

11 THE WORLD

TOPOF THE
WORLD

Pak court orders protection for two Hindu girls after 'forced conversion'

SAJJAD HUSSAIN
ISLAMABAD, MARCH 26

A PAKISTANI high court on Tuesday ordered official protection for two Hindu girls due to concerns about their safety as authorities widened a probe to ascertain if the teenage sisters were abducted, forcibly converted and married.

The two girls, Raveena (13) and Reena (15), were allegedly kidnapped by a group of "influential" men from their home in Ghotki district in Sindh on the eve of Holi. Soon after the kidnapping, a video went viral in which a cleric was purportedly shown solemnising the nikah (marriage) of the two girls, triggering nationwide outrage.

The Islamabad High Court issued the order Tuesday after the petition was filed by the girls and their husbands to seek protection from adverse action. Chief Justice Athar Minallah heard the case.

Theresa May under fire as British MPs seize control of Brexit

ADITIKHANNA
LONDON, MARCH 26

British Prime Minister Theresa May was reeling on Tuesday from yet another Parliament defeat when MPs backed an amendment to seize control of Brexit by 329 to 302 votes.

In a House of Commons vote on Monday night, many of her own party MPs, including three ministers, backed the motion which called for a series of "indicative votes" to be held to find alternatives to May's controversial European Union (EU) divorce bill, which has been rejected twice before by Parliament.

May said she remains "sceptical" about the process as it was not guaranteed to produce a majority for any one course of action and refused to commit the government to abiding by any particular result at the end of Wednesday's votes. "The votes could lead to an outcome that is un-negotiable with the EU," she told MPs.

As part of the latest Commons high-drama, MPs voted in favour of Conservative backbencher Oliver Letwin's cross-party amendment to allow them to put forward motions relating to Brexit.

It will give them a chance to weigh up a number of options on Wednesday — likely to include a so-called softer Brexit with closer alignment with the EU, a Customs Union with the EU, a second referendum on the decision leave the economic bloc and possibly even an option to revoke Article 50 and reverse Brexit altogether.

Three ministers — foreign affairs minister Alistair Burt, health minister Steve Brine, and business minister Richard Harrington — who went against the Cabinet's collective responsibility principle to vote for the amendment, resigned from government. **PTI**

VATICAN Female reporters quit over call for 'obedience'

Vatican City: The all-female editorial team behind the Vatican's women's magazine has resigned over what they describe as attempts to stifle their reporting and bring in more "obedient" journalists, its founder said Tuesday. "We are throwing in the towel because we feel surrounded by a climate of distrust and progressive de-legitimisation," *Woman Church World* founder Lucetta Scaraffia wrote in an editorial published by Italian religious news blog *Il Sismografo*. The magazine has not shied away from tackling hard-hitting issues such as sexual abuse of nuns by priests.

The mission itself is unchanged. On Friday, two astro-

Activists at a protest in Hyderabad, Pakistan, Tuesday. AP

The judge, after hearing their petition, handed over their custody to Deputy Commissioner Islamabad and Director General Human Rights. He ordered that a woman Superintendent of Police should be deputed with the two girls to ensure their safety.

The court directed authorities to present a report on the case before it by April 2, after which it will issue further directions.

The court also noted that Prime Minister Imran Khan ordered a probe into the matter.

On March 20, the girls' family lodged an FIR against their alleged forced conversion to Islam.

A war of words broke out between India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Pakistan's Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry over the matter. **PTI**

Another underage Hindu girl abducted in Sindh

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
KARACHI, MARCH 26

A FRESH case of an underage Hindu girl being abducted in Pakistan's Sindh province has come to the fore, even as uproar continued over the alleged kidnapping, forcible conversion and marriages of two teenage girls from the minority community.

According to a handout issued by the Sindh Information Department, Minorities Affairs Minister Hari Ram Kishori Lal took note of reports that went viral on social media regarding the abduction of a 16-year-old Hindu girl from Badin district.

The victim's father has approached SSP Badin, Sardar Hassan Niazi, to register a case

against suspects. It was, however, not clear when the girl was abducted.

Lal has directed authorities to register an FIR of the abduction and provide protection to the girl's family.

He said the marriage of underage girls is banned in Sindh under the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act 2013, adding it was a criminal act to marry a girl below the age of 18.

Lal said that the Act is being strictly implemented in Sindh.

The minister said that his government was doing everything to protect underage Hindu girls. He said the Sindh government is working to establish the Sindh Minorities Protection Commission and its draft has been approved by the chief minister two days ago.

AMID MASS PROTESTS

Algeria's army chief asks for president to be declared unfit for office

HAMID OULD AHMED
ALGIERS, MARCH 26

ALGERIA'S ARMY chief of staff on Tuesday called for a constitutional procedure that would see President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika declared unfit for office, arguing this would meet the demands of protesters seeking an end to his 20-year rule.

Lieutenant General Ahmed Gaed Salah, addressing army officers in a speech broadcast on two private Algerian TV stations, called for a unified stand to resolve the crisis, which has seen weeks of mass anti-government protests. Salah said the solution would be based on Article 102 of the constitution and achieve a consensus of "all visions and parties". That article applies under certain conditions, such as deteriorating health. Bouteflika, 82, has rarely appeared in public since suffering a stroke in 2013.

The next formal step is for the constitutional council to formally declare Bouteflika unfit for office, a decision that members of parliament's lower and upper house need to ratify by a two-thirds majority.

Based on Article 102, the chairman of parliament's upper

(Left) Algeria's President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika; army chief Ahmed Gaed Salah

house, Abdelkader Bensalah, would serve as caretaker president for at least 45 days.

El Bilad television said the constitutional council had convened in special session after Salah's move. Algeria's powerful military had avoided direct intervention until now, patiently monitoring the unrest from the sidelines, although warning it would not tolerate chaos in the vast North African state, a major oil and natural gas exporter.

Bouteflika had earlier bowed to protesters by reversing a decision to seek another term and putting off elections that had been set for April.

But his gesture failed to defuse growing anger in the streets, for he stopped short of quitting as head of state and said he would stay on until a new constitution is adopted, effectively extending his current term. **REUTERS**

Trump, Republicans seek to turn the tables after Mueller probe

PETER BAKER AND
NICHOLAS FANDOS
WASHINGTON, MARCH 26

PRESIDENT TRUMP and his Republican allies went on the offensive on Monday, vowing to pursue and even punish those responsible for the Russia investigation now that the special counsel has wrapped up without implicating him or his campaign in a criminal conspiracy to influence the 2016 election.

Trump, grim faced and simmering with anger, denounced adversaries who have pounded him for two years over Russian election interference, calling them "treasonous" people who are guilty of "evil" deeds and should be investigated themselves. "Those people will certainly be looked at," he said.

On Capitol Hill, the Republican chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee announced he would do just that while also calling for a new special counsel to look at the origins of the last one. White House officials and Republican lawmakers demanded the resignation of a Democratic committee chairman investigating the Russia matter, and Trump's re-election campaign lobbied television networks to blackball Democrats who advanced the collusion theory.

The assertive posture indicated that despite initial calls by Republican leaders to move on after the investigation by the special counsel, Robert S Mueller III, the president and his supporters were intent on turning the tables on his foes. While Democrats saw the actions as re-

The US president denounced his adversaries on the issue, calling them 'treasonous' people. *File*

venge, Trump's defenders said they wanted accountability for a "witch hunt" that has consumed half of his term.

"There are a lot of people out there that have done some very, very evil things, very bad things, I would say some treasonous things against our country," Trump told reporters at the White House. "I've been looking at them for a long time," he added, "and I'm saying why haven't they been looked at? They lied to Congress, many of them, you know who they are. They've done so many evil things."

The approach, if it lasts, contrasts with those of other presidents who survived major scandals. After the Iran-contra affair, President Ronald Reagan happily dropped the subject and focused on arms control talks with the Soviet Union and other issues. After being acquitted at his Senate impeachment trial, President Bill Clinton was just as eager to move on to Social Security and other initiatives. **NYT**

Siblings outside their destroyed house in Gaza City on Tuesday. *Reuters*

Lull in Gaza fighting, but tensions high as Israel moves tanks, troops to border

NIDAL AL-MUGHRABI AND
ARI RABINOVITCH
GAZA/JERUSALEM, MARCH 26

CROSS-BORDER fighting between Israel and Hamas abated on Tuesday after a day of Palestinian rocket attacks and Israeli air strikes but Israel said it reserved the right to strike again and kept its troops and tanks massed at the Gaza frontier.

The biggest Israeli-Palestinian escalation in months, which began on Monday with the longest-range Palestinian rocket attack to cause casualties in Israel for five years, appeared to have been curbed overnight by Egyptian mediation.

But even if brought to an end, the crisis could have an impact on an Israeli election in two

Fears over rise in violence as key event draws closer

MARCH 30 will mark one year of the 'Great March of Return' weekly protests organised by Palestinians along the Gaza-Egypt border, protesting the blockade of the Gaza Strip and calling for the right to return to their ancestral homes on the Israeli side. Reports said more than 250 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces during such protests. With tens of thousands expected to participate in the upcoming protest, there are concerns that this could lead to a surge in the confrontation between Gaza and Israel as well as the use of force against such protesters.

weeks in which right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he must stay in power to keep Israelis safe.

Israel responded to Monday's rocket attack with a wave of strikes on targets belonging to the Hamas militant

group that controls the Palestinian enclave of Gaza.

Seven Israelis were injured in the initial rocket attack and five Palestinians were wounded by the retaliatory Israeli strikes.

Netanyahu, who cut short a visit to the United States to fly home and deal with the crisis, said Israel may take further action in Gaza.

"We are prepared to do a lot more. We will do what is necessary to defend our people and to defend our state," he said in a satellite address delivered from Tel Aviv to the pro-Israel U.S. lobby group AIPAC in Washington.

The border fell quiet on Tuesday morning after Hamas and the Islamic Jihad militant group, which also took part in the fighting, said Egypt had brokered a truce. **REUTERS**

'THE MISSION BECOMES MORE IMPORTANT THAN A COOL MILESTONE'

NASA cancels first all-female spacewalk over spacesuit sizes

JACEY FORTIN AND
KAREN ZRAICK
MARCH 26

IT HAD not been planned as a historic mission, yet it would have represented a moment of sorts: the first all-female spacewalk.

But that moment will have to wait, NASA said Monday, because of a somewhat basic issue — spacesuit sizes.

The two astronauts who were scheduled to walk together in space Friday, Anne C. McClain and Christina H Koch, would both need to wear a medium-size torso component. But only one is readily available at the International Space Station.

The mission itself is unchanged. On Friday, two astro-

Christina Koch is scheduled to do her first spacewalk on Friday, but not with another female astronaut as had been planned. *Credit: NASA*

nauts will venture outside the space station on a six-hour mission to install massive lithium-ion batteries that will help power the research laboratory. Koch is still scheduled to partic-

ipate, along with fellow astronaut Nick Hague; McClain did her first spacewalk last week.

But the first women-only venture outside of the confines of the space station will have to happen on another day. "After consulting with McClain and Hague following the first spacewalk, mission managers decided to adjust the assignments, due in part to space-suit availability on the station," NASA said in a statement.

Stephanie Schierholz, a spokeswoman for NASA, said in an interview Monday that there were already two medium-size hard upper torsos — "essentially the shirt of the spacesuit," according to NASA — at the space station.

But there were a couple of issues. One was that McClain had thought she would be able to

work in a large-size torso, but after her spacewalk last Friday, she wore a medium-size torso and learned that it fit her better. Koch also uses the same size.

And of the two medium-size torsos available, one has yet to be properly configured for a spacewalk. It would take hours of crew labor — not to mention some additional risk — to fix that in time for Friday. Instead of doing that, NASA decided to simply switch out the astronauts.

In the end, both women will have done a spacewalk — just not together. "When you have the option of just switching the people, the mission becomes more important than a cool milestone," Schierholz said.

On Friday, Koch and Hague will be supported by a team on

the ground that includes a number of women in key positions, including the spacewalk's flight director, Mary Lawrence, and its lead officer, Jackie Kagey.

In a briefing at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston this month, Lawrence, Kagey and Kenneth Todd, the station's operations integration manager, said officials had not immediately recognized the significance of the original lineup for Friday's "extravehicular activity," or EVA.

It was only as they discussed the schedule during a meeting that they realized it was the first time they had scheduled an all-female spacewalk.

After the rescheduling Monday, Schierholz said that while there were no concrete plans for an all-female spacewalk,

one is increasingly likely because NASA astronauts have been diversifying in terms of gender.

"We're sort of getting to the point of inevitability," Schierholz said of an all-female EVA.

McClain and Koch were part of the 2013 astronaut class, and of the eight people in that class — chosen from more than 6,000 applicants — half were women, a first for NASA.

The current roster of six astronauts at the space station — three Americans, one Canadian and two Russians — no longer has the team to carry out a number of important projects, with an eye toward making sure each crew member accumulates significant experience, Todd said. NASA officials hope the relatively young American astronauts will

continue to travel to space in the coming years and assist new recruits in the future.

The batteries being installed on this mission store solar power that the station needs when it is not in direct sunlight. Work on the battery systems will continue for the next few years as international teams bring more lithium-ion batteries to the station, which is more than 200 miles from Earth.

The missions require meticulous planning, and robots do as much of the work as possible before astronauts take the risk of venturing into space. In the busy days before a spacewalk, the crew help to prepare and fit their colleagues' spacesuits, which function as mini-spacecraft once they step outside. **NYT**