

Muslims Mark Terrorist Carnage at Mosque in New Zealand



Members of the Muslim community leave after attending a national remembrance service in Christchurch on March 13, 2021.

WELLINGTON (AFP) -- New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told an emotional memorial service marking two years since the Christchurch mosque attacks that the country had “a duty” to support its Muslim community.

Hundreds of people turned out for the service, held amid tight security, to remember the 51 people killed and dozens wounded when a heavily armed gunman opened fire in two mosques on March 15, 2019.

Temel Atacocugu, who was shot nine times in the face, arms and legs, wept as he recalled waiting to be treated with the father of three-year-old Mu-

caad Ibrahim when they learned the toddler had died.

“Suddenly, my pain seemed insignificant,” he said.

Ardern, who was widely praised for the compassion shown to survivors and the families of the victims of the shooting and her swift move to tighten firearms control in New Zealand, said words “despite their healing power” would never change what happened.

“Men, women and children ... were taken in an act of terror. Words will not remove the fear that descended over the Muslim community,” she said, adding the legacy should be “a more inclusive nation, one that stands proud

of our diversity and embraces it and, if called to, defends it staunchly.”

Atacocugu said it was a miracle he was still alive.

“I have since had seven major surgeries and there are more to come. I will carry lots of shrapnels in my body for the rest of my life. Every time I have an X-ray it lights up like a Christmas tree.”

Kiran Munir, whose husband Shaheed Haroon Mahmood was killed in the attack, told the service that the best revenge was to “not be like the enemy. We are learning to rise up again with dignity and move forward as best we can.”

The gunman, self-proclaimed white supremacist Brenton Tarrant, was arrested minutes after the attacks on the Al Noor mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre.

He pleaded guilty to 51 charges of murder, 40 of attempted murder and one of terrorism, and was sentenced last year to life imprisonment without parole, the first time a whole life term has been handed down in New Zealand.

Last week, police arrested a 27-year-old man in Christchurch and charged him with threatening to kill following online threats to the same two mosques.

During the memorial service, armed police were stationed outside the venue and a sniffer dog checked the bags of people entering the building.

At Least Six Killed in New Anti-Coup Protests in Myanmar



Demonstrators walk past sandbag road barriers in the outskirts of Yangon, on March 13, 2021.

YANGON (REUTERS/AFP) -- At least six protesters were killed in police firing in Myanmar overnight, domestic media reported, as activists called for more anti-coup protests on the death anniversary of a student whose killing in 1988 sparked an uprising against the government.

Three people were killed and several injured when police opened fire on a sit-in protest in Mandalay, Myanmar’s second-biggest city, two witnesses told Reuters. Another person was killed in the central town of Pyay and two died in police firing in the commercial capital Yangon overnight, domestic media reported.

“The security forces initially stopped the ambulance from

reaching the injured people and only allowed it later,” a 23-year-old protester in Pyay told Reuters, asking not to be named for fear of retribution.

“By the time they allowed it, one of the injured became critical and he later died.”

Domestic media reported two protesters were killed in police firing in the Tharketa district of Myanmar’s commercial capital Yangon overnight.

DVB News said police opened fire on a crowd that gathered outside the Tharketa police station demanding the release of people arrested.

Across town in Hlaing township, residents alarmed at the presence of police and soldiers in their neighbor-

hood left their homes to protest.

Posters spread on social media calling on people to come out on the streets to protest against the junta and to mark the death anniversary of Phone Maw, who was shot and killed by security forces in 1988 inside what was then known as the Rangoon Institute of Technology campus.

His shooting and that of another student who died a few weeks later sparked widespread protests against the military government known as the 8-8-88 campaign, because they peaked in August that year. An estimated 3,000 people were killed when the army crushed the uprising.

On Feb 1 this year, the generals overthrew the government of Aung San Suu Kyi and detained her and many of her Cabinet colleagues, claiming fraud in the November elections.

More than 70 people have been killed in the South-east Asian nation in widespread protests since then, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) advocacy group said.

UN human rights investigator Thomas Andrews on Friday dismissed as “absurd” comments by a senior Myanmar official that the authorities were exercising “utmost restraint”.

Addressing the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, he called for a united approach to “strip away the junta’s sense of impunity”.

Bolivia Arrests Ex-President Over Role in 2019 Coup

LA PAZ (Dispatches) -- Bolivia’s government arrested former interim President Jeanine Anez on Saturday over involvement in a 2019 coup, which sparked deadly protests and ousted Evo Morales.

Bolivia’s government, which swept back to power in October last year, is seeking the arrest of a raft of officials in Anez’s right-wing former administration as well as ex-police and military leaders they say fomented a coup.

Anez took power in late 2019 after Morales resigned amid orchestrated riots. Morales and his supporters have long said he was forced out in a military-backed coup and have claimed involvement by foreign governments. Morales’ MAS socialist party returned to power in elections in October with President Luis Arce at the helm.

Government Minister Eduardo del Castillo said on Saturday that the Public Prosecutor’s Office issued an arrest warrant for Anez “due to the case of a coup in our country”.

He said the investigation against Anez and her ministers began in December and would follow due process. He confirmed the arrest along with that of Anez of her former justice minister Álvaro Coimbra and former energy minister Rodrigo Guzmán.

“There is no political persecution on our part here, and we do not fear anyone who thinks differently,” he told a news confer-

ence. “What the government is doing is making sure justice exists in our country.”

On Friday evening, Anez shared a link to the arrest warrant on social media, which included her name and those of many of her former Cabinet and said it contained allegations of terrorism and sedition against them.

Anez’s 11-month caretaker administration took Bolivia in a sharply different direction to Morales and had itself detained some members of Morales’ previous government.

Arce, Morales’ former economy minister, won the presidency in a landslide election, enabling Morales to return from exile.

Last week, Morales tweeted in reference to the post-election riots in 2019: “For a democracy with human rights, it is important to eradicate acts of violence like those in November 2019 and investigate violent groups and their regional leaders and submit them to justice.”

Bolivian prosecutors are also seeking to arrest two former commanders accused by the current government of involvement in the purported coup against Morales. The military had urged Morales to resign during the protests in 2019.

A prosecutor issued arrest warrants on Thursday for former police chief Yuri Calderón and former Armed Forces commander Williams Kaliman over allegations of terrorism, sedition and conspiracy.

Sri Lanka to Ban Burqa, Shut Over 1,000 Islamic Schools



A Muslim woman wearing a hijab walks through a street in Colombo, Sri Lanka, April 29, 2019.

COLOMBO (Reuters) -- Sri Lanka will ban the wearing of the burqa and shut more than a thousand Islamic schools, a government minister said on Saturday, the latest actions affecting the country’s minority Muslim population.

Minister for public security Sarath Weerasekera told a news conference he had signed a paper on Friday for cabinet approval to ban the full face covering worn by some Muslim women on “national security” grounds.

“In our early days Muslim women and girls never wore the burqa,” he said. “It is a sign of religious extremism that came about recently. We are definitely going to ban it.”

The wearing of the burqa in the majority-Buddhist nation was temporarily banned in 2019 after the bombing of churches and hotels by takfiri militants that killed more than 250.

Later that year, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, best known for crushing a decades-long insurgency in the north of the country as defense secretary, was elected president after promising a crackdown on extremism.

Rajapaksa is accused of widespread rights abuses during the war, charges he denies.

Weerasekera said the government plans to ban more than a thousand madrassa Islamic schools that he said were flouting national education policy.

“Nobody can open a school and teach whatever you want to the children,” he said.

The government’s moves on burqas and schools follow an order last year mandating the cremation of COVID-19 victims - against the wishes of Muslims, who bury their dead.

This ban was lifted earlier this year after criticism from international rights groups.

Cuba: U.S. Stoking Migration by Encouraging Asylum



A view of Cuban and U.S. flags beside the U.S. Embassy in Havana, December 15, 2020.

HAVANA (Reuters) -- Cuba accused Washington of stoking illegal migration by not processing visas in Havana and making it relatively easy for Cubans to claim asylum, in the wake of a spate of ill-fated clandestine attempts to reach U.S. shores by boat.

The fate of a group of Cubans risking their lives to reach the United States illegally by boat has gripped people on both sides of the Florida Straits after a vessel capsized near the Bahamas a week ago, leaving some people floating in the water for more than 14 hours.

While a Royal Bahamas Defense Force ship has rescued 12 people and recovered one body, several others have not yet been found, including women and two children, the Cuban foreign ministry said in a statement late on Thursday.

Thousands of Cubans used to attempt to emigrate to the United States by boat per year until former U.S. President Barack Obama in 2017 ended a measure granting automatic residence to Cubans who reached U.S. soil, though he left in place some other exceptions to usual migration rules.

Since then, the numbers have dropped but still hover around several hundred per year.

The U.S. Coast Guard has intercepted 87 people of Cuban origin in the

Caribbean in the first six months of the 2021 fiscal year which began on Oct. 1, a spokesman told Reuters. That is an increase on the 49 registered in the full 2020 fiscal year, although this was impacted by the pandemic, and compares with 314 in 2019, the spokesman said.

“Among the factors that constitute incentives for irregular migration are the suspension of the processing and granting of immigrant and non-immigrant visas at the United States Consulate in Havana,” the Cuban foreign ministry said in its statement.

A U.S. State Department official said in response to the statement that it had designated the U.S. embassy in Guyana as the primary site to process immigrant visas for residents of Cuba.

The administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump drew the U.S. embassy in Havana down to skeletal staffing after a series of unexplained health incidents among its diplomats, moving consular services for Cubans to third countries.

Trump’s successor, President Joe Biden, vowed during his campaign to reverse some Trump policy shifts that “have inflicted harm on the Cuban people.” But hopes he might move quickly restore consular services were dampened when the White House said this week a broad Cuba policy shift is not among Biden’s top priorities.

News in Brief

PARIS (Reuters) -- The COVID-19 situation in the Paris region is extremely tense and authorities are ready to take new measures, French Prime Minister Jean Castex said, but he did not announce a tightening of curfew or new regional lockdowns. Despite rising COVID-19 cases, the administration of President Emmanuel Macron has not to date declared a new national lockdown, opting instead to tighten measures locally in hard-hit towns like Nice and Dunkirk, but Paris has been spared so far. “I call on everyone, and especially those who live in the capital, to be extremely careful, wear the mask and respect social distancing. The aim is to reduce the pressure on the hospital system,” Castex said during a visit to a hospital. The number of people with COVID-19 in intensive care units on Friday exceeded 4,000 for the first time since Nov. 26, with nearly 1,100 COVID-19 patients in ICUs in the Paris region alone. In Paris and the surrounding region, healthcare managers say the intensive care units are close to being overloaded.

LONDON (Reuters) -- A London police officer appeared in court on Saturday for the first time after being charged with murder in a case that has caused widespread concern in Britain about women’s safety. Wayne Couzens, 48, is charged with the kidnap and murder of 33-year-old Sarah Everard, who disappeared on the night of March 3 while walking home in south London after visiting a friend. Everard’s remains were found on Wednesday in woodland around 50 miles away in southeast England. Her killing has brought an outpouring of personal accounts from women of their own experiences and fears of walking streets alone at night, and calls for action to tackle this.

LONDON (Reuters) -- Ireland’s foreign minister Simon Coveney said on Saturday that Britain was demonstrating “perverse nationalism” by seeking to reach a trade deal with the United States before the European Union and questioned whether it was a trustworthy partner. “This idea that Britain can get there first is narrow minded thinking, frankly. It’s a perverse nationalism when actually Britain and the EU should work together as partners,” he said in an interview with The Times newspaper. Coveney advocated Britain working with the EU and Canada to reach a joint trade deal with the United States, although the EU does not currently have plans for a major U.S. trade deal. He also questioned Britain’s trustworthiness following its plans to unilaterally delay imposing checks required by the Brexit deal on some food products travelling from England, Scotland or Wales to Northern Ireland. “It has reinforced an awful lot of the doubts in Brussels about whether or not this really is a British government we can rely on to be a trusted partner when it comes to implementing what has already been agreed,” he said.

KADUNA, Nigeria (Reuters) -- Nine more students than originally thought are missing after gunmen stormed a forestry college in northwest Nigeria earlier this week, a government official in Nigeria’s Kaduna state said on Saturday. The revision brings the total number of missing students to 39 following Thursday’s nighttime raid on the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization, the fourth mass school abduction in northern Nigeria since December. Samuel Aruwan, Kaduna state’s security commissioner, said the missing comprised of 23 females and 16 males. The armed gang broke into the school in Kaduna state, located on the outskirts of Kaduna city near a military academy, at around 11:30 p.m. (2230 GMT) on Thursday. Aruwan said on Friday that the army rescued 180 people after a distress call in the early morning hours.

NAIROBI (Reuters) -- Ethiopia on Saturday rejected U.S. allegations there has been ethnic cleansing in Tigray, pushing back against the latest criticism of its military operation in its northern region by the new administration in Washington. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday he wanted to see Eritrean forces and those from the Amhara region replaced in Tigray by security forces that will respect human rights and not “commit acts of ethnic cleansing”. “(The accusation) is a completely unfounded and spurious verdict against the Ethiopian government,” the ministry of foreign affairs said in a statement on Saturday. “Nothing during or after the end of the main law enforcement operation in Tigray can be identified or defined by any standards as a targeted, intentional ethnic cleansing against anyone in the region,” it said. “The Ethiopian government vehemently opposes such accusations.”

ALMATY (Reuters) -- An An-26 military aircraft flying from the Kazakh capital, Nur-Sultan, crashed while landing in Almaty on Saturday, killing four of six people on board, the Central Asian nation’s emergencies ministry said. Russia’s Interfax news agency said citing a source that the plane belonged to Kazakhstan’s border guard service, part of the National Security Committee. “According to preliminary data, four people have been killed, two people have been hospitalized... with injuries,” the emergencies ministry said in a statement. Photographs from the site showed the plane turned over and on fire. Videos posted online also showed plumes of smoke rising from the crash site and visible from a nearby highway.