

ELSEWHERE



Iran to fight U.S. sanctions legally

LONDON
Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on Monday that the government would file a legal case in Iran against U.S. officials who imposed sanctions on the country as a precursor to action in international courts. Mr. Rouhani said that U.S. sanctions had created difficulties, including a weaker rial. **REUTERS**

Seven shot dead during polls in Bangladesh hills

CHITTAGONG
At least seven people were shot dead during local government elections in Bangladesh's restive Chittagong Hills Tracts, where a low level insurgency has left dozens killed in recent years, police said on Monday. Police said they suspect supporters of a local candidate, who boycotted the polls, were behind the killings. **AFP**

'Mozambique cyclone toll could exceed 1,000'

BEIRA
Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi on Monday warned that the death toll from a cyclone that smashed into the country's central provinces last week could climb to more than a thousand. Mr. Nyusi said more than 400 people were rescued from flooded areas on Monday. **AFP**

Ardern vows tough gun laws within days

New Zealand PM says she favours a ban on semi-automatic weapons

REUTERS
CHRISTCHURCH

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said on Monday that she would announce new gun laws within days, after a lone gunman killed 50 people in mass shootings at two mosques in the city of Christchurch.

Australian Brenton Tarrant, 28, a suspected white supremacist, was charged with murder on Saturday. Tarrant was remanded without a plea and is due back in court on April 5 where police said he was likely to face more charges.

"Within 10 days of this horrific act of terrorism we will have announced reforms which will, I believe, make our community safer," Ms. Ardern told a news conference after her Cabinet reached in-principle decisions on gun reform laws in the wake of New Zealand's worst ever mass shooting.

Gun shop owner speaks
The owner of gun shop Gun City, David Tipple, said the suspected gunman had legally bought four weapons and ammunition online from it between December 2017 and March 2018, but it did not sell him the high-powered



Grief and reflection: School students attending a vigil in Christchurch on Monday, in memory of the victims of last week's shootings. **AFP**

weapon used in the massacre. "The MSSA, military-style automatic, reportedly used by the alleged gunman was not purchased from Gun City. Gun City did not sell him an MSSA, only A-category firearms," Mr. Tipple told a news conference in Christchurch.

Under New Zealand gun laws, A-category weapons can be semi-automatic but limited to seven shots. Live-streamed video of a gunman in one of the mosques showed a semi-automatic weapon with a large magazine.

Mr. Tipple said he supported Ms. Ardern's decision to reform gun laws as the Christchurch shootings had raised legitimate concerns.

Ms. Ardern did not give details on new laws, but said she supports a ban on semi-automatic weapons following the Christchurch shootings.

Australia introduced some of the world's toughest gun laws after its worst mass killing, the 1996 Port Arthur massacre in which a lone gunman killed 35 people using a semi-automatic AR-15 — the same weapon used in the Christchurch massacre.

Australia banned semi-automatic weapons, launched a gun amnesty in which tens of thousands of weapons were handed in, and made it much tougher to own them.

Ms. Ardern encouraged gun owners who were thinking of surrendering their

weapons to do so. "The clear lesson from history around the world is that to make our community safer, the time to act is now," she said. "I strongly believe that the vast majority of gun owners in New Zealand will agree with the sentiment that change needs to occur."

New Zealand's top online marketplace Trade Me Group said it was halting the sale of semi-automatic weapons in the wake of Friday's attack. New Zealand, a country of only five million people, has an estimated 1.5 million firearms.

A New Zealand standard A-category firearm licence is issued after a police and background check. Only firearm owners are licensed,

not weapons, so there is no monitoring of how many weapons a person may possess. Still, violent crime is rare in New Zealand and police do not usually carry guns. Before Friday, New Zealand's worst mass shooting was in 1990 when a man killed 13 men, women and children in a 24-hour rampage in the seaside village of Aramoana. He was killed by police.

Ms. Ardern said an inquiry will be held into what authorities knew or should have known about Tarrant and the events leading up to the massacre, to see whether the attack could have been prevented.

There were 250 detectives and specialists across the country working on the investigation, said police.

'Gunman was lucid'

Tarrant had declined to be represented by a lawyer but the court appointed duty lawyer Richard Peters to handle the case.

Mr. Peters told media Tarrant was lucid and understood the situation facing him. "He was lucid," Peters told Australian TV network Channel Nine. He seemed to appreciate what he was facing and why he was there."

Ms. Ardern was the first person to sign a national condolence book that she opened in the capital, Wellington. "On behalf of all New Zealanders, we grieve together. We are one. They are us," she wrote.

Suspect had run-ins with Dutch police: media

'He was involved in a 2013 shooting'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
REUTERS
UTRECHT

Dutch police on Monday arrested Gokmen Tanis, 37, after a huge manhunt, issuing a picture of him on the tram and warning the public not to approach him. Heavily armed officers later surrounded a building following the bloodshed in the Netherlands' fourth largest city and his arrest was dramatically announced at the end of a news conference.

Dutch authorities said they were still investigating a likely terrorist motive for the attack but said they "cannot exclude" other motives, including a family dispute. "We have just heard that the suspect we are looking for has been arrested," Utrecht police chief Rob van Bree said.

Possibly a terror attack
Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said the theory that it was a terror attack "could not be excluded", vowing that the Netherlands would "never give way to intolerance".

Prosecution officer Rutger Jeurken said that "it looks like what we are dealing with is a terrorist motive".

But officials added that they "could not exclude" reports that the gunman had targeted a woman known to him and others who tried to help her. Tanis was report-



Gokmen Tanis, the man reportedly involved in Monday's shooting. **AFP**

edly in court in a rape case two weeks ago, broadcaster NOS said. Local broadcaster RTV Utrecht said the suspect had a long history of run-ins with the police for both minor and major crimes, including a shooting in 2013.

The father of the suspect, Mehmet Tanis, said his son should be punished if found responsible, a Turkish news agency reported. "If he did it he must be punished," the DHA agency quoted the father as saying.

He said he had lost contact with his son having returned to his homeland in 2008 after divorcing his wife, DHA reported. She remained in the Netherlands with Gokmen.

"He did not have an aggressive attitude — but 11 years have gone by. What happened, what has he experienced? I know nothing whatsoever," Mr. Tanis said.

'No new vote on the same Brexit deal'

Speaker deals a fresh blow to PM's hopes of securing Parliament's backing

VIDYA RAM
LONDON

Plans by British Prime Minister Theresa May to put her controversial withdrawal deal to MPs this week or next suffered a significant blow, as the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, made a surprise statement confirming that the same question could not be put to the House repeatedly during the same session.

While he said that his statement was not intended to be the "final word", it indicated that this was the rule the government would have to meet. This means that the deal is unlikely to be put to MPs this week, ahead of a meeting of the European Council.

Hope for concessions

Ms. May had hoped to put the withdrawal deal to MPs before that meeting to be able to show to the EU that progress had been made, and potentially sway it to make further concessions or clarifications.

"Decisions of the House matter. They have weight.



PM Theresa May; and, right, Speaker John Bercow. **REUTERS**

They have direct effects not only here but also on the lives of our constituents," Mr. Bercow told MPs in response to several questions about whether the government could repeatedly put the "same fundamental proposition" to them again.

Quoting from Erskine May, the 19th century originator of parliamentary practice and rules, Mr. Bercow said that the second vote on the withdrawal agreement earlier this month had been permissible because the deal on offer had been substantially different to what had been voted on in January. It followed legally binding changes that had been made after a meeting in Strasbourg between Ms. May and Euro-

pean Commission president Jean Claude Juncker.

However, the deal, if put to a vote again, would have to meet the same criteria, he told MPs on Monday afternoon, in a surprise development that could stand in the way not only of a vote this week, but also one next week.

While Ms. May had been expected to lose the vote this week, there has been much speculation that she could return to the House of Commons in an attempt to put the deal to MPs once again next week, just days before Britain is due to leave the EU on March 29. While MPs last week voted to delay Brexit — either till June 30 or potentially longer — a delay can-

ly happen if the EU agrees to it. It has indicated that that would only happen if there was credible justification.

Coaxing the MPs

Mr. Bercow's intervention potentially puts a spanner in the works of what Ms. May's critics believe is a strategy of trying to bulldoze MPs to support the deal. The government has been in talks with a number of parties, including the Democratic Unionist Party, which has been critical of the Irish backstop — the arrangement to ensure that no hard border develops in Ireland. Some critics of Ms. May appeared to waver, such as Jacob Rees-Mogg, who said that while no deal was better than a bad deal, a bad deal was "better than staying in the EU."

However, other Brexiters remained opposed, such as Boris Johnson, who in an article in *The Daily Telegraph* urged MPs not to back Ms. May's deal, and urged her to return to Brussels and push for changes to the backstop arrangements before putting it to MPs again.

China-Pak. talks to focus on 'regional tensions'

Foreign Minister Qureshi in Beijing, could discuss India during 'strategic dialogue'

ATUL ANEJA
BEIJING

China on Monday said it would discuss the deterioration in ties between New Delhi and Islamabad with the visiting Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said that Islamabad had sent its top diplomat for the first foreign ministerial "strategic dialogue" that begins on

February 14 would be discussed in view Beijing's stated intent to mediate between India and Pakistan, during the ongoing visit of Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said that Islamabad had sent its top diplomat for the first foreign ministerial "strategic dialogue" that begins on

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Tuesday. "As I said, tomorrow, March 19, State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, will have the first China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers strategic dialogue with the Pakistan Foreign Minister in Beijing to discuss regional and international issues of mutual concern. As you said, I believe issues causing regional tensions will be discussed."

Mr. Geng said that China would continue to remain engaged in defusing India-Pakistan tensions, despite its hold on designating Masood Azhar as an international terrorist at the 1267 committee of the UN Security Council (UNSC) last week. Mr. Geng reiterated that Beijing would remain in "close communication" with India and Pakistan regarding listing Azhar.

12,995 terrorists arrested in Xinjiang since 2014: Beijing

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

China on Monday defended its controversial security crackdown in the fractious far west region of Xinjiang, saying nearly 13,000 "terrorists" have been arrested there since 2014.

The State Council, China's Cabinet, hit back again with a white paper saying that the government "is relentless in striking hard, in accordance with the law, at any conduct advocating terrorism and extremism".

"Since 2014, Xinjiang has destroyed 1,588 violent and terrorist gangs, arrested 12,995 terrorists, seized 2,052 explosive devices, punished 30,645 people for 4,858 illegal religious activities, and confiscated 3,45,229 copies of illegal religious materials," according to the white paper.

"The counter-terrorism work and the de-extremism struggle in Xinjiang have always been carried out in accordance with the rule of law."

Saudi Prince ordered secret campaign

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON

More than a year before the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved a secret campaign to silence dissenters, *The New York Times* reported on Sunday.

The campaign included surveillance, kidnapping and torture of Saudis, said the report, which cited U.S. officials who have read classified intelligence reports about the effort. American officials referred to it as the Saudi Rapid Intervention Group.

The Senators, briefed by the heads of U.S. intelligence agencies, said they were convinced that Prince Mohammed was responsible for the Khashoggi killing. Among its activities, the group appears to have been involved in the detention and abuse of prominent women's rights activists arrested last year.

Rajapaksa camp could field Gotabaya

Ex-President's brother emerges as a possible candidate for presidential poll

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

Following months of speculation, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's political camp appears to have come closer to finalising the candidate for the presidential race later this year. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, former Defence Secretary and a younger brother of the ex-President, is very likely to represent the clan and its followers, political sources told *The Hindu*.

Though there has been no official announcement in this regard, a top political source said the family has now come to an understanding on the matter. "A decision was reached at a recent dinner meeting held at the former President's residence last week," the source said on Monday. "They think it is premature to name the candidate now since we have at least a few months until elections," the source familiar with the discussions said, requesting anonymity.

Mr. Gotabaya's potential candidature signals the fami-



Sri Lanka's former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, left, along with his brothers Gotabaya Rajapaksa, centre, and Basil. **AP**

ly's comeback bid in the country's national politics, after losing the presidential poll in 2015. The former Defence Secretary has applied to denounce his U.S. citizenship, as Sri Lankan law prevents dual citizens from contesting. Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa cannot contest elections to the top office, as a 2015 legislation disallows a third term.

Mr. Gotabaya has been focussing on strengthening his own political base over the last two years. Meanwhile,

Basil Rajapaksa, another brother of the former President, has been working on building a new party — the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) or People's Front.

SLFP-SLPP alliance?

The SLPP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) are currently exploring a possible alliance, but with the SLFP maintaining that it would field President Maithripala Sirisena, it remains to be seen if the party will back Mr. Gotabaya.

Mr. Gotabaya, 69, remains a controversial figure in Sri Lankan politics, especially among minority Tamils and Muslims. He is currently fighting multiple court cases in which he is charged with large-scale corruption.

In March 2017, Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigations Department (CID) told a magistrate court in March 2017 that Mr. Gotabaya directed a top-secret death squad which targeted journalists and dissidents, news agency AFP reported. He has denied the allegations.

The media and civil society have in the past accused him of overseeing the infamous 'white-van abductions' during the war and soon after.

Further, Mr. Gotabaya has in the past been associated with hard-line Buddhist group Bodu Bala Sena that is notorious for inciting anti-Muslim violence. His supporters, on the other hand, see him as a 'doer' and 'strong leader', often pointing to his role in "ending the war".