

International

Female suicide bomber kills 8 in northwestern Pakistan

Pakistan to reform madrassa, tackle hate speech and extremism

DERA ISMAIL KHAN: A female suicide bomber in northwestern Pakistan killed at least eight people and wounded 26 more in an attack outside a local civilian hospital yesterday, local officials said. The attack in Dera Ismail Khan early yesterday was claimed by Tehrik-e-Taleban Pakistan, often known as the Pakistani Taliban, which is separate from the insurgent movement across the border in Afghanistan.

Local officials said the attack happened after two police were killed at a roadside checkpoint outside the city. "When their bodies were taken to the main hospital, a suicide bomber, believed to be a female, wearing a burqa, triggered an explosive-laden jacket and caused huge losses," said Waqar Ahmad, a local police officer. He said the blast had damaged the emergency ward of the hospital and forced some of the wounded to be transferred to other cities.

Muhammed Khurasani, a spokesman for the TTP, claimed responsibility for the attack, which he said was carried out in revenge for the killing of two Taliban commanders by counter terrorism police around a month ago. However he denied the bomber was female. Dera Ismail Khan has seen a number of suicide attacks over the past decade as the Pakistani military carried out a campaign to suppress militant attacks in the area, an important hub in the \$60 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Religious school reform

In another development, Pakistan said it has agreed with the country's clergy to introduce reforms in madrassa religious schools to bring them in line with conventional

schools, curbing hate speech and extremist narratives. The announcement came just before Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Washington for a Monday meeting with President Donald Trump, whose administration continues to press Pakistan over terrorist financing and curbing militancy.

The government will register more than 30,000 madrassas, which will teach subjects like English, mathematics and science, Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training Shafiqat Mehmood said. He said the government will conduct their exams and is aiming for a first batch next June, although that is not a firm goal. Pakistan's madrassas have long been accused of promoting extremist narratives and have been dubbed "nurseries of extremism".

"There will be no preaching of hate speech against any religion or sect," the minister said. "We will look at their curriculum to see there is no hatred against any sect or faith," he added. Pakistan pledged to crack down on religious seminaries suspected of fostering extremism following a school massacre by the Taliban in December 2014 that left more than 130 children dead, but the move faces stiff resistance from conservatives.

Madrassa reforms attempted by the past governments have failed due to pressure from the clergy. Pakistan is a deeply religious Muslim-majority society and, despite misgivings about madrassas, clergy are generally well respected. In another move ahead of Khan's US trip, Pakistan on Wednesday detained Hafiz Saeed, the alleged mastermind of an attack on the Indian city of Mumbai in 2008 that killed more than 160 people. — Agencies



DERA ISMAIL KHAN: Pakistani security officials examine the site of a suicide bomb attack at the entrance of a hospital in Kotian Saldan village on the outskirts of the northwestern city of Dera Ismail Khan yesterday. — AFP

Puerto Rico leader urged to step down; protests roil island

SAN JUAN: Several US Democratic presidential candidates and lawmakers have demanded Puerto Rico's governor step down over offensive chat messages, as thousands on the Caribbean island staged a seventh day of protests to seek his resignation. Banging pots and pans and chanting "Ricky Resign!" Puerto Ricans streamed into San Juan's old city on Friday night and called on Ricardo Rossello to quit over the misogynistic and homophobic messages.

The chats, from a Telegram message group and referring mainly to politicians and officials, were published on Saturday. The leak, running to 889 pages, added to Rossello's woes after two former officials were arrested by the FBI last week as part of a federal corruption probe in the US territory. The protests have also tapped into simmering resentment over Rossello's handling of devastating hurricanes in 2017 and alleged corruption as Puerto Rico's fragile economy struggles to recover from the island's bankruptcy.

US Representative Tulsi Gabbard joined the protests in San Juan, saying she wanted to "stand up to corruption," as other Democratic presidential candidates including Julian Castro and Elizabeth Warren also called for Rossello to quit. "We must stand with la isla. Rossello must resign," tweeted US Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, whose mother was born in Puerto Rico.

The island's nonvoting representative in the US Congress, Jennifer Gonzalez, earlier called for his resignation, while Rossello's press secretary Denise Perez resigned, saying she could no longer hold the position after she was called corrupt in front of her son. "It's your turn, Ricky," protesters chanted on the street after word spread that Perez had stepped aside. Rossello, who is affiliated with the US Democratic Party, has refused to step down but said he would hold an emergency meeting with leaders of Puerto Rico's New Progressive Party, which he leads.

Puerto Rico House Speaker Carlos Mendez on Friday announced the creation of an independent committee to



SAN JUAN: Puerto Rican singer Ricky Martin (center), Puerto Rican rapper Rene Perez, aka Residente, (right), Puerto Rican reggaeton singer Bad Bunny (top), take part in a demonstration demanding Governor Ricardo Rossello's resignation in San Juan. — AFP

determine whether the center-right politician engaged in illegal activity in the chats. The group has ten days to deliver its findings. The island's bar association published a report citing clear grounds to impeach the 40-year-old former scientist, based on the "depravity" of his messages. The chats, revealed by Puerto Rico's Center for Investigative Journalism, showed how Rossello and allies exchanged vulgar memes and comments as well as privileged information.

While opposition legislators back impeachment, the process has yet to gain critical support from lawmakers in Rossello's ruling party. But politicians like Gonzalez are

increasingly concerned about Puerto Rico's "anarchic" image after clashes in San Juan this week and allegations the two administration officials arrested by the FBI stole government funds.

The violence and political turmoil comes at a critical stage in the US territory's bankruptcy process. It has also raised concerns with US lawmakers who are weighing the island's requests for billions of federal dollars for health-care and hurricane recovery efforts. "The island cannot afford to lose already approved federal resources, nor the ones we are working to obtain," Gonzalez said in her letter to Rossello urging him to step aside. — Reuters

New Zealanders hand over 10,000-plus guns in buy-back scheme

SYDNEY: New Zealanders have handed over more than 10,000 guns, weapons parts and accessories in the first week of a buy-back scheme prompted by the country's worst peacetime mass shooting, police figures released yesterday show. A gun reform law passed in April banned most semi-automatic firearms, parts that convert firearms into semi-automatics, magazines over a certain capacity and some shotguns. Owners have until Dec 20 to hand in their weapons and the government has set aside NZ\$208 million (\$140.63 million) to compensate them for up to 95% of the original cost.

The buy-back comes four months after a lone gunman with semi-automatic weapons attacked Muslims attending Friday prayers in Christchurch on New Zealand's South Island, killing 51 people. More than 2,000 people have surrendered 3,275 firearms, 7,827 parts and accessories and in return authorities have paid them slightly more than NZ\$6 million (\$4.06 million) since the buy-back began last Saturday, a police spokesperson told Reuters by telephone yesterday.

Police said they were pleased with the turnout yesterday, as 684 people handed in 1,061 guns and 3,397 parts and accessories at events across the country. Police superintendent Karyn Malthus said hundreds of firearms had been surrendered in Auckland. "The feedback from firearms owners at the event has been very positive," she said in an emailed statement. Media reported on Wednesday that Christchurch residents were upset about the proposed opening of a Gun City mega store in the city.

Brenton Tarrant, accused of the March 15 killings, bought four weapons and ammunition from the Gun City chain online from December 2017 to March 2018, owner David Tipple said in March. Tarrant, due to stand trial in May, has pleaded not guilty to 92 charges over the attacks, including New Zealand's first terrorism charge. With a population of just under 5 million and an estimated total of 1.5 million firearms, New Zealand ranks 17th in the world in terms of civilian firearm ownership, the Small Arms Survey shows. — Reuters



MUZAFFARPUR: An Indian resident swims in floodwaters following heavy monsoon rains at Muzaffarpur district in the Indian state of Bihar. In India, the death toll rose to at least 120 and entire communities were cut off by rising floodwaters which damaged or submerged roads. — AFP

'Nobody cares about us': Hunger, despair for flood victims

MUZAFFARPUR: Chest-deep in brown, flowing monsoon water and holding bags of clothes and utensils above their heads, residents in the Indian state of Bihar are hungry and despairing. "When many of us poor people drown, then the politicians suddenly take notice... But otherwise, nobody cares about us," shopkeeper Raj Majhi said. Majhi's home - like many others - is submerged, with only rooftops remaining above floodwaters. His family has found their way to a small patch of land beside a highway, where they cook on a small stove.

Bihar is no stranger to floods, and is usually one of the worst-affected regions during the monsoons, but as one of the poorest regions in South Asia, residents feel helpless faced with the annual deluge. This year's floods - caused by torrential rains in Bihar and from across the border in Nepal - have been unrelenting. Some 67 people have been killed in the state and 4.5 million residents affected by the floods so far, and water levels are still rising. Thatched huts

have been washed away and entire communities cut-off as roads and bridges are destroyed and crops devastated.

In Sitamarhi district, floodwaters cover roads and homes as far as the eye can see. Marooned villagers, tired from hours of wading through the churning waters, wait for help to arrive on small islands of higher ground. Farmer Sonabati Devi managed to save some of her goats, but not much more. "We left the house to save ourselves and left everything behind," she said, sitting under a makeshift tent - one of many that have popped up around Sitamarhi using meagre household materials that villagers managed to salvage.

In areas where floodwaters have eased slightly, villagers cram into small, wooden boats or swim home to retrieve belongings. Some have received khichdi - an Indian porridge made with rice and lentils - from the government. "My children keep asking me for food and say they are hungry, but what can we do?" said Nima Devi, who only eats once a day with her children when the khichdi is distributed. But many others are going hungry, with next to no food supplies and only the clothes on their back. In a rare spot of good news, no extreme warnings have been issued by national weather bureau for the days ahead, although rains could continue. But even when the water retreats, villagers face the daunting task of cleaning up homes - now littered with rubbish accumulated by the flood - that weren't swept away. — AFP

News in brief

Iran executes convicted nurse

TEHRAN: Iran has executed a nurse convicted of murdering a six-year-old boy, the judiciary's official news agency reported yesterday. The woman was found guilty of carrying out the murder in June 2016 while working for the boy's grandmother at her home in Kelardasht city, in the northern province of Mazandaran. The nurse was sentenced to death a year later. She confessed to the premeditated murder and said she did it out of "anger", the prosecutor said, quoted yesterday by the Mizan Online news agency. "The verdict was finalized as it was not appealed," the prosecutor added. The executed woman was not identified in the report. She was in her early 40s. Iran does not publish official statistics on the number of people it executes. But according to Amnesty International, while secretive China is the world's "leading executioner", Iran had the highest known figure in 2018 with at least 253 people put to death. — AFP

2 dead in clash with 'terrorists'

TEHRAN: A member of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and a Basij militia fighter have been killed in a clash with a "terrorist group" in the country's southeast, state media reported yesterday. The firefight took place late Saturday in Saravan county of Sistan-Baluchistan province, which straddles the border with Pakistan, said the official IRNA news agency. The two dead were identified as Guards commando Mohsen Naghibi and local Basij member Abdolkhalagh Derazehi. Sistan-Baluchistan has long been a flashpoint, where Pakistan-based Baluchi separatists and jihadists carry out cross-border raids. The jihadist outfit Jaish al-Adl ("Army of Justice") has in the past attacked and abducted Iranian security personnel. The most recent attack killed 27 Guards in a February 13 suicide bombing which targeted a busload of the unit in the volatile region. — AFP

Ethiopia unrest kills 17

ADDIS ABABA: At least 17 people have been killed in clashes between Ethiopian security forces and activists seeking a new autonomous region for their Sidama ethnic group, according to a local official and hospital authorities. A local district official told Reuters on Saturday that at least 13 people were killed in a town near Hawassa city, 275 kms from the capital Addis Ababa, while hospital authorities said on Friday that four protesters had died of gunshot wounds in the city itself. Emboldened by political reforms introduced by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed since he took power in 2018, Sidama activists wanted to unilaterally declare a new regional state on Thursday. While the threat of large-scale violence in Hawassa was largely averted after a Sidama opposition party agreed to delay the declaration and accept a government offer to hold a referendum in five months, not all Sidama people accepted the delay. — AFP

Vatican opens ossuaries

VATICAN CITY: Forensic experts extracted bones from two ossuaries within the walls of the Vatican yesterday as part of an investigation aimed at resolving the case of a girl who vanished in 1983. Following an anonymous tip-off, the Vatican earlier this month opened two tombs to see if the body of Emanuela Orlandi, the daughter of a Vatican clerk, was hidden there. Instead, they ran into a new mystery when nothing was found, not even the bones of two 19th century princesses who were supposed to be buried in the Vatican's tiny Teutonic Cemetery. After consulting its records, the Vatican announced last week they had located bones under the floor of the Pontifical Teutonic College, which flanks the graveyard. Structural work was carried out in the cemetery at the end of the 19th century and again about 60 years ago. — Reuters