorities of forcibly sterilizing women and imposing forced labor.

The European Union, Britain, Canada and the United States sanctioned several members of Xinjiang's political and economic hierarchy this week over the allegations. China retaliated Saturday, with its foreign ministry accusing the United States and Canada of imposing sanctions "based on rumors and

disinformation". The officials targeted by Beijing, who are also banned from conducting business with Chinese citizens and institutions, "must stop political manipulation on Xinjiang-related issues, stop interfering in China's internal affairs in any form," the ministry said. "Otherwise, they will get their fingers burnt." Two members of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Gayle Manchin and Tony Perkins, as well as Canadian MP Michael Chong, and a Canadian parliamentary committee on human rights, are prohibited from entering mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau, the foreign ministry said.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken slammed the sanctions as "baseless", saying they would only shine a harsh spotlight on the "genocide" in Xinjiang. "Beijing's attempts to intimidate and silence those speaking out for human rights and fundamental freedoms only contribute to the growing international scrutiny of the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang," Blinken said Saturday.

Chong called the sanctions a "badge of honor". "We've got a duty to call out China for its crackdown in #HongKong & its genocide of #Uyghurs," he tweeted. "We who live freely in democracies under the rule of law must speak for the voiceless." — AFP



BEIJING: This file photo taken on March 22, 2021 shows William Klein (center left-red scarf), the acting deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy in Beijing, joining Jim Nickel (center right-holding hat), the charge d'affaires of the Canadian embassy in Beijing, and other diplomats outside the Beijing Second Intermediate People's Court in Beijing, during the trial of Michael Kovrig, a Canadian detained more than two years ago in China on espionage charges. — AFP

Gun ownership tempts more South Africans

HEIDELBERG, South Africa: It was the first indication a crowd was expected—a coffee trailer perched itself on the lawn of the Rooikraal shooting range south of Johannesburg. Folding chairs and cooler boxes in tow, the crowd swelled as the morning gloom lifted to be gradually replaced with a red glow over the maize plantation that nestled the range.

Dozens of people, mostly women of color weighed down by their ever-growing safety fears, gathered to practice target shooting. Africa's most industrialized nation is notorious for its terrifyingly high crime rate. At least 50 people are killed daily, according to police figures. "Is it painful to put next to your shoulders?" 21-year-old Rabina Karabo asks an instructor, pointing to a 50-calibre precision rifle.

A middle-aged woman standing behind her sipping coffee and sporting ear muffs and safety goggles exclaims: "That's a beast of a gun!" If the gun is not rested well on the shoulders "it is going to kick you like a donkey", warns the instructor. — AFP

Rwandans say 'France alone did not know' its role in genocide

KIGALI: The findings of an official French commission that Paris bears overwhelming responsibilities in the 1994 Rwandan genocide created little surprise in Kigali on Saturday, but there was a ray of hope for future ties. "Only France did not know of its role," said MP John Ruku-Rwabyoma.

"But the whole world, especially Rwandans, knew." The commission of historians set up by President Emmanuel Macron declared a "failure" on the part of France over the genocide that saw around 800,000 people slaughtered, mainly from the ethnic Tutsi minority. After years of accusations France did not do enough to halt the massacres, the MP urged the French government to make a "clear apology".

"Now the next step for France is to accept that they have to pay reparations to the victims," he added. With genocide remembrance events starting on April 7, the memorial site in Kigali was full of students, tourists and locals on Saturday. Jean Dushimimana, 29, was in the genocide museum's section documenting France's role. "There is nothing that they (France) can pay back for what they did," said the computer engi-

News in brief

Demo against virus law in Denmark

COPENHAGEN: Hundreds gathered in central Copenhagen on Saturday to protest against a controversial virus law and Denmark's plan to create so called "corona passports". Marching through the streets, the crowd of mostly younger people, lit fireworks during a march which was described as mostly peaceful. Police told the Ekstrabladet newspaper that some 600 people had gathered and one person was arrested for throwing firecrackers towards police officers. Organized by Danish anti-restriction group "Men in Black," the main issue for the protesters was a new provision to the penal code that calls for a doubled sentence for a crime that "has a background in or is connected to the COVID-19 epidemic". — AFP

Bolsonaro to pay compensation

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has been ordered to pay compensation to a journalist for making degrading remarks against her, according to a court document on Saturday. According to the decision by a Sao Paulo court, Bolsonaro will have to pay 20,000 reais (about \$3,500) to Patricia Campos Mello, a reporter with the respected daily Folha De S. Paulo. The judge ruled in a March 16 decision that the far-right leader had "damaged the honor of the complainant, causing moral damage." Bolsonaro can appeal the decision. — AFP

Total halts work in N Mozambique

JOHANNESBURG: French energy giant Total has suspended its gas operations in northern Mozambique following a brazen jihadist attack close to its site that left several people dead, the company said Saturday. "The remobilization of the project that was envisaged at the beginning of the week is of course now suspended," it said in a statement, referring to their Wednesday announcement of a resumption of work in the area. Militants have seized control of the town of Palma in the northern province of Cabo Delgado following raid launched on Wednesday. — AFP

French police scare Afghan migrants off

ROME: Afghan migrants accused French police of driving them back across the border with Italy by firing into the air, a media report said, while French gendarmes denied the charge. A Turin prosecutor who handles child protection cases was asked to look into the affair after an 11-year-old Afghan girl was hospitalized in a state of shock, the Ansa news agency reported. Her mother told Red Cross workers that on March 25, she and her husband and daughter had left temporary housing near the French border and were on a path when French police arrived. — AFP

Two arrested for killing Libya militia

BENHAZI: Libyan authorities Saturday announced increased security measures in second city Benghazi and the arrest of two suspects in connection with the killing of a militia leader wanted by the International Criminal Court. Security is precarious in Benghazi with frequent tit-for-tat violence and executions. Mahmoud al-Werfalli, a member of forces loyal to eastern military strongman Khalifa Haftar, was shot dead Wednesday along with his cousin in the city, cradle of the country's 2011 revolution. Oil-rich Libya descended into chaos after the NATO-backed uprising that ousted and killed veteran dictator Muammar Gaddafi, with rival militias and administrations vying for power. — AFP



DHAKA: Police personnel march towards activists from Hefazat-e Islam as they block a road during a nationwide strike following deadly clashes with police over Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit, in Narayanjanj yesterday. — AFP

Violence breaks out in fresh Bangladesh protests

NARAYANGANJ: At least a dozen people were reported injured in clashes between police and Islamist demonstrators in Bangladesh yesterday, the third day of protests against the visit of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Five people died on Friday, and another six the next day, after police shot at demonstrators in several major districts across the Muslim-majority nation of 168 million people. The protesters—mostly from the hardline Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam—were angry at the visit of Modi as Bangladesh marked 50 years of independence, accusing him of stoking communal violence against Muslims in his country.

At one new protest in Narayanjanj just outside the capital Dhaka, Hefazat supporters chanted "action, action, direct action" as they blocked the key highway linking Dhaka with the port city of Chittagong. Hundreds of demonstrators burnt furniture and tires on the roads as they chanted anti-Modi slogans and called on authorities to investigate the shootings. Police fired tear gas and rubber bullets after the protesters barricaded parts of the highway. A police spokesman said they had since left the road. Prothom Alo, the country's biggest Bengali-language daily, said at least 15 people were injured in the Narayanjanj clashes.

Hefazat spokesman Jakaria Noman Foyez told AFP thousands of its supporters joined demonstrations at its headquarters at Hathazari outside Chittagong, which is home to a top Islamic seminary. The Islamist group has a nationwide network, and it has held large protests in the past demanding that Bangladesh introduce blasphemy laws. Protests were also held in the northeastern city of Sylhet, the eastern district of Brahmanbaria and in Bosila, a Dhaka suburb, but there were no reports of violence, local media reported. As Bangladesh celebrated independence, human rights groups criticised the government for what they described as growing authoritarianism, including forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Other groups—including students, leftists and other Islamist outfits—had also staged protests against Modi's visit on Friday and Saturday. — AFP