

International

Burnt, stabbed and beaten police detail Papua deaths

Most of the 33 people killed in riots died of stab wounds

JAYAPURA: Most of the 33 people killed in riots that paralyzed Indonesia's restive Papua region this week died of stab wounds, blunt force trauma or burns, police said yesterday, after one of the deadliest eruptions of violence in years. Thousands fled to shelters following the outburst of bloodshed that saw civilians burned alive in buildings set ablaze by protesters on Monday, and clashes between demonstrators and security forces.

Papua, on the western half of New Guinea island, has seen weeks of protests fuelled by anger over racism against indigenous Papuans by people who have migrated from other parts of Indonesia, as well as fresh calls for self-rule in the impoverished region. Weeks of protests broke out across Papua and in other parts of Indonesia after the mid-August arrest and tear-gassing of dozens of Papuan students, who were also racially abused, in the country's second-biggest city, Surabaya.

The fresh violence this week was reportedly sparked by racist comments made by a teacher towards students in unrest-hit Wamena city, but police have disputed that account. Yesterday, local police said the chaos had subsided in Wamena, leaving a trail of burnt-out buildings and charred cars in its wake. "The situation in Wamena is now under control," said Papua police spokesman Ahmad Mustofa Kamal. "Most victims had stab wounds, blunt object injuries and severe burns," he added.

Kamal said 29 people were known to have died in Wamena, where hundreds demonstrated and burned

down a government office and other buildings on Monday. Some 66 people were injured, police said. A soldier and three civilians also died in the provincial capital Jayapura, where security forces and stone-throwing protesters clashed Monday. The soldier was stabbed to death and three students died from rubber bullet wounds, authorities have said, without elaborating.

On Tuesday evening, the district head office in Yalimo, near Wamena, was set ablaze, police said. The United Liberation Movement for West Papua described this week's violence as a "massacre" and said that 17 Papuan high school students had been gunned down by Indonesian security forces. Neither the military nor the separatist movement's claims could be independently verified. Conflicting accounts are common in Papua and the government appears to have renewed a region-wide Internet service shutdown.

Jakarta has said the riots were meant to draw attention to Papuan independence at this week's UN General Assembly. A low-level separatist insurgency has simmered for decades in the former Dutch colony after Jakarta took over the mineral-rich region in the 1960s. A UN-sponsored vote to stay within the archipelago in 1969 was widely viewed as rigged, but Jakarta has long refused to consider another referendum. The majority of Papuans are Christian and ethnic Melanesian with few cultural ties to the rest of Muslim-majority Indonesia. — AFP



JAYAPURA: Indonesian riot police take positions at a university in provincial capital Jayapura as protests break out in the restive region. — AFP

Court sentences Bouteflika brother to 15 years in jail

ALGIERS: An Algerian military court yesterday sentenced the brother of deposed president Abdelaziz Bouteflika and three co-defendants to 15 years in prison in a swift verdict delivered out of sight of the media. Said Bouteflika, widely seen as the real power behind the presidency after his brother suffered a debilitating stroke in 2013, went on trial on Monday alongside two former intelligence chiefs and a political party head.

Their convictions are the most high-profile in a string of prosecutions of prominent politicians and businessmen over alleged graft launched since Bouteflika was pushed out in April after two decades in power. All four defendants were convicted of "undermining the authority of the army" and "conspiring" against the state, in the run-up to the ageing president's resignation in the face of mass protests earlier this year.

Prosecutors at the military court in Blida, south of Algiers, had asked for the maximum sentence of 20 years against all the defendants, defense lawyer Miloud Ibrahim said. Former defense minister Khaled Nezzar has said that as protests mounted against the veteran leader, Said Bouteflika proposed declaring a state of emergency and firing army chief General Ahmed Gaid Salah.

Lawyers for Workers' Party chief Louisa Hanoune have admitted she met the president's brother and General Mohamed Mediene on March 27, a day after Gaid Salah publicly called for the ailing president to step down.



ALGIERS: In this file photo, Said Bouteflika, brother of Algerian President, attends the funeral of at the El-Alia cemetery in Algiers. An Algerian military court sentenced Said Bouteflika, brother of deposed President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, to 15 years in prison. — AFP

Hanoune, Mediene - who headed the all-powerful secret service for 25 years - and fellow ex-spy chief General Athmane Tartag were all given 15 years alongside Said Bouteflika, state news agency APS reported.

Defense counsel expressed indignation at the trial's speed and lack of transparency. "I have absolutely nothing to say about this trial except that we will appeal," defense lawyer Miloud Ibrahim said. One of Mediene's lawyers, Farouk Ksentini, said he was "surprised by the severity of the verdict." One of the lawyers for Hanoune's Workers Party, Ramdan Tazibt, said the trial was "political" and an "attack on democracy." He said counsel for Hanoune had "showed there was no reason for her to be detained let alone convicted."

Cameroon anglophone region on tenterhooks ahead of peace talks

BUEA: The mood in English-speaking Cameroon is a mix of anxiety, resignation and fatigue as the clock ticks. On September 30, the government will start hosting a national "dialogue" on the future of the anglophone territories, where separatist violence and a government crackdown have cost thousands of lives and forced hundreds of thousands to flee.

The following day, October 1, marks the second anniversary of this spiral towards conflict - the declaration of the self-described "Republic of Ambazonia" for Cameroon's English-speaking minority. Traders in Buea, the capital of Cameroon's Southwest Region, say they are under relentless pressure to choose sides. The militants have staged "dead city" protests every Monday, aimed at bringing the English-speaking regions to a standstill.

If traders close their store, they risk being punished by the authorities. But if they keep it open, they face the wrath of separatists for ignoring strike calls. "If you're stubborn," said snack-bar owner Jeremie, the separatists "come back and burn down your property or they'll follow you and pay you a visit." "We're scared," said a man who asked not to be named. He kept his shop open on Monday but said he feared the arrival of the "Amba-boys" at any minute.

A member of a local NGO said the army had recently managed to secure a volatile part of Buea because it found informants among residents fed up with racketeering by separatists. "The Amba-boys who operate in town from time to time come from rather remote parts," he said, asking not to be identified. English-speakers account for about a fifth of Cameroon's population of 24 million, who are majority French-speaking.

Anglophones are mainly concentrated in two western areas, the Northwest Region and the Southwest Region, that were incorporated into the French-speaking state after the colonial era in Africa wound down six decades ago. Years of mounting resentment at perceived discrimination exploded in 2017, unleashing a conflict that has claimed more than 2,000 lives, according to International Crisis Group (ICG) thinktank, while the UN says at least half a million have fled their homes. All the people approached by AFP in Buea expressed weariness at the situation. None voiced much hope for the "Great National Dialogue" announced on September 10 on President Paul Biya, who has ruled Cameroon for 37 years. The five-day forum will take place in Yaounde under the aegis of Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute, who comes from the troubled territory. — AFP



DOHA: Women hold up protest signs during a demonstration calling for a stand against climate change at the Education City campus of the Qatar Foundation (QF) in the capital Doha yesterday. — AFP

Humanity must rescue oceans to rescue itself: UN

MONACO: Two days after a climate summit failed to deliver game-changing pledges to slash carbon emissions, the United Nations warned yesterday that global warming is devastating oceans and Earth's frozen spaces in ways that directly threaten a large slice of humanity. Crumbling ice sheets, rising seas, melting glaciers, ocean dead zones, toxic algae blooms - a raft of impacts on sea and ice are decimating fish stocks, destroying renewable sources of fresh water, and incubating superstorms that will ravage some megacities every year, according to a landmark assessment approved by the 195-nation Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Some of these impacts are irreversible. The report, a digest of 7,000 peer-reviewed studies, is a sobering reminder that record greenhouse gas emissions, mostly from burning fossil fuels, are driving the planet towards a hothouse climate our species could find intolerable. But it also raises more clearly than ever before a red flag on the need to confront changes that can no longer be averted. For some island nations and coastal cities, that will almost certainly mean finding new places to call home.

Crumbling ice sheets

"Even if we manage to limit global warming, we will continue to see major changes in the oceans," said Valerie Masson-Delmotte, a researcher at the Laboratory for Climate and Environmental Sciences and an IPCC co-

Fugitive in Spain

Nezzar, his son Lofti, and a former businessman Farid Benhamdine, were all sentenced to 20 years in absentia, APS said. The retired general has for weeks been on the run in Spain, where he has been joined by his son, according to Algerian media reports. Nezzar was at the head of the army in 1992 when it cancelled the electoral process, denying Islamist groups a victory at the polls and pitching the country into a devastating, decade-long civil war.

A Swiss court in mid-2018 cleared the way for Nezzar to face war crimes charges after he was arrested in Switzerland. In a complaint filed by rights group TRIAL International, a group of alleged victims accused him of torture and arbitrary arrests. Said Bouteflika's detention in May was part of a wave of arrests targeting the ousted president's inner circle.

But many fear they are little more than a high-level purge and a power struggle between still-powerful regime insiders, rather than a genuine effort to reform the state. The hearings were restricted to lawyers and defendants' families, with media kept out of the courtroom. Mediene, whose health has been deteriorating according to his family, arrived in court in a wheelchair and asked for an adjournment, according to defense lawyers. The judge consulted a doctor and turned down the request.

Known as Toufik, Mediene headed the all-powerful DRS intelligence agency from its foundation in 1990 up to his fall from grace in 2015. Tartag, his deputy, succeeded Mediene and when the DRS was dismantled in 2016 he served as Algeria's security coordinator under the supervision of the presidency. Presidential elections have now been set for December 12. But protesters have kept up demands for political reforms and the removal of the former president's loyalists, including army chief Gaid Salah, who has emerged as Algeria's strongman since Bouteflika's fall. — AFP

Masked men and murder: Vigilantes terrorize LGBT+ Russians

MOSCOW: Receiving photos of mutilated bodies with the warning "you're next" rattled gay rights activist Nikita Tomilov but when he saw surveillance men outside his home, he fled Russia for good. The threats via social media came from Pila - Russian for "saw" - a homophobic group which has said it was behind the fatal stabbing in July of an LGBT+ activist whose name was among a dozen on their widely-circulated assassination "blacklist".

"I went to the police when I saw two masked men lurking outside my apartment, but they said they couldn't do anything without proof that these men were there," Tomilov, 22 said via Skype from a European country. "What kind of proof could I bring them? And my family members started receiving threats as well. I realized it was too dangerous for me to stay in Russia." Elena Grigoryeva, 41, was stabbed eight times in the face and back in St Petersburg.

The Investigative Committee, which handles major crimes, said she was murdered by a local resident she had been drinking with and detained two suspects. Although the police did not treat the murder as a hate crime initially, they promised to investigate whether Pila had anything to do with Grigoryeva's death after complaints from lesbian gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) rights groups.

Pila - which takes its name from the "Saw" American horror movies - is the latest threat to shake the LGBT+ community in Russia, where homosexuality was deemed a criminal offence until 1993 and classed as a mental illness until 1999. Violence against gay people and hostility from the wider community has been on the rise since 2013 when the Kremlin adopted a gay "propaganda" law as part of a drive to defend what President Vladimir Putin called Russia's "traditional values". LGBT+ campaigners say the law has helped authorities crack down on activists and contributed to a rise in anti-LGBT+ hate crimes as well as police reluctance to investigate them. The Russian LGBT Network, which offers legal aid to gay people, said only eight out of 64 cases of physical violence against LGBT+ people that it received in 2018 were investigated by the police. Moscow police headquarters, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and human rights commissioner Tatyana Moskalova did not respond to requests for comment. In several public statements, Putin has said there is no discrimination against LGBT+ people in Russia.

Attacks

Pila has used its website, Instagram, Russia's biggest social network VK and messaging app Telegram to call for gay Russians to be deported, posted a list of LGBT+ activists to be assassinated, and offered cash rewards for attacks on them. Opinions differ on the danger it poses. The size of the vigilante group, which became active online in mid-2018, and the identities of its backers remain unclear. Tomilov believes it is a powerful organization capable of murder, while others see it merely an intimidation campaign, unlikely to go beyond online threats.

"We can't be certain it's a real group that can organize physical attacks on people," said Igor Kochetkov, head of the Russian LGBT Network. "There isn't a single confirmed fact of assaults, let alone murders, committed by the so-called Pila. What we're seeing is a website that comes and goes, emails and messages on social media." Pila's website and all of its online accounts were blocked last month after complaints from activists who fear its threats are fuelling homophobia and violence against LGBT+ people.

"They openly call for violence against certain people, but law enforcement has taken no action whatsoever," said Alexander Kondakov, a sociologist at Finland's University of Helsinki who authored a study on anti-gay hate crimes in Russia. "This terrible situation encourages not just Pila itself, but others like them, too - people see that these actions go unpunished. LGBT+ rights group Vykhod said the police promised to examine and analyze screenshots of Pila's website last week. Vitaly Bespalov, editor of the gay news site ParniPlus, received an email on Aug. 26 instructing him to kill Maxim Lapunov - a gay man who went public about being kidnapped and tortured in Chechnya - before Oct. — Reuters