

## International

# Almost 20 killed in avalanche on Afghan-Pakistan border

## Firing from Afghanistan kills five Pakistan soldiers

**JALALABAD:** At least 20 people were killed by an avalanche yesterday while crossing a remote mountain pass from Afghanistan to Pakistan, a Taliban official said. Scores of Afghans cross illegally to Pakistan every day through the porous mountain border in search of jobs or to buy essential goods for trade.

Najibullah Hassan Abdal, head of information for eastern Kunar province, told AFP rescue workers were still searching at the scene of the avalanche. "Twenty bodies have been recovered already," he said. Illegal traffic across the Pakistan-Afghan border has soared since the Taliban returned to power in August, plunging the country into a severe crisis with tens of thousands of people made jobless.



**Pakistan attempting to fence the entire 2,670-km frontier**

Pakistan is attempting to fence the entire 2,670-kilometre (1,660 mile) frontier, known as the Durand line for the British colonial administrator who first drew it. Traders and smugglers have for centuries used well-trodden remote mountain passes to criss-cross the territories and avoid paying taxes.

But deadly avalanches are common in the area. In 2015 more than 250 people were killed across the country in a series of devastating avalanches.

Meanwhile, at least five Pakistan soldiers were killed

by firing from neighbouring Afghanistan, Islamabad said Sunday, in an attack claimed by the Pakistani Taliban. It comes just days after Baloch separatists in the southwest killed nine Pakistan troops in a series of brazen attacks that officials said involved planners from Afghanistan as well as India.

After seizing power in August, Afghanistan's Taliban pledged terror groups would not be allowed to operate from the country, but Pakistan militant groups have long taken sanctuary across the porous border. They include the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which on Sunday claimed responsibility for the attack in the Kurram district of rugged Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The TTP has been emboldened by the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan and has stepped up attacks since a month-long truce with the Pakistan government ended last year. The Taliban are separate groups in both countries, but share a common ideology and draw from people who live on either side of the border.

The TTP said it killed six Pakistani troops in Saturday night's attack, but the Pakistan military's public relations wing (ISPR) said five Frontier Corps members had died. "Own troops responded in a befitting manner," it said, adding "terrorists suffered heavy casualties". Pakistan "strongly condemns the use of Afghan soil by terrorists", ISPR said. The army "is determined to defend Pakistan's borders against the menace of terrorism, and such sacrifices of our brave men further strengthen our resolve".

### Premier in China

It took four days until Saturday for Pakistani troops to put an end to assaults by separatists in Balochistan province, with the army putting the final death toll at 20 militants and nine soldiers. The ISPR said intelligence



**HERAT:** People sit on the wreckage of a Soviet-era tank at the Darwaza-e-Kandahar area in Herat. — AFP

agents intercepted communications during those assaults on army posts that showed militants had links to Afghanistan and India.

Separatists have waged an insurgency in the vast southwestern province for years, fuelled by anger that its abundant reserves of natural resources are not relieving citizens from crushing poverty. The fighting came as Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was making an official visit to China, which has invested significantly in

Balochistan, further stoking tensions.

Chinese investments in Balochistan are part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. A Pakistani security official told AFP on Friday that the attacks were an attempt to derail Khan's visit to China. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project linking China's far-western Xinjiang region with the strategic port of Gwadar in Balochistan has sparked claims that the vast influx of investment does not benefit locals.—AFP

## Sri Lanka frees rights lawyer after 2 years

**COLOMBO:** A Sri Lankan court yesterday ordered the release of a lawyer arrested over his alleged ties to the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings and held for nearly two years on charges rights groups say lacked evidence. Hejaz Hizbullah was arrested in April 2020 on suspicion of being linked to the devastating series of attacks on churches and hotels that left 279 people dead.

But after prosecutors failed to provide evidence of his involvement in the attacks, blamed on a local jihadist group, he was instead charged with inciting "racial hatred" under Sri Lanka's expansive Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

The Court of Appeal said "draconian elements" of the law had been misused to keep Hizbullah detained and noted that parliament had begun a process to reform the act. Yesterday's decision to grant bail comes just weeks before his case was due to be discussed at the UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva, according to diplomats.

Amnesty International had classified Hizbullah a prisoner of conscience and welcomed his release. "He was in prolonged detention... without a shred of credible evidence," the London-based rights group said.

Dozens of rights groups have campaigned for Hizbullah's freedom, and his detention has been highlighted by the European Parliament, which has also censured Sri Lanka over its rights record. Eran Wickramaratne of Sri Lanka's opposition SJB party called for the outright repeal of the "much abused" law that was used to detain him.

"We must ensure there will be no more Prisoners of Conscience like Hejaz," he wrote on Twitter. Hizbullah was a vocal advocate of Sri Lanka's minority Muslim community. He earned the ire of the island nation's ruling family after successfully challenging an effort to return former president Mahinda Rajapaksa to power during a constitutional crisis in 2018. The following year, Mahinda was appointed prime minister after his younger brother Gotabaya won presidential elections. UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet called for "renewed attention" to the intimidation of journalists, lawyers and activists in Sri Lanka after the Rajapaksa clan returned to power.—AFP

## Rakhine rebels clash again with Myanmar junta troops

**YANGON:** A Myanmar rebel group said yesterday that junta troops attacked its fighters in breach of a ceasefire, accusing the military of trying to destabilise the only region of the country that has seen no post-coup crackdown. The Southeast Asian country has been in chaos since last February's putsch, with a brutal crackdown on dissent and increased fighting in borderlands involving ethnic armed organisations.

Days after the coup, the junta reaffirmed a commitment to a ceasefire with the Arakan Army (AA), which has for years fought a war for autonomy for Rakhine state's ethnic Rakhine population. On Friday junta troops entered an AA base in Maungdaw township, sparking three hours of clashes, a spokesperson for the group told AFP, adding one of its fighters had been killed.

"There is high tension militarily, which could break out any time," he said. "It seems as if the military wants to destabilise Rakhine's stability and calm." A junta spokesman said a number of border police had been killed in a mine attack on February 4, but blamed a local Rohingya insurgent group for the attack.

"We are still investigating the presence of the AA situation there," said spokesman Zaw Min Tun. Clashes



**BEIJING:** People queue for a swab test for the COVID-19 in Beijing. — AFP

## China locks down city of 3.5m near Vietnam border

**BEIJING:** A Chinese city of 3.5 million near the border with Vietnam was on lockdown yesterday after more than 70 coronavirus cases were discovered there over the past three days. China, the only major world economy still sticking to a staunch zero-COVID policy, is on high alert for any outbreaks as it hosts the Beijing Winter Olympics.

Local officials in the city of Baise in the southern Guangxi region announced Sunday that no one would be allowed to leave the city, while residents of some districts would be confined to their homes. "Citywide traffic controls will be implemented," vice-mayor Gu Junyan told a briefing.

"In principle, vehicles and people cannot enter or leave the city... with personnel control strictly enforced and no unnecessary movement of people." Residents of some neighbourhoods in smaller rural cities and counties under Baise's jurisdiction have been placed under strict home confinement, while others cannot leave their district, Gu added.

Baise, located about 100 kilometres (62 miles) from the Vietnamese border, on Friday discovered its first local case—a traveller who had returned home for the week-long Lunar New Year holiday, according to offi-

cial. Since the pandemic, China has built a heavily enforced wire mesh fence along its southern border to keep out illegal migrants from Vietnam and Myanmar as well as potential Covid-19 infections.

Mass testing is already under way for residents, authorities said. Since the coronavirus pandemic first emerged two years ago in Hubei province's Wuhan, China has used strict local lockdowns, mass testing and contact-tracing apps to try and eliminate outbreaks as soon as cases are detected, sparing the country the mass deaths witnessed around the rest of the world.

Millions were confined to their homes in multiple Chinese cities in the run-up to the Olympics after cases involving both the Delta and Omicron coronavirus variants flared. The outbreaks were mostly stamped out. In December, 13 million residents of the northern megacity of Xi'an were placed under strict home confinement for over a month after an outbreak of more than 2,000 cases. Residents complained of grocery shortages and overly harsh enforcement of lockdown measures by local officials, which saw patients blocked from receiving critical medical treatment, leading to deaths in some cases.

China reported 79 new cases nationwide yesterday, of which 37 were in Guangxi. Meanwhile, Hong Kong's zero-Covid policy is on the ropes after a record number of new infections was announced over the weekend, sending officials scrambling to ramp up testing capacity and warning that a tightening of virus-control measures could be needed. China's borders with the rest of the world, including Hong Kong, are largely sealed.—AFP



**RAKHINE STATE, Myanmar:** A child looks on as Rohingya vendors sell vegetables at a market at Thet Kal Pyin camp in Rakhine State. — AFP

between the AA and the military in 2019 displaced more than 200,000 people across the state, one of Myanmar's poorest. After the coup, the junta ended a 19-month internet shutdown in the state of around one million.

The AA previously reported its fighters had clashed with junta troops in November. Rakhine state, home to both the Rohingya and a largely Buddhist ethnic Rakhine majority, has been a tinderbox of conflict for decades. The military drove out more than 740,000 Rohingya Muslims from the state in a 2017 campaign that United

Nations investigators have called genocide. Rights groups have also accused soldiers of committing war crimes including extrajudicial killings in their later campaign against the AA. Meanwhile, Myanmar's junta has denied freeing an Australian academic detained for almost a year after Cambodia's leader yesterday took credit for arranging the release. Economist Sean Turnell was working as an advisor to Myanmar civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi when he was detained shortly after the coup in February last year.—AFP

### News in brief

#### Indonesia bus crash kills 13

**SOLO:** At least 13 people were killed and dozens more injured after a tour bus carrying factory workers to a beach holiday crashed on Indonesia's Java island, according to police. The bus and its 47 passengers were headed from Sukoharjo in Central Java to a family gathering in neighbouring Yogyakarta province when the driver lost control going downhill, officers said late Sunday. "Witnesses we questioned said they saw the driver panicking as he tried to manage the gear stick, so there's an indication the brake was not functioning or faulty," Bantul district police chief Ihsan, who like many Indonesians uses only one name, told a media briefing. Deadly traffic accidents are common in the archipelago nation of 270 million, where vehicles are often old and poorly maintained and road rules are routinely ignored.—AFP

#### Philippine van crash kills 9

**MANILA:** Nine people including a baby were killed in the northern Philippines after a speeding van lost control on a corner and smashed into a row of houses on the edge of a highway, police said yesterday. The victims were gathered on the porch of a friend's house after attending a wake in Lal-Lo town in Cagayan province on Saturday night when the accident happened. "They were hanging out when the speeding van ploughed into them," Lal-Lo police chief Jefferson Mukay told AFP. A parked sports utility vehicle and motorised tricycle were also hit. The driver of the van, a military reservist, and his passenger were taken to hospital in a critical condition, Mukay said. He said the driver would face multiple homicide and other charges. Deadly road accidents are common in the Philippines, where drivers frequently flout the rules and vehicles are often poorly maintained or overloaded.—AFP

#### Nigeria oil vessel fire

**LAGOS:** Three crew members on board a Nigerian oil vessel that exploded and sank last week have been found alive while seven were still missing, the ship operator said. The Nigerian FPSO Trinity Spirit—a floating production, storage and offloading vessel—caught fire following an explosion on Wednesday, but the blaze was extinguished a day later. The vessel was located at the Ukpokiti Terminal, along the coast of the oil-rich Niger Delta region. Ten crew members were on board the vessel at the time of the accident. Ikemefuna Okafor, the executive officer of Shebah Exploration & Production Company Ltd (SEPCOL), the vessel owner, said late Sunday "three crew members have been found alive in the community". —AFP

#### Kenya forest blaze under control

**ABERDARE:** Dozens of forest rangers, firefighters and volunteers struggled yesterday to stem a blaze that broke out in Kenya's Aberdare national park at the weekend, as suspicions of arson emerged. The fire started on Saturday and was still ravaging the park some 36 hours later, as firefighters sought to bring it under control before it spread deeper into the forest. The park was etched in history when Britain's Elizabeth II, then a princess on a visit to Kenya, received news of her father's death while staying at the Treetops hotel, a remote game-watching lodge built high into a tree in the Aberdare forest. Rhino Ark, a conservation charity in Kenya, said it had sent in helicopters to conduct aerial surveys of the area to estimate the extent of damage to the forest cover. "Thirty-five trained firefighters have been deployed by chopper on the southern fireline," the group said on Twitter yesterday.—AFP