



15 die in dam collapse at illegal Siberian gold mine

High-profile cases turn spotlight on domestic violence in Russia

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BARCELONA: Protesters throw objects against police during a demonstration called by the local Republic Defense Committees (CDR) in Barcelona on October 16, 2019, after police arrested 51 people across Catalonia overnight following violent protests. — AFP

Catalan leaders demand talks after clashes

Arran calls for a new demonstration 'against repression'

BARCELONA: Separatist Catalan leaders yesterday called on the Spanish government to enter into talks as Barcelona braced for fresh violence after days of clashes between police and protesters. Nearly 200 people were hurt in another night of clashes with radical separatists hurling rocks and fireworks at police who responded with tear gas and rubber bullets.

A hardcore movement of young separatists, Arran, called for a new demonstration "against repression" for 1600 GMT in central Barcelona. "We exhort the head of the government to fix today a day and hour to sit with us for unconditional talks," regional president Quim Torra said in a speech. His demand for "unconditional" negotiations, addressed to Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, appeared to be aimed at ensuring that a referendum on independence, currently a non-starter for Madrid, is up for discussion.

The Spanish government responded by saying it had "always been open to dialogue in the framework of respect for the law". In a statement, it also called on Torra to condemn the violence, "which he has not done so far". Barcelona has been rocked all week by protests against a Spanish court's jailing of nine separatist leaders on sedition charges over a failed independence bid.

Emergency services said yesterday that 152 people were injured in overnight clashes in Barcelona, and dozens more hurt elsewhere in Catalonia, taking the total to 182. Authorities had already reported 500 injured since protests started Monday even before the latest clashes erupted. The interior ministry said 83 people were detained in the overnight violence, in addition to 128 arrests police had reported previously.

Smell of burning

"This can't go on, Barcelona does not deserve this," said Ada Colau, the city's leftist mayor yesterday, condemning "all kinds of violence". Air in the Catalan capital was heavy with a burning stench as municipal workers cleared the streets of broken glass, rocks and rubber bullets, and repaired pavements where bricks had been ripped out. "All this is very sad, and is not helping our cause," said Assumpcio Segui, a 75-year old pro-independence pensioner. Torra urged demonstrators to remain calm, saying "the defense of rights and freedoms must always be expressed peacefully."

Around half a million people had rallied in

Barcelona on Friday in the biggest gathering since Monday's court ruling as separatists also called a general strike in the major tourist destination. While most marchers appeared peaceful, hordes of young protesters went on the rampage near the police headquarters, igniting a huge blaze that sent black smoke into the air as police fired teargas to disperse them, an AFP correspondent said. Other fires broke out near Plaza de Catalunya at the top of the tourist hotspot Las Ramblas, where hundreds of demonstrators had rallied to defy the police.

'Our streets'

"Anti-fascist Catalonia!" they roared. "The streets will always be ours!" Police vans fanned out around the city, sirens screaming as regional police warned people in a message in English on Twitter "not to approach" the city centre. Thousands of "freedom marchers" from five regional towns arrived in Barcelona for the rally, which coincided with a general strike. That prompted the cancellation of flights and the closure of shops, business and top tourist attractions, including the Sagrada Familia basilica. Public transport slowed to a trickle in a region that accounts

for about a fifth of Spain's economic output. Activists also cut off Catalonia's main cross-border highway with France.

'No surrender'

In downtown Barcelona, luxury shops were closed on the Paseo de Gracia, with blackened, charred patches a reminder of the nightly clashes that have raged since Monday. Retired lawyer Jaume Enrich called the Spanish court ruling "the straw that broke the camel's back". "Madrid is putting Spanish unity above everything, including basic rights," he told AFP, wearing a badge saying "No surrender".

Spain's Clasico postponed

With the region mired in chaos, football authorities cancelled the Barcelona and Real Madrid Clasico set for October 26 at the Camp Nou stadium. Both clubs had reportedly refused an offer to hold the match in Madrid. The Supreme Court's explosive decision has thrust the Catalan dispute to the heart of the political debate as Spain heads towards a fourth election in as many years, which is to be held on November 10. — AFP

Iraqi pilgrims protest corruption during Arbaeen march

KARBALA: Thousands of Iraqis chanted anti-corruption slogans during the Shiite Arbaeen pilgrimage to the holy city of Karbala yesterday, responding to firebrand cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr's call to keep up anti-government protests. Amid the throngs of black-clad pilgrims mourning the seventh-century death of Imam Hussein, Sadr supporters dressed in white demanded "No, to corruption!" and "Yes, to reform!"

Waving Iraqi flags, they chanted "Baghdad free, corrupt ones out!" Sadr, whose list emerged as the largest bloc in parliamentary elections last year, helped Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi to form his government. But on Tuesday he called on Twitter for his supporters to march in shrouds. Iraq — the second-largest OPEC oil producer — is "a rich country where the people are poor," Khedheir Naim told AFP.

The grey-bearded man came from the southern oil city of Basra to join the world's largest Shiite pilgrimage, which culminated yesterday. He denounced corrupt leaders, who according to official figures pocketed 410 billion euros over the past 16 years. "Unfortunately, tyrants and criminals live handsomely at the expense of the people," Naim said. Denouncing corruption has been a primary theme of the protest movement shaking Iraq, alongside demands for jobs and functional services.

In a single week of protests at the start of the month, 110 people were killed and 6,000 injured, according to official figures. Calls have been made for fresh marches on October 25, to mark the anniversary of the govern-

ment that is the focus of public anger. The annual Arbaeen pilgrimage sees millions of worshippers, mostly Iraqis and Iranians, converge by foot on Karbala, 100 kilometers south of Baghdad.

Arbaeen marks the end of the 40-day mourning period for the killing of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, by the forces of the caliph Yazid in 680 AD. Placards with anti-United States and anti-Israel messages are often seen in the crowd, though anti-corruption slogans are rare. Despite warnings from Iranian authorities for pilgrims to delay travelling, 3.5 million people — mostly Iranians — officially entered Iraq by land borders by Friday. Shiite Muslims from the Gulf also attended, like Saudi Talib Al-Ghadir. "It's necessary to make the pilgrimage regardless of the situation in the country," he said. "We haven't seen anything out of the ordinary, even if people from the Gulf came at the last minute because of the protests." Last year, more than 14 million worshippers visited the gold domed mausoleum where Imam Hussein is buried.

Iraqi blogger returns

In other news, a prominent Iraqi blogger resurfaced Friday a day after he was seized by masked gunmen, his father said, as Amnesty International denounced a "climate of fear" in the country after protests and deadly violence. Shujaa Al-Khafaji's family said armed men had snatched him from his home on Thursday without identifying themselves or showing an arrest warrant.

Khafaji's Facebook page, Al-Khowa Al-Nadifa (Arabic for "Those Who Have Clean Hands"), carries posts on political and social issues and has some 2.5 million followers. "Around 15 men wearing masks and black uniforms" took Khafaji from his home, the blogger's father, Fares al-Khafaji said. He said they seized his son's phones and computers, but were not violent. Twenty-four hours later, Khafaji was "abandoned in a street with \$20 to pay for a taxi home", his father added.



BARTALLA: Shiite Muslim pilgrims march towards the shrine of Imam Zein Al-Abdedin in Bartalla in the northern Iraqi Nineveh province yesterday to mark the peak of the Arbaeen religious festival which ends a period of mourning for Imam Hussein, a founding figure in Shiite Islam. — AFP

The report of Khafaji's seizure sparked an outcry from activists and influential political leaders. Rights watchdog Amnesty International denounced a "relentless campaign of intimidation and assault against activists in Iraq" by authorities. "The Iraqi authorities must immediately rein in the security forces and dismantle the climate of fear they have deliberately created to stop Iraqis from peacefully exercising their rights to freedoms of expression and assembly," said Lynn Maalouf, the group's Middle East research director.

The group said other activists, including a doctor

and a lawyer, were "forcibly disappeared more than 10 days ago", and called on Iraqi authorities to reveal their whereabouts. Firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr wrote on Twitter that "any act of aggression (against journalists or activists)... by the state constitutes an attack on freedom of speech". Former Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's parliamentary bloc called on the government "to stop abuses of free media". Iraq was gripped by anti-government protests between October 1 and 6, during which 110 people, mainly demonstrators, were killed in clashes with security forces. — AFP