

## World News Roundup



In this handout photograph released by The Indian Press Information Bureau (PIB) on May 11, a US Congressional Delegation including Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (center left), Congressman Jim McGovern (left), and Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner (center right), pose ahead of a meeting with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (center), in New Delhi. (AFP)

## Pakistan

## Army backs off

## Blasphemy warning texts sent to millions

ISLAMABAD, May 11, (Agencies): Millions of Pakistanis have been receiving text messages from the government warning them against sharing "blasphemous" content online, a move rights activists said would encourage more vigilante attacks.

It comes amid a surge in mob violence linked to accusations of insulting Islam including three attacks within the past month.

"Uploading & sharing of blasphemous content on Internet is a punishable offense under the law. Such content should be reported on info@pta.gov.pk for legal action," read the SMS sent by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to all mobile phone subscribers.

A similar note was posted on the agency's website in Urdu. A PTA spokesman said the agency was acting on a court order.

Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive issue in conservative Muslim Pakistan, with unproven allegations leading to dozens of mob attacks or murders since 1990.

The law was originally inherited from Pakistan's former colonial masters Britain, but strengthened by former dictator Zia-ul-Haq in 1986 to include a provision for capital punishment in cases of insulting the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Activists said the initiative would likely encourage lynchings, such as the killing of a 23-year-old student known for his liberal views at the hands of hundreds of fellow students last month. "This mass messaging will only further fuel hatred among different sects and segments of the society. It is a very very bad move," digital rights activist Shahzad Ahmad told AFP.

"PTA's mass texting on 'blasphemy' smacks of insincerity and political exploitation of religion; it will embolden public to greater violence," tweeted popular television anchor Moeed Pirzada.

Last week a 10-year-old boy was killed and five others were wounded when a mob attacked a police station in an attempt to lynch a Hindu man charged with blasphemy for allegedly posting an incendiary image on social media.

## Also:

**ISLAMABAD:** Pakistan's military backed off on Wednesday after publicly questioning the prime minister's decision to sack an adviser over an explosive newspaper article alleging a rift between the country's civilian government and the military.

Government-military relations are a sensitive topic in Pakistan, which has had a history of military coups since gaining independence from Britain in 1947.

Two weeks ago, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif fired a senior adviser over a front-page article last year in the Dawn newspaper alleging the rift.

Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor, a military spokesman, subsequently questioned the firing in a tweet, saying it was not in line with the findings of an inquiry that was set up to determine who leaked information to journalist Cyril Almeida about a top-level security meeting.

Almeida, in a front page article in Dawn, had reported that the government asked the military's Inter-Service Intelligence spy agency to act against militants or face international isolation.

The military on Wednesday released a statement saying Ghafoor's tweet had been withdrawn and that the issue had been settled. It also said the tweet was not "aimed at any government office or person," and reaffirmed the army's commitment to uphold the constitution and support the democratic process. Army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa met with the prime minister in Islamabad earlier in the day, apparently in an effort to defuse tensions.

Ghafoor told reporters his tweet had been misinterpreted to give an impression the army and the government were not on the same page. He also said the issue of the media leak to Dawn had been "resolved" and that the Ministry of Interior had fully "implemented recommendations" of the inquiry board in the leak to Almeida. He did not elaborate.

The ministry said it had referred the matter of Almeida and Dawn to All Pakistan News Papers Society, an organization of newspaper owners, for "disciplinary action."



Zia-ul-Haq



Injured Indian patients gather in a ward of The R. B. M. Government Hospital in Bharatpur on May 11, after an accident at a wedding party in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan. A wall crashed down on an Indian wedding party during a storm killing at least 24 people including four children, police said, with one rescuer describing the scene as 'horrific'. (AFP)



Sirisena



Modi

## Subcontinent

**6 dead in B'desh raid:** Bangladesh police on Thursday raided a suspected Islamist hideout in an operation that left five relatives and a fire officer dead, officials said.

Police shot dead the five people, all from the same family, as they emerged from a house in northwest Bangladesh, senior police officer Sumit Chowdhury told AFP.

One of the five stabbed the fire officer, who died of his injuries, while two others hurled grenades at police. Two police were also injured.

"We were surprised by the attack. Two of them threw grenades and another attacked a fire service officer with a sharp rod. He later died in hospital," said Chowdhury.

"Five extremists were killed in our shooting. They include a father, his wife and their two sons and a daughter," he said.

Police raided the house in Habashpur, Rajshahi district, following a tip-off that members of the outlawed Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) Islamist group were holed up there, Chowdhury said.

Police rescued a two-month-old baby and a seven-year-old boy, and believe one woman may still be inside the house, (AFP)

**Lanka seizes 200 kgs of heroin:** Sri Lankan police on Thursday made one of their biggest heroin hauls in years, days after unidentified gunmen shot dead an anti-narcotics agent near Colombo.

Police said the 200-kg (440-pound) haul — worth more than two billion rupees (\$13.3 million) on the street — was found stashed inside plastic bags in a car north of Colombo.

It was the biggest heroin seizure since 2013, when 260 kilos were taken off the street, police said.

The seizure came after a drugs agent was killed Tuesday in a shootout that also wounded several other officers.

"Our latest detection shows we will not be deterred by attacks against our men," police said in a statement.

It is suspected the drugs were smuggled by boat into Sri Lanka. Police believe the Indian Ocean island is being used as a transit point by traffickers.

Last June, anti-narcotics authorities seized 90 kgs of cocaine concealed in sugar containers from Brazil. Two months earlier police detained 14 foreigners after seizing 110 kgs

## India

## School head held over child rape

## Wall collapse kills 24

JAIPUR, India, May 11, (AFP): A wall crashed down on an Indian wedding party during a storm killing at least 24 people including four children, police said Thursday, with one rescuer describing the scene as "horrific".

Dozens more were injured when the 13-foot (four-metre) high concrete wall collapsed, trapping guests who had taken shelter from violent rain in a tin shack on Wednesday night, police superintendent Anil Tank told AFP.

"We worked through the night," one rescue worker at the scene in Bharatpur, Rajasthan state, told India TV news network.

"We tried to rescue as many people as possible, the scene was horrific."

Tank, a senior officer in Bharatpur, said 26 people were injured, 15 of them seriously. Television footage showed anxious relatives standing next to hospital beds. Police have launched an investigation and detained a wedding hall manager on charges of causing death by negligence.

"We have registered a case and taken one of the managers of the banquet hall into custody," district magistrate Narendra Kumar Gupta told reporters.

## Action

"We will investigate if the hall owners had a valid licence. In case they did not have a licence, appropriate action will be taken against them."

Gupta also announced compensation of 50,000 rupees (\$775) for the family of each person killed.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the incident had pained him "beyond words". "My thoughts are with the families of the deceased. I hope the injured recover soon," he tweeted.

Indian weddings are often grandiose affairs with huge numbers of guests and lavish ceremonies that run for several days.

Many families pour their life savings into them, and it is not uncommon for affluent urban families to host thou-

sands of guests.

Two people were killed in cross-border firing in Kashmir Thursday, one on each side of the disputed region's de facto border, officials in India and Pakistan said in the latest skirmishes between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

A teenage boy was killed and his grandmother wounded in Chorhai village in Pakistani Kashmir after "indiscriminate" firing from Indian troops, local official Raja Arshad told AFP.

Another man was wounded in Khoi Ratta sector along the Line of Control (LoC), the internationally agreed frontier between the two regions, he added.

While on the Indian side a woman was killed and her husband wounded in Naushera sector, police director general S.P. Vaid said.

The head of a school in southern India has been arrested on suspicion of raping scores of disabled girls over a period of at least four years, police said Thursday.

They said complaints from two former pupils at the school for speech- and hearing-impaired girls in Tamil Nadu state had alerted them to the alleged abuse. Both are now adults and are working at the school.

"We received the complaint from two victims who are working in the school about sexual exploitation of girls," said Jayachandaran, a local police officer who goes by just one name. One, a 19-year-old, alleged she was repeatedly raped by the school head when she was just 15 and that school staff had taken her to hospital for an abortion.

Police have received a similar complaint from a second female employee who alleged she was also raped by the school head, and that he was continuing to abuse children, Jayachandaran said.

of heroin worth \$7.5 million from an Iranian fishing trawler. (AFP)

**Modi heads to Sri Lanka:** India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi headed to Sri Lanka on Thursday on a charm offensive as New Delhi seeks to reassert its influence on the island amid signs of a Chinese comeback. Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena came to power in January 2015



Novice Sri Lankan Buddhist monks stand for a procession for alms as part of a ritual during Buddha Purnima in Colombo, Sri Lanka on May 11. The festival marks Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death. (AP)

## Lat/Am

**Lula calls trial a 'farce':** Brazil's leftist former president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva called the corruption trial threatening to end his storied career a "farce" during almost five hours of testimony Wednesday.

Arguably the country's most popular and controversial politician, Lula is accused of receiving a seaside apartment as a kickback from the OAS construction company.

If found guilty, he could be barred from running for office and even jailed, destroying his hopes of coming back to power in the 2018 presidential elections.

The closed hearing put Lula, 71, face-to-face with Judge Sergio Moro, a hero to many Brazilians for his relentless pursuit of senators, millionaires and other powerful figures in a graft probe called "Car Wash."

Lula, whose 2003-2010 rule made him loved by the left and equally loathed on the right, would be by far Moro's biggest scalp.

However, the fiery orator — who grew up in severe poverty before becoming a metal workers' union leader, co-founder of the Workers' Party and leftist icon — was defiant. (AFP)



Lula

**Feces hurled at soldiers:** Young Venezuelan protesters lobbed bottles and bags of feces at soldiers who fought with tear-gas on Wednesday to block the latest march in more than a month of nationwide protests against socialist President Nicolas Maduro.

The extraordinary scenes, in what was dubbed the "Shit March" on the main highway through Caracas, came as thousands of opposition supporters again poured onto the streets decrying Venezuela's economic crisis and demanding elections.

"These kids live in a dictatorship, they have no other option but to protest however they see fit," said Maria Montilla, 49, behind lines of youths with masks, slingshots and makeshift wooden shields.

Many carried stones and so-called "Poopotov cocktails" — feces stuffed into small glass bottles — that they threw when National Guard troops blocked their path, firing gas and turning water cannons on the crowds. (RTRS)

**Baby deaths soar:** Thousands of babies died in Venezuela last year, new official data show, highlighting the tragic impact of the country's economic crisis as political tension heightened with deadly street clashes Wednesday.

The health ministry said deaths of infants under the age of one soared by 30 percent in 2016, a year when hospitals and protesters complained of severe shortages of medical supplies.

Deaths of mothers linked to childbirth soared by two-thirds meanwhile, according to the data published by the ministry — the latest such figures since 2015. It said 11,466 babies died in 2016, up from 8,812 the year before. The report gave no comparative rate in relation to the number of births. (AFP)

**Bahamas elects Minnis 'PM':** The Bahamas voted in a new leader Wednesday, with Hubert Minnis, who campaigned on a platform of change, beating scandal-tainted incumbent Perry Christie in general elections on the island archipelago.

"My fellow Bahamians, the people have spoken," Minnis, a doctor, said in a victory rally before thousands of supporters. "We have been given a mandate for change."

Christie, leader of Progressive Liberal Party, conceded defeat in a statement in which he said he had made a congratulatory telephone call to Minnis wishing the leader of the Free National Movement success.

"I understand as perhaps few others the challenges that await Dr Minnis, and I wish him only success on behalf of our nation. He has my full support for a smooth transition," he said.

Christie, who was finishing his second non-consecutive term as prime minister, was dogged by scandals and double-digit unemployment. (AFP)

**Village farewells dead:** Screams and tears burst forth in this Mexican village on Wednesday when small white coffins arrived for the bodies of nearly a dozen children killed in an accidental fireworks warehouse explosion two days before.

In all, 14 people died in San Isidro, in the central state of Puebla, on Monday night. Eleven of them were children.

The tragedy occurred five months after blasts in a fireworks market near Mexico City killed 42 people, highlighting the dangers of stocked pyrotechnics in the country, where families often poorly store explosives used to mark religious festivals.

The national civil protection service said after the latest deaths that new safety regulations would soon be introduced, though no ban was envisaged.

"We know a ban would affect thousands of families. We are not thinking of stopping this activity," the head of the service, Luis Felipe Puente, told reporters.

In San Isidro, a priest recited prayers into a microphone, near to where flowers and candles had been left. (AFP)

**Pot med sales start:** Pharmacies in Chile's capital Santiago will start selling cannabis-based medicines this week, the first time such treatments have been offered by drug stores in Latin America, the companies behind the launch said on Wednesday.

Canadian cannabis producer and distributor Tilray said it had partnered with local firm Alef Biotechnology, which is licensed by the Chilean government.

Chile legalized the use of medical marijuana in 2015 and is among a number of Latin American countries gradually loosening laws prohibiting the cultivation, distribution and consumption of cannabis.

"By importing Tilray's medical cannabis products to Chile we intend to ease the suffering of those in need by offering pure, precise and predictable medical cannabis products," Alef board president Roberto Roizman said in a statement. Tilray's T100 and TC100 products will be available at a number of pharmacies in Santiago initially, under prescription. The average sale price will be \$310 for a treatment that lasts around a month, a spokesman said. (RTRS)