



Hong Kong political crisis builds after huge protest

To deter shootings, Americans shun naming suspects



WEST BENGAL: Indian supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) shout slogans as they block a road during a protest against the recent killings at Sandeshkhali in West Bengal yesterday. —AFP

# 4 killed in India political gun battle

## BJP, Trinamool rivals accuse each other of killings, intimidation

KOLKATA: A gun battle between supporters of India's ruling right-wing party and a regional rival has killed four people in West Bengal, police said yesterday, as violence raged in the tinderbox state. At least 18 others were injured in the clashes that broke out Saturday in the eastern state that has been on edge since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) launched an aggressive campaign to win parliamentary seats last year.

"Three of the dead were BJP workers while the other was a (regional) Trinamool party supporter," a police official said. Local BJP leader Mukul Roy tweeted that three BJP workers were shot dead and a Trinamool minister said one of his party members was killed in the fight.

Violence peaked across the state during the general election in April-May and has continued even after results were announced, giving a massive nationwide

victory to the BJP. Both the BJP and Trinamool, led by the firebrand Modi critic Mamata Banerjee, accuse each other of killings, intimidation and corruption. Sandeshkhali, the site of the latest gun battle, remained tense yesterday with more than 100 police personnel standing guard in the area, witnesses told AFP.

The BJP, which has traditionally held sway in the Hindi-speaking belt in the north, has been trying hard to pick up support in West Bengal where Banerjee's party has dominated for close to a decade. It won 18 seats in the general election in West Bengal, up from the two that it managed in 2014, en route to its

national win. Trinamool won 22 while centre-left opposition party Congress picked up two of the total 42 seats in the state. Modi's party won a huge 303 seats in the national parliament, increasing its previous tally of 282 seats in 2014.



### Violence rages in West Bengal

party flags and posters and when we protested, our workers were shot from point blank range," Basu was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India (PTI). Local

#### Fight over flags

The clashes in Sandeshkhali broke out over the hoisting of BJP flags and the putting up of posters, said the BJP's general secretary in the state, Sayantan Basu. "They tried to throw away our

minister Jyotipriyo Mullick who belongs to the Trinamool party said one of their supporters was "hacked and shot dead by BJP workers". State elections in West Bengal are scheduled to be held in 2021 with the BJP expected to give a tough fight again. The state has witnessed some of the most violent feuds between rival parties.

Last month, a BJP supporter was shot dead in state capital Kolkata and a car belonging to a Trinamool member was pelted with rocks. In February, a Trinamool lawmaker was shot dead. And last year, a BJP worker was killed and his body was hanged from a tree. Modi has called the killings "shameful and anti-democratic". Political killings are rife across India. While National Crime Bureau data said there were more than 100 political murders in 2016, experts say the figure was likely much higher. Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states are the worst for political murders, the government data shows. —AFP

## Tehran urges Europe to normalize ties or face consequences

LONDON: Iran said yesterday that Europe was not in a position to criticize Tehran for its military capabilities, and called on European leaders to normalize economic ties with the Islamic Republic despite US sanctions or face consequences. President Donald Trump last year withdrew the United States from a nuclear deal with Iran and reimposed sanctions. Trump has condemned a 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, signed by his predecessor Barack Obama, as flawed for not being permanent and for not covering Iran's ballistic missile program or its role in conflicts around the Middle East.

The European signatories to the deal - France, Britain and Germany - share the same concerns as the United States over Iran's ballistic missile program and regional activities. However, they have defended the nuclear accord saying that at least it puts curbs on Iran's nuclear program and can be the basis for future talks. "Europeans are not in a position to criticize Iran for issues outside the JCPOA," Zarif was quoted as saying by the state broadcaster, using the acronym for the nuclear deal.

"The Europeans and other signatories of the JCPOA should normalize economic ties with Iran... We will halt our commitments or will take action in accordance to their measures." Iran last month stopped some commitments under the nuclear deal and warned that in 60 days it would scale back more commitments if Europeans fail to shield it against the US sanctions. German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas will visit Iran this week, during which he will explore options for preserving the fraying nuclear non-proliferation pact.



TEHRAN: A handout picture provided by the office of the Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei shows Iranians gathering to listen to the Iranian supreme leader's speech at his shrine in Tehran. —AFP

Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani yesterday also criticized French President Emmanuel Macron for saying last week in a meeting with Trump that they shared the same objectives on Iran. Macron said France wanted to make sure Tehran will not get nuclear weapons: "We had an accord until 2025 and we want to go further and have full certainty in the long run... (Then) reduce ballistic activity and contain Iran regionally."

"The recent remarks by the French president in a meeting with Trump were shameful and inept," Larijani was quoted as saying by Fars news agency. "Macron's comments did not match what he has been telling our president, Mr (Hassan) Rouhani, in their meetings and on the phone." Iran insists its nuclear activities are entirely peaceful, and has repeatedly refused to discuss its missile program. —Reuters

## Indian authorities offer cash reward for missing plane

ITANAGAR: Indian authorities have offered a cash reward to boost a desperate hunt for a military transport plane missing for nearly a week and feared to have crashed in a remote northeastern state. The Indian Air Force and Arunachal Pradesh state government announced the 550,000 rupee (\$8,000) reward to get village chiefs to organize search parties for the AN-32 that disappeared from radars last Monday carrying 13 people.

The Soviet-built air force plane went missing near the border with China and air searches, satellite surveys and efforts to pick up signals from the plane have all failed. In addition to using Indian Space Research Organization satellites and other hi-tech means, ground teams have been scouring the Mechuka jungle region for the plane. The air force said it would give 500,000 rupees and the state government offered 50,000 rupees for "credible information" leading to the discovery of the plane. Rewards after air accidents are rare. An \$80 million reward was offered after Malaysian Airlines flight went missing in 2014 on a Kuala Lumpur-Beijing flight. It has not been found. The Indian military has deployed nine helicopters, fighter jets and transporters looking for the plane. The ground search is concentrated in Siang district and involves police, air force and army forces, the Indo-Tibetan border police, civil administration teams, hunters and some local people.

A senior district official told AFP that authorities wanted to get village chiefs more involved. Bad weather has hampered the search in recent days but a full hunt resumed Saturday. The turboprop plane was carrying eight crew and five military personnel on the flight. Many relatives of the missing are waiting in the state city of Jorhat for news. Military spokesman Wing Commander Ratnakar Singh said that no efforts are being spared in the hunt. "We stand in support of the families in these difficult times," Singh said. —AFP