



LONDON (AFP) -- The British government on Monday took back control of a privately-run prison after a watchdog found "a dramatic deterioration" and "appalling" conditions. The justice ministry assumed control of HMP Birmingham from private security company G4S, following a damning inspection that found "squalor, violence and the prevalence of drugs and looming lack of control". In a first since Britain began contracting the running of some prisons to private companies in the early 1990s, it will run the jail in central England, one of the largest in the country, for an initial six-month period. The moves follow a scathing critique from Britain's Chief Inspector of Prisons Peter Clarke, who warned Birmingham had "slipped into crisis". He found problems ranging from widespread drug-use and associated violence, to vermin, uncollected rubbish and dilapidated buildings, with staff found asleep or locked in offices during an inspection. Shadow Justice Secretary Richard Burgon said the situation at Birmingham "should be a nail in the coffin for the flawed idea of prison privatization".

MADRID (Reuters) -- Three people were injured when a car mounted a pavement in the northern Spanish town of Casetas Monday, before its driver fled, a Civil Guard police spokesman said. The spokesman could give no more details. The local unit of COPE radio station tweeted that two people in the car were detained shortly afterwards. The injured included a 45-year-old man who was taken to a nearby hospital. Two other people were taken to a different hospital, a civil protection agency spokeswoman said. No details of the victims' medical conditions have been given, the spokeswoman added. Earlier, police said they had shot a man armed with a knife as he tried to attack a police station in the northeastern region of Catalonia. Regional police said on Twitter the man had entered the police station in Cornella, near Barcelona, just before 0400 GMT "with the aim of attacking the officers," adding he had then been shot.

MOSCOW (AFP) -- Daesh Monday claimed responsibility for several attacks against policemen in Russia's Chechnya, the SITE monitoring group reported, citing the militants' main propaganda agency Amaq. "Fighters from the Daesh attacked Chechen police officers and elements in Grozny and Shali in Mesker-Yurt," Amaq said, according to SITE. Officials in Russia confirmed that several policemen were injured by attacks in Grozny and Shali.

RIO DE JANEIRO (AFP) -- At least 14 people were killed Monday in Rio de Janeiro during operations by soldiers and police against drug gangs in impoverished favelas and a suburb, officials and media reports said. The military command heading security in Brazil's second biggest city said eight people died in the sweep of favelas "and there could be more." Local media reported six suspected armed gang members were killed after a car chase in the suburb of Niteroi.

GENEVA (Reuters) -- The UN rights chief said Monday that U.S. President Donald Trump bears "a heavy responsibility" for how the media is portrayed and that his remarks could have a knock-on effect that make the situation for journalists more difficult in other countries. "To label the press in this way is very worrisome," Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini said in an interview before his four-year term ends. "Because it also has a demonstration effect, other leaders in authoritarian settings will do same thing. We've seen now how they mimic President Trump and so what could already be a difficult situation in other countries becomes even more difficult for the press to operate and for journalists to uncover stories and for lawyers to do their work and for human rights defenders to do their work," Zeid said.

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria (Reuters) -- At least 19 people were killed in a Takfiri militant attack on a village in northeast Nigeria in the early hours of Sunday, a survivor of the attack said. The strike is the latest blow to Nigeria's efforts to defeat insurgencies by the Nigerian Boko Haram group and Daesh in West Africa. In recent months, the military has suffered its heaviest defeats in years, commanders have been repeatedly replaced, and special forces soldiers have mutinied. The militants attacked the village of Mailari in the Guzamala region of Borno state at around 2 a.m., according to the survivor, Abataha Umar. He said he had not been able to tell whether they belonged to Boko Haram or to Daesh in West Africa. Umar said he had counted 19 people killed, including his younger brother. An aid worker at a camp that received the survivors, and who declined to be identified, put the death toll at 63.

BRASILIA (Reuters) -- The government of the northern Brazilian state of Roraima Monday asked the country's supreme court to halt the entry of Venezuelan immigrants, as the border state struggles to cope with a flow that has already sparked violent confrontations. Tens of thousands of Venezuelans have poured over the border into Roraima state over the last few years, fleeing economic and political turmoil in their country. The influx has overwhelmed the state's social services and brought a rise in crime, prostitution and disease, and has sparked incidents of xenophobia, Brazilian government officials say.

Russia Will Not Be First to Put Weapons in Space



A Proton-M rocket, carrying a Nimiq 6 communication satellite is raised to the launch pad at the Russian-leased Kazakhstan's Baikonur cosmodrome, on May 14, 2012.

MOSCOW (Reuters) -- Russia does not plan to put weapons in space first and considers this to be an important signal that Washington should not ignore, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency Monday.

The United States last week voiced suspicion over Russia's pursuit of new space weapons, including a mobile laser system to destroy

satellites in space, and the launch of a new inspector satellite which was acting in an "abnormal" way. The Kremlin said Monday Russian President Vladimir Putin still hopes to pull Moscow's ties with Washington out of a deep crisis, but nobody will go into mourning if this ambition is not reciprocated by the United States. Moscow is bracing itself for a slew of new U.S. sanctions despite Putin meeting U.S. President Donald Trump

at a summit in Helsinki in July, an encounter both sides said went well.

Initial Russian triumphalism after the summit turned sour however as anger over what some U.S. lawmakers saw as an over deferential Trump performance galvanized a new sanctions push.

The U.S. State Department has said it will impose fresh sanctions by the end of this month, while bi-partisan legislation from senators calls for other curbs to be widened.

Moscow is also bracing itself for potential U.S. measures designed to frustrate its Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on a conference call that the new U.S. sanctions proposals were unfriendly, illegal and would harm world trade.

"Let's wait and see what will happen, if anything," said Peskov, saying any Russian response would be dictated by Russia's own national interests.

"The Russian president is hoping for the best and, despite all this, wants to pull our bilateral ties out of the deep crisis they are in. He (Putin) still has that desire. But at the same time nobody plans to go into mourning if our approach is not reciprocated by Washington."

South Korean Relatives Meet After 60 Years



North and South Korean family members meet during a reunion at North Korea's Mount Kumgang resort, near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas, North Korea, August 20, 2018.

SEOUL (Reuters) -- About 90 families from North and South Korea wept and embraced on Monday as the neighbors held their first reunion events in three years for relatives wrenched apart by the Korean War for more than six decades.

The brief reunions are set to total just 11 hours over the next three days in the North's tourist resort of Mount Kumgang after the neighbors renewed exchanges this year following a standoff over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in agreed to the reunion events at a summit

in April.

About 330 South Koreans from 89 families, many in wheelchairs, embraced 185 separated relatives from the North with tears, joy and disbelief. Some struggled to recognize family not glimpsed in more than 60 years.

"How are you so old?" Kim Dal-in, 92, asked his sister, Yu Dok, after gazing at her briefly in silence.

"I've lived this long to meet you," replied the 85-year-old, wiping away tears as she clasped a photograph of her brother in his youth.

Siblings Kim Gyong Sil, 72 and Gyong Yong, 71, wearing the traditional hanbok dress, colored pale violet,

stood nervously staring at the entrance, awaiting their 99-year-old mother Han Shin-ja. They could not speak for minutes, wailed loudly and rubbed their cheeks and hands.

The separated families are victims of a decades-long political gridlock since the 1950-53 war ended in a truce rather than a peace treaty, with ties increasingly strained.

More than 57,000 South Korean survivors have registered for the family reunions, which usually end in painful farewells.

For years, Seoul has called for regular meetings between separated families, including the use of video conferences, but the program often fell victim to fragile ties.

Ninety-three families from both sides of the border had been initially due to hold a three-day gathering from Monday, but four South Korean members canceled at the last minute because of poor health, the Red Cross said.

From Thursday, 88 more groups of relatives will meet, comprised of 469 individuals from the South and 128 from the North, Seoul's Unification Ministry says.

For Lee Jong-shik, 81, Monday's reunion was a hard-won second chance to track down his younger brother, Ri Chong Song, after the failure of a 2009 effort when a different individual showed up, to the dismay of the family from the South.

"I tried so hard, too, searching for you for seven years," Ri told his brother.

Death Toll From Floods in India's Kerala Nears 400

KOCHI/NEW DELHI, India (Reuters) -- The death toll rose Monday to nearly 400 in India's southern state of Kerala, reeling under its worst flood in a century, as authorities handed out medicine and disinfectants to ward off disease in thousands of relief camps.

Dozens of people are missing and 1.2 million are sheltering in the camps, state officials said, as water receded and a huge clean-up gathered pace.

"The death toll has risen to 373," an official of the state's disaster management authority told Reuters.

Kerala received rainfall that was more than 40 percent greater than normal for the monsoon season, which runs from June to September, and torrential rain in the last 10 days forced officials to release water from dozens of dangerously full dams.

Federal health minister J.P. Nadda said more than 3,500 medical camps were set up across a region roughly the size of Switzerland, where rains since Aug. 8 have swelled rivers and triggered landslides.

Light to moderate rain was expected across Kerala Monday, promising respite to rescue workers, who have battled rising waters and mudslides to reach tens of thousands of stranded villagers.

The insides of many homes will have about 60 cm of mud, officials said. Wells, commonly used in Kerala, are contaminated and few places have electricity to pump water.

Kochi's airport has suspended operations until Sunday due to waterlogging. National carrier Air India, on Monday began flying turboprop planes from the city's naval airport to the cities of Bangalore and Coimbatore in neighboring states.

To assist passengers, India's aviation regulator asked domestic airlines to cap maximum fares to and from Kerala and nearby airports.

Even though Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan called the flood one of the worst in India's history, displacing more than half a million people, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not yet declared it a national disaster.

State authorities say they are making a case for such a declaration, which prompts greater commitments of funds for relief and rebuilding efforts. But without a yardstick for such a declaration, it could be an uphill task.

Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the opposition Congress party, urged Modi not to discriminate between states controlled by his Bharatiya Janata Party and those such as Kerala, which it does not rule.

Imran Khan Pledges Change in First Address as PM



Pakistani men sit in a barber shop as new Prime Minister Imran Khan gives an address on Aug. 19, 2018.

ISLAMABAD (AFP) -- Imran Khan made his first speech as Pakistan's prime minister late Sunday, giving a wide-ranging, televised address in which he announced reforms targeting corruption and focusing on human development in the rapidly growing country.

Khan addressed the nation for more than an hour, repeating many of his campaign pledges to build an Islamic welfare state but also touching on issues rarely mentioned by Pakistani prime ministers such as fighting child sex abuse and climate change.

Without naming names, he vowed to improve Pakistan's relationship with neighboring countries, and to improve security in restive Balochistan province and the tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan.

"We want peace, because Pakistan cannot prosper until the peace is restored," he said.

Khan said he has retained the interior ministry portfolio for himself as he personally oversees steps against money laundering and graft.

The former cricketer also announced an austerity drive to trim back the trappings of government, such as selling most of the vehicles allotted to the prime minister, cutting down on staff and turning the official residence into a university.

"I will fight the corrupt. Either this

country will survive or the corrupt people," he said.

Khan called for a progressive tax system, vowing to spend the money on the neediest -- such as malnourished children, and justice for victims of abuse -- and on fighting climate change.

Few in Pakistan pay their taxes currently, and he did not explain how he would enforce more taxation, especially on the rich.

Khan's leadership represents the end of decades rotating between two establishment parties, punctuated by periods of army rule.

But he and his cabinet face a myriad of challenges including a faltering economy, militant extremism, water shortages, and a rapidly growing population negating growth in the developing country, among others.

The most pressing is a looming balance-of-payments crisis, with analysts predicting Pakistan will have to go to the International Monetary Fund for a bailout.

Khan did not confirm if his government would ask for the loan, but stated: "We have to stand up on our own feet... By going with a begging bowl, no nation becomes great."

His finance minister Asad Umar has said they will decide by September if they will go to the IMF.

Pope Writes Letter on Sexual Abuse to All Catholics



Pope Francis celebrates a Palm Sunday Mass in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on March 25, 2018.

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) -- Pope Francis, facing sexual abuse crises in several countries, wrote an unprecedented letter to all Catholics Monday, asking each one of them to help root out "this culture of death" and vowing there would be no more cover ups.

In a highly personal letter addressed to "the people of God," Church language for all members, the pope appeared to be launching an appeal for all Catholics to face the crisis together and not let it tear the Church apart.

The Catholic Church in the United States, Chile, Australia, and Ireland -- where the pope is making a two-day visit this weekend -- are reeling from crises involving sexual abuse of minors. Numerous surveys have pointed to plummeting confidence in the Church in those countries and elsewhere.

In his letter, the pope referred to the suffering endured by minors due to sexual abuse at the hands of a "significant number of clerics and consecrated persons."

The Vatican said it was the first time a pope had written to all of the world's some 1.2 billion Catholics about sexual abuse. Past letters on sexual abuse scandals have been addressed to bishops and faithful of individual countries.

"We have realized that these wounds never disappear and that they require us forcefully to condemn these atrocities and join forces in uprooting this culture of death," he said.

"With shame and repentance, we acknowledge as an ecclesial community that we were not where we should have been, that we did not act in a timely manner, realizing the magnitude and the gravity of the damage done to so many lives. We showed no care for the little ones; we abandoned them," Francis wrote.

Last week a grand jury in the U.S. state of Pennsylvania released the findings of the largest-ever investigation of sex abuse in the U.S. Catholic Church, finding that 301 priests in the state had sexually abused minors over the past 70 years.

Victims groups have said that while new policies have been put into place in several countries to alert civil authorities about cases of abuse, the pope still needed to do more to hold accountable bishops who covered it up, mostly by moving priests from parish to parish.

Last month, Theodore McCarrick, the former archbishop of Washington, D.C., and one of the U.S. Church's most prominent figures, stepped down as a cardinal after accusations that he abused two minors about 50 years ago and later abused adult seminarians.

He was believed to be the first cardinal to lose his red hat in nearly a century.

In May, all 34 of Chile's bishops offered their resignation to the pope over a widening sexual abuse crisis there. He has so far accepted five of the resignations.