

International

Philippine lawmaker accused of organising governor's murder

Police have arrested 11 people over the audacious attack

MANILA: A Philippine lawmaker has been accused of organising the murder of a provincial governor last month, officials said Monday, after an investigation into one of the country's deadliest political attacks in years. Gunmen wearing military-style uniforms shot and killed Roel Degamo, governor of the central province of Negros Oriental, and eight others in Degamo's home.

Police have arrested 11 people over the audacious attack in the sugarcane-growing heartland of the Philippines. A twelfth suspect was killed in a shoot-out. Arnolfo Teves, who represents a Negros Oriental district in the national Congress, was alleged to be the mastermind of the shooting, Justice Secretary Crispin Remulla told reporters.

Teves, who is overseas, has denied involvement in Degamo's murder. The congressman's brother, Henry Teves, was unseated as governor of Negros Oriental after the election commission declared in September that Degamo was the rightful winner of the 2022 election following a vote count.

The Supreme Court upheld the decision in February. Arnolfo Teves' longtime bodyguard Marvin Miranda allegedly recruited the shooters, Remulla said, likening the crime to a movie. "Marvin was the director, producer of the props and casting director. He recruited the men," he said. "Congressman Teves was the producer or executive producer of the whole production."

Arnolfo Teves could face charges for murder and illegal possession of firearms once a preliminary investigation wrapped up, Remulla said. He has been suspended from the House of Representatives for 60 days after failing to return home and report for work after his authority to travel abroad expired.

His lawyer, Ferdinand Topacio, accused the justice department and the police of subjecting suspects in the case to "improper pressure and influence" to make them testify against his client. "These acts evince not just the weakness of the government's case, but an illegal scheme to manipulate the evidence to unfoundedly incriminate a person," Topacio said in a message sent to AFP. Degamo campaigned for President Ferdinand Marcos when he ran for the nation's top job last year. Marcos has condemned the "dastardly and heinous" assassination of his political ally and has sent his top officials, including police and military chiefs, to investigate.

The Philippines has a long history of attacks on politicians. In the bloodiest politically motivated ambush on record, the leaders of a powerful southern clan and about two dozen followers were sentenced to life in prison for a 2009 attack on supporters of a gubernatorial election rival in Maguindanao province. Fifty-eight people were killed in the attack, including the politician's wife and relatives, along with 32 journalists and media workers who were covering the race. — AFP



SIATON: File photo shows supporters attending the funeral procession of Roel Degamo, governor of Negros Oriental province, in Siaton, Negros Oriental. Three people have been arrested over the murder of a Philippine provincial governor and eight others. — AFP

Headmistress guilty of sexual abuse at Australian school

MELBOURNE: A former headmistress was found guilty on Monday of sexually assaulting two sisters at an ultra-orthodox Jewish school in Australia, 15 years after she escaped arrest by fleeing to Zionist territory. Malka Leifer was guilty on 18 charges, the jury said, including raping a student during a sleep-over and sexually assaulting another teenage pupil during a school camp.

She was cleared of a further nine charges. Leifer was the principal of the Adass Zionist School in Melbourne when she was first accused of sexual assault in 2008. A dual Zionist-Australian citizen, Leifer fled to Zionist territory before she could be arrested, sparking a drawn-out court battle spanning more than 70 extradition hearings.

The fugitive mother-of-eight was fi-

nally flown back to Australia in 2021 and was put on trial in February this year. Prosecutors alleged during the trial that Leifer sexually assaulted three sisters who were studying at the Adass Zionist School, which is part of a reclusive Jewish sect on the city's outskirts.

After a seven-week trial, and seven days of deliberations, the jury convicted Leifer of sexually assaulting two of the sisters. Leifer, who has maintained her innocence throughout, sat with her hands folded and stared straight ahead as the verdicts were read.

Abuse of power

Leifer's abuse "held us hostage for many years", said one of the sisters, Dassi Erlich. "Today we can start to take that power back that she stole from us as children," she told reporters outside the court. Another sister, Elly Sapper, said justice had been served. "She abused the three of us for so many years and while today's verdict may not properly reflect that, today Malka Leifer was finally found accountable," Elly Sapper said.

The court heard how Leifer had abused her high standing within the Adass community to prey on the sisters. According to an

indictment, Leifer raped one student in 2006 after inviting her home to "sleep over for kallah lessons"—a kind of pre-wedding etiquette class that includes sexual education.

On other occasions Leifer told the students she was preparing them to be wives, prosecutor Justin Lewis told the court in his opening statement. "This will help you for your wedding night," Leifer said after one sexual assault, according to Lewis. "This is what is good for you," she allegedly said during another incident. Leifer fled Australia in 2008 after one of the students confided in her therapist about the sexual assaults. She eventually settled in the ultra-orthodox Emmanuel settlement in the occupied West Bank.

Secretly filmed

Australian police filed charges against Leifer in 2012 and requested her extradition from Zionist territory two years later, sparking a lengthy legal saga. Leifer claimed that crippling depression had left her catatonic and that she was mentally incapable of standing trial. The extradition process was suspended—until a private investigator secretly filmed Leifer going about her daily chores,



MELBOURNE: Sisters Elly Sapper (L), Nicole Meyer (C) and Dassi Erlich (R) speak to the media outside the County Court in Melbourne on April 3, 2023 after the trial of former school principal Malka Leifer. — AFP

apparently unaffected by the mental illnesses she had claimed.

She was eventually extradited to Melbourne in 2021. Defence lawyer Ian Hill previously said Leifer denied "all of

the criminal conduct alleged by each of the complainants" and that her interactions with the students were "professional and proper". "We deny that they are telling the truth," he said.—AFP

Malaysia MPs vote to axe mandatory death penalty

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's parliament passed a bill Monday to remove mandatory death sentences, with rights groups welcoming the vote as an "important step" that could have a knock-on effect elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Convictions for several offences, including murder and drug trafficking, previously came with automatic death penalties, giving judges no leeway. The bill does not scrap death sentences, but grants judges the option to instead impose lengthy prison sentences of between 30 to 40 years under certain conditions. Speaking before the lower house of Malaysia's parliament, Deputy Law Minister Ramkarpal Singh said: "We cannot arbitrarily ignore the existence of the inherent right to life of every individual." Malaysia has had a moratorium on executions since 2018, but courts have continued to send inmates to death row.

The reform will still have to clear the senate, but is widely expected to pass without major opposition. Human Rights Watch deputy Asia director Phil Robertson called Monday's vote an "important step forward for Malaysia", and hopes it will add pressure for other Southeast Asian nations to follow suit.

"This is an important breakthrough that will cause some serious conversations in the halls of upcoming ASEAN meetings," he told AFP, referring to the 10-member Southeast Asian bloc. "Malaysia should show regional leadership by encouraging other governments in ASEAN to re-think their continued use of the death penalty, starting with Singapore which has recently gone on a post-COVID execution spree." — AFP

Taiwan president makes tour stop in Belize

BELIZE CITY: Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen arrived in Belize on Sunday for the last stop of a Central America tour to shore up relations a week after Honduras became the latest country to switch ties to Beijing. Tsai was greeted with military honors and a red carpet welcome as she arrived in Belize City from neighboring Guatemala, which she said Taiwan would "continue assisting." Guatemala vowed in turn to maintain "recognition of the sovereignty" of Taiwan.

Tsai was to meet in the evening with people of Taiwanese origin before conferring on Monday with Prime Minister John Briceno, state television reported. The two are expected to reaffirm bilateral ties in the wake of Honduras cutting off diplomatic relations with Taiwan in late March to recognize China instead.

That reduced the number of countries maintaining diplomatic ties with Taipei to 13, including Guatemala and Belize. China considers self-ruled, democratic Taiwan part of its territory to be retaken one day, and does not allow other countries to recognize both

Beijing and Taipei. Taiwan said that before Honduras decided to cut ties, it had asked for money, but Taipei would "not engage in a meaningless cash diplomacy contest with China."

On Sunday in Guatemala, Tsai said her country would "continue assisting the substantial and prolonged development of its diplomatic allies," as she visited a hospital built with a donation of \$22 million from Taipei.

"We will not stop working with the world's democratic partners," she said. Tsai was accompanied by her Guatemalan counterpart Alejandro Giammattei, who vowed his country would maintain "recognition of the sovereignty of the Republic of China, Taiwan."

He also spoke out against "tensions generated by mainland China in the Taiwan Strait, which sow anxiety and snatch happiness and peace from the citizens of the Republic of China, Taiwan." Tensions in the Taiwan Strait soared to their highest level in years in August 2022 after then-US House speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taipei, with Beijing staging days of air and sea exercises around the island. "May God bless the Republic of Taiwan and its yearning for peace, longing for freedom and the right to the full exercise of sovereignty. Long live the Republic of China!" the Guatemalan president exclaimed.

Philippines announces four military bases US troops can use

MANILA: The Philippines announced Monday the location of four additional military bases to be used by US troops, with one site near the hotly disputed South China Sea and another not far from Taiwan. The longtime treaty allies agreed in February to expand cooperation in "strategic areas" of the Philippines as they seek to counter China's growing assertiveness over self-governed Taiwan and the building of Chinese bases in the South China Sea.

The 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, known as EDCA, gave US forces access to five Philippine bases. It was expanded to nine, but the locations of the four additional bases were withheld until Monday while the government consulted with local officials.

The four sites had been assessed by the

Philippine military and deemed "suitable and mutually beneficial", the Presidential Communications Office said in a statement. It said the bases would also be used for humanitarian and relief operations during disasters.

A US official confirmed that the locations announced by the palace were the new EDCA sites. Three of the sites are in the northern Philippines, including a naval base and airport in Cagayan province and an army camp in the neighbouring province of Isabela, the Philippine statement said.

The naval base at Cagayan's Santa Ana is about 400 kilometres (250 miles) from Taiwan. Another site will be an air base on Balabac Island, off the southern tip of Palawan Island, near the South China Sea.

Cagayan Governor Manuel Mamba has publicly opposed having EDCA sites in his province for fear of jeopardising Chinese investment and becoming a target in a conflict over Taiwan. But Philippine acting defence chief Carlito Galvez told reporters recently the government had already decided on the sites and that Mamba had agreed to "abide with the decision". The agreement allows US troops to rotate

through the bases and also store defence equipment and supplies at them.

The pact stalled under former president Rodrigo Duterte, who favoured China over the Philippines' former colonial master. But President Ferdinand Marcos, who succeeded Duterte in June, has adopted a more US-friendly foreign policy and has sought to accelerate the implementation of the EDCA. Marcos has insisted he will not let Beijing trample on Manila's maritime rights. While the Philippine military is one of the weakest in Asia, the country's proximity to Taiwan and its surrounding waters would make it a key partner for the United States in the event of a conflict with China.

Beijing has been critical of the agreement, which its embassy in the Philippines said recently was part of "US efforts to encircle and contain China through its military alliance with this country". The Chinese embassy did not respond immediately to a request for comment.

The United States has a long and complex history with the Philippines. They share a decades-old mutual defence treaty, but the presence of US troops in the



FORT MAGSAYSAY, Philippines: This photo taken on March 31, 2023 shows US army soldiers demonstrating to their Philippine counterparts the operation of a high mobility rocket system (HIMARS) prior to a live fire exercise. — AFP

Southeast Asian country remains a sensitive issue. The United States had two major military bases in the Philippines but they were closed in the early 1990s after grow-

ing nationalist sentiment. US troops return to the Philippines every year for joint military exercises, including Balikatan, which kicks off next week. — AFP