

## EXPLOSIONS KILL 6 AS BANGLADESH FORCES STORM ISLAMIST HIDEOUT

**DHAKA:** Two explosions ripped through a crowd Saturday, killing six people and injuring some 50 in Bangladesh's northeastern city of Sylhet as army commandos stormed an Islamist extremist hideout, police said. The "powerful" blasts went off some 400 yards from the hideout, targeting police and hundreds of onlookers who were watching the commandos conduct an anti-militant operation at a five-storey apartment building, police said.

Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet police Basudeb Banik told AFP "six people including two police officers were killed" in the attack, which was claimed by the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group via its propaganda agency Amaq. He said around 50 people were injured including

about a dozen police and security officers. Several people were reported to be in critical condition, including the head of intelligence of the elite Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which is tasked with combating Islamist extremism in the country, he said.

Police primarily suspect the blasts were the work of a new faction of the homegrown extremist group, Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which has been blamed for a wave of attacks in recent years. Police could not confirm if it was a suicide attack but believe one of the attackers could be among the dead. IS claimed via Amaq that there were "dozens killed and wounded among Bangladeshi forces as a result of the detonation of an explosive device", accord-

ing to US-based monitoring agency SITE Intelligence Group.

Banik rejected the claim, saying IS does not have any presence in the country. The blasts occurred after an hours-long exchange of gunfire and commandos rescued "78 civilian hostages" from the hideout where several Islamist militants were holed up in a ground-floor apartment. "Our main task was to rescue the hostages, which we have done successfully. We were able to rescue all 78 people safely," army spokesman Brigadier General Fakhruddin Ahsan told reporters. He said the extremists were still inside the apartment building where they had barricaded themselves and laid explosive devices. "As a result the whole operation is being conducted carefully," he said.

## 30-hour standoff

The commandos backed by armored personnel carriers launched the operation after a more than 30-hour standoff that began early Friday morning when police sealed off the building as militants detonated small bombs. The spokesman could not say how many extremists were in the building, but police said there were at least two including a woman.

"They are Islamist extremists," police spokesman Musa said, adding they shouted "Allahu Akbar" (God is the greatest). Police used loudspeakers to ask the extremists to surrender, but they refused to give up, Musa said. The raid came after a series of suicide attacks on security camps by Islamist extremists this month

including one at a police checkpoint near the country's main international airport on Friday night.

Two of the three attacks, including Friday's blast in which the suicide attacker was killed, were claimed by the Islamic State group. This month a police elite unit also stormed a building outside the port city of Chittagong, killing four members of JMB, including a woman. IS has claimed responsibility for a wave of killings since 2015 including a major attack on a Dhaka cafe last year in which 22 people, including 18 foreign hostages, were killed. The Bangladeshi government denies IS has any presence in the country, arguing instead that a new faction of JMB was behind the attacks. —AFP

## PAKISTAN TO BUILD FENCE ALONG DISPUTED BORDER

**ISLAMABAD:** Pakistan says it has started building a fence along the Afghan border in areas where it says militants have launched cross-border attacks, a move that could worsen tensions with Afghanistan, which has never accepted the colonial-era frontier. Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa, the head of Pakistan's armed forces, announced the construction of fencing in "high threat zones" Saturday during a visit to tribal regions along the border, saying it was in the interest of both countries.

The two countries share a 2,400-kilometer internationally recognized border known as the Durand Line, which was drawn in the 19th century, when the British dominated South Asia. The Afghan government has never recognized the border, which runs through the Pashtun heartland, diluting the power of Afghanistan's largest ethnic group on both sides.

Najib Danish, the deputy spokesman for the Afghan Interior Ministry, said authorities had not yet seen any signs of construction along the frontier but would move to prevent any such project. "Building fences or any construction is not acceptable for us and we won't allow anyone to do it," he said. Pakistan and Afghanistan have long accused each other of turning a blind eye to Islamic militants operating along the porous frontier, and Pakistan recently closed the border for more than a month Bajwa said Pakistan is trying to develop a bilateral border security mechanism with Afghanistan.

## US air strike kills senior Qaeda leader

In related news, a senior Al-Qaeda commander linked to major attacks in Pakistan including the bombing of a luxury hotel and an assault on a cricket team has been killed in a drone strike in Afghanistan, Washington said Saturday. Qari Yasin, a member of the Tehrik-e-Taleban Pakistan group (Pakistani Taliban), was killed on March 19 in Afghanistan's eastern Paktika province, the Pentagon said.

"The death of Qari Yasin is evidence that

terrorists who defame Islam and deliberately target innocent people will not escape justice," Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said in a statement.

Yasin, who went by several aliases including Ustad Aslam, was accused of plotting the September 20, 2008 bombing on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad that killed dozens of people, including two US service members. He was also said to have been behind a 2009 attack on a bus carrying the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore that killed six Pakistani police officers and two civilians, and wounded six members of the team.

According to official Pakistani 'Most Wanted' lists he was also behind failed attempts to kill former President Pervez Musharraf in 2003 and former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz in 2004. The Pentagon described him as being a native of Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan region, though Pakistani records said he hailed from the country's populous Punjab province. Security analyst Amir Rana said Yasin was the latest in a series of Pakistani militant fugitives to have been killed across the border in Afghanistan, including Qari Saifullah Akhtar, a former close associate of Mullah Omar, who died in a clash with Afghan security forces in January. "He was once a senior figure and one of the Pakistani Taliban's few non-Pashtun leaders," said Rana, but added that Yasin had fallen inactive in recent years after fleeing to Afghanistan.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have long accused each other of harboring militants who carry out attacks in each others' countries. Taliban fighters on Thursday captured Afghanistan's strategic southern district of Sangin, where US and British forces had suffered heavy casualties before it was handed over to Afghan personnel. The Taliban effectively control or contest 10 of 14 districts in Helmand, the deadliest province for British and US troops over the past decade, blighted by a huge opium harvest that helps fund the insurgency. — Agencies



**HERAT:** In this photograph taken on February 9, 2017, an Italian soldier from NATO's Resolute Support Mission (2L) trains Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers at the Kabul Military Training centre on the outskirts of Herat. —AFP

## NATO TROOPS RACE WINTER TO GIVE AFGHAN FORCES A MORALE BOOST

## GIVING THEIR AFGHAN COUNTERPARTS A FIGHTING CHANCE

**CAMP ARENA:** The target is behind a slope, the advance is unprotected: Crawl, fire! Italian instructors in western Afghanistan have been using the relatively quiet winter to bolster Afghan troops against the Taliban. The war-torn country's security forces are being killed in horrific numbers as they grapple with a militant resurgence, raising questions about how much more they can endure. But under the banner of NATO's Resolute Support mission, Italian forces at Camp Arena in Herat province are racing the coming spring to give their Afghan counterparts a fighting chance.

The Taliban are the main enemy in Herat, which borders southern Helmand, apex of Afghanistan's opium production and most of which is controlled by insurgents. The strategic district of Sangin fell on March 23, another setback underscoring the militants' growing strength. Criminal gangs masterminding trafficking and smuggling operations to neighboring Iran are equally feared.

Confidence, says Camp Arena base commander General Claudio Minghetti, is key. "The main message to the soldiers is that they are in much better condition and better equipped than the enemy, which is of paramount importance for their morale." According to US watchdog SIGAR, casualties among Afghan security forces soared by 35 percent in 2016, with 6,800 soldiers and police killed.

Even the winter, when there is usually a lull in fighting, brought only a measured respite: according to the latest UN report released in early March, the number of clashes increased by a record 30 percent in January 2017 compared to 2016. One challenge is the shortcomings of the

military command. The 207th Brigade stationed in Herat was without a commander for almost two months, until General Ziarat Abed arrived in January after training in Rome and Paris.

General Abed "is on the ground with his men every day, it's new," confirms Colonel Tomaso Capasso, watching the training from the sidelines on Camp Arena's firing range. "This new generation is not like the previous generation, who spent their time in the office," he adds, watching the men crawl in line. "They know how to shoot but not fight together. We have to create a team spirit, we have a month to do it."

## Bombs are 'easy'

Moral support and military counseling are what the Italians offered in Farah, one of the four western provinces assigned to them under Resolute Support, when its harassed governor called for help in tackling the insurgency. He wanted NATO to conduct a few strikes to drive the insurgents away, the colonel who led the operation told AFP. "It's easy, but it keeps them in a state of dependency," the colonel, who asked not to be named, said.

Instead, the governor got an Italian deployment of 120 men whose goal was to boost spirits within a week. "In Farah, we found demoralized troops, very young soldiers, ill-trained, ready to surrender," the Italian colonel said, pointing to the "lack of leadership even at the lower levels" of the Afghan army. Resolute Support spokesman General Charles Cleveland confirms that a broad movement is under way at all levels that will continue throughout 2017 to "replace the leaders, those who are corrupt and those who didn't properly deliver what was

expected last year. "It's going to take some time, institutional changes can't happen overnight," he said. For General Minghetti, the lightning Farah operation exemplifies Resolute Support's mandate of training, advising and assisting Afghan forces. "Just the fact that one is present at their side enabled the Afghans to regain control. With a few tips, they were able to show their abilities," he said.

## Ominous spring

NATO withdrew its combat forces at the end of 2014, and under Resolute Support there are 11,000 troops including 8,400 Americans still in the country. Camp Arena hosts 900 Italian officers and soldiers, including a detachment of the prestigious Bersaglieri, the elite regiment whose helmets are adorned with moiré feathers, a 200-year-old tradition meant to provide shade.

US General John Nicholson, head of Resolute Support, warned last month that he would need "a few thousand" more troops to finally defeat the Taliban and the increasing threat posed by Islamic State. For Captain "Luca," who could not give his real name as he is part of the Italian special forces, the NDS (Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security) and police must be trained together.

After all, they often find themselves fighting side by side, as during an insurgent assault on a military hospital in Kabul on March 8. But time is short. The NDS is rarely available—"they are always mobilized," he says—and the weather is getting warmer, heralding the arrival of spring and Afghanistan's traditional fighting season. "As soon as the weather turns to beautiful, it is over," says Luca. "We will lose them." — AFP



**In this June 15, 2016 file photo, a Pakistani army soldier stands guard in Pakistani tribal area of Khyber, near Torkham border post between Pakistan and Afghanistan. —AP**

## VIETNAMESE DETAINEE DIES IN JAPAN'S IMMIGRATION CENTRE

**TOKYO:** A Vietnamese man held in a Japanese immigration detention centre died on Saturday, six people told Reuters, drawing fresh attention to conditions in the country's detention system. The man died at the East Japan Immigration Center in Ibaraki prefecture, northeast of Tokyo, according to activists, a lawyer and a detainee held at the facility. Two men died at the same facility in 2014.

The deceased man was named Van Huan Nguyen and was one of more than 11,000 refugees that the country took in over the three decades to 2005 in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, according to two of the sources. It was not clear for how long he had been detained or why. Nguyen did not have relatives in Japan but had many friends, said one of the sources who had known him.

"He was a bright, fun person," she said. "I can't believe he died." The Sankei daily reported that the East Japan Immigration Center said a guard had found a Vietnamese man in his forties lying unconscious in his cell alone early

on Saturday. The guard called an ambulance and the detainee was sent to hospital, where his death was confirmed about an hour and a half later, the Sankei said, citing the centre.

The authorities would conduct an autopsy and investigate the cause of death, the Sankei said. The East Japan Immigration Center and the justice ministry, which oversees immigration facilities, could not be reached for comment yesterday. Reuters was not able to independently verify the death or the identity of the deceased. A Reuters investigation last year into the death of a Sri Lankan at a different facility in Tokyo revealed serious deficiencies in medical care and monitoring in the immigration detention system.

Since 2006, at least dozen people have died while in immigration detention, including four cases of suicide. Some detainees are held for months and even years with no clear knowledge of when they will be let out. Many develop depression and insomnia, detainees and psychiatrists have told Reuters. — Reuters

## SPAIN'S SOCIALISTS KICK OFF LEADERSHIP BATTLE

**MADRID:** Deeply divided and weakened by the rise of far-left party Podemos, Spain's Socialists are gearing up for a leadership contest that will see ousted chief Pedro Sanchez attempt a comeback. The 45-year-old former economics professor will be up against two other prominent candidates in a contest that will prove decisive for the future of a party that has run out of steam, much like fellow socialists in France and Britain.

The battle begins in earnest yesterday when Susana Diaz, 42, the president of the southern region of Andalusia and one of Spain's most powerful female politicians, is due to announce she will run in May primaries. A long-time rival of Sanchez, who was ousted in October after a bitter internal rebellion, Diaz will launch her candidacy near Madrid with the backing and presence of two former Socialist prime ministers—Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and Felipe Gonzalez.

That same day, Patxi Lopez, the 57-year-old former president of the Basque Country and already a candidate, will meet with supporters in the northern region of Cantabria.

And Sanchez will head up a gathering in Valencia in the east, having already announced he will attempt a comeback. Much like Britain's Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who survived a leadership challenge last year but still faces internal dissent, Sanchez enjoys considerable support among

grassroots Socialist activists. Diaz, though, is backed by many high-ranking party members.

## 'Start to win again'

The primaries due in May at an as-yet unannounced date will see some 180,000 activists vote for their preferred candidate—a choice



**MADRID:** President of the Regional Government of Andalusia and PSOE member, Susana Diaz gestures during an event to announce her candidacy for the general Secretary of the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Party), initiating her campaign for the party primaries. — AFP

that will determine the future direction of the party. Plagued by bad results in general and regional elections in 2015 and 2016, and challenged from the far-left by Podemos, the Socialist party is struggling to rise again and impose itself.

Podemos, led by the charismatic Pablo Iglesias, has become Spain's third most powerful political force and threatens to overtake the Socialists as the main opposition grouping. "The Socialist party must stop battling to avoid being relegated to third place, it must (instead) start to win again," Socialist lawmaker Eduardo Madina summed up last week.

## But how?

Sanchez has been a staunch opponent of Spain's conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and maintains that the party must continue in this vein to have any hope of winning back voters. Rajoy must know that there "will be no Socialist votes for right-wing policies," he has said, deeply critical of corruption scandals impacting the conservatives and of their severe austerity measures. — AFP