

Gunman Kidnap 300 Girls From Dormitory in Nigeria



Campaigners protesting a prior abduction of Nigerian schoolgirls hang a banner in Abuja, Nigeria, on March 27, 2015.

ABUJA, Nigeria (Dispatches) -- Gunmen raided a boarding school in northwestern Nigeria early Friday and kidnapped more than 300 girls, marking the third mass abduction of children since December in Africa's most populous nation.

The assailants struck the Government Girls Secondary School in Zamfara state in a predawn ambush, teachers and residents said, waking up the town as shots rang out.

By daylight Friday, community members tallied the missing — 317 girls vanished into the darkness, local police said — while security forces scoured the area, which has been plagued by kidnappings in recent months.

No one has asserted responsibility for

the attack, but criminal gangs known as "bandits" are increasingly seizing groups for ransom — a menace that has prompted some Nigerians to call for a national state of emergency.

One of the girls' guardians, Saidu Kwairo, said he watched from his window as pickup trucks roared into the town of Jangebe. The gunmen were firing their weapons into the air.

"We could hear the helpless voices of the girls screaming," he said, "amid the sounds of dangerous rifles."

The kidnapping comes nine days after attackers stormed another boarding school in north-central Nigeria, abducting more than 40 people, including 27 students. The Niger state victims all remain in captivity as authorities attempt to negotiate their

release.

Taking hostages is a growing business in the country.

Between 2011 and 2020, Nigerians paid at least \$18 million to liberate themselves or loved ones, according to a report from SB Morgen, a consulting firm that crunched data from open sources.

Sixty percent of that amount was spent in the last half of that time frame, reflecting a troubling acceleration, the authors noted.

Kidnappers formerly focused on wealthy people or foreigners — targets that dangled bigger rewards. Over the last three years, though, the pattern has shifted: Practically anyone can be ripped out of their dwellings or off the streets in a string of northern states. Gunmen have even stopped public buses.

"Bandits have realized that the authorities cannot protect the people," said Isa Sanusi, spokesman for Amnesty International in the Nigerian capital, Abuja. "That is lucrative. Ordinary people will give up all they have to save their families."

In December, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for capturing more than 300 boys from a school in the northwestern state of Katsina. The classmates were released days later under murky circumstances. Officials rarely say how they negotiate the abductees' freedom.

The extremist takfiri group garnered notoriety for kidnapping more than 270 school girls from the town of Chibok in 2014, sparking a viral social media campaign calling for their safe return: #Bring-Back-Our-Girls. More than 100 are still missing.

After Imposing Sanctions:

EU Declares Venezuelan Ambassador 'Persona Non Grata'



EU Ambassador to Venezuela Isabel Brilhante Pedrosa leaves after a meeting with Venezuela's Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza at the Foreign Ministry headquarters in Caracas, February 24, 2021.

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) -- The European Union has declared Venezuela's ambassador to the 27-member bloc "persona non grata" after imposing sanctions on the Latin American country.

An EU statement said on Thursday that the member states had agreed on the measure proposed by the bloc's Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell after Caracas ordered the EU envoy to leave.

"This is a response to the decision by the Venezuelan government to declare the head of the EU delegation to Venezuela as persona non grata," it said.

"The EU considers this declaration as wholly unwarranted and contrary

to the EU's objective of developing relations and building partnerships in third countries."

The government in Caracas gave Isabel Brilhante, the bloc's ambassador, 72 hours on Wednesday to leave the country following the EU's decision to sanction 19 Venezuelan officials.

Brussels described the move by Caracas as "wholly unwarranted" and contrary to the bloc's objective of developing relations and building partnerships in third countries.

The EU expanded its list of sanctions against Venezuelan officials after it refused to recognize the results of the December 2020 legislative elections, which saw incumbent

President Nicolas Maduro win total control of parliament.

The United States and several Latin American countries have also rejected the election results.

They have long been supporting opposition figure Juan Guaido, who has plans to maintain a parallel parliament of shadow opposition lawmakers at an assembly that has already been declared defunct by Caracas.

Last month, Guaido thanked the European Parliament for recognizing him as "president of Venezuela's National Assembly."

Guaido sparked a political crisis in Venezuela when he unilaterally declared himself "interim president" of the country in January last year.

The EU, however, announced that it no longer considered Guaido as Venezuela's "interim president," describing him merely as a "privileged interlocutor."

Guaido's self-proclamation and his coup received backing from the U.S. administration and a group of its European and regional allies.

Washington has likewise imposed several rounds of crippling sanctions against the oil-rich Latin American country aimed at ousting Maduro and replacing him with Guaido.

The sanctions, which include the illegal confiscation of Venezuelan assets abroad and an economic blockade, have caused enormous suffering for millions of people in the country.

China, India Discuss Mending Fences After Deadly Clash



Indian Army soldiers walk past their parked trucks at a makeshift transit camp before heading to Ladakh, near Baltal.

BEIJING (Dispatches) -- Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Indian counterpart Subrahmanya Jaishankar have discussed border control and other bilateral issues during a lengthy phone call.

The Chinese foreign minister addressed the completion of troops disengagement from the Pangong Lake following a deadly confrontation last year.

"China and India must cherish the hard-won situation, maintain the momentum of consultation, improve border control mechanisms, and advance the border negotiation process, to realize peace and tranquility along border areas," he said.

Yi said India's approach toward China has relaxed recently and the relationship between the two countries has undergone some disruptions, which is not favored by any of the parties.

He added that highlighting the differences between the two nations not only retains the problems, but also erodes the foundation of mutual trust.

"China and India should follow the right path of mutual trust and cooperation instead of the path of suspicion, or retrogressive path, and properly handle border issues to prevent bilateral relations from falling into a negative cycle."

Yi asserted that the two countries are the emerging economies that should

develop cooperatively and remove all hurdles to that end.

The two countries, he said, have the capacity of "advancing pragmatic cooperation", adding that "border issues are not the whole of China-India relations and should be placed in an appropriate position in bilateral relations".

The Indian minister also tweeted about the phone call, saying he "discussed the implementation of the of our Moscow agreement and reviewed the status of disengagement," referring to their discussions in Moscow in September last year on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting.

"The recent disengagement of the two militaries in the Pangong Lake area is an important result of the two sides earnestly implementing the consensus reached by the two foreign ministers in Moscow," Jaishankar said.

Jaishankar stressed that his government is looking forward to strengthening dialogue and consultation with China to solve the border issues, achieve complete disengagement in other regions and establish long-term bilateral relations.

During the telephone call, the two sides agreed to set up a communication hotline to exchange views and discuss the issues in a timely manner.

Thousands Rally in Armenia to Demand PM's Resignation



Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has defied calls to resign.

YEREVAN (AFP) -- Several thousand opposition supporters marched through the capital of Armenia on Friday to demand Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's resignation over his handling of last year's war with Azerbaijan which many see as a national humiliation.

Columns of people angry with the prime minister flooded the streets of central Yerevan, waving Armenian flags and chanting anti-government slogans, hours before a planned meeting with the ex-Soviet country's president.

Former prime minister Vazgen Manukyan, who has been put forward by the opposition to replace Pashinyan, called on all Armenians to join the protest.

"The people must take to the street and express their will so that we can avoid bloodshed and turmoil," he said at the rally.

"Either we get rid of them," Manukyan said, referring to Pashinyan and his allies who control parliament, "or we will lose Armenia."

The small South Caucasus nation plunged Thursday into a fresh political crisis as Pashinyan defied calls to resign, accused the military of an attempted coup and rallied some 20,000

supporters in Yerevan.

But the opposition gathered some 10,000 of its own supporters, who erected barricades and set up tents and stoves outside the parliament building and vowed to hold round-the-clock demonstrations.

The crisis spilled into a second day after Pashinyan's critics spent the night, then blocked streets near the parliament building in preparation for Friday's rally.

The march led them to the presidency and then to the prime minister's residence, ahead of a meeting with President Armen Sarkisian at 15:40 local time (1140 GMT).

A leader of the opposition Dashnaksutyun party, Gegham Manukyan, told reporters that opposition parties would only speak with Pashinyan about "his resignation."

Pashinyan has said he is ready to start talks with the opposition to defuse tensions, but also threatened to arrest any opponents if they violate the law.

Armenia's military had backed Pashinyan for months, but on Thursday the military's general staff joined calls for him to step down, saying in a statement that he and his cabinet were "not capable of taking adequate decisions".

News in Brief

HONG KONG/BEIJING (Reuters) -- China is expected to reveal a robust increase in defense spending at the March 5 annual opening of parliament, as its economy rebounds from the COVID-19 pandemic and military tensions rise, Chinese and Western security experts said. With the coronavirus hammering its economy, China last year announced a 6.6 percent boost in defense spending to \$178 billion, the lowest rate of increase in three decades. "China is facing the most severe security situation since the Korean War," said Ni Lexiong, a retired professor at the Shanghai University of Political Science and Law. He predicts a substantial hike in China's military budget, citing U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, regular deployments of U.S. aircraft carriers off the China coast and the recent presence of a French warship and nuclear submarine in the South China Sea.

ISLAMABAD (AFP) -- Pakistan and India on Thursday pledged to end all firing along their disputed Kashmir frontier, according to a joint statement from their militaries, after months of violence between the nuclear-armed rivals. The two nations regularly exchange artillery and machine-gun fire along the ceasefire line known as the Line of Control (LoC) that has separated the countries for decades. "Both sides agreed for strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease firing along the Line of Control and all other sectors with effect from midnight," read the statement. The announcement follows months of clashes with each accusing the other of being responsible for thousands of ceasefire violations in the past year alone. According to the Pakistan military, approximately 1.7 million civilians live along the LoC and increasingly rely on hundreds of bunkers to shelter during frequent skirmishes.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Russia's envoy to the European Union says his country has no plans to sever relations with the EU but if the bloc adopts further "destructive" measures against Moscow, they "definitely won't go without consequences." Vladimir Chizhov made the remarks in a televised interview with Rossiya-24 news channel on Wednesday. TASS news agency reported. "In case of further destructive steps from the European Union, Russia will not let grass grow under its feet, but will find corresponding ways and means to influence the situation. We can call it an asymmetric response, but those steps definitely won't go without consequences," he stressed. Relations between Russia and the European bloc strained when Brussels initially imposed sanctions on Russia in 2014 over the conflict in Ukraine and Crimea's unification with Russia.

NAIROBI (Reuters) -- Eritrean soldiers killed hundreds of civilians in Ethiopia's ancient town of Axum between Nov. 28 and 29, rights group Amnesty International said on Friday, one of several mass killings reported during a conflict that erupted nearly four months ago in the northern region of Tigray. "Over an approximately 24-hour period, on 28-29 November 2020, Eritrean troops operating in the Ethiopian city of Axum killed many hundreds of civilians," Amnesty said, citing 41 witnesses. The rights group said that the mass execution of civilians by Eritrean troops may amount to crimes against humanity. The Ethiopian government's emergency task force for the Tigray said on Thursday that investigations into violence in Axum were underway. The state-run Ethiopian Human Rights Commission released a statement timed to coincide with the Amnesty report, saying preliminary investigations indicated that Eritrean soldiers had killed an unknown number of civilians in Axum in retaliation for an earlier attack by soldiers of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the region's ousted ruling party.

TOKYO (Reuters) -- A forest fire in a sparsely populated area 75 kilometers north of Tokyo continued to rage for a fifth day on Friday, as local officials were set to ask dozens more households to evacuate hillside villages. The fire in the vicinity of Ashikaga city, in Tochigi prefecture, has continued to spread since breaking out Sunday, despite efforts by firefighters on the ground and military helicopters dousing the area. No injuries have yet been reported, but the fire has scorched about 100 hectares so far and burnt down a mountain temple, according to the prefecture. About 15 villagers had been evacuated in total as of late Thursday, the prefecture said. Broadcaster NHK reported on Friday that evacuation warnings will be expanded to cover more households.

NEW DELHI/DHAKA (Reuters) -- India's coast guard found 81 survivors and eight dead on a boat crammed with Muslim Rohingya refugees adrift in the Andaman Sea, and were repairing the vessel so that it can return safely to Bangladesh, Indian officials said on Friday. The Indian government was in discussions with Bangladesh to facilitate the safe return of the vessel, which was found drifting in international waters having left southern Bangladesh about two weeks ago with hopes of reaching Malaysia. The boat had sailed on Feb. 11 from Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh carrying 56 women and eight girls as well as 21 men and five boys, officials said. Many of the survivors, according to Indian officials, were sick and suffering from extreme dehydration, having run out of food and water after the boat's engine failed four days after leaving Cox's Bazar. When refugee camps house hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas who have fled neighboring Myanmar.

Police Fire Into Air to Disperse Protesters in Myanmar

NAYPYITAW (Reuters) -- Police dispersed protesters in Myanmar's two biggest cities on Friday, firing stun grenades, rubber bullets and guns into the air in a crackdown on weeks of demonstrations that have challenged the army's bid to reimpose its rule.

At least one person was wounded in the protests in the main city of Yangon, a witness said, and several people were hurt in the second city of Mandalay.

The Southeast Asian country has been in crisis since the army seized power on Feb. 1 and detained government leader Aung San Suu Kyi and much of her party leadership after the military complained of fraud in a November election her party won. The election commission said the vote was fair.

Suu Kyi had been moved this week from house arrest in the capital Naypyitaw to an undisclosed location, the Myanmar Now website said, quoting officials of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party.

A lawyer for Suu Kyi said he had been told the same by NLD officials. He earlier complained that he had been given no access ahead of a court appearance set for March 1.

There have been daily protests and strikes by democracy supporters for about three weeks, often drawing hundreds of thousands of people across the ethnically diverse country.

In Yangon, hundreds of people congregated again in several groups, chanting slogans. Riot police rushed at them, firing stun grenades and guns into the air to send people scattering.

Several people were detained, witnesses said, among them a Japanese journalist who was held briefly.

Domestic media and witnesses reported a similar confrontation in Mandalay where police also fired rubber bullets. An emergency service worker said children were hurt there and media published pictures of two with minor injuries as well as of one man with a bloody leg wound. It was not clear how they were hurt.

Police also broke up protests in the capital, Naypyitaw, the central town of Magwe and in the western hill town of Hakha, according to witnesses and social media posts.

Security forces have been more restrained than they were during earlier bouts of protest in the course of nearly half a century of military rule.

Military chief General Min Aung Hlaing says authorities were using minimal force. Nevertheless, at least three protesters have died. The army says a policeman was also killed.

Suu Kyi, 75, has been detained incommunicado in Naypyitaw since the coup.