

International

Myanmar's UN envoy urges action against junta as carnage continues

Civilian toll crosses 600 amid crackdown in Bago

YANGON: Myanmar's own ambassador to the United Nations has urged "strong action" against the junta, as reports emerged of scores killed in the military's latest crackdown. The country has been in turmoil since the junta ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi in February, with protesters refusing to submit to the junta regime and continuing to demand a return to democracy.

With more than 600 people killed by security forces trying to quell the movement, the international community has increasingly raised the alarm on the crisis. During a UN Security Council meeting on Friday, Myanmar's ambassador pushed for more concrete action-proposing a no-fly zone, an arms embargo and more targeted sanctions against members of the military and their families.

"Your collective, strong action is needed immediately," Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun told the meeting.

"Time is of the essence for us," he said. "Please, please take action." An independent analyst with the International Crisis Group also warned the council that Myanmar was "at the brink of state failure".

"The vast majority of the population does not want military rule and will do whatever it takes to prevent that outcome. Yet the military seems determined to impose its will," said Richard Horsey.

"Its actions may be creating a situation where the country becomes ungovernable. That should be of grave concern to the region and to the broader international community." China and Russia wield veto power at the Security Council and generally oppose international sanctions. However, Beijing—the top ally of Myanmar's military—has voiced growing concern about instability, and has said it is speaking to "all parties". There have been reports that China has opened contact with the CRPH, a group representing the ousted civilian government.



MANDALAY: This photo taken and received from an anonymous source via Facebook yesterday shows protesters holding a banner as they march during a demonstration against the military coup in Mandalay. — AFP

Bloodshed in Bago

At least 618 civilians have been killed in the military's crackdown on protests, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, a local monitoring group. Efforts to verify deaths and confirm news of crackdowns have been greatly hindered by the junta's throttling of mobile data within the country—effectively shutting most of the population into an information blackout.

News emerged yesterday morning of more violence in the city of Bago, 65 kilometers (40 miles) northeast of Yangon—the site of a day-long crackdown that forced residents into hiding in nearby villages. AFP-verified footage shot early Friday showed protesters hiding behind sandbag barricades wielding homemade rifles, as explosions could be heard in the background.

A resident told AFP that the military crackdown killed at least 40 protesters, and authorities refused to

let rescue workers remove the bodies. "They piled up all the dead bodies, loaded them into their army truck and drove it away," he said, adding that authorities then proceeded to arrest people around the community.

Local media reports have put the death toll for Bago's crackdown at far higher.

The junta had branded the victims of anti-coup unrest "violent terrorist people", putting the total death toll since February 1 at 248, according to a spokesman Friday.

Despite the daily bloodshed, protesters have continued to take to the streets, with dawn strikes sprouting across the country yesterday. Demonstrators are also manifesting their discontent in pointedly creative ways. In commercial hub Yangon, crimson paint—representing the blood already spilled—was splashed across the streets in view of the historic Shwedagon Pagoda.—AFP

Two dead whales wash up on Bangladesh beach

COX'S BAZAR, Bangladesh: Two dead whales have washed up on the same stretch of Bangladesh coastline in two days, officials said yesterday, raising suggestions that they were killed by sea pollution.

Officials said the second, much longer whale washed up on Himchhari Beach, outside the resort city of Cox's Bazar, at around 8:30 am (0230 GMT) yesterday, just a day after the carcass of another Bryde's whale was found two kilometers (1.25 miles) from the spot. "The carcass of the whale found today is at least 50 feet (16

meters) long and 10 feet wide. It weighs three-four tons," Jahurul Islam, executive director of the Cox's Bazar-based Marine Life Alliance, said.

Islam said the whales could have been killed in a collision with a ship plying the Bay of Bengal, or have died after eating plastics which litter the sea. "Primarily we think the two have died from consuming plastic and polluted objects. There is an injury mark on the back of the second whale. We suspect it could have been hit by a high-speed vessel," Islam said. Mohammad Shahidul Alam, a professor at the Institute of Marine Science and Fisheries, said parts of the Bay of Bengal are seriously polluted, and that could have led to the animals' demise.

A spokesman for Bangladesh's environment and forestry department said its researchers had collected samples from the carcasses for post mortem examinations. Two similar whales also washed up on Cox's Bazar beaches in 1996 and 2006. — AFP



COX'S BAZAR: People gather around a dead whale washed ashore on a beach in Cox's Bazar yesterday. — AFP

Veteran ruler Guelleh re-elected Djibouti president for 5th term

DJIBOUTI, Djibouti: Djibouti's veteran ruler Ismail Omar Guelleh was re-elected for a fifth term as president with more than 98 percent of the vote, according to provisional results announced early yesterday, after the election in the tiny but strategically important country was boycotted by the main opposition. Around 215,000 citizens were registered to vote in the ballot pitting Guelleh, 73, against a little-known businessman widely seen as posing scant threat to the strongman, who has been in power since 1999.

Counting started shortly after polling stations closed around 7:00 pm in the Horn of Africa nation, which overlooks one of the world's busiest trade routes at the crossroads between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. "President Ismail Omar Guelleh obtained 167,535 votes, which is 98.58 percent," Interior Minister Moumin Ahmed Cheick told public broadcaster RTD early Saturday, adding that confirmed results would be released soon by the Constitutional Council.

Independent election observers said the process went smoothly, with no reports of misconduct.

Earlier, after voting in the capital where most of Djibouti's one million people reside, Guelleh praised the trouble-free conduct of the electoral exercise. Dressed in immaculate white traditional robes, he said he was "very, very confident" of victory, after placing his vote in a transparent ballot box.

'My vote is useless'

Guelleh was the handpicked successor to his relative Hassan Gouled Aptidon, the country's first president after independence from France in 1977. He faced just one challenger—political newcomer Zakaria Ismail Farah—after Djibouti's main opposition parties boycotted the election. Farah, a 56-year-old cleaning

products importer, ended up with under 5,000 votes, according to the provisional results.

Farah cast doubt on the transparency of the voting process, saying his delegates were not present at polling stations. "My vote is of no use, nor are the votes of 80 percent of the Djiboutian people," the opposition candidate told AFP in a text message.

Ahmed Tidiane Souare, the head of an African Union (AU) observer mission, said all candidates were free to send their officials to any polling station. Farah, who had styled himself as the "flag bearer of poor Djiboutians", had alleged unfair treatment during the election campaign, including that he was not provided security at his rallies. Guelleh, and his extended family, have controlled Djibouti with an iron fist since he was handed power. A rare wave of opposition protests in 2020 were brutally suppressed. His predicted fifth term will be his last, under a 2010 constitutional reform that scrapped term limits while introducing an age limit of 75, which would lock him out of future elections.

Guelleh has clinched at least 75 percent of the vote in every presidential election he has contested.

"I am with President Ismail. I voted for him, I love him," said 64-year-old Ahmed Abdillah Hadi after casting his ballot. The vote proceeded despite a surge in Covid-19 cases and infection rates, and few wore face masks as they cheered Guelleh at a crowded final rally this week.—AFP



DJIBOUTI: Djibouti's incumbent president Ismail Omar Guelleh (center) leaves the polling station after he cast his ballot at the Ras-Dika district polling station in the capital Djibouti on Friday.— AFP

Indian troops shoot dead four in fresh election bloodshed

KOLKATA: Five people were killed in fresh election bloodshed in the Indian state of West Bengal yesterday, including four shot dead by paramilitary troops "in self-defense", officials said.

West Bengal in eastern India has seen thousands killed in decades of political violence, and the current state election campaign has triggered deadly clashes between rival parties. The latest incident in the northern district of Coochbehar 700 kilometers (450 miles) north of Kolkata saw a crowd of around 400 people surround troops guarding a polling station. "Paramilitary troops opened fire in self-defense after being challenged by over 400 people," a senior Election Commission official said.

"They also formed a ring around the troops and tried to snatch rifles... Four people were killed in the shooting." Addressing an election rally in Siliguri, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said chief minister Mamata Banerjee "and her goons provoked the paramilitary forces to open fire". Elsewhere in the state a man was shot dead on Saturday in clashes between supporters of Banerjee's All India Trinamool Congress and Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), police said.

"The victim was a BJP supporter," local party chief Dilip Ghosh said. "Three people who were injured in the clash were admitted to a local health facility." Winning power in the state of 90 million people when results are announced on May 2 would be a major victory for Modi. Banerjee, one of Modi's most prominent critics, has accused the BJP of attempting to import divisive sectarian politics into the state. — AFP

Defying Beijing, US loosens curbs on Taiwan contacts

WASHINGTON: The State Department said Friday it will make it easier for US officials to meet Taiwanese representatives, defying pressure from China at a time of high tensions. The United States still considers Beijing as China's legitimate government, consistent with its switch of recognition in 1979, but will do away with some of the convoluted rules that restricted dealings with Taiwan including in-person meetings. The updated guidance "underscores Taiwan is a vibrant democracy and an important security and economic partner that is also a force for good in the international community," State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

"These new guidelines liberalize guidance on contacts with Taiwan, consistent with our unofficial relations," he said in a statement. The move by President Joe Biden's administration formalizes increasingly vocal US support for Taiwan, a self-governing democracy, and comes in response to an act of Congress that required a review. Taiwan's mission in Washington—officially called the "Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States", rather than an embassy—welcomed

News in brief

Earthquake strikes off Java

JAKARTA: A 6.0-magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Indonesia's Java island yesterday, the United States Geological Survey said, but no tsunami warning was issued. The quake hit at a depth of 82 kilometers (50 miles), about 45 kilometers southwest of Malang city in East Java. There were no immediate reports of casualties, but the tremor shook Malang, a city of several million people. "It was pretty strong and went for a long time," resident Ida Magfiroh told AFP. "Everything was swaying." Indonesia experiences frequent seismic and volcanic activity due to its position on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", where tectonic plates collide.—AFP

Russian agents raid journalist

MOSCOW: Russian security agents on Friday raided the home of the editor of an online investigative journal which recently published articles on the security services, his editorial team said. Operatives of the FSB security agents searched the apartment of Roman Anine, his "Vajnie historie (important stories)" website colleagues said. They cited his lawyer saying that Anine was targeted in connection with enquiries into "violation of privacy by abusing his professional functions", an offence punishable by up to four years in prison. He was due to go with his lawyers to talk to the committee in charge of criminal enquiries, according to media reports.—AFP

Mali tightens COVID restrictions

BAMAKO: Mali decided Friday to tighten restrictions aimed at curbing COVID-19, suspending events while closing leisure centers due to an increase in infections in the West African nation. National authorities in a statement spoke of "a worrying increase in the spread of the disease in the country". All leisure centers will be closed from Saturday until April 25, while festivals and other events will be suspended for 15 days with immediate effect. They also announced a new free distribution of masks and a ban on gatherings of more than 50 people, while pledging to speed up the acquisition of vaccine doses.—AFP

Portugal PM Socrates to stand trial

LISBON: A Portuguese judge cleared the way on Friday for former prime minister Jose Socrates to stand trial for alleged money laundering and falsifying documents, but cleared him of corruption charges in the years-long case. Prosecutors have accused Socrates of pocketing 34 million euros (\$40 million) from three companies while he was in power between 2005 and 2011, but the ex-prime minister has maintained his innocence. The 63-year-old is alleged to have concealed funds with the complicity of businessman and longtime friend Carlos Santos Silva.—AFP

Trudeau urges strict COVID curbs

OTTAWA: Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday called on Canada's provinces to tighten public health measures as an accelerating vaccination program fails to keep pace with surging coronavirus infections. "In several places in the country, stricter measures are needed to curb the spread of the virus," he told a news conference days after Ontario imposed a stay-at-home order and Quebec tightened restrictions. But Alberta, which is leading the country in new cases per capita, has been more passive, only now closing bars and restaurants.—AFP

the new guidelines, saying they reflected a bipartisan consensus for closer relations. "Taiwan and the US share a deep and abiding partnership based on our common values and joint interests," it said, pointing to cooperation on global health, space, trade and democracy promotion.

Former secretary of state Mike Pompeo, a staunch critic of Beijing, in his last days in office said he was getting rid of previous guidelines on dealing with Taiwan but not issue new ones, drawing confusion in some quarters on what had changed. Under the guidelines issued by the Biden administration, US officials will be allowed to invite Taiwanese representatives into government buildings in Washington or attend working-level meetings at the Taiwanese mission, both of which were earlier prohibited, a State Department official said. The United States has already begun allowing open interactions with Taiwanese diplomats since Pompeo ended earlier guidance. The Biden administration last month sent the US ambassador to Palau on a visit to Taiwan to accompany the president of the island nation—one of a dwindling number of countries that recognize Taipei. Similarly, the acting US ambassador in Japan in March tweeted a picture of himself meeting at his official residence with his Taiwanese counterpart—the type of day-to-day diplomacy that is usually a non-event but which Washington had previously shied away from with Taiwan for fear of upsetting Beijing.—AFP