Roadside blast kills two policemen in southwest Pakistan

At least two policemen were killed and nearly two dozen others wounded in a blast in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan in southwestern Pakistan, officials say.

"At least two policemen were killed in the blast in Quetta," Liaquat Shahwani, spokesman for the Balochistan government, said in a statement on Sunday.

Another 21 people, including 12 policemen, were injured, said Wasim Baig, a provincial health department spokesperson.

The injured have been moved to the city's Civil Hospital, a senior police official said.

Shahwani said four passersby were also wounded in the blast that targeted the police mobile van at Tanzeem Square near the upscale Serena Hotel.

The bomb, which was planted on a motorcycle, went off near a van full of policemen, a local police official said, adding that the windows of nearby buildings were shattered by the explosion.

No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack.

Security agencies have cordoned off the area and launched a manhunt to arrest the culprits, Shahwani said.

Balochistan, which shares a border with both Afghanistan and Iran, is Pakistan's largest and most volatile province.

It faces a multifaceted threat from armed groups, including the Taliban, Sunni fighters targeting Shia Muslims, and nationalist rebels seeking independence for their province.

The violence is partly seen as a response by rebels to Beijing's investment plans linking China's Xinjiang province with the Gulf of Oman via Balochistan by way of a network of roads and rail tracks.

Attacks targeting law enforcement agencies and workers from other provinces, especially those working on projects initiated by China under a $62bn investment plan, are common in Balochistan.

Aljazeera

With 2,609 new cases, Nepal's Covid-19 tally reaches 717,486

Nepal on Monday reported 2,609 new coronavirus cases in the last 24 hours taking the nationwide infection tally to 717,486.

Similarly, 1,042 people tested positive in a total of 6,149 antigen tests, according to the Health Ministry. As of Monday, 3,694,179 PCR and 363,744 antigen tests have been carried out across the country.

A total of 10,445 PCR tests were performed in the past 24 hours, according to the Health Ministry. In its regular situation report, the ministry did not mention the death toll over the past 24 hours. It, however, reported 22 Covid-19-related fatalities, which included the number of deaths managed by Nepal Army on different dates. The country-wide death toll has now reached 10,115. The number of active cases stands at 36,288. According to the ministry, 671,083 infected people have recovered from the disease so far; 1,784 of them in the last 24 hours.

Kathmandu Valley recorded 959 new infections in the past 24 hours. Of these, 624 cases were confirmed in Kathmandu, 165 in Lalitpur and 170 in Bhaktapur.

In the past 24 hours, 343 new infections were recorded in Province 1, 57 in Province 2, 1,526 in Bagmati, 472 in Gandaki, 154 in Lumbini, 10 in Karnali and 47 Sudurpaschim. According to the data released by the ministry, 16 districts are home to more than 500 active cases each and 21 other districts host more than 200 active cases each. On Monday, 741 individuals infected with the virus were being treated in intensive care units across the country.

kathmandupost

Indian bankers in talks as court rulings threaten over $6 billion in loans

MUMBAI: - Informal talks are taking place to deal with the fall-out from two rulings by India's Supreme Court that threaten the repayment of loans totalling nearly 500 billion rupees ($6.73 billion) to some of India's largest banks, bankers close to the matter say.

Any failure to recoup the money adds to stress in the banking sector, which is already dealing with an increased level of bad loans and reduced profits because of the impact of the pandemic.

Last week, India's Supreme Court effectively blocked Future Group's $3.4 billion sale of retail assets to Reliance Industries , jeopardising nearly $2.69 billion the retail conglomerate owes to Indian banks. read more

That ruling was delivered days after the Supreme Court rejected a petition to allow telecom companies to approach the Department of Telecommunications to renegotiate outstanding dues in a long-runining dispute with Indian telecom players.

That raises concerns, bankers say, over whether Vodafone Idea (VODA.NS) will repay some 300 billion rupees ($4.04 billion) it owes to Indian banks and billions of dollars more in long-term dues to the government. read more

FUTURE OF FUTURE?

Two bankers, speaking on condition of anonymity said negotiations were taking place to try to limit potentially severe consequences.

Loans to Future worth nearly 200 billion rupees were restructured earlier this year, giving it more time to come up with repayments due over the next two years, but that was on the premise that Reliance would bail it out, the bankers said. Future group did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Should Future be taken to a bankruptcy court, bankers say they are concerned they will have to take haircuts on the loans of more than 75%.

"The immediate apprehension is that the restructuring deal will fall through for banks by December," said a banker at a public sector bank that has lent money to Future. Future's leading financial creditors include India's largest lender State Bank of India (SBI.NS), along with smaller rivals Bank of Baroda (BOB.NS) and Bank of India (BOI.NS).

Bank of India, the lead bank in consortium lending to Future, did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment.

VODAFONE IDEA

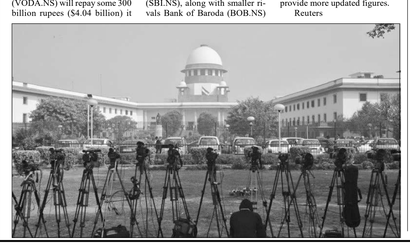
Banks have also started discussing Vodafone's debt to lenders of nearly 300 billion rupees. Top lenders to Vodafone include Yes Bank (YESB.NS), IDFC First Bank (IDFB.NS) and IndusInd Bank (INBK.NS), as well as other private and state-owned lenders.

Vodafone, Yes Bank, IDFC First Bank and IndusInd did not immediately respond to a request seeking comment.

"Even though banks have the option of restructuring loans in case the company defaults, it will only make sense if there is clear cash flow visibility, which is not the case right now," a senior banker at a public sector bank said on condition of anonymity.

Already, at the end of March, Indian banks had total non-performing assets of 8.34 trillion rupees ($112.48 billion), the government has said. It has yet to provide more updated figures.

Reuters



Presidential election campaign kicks off in Uzbekistan with Mirziyoyev certain to be re-elected

Moscow (AsiaNews) – The campaign to elect Uzbekistan's next president on 24 October is underway. Only candidates picked by political parties can run; independents are excluded.

Five, pro-government parties registered with the Ministry of Justice will run a candidate: the Uzbekistan National Revival Democratic Party[*] (Milliy Tiklanish), the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan,[†] the Justice Social Democratic Party (Adolat),[‡] the incumbent president's Uzbekistan Liberal Democratic Party (UzLiDeP),[§] and the Ecological Party of Uzbekistan.[**]

Two opposition parties, the Liberty (Erk) Democratic Party[††] and the Truth and Progress Social Democratic Party[‡‡] were not allowed to register. Clearly their views diverged too much from the "general line" set by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to be allowed to join the race.

The president's re-election is not in doubt given the lack of real political opposition, while the country's majoritarian democracy guarantees its stability.

For the campaign, Uzbekistan's Central Electoral Commission has invited observers from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Uzbek authorities also plan to allow envoys from other governments and other international bodies to celebrate the country's "democratic calm". Uzbeks abroad at the time of the vote will be able to cast their ballot at all Uzbek consular offices and diplomatic missions.

For Mirziyoyev, this is a second term. In 2016, he replaced Islam Karimov, the country's historic first president, who suffered a fatal stroke after 27 years in power. His re-election is certain given the absence of credible alternatives.

Yet, his political success does not depend only on Uzbekistan's post-Soviet legacy and the tradition of quasi one-man rule. Mirziyoyev has also shown to be Central Asia's most effective leader, introducing major reforms without causing waves across the country.

Upon coming to power, the Uzbek president quickly ended all conflicts with neighbouring countries. In the difficult context of post-Soviet Asia, his foreign policy has been quite effective, opening up the country to the outside, allowing for instance business transactions in foreign currencies.

This has enabled Uzbekistan to attract foreign investment, not only from powerful China, but also the West. Almost all political prisoners have been released, and a lot of leeway has been granted to the mass media.

All these overtures cannot hide however the devotion to the "Father of the Nation" Karimov, who ruled with a tight fist. In fact, the rare critics who dare to speak out note that Mirziyoyev granted more freedom in the economic sphere than in the country's political life since all forms of opposition have been marginalised.

Given Central Asia's current political situation, soon to be tested by the mounting crisis in Afghanistan, Mirziyoyev is not likely to make more concessions at home, especially in light of what is happening in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, which goes through major crises every two to three years.

As for corruption, the other countries of region, starting with "Big Brother" Kazakhstan, have much higher levels than Uzbekistan.

At the same time, Mirziyoyev does not have to do much to contain the opposition since Karimov had already liquidated it.

Even if someone did try to oppose government policy, they would lack the means and know-how to counter it.

In his first re-election bid, the incumbent can expect to win at least 80 per cent of the vote, like in good old Soviet times; enough to make leaders like Putin and Lukashenko envious.

Horse graves on the steppes as Kazakhstan is battered by one of worst droughts in living memory

Dead horses are strewn across the arid steppes of Kazakhstan as parts of the country suffer through what has been called one of its worst droughts in living memory.

Much of Central Asia, including western Kazakhstan, has been gripped by a months-long drought. A dry winter and spring were followed by a heat wave that started in June, according to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Meager reserves of food and water have been exhausted, and for much livestock, there is no longer enough grass to graze on. This has led to the mass death of animals, including horses, sheep and cows, the international aid groups said in a July 30 statement. A majority of drought-affected herders are smallholders, and their only source of income is their livestock.

Gabidolla Kalynbayuly, a 70-year-old who lives in a village in the country's west, said he has lost about 20 horses this summer. The remainder of his 150-strong herd are malnourished, making them susceptible to disease, he told Reuters.

"When they die out there in the field, we cannot even bring them back to the village to report the death," he said.

As extreme heat events become more frequent and average temperatures rise worldwide, scientists are becoming increasingly concerned about animals' ability to survive and adapt.

"We're going to have more heat waves, and they're going to get worse," said Nerilie Abram, a climate scientist at Australian National University. "Heat waves aren't just uncomfortable, they're also deadly to humans, and to animals."

Extreme heat causes significant stress for all animals, according to experts. For horses, prolonged exposure to high temperatures can result in heat stress, heatstroke and dehydration.

Extremely high temperatures have triggered mass die-offs in Canada and the Pacific Northwest this summer. An estimated 1 billion small sea creatures — including mussels, clams and snails — died during that heat wave, according to marine biologists. Millions of mussels baked to death in their shells, The Washington Post reported.

Crushing heat wave in Pacific Northwest and Canada cooked shellfish alive by the millions

Kazakhstan, a major wheat producer, has "suffered reduced crop yields from drought and fires" in recent years, according to the World Health Organization. The United Nations has said that nearly 75 percent of the country, known for its arid steppes and deserts, is at risk of ecological destabilization because of climate change.

In the country's western Mangistau province, civic activist Zhanibek Kozhyk told Radio Free Europe last month that older people in the area have never experienced anything like the current drought. Thousands of animals are believed to have died in that area.

Mangistau is primarily desert, but herding is possible in some areas. Kozhyk said some farmers resorted to feeding their animals torn-up cardboard soaked in water, as grass dried up and hay and grain prices soared amid worsening conditions.

Last month, the national government imposed a six-month ban on exports of fodder and grain for animal food so that supplies could be redirected to Kazakh farmers. The Mangistau, Kyzylorda and Turkestan provinces in the country's south and west are among the worst-affected regions, according to aid groups.

Dozens of wild horses died during an extreme heat wave in Australia's outback in January 2019. Rangers found the dead and dying animals in a dried-up water hole, the BBC reported. More than 20,000 fruit bats died a few months earlier as temperatures soared above 107 degrees. Temperatures that summer were well above average even for the typically hot country, with weeks-long heat waves across much of Australia, according to the country's weather bureau.

washingtonpost