

## World News Roundup

## Pakistan

## Attacks down

## Security naps over 'longterm'

ISLAMABAD, Oct 22, (AFP): A palpable sense of security is returning to Pakistan as a crackdown on militancy bears fruit, but critics warn the government has not taken long-term steps to tackle the underlying scourge of extremist Islam.

Peace in Pakistan and Afghanistan will be top of the agenda in Washington on Thursday when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif meets US President Barack Obama.

At home, an army offensive against extremists and a grand "National Action Plan" (NAP) to rein in militancy have seen a drop in attacks this year, while recent Supreme Court rulings on blasphemy have encouraged moderates that the establishment is willing to take a stand against religious intolerance.

Emboldened Pakistanis are once again attending public gatherings, culminating in this year's Independence Day in August, which saw thousands attending celebrations in Karachi — where Taliban "no-go" areas have recently been liberated by police.

"It is extremely peaceful now", Mohammad Ameen, a 30-year-old mechanic from Karachi told AFP.

"Before, everyone was worried, fearful ... but now things have changed".

Things began in earnest in June of last year when the army launched a long-awaited offensive against militants in the tribal areas of North Waziristan.

And in December Islamabad unleashed the NAP amid a wave of outrage after Taliban militants massacred 154 people at a Peshawar school, most of them children.

A six-year moratorium on the death penalty was lifted and the constitution was amended to allow military courts to try those accused of carrying out attacks.

## Attacks

The combined results, so far, are persuasive: in 2013 there were 170 reported attacks killing 1,202 people, while in 2014 the figures stood at 110 reported attacks killing 644, according to an AFP tally.

The total number of blasts so far this year, however, has dropped to 36 with 211 dead.

Gratitude towards the army has even spawned a viral hashtag lauding the powerful military chief, #ThankYouRaheelSharif.

The crackdown has seemingly prompted several institutions to confront extremist elements openly — judicially and otherwise.

Earlier this month, Pakistan's Supreme Court upheld the death sentence for Mumtaz Qadri, feted by Islamists after he murdered a politician who sought blasphemy law reform, in a judgement moderates hailed as a blow against religious extremism.

Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive issue in Pakistan, and courts previously judged such cases "in fear", said Zohra Yusuf, chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

"Now they will decide these matters without any fear", she commented.

Perhaps the most high-profile change under the NAP has been the resumption of executions, which has seen the state go on a hangings spree.

Though official figures are not available, rights groups and an AFP tally estimate that more than 250 people have been executed since December.

However critics question the efficacy of the hangings, with Amir Rana, a leading security analyst and columnist, estimating just 25 of those executed had actually been convicted of terror charges.

At any rate, recent research by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) suggests that death is no deterrent for militants.

"Many of the extremist terrorists that the executions have seemingly been revived for are individuals who ... are committed to dying for their cause", wrote the paper's author Najam U Din.

Analysts have cited one area listed under the NAP's 20-point agenda where government action could have more impact: Pakistan's Islamic seminaries, or madrassas.

With little oversight of what was being taught to the children enrolled in them and accusations of foreign funding, fears grew after Peshawar that some were breeding grounds for intolerance — or even extremism.

But, said security analyst Rana, little has been done.

"The government lacks the courage to formulate a permanent strategy to bring religious seminaries under complete control", he said.



Sharif



An Indian paramilitary soldier stands guard in an empty street as restrictions are put in place ahead of a planned Muharram procession in Srinagar on Oct 22. Authorities on Oct 22 imposed restrictions in parts of Srinagar, the summer capital of Kashmir, to thwart planned Muharram processions. (Inset): Kashmiri Shiite Muslims are detained by Indian police as devotees defy restrictions for a Muharram procession in Srinagar on Oct 22. (AFP)

## India

## Summit ramps up race for resources

## India reaches out to Africa

505-km project will link Mumbai with Ahmedabad

## Japan offers India soft loan for \$15b bullet train

NEW DELHI, Oct 22, (AFP): India will host an unprecedented gathering of Africa's leaders next week as it ramps up the race for resources on the continent, where its rival China already has a major head start.

Postponed since December over the Ebola crisis, the India-Africa Forum Summit from Oct 26-29 will be the first under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the biggest gathering of foreign dignitaries in India since 1983.

Hotels have been block-booked and intense security is expected to add to the chaos on Delhi's congested streets.

More than 40 leaders have confirmed their attendance, with controversy looming over the possible appearance of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court.

India's presence in Africa is dwarfed by China, whose bilateral trade topped \$200 billion last year — more than the GDP of the 30 smallest African economies combined.

Yet economic winds blowing across the Indian Ocean have warmed considerably, with trade swelling twenty-fold from about \$3 billion in 2000 to \$70 billion in 2014, according to government data.

From Punjabi farmers leasing Ethiopian fields to a telecoms magnate running a Malawi mobile network, Indian entrepreneurs have led the charge in Africa as politicians scramble to follow.

## History

Keen to be seen as friend not predator, Delhi plays up a shared history that China lacks, citing 16th century maritime merchants who plied Africa's coastline and the joint fight against colonialism.

Politicians point to a 2.7 million-strong Indian diaspora, including many in South Africa, where independence hero Mahatma Gandhi began his freedom struggle.

"Throughout the period of struggle for African independence against neo-colonialism, against apartheid, against discrimination ... we've been brothers in arms", said Navtej Singh Sama, an Africa specialist at India's foreign ministry.

Despite the shared history, the first India-Africa summit was just seven years ago — long after China, the European Union and Japan held similar get-togethers.

India's Africa-bound investment is

NEW DELHI, Oct 22, (RTRS): Japan has offered to finance India's first bullet train, estimated to cost \$15 billion, at an interest rate of less than 1 percent, officials said, stealing a march on China, which is bidding for other projects on the world's fourth-largest network.

Tokyo was picked to assess the feasibility of building the 505-kilometre corridor linking Mumbai with Ahmedabad, the commercial capital of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state, and concluded it would be technically and financially viable.

The project to build and supply the route will be put out to tender, but offering finance makes Japan the clear frontrunner.

Last month China won the contract to assess the feasibility of a high-speed train between Delhi and Mumbai, a 1,200-km route estimated to cost twice as much. No loan has yet been offered.

Japan's decision to give virtually free finance for Modi's pet programme is part of its broader push back against China's involvement in infrastructure development in South Asia over the past several years.

"There are several (players) offering the high-speed technology. But technology and funding together, we

only have one offer. That is the Japanese", said A. K. Mital, the chairman of the Indian Railway Board, which manages the network.

The two projects are part of a 'Diamond Quadrilateral' of high speed trains over 10,000 km of track that India wants to set up connecting Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata.

Japan has offered to meet 80 percent of the Mumbai-Ahmedabad project cost, on condition that India buys 30 percent of equipment including the coaches and locomotives from Japanese firms, officials said.

Japan's International Cooperation Agency, which led the feasibility survey, said the journey time between Mumbai and Ahmedabad would be cut to two hours from seven. The route will require 11 new tunnels including one undersea near Mumbai.

"What complicates the process is Japanese linking funding to use of their technology. There must be tech transfer", said Mital.

JICA declined to comment on the details of its offer. "The report has already been handed over to India, and the Indian government is now in the process of making a consideration", a spokesman said.

Toshihiro Yamakoshi, counsellor in

the economic section of the Japanese embassy, said Japanese companies were keen to collaborate with their Indian counterparts on the rail project as part of Modi's Make-in-India programme. He said it was too early to provide details of the cooperation.

Tokyo's push in India comes just weeks after it lost out to China on the contract to build Indonesia's first fast-train link. Beijing offered \$5 billion in loans without asking for guarantees, an Indonesian official said, ending a months-long battle to build the line linking Jakarta with the textile hub of Bandung.

Japan's NHK broadcaster quoted Transport Minister Keiichi Ishii as saying that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had instructed him to step up exports of transport systems to India and Southeast Asia.

"It is very regrettable that a high-speed railway project in Indonesia was awarded to China", he said.

China won the Delhi-Mumbai survey after securing clearance from Indian security agencies long worried about China's involvement in Indian infrastructure.

The two neighbours fought a war in 1962 over a border dispute that remains unresolved, though trade between them is booming.

runs call centres and IT projects in countries including Burkina Faso, Tanzania and Chad, told AFP.

"China has been pushing its agenda in Africa so hard, India has been left behind. I would like to see more bilateral talks".

## Capitalise

Modi's government has been tight-lipped on what the summit will yield, aside from vagaries over enhancing trade.

But it will be an opportunity to capitalise on disillusionment with China, whose demand for resources has plummeted as growth decelerates.

Deep-pocketed Beijing has for decades sprinkled stadiums, hospitals, highways and dams across Africa in exchange for deals.

Yet critics say it has left countries



A Pakistani Shiite Muslim prayer over burning coal during a commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Islam's Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), in Lahore on Oct 22. The Islamic month of Muharram marks the seven-century martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) grandson Imam Hussein who was killed in battle in Karbala in Iraq 680 AD. (AFP)

## Subcontinent

**21 militants killed:** Pakistan's military said Thursday it had killed 21 militants in air strikes in a restive northwestern tribal area bordering Afghanistan.

The strikes were carried out late Thursday in the Rajgal and Tirah areas of the lawless Khyber tribal district, where Taliban militant and local Islamist groups are active.

"Twenty-one terrorists were killed in precise aerial strikes last night in remote areas of Rajgal and Tirah," the military said in a brief statement.

The strikes are part of a major offensive to clear Taliban and Al-Qaeda strongholds that began last year in North Waziristan, one of seven Pakistani tribal districts bordering Afghanistan.

The conflict zone is remote and off-limits to journalists, making it difficult to verify the army's claims, including the number and identity of those killed.

The military began an offensive in Khyber in October 2014, carrying out air strikes and using artillery, mortars and ground troops. (AFP)

**Delhi holds 'car-free day':** The Indian capital held its first "car-free day" Thursday to try to improve New Delhi's notoriously filthy air, but motorists were seen ignoring signs to keep off the roads.

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal flagged off the initiative by cycling along what would normally be one of the city's busiest roads, flanked by a couple of hundred bureaucrats and bicycle enthusiasts.

"People should leave their vehicles and use public transport. Since pollution is increasing in Delhi, there is a need to run, cycle which is also good for health," Kejriwal said.

Around 8.5 million vehicles ply the city's roads, which are considered highly unsafe for both pedestrians and cyclists.

Authorities have been criticised for failing to curb pollution, in a city ranked by the World Health Organization as having the worst air quality in the world.

Thursday's voluntary initiative, lasting five hours, was held on a public holiday when most offices and schools are shut and traffic is thinner anyway.

"It is more of a symbolic gesture at the moment, more of an awareness-raising activ-

ity," Anumita Roychowdhury, executive director of Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment think tank, told AFP. (AFP)

**'Build tech-savvy city':** Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged authorities on Thursday to build a modern, tech-savvy city, as he laid the foundation stone for the new capital of a state in southern India. Hundreds of thousands of locals and digni-



Anumita



Modi

taries attended the elaborate ceremony to kickstart the building of Amaravati, the new capital of Andhra Pradesh, on former farmland on the banks of a river.

The city is needed after Andhra Pradesh was last year carved in two, forming the new state of Telangana, after an emotional campaign by locals stretching almost six decades. Hyderabad, an IT hub home to giants Google and Microsoft, will serve as the capital of both states for the next decade until

Amaravati is completed. Modi praised the state government for seeking outside help to design the city, after Singapore government agencies developed master plans.

"Very few new cities have been formed in India since after our independence, so, sadly this idea still isn't discussed as much," Modi said at the ceremony broadcast on national television. "We should take urbanisation as an opportunity and not a challenge for us. (AFP)