

# Crowds rally in largest US gun control protest in a generation

WASHINGTON: Bundled against the cold but fired up with passion after a Florida high school massacre, crowds gathered in Washington yesterday for what was expected to be the biggest US gun control protest in a generation, with hundreds of thousands attending. The student-organized protest is to feature rallies from coast to coast, with the main event in Washington within sight of the US Capitol - whose lawmakers the protesters hope to influence.

"Let our votes be our best weaponry," said one of the many signs carried by early protesters, who arrived more than three hours before the event's official mid-day start. Thousands of demonstrators poured out of the city's subway and had already filled Constitution Avenue and Pennsylvania Avenue, which links the White House with the Capitol, making it difficult to get close to the main stage. The area was closed to traffic in order to hold the half-million protesters squeezing into streets flanked by giant video screens proclaiming their slogan, "March for Our Lives".

Lauren Tilley, 17, told AFP she arrived from the other side of the country in El Dorado County, California, with seven other teens and three adults. "We came here through an essay contest. They raised the money in order for us to fly here for the march," Tilley said, holding a sign calling for the US Constitution's Second Amendment, the right to bear arms, to itself be amended. "We are the people who are scared to go to school every day because we don't know if we are next," she said. "Our main message is we are not going to be quiet, we will keep fighting. I don't care how much money you have, your money can't drown out the sounds of our voices. We will be voting in 2020. Our generation wants change."

Other marchers carried homemade signs reading: "My dress code is stricter than our gun laws," "Your right to bear arms doesn't override my right to stay alive," and "Your silence leads to violence." A large peace sign decorated with flowers called for a ban on assault rifles, such as the type used in the Florida shooting. "The Second

Amendment doesn't guarantee, I don't believe, the right to own an assault rifle," said Billy McLaughlin, 67, a teacher from West Virginia. He and other demonstrators repeated a common complaint of gun control advocates, that politicians are beholden to the powerful National Rifle Association lobby group.

## 'Paying off' politicians

"We shouldn't have guns in our society. These kids are right," said Jeff Turchin, 68, of New York. "They're basically saying the NRA is paying off these Republicans," the party of President Donald Trump, which controls the Senate and House of Representatives. Students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida - where 17 students and staff were shot dead on Feb 14 by a 19-year-old former classmate - have been the driving force behind the march.

With a mixture of outrage and passion, they have been badgering US lawmakers to enact a ban on assault rifles and to expand background checks to cover all gun purchases, even private sales. Since the Parkland shooting, the state of Florida and the US Congress have made only modest tweaks to gun laws and Trump's proposal to arm teachers has been met with widespread resistance.

Organizers say more than 800 marches are being held across the country and around the world under the slogan #NeverAgain. In London, hundreds of people protested outside the US embassy. Although the Florida mass shooting triggered the movement, it has embraced the entire problem of gun violence in a nation that sees more than 30,000 gun-related deaths a year. Most of those fatalities do not come from mass shootings but from neighborhood homicides and suicides.

## 'Electoral force'

The appeals for stricter gun regulations have drawn the backing of Democratic lawmakers. A series of American celebrities have pledged \$500,000 donations to support the



WASHINGTON: Participants arrive for the March for Our Lives rally yesterday. - AFP

protests. They include actor George Clooney and his wife, Amal, a human rights lawyer; actress and media mogul Oprah Winfrey and director Steven Spielberg and his actress wife, Kate Capshaw. Later, artists including Ariana Grande, Jennifer Hudson, Miley Cyrus and Demi Lovato will perform at the rally.

Democratic Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, where 20 elementary school children were shot dead in 2012, told AFP the student-led movement needs to become an "electoral force, and this march may be the beginning of that". Conscious of their growing political power, March For Our Lives organizers provided a link on their website for supporters to register to vote. They have called on supporters to vote against lawmakers who receive money from the NRA. "Either you stand with the kids or you stand with the NRA," said David Hogg, a Stoneman Douglas student.

"I don't want any child to be seen as another statistic," said Ashley Schlaeger, an 18-year-old freshman at Ohio State University who drove to the Washington rally with friends. In the Fort Lauderdale suburb of Parkland, thousands of people passed through police checkpoints to assemble in a park for a rally and march. Many held signs with slogans including "Am I Next?" "A Call To Arms For the Safety of Our Sons and Daughters" and "Congress = Killers."

Adam Buchwald, who survived the mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas, told the crowd he and his friends would stay focused on getting new legislation passed. "Sadly, this could be repeated in your city or town. This stops now!" he said to loud cheers. At a rally in New York, a moment of silence was held for the Parkland victims.

In Sydney, Australia, rally organizer Jennifer Smith told a crowd of about 300

people, many of them Americans, that she could "breathe easy" about sending her children to school in Australia with its tough gun laws. "I never have to worry about them having to do active shooter drills," she said. Organizers of the US marches retweeted photos from sister demonstrations as far afield as Northern Ireland, Mauritius, and Stockholm.

Lyft, the ride-hailing service, said it would offer free rides to 50 marches around the United States. Several restaurants in Washington said they would hand out free lunches to high school students, and local residents opened their homes to provide accommodation for the visiting young people. According to a Quinnipiac University poll, 63 percent of American voters approve of the march in support of tougher gun laws but are not optimistic it will lead to new legislation. — Agencies

## Bomb kills 2 Egypt policemen...

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Voters tomorrow choose between Sisi and one little-known candidate who supports the former field marshal. All credible opponents dropped out in January, citing intimidation by the authorities after the main challenger was jailed. Sisi's critics say he has cracked down harshly on dissent and that tough economic reforms have eroded his popularity. Supporters say such measures are needed to stabilize Egypt, which was rocked by years of unrest after protests toppled veteran leader Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

As military commander, Sisi led the ousting of Egypt's

only competitively-elected leader, President Mohamed Mursi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was toppled amid demonstrations against his rule in 2013, a year after taking power. Sisi took office with a landslide election victory a year later. State news agency MENA blamed the Brotherhood, banned in Egypt and designated a terrorist group, for yesterday's bombing. "This attempt comes in the context of terrorist Muslim Brotherhood elements trying to disrupt the electoral process and influence citizens into not going to the polls and participating in the presidential election," the agency said.

Islamic State (IS) and other militant groups have assassinated several officials in recent years. Islamic State attempted to assassinate Egypt's defense and interior ministers in December during a trip the pair made to the Sinai Peninsula, where the hardline militant group has been waging an insurgency for almost five years. Sisi said on Friday the militants would soon be defeated in the region. — Agencies

## France mourns slain 'hero' officer...

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Beltrame offered to take the place of a woman being held as a final hostage by 25-year-old Radouane Lakdim, who had already shot dead the supermarket's butcher and a customer. Lakdim, a petty criminal who was on a watchlist over fears he had been radicalized, shot and stabbed the policeman before anti-terror officers moved in to kill him and end the siege. Macron said the police officer, who hoped to be able to negotiate with the attacker once shoppers were taken to safety, had "died a hero". He deserves "the respect and admiration of the whole nation", the president said.

Lakdim's partner and a 17-year-old friend were in custody as investigators sought to understand events leading to the attack. Investigators found notes at his home which refer to IS, a legal source said, including a hand-written letter in which he claimed allegiance to the group. The shootings come as France remains on high alert following a string of deadly attacks that have killed more than 240 people since 2015.

HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent Friday a cable of condolences to Macron, expressing Kuwait's strong denouncement and condemnation of the terrorist operation. The Amir reiterated Kuwait's firm stand against all forms and types of terrorism, and supportive stand in favor of Paris and all measures and procedures taken by the French government to face such heinous terrorist actions and preserve the country's security and stability. HH the Amir also expressed his sincere condolences and sorrow to victims of the terrorist act, praying mercy for the deceased ones and wished a swift recovery for the wounded. Meanwhile, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables to the French president.

Lakdim, a Moroccan-born French national, fit a familiar profile as a petty criminal who had turned to extremism. A small-time drug-dealer, his rap sheet included convictions for carrying a banned weapon and for drug use. He spent a month in jail in 2016. "He had been on a watchlist for his radicalization and links to the Salafist movement," said top anti-terror prosecutor Francois Molins.

Lakdim started Friday's rampage in Carcassonne, hijacking a car and shooting the two people inside. The passenger was killed, and the driver remains in a critical condition. Lakdim then shot and wounded a policeman who was out jogging with colleagues before driving to nearby Trebes and bursting into the Super U supermarket, "shouting 'Allahu Akbar' (God is greatest) and saying he was a soldier of the Islamic State, ready to die for Syria", Molins said. He further demanded the release of certain prisoners - notably, according to a security source, Salah Abdeslam, prime suspect in the November 2015 Paris terror attacks.

IS claimed the attack was in response to its call to target Western enemies - as is customary when the assailant has pledged allegiance to the militants. Experts said the attack showed the evolving nature of the IS threat, seeking to inspire lone-wolf attacks in its name as its self-proclaimed "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq crumbles. "The persistence of the homegrown threat has largely escaped public debate in comparison to concern over jihadists coming home after fighting in Syria and Iraq," said Jean-Pierre Filiu, Middle Eastern Studies professor at Sciences Po university.

The attack has rocked Trebes, a sleepy town of 5,000 located on the picturesque Canal du Midi. "We thought this only happened in big towns," said a 52-year-old restaurant-owner who gave her name as Khadija. Supermarket boss Samia Menassi, whose store remains closed and surrounded by police tape, was still in shock yesterday as she recalled hearing the first gunshots. "I said to the girls, 'Call the police, there's a terrorist in the shop,'" she told AFP. "We felt powerless because we still had colleagues in there."

Of around 50 people in the store at the time, most were able to get out through an emergency exit, some after sheltering in a meat refrigerator. France has suffered a series of major attacks over the past three years, including the massacre at the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, the Nov 2015 attacks that killed 130 in Paris, and the 2016 Bastille Day truck attack in Nice. The most recent assault came in October when a Tunisian man stabbed to death two women at Marseille's railway station.

A state of emergency put in place just after the 2015 Paris attacks was lifted in October when Macron's centrist government passed a new law boosting the powers of security forces. Thousands of French troops remain on the streets under an anti-terror operation known as Sentinelle, patrolling transport hubs, tourist hotspots and other sensitive sites. — Agencies



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