



MOGADISHU (Reuters) -- More than 300 people were killed by twin bomb explosions in Mogadishu, an official said on Monday, as locals packed hospitals in search of friends and relatives caught by Somalia's deadliest attack in a decade.

The death toll has steadily risen since Saturday, when the blasts struck at two busy junctions in the heart of the capital city. One truck bomb detonated near a fuel truck, creating an enormous fireball.

The bomb attacks were the deadliest since militant group Al-Shabaab began an insurgency in 2007. The Takfiri group has not claimed responsibility, but the method and type of attack - a large truck bomb - is increasingly used by the Al Qaeda-linked organization.

"We have confirmed 300 people died in the blast. The death toll will still be higher because some people are still missing," Abdikadir Abdurahman, the director of the city's ambulance service, told Reuters.

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) -- An overcrowded boat carrying Rohingya Muslims fleeing Myanmar capsized Monday in the Bay of Bengal near a Bangladeshi fishing village, killing 12 people, including six children, police said.

Survivors of the capsizing told local officials that up to 65 people were on board and almost half of them were children, local police official Sheikh Ashrafuzzaman said. The capsizing occurred as the boat was approaching Shah Porir Dwip in Teknaf in Cox's Bazar district bordering Myanmar's Rakhine state.

He said villagers told police they recovered five bodies and at least 21 people survived.

Including Monday's capsizing, boat accidents have killed at least 184 Rohingya trying to reach Bangladesh.

HANOI (AFP) -- Vietnam braced Monday for fresh storms as the official death toll from last week's floods and landslides rose to 72.

Downpours lashed much of northern and central Vietnam last week, causing floods and landslides that killed dozens, wiped out thousands of homes and left at least 30 missing in one of the country's worst weather disasters for years.

The desperate search for the missing continued on Monday, with officials trying to clear roads as Tropical Depression Khanun barreled towards northern Vietnam.

Forecasters said Khanun has weakened from a typhoon after passing south of Hong Kong. But it threatens to bring heavy rain and more misery to areas already hard hit by floods and landslides, including Hoa Binh province where 23 died last week.

The province declared a state of emergency on Monday over warnings that more landslides could occur as Khanun approached.

MANILA (AFP) -- The Philippines' military chief vowed no letup Monday in hunting down and destroying extremist groups loyal to Daesh, saying Marawi City would be retaken within days after the pivotal killing of two top rebel commanders.

General Eduardo Ano said the successful operation to take out the two leaders was a "triumph of good over evil" and urged the 30 militants remaining in a shrinking combat zone to surrender and free hostages as troops stepped up their fight.

"It will be just a matter of days before it will finally be declared that Marawi has been liberated from the clutches of terrorists," Ano told a televised news conference. "There will be no let up. It's about time to end these terrorists."

Isnilon Hapilon, Daesh's appointed "emir" in Southeast Asia, was shot in the head by a sniper and Omarkhayam Maute, one of two Middle East-educated "Khalifas" at the helm of the militant alliance, died of a chest wound in a targeted operation during the night, officials said.

PARIS (AFP) -- A new law banning cat-calling and harassment of women on French streets will see men fined on the spot for lecherous and aggressive behavior, France's women's minister said Monday.

The legislation is being piloted by 34-year-old Marlene Schiappa, a feminist and early supporter of French President Emmanuel Macron who wants to tackle sexist male attitudes in public spaces.

"It's completely necessary because at the moment street harassment is not defined in the law," she told RTL radio on Monday in a major interview to outline the law, which is to be voted next year.

The escalating scandal over Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's alleged sexual assaults on a string of actresses has rekindled debate on sexual harassment and predation in France.

LEOGANE, Haiti (AFP) -- About 40 people remain missing after a migrant vessel sank off the northern coast of Haiti, authorities said Monday.

Nine people have so far been rescued by search teams scouring the seas off the island of La Tortue, Haiti's civil emergency agency said, adding they were pessimistic about the prospect of more survivors.

The vessel sank after leaving La Tortue on Sunday for Providenciales island in the northern Turks and Caicos archipelago, 200 kilometers (120 miles) to the north.

According to the survivors, three of whom were hospitalized on their return to Haiti, the vessel was carrying 50 people when it sank.

Spain Prepares for Direct Rule Over Catalonia



Pro-independence supporters are holding the European Union flag during a rally in Barcelona on Oct. 10, 2017.

MADRID/BARCELONA (Dispatches) -- Spain's government set the clock ticking Monday on imposing direct rule over Catalonia, after the region's leader missed a deadline to clarify whether he had declared independence.

The wealthy region threatened to break away following a referendum in Oct. 1 that Spain's Constitutional Court said was illegal. That plunged the country into its worst political crisis since an attempted military coup in 1981.

Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont made a symbolic declaration of independence last Tuesday, but suspended it seconds later and called for negotiations with Madrid on the region's future.

Madrid had given Puigdemont until Monday 10:00 a.m. (0800 GMT) to clarify his position on independence with a "Yes" or "No," and until Thursday to change his mind if he insisted on a split - saying Madrid would suspend Catalonia's autonomy if he chose secession.

Catalan authorities will not respond Thursday to the Spanish government's order that they clarify whether they have declared independence from Spain, Catalonia's TV3 reported Monday, citing sources.

Justice Minister Rafael Catala said on Monday the answer that Puigdemont had given in a letter to Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy was

not valid.

"The question was clear but the answer is not," Catala told journalists.

While the government had not yet taken a decision and was still analyzing the letter, it would take steps once the Thursday deadline has expired.

In his letter, Puigdemont did not directly answer the independence question.

The Catalan leader said instead that the two men should meet as soon as possible to open a dialogue over the next two months.

A declaration of independence would trigger Article 155 of the 1978 constitution, under which the government in Madrid can impose direct rule on any of Spain's 17 autonomous communities if they break the law.

The central government can then sack the local administration and install a new governing team, take control of the police and finances, and call for a snap election.

The Catalan government says 90% of Catalans voted for a breakaway in the referendum. But most opponents of independence boycotted it, reducing turnout to around 43%.

Catalan police chief Josep Lluís Trapero was due to appear before Spain's High Court on Monday to be questioned over whether his force, the Mossos d'Esquadra, deliberately failed to enforce the court ban on the independence referendum.

Maduro Supporters Claim Landslide Election Victory



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro (C) speaks during a meeting with government members after the announcement of the results of the nationwide election for new governors in Caracas, October 15, 2017.

CARACAS, Venezuela (Dispatches) -- Pro-government candidates have swept to victory in Venezuelan gubernatorial races according to official results that have quickly been challenged by the country's opposition.

Tibisay Lucena, president of the government-stacked National Electoral Council, announced late Sunday that the socialist party had won 17 of 22 races in which the outcomes were considered irreversible, with one other race too close to call.

The council said 61% of the nation's 18 million voters participated. Gerardo Blyde, an opposition leader, however claimed the official results were fraudulent.

"There is a wide disparity between the poll numbers and the results which show that these elections were not free and fair and don't reflect the will of the people," Michael Shifter, president of the U.S.-based Inter-American Dialogue, claimed.

The opposition called for an audit and urged Venezuelans to mobilize on the streets Monday in support.

President Nicolas Maduro said he had "absolute faith" in the official results but would ask the constitutional assem-

bly to request an audit in order to extinguish any doubts.

"A triumphant victory for Chavismo!" he proclaimed, referring to the movement founded by his predecessor and mentor, Hugo Chavez.

The disputed result threatened to heighten an already sometimes-violent standoff between the government and opposition. Four months of anti-government protests that began in April left at least 120 people dead, mostly young men in their 20s and 30s.

In August, a new assembly was installed to rewrite the constitution following an election boycotted by the opposition.

While many Venezuelans express anger at the government, many too say they are frustrated with opposition leaders they perceive as disorganized.

Government supporters said the count is proof that the movement started by Chavez remains alive and well, despite Maduro's low approval ratings. "The cradle of the revolution doesn't surrender," said Argenis Chavez, the late president's brother and declared winner of the race in Barinas state, where Hugo Chavez spent his early years.

U.S., South Korea Begin Naval Drills



The USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier arrives in Hong Kong, Oct. 2, 2017 to participate in joint drills with South Korea.

SEOUL (Dispatches) -- The United States and South Korea on Monday launched a joint naval exercise in a fresh show of force against North Korea over its growing missile and nuclear threats.

Tensions have soared in the Korean Peninsula in recent months, with Pyongyang carrying out a series of missile launches and its sixth nuclear test in the face of belligerent rhetoric from U.S. President Donald Trump.

The United States has also ramped up military drills with South Korea and Japan, its two closest allies in the region.

The 10-day drills are taking place on the southern side of the de fac-

to maritime border known as the Northern Limit Line, the spokesman added.

The U.S. navy said earlier that the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier and two U.S. destroyers would take part.

North Korea's state-run KCNA news agency on Saturday called the Ronald Reagan's participation a "reckless act of war maniacs as it only drives the tense situation on the peninsula into the point of explosion."

The exercises are the latest instance of U.S. military hardware movements around the Korean Peninsula.

On Friday the nuclear-powered submarine USS Michigan arrived in

the southern port of Busan, according to Yonhap news agency, days after another nuclear-powered submarine -- the USS Tucson -- left.

Last week the U.S. flew two supersonic heavy bombers over the Korean Peninsula, staging the first night-time joint aviation exercises with Japan and South Korea.

The U.S. is showcasing a line-up of its warplanes including the B-1B bomber, and F-22 and F-35 stealth fighters at the Seoul International Aerospace and Defense Exhibition which opens Tuesday.

Organizers said the event was a showcase for South Korean arms exporters, rather than a platform for foreign manufacturers as in the past, but added that the display of Seoul and Washington's newest military assets would send a strong message about the allies' readiness.

President Donald Trump has engaged in an escalating war of words with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, trading personal insults and threats of military strikes and raising concerns about an outbreak of hostilities.

The North's missile and nuclear capabilities have made significant progress under Kim, who told party officials this month that the country's atomic weapons were a "treasured sword" to protect it from aggression.

Kurz Poised for Victory as Austria Swings to Right



Sebastian Kurz, head of Austrian People's Party, talks to the media after casting his vote in Vienna Oct. 15, 2017.

VIENNA (Reuters) -- Young conservative star Sebastian Kurz is on track to become Austria's next leader after an election on Sunday, but his party is far short of a majority and likely to seek a coalition with the resurgent far right.

Foreign Minister Kurz, who is just 31, managed to propel his People's Party to first place by taking a hard line on immigration that left little space between it and the far-right Freedom Party (FPO).

Both parties increased their share of the vote from the last parliamentary election in 2013, projections showed, marking a sharp shift to the right in the wake of Europe's mi-

gration crisis. Chancellor Christian Kern's Social Democrats were in a close race with the FPO for second place.

"I am truly overwhelmed," Kurz told cheering supporters at an election party after polls closed. "We made the impossible possible. Thank you very much for your commitment and this historic success."

He was less effusive about his coalition plans. Kurz repeatedly declined to say which option he favored, adding that he wanted to await the count of postal ballots that will settle the race for second place.

The bulk of those ballots, which are roughly a sixth of those cast, was

to be counted on Monday.

"Let's give it a couple of days. Then we will see what the result really looks like," Kurz told broadcaster ORF when pressed on what he plans to do. He said he intended to talk to all parties in parliament and did not rule out forming a minority government.

Austria, a wealthy country of 8.7 million people that stretches from Slovakia to Switzerland, was a gateway into Germany for more than 1 million people during the migration crisis that began in 2015. Many of them were fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Austria also took in roughly one percent of its population in asylum seekers in 2015, one of the highest proportions on the continent. Many voters feel the country was overrun.

Kurz's strategy of focusing on that issue appears to have paid off, despite economic growth on track to be the fastest in six years and falling unemployment touted by Kern, who depicted Kurz as the candidate of the rich.

Kurz, named party leader only in May, called an end to the current alliance with the Social Democrats, forcing Sunday's snap election. He has pledged to shake up Austrian politics, dominated for decades by coalitions between those two parties.

Police Fire Tear Gas to Halt Protests in Kenya

NAIROBI (Reuters) -- Kenyan police used tear gas to disperse opposition protesters on Monday in the capital Nairobi and another city as demonstrations against a presidential vote re-run continued despite a government ban.

Kenya's supreme court nullified the presidential election result in August, citing procedural irregularities and voiding the victory of President Uhuru Kenyatta. The ruling opened the way to a repeat vote on Oct. 26.

But opposition leader Raila Odinga has refused to take part, saying the re-run should not happen until major reforms are introduced to prevent another failed vote.

The election board has said the polls will go ahead anyway, pitting Kenyatta against six other candidates, none of whom polled more than 1 percent in August.

The standoff has spooked investors in the region's most advanced economy and is slowing growth. Last month,

Kenya lowered its 2017 economic growth forecast to 5.5 percent due to drought and political uncertainty.

On Sunday, Odinga repeated his call for more protests, which authorities banned in the central business districts of Nairobi, the coastal city of Mombasa and the opposition stronghold of Kisumu in western Kenya.

The events in Kenya have raised confusion among voters and fears that politically-driven violence might escalate.

At a political rally on Monday, Kenyatta accused the opposition of seeking to wreak chaos and force a coalition government, allegations the opposition has denied.

At least 33 people died in Nairobi during a police crackdown on opposition supporters after the August election, including a child and a pregnant woman, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said on Monday. The national police disputed the report, saying it was "totally