

International

21 die as blast rips through mosque in Afghan capital

Most of the injuries were caused by shrapnel and burns

KABUL: A blast that ripped through a mosque packed with worshippers in the Afghan capital killed at least 21 people and wounded more than two dozen others, police said Thursday. The number of bombings across Afghanistan has declined since the Taliban returned to power last year, but several attacks—some targeting minority communities—have rocked the country in recent months, including those claimed by the jihadist Islamic State (IS) group.



Security was deteriorating in the country

No group has claimed responsibility for Wednesday evening's blast at Kabul's Sediqia Mosque, which has an adjoining madrasa. "He was my cousin, may God forgive him," said one local resident who gave his name as Masiullah, referring to a relative who died in the explosion.

"One year had passed from his marriage, he was 27 years old... he was a good person." Kabul police spokesman Khalid Zadran said 21 people were killed and 33 others wounded. Italian non-governmental organisation Emergency, which operates a hospital in Kabul, said it had received 35 patients, including three who died.

"Most of the injuries were caused by shrapnel and



KABUL: Afghans pray at a grave of victims, after burial ceremony in a cemetery on the outskirts of Kabul on August 18, 2022. The death toll from a blast which ripped through a mosque packed with worshippers in the Afghan capital Kabul on August 17, has risen to 21, police said. — AFP

burns. Our surgeons were operating throughout the night. There were nine children among the victims that we received," country director Stefano Sozza said in a statement on Thursday.

Local hospitals contacted by AFP said they were not permitted to provide details of casualties they had treated. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan on Thursday said security was "deteriorating" in the country.

"We deplore yesterday's attack in a Kabul mosque, the latest in a disturbing series of bombings which have killed & injured more than 250 people in recent weeks, the highest monthly number of civilian casualties over the last year," said a statement released on Twitter.

Security challenge

Taliban officials insist they have full control of security and frequently deny or play down incidents report-

ed on Afghanistan's vibrant social media. They have also taken recently to preventing local and foreign media from covering the aftermath of attacks—sometimes using violence—and on Thursday armed Taliban fighters blocked journalists from reaching the latest blast site.

Wednesday's explosion comes nearly a week after a suicide bomber killed top Taliban cleric Rahimullah Haqqani, along with his brother, at his madrasa in Kabul. Haqqani was known for angry speeches against IS, which later claimed the attack.

The jihadist group has primarily targeted minority communities such as Shiites, Sufis and Sikhs. The Taliban claim they have defeated IS, but experts say the group remains a key security challenge for the hard-line Islamists.

While IS is a Sunni Islamist group like the Taliban, the two are bitter rivals and greatly diverge on ideological grounds. Taliban leaders on Thursday led a major gathering of more than 2,000 clerics and elders in the southern city of Kandahar, the movement's de facto power base.

In a statement sent to the media, a Taliban spokesman said "important decisions" would be taken at the conference but provided no details. The Taliban on Monday marked the first anniversary of their return to power following a turbulent year that saw women's rights crushed and a humanitarian crisis worsen.

Initially, they promised a softer version of the harsh Islamist rule that characterised their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001, but many restrictions have gradually been imposed. Afghanistan is in economic crisis, with its overseas assets frozen by Washington and aid curtailed to keep funds out of the Taliban's hands. No country has officially recognised the government. — AFP



NEW DELHI: Activists hold placards during a protest against the release, following a recommendation by a Gujarat's state government panel, of men convicted of gang-raping Bilkis Bano during the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat. — AFP

Gang-raped Indian woman 'numb' after attackers released

AHMEDABAD, India: A Muslim woman who was gang-raped as 14 other people were murdered during one of post-independence India's worst religious riots has said she is "numb" after her attackers were released early from prison.

In a case that drew global outrage, Bilkis Bano and two of her children were the only survivors among a group of 17 Muslims attacked by a Hindu mob in the western state of Gujarat in 2002. Bilkis was pregnant at the time and seven of those killed were relatives including her three-year-old daughter. The attack took place when current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was Gujarat state premier.

Eleven Hindu men were later sentenced to life in prison but were freed on Monday, with the Gujarat government timing its announcement to coincide with celebrations for the 75th anniversary of India's independence. The attackers, released following a recommendation by a state government panel, were greeted by relatives outside the prison who gave them sweets and touched their feet in a traditional Indian sign of respect. Bilkis said in a statement released by her lawyer on Wednesday that she was "bereft of words. I am still numb." "I trusted the highest courts in our land.

I trusted the system, and I was learning slowly to live with my trauma. "The release of these convicts has taken from me my peace and shaken my faith in justice. My sorrow and my wavering faith is not for myself alone but for every woman who is struggling for justice in courts," she said. On Thursday around a dozen people staged a demonstration in New Delhi against the release of the men.

Opposition politician Rahul Gandhi, grandson of former premier Indira Gandhi, tweeted: "Prime Minister... the entire country is seeing the difference between your words and deeds." Modi was accused of turning a blind eye to the riots but was cleared of any wrongdoing in 2012, two years before becoming leader of the Hindu-majority nation that is home to 200 million Muslims.

"BJP's bias for a religion is such that even brutal rape and hate crimes are forgivable," prominent Muslim politician Asaduddin Owaisi said, referring to Modi's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. The Gujarat state government, run by the BJP, defended the decision to release the men. "The remission of the 11 convicts was considered after taking various factors like life imprisonment term in India which is typically of 14 years or more, age, behaviour of the person and so on," senior official Raj Kumar was quoted by the Hindustan Times as saying. According to the official toll, around 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were hacked, beaten, shot or burnt to death in the riots, which erupted after 59 Hindu pilgrims died in a train fire that was blamed on a Muslim mob. More than three dozen Muslims were later convicted over the fire, although the cause remains disputed. — AFP

But earlier this month a more senior judge declared such requests must be granted, and on Thursday Law agreed to lift the restrictions.

'Vague charges'

During many of the pre-trial proceedings, which can now be reported for the first time, defendants have described feeling pressured by prosecutors to plead to what they believe are vague charges. Defence lawyers have also argued that prosecutors have not properly detailed what the conspiracy is that their clients are alleged to have taken part in.

"The prosecution has been allowed to dance around and change and add (to the charges)," veteran barrister Gladys Li argued at one of the hearings. "We will not be held at gunpoint to offer a plea."

The prosecution has denied being vague on the charges. The 47 defendants are some of Hong Kong's best-known dissidents, ranging from moderate reformists and former lawmakers to more radical China critics. Some, such as Joshua Wong and Benny Tai, are already serving sentences for protest-related convictions. As the case has wound its way through the courts, most have opted to plead guilty—a step that usually gets them a reduced sentence. So far just 18 defendants have opted for a full trial. It is still not clear when the trial will begin, and those in the dock face up to life in jail. On Tuesday, AFP reported that Hong Kong's justice minister had ordered a no-jury trial for the 47.—AFP

Restrictions lifted on HK's largest security trial

HONG KONG: Reporting restrictions blanketing Hong Kong's largest national security prosecution were lifted on Thursday following an earlier a High Court ruling, shedding new light on pre-trial hearings that have dragged on for more than a year.

Beijing imposed a sweeping security law on Hong Kong after 2019's huge and sometimes violent pro-democracy protests. It criminalised most dissent and transformed the once-outspoken city into something more closely resembling the authoritarian mainland.

The largest joint prosecution is of 47 leading democracy activists, most of whom have been held behind bars for more than a year as prosecution and defence lawyers prepare for an eventual trial in what is new legal territory.

They are charged with "conspiracy to commit subversion", for organising an unofficial primary election. Repeated requests by the defendants to lift reporting restrictions covering those hearings were denied by trial judge Peter Law.

Najib starts final bid to overturn 1MDB jail sentence

PUTRAJAYA, Malaysia: Malaysia's top court on Thursday began hearing ex-leader Najib Razak's appeal to overturn his jail sentence for corruption in a high-stakes legal gambit that could see him locked up or potentially launching a political comeback.

Following a brief drama at the Federal Court seen as an attempt by defence lawyers to delay proceedings, government prosecutors started outlining why the former prime minister's 12-year jail sentence over a financial scandal at state fund 1MDB should stay.

The court dismissed Najib's plea for a retrial two days earlier, clearing the way for the hearings, which will be held until August 26. Lead defence lawyer Hisyam Teh Poh Teik surprised the court Thursday by telling the panel of five judges that he wanted to be discharged from the case, citing inadequate time to prepare as he had been recently appointed.

The court, however, refused to discharge him and Chief Justice Tengku Maimun Tuan Mat ordered the prosecution to present its case. Najib, 69, and his ruling party were roundly defeated in 2018 elections following allegations of their involvement in the multibillion-dollar scandal.

He and his associates were accused of stealing billions of dollars from the country's investment vehicle and spending it on everything from high-end real estate to pricey art. Following a lengthy High Court trial, Najib was found guilty of abuse of power, money laundering and criminal breach of trust over the transfer of 42 million ringgit (\$10.1 million) from former

No easy comeback

Dressed in a dark suit and white mask, Najib arrived in court and waved to about 70 supporters, who shouted "bossku", meaning "my boss", which has become a rallying cry among his defenders. "This is not a fair trial. Najib is a victim of political persecution," one of the supporters, 65-year-old businessman Mohamad Yusof Khalid, told AFP.

But government prosecutor V. Sithambaram painted a different picture in court. He said the funds that went into Najib's bank account "were used for his personal expenses like buying Chanel watches and to pay credit cards". In a statement after the hearing, Najib objected "in the strongest of terms" to how the court forced his lawyer to continue despite him wanting to be discharged, which he said effectively left him without proper counsel.

"I am now in a situation where my right to counsel and a fair hearing is illusory," he said. If the conviction is upheld, Najib will begin serving his jail sentence immediately, lawyers said. An acquittal, however, could propel him into contention for his former political post, as he remains popular in Malaysia despite the scandal that plagued his administration.

He remains a lawmaker with the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the leading party in the current government, and helped its candidates win in recent by-elections. Some analysts, however, said it may not be an easy comeback for Najib as rivals within his own party may try to derail him.—AFP



PUTRAJAYA, Malaysia: Malaysia's former prime minister Najib Razak (C) speaks next to his lawyer Hisyam Teh Poh Teik (R) during a press conference at the federal court in Putrajaya. — AFP

S Lanka police fire tear gas to disperse protest

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka police fired tear gas and water cannon on a small protest Thursday to break up the first demonstration since the crisis-hit island nation lifted a state of emergency. An unprecedented economic collapse has sparked often huge anti-government rallies this year after months of hardship caused by shortages of essential goods, rolling blackouts and spiralling inflation.

The government has curbed dissent by imposing a state of emergency giving security forces sweeping detention powers, but the ordinance lapsed overnight. Several hundred students attempted to march to the city centre in Colombo for a rally outside the railway station before they were blocked and dispersed by

officers armed with batons and riot shields.

A police official told AFP that Wasantha Mudalige, leader of the Inter-University Student Federation, was among six people taken into custody. Police said they used minimum force and only arrested those who attacked officers or damaged state property.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe announced this week that his government would not renew the state of emergency it imposed last month, after hundreds of thousands of people stormed the home of his predecessor Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

The measure had been widely criticised by rights groups as a draconian limit on freedoms. Student groups have since tried to drum up support for protests against Wickremesinghe, who took charge after Rajapaksa fled abroad, but the response has so far been muted. Sri Lanka's 22 million people have endured chronic shortages of food, fuel and medicine since late last year after the country ran out of foreign currency to finance imports. The country defaulted on its \$51 billion foreign debt in mid-April and is in talks with the International Monetary Fund for a possible bailout. — AFP