

World News Roundup

India

Travel advisories issued

More people across India join protests against CAA

NEW DELHI, Dec 15, (Agencies): Protests against the new Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) swept across Indian states amid reports of large scale violence and vandalism in the state of West Bengal.

Several major Indian cities including those from the north eastern states, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, New Delhi, Maharashtra, Bihar, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Telangana witnessed fresh protests, the Press Trust of India said.

Popular protests are spreading to new cities across India while north eastern states are continuing with their protests against the new Citizenship Act which would pave the way to Indian citizenship to persecuted religious minorities belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian communities coming to India from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

Several countries including the US, the UK, Israel and Singapore have issued travel advisories to their citizens asking them to avoid north eastern Indian states.

Thousands of agitators gathered in several centers across New Delhi especially Jantar Mantar and the premises of Jamia Millia Islamia. The Delhi Metro was forced to shutter several gates especially those leading to the protest sites.

In West Bengal, media reports said that several buses and five trains were put on fire in Murshidabad.

Violence, vandalism and arson were reported from several cities across West Bengal as Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee asked the protesters to keep away from violence and protect public properties.



Modi

Killed

In Assam, where at least six people were killed since the agitation against CAA started four days back, reports emerged of protests while government employees have announced to go on strike on Dec 18 to register their protest against the CAA.

Internet and transportation services are still suspended in the state while educational institutions remained closed.

Other north eastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura also witnessed protests demanding to roll back the CAA.

In the southern Indian state of Kerala, thousands of Muslims gathered in the city of Calicut to express their opposition to the Act and demanded that the central government should not go ahead with the amended Citizenship Act while the ruling and opposition parties in the state have decided to organise a united protest march on coming Monday.

In Uttar Pradesh, Aligarh Muslim University was a major site of protests while several other cities also saw mobilising Muslims against the Act.

Police arrested dozens of people and enforced curfew Thursday in several districts in India's northeastern Assam state where thousands protested legislation granting citizenship to non-Muslims who migrated from neighboring countries.

Groups of protesters defied the curfew in Guwahati, the state capital, on Thursday morning and burned tires before police dispersed them.

Soldiers drove and marched through the streets to reinforce police in violence-hit districts, which included Guwahati and Dibrugarh, said state police chief Bhaskar Mahanta.

The protesters in Assam oppose the legislation out of concern that migrants will move to the border region and dilute the culture and political sway of indigenous tribal people. The legislation was passed by Parliament on Wednesday and now needs to be signed by the country's ceremonial president, a formality, before becoming law.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi appealed for peace and in a tweet said: "I want to assure them - no one can take away your rights, unique identity and beautiful culture. It will continue to flourish and grow."

The Press Trust of India news agency said the protesters uprooted telephone poles, burned several buses and other vehicles and also attacked homes of officials from the governing Hindu nationalist party and the regional group Assam Gana Parishad.

Protesters

Police used batons and tear gas to disperse protesters in 10 out of the state's 33 districts.

In curfew-bound Guwahati, police escorted a team of Japanese security officials to their hotel to prepare for a likely visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Sunday for a summit with Modi.

Abe's visit is yet to be officially announced by India. Media reports say the summit may shift from Guwahati to another city because of ongoing protests. Assam was chosen as the venue for Abe's visit because the state has several Japanese government-aided projects.

Assam is also one of India's northeastern states where foreign journalists require permission to visit.

While those protesting in Assam are opposed to the bill because of worries it will allow more migrants regardless of their religion, others consider the measure as discriminatory for not applying to Muslims.

The Citizenship Amendment Bill seeks to grant Indian nationality to Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Parsis and Sikhs who fled Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh because of religious persecution before 2015. It does not, however, extend to Rohingya Muslim refugees who fled persecution in Myanmar.

Home Minister Amit Shah rejected criticism the legislation was anti-Muslim, saying it did not affect the existing path to citizenship available to all communities.

Human rights watchdog Amnesty India said it legitimized discrimination on the basis of religion and stood in clear violation of India's Constitution and international human rights law.

"Welcoming asylum seekers is a positive step, but in a secular country like India, slamming the door on persecuted Muslims and other communities merely for their faith reeks of fear-mongering and bigotry," the group said in a statement.

Several opposition lawmakers who debated the bill in Parliament said it would be challenged in court.

The bill's passage follows a contentious citizenship registry exercise in Assam intended to identify legal residents and weed out those in the country illegally. Shah has pledged to roll it out nationwide, promising to rid India of "infiltrators."

Nearly 2 million people in Assam were excluded from the list - about half Hindus and the other half Muslims - and have been asked to prove their citizenship or else be rendered stateless.

India is constructing a detention center for some of the tens of thousands the courts are expected to ultimately determine came to the country illegally.

But for many Hindus who were left off Assam's citizenship list, the bill could provide protection and a fast track to naturalization.



Trapped flower vendors are pulled out from a collapsed wall following an earthquake that struck Padada, Davao del Sur province, southern Philippines on Dec 15. (AP)

Strong quake kills 1, collapses building in Philippines

A strong earthquake jolted the southern Philippines on Sunday, killing at least one person and causing a three-story building to collapse, setting off a search for people feared to have been trapped inside, officials said.

The magnitude 6.9 quake struck an area about 6 km (3.7 miles) northwest of Padada town in Davao del Sur province at a depth of 30 km (18 miles), according to the Philippine

Institute of Volcanology and Seismology. The area has been battered by a series of powerful quakes in recent months.

A child was killed in a village in Davao del Sur's Matanao town when a wall of her house tumbled down as the ground shook and hit her in the head, officials said.

Davao del Sur Gov. Douglas Cagas said a three-story building housing a

grocery store collapsed in downtown Padada during the quake, trapping an unspecified number of people inside. Search and rescue efforts were underway, he told the DZMM radio network, adding that an unknown number of people were injured in his province.

Matanao Mayor Vincent Fernandez said his two-story town hall was badly damaged by the intense shaking, along with two bridges and several

buildings already weakened by previous quakes.

"The shaking was different this time, it wasn't swaying. It's like a roller was rumbling by underneath," Fernandez told DZMM from an emergency shelter.

As he was being interviewed, he paused briefly, saying the ground was shaking again in the latest of dozens of aftershocks. (AP)

North Korea

Bid to counter US threats

North Korea conducts another test

SEOUL, Dec 15, (AP) North Korea said Saturday that it successfully performed another "crucial test" at its long-range rocket launch site that will further strengthen its nuclear deterrent.

The test - the second at the facility in a week, according to North Korea's Academy of Defense Science - possibly involved technologies to improve intercontinental ballistic missiles that could potentially reach the continental United States.

In a separate statement, Pak Jong Chon, chief of the Korean People's Army's general staff, asserted that North Korea has built up "tremendous power" and that the findings from the recent tests would be used to develop new weapons to allow the country to "definitely and reliably" counter US nuclear threats.

The North in recent weeks has been dialing up pressure to coax major concessions from the Trump administration as it approaches an end-of-year deadline set by leader Kim Jong Un to salvage faltering nuclear negotiations.

The Academy of Defense Science did not specify what was tested on Friday. Just days earlier, the North said it conducted a "very important test" at the site on the country's northwestern coast, prompting speculation that it involved a new engine for either an ICBM or a space launch vehicle.

The testing activity and defiant statements suggest that the North is preparing to do something to provoke the United States if Washington doesn't back down and make concessions to ease sanctions and pressure on Pyongyang in deadlocked nuclear negotiations.

An unnamed spokesman for the

academy said scientists received warm congratulations from members of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee who attended the test, which lasted from 10:41 to 10:48 pm Friday at the Sohae Satellite Launching Ground, where the North has conducted satellite launches and liquid-fuel missile engine tests in recent years.

The spokesman said the successful outcome of the latest test, in addition to the one on Dec 7, "will be applied to further bolster up the reliable strategic nuclear deterrent of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," referring to North Korea's formal name.

Development

"Genuine peace can be safeguarded and our development and future be guaranteed only when the balance of power is completely ensured. We have stored up a tremendous power," Pak said in a statement carried by the North's official Korean Central News Agency.

"We should be ready to cope with political and military provocations of the hostile forces and be familiar with both dialogue and confrontation," Pak said. "Our army is fully ready to thoroughly carry out any decision of the supreme leader with action. ... US and other hostile forces will spend the year-end in peace only when they hold off any words and deeds rattling us."

Kim Dong-yub, a former South Korean military officer and currently an analyst from Seoul's Institute for Far Eastern Studies, said the North mentioning its nuclear deterrent makes it clear it tested a new engine for an ICBM, not a satellite-launch vehicle. Kim said it was notable that North Korea announced the specific length of

the test, which he said possibly signals a larger liquid-fuel ICBM engine.

North Korea's current ICBMs, including the Hwasong-15, are built with first stages that are powered by a pair of engines that experts say are modeled after Russian designs. When the North first tested the engine in 2016, it said the test lasted for 200 seconds and demonstrated a thrust of 80 tons-force.

The North Korean statement came a day before Stephen Biegun, the US special representative for North Korea, was to arrive in South Korea for discussions with South Korean officials over the nuclear diplomacy. It was unclear whether Biegun would attempt contact with North Korean officials at the inter-Korean border, which has often been used as a diplomatic venue, or whether such an effort would be successful.

During a provocative run of weapons tests in 2017, Kim Jong Un conducted three flight tests of ICBMs that demonstrated potential range to reach deep into the US mainland, raising tensions and triggering verbal warfare with President Donald Trump as they exchanged crude insults and threats of nuclear annihilation.

Experts say that the North would need further tests to establish the missile's performance and reliability, such as improving its accuracy and ensuring that the warheads survive the harsh conditions of atmospheric reentry.

Relations between Kim and Trump became cozier in 2018 after Kim initiated diplomacy that led to their first summit in June that year in Singapore, where they issued a vague statement on a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, without describing when or how it would occur.



Police divers prepare to search the waters near White Island off the coast of Whakatane, New Zealand on Dec 14. A team of nine from the Police National Dive Squad resumed their search early Saturday for a body seen in the water following Monday's volcanic eruption. (AP)



Tsai



Ardern

Asia

Taiwan probes visa scam: Taiwan prosecutors say they have detained 10 people, including a former staff member of the China-friendly opposition party, and are investigating them on suspicion of falsifying documents to bring thousands of mainland Chinese to Taiwan, possibly including some who spied on the self-ruled island claimed by Beijing.

The investigation comes just weeks before presidential and legislative elections in Taiwan in which Beijing has been accused of intervening in hopes of unseating independence-leaning President Tsai Ing-wen.

The suspects allegedly sent letters containing false information that allowed at least 5,000 people to visit Taiwan from China between early 2017 and June this year, according to Chen Yu-ping, spokesman for the Taipei city prosecutor's office.

The letters issued by Taiwanese front companies and civic groups let the Chinese citizens enter for "professional exchanges" as a way around the stricter vetting required had they applied to visit as tourists, Chen said.

Some of the visitors were "high-level" Communist Party officials and intelligence operatives "who would otherwise be barred from visiting," the Taipei Times newspaper reported Thursday. It said two were connected to the Communist Party's United Front Work Department dedicated to infiltrating civic groups, ethnic minorities and Chinese communities abroad. (AP)

Toxic air hampers search: A second land search of New Zealand's volcanic White Island on Sunday failed to locate the bodies of the last two victims of an eruption that has now claimed 16 lives, most of them tourists. New Zealand police confirmed the 16th victim died Saturday at Sydney's Concord Hospital, one of several Australian hospitals

where survivors suffering from severe burns were being treated. Ten of the dead are thought to be Australians.

Of the 47 people on White Island when it erupted, 24 were Australian citizens and four more were permanent residents of

Australia.

Two four-person teams landed on the island by helicopter early Sunday morning and searched a location thought to be the most likely place where one of the bodies might be. The teams, wearing heavy protective clothing, were using breathing apparatus that allowed them to search for only 75 minutes.

They were unable to locate either body and returned to the New Zealand mainland where they underwent decontamination after being exposed to toxic ash and gases.

"We have always anticipated recovering all bodies from the island and we remain deeply committed to that goal to allow families some closure," Police Deputy Commissioner John Tims said.

Later Sunday, divers were due to resume their search of waters around the island despite near zero visibility that hampered their efforts on Saturday. Rescue teams had reported seeing a body in the sea a day after Monday's eruption.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern called on New Zealanders to observe a minute's silence in memory of victims of the disaster at 2:11 pm on Monday, exactly a week from the eruption. Ardern and her Cabinet will pause in silence during their regular meeting at Parliament in Wellington. (AP)



Indian artists join a protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act in Guwahati, India on Dec 15. Protests have been continuing over a new law that grants Indian citizenship based on religion and excludes Muslims. (AP)