

International

Half a million attend protest against India's Modi: Police

Discontentment over unemployment and economic inequality

KOLKATA: India's opposition parties drew half a million supporters to Kolkata's streets yesterday for the largest show of force yet against Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a national election looms. Police in the eastern city said 500,000 people turned out for the massive "Unite India" rally, which saw leaders from across the opposition spectrum rail against Modi and his ruling Hindu nationalist party.

Speeches were beamed on 20 giant screens to a sea of spectators waving the national tricolour flag and the banners of India's myriad opposition movements. Police said 5,000 officers were on standby for security. "The Modi government is past its expiry date," said Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal state, from an enormous raised platform. Her government, which organised the rally, had suggested four million would attend but Kolkata Police Chief Rajeev Kumar said 500,000 showed up.

'It's against India'

Modi, who was inspecting military hardware in Gujarat state yesterday, accused the opposition of acting in self interest. "The alliance is not against me, it's against India," he said, as quoted by the Hindustan Times newspaper. The rally comes as hundreds of millions of Indians prepare to go to polls expected in April and May, the world's largest demo-

cratic exercise. Modi — the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader who won a landslide victory in 2014 — is seeking another term, and remains hugely popular.

But he faces rising discontentment over unemployment and economic inequality. The BJP suffered a rare reverse in December when it lost three key state elections to Congress, the main opposition party. Its leader, Rahul Gandhi, did not attend the rally but sent party representatives. His mother Sonia Gandhi, the party's former president, said it was "an important attempt to galvanise leaders to fight the Modi government".

Speakers from India's myriad state, regional and caste-based parties urged voters from the pulpit to unite against the prime minister and his BJP. "Narendra Modi is a publicity PM, we need a performing PM," said Chandrababu Naidu, chief minister of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. HD Deve Gowda, who was briefly prime minister in the 1990s, said regional parties were powerful but "cannot save India without uniting". The opposition has not allied in a formal bloc, but some state outfits have joined forces as the election draws nearer. This month two regional parties that were former bitter rivals in Uttar Pradesh — India's most populous state — announced an unlikely alliance to challenge Modi. — AFP



NEW DELHI: Indian protestors hold placards as they shout slogans against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and northeastern Assam state's chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal during a protest against the controversial Citizenship Amendment bill. — AFP

Abe, Putin on collision course over islands

TOKYO: The leaders of Japan and Russia hold crunch summit talks on Tuesday, with the two countries locked in an undiplomatic war of words over a set of disputed islands. Simmering tension between Moscow and Tokyo over the islands has ramped up in recent weeks, with Russia angrily accusing Japan of whipping up tension ahead of the summit and failing to accept it lost World War II. Setting the tone for the talks, Putin's foreign policy advisor Yuri Ushakov admitted the meeting would "not be easy."

The Russian army claimed the four islands in the closing days of World War II and a dispute over their sovereignty prevented the two countries signing a peace treaty — a situation both countries have vowed to rectify. The islands, off the northern coast of Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido, are known as the southern Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan.

During a New Year address,

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe sparked outrage in Moscow when he spoke of the need to help Russian residents on the disputed islands "accept and understand that the sovereignty of their homes will change." A furious Russia summoned the Japanese ambassador to complain that Abe's statements were an "attempt to artificially stir up the atmosphere" over the issue of a possible peace treaty.

Moscow also fumed Japan was trying to "disorientate" the public and that the Japanese leader's statements "flagrantly distort the essence of the agreements" reached by Putin and Abe in Singapore in November, where they vowed to accelerate efforts towards peace. Talks lasting several hours between the two foreign ministers on Monday failed to improve the situation, with Taro Kono and Sergei Lavrov not even appearing together for a joint press conference. And at his own New Year's news conference, Lavrov let rip at Tokyo, saying the two countries were "still far from being partners in international relations."

"Why is Japan the only country in the world that cannot accept the results of World War II in their entirety?" he asked. He also lashed out at the pro-Western bias of Japan — the key US ally in the region. "Japan votes not with us but against us on all the resolutions that interest Russia in the U.N," Moscow's veteran top diplomat said. — AFP

Two monks shot dead as violence flares in Thailand's deep south

BANGKOK: Gunmen in Thailand's deep south shot dead two Buddhist monks and wounded two others inside a temple, police said yesterday, capping a week of deadly violence as the prime minister vowed to "punish" those responsible. Black-clad assailants carrying rifles crept into Rattanaupap temple in Narathiwat province near Malaysia's border on Friday evening and started firing, local superintendent Pakdi Preechachon told AFP.

"The attack took place around 7:30 pm when an unknown number of gunmen dressed in black entered the temple through a rear area via a creek," Pakdi said. "Two monks were shot dead at the temple while two others were wounded." Since 2004 clashes between ethnic Malay-Muslim rebels and the Buddhist-majority Thai state that annexed the region a century ago have killed nearly 7,000 people, mostly civilians of both faiths.

The death toll in the south dropped to a record low last year as Thailand's junta tightened its security web but violence has boiled over in recent days, raising concerns about soft targets at schools and religious institutions. In the past, Buddhist monks have been targeted only infrequently. But they have been told to suspend morning alms collection starting from Saturday in three southern provinces and the southern army commander has instructed security officials to step up safeguards of Islamic



NARATHIWAT: A Buddhist monk and a Muslim village leader sit together to express sympathy and support during a gathering in Rattanaupap temple in Narathiwat province yesterday following an attack by black-clad gunmen that killed two Buddhist monks. — AFP

leaders who could also be at risk.

Junta leader and prime minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha condemned the temple shootings. "The prime minister denounced such a brazen attack and instructed officials to investigate and find the assailants to punish them," said government spokesman Buddhpongse Punnakanta. Human Rights Watch, which said in a statement that at least 23 monks had been killed since the outbreak of the insurgency in 2004, called the assault "ghastly" and a war crime because gunmen went after civilians and a place of worship.

The Sheikhul Islam Office, a national representative of Muslim communities in Thailand, denounced the violence against the monks and expressed sorrow over the inci-

dent. "There are no religions that teach people to kill innocent people, it's the work of some group of people who want to create divisiveness," it said in a statement yesterday. Pictures taken in the aftermath show monks standing next to heavily armed Thai soldiers and an alms bowl inside the temple compound with bullet holes in it.

No one has claimed responsibility, but that is not unusual for the conflict. Last week, an imam in the same province was shot dead but it was unclear if the temple attack was related. Friday's shooting came the same day as four security officials were wounded by two separate roadside bombs and an insurgent was shot dead in a clash near a school that sent students home for the day. — AFP

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