



Transgender leader a star at massive Indian festival

Backlash in Nigeria as main candidates shun election debate

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LAHUELILPAN: Aerial view of the scene where a massive blaze triggered by a leaky pipeline took place the night before in Tlahuelilpan, Hidalgo state, Mexico. —AFP

Mexico fuel theft in focus after blast

‘Blame lies with authorities who let them go there knowing it was dangerous’

TLAHUELILPAN: A blast at a gasoline pipeline in Mexico that killed at least 73 people has put renewed attention on the government's strategy to stop fuel theft, with some relatives saying fuel shortages stemming from the plan led people to risk their lives. Fuel thieves punctured the Tula-Tuxpan pipeline a few miles from one of Mexico's main refineries on Friday. Up to 800 people flocked to fill plastic containers from the 7-meter gasoline geyser that ensued, officials say. A couple of hours later, it exploded.

Half a dozen people interviewed by Reuters on Saturday said their relatives went to the leaking duct in Tlahuelilpan district in Hidalgo state because they struggled to find fuel elsewhere and were desperate to fill up cars to get to work or run their farms. “A lot of innocent people came here, perhaps their car didn't have enough gasoline for tomorrow, and they said I'm just going to go for a few liters,” said farmer Isidoro Velasco, 51, who was waiting for news of his nephew Mario Hidalgo, who he believed likely dead. Hidalgo turned 34 on Saturday. Late last month, President

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador launched a program to shut down an illegal fuel distribution network that siphons off about \$3 billion worth of fuel annually from state oil firm Pemex. The plan, which involves shutting off pipelines compromised by gangs who fit valves to drain fuel, led to widespread gasoline shortages in central Mexico in January, including in Hidalgo, to the north of Mexico City. On Saturday, most gas stations in Tlahuelilpan were closed.

Scrutiny

Polls show the measures have until now enjoyed fairly broad public support, despite the difficulties and long lines at gas stations. The disaster in Tlahuelilpan, however, has brought renewed scrutiny of the strategy. Lopez Obrador has faced repeated questions about the disaster, demanding he explain why soldiers deployed to guard the duct did not chase people away from the leak and how quickly supplies to the duct were cut after Pemex detected the leak.

Pemex CEO Octavio Romero on Saturday said a valve had been closed at the pipeline once a drop in pressure from the leak had been noted, but he did not say at what time that happened. Fuel spurted from the pipeline for around two hours before it exploded, with no visible loss of pressure. Romero said about 10,000 barrels of high octane gasoline were in the section of the pipeline between the Tula refinery and the village when it blew up on Friday.

The defense ministry and Lopez Obrador said there were only 25 soldiers present and the army did not want to repress the crowd. Critics say authorities should have been firmer in controlling the crowd and sealing the area, and should have called for reinforcements. “Part of the blame goes to the people (at the ruptured pipeline) but the bigger blame lies with authorities who let them go there knowing it was dangerous,” said Velasco.

The Tula-Tuxpan pipeline delivers fuel to other central states, raising the possibility that its closure for repairs after the explosion could worsen fuel supply

problems, including in car hub Guanajuato. Romero said the pipeline had been out of service since late December as the government tried to secure it from gangs who had hit it 10 times in Tlahuelilpan municipality. Since they began reopening it on Jan 16 it had been hit four times he said.

In response to a question about whether cartels present in Hidalgo, which include Los Zetas and the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, might have caused the disaster in revenge for the clampdown, the president said all possibilities were being investigated. However, one federal police source in Hidalgo said he believed the hole in the duct was made by local criminals not major cartels. Lopez Obrador said the disaster had hardened his resolve to fight fuel theft and the government was looking at ways to strengthen ageing pipelines to make it harder to illegally suck fuel from them. Meanwhile, he said, Mexico was buying more tanker trucks for road distribution. “Even though it hurts a lot, we have to carry on with the plan, to end fuel theft,” he said. —Reuters

Don't hijack Brexit, minister warns UK's parliament

LONDON: Parliament cannot be allowed to hijack Brexit, Trade Minister Liam Fox said yesterday, in a warning to lawmakers who want to take more control over Britain's departure from the European Union. With just weeks to go before Britain is due to leave the EU, Prime Minister Theresa May will return to parliament on Monday to set out how she plans to try to break the Brexit deadlock after her deal was rejected by lawmakers last week.

She will also speak to ministers on Sunday on a conference call, a government source said, as the prime minister tries to navigate a way through the competing visions for the future from a second referendum to staying in the EU. Time is running out for Brexit, Britain's biggest shift in foreign and trade policy in more than 40 years, but so far there is little that unites a divided parliament beyond its rejection of May's deal that envisages close economic ties with the EU. Britain's main opposition Labour Party is pressing for a new election and for May to rule out the possibility of a no-deal Brexit, while others in parliament are lobbying for anything from a second referendum to leaving without an agreement. Fox, a Brexit supporter, told the BBC's Andrew Marr Show that May's divorce agreement with the EU was still the best basis for a deal and warned lawmakers against trying to take more control of Britain's departure.

“Parliament has not got the right to hijack the Brexit process because parliament said to the people of this country: ‘we make a contract with you, you will make the decision and we will honor it,’” Fox said. “What we are now getting are some of those who

were always absolutely opposed to the result of the referendum trying to hijack Brexit and in effect steal the result from the people.” Britain voted with a 52 percent majority to leave the EU in a 2016 referendum that exposed deep divisions across the country, divisions that still split cities and towns, and the country's parliament, almost three years on.

Deadlock

After seeing her deal rejected by more than 200 lawmakers last week, May has opened talks with other parties to try to find a way to break the deadlock. But with Labour refusing to take part until May rules out leaving without a deal, some lawmakers fear those talks will change little and instead have said they will launch attempts next week to force the government to change course.

Several are trying to make sure Britain does not “accidentally” leave without a deal on March 29, a scenario some businesses say would be catastrophic for the economy. “What happens when you have a hung parliament is that power does pass from government ... to parliament and that's what we are seeing play out,” Nicky Morgan, a Conservative former minister, told Sky News.

She said she was backing a bill that would force the government to extend Article 50, which triggered Britain's two-year talks to leave the EU, if it cannot get an agreement approved by parliament by the end of February. Dominic Grieve, another Conservative lawmaker, is also looking at ways to stop Britain from leaving without a deal.

With much of the focus now on Labour, its Brexit spokesman Keir Starmer said there was now only really two options that could find majority support – a future close economic relationship with the EU or a second referendum – and that it was increasingly inevitable that Article 50 would be extended. “We've arrived at phase three and therefore we need to be realistic about what the options are,” Starmer told the BBC. “Let's ... reduce it to the options that are at least capable of getting a majority and that is a close economic relationship and a public vote.” —Reuters

Attack on base in Mali kills 8 UN peacekeepers

BAMAKO: Gunmen killed at least eight Chadian UN peacekeepers in an attack yesterday on one of their bases in northern Mali, multiple sources reported. The UN spokesman in Mali condemned what he described as a vile and cowardly attack and called for a “robust” response. “According to a new toll, still provisional, at least eight peacekeepers have been killed,” a source close to the MINUSMA force said.

The attack happened early Sunday at the Aguelhok base 200 kilometers north of Kidal and towards the border with Algeria, the source added. A diplomat in northern Mali told AFP that several of the attackers had also been killed. Mahamat Saleh Annadif, the UN's

special representative for Mali, condemned the attack in a statement. “Peacekeepers of the MINUSMA force at Aguelhok fought off a sophisticated attack by assailants who arrived on several armed vehicles,” he said.

The “cowardly” attack, he added, “illustrates the determination of the terrorists to sow chaos. It demands a robust, immediate and concerted response from all forces to destroy the peril of terrorism in the Sahel.” An attack at the same base last April killed two peacekeepers and left several others wounded. More than 13,000 peacekeepers are deployed in Mali as part of a UN mission that was established after Islamist militias seized northern Mali in 2012. They were pushed back by French troops in 2013.

A peace agreement signed in 2015 by the Bamako government and armed groups was aimed at restoring stability to Mali following a brief Islamist takeover in the north. But the accord has failed to stop violence by Islamist militants, who have also staged attacks in neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger. Earlier this month, both

France and the United States criticized the authorities in Mali for their failure to stem the worsening violence.

On January 16, France threatened to push for more targeted sanctions to be imposed on Mali after hearing a UN official report on worsening violence in the West African country. And Washington renewed its warning that it would push for changes to the peacekeeping mission in Mali, possibly a major draw-down, if there was no progress. In August, a panel of experts said in a report to the UN Security Council that inter-communal conflicts in the region were exacerbating existing tensions from clashes between jihadists groups and international and Malian forces.

Yesterday, France's Defense Minister Florence Parly told French radio that the G5 Sahel anti-jihadist force in the region was in the process of resuming operations. They were suspended after an attack on their headquarters in mid 2018. The countries working in the G5 force comprise Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad. —AFP