

## International

# Angry at criticism, Philippines' president dares vice to take over law enforcement

## Philippine mayor on Duterte 'narco' list shot dead

**MANILA:** Philippine leader Rodrigo Duterte yesterday lashed out at Vice President Leni Robredo for criticizing his war on drugs, and offered to put her in charge of law enforcement. The president has a frosty relationship with opposition leader Robredo, who was elected separately from Duterte, whose drugs crackdown has killed thousands, stirring global alarm, although polls show strong domestic support for the campaign. "I will surrender my powers to enforce the law," Duterte said in remarks to newly-appointed government officials. "I will give it to the vice president for six months. I'll let her carry it out, let us see what will happen. I will not interfere."

It was not immediately clear if Duterte's offer was meant sarcastically, although he said he would send a letter to Robredo, a former human rights lawyer. A spokesman for Duterte did not immediately respond to a request from Reuters asking about the legal basis for such a transfer of authority. The comments follow Robredo's statements in an interview with Reuters, saying that too many people had been killed in the crackdown, which had not solved the drugs problem.

The comments have outraged Duterte, his aides and supporters. Robredo also urged access for the United Nations to investigate accusations of rights abuses over the crackdown, which Duterte's administration has rejected as lies. Later, Duterte told reporters Robredo could start the job anytime. "If she wants, I can commission her to be the drug czar," Duterte said. "I'll give her a clean slate, so she will know how easy it is to control drugs." Approached by Reuters for comment, Robredo's office said the vice president had no statement on the matter yet.

In an interview with news channel ANC yesterday, Robredo stood by her criticism of Duterte's policies. "I can't just sit back and look the other way," she said. "If I see something wrong, I feel it's my obligation to verbalize what I see, no matter how few we are." Philippine authorities reject activists' allegations that drug dealers and users are being executed and say the more than 7,000 people killed by police had all resisted arrest. Police say they have

no connection to the mysterious murders of thousands more drug users.

### Philippine mayor shot dead

In another development, a Philippine mayor tagged by President Rodrigo Duterte as a "narco-politician" was ambushed while in police custody and killed Friday, police said, the latest official on the leader's blacklist to be targeted by unknown gunmen. Gunmen stopped a police van that was taking David Navarro, the mayor of the small southern town of Clarin, to the state prosecutor's office in the central city of Cebu and shot him dead, authorities said. City police had arrested Navarro, who was visiting on official business, late Thursday after he allegedly assaulted a masseur, a Cebu police officer who asked not to be named told AFP. Following the attack, in which one of Navarro's police escorts was also injured, the gunmen escaped, police said. Local television footage showed two women named by the station as the politician's siblings crying and hugging a bloodied body sprawled on the road beside a police van.

The Philippines has a violent and often deadly political culture, but rights monitors have expressed concern that Duterte's signature drug war - which has led to the killings of thousands of narcotics suspects by police - may be emboldening assailants. On March 14, ahead of May elections, Navarro's name had turned up in a list of 44 mostly local officials put out by Duterte, who accused them of being "involved in the deadly game of drug trafficking". Duterte had also released a longer list in 2016 of more than 150 judges, mayors and other local officials allegedly linked to drugs. On that list, Mayor Vicente Loot of the central town of Daanbantayan later survived a 2018 ambush, while Mayor Jed Mabilog of the central city of Iloilo went into hiding in 2017. Two other mayors in the longer list, Rolando Espinosa and Reynaldo Parojinog, were killed by police in 2016 and 2017 respectively. Espinosa was shot dead inside a police jail. Mayor Antonio Halili, who was assassinated by a sniper as he attended a flag-raising ceremony outside his



**CEBU:** A police investigator looks at the body of slain Clarin town mayor David Navarro, after he and his police escort were ambushed in Cebu. A Philippine mayor tagged by President Rodrigo Duterte as a 'narco-politician' was shot dead in an ambush on October 25, police said, the latest official on the leader's blacklist later targeted by unknown gunmen. — AFP

office in Tanauan city near Manila last year, was linked by Duterte to illegal drugs hours after the attack.

The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency also said Mariano Blanco, who was killed by unknown gunmen at his office in the southern town of Ronda last year, was also on the government's narcotics watchlist. Philippine police say

they have killed just over 5,500 drug suspects who fought back against arrest, but rights groups say the true toll is four times higher and may amount to crimes against humanity. International Criminal Court prosecutors have launched a preliminary probe of the drug war killings, and the UN's top human rights body has approved a review. — Agencies

## Indian rescuers struggle to save toddler stuck in 26-metre well

**NEW DELHI:** Scores of workers were racing against time yesterday to try to rescue a two-year-old boy trapped for more than 72 hours down a 26-metre (85-foot) well in south India, officials said. The boy fell into the 30-centimetre (one-foot) diameter pipe on Friday afternoon while playing near his home in Tiruchirappalli district of Tamil Nadu state.

A thermal camera was briefly used to monitor the child's body temperature while oxygen was supplied through a pipe. The toddler, Sujith Wilson, was unconscious but breathing until Sunday morning, but rescuers have been unable to check his condition since then. Authorities said the child was initially wedged at around nine meters (30 feet) before slipping to the bottom in an upright standing position. "It's a race against time," said Jawaharlal Nehru, a senior district officer at the site.

Workers used an oil drill to dig a hole parallel to the well on Sunday, but the rig broke down at around ten metres (33 feet) because of the rocky ground. Attempts to use robotic devices to lower ropes to latch onto the boy's wrist failed on Saturday. The incident is the latest in series of mishaps that have seen children accidentally fall into



**MANAPPARAL:** Rescue workers gather with heavy digging equipment during an operation to rescue a toddler stuck in a deep well near Manapparal town in Tiruchirappalli district, in India's southern Tamil Nadu state yesterday. — AFP

disused and uncovered wells in rural India. In 2006 the

rescue of a six-year-old child made headlines when he was recovered safely in Haryana state after being stuck in an 18-metre (60-foot) well for 48 hours. — AFP

## India allows EU MPs into Kashmir in first foreign visit since clampdown

**NEW DELHI:** A group of European Union lawmakers will visit Indian Kashmir today, the first foreign delegation since the special status of the Muslim-majority territory was revoked, Indian officials said. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government withdrew Kashmir's autonomy in August, a move accompanied by a crackdown on dissent by security forces there, to head off protests. It has since said the situation is returning to normality.

Hundreds of people have been freed from detention and phone lines restored, although the internet remains suspended for fear it could be used to organize street demonstrations that have turned violent in the past in the region. Pakistan, which like India lays claim to the region, has condemned the change of status of the territory and warned it could drive more Muslims to extremism across the world.

The dispute over Kashmir has bedeviled relations between the two nuclear-armed nations and sparked two of their three wars. The EU delegation of 27 lawmakers drawn from 11 countries will meet with government officials and residents to assess the situation in Kashmir, Indian officials said. The Europeans will be the first foreign group visiting Kashmir since August. This month, US members of Congress expressed concern over a lack of access for diplomats and foreign media.

Yesterday, the EU lawmakers met Modi who said the visit would give them a clear view of the development priorities of the region, his office said. Modi, making the biggest political move in Jammu and Kashmir since an armed revolt erupted in 1989, has said that special rights for Kashmir, such as a ban on outsiders buying property, had hindered its development. Within the region, which includes the Hindu-dominated Jammu region and the Buddhist enclave of Ladakh, the turmoil that was confined to the disputed Kashmir Valley had held back the development of other parts of the state. — Reuters



**GOH:** President Joko Widodo takes a selfie with Papuans welcoming him to Wamena, Papua. — AFP

## Indonesian president opens bridge in Papua

**JAKARTA:** Indonesian President Joko Widodo will officially open a new \$128 million bridge in Papua yesterday amid a renewed pledge to develop one of the country's poorest regions, which has seen a spike in unrest over perceived racial discrimination. Widodo at the weekend visited several towns across Papua and West Papua provinces, which are collectively known as Papua, in his first trip to the country's easternmost area since he was sworn in for a second five-year term last week.

Indonesia's newly appointed deputy minister of public works, John Wempi Wetipo, a native Papuan politician, also joined the trip to Papua, where a mostly low-level separatist conflict has simmered for decades. In Kaimana, the president, his wife and others in his party took part in a traditional Papuan dance on the sea front, with some officials swaying awkwardly.

There has been a spike in unrest over the past few months in Papua, including some of the worst bloodshed in decades when 33 people died in the town of Wamena in September, adding momentum to calls by separatist groups for a new independence referendum. Yesterday, Widodo ordered that the reconstruction of the main market in Wamena should be accelerated after it was torched

during protests, according to a statement by the presidential office.

"If everyone here commits to staying united, together we can build the land of Papua and I think we can achieve prosperity and welfare quickly," he said in the statement. Widodo will hold talks with local leaders before opening the newly constructed Youtefa bridge in the provincial capital of Jayapura, his office said. The bridge cost 1.8 trillion rupiah (\$128 million) to build, according to news portal CNN Indonesia.

Widodo has also promised 139 km of roads and a new airport in the Arfak highlands to help locals transport agricultural products to the Papuan city of Manokwari, his office said. The killings of 16 construction workers building the Trans Papua highway, Widodo's flagship project in the region, by separatist rebels last year has focused new attention on who will benefit from the new infrastructure in the region.

In the latest unrest in the area, Indonesian security forces said three motorbike taxi drivers were shot dead on Friday by separatists in Hitadipa, some 340 km away from Jayapura. The military wing of the Free Papua Movement, a separatist group, claimed responsibility, but said the victims were Indonesian military personnel. Resource-rich Papua, which shares the island of New Guinea with the nation of Papua New Guinea, has a distinct Melanesian population and was a Dutch colony that was incorporated into Indonesia after a controversial UN-backed referendum in 1969. — Reuters

## New Delhi fights hazardous pollution after Diwali party

**NEW DELHI:** After India's biggest firework party of the year, Delhi awoke to a pollution hangover yesterday with the capital forced to breathe hazardous levels of toxic particles. A thick smog engulfed landmarks such as the capital's Red Fort and India Gate while drivers had visibility cut by the haze that built up after the Diwali holiday weekend.

With the pollution threat growing over the past decade, the Supreme Court banned most fireworks for the Hindu festival of lights. However, few revelers followed the order. Firecrackers and rockets lit up the night sky and left clouds of smoke, adding to emissions from cars and trucks and stubble fires by farmers around Delhi that have made it the world's most polluted capital. Tens of thousands of people set off firecrackers into the early hours of yesterday, pushing the government air quality index beyond the top recordable level of 999.

While the pollution was less serious than previous years, the amount of the most harmful PM 2.5 pollutants was still more than 20 times international safe levels at several locations in the city of 20 million people during commuting hours. The government monitoring system said air quality was "very poor" yesterday morning. The 2.5 particulate matter (PM2.5) measures less than 2.5 microns and can penetrate the lungs through the blood system, causing serious respiratory and heart diseases.

Experts say the toxic cocktail that hits Delhi and other Indian cities each winter causes the premature deaths of more than one million people each year. Weather officials said moderate winds will help clean the city's air but that increased fires on farms in Haryana and Punjab states was a particular threat. Thousands of farmers in Haryana burn their rice and wheat stubble in between planting new crops sending clouds of smoke toward Delhi. Experts say this contributes a fifth of the PM2.5 pollution that hits each year, while the millions of vehicles on the roads and unregulated construction and factory emissions are the major cause.

The government has taken a slew of anti-pollution measures in recent years, including shutting down thermal power plants and banning construction during the pollution season. In November, a bid to reduce road traffic will be introduced with odd and even registration plates allowed on Delhi roads on alternate days. — AFP



**NEW DELHI:** An icecream vendor waits for customers under heavy smog near India Gate in New Delhi yesterday. — AFP