

EASTER CELEBRATED ACROSS CONFLICT-TORN MIDDLE EAST

JERUSALEM: Christians celebrated Easter yesterday across the Middle East, where many are struggling to maintain their embattled communities in the face of war, religious violence and discrimination. Thousands of worshippers flocked to Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built on the site where Christians believe Jesus was crucified and resurrected. This year the holiday was celebrated on the same day by both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox worshippers. The denominations, which jealously guard different sections of the church, held separate services one after another.

The church is located in Jerusalem's Old City. Worshippers lined up to admire the edicule, the chamber that tradition says marks Jesus' tomb. A Greek restoration team recently completed a historic renovation of the spot. The limestone and marble structure stands at the center of the church - a 12th-century building standing on 4th-century remains. The shrine needed urgent attention after years of exposure to water, humidity and candle smoke.

A service was also held in West Bank city of Bethlehem, in the Church of

Nativity, the place where Christian tradition says Jesus was born. Egypt's Coptic Christians meanwhile marked a somber Easter a week after twin bombings by the Islamic State group killed dozens of worshippers at churches in two separate cities. Coptic Christian Pope Tawadros II presided over Easter Mass late Saturday at St Mark's Cathedral in Cairo, with several government ministers in attendance.

Heightened security

Tawadros had earlier announced during his Good Friday sermon that, as mourning for the attack victims was ongoing, the celebratory aspects of Easter would be canceled this year, including the Easter morning reception. Last Sunday, a suicide bomber was able to make his way to the front rows of a church in the Nile Delta City of Tanta before blowing himself up. In the Mediterranean city of Alexandria, another attacker detonated his suicide vest at the church gate's metal detector after being stopped by guards. The Islamic State group claimed the bombings.

Many of Iraq's Christians observed the holiday in camps for the displaced after

fleeing IS and the ongoing operation to drive the militants from Mosul, the country's second largest city. A number of Christian villages around Mosul have been retaken from the extremists since US-backed Iraqi forces launched the operation in October, but few residents have returned. Pakistan's tiny Christian minority celebrated Easter amid high security after last year's celebrations were marred by a suicide bombing that killed more than 70 people.

The bomber had struck in a public park in Lahore that was packed with Christians as well as Muslims. The attack was claimed by a breakaway Taliban faction. Pakistani security forces said Saturday that they had foiled a "major terror attack" against Christians when they killed a militant and detained another in Lahore hours after Christians marked Good Friday. Zubaida Amanat, who lost her 21-year-old son in last year's bombing, said the violence had transformed what should have been a joyous holiday into an annual reminder of her grief. "I just want this terrorism to end," she said. "All I can hope is that no other mothers go through the pain I did." —AP



BAGHDAD: Iraqi Christians celebrate Easter at Mar Youssif Chaldean Church. —AP



MOSCOW: Russian believers hold candles as they wait to take part in a religious procession during the Easter service at the Church of the Holy Martyr Tatiana just next to the Kremlin Wall. —AP

MILLION ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS CELEBRATE A SOMBER EASTER

BUCHAREST: Millions of Orthodox Christians around the world have celebrated Easter in overnight services and with "holy fire" from Jerusalem, commemorating the day followers believe that Jesus was resurrected nearly 2,000 years ago. This year the Orthodox churches celebrate Easter on the same Sunday that Roman Catholics and Protestants mark the holy festival. The Western Christian church follows the Gregorian calendar, while the Eastern Orthodox uses the older Julian calendar and the two Easters are often weeks apart.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, who is the spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christian faithful, delivered a message of peace during the midnight service at the Patriarchate in Istanbul. "Our faith is alive, because it is based on the event of the resurrection of Christ," Bartholomew said. In his official Easter message issued earlier in the week, Bartholomew urged strong faith in the face of the world's tribulations.

"This message - of the victory of life over death, of the triumph of the joyful light of the (Easter) candle over the darkness of disorder and dissolution - is announced to the whole world from the Ecumenical Patriarchate with the invitation to experience the unwaning light of the resurrection," his message said. In predominantly Orthodox Romania, Patriarch Daniel urged Christians to bring joy to "orphans, the sick, the elderly the poor ... and the lonely."

Late Saturday, Orthodox clerics transported the holy flame from Jerusalem by plane and it was then flown to other churches around the country. According to tradition the flame appears each year at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and is taken to other Orthodox countries. In Russia, where Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion, President Vladimir Putin along with Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and his wife Svetlana attended midnight Mass at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral.

The cathedral is a potent symbol of the revival of observant Christianity in Russia after the fall of the officially atheist Soviet Union. It is a reconstruction of the cathedral that was destroyed by explosion under dictator Josef Stalin. In Serbia, the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Irinej, held a liturgy in Belgrade's St Sava Temple which outgoing president Tomislav Nikolic attended.

Irinej said in his Easter message that "with great sadness and pain in our hearts, we must note that today's world is not following the path of resurrection but the road of death and hopelessness." He also lamented the falling birth rate in Serbia as "a reason to cry and weep, but also an alarm." Irinej evoked Kosovo, Serbia's former province which declared independence in 2008. Hundreds of medieval Orthodox churches and monasteries are located there. Orthodoxy is also predominant in Bulgaria, Ukraine and Moldova. —AP

BOTH TRUMP SUPPORTERS AND OPPONENTS CLASH IN BERKELEY

BERKELEY: A melee erupted on Saturday in a Berkeley, California park where supporters and opponents of President Donald Trump were holding competing rallies, resulting in at least 20 arrests as police struggled to keep the two camps apart. As fist fights broke out between the two sides and people threw bottles and cans over a barricade separating them, police resorted to using an explosive device at one point in a bid to restore order.

Several people were observed by a Reuters reporter with bloodied faces and minor injuries, but there was no official word on casualties from authorities. Media, citing police, reported that at least 11 people were injured. Police said more arrests could follow after video shot during the melee was reviewed. The trouble unfolded when hundreds of Trump opponents staged a counter-rally alongside an event billed as a "Patriots Day" free-speech rally and picnic, organized by mostly Trump supporters.

Between 500 and 1,000 people were in the park as the rallies peaked, according to an estimate by a Reuters reporter. Among the Trump opponents were some counter-protesters dressed in black and wearing masks. The other side

included self-described "patriots" and "nationalists", Trump supporters, free speech advocates, and other groups. Daryl Tempesta, 52, who said he served in the US Air Force near the end of the Cold War, went to the rally to show his support for Trump.

"As a veteran, I like the track America is on, and that Trump is willing to stand and say we are still America and we are not going to be globalist, we're not going to be a communist country," Tempesta said. "That's a message I can get behind." A weekly farmers market was canceled ahead of the rally due to concerns about violence. Even so, a stall selling fresh vegetables was open for business amid the fist fighting, explosions from firecrackers and smoke wafting through the air.

"We decided to show up anyway because this is our livelihood," said Tim Mueller, a farmer who owns the stall, surrounded by protesters on both sides. At least 100 people from both camps eventually moved out of the park and into one of the city's main intersections, where they continued to fist fight, hurl insults and chant at each other. The police presence was light there, and only two or three officers were seen near the crossroads. —Reuters

POPE URGES AN END TO SYRIA 'HORROR' IN EASTER ADDRESS

MASS HELD WITHIN TIGHT, HEAVY SECURITY

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis urged an end to "horror and death" in Syria and implored God to bring peace to the Middle East as he delivered the traditional Easter Day mass in Rome yesterday. The Easter mass, the highlight of the Christian calendar began under a cloudy sky where worshippers had gathered since the early hours to gain access amid tight security.

After a short bout of heavy rain, the pontiff gave his traditional Urbi et Orbi blessing, to the city and the world, in which he prayed for those suffering from war, famine and political unrest, highlighting Syria, but also Ukraine and conflict zones in Africa. He expressed hope that Jesus' own sacrifice might "sustain the efforts of all those actively engaged in bringing comfort and relief to the civil population in Syria, prey to a war that continues to sow horror and death."

And he prayed for peace "beginning with the Holy Land, as well as in Iraq and Yemen." He also spoke out against the hostilities and famine in Africa, notably in South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo "who endure continuing hostilities, aggravated by the grave famine affecting" parts of Africa. He further urged world leaders to hear the message of peace as they contend with "the complex and often dramatic situations of today's world," and to work "to prevent the spread of conflicts and to put a halt to the arms trade."

Without mentioning Venezuela by name, Pope Francis also alluded to political and social tensions in Latin America, expressing the hope that the "common good of societies" would prevail. "May it be possible for bridges of dialogue to be built, by continuing to fight the scourge of corruption and to seek viable and peaceful solutions to disputes, for progress and the strengthening of democratic institutions in complete respect for the rule of law," he said.

Bloody start to Holy Week

Turning his attention to eastern Europe, he asked that "the Good Shepherd come to the aid of Ukraine, still beset by conflict and bloodshed." Of the social and political upheaval in Europe, Francis prayed for God's blessing on "those experiencing moments of crisis and difficulty, especially due to high unemployment, particularly among young people."

The mass followed his Good Friday prayer in which he deplored the suffering of migrants, the victims of racism and the persecution of Christians around the world. Easter week got off to a bloody start last Sunday when 45 people were killed in attacks on two

Coptic churches in Egypt which were claimed by the Islamic State group.

The entire area around St Peter's Basilica was blocked off, with only several access points for those admitted after having their bags inspected. Access to St Peter's Square itself was only possible after security checks similar to those at airports. Hundreds of police and security forces stood guard. Yesterday also saw Francis' retired predecessor Pope Benedict XVI turn 90, marked by a quiet celebration at the restored convent where he lives within the Vatican grounds.

"There will doubtless be something on the menu to mark his birth-

day," former Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi told reporters last week. Benedict's brother will join a small group of old friends on Monday for a birthday party at which they will celebrate with a few "Bavarian songs," Benedict's personal secretary Georg Gaenswein told Italian media. "He will see his brother Georg, which will be the best present for him," he said. To mark the occasion, the Vatican stamp and coin office has released a series of stamps marking important events in the two millennia history of the church. Benedict stepped down in 2013 citing his increased frailty. He was the first pontiff to do so in 600 years. —AFP



VATICAN: This handout picture released by the Vatican press office shows Pope Francis during the "Urbi et Orbi" blessing for Rome and the world from the central loggia of St Peter's basilica following the Easter Sunday mass. —AFP

VETERAN EVENT PLANNER IS FORCE BEHIND EGG ROLL

WASHINGTON: Anna Cristina Niceta Lloyd auditioned for the job of White House social secretary and may not have known it. The veteran event planner's creativity and handcraft were prominently on display at President Donald Trump's inaugural luncheon at the Capitol, the fifth one she has worked on. Maine lobster and Gulf shrimp, grilled Angus beef, and chocolate soufflé with cherry vanilla ice cream were on the menu. Sprays of roses in shades of pink, cream and melon spruced up Statuary Hall, the otherwise drab venue.

Among the roughly 200 guests taking it all in was Melania Trump. Less than a month after the Jan. 20 luncheon, the first lady announced she had hired Niceta Lloyd to fill one of the most coveted behind-the-scenes roles at the White House: social secretary. The post makes Niceta Lloyd the creative curator behind near-daily events for the president and first lady. It meant deciding what to serve at the recent get-to-know-you dinner between a new president and his Chinese counterpart. (Pan-seared Dover sole and New York strip steak were served, and Trump praised the "beautiful" chocolate cake they ate while discussing the US cruise missile strike on Syria.) And on Monday, it involves hosting no fewer than 21,000 children and adults for the annual Easter Egg Roll, a 139-year-old tradition and the Super Bowl of White House social events.

Master of events

For Niceta Lloyd, who goes by "Rickie," the job has the added challenge of collaborating with a first lady who is not yet living at the White House full time. In announcing the appointment, Mrs. Trump highlighted that Niceta Lloyd has more than two decades of experience in diplomatic, political and social entertaining in Washington. The first lady, who was a model, said she looked forward to "sharing my ideas and traditions of entertaining and social hospitality" with her new aide. She is mostly living at the family's Trump Tower penthouse in midtown Manhattan with the couple's 11-year-old son until school lets out. Niceta Lloyd was in her 20s when she was hired by Design Cuisine, an Arlington, Virginia-based special event caterer whose clients include the White House, State Department and several embassies. She also worked on the past five inaugurations of Republican and Democratic presidents. Now 46, the mother of two left the company after the White House made an offer she couldn't refuse. Bill Homan, a founder of Design Cuisine, praised his former employee's intelligence, creativity and organizational skill, as well as her sensitivity and discretion. "These are certainly very important in our business," he said.

Lea Berman, a social secretary during George W. Bush's administration who for many years relied on Niceta Lloyd to plan her private parties, said she is a "joyful person to work with" despite the stress that's built into event planning. "The best never lose their

cool; Rickie is like that," Berman said. "She's unflappable. Just what you'd hope for in a White House social secretary."

Niceta Lloyd's appointment to a job that paid her immediate predecessor \$119,000 closes the loop on a chapter in White House history, and her family's history, too. Her husband is Thomas Lloyd, a grandson of the late Rachel "Bunny" Mellon, an arts patron and political financier who was a confidante to Jacqueline Kennedy. Mellon helped Mrs. Kennedy redesign the White House Rose Garden. "Having that kind of background, it just made it like things had come full circle," said Bryan Huffman, a North Carolina-based interior designer who knew Mellon and knows Niceta Lloyd. A former social secretary recommended her to Mrs. Trump. The first lady had also attended events Niceta Lloyd had organized, including the inaugural luncheon, and is said to have come away impressed. "Sometimes, seeing is believing and seeing what she pulled off that day ... that might have definitely contributed to the decision," said Anita McBride, who was first lady Laura Bush's chief of staff.

Mrs. Trump's decision to hire Niceta Lloyd also shows that the first lady, a New Yorker who is slowly building her White House team, recognizes that she's unfamiliar with Washington's customs and needs experienced hands to help guide her. Lack of staff has already hampered some operations, such as the White House Visitors Office, which stayed closed for several weeks longer than usual following a change in presidents. —AP