

Subcontinent

Pakistani carrier fires 28 pilots

Assailants fatally shot a 'pro-India' politician

SRINAGAR, India, July 9, (AP): Unidentified assailants late Wednesday fatally shot a pro-India politician along with his father and brother in Kashmir, police said, in a first major attack against India's ruling party members in the disputed region.

Police blamed militants fighting against Indian rule in Kashmir for the attack.

Militants fired at Sheikh Wasim Bari, a leader with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in north-western Bandipora town Wednesday night, police said in a statement. The statement said "during indiscriminate firing," Bari, his brother and father were injured but later died at a hospital. Bari's brother and father also were BJP members.

The shooting is the first major attack against members of India's ruling Hindu nationalist party in the Muslim-majority Kashmir valley. Bari, who was about 35 years old, was an executive council member of the party in the region.

He helped the BJP to strengthen its base in the region and was considered the face of the party in Bandipora district.

According to police officials, at least two assailants fired at the three outside their home, which is about 100 meters from the town's main police station.

Bari was guarded by at least eight police guards, but it was unclear whether they were present at the time of shooting. Government forces cordoned off the area and launched a search for the attackers, police said.

Ram Madhav, the party's national general secretary, said in a tweet that he was "shocked and saddened" by the killings.

No rebel group claimed responsibility for the attack. Rebels have been fighting Indian rule since 1989, with tens of thousands of lives lost, including civilians, militants and government forces.

Muslim Kashmiris generally support the rebels' goal of uniting the territory, either under Pakistani rule or as an independent country.

Earlier Wednesday, Indian and Pakistani soldiers barraged each other with mortar shells and gunfire along the highly militarized frontier in Kashmir, killing a woman and wounding another in the Indian-controlled portion of the Himalayan region, officials said.

Pakistani troops hit Indian positions at two places in southern Poonch district along the Line of Control dividing Kashmir between the two countries early Wednesday, Indian army spokesman Lt. Col. Devender Anand said.

Anand called it an "unprovoked violation" of a 2003 cease-fire accord between the two nuclear rivals. He said Indian troops "retaliated befittingly," and the fighting continued for 45 minutes.

The 60-year-old woman was hit by a splinter while visiting relatives near the de facto border, civil administrator Rahul Yadav said. Another woman was injured and was being treated at a hospital.

Pakistan did not immediately comment. However, in the past, each side has accused the other for starting the border skirmishes in the region that both claim in its entirety.

There has been almost daily fighting over the last several months along the rugged and mountainous frontier between Indian and Pakistani soldiers, leaving dozens of civilians and soldiers dead on both sides.

Indian military says Pakistan has so far this year committed more than 2,500 cease-fire violations.

India and Pakistan have been on maximum alert since February 2019, when Pakistan said it shot down two Indian warplanes in Kashmir and captured a pilot, in response to an airstrike by Indian aircraft targeting militants inside Pakistan.

India said the strikes targeted Pakistan-based militants responsible for a suicide bombing that killed 40 Indian troops in the Indian-controlled Kashmir.

Relations between the two countries have further strained over Kashmir since last August, when New Delhi revoked the Muslim-majority region's decades-old semi-autonomous status, touching off anger on both sides of the frontier.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's national carrier is firing 28 pilots found to have tainted licenses, the company's spokesman said Wednesday, the latest chapter in a scandal that emerged in the wake of the Airbus A320 crash in Karachi in May.

An inquiry into the May 22 crash that killed 97 people on board resulted in the stunning revelation that 260 of 860 pilots in Pakistan had cheated on their pilots exams, but were still given licences by the Civil Aviation Authority.

The government later fired five officials of the regulatory agency and criminal charges against them are being considered. According to news reports Wednesday, 262 pilots are currently grounded in Pakistan.

The scandal has shocked the nation, including the families of those passengers who died when the flight PK8303 went down in a congested residential area while trying to land in the port city of Karachi. There were only two survivors on board and a girl died on the ground.

The revelations of tainted pilot licenses have also embarrassed the government and shaken the top ranks of Pakistan International Airlines.

The European Union's aviation safety agency and the United Kingdom subsequently banned PIA from flying into Europe for at least six months following revelations that nearly a third of Pakistani pilots had cheated on their exams. Pakistani pilots flying with European airlines have also been grounded while their credentials are being verified.

"We are really hurting," said PIA spokesman Abdullah Hafeez.

He told The Associated Press that 17 of the 28 sacked pilots were already grounded in January last year, after an aircraft skidded off the runway in northern Pakistan. An internal inquiry into that accident, which did not result in any injuries, questioned the licences being issued by the country's Civil Aviation Authority.

However, Hafeez said the 17 pilots have since been paid \$1.7 million in salaries after a court ruled that PIA could not dismiss them until an investigation into their qualifications had been completed.

Opposition politicians have sharply criticized Prime Minister Imran Khan's government for going public with the report's findings of widespread cheating on exams taken by pilots. The government replied saying Khan was cleaning up the corruption left behind by past governments in Pakistan.

The national airline, once considered among the finest, has deteriorated over the decades as successive governments doled out patronage by giving jobs at PIA to supporters. As a result - at roughly 450 employees to each of its 31 aircraft - PIA has one of the world's highest employee to aircraft ratio in the industry. Most airlines have less than 200 employees per aircraft. The ratio is considered a key benchmark in calculating an airline's productivity.

Also:

KABUL: A suicide truck bomber targeted a police district headquarters in Afghanistan's southern Kandahar province on Wednesday, killing three officers, a local official said. Three other police officers, including a district police chief, were killed in a roadside bombing in eastern Ghazni province.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for both attacks. In the Kandahar attack, the suicide bomber struck in the district of Shah Wali Kot, according to Bahir Ahmadi, the provincial governor's spokesman. The explosion also wounded 14 people, both policemen and civilians.

Ahmadi said the guards at the district headquarters realized the truck was suspicious and opened fire before it could reach the building. But the shooting set off the explosives' load, triggering a huge blast that caused the casualties and damaged several nearby buildings as well as the district headquarters, which also houses the office of the police chief and the district administrative department.

But with most restrictions lifted and some



A hearse parks during the funeral service for Priest Georg Ratzinger in front of St Peter's Cathedral in Regensburg, Germany on July 8. The elder brother of the Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI had died on July 1 at the age of 96 years. (AP)

Mourners attend funeral mass for retired pope's brother

A memorial mass was held Wednesday in Germany for the Rev Georg Ratzinger, the older brother of Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI.

Following the Pontifical Requiem at the High Cathedral of St Peter's in Regensburg, Ratzinger, who died on July 1 at the age of 96, was to be buried at the Bavarian city's Lower Catholic Cemetery.

Bishop Rudolf Voderholzer, who led the service, told mourners that Ben-

edict was following the mass online. "As we reliably know, the pope emeritus is connected with us via livestream," Voderholzer said.

The 93-year-old emeritus pope made a four-day visit to Regensburg to be with his ailing brother just over a week before Ratzinger's death.

Toward the end of the funeral mass, a cleric read out a message from Benedict.

Benedict thanked all those who

had taken care of his brother in his last weeks and said his "heart was touched" by the many letters he received from believers around the globe after his death.

Talking about his visit to say goodbye to his ailing brother shortly before he died, Benedict said that, "I felt the hour had come to visit him one more time ... I am deeply grateful that the Lord gave me this sign."

Georg Ratzinger headed the fa-

mous Regensburger Domspatzen choir, which traces its history back to the 10th century. The choir toured the world under his leadership, performing for Queen Elizabeth II and Pope John Paul II. But after his retirement from the post, Ratzinger apologized for using corporal punishment to discipline boys amid a wider investigation into sexual and physical abuse in the Roman Catholic Church. (AP)

Coronavirus

Virus killed over 100,000 people in 27 EU nations

Pandemic highlights limits of populism



German Chancellor Angela Merkel wears a face-mask, to protect against the coronavirus, prior to addressing a plenary session at the European Parliament in Brussels on July 8. Germany has just taken over the European Union's rotating presidency, and must chaperone the 27-nation bloc through a period of deep crisis for the next six months and try to limit the economic damage inflicted by the coronavirus. (AP)



Macron

Hoti

Europe

French, Kosovo to discuss peace:

French President Emmanuel Macron has met here with Kosovo's Prime Minister Abdullah Hoti to discuss the potential for lasting peace with Kosovo's northern neighbour, Serbia, Macron's office said in a statement on Wednesday.

The talks, held late on Tuesday, confirmed the opening of talks between Kosovo and Serbia on July 10 by videoconference under the aegis of the French President and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

European Union high representative Josep Borrell and other senior EU officials will also take part.

The current Franco-German initiative is an attempt to bring closure to the open wound that remains between Serbia and Kosovo after the latter declared independence from Serbia in 2008, following a protracted and bloody war that got NATO involved to halt Serbian onslaughts against its southern neighbour.

For decades, relations between the two protagonists have been marred by border incidents and lack of a functional relationship at a time when they should be gearing up for closer ties with the EU. (KUNA)

Masks mandatory in N. Spain: Authorities in northeast Spain will start fining individuals who do not wear face masks 100 euros (\$113) starting Thursday when the use of masks becomes mandatory in Barcelona and the surrounding Catalonia region following a resurgence of the coronavirus.

Spain ended a nationwide lockdown in mid-June after restrictions on movement and public activity succeeded in reining in the country's virus outbreak after it had pushed the healthcare system to the breaking point and killed thousands of people.

But with most restrictions lifted and some

BRUSSELS, July 9, (Agencies): The coronavirus pandemic is showing the limits of "fact-denying populism," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Wednesday, as she urged European Union countries to quickly agree on a major economic recovery package and deprive nationalists of any opportunity to take advantage of the crisis.

The virus has killed more than 100,000 people in the 27 EU nations. It sparked what is likely to be the worst economic crisis in Europe in almost a century, according to the European Commission, after the disease ravaged health care systems and forced the closure of businesses, transport systems and schools.

Merkel's remarks to the European Parliament came as the leaders of Italy and Spain - the first EU countries to impose far-reaching lockdowns and two of the worst-hit countries in the world - urged fellow EU members to agree at a summit next week on "ambitious terms" for the recovery fund to help get economies back on track.

"The depth of the economic decline demands that we hurry," Merkel told lawmakers. "We must waste no time - only the weakest would suffer from that. I very much hope that we can reach an agreement this summer. That will require a lot of readiness to compromise from all sides - and from you too."

Germany took over the task of chairing EU meetings on July 1 and faces the daunting challenge of seeking a compromise on the coronavirus recovery fund worth as much as 750 billion euros (\$850 billion). Berlin must also help chaperone through a European budget for the next seven years, which will be linked to the recovery fund, to confront the recession.

"We must not be naive: In many member states, opponents of the crisis are just waiting to misuse the crisis

for their ends," Merkel said. "We must show them all where the added value of cooperation in the European Union lies. We must show that a return to nationalism means not more, but less control."

Without explicitly naming any countries or politicians, Merkel pointed to cautionary examples elsewhere.

"We are seeing at the moment that the pandemic can't be fought with lies and disinformation, and neither can it be with hatred and agitation," she said.

"Fact-denying populism is being shown its limits," she added to applause. "In a democracy, facts and transparency are needed. That distinguishes Europe, and Germany will stand up for it during its presidency."

Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron in May proposed creating a one-time 500 billion-euro (\$563 billion) recovery fund that would be filled through shared EU borrowing. That is a big step for Germany, breaking with its long-standing opposition to any kind of joint borrowing.

The EU's executive commission expanded on the proposal, putting forward plans for a 750 billion-euro fund made up mostly of grants. It faces resistance from countries dubbed the "Frugal Four" - Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden - that oppose grants and are reluctant to give money away without strings attached.

"It is right and important for the regions particularly hard hit by the crisis, and above all the people who live there, to be able to count on our solidarity," Merkel said Wednesday. "It is in our very own interests - but at the same time, that also means the effort that is necessary for the good of all must not overburden the economically strong member states in a one-sided way."

Merkel is scheduled to hold talks with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte

in Berlin on Thursday.

In Madrid, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte exhorted his European partners to be bold in their response to the pandemic or risk endangering the bloc's common market and economy.

"If we end up going for the most diluted option, that would be an erroneous approach because it wouldn't help any country at all," Conte told reporters after meeting with his Spanish counterpart, Pedro Sánchez. "Europe must give an ambitious political response."

Southern European countries are pressing for a no-strings-attached approach to the recovery fund at the summit in Brussels on July 17-18. That will be first in-person meeting of the bloc's leaders since the outbreak hit the continent.

Sánchez said that the planned fund could be "historic" and comparable to the significance of the EU's foundation or the establishment of the euro single currency. He said consensus among EU leaders was needed no later than this month.

"Recovery and unity are two faces of the same coin," Sánchez said. "Without unity, there will be no recovery, it's important that we convey that to our European partners."

Meanwhile, Merkel Wednesday presented Germany's Presidency of the European Union in the European Parliament in Brussels.

Under the motto "Together for Europe's recovery", the German presidency is determined to tackle the huge challenge posed by the pandemic, Merkel said.

She highlighted five areas that Europe needs to work on if it wants to emerge unified and strong from the current pandemic crisis: fundamental rights, solidarity and cohesion, climate change, digitisation and Europe's role in the world.

people not following social-distancing rules, the number of confirmed new cases reported daily in Spain has begun to creep up. Confirmed cases doubled between Tuesday and Wednesday amid dozens of small outbreaks. The biggest increase was in the Catalonia region, with 52 new confirmed cases in a 24-hour period and nearly 2,000 in the past two weeks. (AP)

Italy cracks down on Bangladeshis:

More than 100 Bangladeshis who arrived at Rome's airport Wednesday were refused entry as Italy tightens restrictions on travel from coronavirus hotspots in a bid to prevent new infection clusters in the onetime European epicenter of the outbreak.

The 112 Bangladeshis were among 205 passengers who landed Wednesday aboard a Qatar Airways flight that originated in

Pakistan and stopped in Doha, Qatar. A spokesman for Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport said the 112 were not allowed to disembark and were sent back. The other passengers were being tested and quarantined.

Italy on Tuesday had suspended flights from Bangladesh after at least 37 Bangladeshi passengers aboard a charter flight that landed Monday tested positive for the virus upon arrival in Rome. Italy went on alert about possible infections in the Bangladeshi immigrant community after a cluster of about a dozen cases was traced to a recently returned worker in Rome. (AP)

Man convicted of killing: A 57-year-old German man was convicted Wednesday of killing the son of Germany's former president Richard von Weizsäcker and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. He was ordered held in a psychiatric ward.

Fritz von Weizsäcker, a doctor, was stabbed to death in November while delivering a lecture on liver disease at a clinic in Berlin. An off-duty police officer who tried to stop the attack was seriously injured.

Berlin's regional court convicted the defendant, identified only as Gregor S. due to privacy rules, of murder and attempted murder.

Prosecutors said the defendant had acted out of hatred for the former German president, who died in 2015, blaming him for the use of the chemical known as "Agent Orange" during the Vietnam War. (AP)



A kitesurfer rides over the Ammersee in Herrsching, Germany, July 8. In the background you can see the Alps. (AP)