

International

Pakistan seizes religious schools in intensified crackdown on militants

Government takes control of 182 religious schools

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan intensified its crackdown against Islamist militants yesterday, with the government announcing it had taken control of 182 religious schools and detained more than 100 people as part of its push against banned groups. The move represents Pakistan's biggest move against banned organizations in years and appears to be targeting Islamic welfare organizations that the United States says are a front for militant activities.

Pakistan is facing pressure from global powers to act against groups carrying out attacks in India, including Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), which claimed responsibility for the Feb 14 attack that killed at least 40 Indian paramilitary police. The escalating tension in the wake of the bombing led to a major confrontation between the nuclear-armed rivals, with both countries carrying out aerial bombing missions and even engaging in a brief dogfight that prompted fears of a war. Pakistani officials say the crackdown is part of a long-planned drive and not a response to Indian anger over what New Delhi calls Islamabad's failure to rein in militant groups operating on Pakistani soil.

Previous large-scale crackdowns against anti-India militants have broadly been cosmetic, with the

proscribed groups able to survive and continue operations. The interior ministry said law enforcement agencies had placed 121 people in "preventive detention" as part of the crackdown that began this week. "Provincial governments have taken in their control management and administration of 182 seminaries (madaris)", the ministry said in a statement, referring to religious schools. What to do with madrasas is a thorny issue in Pakistan, a deeply conservative Muslim nation where religious schools are often blamed for radicalization of youngsters but are the only education

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100 people
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available to millions of poor children. The interior ministry said other institutions from different groups had been taken over, including 34 schools or colleges, 163 dispensaries, 184 ambulances, five hospitals and eight offices of banned organizations. Many banned groups such as JeM run

seminaries, which counter-terrorism officials say are used as recruiting grounds for militant outfits. Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), which operates hospitals and a fleet of ambulances, is estimated to run about 300 madrasas across the country. Pakistan's government banned the group this week. JuD calls itself a humanitarian charity but the US State Department has designated it a "foreign terrorist organization" and



ISLAMABAD: A Pakistani worker (2nd right) of banned militant Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD) - an organisation believed by the United Nations (UN) to be a front for the banned Islamist militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba - stands at the main entrance of a mosque belonging to the (JuD) in Islamabad. —AFP

calls it a front for Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET), a Pakistan-based group accused of orchestrating attacks in India, including the 2008 Mumbai attack that killed 166 people. JuD called the crackdown unfair and said it would seek to counter the government action in courts.

"The whole nation is asking that what message the government wants to send by sealing welfare organizations and kicking students out," said JuD spokesman

Yahya Mujahid. Pakistan has long used Islamist groups to pursue its aims in the region, but it has denied New Delhi's accusations it actively supports militants fighting Indian forces in India's part of Muslim-majority Kashmir. The South Asian neighbors have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947, two of them over Kashmir which they both claim in whole but rule in part. —Reuters

Iranian hackers caused hundreds millions of dollars in damages

WASHINGTON: Iranian hackers working to penetrate systems, businesses and governments around the world have caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damages, a report said Wednesday. Researchers for tech giant Microsoft said the attackers stole secrets and wiped data from computer networks after targeting thousands of people at some 200 companies over the past two years, according to The Wall Street Journal.

Microsoft did not immediately respond to an AFP query on the report. The Journal said Microsoft traced the attacks to Holmium, a group linked to Iran, and that some of the hacking was done for Holmium by another Iranian group known as APT33. John Lambert, the head of Microsoft's Threat Intelligence Center, told the newspaper the attacks were "massively destabilizing events."

The report said the hackers notably targeted oil-and-gas companies, heavy-machinery manufacturers and international conglomerates in Saudi Arabia, Germany, Britain, India and the United States. In 2017, the security firm FireEye blamed APT33 for destructive malware that targeted organizations in the Middle East and elsewhere. The news comes with Iran, according to security experts, seeking to step up its cyber capabilities amid increasing efforts by the United States to isolate the Islamic regime.—AFP

Malaysia PM warns Philippines against foreigner influx

MANILA: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad yesterday warned the Philippines against letting in foreigners who could "disturb" the country's domestic political stability, as President Rodrigo Duterte's Beijing pivot sparks an influx of Chinese workers. At least 200,000 Chinese have flocked to Manila since Duterte's 2016 election, many of them employed by online gaming firms that cater to Chinese players, a Philippine Senate inquiry was told late last year. Some Filipino politicians have alleged this drives up property prices, takes away jobs from locals and even affects tax revenues.

Mahathir, who has suspended several of his nation's major projects with China, warned during an official visit to the Philippines against allowing a surge of foreigners. "Foreign direct investment should not involve bringing huge numbers of foreigners to live in the country, because that might disturb the political equations in the country," Mahathir told ABS-CBN television in an interview. "If huge numbers of any foreigners (come) to live and stay in the country... you have to do some rethinking as to whether it is good or bad, or the limits that you have to impose on them," Mahathir said.

Mahathir, 93, is in the Philippines for the first time since his shock election victory last year. He held talks with Duterte and addressed a business forum after the television interview. The Malaysian leader has taken a cautious approach to relations with China, saying he would discuss "unfair" terms of deals signed by his predecessor, Najib Razak. Duterte's pursuit of closer ties with China for the Philippines — a traditional ally of the United States - has prompted a

surge of Chinese worker arrivals.

Last year legislators said around 200,000 Chinese were working in the country, and vowed to introduce protection for Filipinos. Philippine Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez had also said he would ensure that foreigners working in the nation's offshore gaming industry paid taxes. But Duterte last month said Chinese workers should be allowed to continue staying in the country as Beijing also hosted hundreds of thousands of Filipinos. Most of them are domestic workers in Hong Kong.

Duterte has warmly embraced China despite his nation's long-standing maritime row with Beijing over the South China Sea. Beijing asserts sovereignty over almost all of the resource-rich sea, with competing claims from the Philippines, Malaysia and other nations. Commenting on the sea dispute on Thursday, Mahathir said there should be no impediment to vessels using the strategic waterway, through which trillions of dollars in global trade pass each year. "The South China Sea in particular must be open to navigation," he said in the television interview.

Peace process

At their meeting, Mahathir and Duterte hailed a peace process that put leaders of the Philippines' largest Muslim guerrilla group at the helm of a new self-governing area near the mainly Catholic nation's sea border with Malaysia. The decades-old rebellion in the Mindanao region claimed 150,000 lives, ushered in violent extremist groups and caused tens of thousands of Filipinos to flee to Malaysia to escape the violence and find work. Duterte said he thanked Mahathir for Malaysia's "unrelenting support for development in the south" and playing a key role in the peace process, which included helping monitor a ceasefire and hosting formal negotiations. Mahathir said he assured Duterte "of Malaysia's desire to... address the serious issue of terrorism and violent extremism". —AFP