

## World News Roundup



Pakistani police commandos take part in a security drill at a local school in Peshawar, Pakistan, on Jan 28. Pakistani authorities closed all the schools in the country's largest province, Punjab, following an alert over possible militant attacks, according to a government notice. (AP)

## Subcontinent

## 'Improve living conditions':

Clothing companies H&M, Inditex, C&A and PVH have committed to improving the lives of workers in India's southern city of Bengaluru, after a report said employees lived in appalling conditions and were denied decent wages and freedom of movement.

Gap Inc, which also sources apparel from Bengaluru, did not respond to the report by the India Committee of the Netherlands (ICN), according to a statement by the Dutch non-governmental group late on Thursday. A draft of the report, Unfree and Unfair, was presented to the companies last November.

The conditions of garment workers in South Asia have come under sharp scrutiny following the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, in which 1,135 workers were killed, many of them employed by suppliers to Western retailers.

The ICN report said hostels run by the Bengaluru factories lacked basic amenities such as beds and clean water, and that workers earned between 95 euros (\$104) and 115 euros per month, just above the official minimum wage of 93 euros to 103 euros.

Bengaluru, a hub for apparel exporters, is also known as India's Silicon Valley for its numerous information technology companies, and draws migrants seeking better economic prospects from its home Karnataka state, as well as from neighbouring Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu and the country's north and east.

There are an estimated 1,200 garment factories in and around Bengaluru, making apparel for large global brands. (RTS)

## Probe into police inaction urged:

Police in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh face mounting criticism for delays in registering complaints of rape during operations against Maoist rebels, with Amnesty International India demanding an independent probe into police inaction.

One of India's poorest regions, Chhattisgarh has seen major security operations to flush out Maoist rebels who say they are fighting for the rights of poor farmers and landless labourers to land and a greater claim on mineral wealth.

According to Amnesty's India office, 13 women from the Adivasi group said they were raped and sexually assaulted by police and security forces during anti-Maoist raids in Nendra village between Jan 11 and 14.

"Two men caught hold of me and dragged me inside my house. They took off my clothes, tore my blouse and pressed my breasts," one woman told the human rights group.

"One policeman raped me and said, 'We will burn down your houses. If it wasn't daytime, we would have killed you.'" (RTS)

## 6 found guilty of rape, murder:

An Indian court convicted six men Thursday of gang-raping and murdering a student as she walked home after an exam in 2013, in a case that sparked outrage over women's safety.

Security was tight outside the court in the eastern city of Kolkata for the verdict, with chanting protesters demanding justice and scuffling with police.

Senior public prosecutor Dipak Ghosh told AFP that six accused were convicted of gang-raping the 21-year-old woman, as well as murder, interfering with evidence and other charges.

Judge Sanchita Sarkar told the packed court that two others "are acquitted due to lack of evidence".

"The ... punishment will be announced after hearing the convicts on Friday," she said.

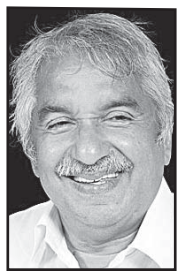
The six face punishments ranging from 20 years in jail to the death penalty.

The gang attacked the university student as she returned home to her village, 50 kms (30 miles) northeast of Kolkata, in June 2013. (AFP)

## Bomber attacks Pakistan: Police say a suicide car bomber has blown him-



An Indian activist holds a placard as she shouts slogans during a protest against a ban on women entering its inner sanctum of the Haji Ali Mosque, in Mumbai on Jan 28. A landmark mosque in Mumbai is facing pressure to overturn a ban on women entering its inner sanctum, a move that could set a precedent on gender restrictions to places of worship in the deeply religious country. A Muslim women's rights group is locked in a bitter legal battle with trustees of Mumbai's Haji Ali Dargah, built in the 15th century and popular not only with Muslims but Hindu devotees and sight-seeing tourists. (AFP)



Chandy



Modi

## Protests injure 48

Forty-eight people were injured on Friday in the southern Indian state of Kerala in rioting by left-wing protesters who accuse the state's chief minister of corruption.

Youths hurled bottles and stones at police in several parts of the state and called for the resignation of Chief Minister Oommen Chandy, a Congress party leader who is seeking re-election in a state election in April.

Chandy, fighting allegations that his office was involved in a solar-power scam, denies any wrongdoing.

He faces an electoral challenge from opposition communists, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationalist party is a marginal force in the state on India's southwestern seaboard that is popular with foreign tourists.

Among the injured were 31 police and 17 activists of the Democratic Youth Federation of India (Marxist) that is seeking to oust Chandy. Police used baton charges and teargas to disperse protesters.

The protests disrupted traffic for four hours in the state capital of Thiruvananthapuram, and spread from the northern city of Calicut to the tourist destination of Alleppey in the south.

State-wide protests were sparked after a court on Thursday ruled that a police complaint must be filed against Chandy over allegations he took a 19-million-rupee (\$280,000) bribe to provide government support to a solar panel company.

The state high court stayed that order on Friday afternoon.

The accusations against Chandy were brought by the owner of the solar panel business, who herself faces allegations of duping victims into investing in fake solar projects. (RTS)

self up outside the gate of an army facility in southwest Pakistan, wounding at least five people.

Senior police officer Zahid Afzal says the attacker detonated the car bomb Friday after being asked to halt in the district of

## Pakistan

## Court orders work to stop on Lahore metro line

## Power outage hits Karachi

KARACHI, Pakistan, Jan 29, (RTS): A major power breakdown on Friday left 90 percent of Pakistan's largest and richest city, Karachi, without electricity and brought much of normal life to a standstill.

The sweltering and violence-plagued metropolis of 23 million people accounts for half of Pakistan's national revenues and is home to the stock exchange, the central bank and a giant port.

The third major outage of the country's dilapidated electricity grid within a month forced shops, hospitals and businesses to turn to back-up generators as the lights went out, including those in the provincial assembly.

However, stock market trading was not interrupted.

The private utility company running the electricity supply said high levels of humidity tripped a transmission line to cause the blackout on Friday morning.

## Tripping

"The tripping should not be attributed to any lack in the infrastructure, rather it was caused by high levels of humidity," K-Electric said in a statement on Twitter, adding that power had returned to most of the city by early afternoon.

An official at the ministry of water and power said at least 90 percent of the city was affected after a transmission line tripped because of dense fog.

K-Electric would be supplied with power through a separate transmission line, added the official, who asked not to be identified because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif rode to power in 2013 on a promise to fix the electricity crisis, but Pakistan still struggles to provide power to its 190 million people and industries.

The capital, Islamabad, was hit by a major blackout this month, as were Punjab, the country's most populous province, and the northwestern region

of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Power cuts running eight hours each day on average have crippled an economy already wrestling with militant violence, a high budget deficit and falling exports.

Pakistan's state power companies are notoriously inefficient. The government sells power below the cost of production but pays subsidies late or not at all. Plants cannot afford fuel.

Many influential families refuse to pay their bills while the poor often cannot afford to pay.

The unpaid bills run right through the generation chain, inflating debt, and chipping off around two percent of Pakistan's GDP in the last five years.

Meanwhile, a Pakistani court has ordered construction of the country's first metro train line to stop after campaigners in the city of Lahore argued that the project endangered historical buildings.

Lahore High Court issued a stay order late on Thursday suspending all work within 200 feet (61 metres) of 11 buildings of historical value, said Azhar Siddique, a lawyer and petitioner in the case.

Buildings deemed at risk include the Mughal Fort and Shalamar Gardens complex — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — a nineteenth century British-built church and the Victorian-era General Post Office.

## Petition

"I, on behalf of civil society, filed the petition to save 26 heritage sites from construction of the Orange Line Train Project," Siddique told Reuters on Friday.

The United Nations last week called on Pakistan's government to halt work on the line. It said construction, which started last year, had led to forced evictions and threatened a large number of Lahore's protected heritage sites, historic buildings and minority places of worship.

Independent experts were puzzled

as to why alternative, less damaging routes were not considered, the UN said.

Part-funded by China, the Lahore Metro is a rapid mass transit system that the government hopes will ease travel in the fast-growing city, Pakistan's second largest.

Public transport remains woefully inadequate across most Pakistani cities and a rapidly urbanising population has left roads choked with traffic, slowing travel times.

## Also:

**ISLAMABAD:** The head of a powerful religious body said on Thursday he is willing to review Pakistan's harsh blasphemy laws that critics say are regularly misused and have led to the deaths of hundreds, to decide if they are Islamic.

Pakistan's religious and political elites almost universally keep clear of debating blasphemy laws in a country where criticism of Islam is a highly sensitive subject. Even rumours of blasphemy have sparked rampaging mobs and deadly riots.

But Muhammad Khan Sherani, chairman of a body that advises the government on the compatibility of laws with Islam, told Reuters he was willing to reopen the debate and see whether sentences as harsh as the death penalty were fair.

"The government of Pakistan should officially, at the government level, refer the law on committing blasphemy to the Council of Islamic Ideology. There is a lot of difference of opinion among the clergy on this issue," Sherani said in an interview at his office close to Pakistan's parliament.

"Then the council can seriously consider things and give its recommendation of whether it needs to stay the same or if it needs to be hardened or if it needs to be softened," Sherani, dressed in a traditional black robe, said.

Press.

Earlier this month, another Taliban faction attacked a university in the northwest and killed 21 people, mostly students. (AP)

## Maldives govt hopes Nasheed will return

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka, Jan 29, (AP): The Maldives' government said Friday it hopes the country's jailed former president will return after undergoing surgery in Britain following comments by the former leader suggesting he may not.

Minister for Legal Affairs Azima Shakoor said the government will have limited options if Mohamed Nasheed doesn't return because he will be out of Maldives' jurisdiction.

"I believe that he would return. He is a former president and a man of stature. He has given a guarantee as all other people serving a prison sentence would give," she said.

The government allowed Nasheed, who is serving a 13-year sentence for ordering the arrest of a judge while in power, a 30-day medical leave to travel to Britain for spinal surgery.

## Colombia

## Bid to seal peace deal

## Remove FARC off terror list: Santos

BOGOTA, Colombia, Jan 29, (AP): President Juan Manuel Santos is asking the United States to remove the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia from its list of terrorist organizations and suspend drug warrants against guerrilla commanders to help him seal a peace deal with Latin America's oldest leftist insurgency.

In an interview days before a key visit to the White House, Santos made his most-sweeping call for action from Washington in more than three years of peace talks with the FARC rebels. His Feb 4 meeting with President Barack Obama will celebrate 15 years and some \$10 billion in US counterinsurgency and anti-narcotics aid to its staunch ally in the region.

The meeting will also underscore Colombia's historic moment: the peace talks taking place in Cuba have reached what both sides describe as a point of no return, with a final deal to end a half-century of bloodshed expected as early as March. This week the UN Security Council unanimously endorsed sending a mission to monitor an eventual accord, handing Santos a diplomatic victory as he tries to drum up funding for what he said will be a 10-year to 15-year effort to recover vast parts of the country he says had been ceded by the state to illegal armed groups.

When a deal is inked, Santos said it would be appropriate for the Obama administration to strike the FARC from a State Department list of terrorist organizations it has been on for almost two decades alongside such groups as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The FARC, which as part of peace talks has already renounced kidnapping and declared a unilateral truce, has long demanded it be excluded.

## Committed

"If they sign it's because we have a timetable for their disarmament and they have committed themselves to lay down their arms and make this transition to legal life.

So I would say yes, I hope that they would be eliminated from the terror list," Santos said Thursday at the presidential palace.

When pressed about how soon after the accord is inked should the FARC be removed, Santos said the "the shorter the better." A Colombian paramilitary umbrella group had to wait a full six years after it completely disarmed to be removed.

In the same vein, he said he would like to see the US follow his lead in Colombia and suspend arrest warrants targeting the FARC's top leadership, many of whom are negotiating in Havana. US federal prosecutors in a 2006 indictment accused 50 FARC leaders of supplying more than half of the world's cocaine, claims that Santos said were exaggerated and in any case out of sync with commitments made at the negotiating table to abandon its involvement in the drug trade and help the government eradicate cocaine crops.

"Any effort by the United States to allow us to apply transitional justice, for example by suspending the arrest warrants, would help us tremendously," he said.

Coca production skyrocketed 39 percent in 2014 and many experts say it will climb even further after Santos last year halted a US-backed aerial eradication campaign over health concerns.

He likened the FARC's charging of a war tax on cocaine moving through territory it dominates to tactics used by the Irish Republican Army in its fight with Britain.

"The way the IRA was robbing banks, the guerrillas were financing themselves from drug-trafficking," he said.

But he warned that if guerrillas continue to enrich themselves through drugs all bets are off.

"Let's be very clear: if they don't behave, they'll be extradited," he said.

## Insisted

US officials have long insisted that only prosecutors can suspend the warrants. Justice Department spokesman Peter Carr declined to comment on Thursday.

Santos, a former defense and finance minister and the scion of the family that founded Colombia's largest newspaper, described Colombia's evolution from a near failed state when Plan Colombia began under President Bill Clinton into one of world's fastest-growing emerging markets with lower levels of conflict-linked violence.

As the country has stabilized, US aid has steadily declined from almost \$1 billion a year to about a third of that now.

He said with a peace deal, demands for spending will surge as Colombia attempts to build roads, schools and extend the state's reach to traditionally forsaken and economically unproductive areas.



Santos