

International

Thousands of security forces on alert ahead of Philippine polls

We are confident that we'll have a secure and orderly election: Colonel Ramon Zagala

MANILA: More than 60,000 security forces in the Philippines were on alert Sunday to safeguard ballots and polling stations on the eve of the presidential election, after police reported four people killed in an outbreak of violence. Elections are a traditionally volatile time in a country with lax gun laws and a violent political culture, but the national police said this season has been comparatively peaceful.

In one of the worst incidents, four people were killed Saturday in a gun battle between armed supporters of mayoral rivals in Magsingal town in the northern province of Ilocos Sur, said police spokesman Brigadier-General Roderick Alba. Another four were wounded. Police in the northern province of Nueva Ecija also arrested two dozen people and seized weapons, including five M-16 rifles, a 12-gauge shotgun and 15 handguns, following a shoot-out between bodyguards of two candidates running for mayor of General Tinio.

Five people were wounded in the incident, which also left the same number of sports utility vehicles riddled with bullets, Alba said. More than 18,000 posts, from president to town councillor, are up for grabs in the elections.

The son of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos looks set to win the presidential vote by a landslide, returning the clan to the pinnacle of political power. Rights groups, Catholic church leaders and opponents see the elections as a make-or-break moment

for the country's democracy, amid fears Marcos Junior could rule with a heavy fist.

Personnel from the police, armed forces and coast guard have fanned out across the archipelago to help secure polling stations and ballots, escort election officials and guard checkpoints. The security deployment involves around 48,000 soldiers and 16,000 police, officials said.

"Based on our planning... we are confident that we'll have a secure and orderly election," said armed forces spokesman Colonel Ramon Zagala. There have been 16 "validated election-related incidents" since January 9, including four shootings and a "slight illegal detention", Alba said.

That compares with 133 incidents during the 2016 presidential elections and 60 in the 2019 mid-term polls. Police spokeswoman Colonel Jean Fajardo attributed the sharp drop to a heightened security presence, as well as military and police operations targeting "loose firearms" and private armed groups. The election commission largely prohibits the carrying of weapons during the election period that lasts until June 8.

'Stay awake'

Experts say the explosion of social media, which has made it easier to report incidents, and the growing domination of political dynasties, which smother electoral competition, have helped tamp down election violence. In the country's deadliest



MANILA: Police officers check documents of motorists at a check point along a road in Manila City, on May 8, 2022, a day before the May 9 presidential election. —AFP

single incident of political violence on record, 58 people were massacred in 2009 as gunmen allegedly belonging to a local warlord in the southern Philippines attacked a group of people to stop a rival filing his election candidacy.

Thirty-two of the victims were journalists covering the contest, making the attack also the deadliest on record against media professionals. The introduction of electronic voting in 2010 has made it harder for widespread vote-rigging that has histori-

cally plagued Philippine elections.

But Marcos Jr, who still insists he was cheated of victory in the 2016 vice presidential race, has warned of electoral fraud in these polls and urged his supporters to be alert. "We will win as long as you stay awake on Monday so there won't be another tragedy," Marcos Jr told hundreds of thousands of fans at his final campaign rally on Saturday. "Many undesirable things happen if we stop paying attention." —AFP

Crowds jeer Sri Lankan PM on rare outing

COLOMBO: Boos and heckles greeted Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa on Sunday on his first public outing since nationwide protests erupted demanding his ruling family resign over the worsening economic crisis.

Months of blackouts and acute shortages of food, fuel and medicines have caused widespread suffering across the South Asian island in its worst economic downturn since independence in 1948. On Sunday, the premier visited one of the holiest Buddhist temples housing a reputedly 2,300-year-old tree-in Anuradhapura.

But dozens of people carried hand-written placards and chanted slogans demanding that "thieves" be banned from the sacred city, 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of Colombo. "We will worship you if you stand down (as Prime Minister) and leave," one man shouted. Heavily armed Special Task Force (STF) commandos were deployed while police moved to clear the road for Rajapaksa's convoy of six vehicles.

Officials said the premier would return to the capital by helicopter. Several major roads in the country are blocked by people protesting the lack of cooking gas, petrol and diesel.

Looting

In the capital, a truck transporting cooking gas was looted Sunday by crowds who had been waiting in line overnight for supplies. Outnumbered police watched helplessly as men climbed onto the truck and got away with 84 cylinders of gas, officials said.

The government imposed a state of emergency granting the military sweeping powers to arrest and detain people on Friday, after trade unions brought the country to a virtual standstill in a bid to pressure President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to step down.

S Korea's president to get tough on North

SEOUL: South Korea's hawkish new president will be sworn in Tuesday, and he looks set to get tough with Pyongyang, departing from what he has called the "subservient" approach of his predecessor. For the past five years, Seoul has pursued a policy of engagement with North Korea, brokering summits between Kim Jong Un and then-US president Donald Trump while reducing joint US military drills Pyongyang sees as provocative.

But talks collapsed in 2019 and have languished since, while the nuclear-armed North has dramatically ramped up weapons tests, conducting 15 so far this year, including the launch of its largest-ever intercontinental ballistic missile. Unlike outgoing President Moon Jae-in, who saw North Korea as a negotiating partner, incoming leader Yoon Suk-yeol sees the country as an adversary, said Cheong Seong-chang of the Center for North Korea Studies at the Sejong Institute.

Yoon has pledged to officially define Pyongyang as South Korea's "principal enemy", Cheong added, and has not ruled out pre-emptive strikes on the North. This hard-line stance appears to have already annoyed Pyongyang.

On Thursday, North Korean propaganda website Urminzokkiri said Yoon was stirring up "confrontational madness" and it was "preposterous" for him to discuss pre-emptive strikes.

Rough ride

Moon, who met Kim four times while in office,



COLOMBO: Buddhist monks participate in an anti-government demonstration demanding President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation over the country's crippling economic crisis, outside Sri Lanka's president office building in Colombo. —AFP

The defence ministry said in a statement Sunday that anti-government demonstrators were behaving in a "provocative and threatening manner" and disrupting essential services. Unions said they would stage daily protests from Monday to pressure the government to revoke the emergency.

President Rajapaksa, who is the brother of the prime minister Mahinda, has not been seen in public since tens of thousands attempted to storm his private residence in Colombo on March 31. Since April 9, thousands have been camping in front of his office in Colombo.

Divine intervention

Mahinda Rajapaksa's visit to Anuradhapura is part of a flurry of religious activity by the ruling family as it clings to power in the Buddhist-majority nation. Local media reported that the president's personal shaman, Gnana Akka, had charmed bottled

water and delivered it to the protest site in the hope the movement would fizzle out. Another report said the premier's wife Shiranthi, a Catholic, had visited a Hindu temple seeking divine help for her family's bid to remain in power.

Official sources say the president may ask his brother Mahinda to stand down in an effort to clear the way for a unity government to navigate Sri Lanka through the crisis. But the country's largest opposition party has already said it will not join any government helmed by a member of the Rajapaksa clan. Sri Lanka was hit by an economic crisis after the coronavirus pandemic hammered income from tourism and remittances. In April, the country announced it was defaulting on its \$51 billion foreign debt.

Finance Minister Ali Sabry warned last week that the country will have to endure unprecedented economic hardship for at least two more years. —AFP



SEOUL: File picture shows South Korea's new president-elect Yoon Suk Yeol (C) of the main opposition People Power Party gestures to his supporters as he is congratulated outside the party headquarters in Seoul. —AFP

sought to avoid harsh rhetorical exchanges with Pyongyang, prioritising engagement. But Cheong warned of a rough ride ahead and said he expected no summits. Instead of delicate diplomacy, Yoon wants the "complete and verifiable denuclearisation" of North Korea—something that is anathema to Kim, said Hong Min, a researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification.

Calling for Kim to give up his nukes first is "too high a hurdle for the North to accept" and looks set to put a final nail in the coffin of Moon's cherished programme of engagement, Hong told AFP. Avowed anti-feminist Yoon won the election in March by the narrowest margin ever, and has since backed off some of his more explosive domestic campaign promises, chiefly his vow to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality. —AFP

Record 12.3m Syrian children need aid: UN

BEIRUT: More Syrian children are in need than at any time since a devastating civil war erupted over a decade ago, but funding for them is "dwindling", the United Nations warned Sunday. "Syria's children have suffered for far too long and should not suffer any longer," the UN children's agency said in a statement, noting that 12.3 million were in need of aid both inside the country and in the wider region where they had fled.

"More than 6.5 million children in Syria are in need of assistance, the highest number recorded since the beginning of the crisis, more than 11 years ago," it added. Syria's war is estimated to have killed nearly half a million people and displaced millions since it began with a brutal crackdown of anti-government protests in 2011. It escalated to pull in foreign powers and global jihadists.

"Children's needs, both inside Syria and in neighbouring countries, are growing," said Adele Khodr, UNICEF's Middle East chief. "Many families struggle to make ends meet. Prices of basic supplies including food are skyrocketing, partially as a result of the crisis in Ukraine."

Children are among the most vulnerable and the UN warned they are bearing the brunt of the impact. "In Syria's neighbouring countries, strained by political instability and fragility, nearly 5.8 million children depend on assistance, their lives riddled with poverty and hardship," Khodr added. —AFP

News in brief

Care home fire kills 4

SOPIA: A fire at a retirement home in eastern Bulgaria has killed four residents, police said Sunday, the latest blaze to strike a care home in the country. An 88-year-old woman and three men aged 73-78 died in the overnight blaze in the city of Varna, regional police official Petya Kupova said. An 83-year-old woman was clinging to life, Kupova said. Investigators have not ruled out arson by a resident suffering psychiatric problems at the home which lacks care staff, particularly at night. Last July, four people died in a fire at another home with the same owner and in November, nine people perished at a home also in the Varna region. Probes into those fires are still underway but prosecutors have said numerous rules were being broken in retirement homes around the region. The latest blaze follows complaints from relatives of residents of a psychiatric clinic about ill-treatment and even deaths shortly after admission to the facility. —AFP

Coastguard rescues 106 migrants

ATHENS: Greece's coastguard on Sunday said it had rescued 106 migrants including many children from a half-sunken sailing boat on the Aegean Sea. A coastguard statement said the migrants were found late on Saturday near the southeastern island of Kos, a short distance from the Turkish coast. The group, of various nationalities which were not disclosed, included 14 women and 20 children. No other people are considered to be missing in the incident, the coastguard said. —AFP

Siberia fires kill 10

MOSCOW: Fires that have broken out across southwestern Siberia have killed at least 10 people and damaged hundreds of buildings, local authorities said on Saturday. Hundreds of firefighters are trying to contain the blazes, which are a rare occurrence in the region during May and have been fuelled by lack of rain and fierce winds, they said. In the Krasnoyarsk region, at least five people lost their lives in the fires, which damaged around 450 homes, the local authorities said, declaring a state of emergency. In the Kemerovo region, three people were found dead in a burnt home. In the Omsk region, two people died. "Extinguishing (the fires) is being complicated by meteorological conditions—violent winds are fanning the flames and preventing them from being put out," the regional ministry for emergencies in Krasnoyarsk said on Telegram. —AFP

Iran arrests 3 policemen

TEHRAN: Three Iranian policemen have been arrested in Tehran, state media reported Sunday, after a video appearing to show the officers violently arresting a woman sparked outrage. The police officers who violently arrested a young woman in Lavasan in eastern Tehran have been detained, the government-run Iran newspaper reported. A short video has sparked anger in recent days on social media in Iran, showing three police officers forcing a woman into a police car. The date of the incident is unknown. In the footage, a woman is seen screaming as she pleads to a man in civilian clothing, who pushes her to the ground in front of a police officer and another man in uniform. —AFP