



Myanmar's activists splash red paint to protest junta bloodshed

More than 1,800 prisoners escape after gang attack on Nigeria jail

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A boy stands next to a donkey loaded with jerry cans by the Atbarah river near the village of Dukouli within the Quraysha locality, located in the Fashaqa Al-Sughra agricultural region of Sudan's eastern Gedaref state. —AFP

Over 50 dead in fighting in Darfur

US urges de-escalation between Sudan, Ethiopia

KHARTOUM: At least 50 people have been killed in four days of violence in Sudan's Darfur, medics said yesterday in a revised toll. El Geneina, capital of West Darfur and close to the border with Chad, has seen days of fighting including gunfire and shelling, residents said. The West Darfur Doctors' Committee said its latest count "raised the total numbers since the start of the events to 50 dead and 132 wounded." "Despite relative calm since (Monday) night, medical teams continue to find it very difficult to move," it said in a statement. The UN humanitarian coordination office OCHA had on Monday reported 40 dead and 58 wounded in clashes pitting Arab tribes against the non-Arab Massalit ethnic group in El-Geneina.

El-Geneina resident Mohamed Abdel Rahman told AFP over the phone yesterday: "There was calm overnight but this morning we heard gunfire from Hay Al-Jabal district which lasted almost an hour." Another resident three kilometers from Hay Al-Jabal, who asked to remain anonymous, said he had also heard gunfire. Authorities on Monday night declared a state of emergency and deployed troops to West Darfur. The region was the epicenter of years of bloodshed starting in 2003 under then

president Omar Al-Bashir. Ethnic minority groups complaining of marginalization had taken up arms against the central government, which responded by unleashing armed groups largely made up of Arab nomads.

Bashir was wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide over the conflict, which the UN says left 300,000 people dead and displaced more than 2.5 million. Bashir's iron-fisted rule was ended by the army in April 2019 following months of mass protests. Sudan's transitional government in October signed a peace deal with several rebel groups, including in Darfur-but certain factions did not sign the accord. Eyewitnesses said fighting still raged on Monday afternoon, as thick smoke billowed over El Geneina. "We stayed in our homes, but we've been hearing gunfire close by—a shell landed at our neighbor's home," said Adam Issa, another resident.

The West Darfur Doctors' Committee said an ambulance carrying wounded victims was attacked. Clashes often pit nomadic Arab pastoralists against settled farmers from non-Arab ethnic groups. Saleh Issa, another El Geneina resident, said he saw a "cloud of smoke" covering swathes of the city.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Monday pressed for an easing of tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia as fears grow of a spillover from the bloody Tigray conflict. In a telephone call with Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, Blinken raised "the need to de-escalate tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia over the Al-Fashaqa border area, including recent commitments to engage in dialogue to resolve the issue," State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

The fertile area claimed by both countries has seen a rise in skirmishes as Sudan sends in troops, which Ethiopia has described as an invasion. The farmland borders Ethiopia's Tigray region where Addis Ababa launched an offensive against the local leadership in November, sending some 60,000 refugees fleeing into Sudan. The United States has been increasingly critical of Ethiopia, a longstanding ally, with Blinken earlier saying that the Tigray campaign involved "ethnic cleansing."

The State Department welcomed a weekend announcement by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed that troops from neighboring Eritrea, accused of perpetrating atrocities, had begun a promised withdrawal from Tigray. "We are encour-

aged by the prime minister's announcement that the government of the state of Eritrea has agreed to withdraw its forces from Ethiopia," Price told reporters. "The immediate and complete withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Tigray will be an important step forward in de-escalating the conflict and restoring peace and regional stability."

US relations have warmed markedly with Sudan since Hamdok, a civilian, took office in a transitional government following the toppling of Omar Al-Bashir. Sudan last week paid \$335 million in compensation over anti-US attacks from when Bashir welcomed Al-Qaeda as part of an Islamist turn in the 1990s. Blinken separately hailed Sudan's signing of an agreement with a rebel faction, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North. Blinken also discussed the latest attempts to jumpstart diplomacy on the massive Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Addis Ababa is moving ahead on despite protests from Sudan and Egypt which rely heavily on Nile water.

US-led talks under former president Donald Trump failed to reach a resolution. The United Arab Emirates recently became the latest to offer to mediate. —AFP

Israel president taps Netanyahu to try to form govt

JERUSALEM: Israel's president nominated Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday to try to form a government after the latest inconclusive election, but voiced doubt that any lawmaker can forge a parliamentary majority. The March 23 election, Israel's fourth in under two years, did not produce a clear path for any candidate to form a coalition capable of commanding a majority in the 120-member parliament, prolonging an unprecedented period of political gridlock. On Monday, President Reuven Rivlin held the traditional round of consultations that follow each Israeli election, seeking recommendations from party representatives on who they want to form a government.

Netanyahu secured 52 recommendations, counting 30 from his right-wing Likud party, plus support from Israel's two ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious parties and the far-right Religious Zionism alliance. Centrist opposition leader Yair Lapid earned 45 endorsements. There were 16 abstentions and religious nationalist leader Naftali Bennett claimed the seven votes controlled by his Yamina party. Rivlin said the tally indicates that "Benjamin Netanyahu has a slightly higher chance of forming a government. Accordingly, I have decided to entrust him with the task of doing so." But, echoing the sentiments of many Israeli analysts, he warned a 61-seat absolute majority may not be possible in the deeply divided legislature. Rivlin said his consultations, "lead me to believe that no candidate has a realistic chance of forming a government that will have the confidence of the Knesset."

Turkey jails four over bombing that killed German tourists

ISTANBUL: A Turkish court yesterday sentenced four men to life in jail over a 2016 sui-

'Not an easy decision'

As Rivlin was holding his talks Monday, Netanyahu was on trial across the city at Jerusalem District Court, charged with accepting improper gifts and illegally trading regulatory favors with media moguls in exchange for positive coverage. In the prosecution's opening arguments and testimony from its first witness, Netanyahu was accused of using his influence to ensure the popular Walla site portrayed him favorably while smearing his rivals. Rivlin, whose antipathy for Netanyahu is well known, said giving the mandate to Netanyahu was "not an easy decision on a moral and ethical basis."

"I know the position held by many, that the president should not give the role to a candidate that is facing criminal charges, but according to the law and the decision of the courts, a prime minister can continue in his role even when he is facing charges," the president said. Lapid reacted to the announcement by conceding that "the president fulfilled his duty and had no choice." "But assigning the mandate to Netanyahu is a shameful disgrace that tarnishes Israel and shames our status as a law-abiding state," he added.

Elusive majority

Netanyahu now has 28 days to form a government, which can be extended by a further two weeks. His path to a 61-seat majority is precarious. To raise his tally above 52, he will likely need support from his estranged former protege, religious-nationalist Naftali Bennett, whose Yamina party controls seven seats. According to Monday's court testimony, Bennett was a main target of Netanyahu's media smear campaign. The prime minister will also likely require backing from the Islamic conservative Raam party. Its leader, Mansour Abbas, has said he is open to dealing with Netanyahu if it helps improve living standards for Israel's 20 percent Arab minority, but Religious Zionism has ruled out sitting with Raam, complicating Netanyahu's coalition prospects.

cide bombing in the heart of Istanbul that killed 12 German tourists and was blamed on Islamic State group jihadists. The blast ripped through Istanbul's historic Sultanahmet square in January 2016 — near the iconic Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia, among the world's most visited tourist sites.

The government blamed the attack that wounded 16 others on the IS group but the



JERUSALEM: In this file photo, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the Likud party, addresses supporters at the party campaign headquarters in Jerusalem. —AFP

'Tough decisions'

In an address late Monday, Lapid sought to foster unity in the anti-Netanyahu camp, with a direct appeal to Bennett. "We need a government of national agreement... to prevent a government led by a criminal suspect," a reference to Netanyahu, who Lapid called "dangerous." Lapid offered Bennett a revolving premiership in which the Yamina leader would take the first turn, an extraordinary gesture given his 45 prime ministerial endorsements dwarfed Bennett's seven.

"The test for a leader is to take tough decisions in complex situations," Lapid said, arguing that sacrifices would be required to unseat the divisive Netanyahu. If Netanyahu fails to form a majority government within his negotiating window, Rivlin will likely turn to Lapid. If neither Netanyahu nor his rivals manage to form a government, voters could be asked to return to the polls for a fifth election in barely two years. —AFP

jihadists never claimed responsibility and the defendants have denied their involvement. The court in Istanbul sentenced four suspects-whose nationality was not stated-to life in jail, saying that the attack represented "an attempt to violently overthrow the constitutional order," the private DHA news agency reported.

Each was also sentenced to 328 years and four months in prison for premeditated murder,

Palestinian killed by Israeli fire in West Bank

JERUSALEM: A Palestinian motorist was killed and his wife wounded by Israeli fire early yesterday, the Palestinian health ministry said, in what the Israeli army described as an "attempted car-ramping attack". The man died "after sustaining head wounds from live fire in Bir Nabala (in the occupied West Bank) ... and his wife suffered bullet wounds to her back," the ministry said. The Palestinians' official Wafa news agency said the shooting took place at dawn as the couple were travelling in their car.

The Israeli army said its troops had "thwarted an attempted car-ramping attack against a group of soldiers operating at a checkpoint south of Ramallah". It said the checkpoint was a temporary one, set up during "operational activity" in Bir Nabala. "Soldiers at the checkpoint spotted a vehicle stopping at the checkpoint and suddenly accelerating towards another group of soldiers operating in the area, in a way that endangered the lives of the soldiers. "The soldiers responded with fire in order to thwart the threat," the army said.

Wafa identified the dead man as Osama Sidqi Mansur, 42, citing local sources. The news agency said there had been clashes between Palestinian residents and the Israeli army in the Bir Nabala area on Monday evening. Israel has occupied the West Bank since the Six-Day War of 1967. There has been a string of lone wolf attacks on troops in the territory since 2015, most of them stabbings or car-rammings. —AFP

the news agency said. Eighteen other suspects were acquitted, it said. In 2018, Turkish judges sentenced three Syrian nationals to life in prison for their involvement in the bombing but an appeals court overturned that verdict for several reasons, including that the sentences were deemed too lenient. Turkey was shaken by a spate of attacks in 2016 blamed on the IS and Kurdish militants. —AFP