

International

At least 35 killed at a wedding party during Afghan army raid

Troops target foreign terrorist group

HELMAND: At least 35 civilians attending a wedding party were killed and 13 people wounded by explosions and gunfire during a raid by Afghan government forces on a nearby militant hideout, two officials in southern Helmand province said yesterday. The officials said the house being used by the Taliban to train suicide bombers was located adjacent to the bride's home that came under fire during Sunday night's attack.

A senior Afghan Defense Ministry official said the raid was against "a foreign terrorist group actively engaged in organizing terrorist attacks". "During the operation, a large warehouse of the terrorists' supplies and equipment was also demolished," the official said. A second Afghan Defense Ministry official said a foreign militant detonated a suicide vest that killed him and others around him, including a woman.

"The compound was being used to train men and women who were willing to become suicide bombers, we raided it. We are aware that civilians were injured in the attack," he said. Attaullah Afghan, a member of the Helmand provincial council member, said 35 civilians people attending the wedding party near to the attack site in the Khaksar area of Musa Qala district were

killed and 13 were injured.

A second provincial council member, Abdul Majid Akhundzadah, said 40 people, all civilians. The Defense Ministry said the Taliban hideout was also used by foreign nationals working for the hardline Islamist group. "As a result of a joint operation in Musa Qala district of Helmand, 22 Taliban members were killed and 14 others arrested," the ministry said in a statement, adding that five Pakistanis and one Bangladeshi national were among those arrested.

Bombing, air strikes and ground clashes between the US backed Afghan forces and hardline Islamist groups have intensified following the collapse of the US-Taliban talks and ahead of the presidential polls next week. A senior US defense official in Afghanistan said the operation was aimed against Al-Qaeda fighters but did not give any details about civilian casualties. The United States in 2001 sent forces to Afghanistan to oust Taliban leaders after they refused to hand over members of the Al-Qaeda militant group behind the Sept 11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Since then, the US forces have supported the Afghan forces in war against the Al-Qaeda, Taliban and Islamic State militant groups that recruit Afghans and foreign-



HELMAND: Afghan villagers carry a dead body on a stretcher outside a hospital following an airstrike in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province yesterday. — AFP

ers who mount attacks against the Western-backed Afghan government and foreign forces. The Taliban said Afghan soldiers backed by US forces conducted a night air strike, followed by ground clashes between

their fighters and Afghan forces in the Musa Qala district. Several civilians at a wedding party were killed and 18 members of the Afghan forces died in the fighting, the Taliban said in a statement. — Reuters



Militant detonates suicide vest

Collapse of US, Taliban talks an awkward blow for Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: The collapse of US-Taliban talks is an untimely setback for Pakistan, which had hoped its efforts to bring the militants to the table would be rewarded with an economic boost and American support in its dispute with India over Kashmir. Prime Minister Imran Khan has promised to issue a rallying cry at the United Nations General Assembly in New York next week over India's moves in the disputed Himalayan region, which he has described as ethnic cleansing, and warned of "impending genocide".

But Pakistan, long condemned for its support for militant groups, needs political capital if it is to sway a global community that has been historically reluctant to challenge New Delhi over Kashmir. Helping the United States with its fervent wish to leave Afghanistan after nearly 18 years of war was widely seen as an opportunity to get back into Washington's good books after years of being accused of duplicity.

For a brief moment in July, it appeared to be working. President Donald Trump delighted Khan in Washington by declaring his willingness to mediate on Kashmir, over which India and Pakistan have fought two wars and countless skirmishes since the end of British colonial rule in 1947. New Delhi repeated its position that Kashmir is a purely bilateral issue with Islamabad and dismissed the possibility of foreign mediation, but still, Pakistan's star once again appeared on the rise in Washington. The relief was short-lived.

Last month, Prime Minister Narendra



NEW YORK: Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan (left) meets with Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad in New York. — AFP

Modi threw a security blanket over the Indian-administered part of Kashmir and revoked the region's autonomy, igniting outrage in Pakistan. And as Islamabad scrambled to win international support for its position on Kashmir, in a separate twist, Trump abruptly called off talks with the Taliban, blowing up nearly a year of painstaking efforts to secure a deal that would have seen the beginning of US troop withdrawal.

Pakistan has for years called for a political solution in Afghanistan, and had used its influence over the Taliban to help facilitate talks with the United States, hoping a successful outcome would help generate diplomatic capital - especially for Kashmir. "Until Pakistan gets Afghanistan settled, they are not going to find it easy to respond to India's action in Kashmir so they are certainly in a bit of a bind," Kashmir militancy expert Myra MacDonald told AFP.

Khan told reporters last week that he will meet with the US President yesterday to urge a resumption of talks with the Taliban. Khan

will take zero comfort from Trump's beaming participation Sunday in a massive "Howdy Modi" rally in Texas on Sunday, during which the Indian leader offered a staunch and unchallenged defense of his move in Kashmir and took several, thinly-veiled swipes at Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism. Trump told the 50,000 crowd of mostly Indian-Americans that Modi was doing an "exceptional job".

Tough times

The talks collapse comes at an especially delicate time in Pakistan, where frustrations are mounting just a year into Khan's rule with the economy under immense stress, and officials are struggling to raise revenues while slashing spending under an International Monetary Fund bailout agreement. They are also bracing for a decision next month by the Financial Action Task Force, an anti-money-laundering monitor based in Paris that has threatened to blacklist Pakistan for failing to combat terror financing. — AFP

Indonesia blames 737 MAX 'design' for Lion Air crash

NEW YORK: Indonesian authorities have cited failures in the Boeing 737 MAX design and oversight as contributing to the 2018 Lion Air plane crash, the Wall Street Journal reported on Sunday. The report into the crash, which will be formally released in early November, also blames pilot error and maintenance issues for the crash that killed 189 people shortly after the flight departed from Jakarta last October, the newspaper said. The Boeing plane model was later grounded worldwide after an Ethiopian Airlines 737 MAX crashed after taking off from Addis Ababa in March, killing 157 people.

Preliminary investigations into both accidents have implicated the MCAS anti-stall system, designed specifically for the 737 MAX. Indonesian investigators could still change their findings, which have been shared with the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the Journal said. US officials are scheduled to visit Indonesia at the end of September to discuss the

report, in which Indonesian investigators list some 100 factors in the crash.

While the NTSB is unlikely to object to the findings, Boeing and the FAA are worried that the report "will unduly emphasize design and FAA certification missteps," the newspaper reported, citing unnamed sources familiar with the matter. "Boeing continues to support the investigation as the accident report is being completed," a spokesman for the company told AFP. The FAA and NTSB declined to comment, referring questions to the Indonesian authorities.

"For the time being we cannot comment since the final report is still being processed by the relevant parties so they can provide input," Haryo Satmiko, deputy chairman of Indonesia's National Transportation Safety Committee said yesterday. The NTSB is preparing to announce "around the end of the month" recommendations to improve pilot and crew training, and to the FAA's certification process for new airplane models, according to the Journal.

A panel of international regulators set up by the FAA is also expected in the coming weeks to submit a report critical of the relationship between Boeing and the agency. New FAA head Steve Dickson is to meet with his international counterparts on Monday ahead of an International Civil Aviation Organization meeting in Montreal to discuss Boeing's proposed changes to the 737 MAX and its eventual return to service. — AFP

One killed as fresh unrest erupts in Indonesia's Papua

WAMENA: At least one person was killed as Indonesia's Papua region plunged into fresh unrest yesterday, the military said, as protesters burned down a government office and other buildings in Wamena city, Papua, on the western half of New Guinea island, has been gripped by weeks of violent protests fuelled by anger over racism, as well as fresh calls for self-rule in the impoverished territory. The clashes had died down in recent days but flared up again as hundreds took to the streets, and houses and stores went up in flames.

Another demonstration erupted in the provincial capital Jayapura, where security forces fired warning shots above stonethrowing protesters at a university, according to an AFP reporter on the scene. A soldier was stabbed to death near Jayapura, the military said, while activists said at least one Papuan university student was shot dead and another wounded in the same area.

Yesterday's protests in Wamena - mostly involving high-schoolers - were reportedly sparked by racist comments made by a teacher, but police have disputed that account, calling it a "hoax". Indonesia routinely blames separatists for violence in Papua, its easternmost territory, and conflicting accounts are common. Demonstrations broke out across the region and in other



WAMENA: A building burns as fresh protests break out in Wamena yesterday. — AFP

parts of the Southeast Asian archipelago after the mid-August arrest and tear-gassing of dozens of Papuan students, who were also racially abused, in Indonesia's second-biggest city, Surabaya.

A low-level separatist insurgency has simmered for decades in Papua, a former Dutch colony, after Jakarta took over the mineral-rich region in the 1960s. A vote to stay within the archipelago was widely viewed as rigged. Earlier yesterday, authorities said the situation had been brought under control in Wamena, while an AFP reporter there said Internet service had been cut. "Security forces have also taken steps to prevent the

riots from spreading," said National Police spokesman Dedi Prasetyo.

The airport in Wamena was shut yesterday with some 20 flights cancelled due to the unrest, local media reported, citing an airport official. Indonesia has sent thousands of security personnel to Papua to quell the recent unrest, and dozens were arrested for instigating the earlier riots. At least five demonstrators and a soldier were killed, but activists say the civilian death toll is higher. Last week the military said a toddler and teenager were among three people killed in a gunfight between security forces and independence-seeking rebels. — AFP

Thousands still homeless a year after Indonesia earthquake

JAKARTA: Nearly 60,000 people are still living in makeshift accommodation nearly a year after a devastating earthquake and tsunami pounded the Indonesian city of Palu, the Red Cross said yesterday. The magnitude 7.5 quake and subsequent deluge razed swathes of the coastal city on Sulawesi island last September, killing more than 4,300 people and displacing some 170,000 residents. The force of the impact saw entire neighborhoods leveled by liquefaction—a process where the ground starts behaving like a liquid and swallows up the earth like quicksand. It also destroyed fishing boats, shops and irrigation systems, robbing locals of their income.

A year later, around 57,000 people "are

still living in temporary accommodation, unsure where and when they can rebuild" said the Indonesian Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). "We are hoping the government will redouble their efforts to identify settlement areas and help thousands of families... build permanent homes," said Jan Gelfand, head of the IFRC Indonesia country office. Saturday marks one year since the double disaster. Earlier the World Bank offered the country up to \$1 billion in loans to get the city back on its feet.

Indonesia is one of the most disaster-prone nations on Earth due to its position straddling the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire, where tectonic plates collide. The sprawling archipelago is also dotted with more than 100 volcanoes, including one that erupted between Java and Sumatra in late 2018 and unleashed a tsunami that killed more than 400 people. On Boxing Day 2004, a 9.1-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Sumatra and triggered a tsunami that killed 220,000 across the Indian Ocean region, including around 170,000 in Indonesia. — AFP



PALU, Indonesia: The remains of buildings are seen on a neighborhood area affected by liquefaction-a process where the ground starts behaving like a liquid due to the September 28, 2018 earthquake, in Palu. — AFP