



New Zealand pledges gun control as mosque 'gunman' sacks lawyer

Australian teen who egged senator hailed online as 'heroic'



SEVASTOPOL: Russian President Vladimir Putin takes part in a ceremony to launch two power plants in Crimea yesterday. — AFP

Putin in Crimea five years after annexation

President signs laws against 'disrespecting' authorities, fake news

SIMFEROPOL: Russian flags flew across Crimea's main city Simferopol yesterday as President Vladimir Putin flew in to mark the fifth anniversary of Moscow's internationally condemned annexation of the peninsula from Ukraine. Putin used the visit to officially open two new power stations on the Black Sea peninsula, which was almost wholly dependent on electricity from Ukraine before the annexation.

Moscow took over Crimea in March 2014 after months of tensions with Kiev following the ouster of a pro-Russian leader. The move resulted in a major boost to Putin's popularity. But the takeover was denounced by Kiev and the West as an annexation and, along with Moscow's support for separatist forces in Ukraine's east, has prompted wide-ranging sanctions against Russia.

"March 18 is a remarkable day for Sevastopol, for Crimea and for the whole country," Putin said, speaking at a ceremony for the launch of the power plants in the port city Sevastopol. He said the plants' opening represented "another important step to strengthen the energy security of Crimea". Kiev stopped supplying energy to Crimea in late 2015, leaving the peninsula reliant on an underwater cable running from Russia and facing frequent supply problems. The plants were at the center of a scandal last year, after the US sanctioned Russian officials who supplied them with turbines built by German engineering giant Siemens - a violation of European Union sanctions against Moscow.

'No progress'

In Russia, March 18 has been proclaimed the "Day of Crimea's Reunification with Russia" and celebrated with events across the country. In Crimea, it is a public holiday. Authorities set up a stage on Simferopol's main square for the celebrations. Posters that read "Five years of Crimea returning to its native land" hung on shop windows and public transport. "There is a feeling of newness, of independence, of freedom," retired teacher Valentina Dorozhko told AFP. She said she felt "reborn" when Russia took over. But Oleg Ivanov, a man in his 40s, called for Putin to change course. "If we have sanctions imposed on us, then you need to sit down, negotiate and change something," he told AFP. "And if there's no progress, then it's time for someone else to have a go."

Putin signed an agreement on March 18, 2014, with local representatives to make Crimea part of Russia, two days after a referendum condemned by Kiev and the West as illegitimate. Pro-Kremlin media yesterday carried reports of improvements on the peninsula under Russian rule. "There is growing understanding in the world that Crimea is part of Russia and will be forever," Valentina Matviyenko, the speaker of Russia's upper house of parliament, wrote in a column for newspaper Izvestia.

But the liberal press painted a more somber picture, saying the takeover had made Russians poorer

and more isolated from the world. The takeover prompted euphoria and a wave of patriotism in Russia, but five years later Crimea has "stopped being a source of political benefit" for authorities, liberal newspaper Novaya Gazeta said. According to a survey published by the Centre for Public Opinion (FOM) in early March, only 39 percent of Russians believe the annexation brought Russia more good than harm. In 2014, that figure was 67 percent.

'Fake news'

Later yesterday, Putin signed controversial laws that allow courts to fine and briefly jail people for showing disrespect towards authorities, and block media for publishing "fake news". Putin signed off on the legislation against the advice of human rights activists, who warned the laws amounted to censorship and would be abused to further crack down on freedom of speech. The law on disrespecting authorities backs punishment for "offending state symbols" and stipulates hefty fines and jail terms of 15 days for repeat offenders.

Another piece of legislation allows authorities to decide what amounts to "fake news" and gives a media watchdog the power to demand an outlet delete the information. Websites that fail to comply would be blocked. Fines could reach 1.5 million rubles (over \$22,700) if the infraction leads to grave consequences

like death or rioting.

Rights activists say that since first becoming president in 2000, Putin has gradually crushed freedoms in Russia, muzzling critics and bringing television under control. The new legislation takes the crackdown on civil society to a whole new level, they say. Critics say the legislation is vaguely worded and would have large scope for abuse, further complicating the difficult and sometimes deadly work of rights activists and opposition journalists in Russia.

The Kremlin is stepping up media control to counter a fall in Putin's approval rating amid mounting economic trouble, according to activists. "These new prohibitions and punishments are not just a continuation of the repressive legislative and practical measures that began in 2012," Yuri Dzhibladze, president of the Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights, told AFP. "This is a completely new level which almost literally repeats the Soviet-era law about 'activities undermining the Soviet system' and 'anti-Soviet campaigning and propaganda'."

The authorities unleashed a major crackdown on dissenters after Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012 in the face of mass protests. "From now it will be police that will decide what fake news is and what's not," said Alexander Cherkasov of Memorial, a top rights group. "This will lead to a violation of civil rights and freedoms." — AFP

Facing Makkah: Islamic burial for mosque attack victims

JAKARTA: Grieving families of 50 worshippers killed in the Christchurch mosque attacks are anxious to bury their loved ones according to Islamic custom. Graves are being dug in a local cemetery, but under-pressure authorities say they need time to make sure no mistakes are made and that the complex investigation is not harmed. Here are some facts about Islamic funeral and burial rites:

Buried within 24 hours?

Burial doesn't have to be within exactly 24 hours, but the sooner the better as it's seen as showing respect for the dead. Preparations typically start right away and that can mean not waiting for far-away relatives to attend the funeral. The custom comes from the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) instruction: "When one of your men dies, do not keep him in the house for long. Make haste in taking him to the grave and burying him." Families of Muslim passengers who died in the Indonesian Lion Air disaster last year were also upset with the time it took to release the remains of loved ones, which had to be identified first through DNA testing.



CHRISTCHURCH: A group of men pray in Christchurch yesterday, three days after a shooting incident at two mosques in the city that claimed the lives of 50 Muslim worshippers. — AFP

Bathing the dead

A Muslim deceased's body must be bathed prior to burial. Males are supposed to wash men while women are left to do the same with female deceased. However, a man is allowed to wash a woman in special cases, such as the body of his wife. The deceased is stripped of all clothing except for a small covering over the genitals. They are washed three times from head to toe and dressed with fragrances or perfumes. The body is then covered with a shroud made of white fabric.

Facing Makkah

Mourners at the funeral service are advised not to wail too loudly or let their tears touch the body as it could interfere with the deceased's journey to the afterlife. An Imam leads prayers in front of the shrouded deceased before the body is taken to a cemetery. The dead are not placed in a coffin but instead lowered into a dug hole and placed at an angle facing the holy city of Makkah - as is customary for Muslims' daily prayers. — AFP

Indian team to trek miles to reach a lone voter

NEW DELHI: A nearly 20-strong team will trek through some of India's remotest terrain to reach a single voter and collect her ballot in the country's mammoth elections, an official said yesterday. The huge undertaking through jungles and over hills involving polling officials, porters and police underscores the logistical challenges confronting India as it prepares to hold the world's largest election. From the Himalayas to the deserts and lush tropics, 900 million Indians are eligible to cast a ballot over nearly six weeks of voting starting from April 11.

One is Sokela Tayang, 39, the sole registered voter in Malogam - a tiny hamlet in the isolated and contested northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh along the border with China. Dagbom Riba, a local election officer, told AFP a team of 15 to 18 strong would have to proceed on foot for six kilometers (3.7 miles) carrying a ballot box and other voting material through tough terrain to reach Malogam. Once

in the village in Anjaw district, rules dictate they must keep the voting booth open all day-even though just Tayang will be exercising her franchise.

"Even if she casts her vote in the morning, we have to remain open until 5pm in keeping with the election commission guidelines," Riba said. "We are committed to reach out to every single voter so no challenge is big for us." The Press Trust of India news agency reported that the tiny outpost had two voters in 2014, the other being Tayang's husband. But he had enrolled in another electorate this time around, leaving just Tayang on the registry, PTI said. Arunachal Pradesh has several polling stations with just a handful of voters. Eight voting booths will have fewer than 10 people turn up, the election commission says.

The state, south of Tibet, is claimed in part by China, whose forces crossed the border briefly in the 1960s during a war with India. It is one of many remote areas where election officials will have to cart in electronic voting machines to collect ballots during voting between April 11 and May 29. In past elections, these units have been strapped to camels in Rajasthan and taken to desert tribes. In the north, yaks and mules have been recruited and elephants in India's tropical south. Election rules stipulate that no voter should have to travel more than two kilometers to cast their ballot. — AFP