

# Bodies of Indians and Pakistani killed in N Zealand return home



(Left) The mother Razia and brother Asif Ali of Ansi Alibava, who was killed during the New Zealand mosque attacks, mourn over her body in Kodungallur in Trissur district in the Indian state of Kerala yesterday. (Right) Mourners carry the coffin of Syed Areeb Ahmed, a Pakistani victim of the Al Noor Mosque attack in New Zealand, during his funeral in Karachi yesterday. — AFP



**KOCHI/KARACHI:** The body of an Indian student killed in the Christchurch mosque attacks was returned yesterday to her grieving family in Kochi, where relatives remembered a bright young woman dedicated to her studies. Masters student Ansi Alibava, 25, was among at least five Indians shot dead by a white supremacist in New Zealand on March 15 and her body was the first of two to be repatriated. Her body arrived at an airport in Kochi in the southern Indian state of Kerala early yesterday where it was received by relatives and government officials.

It was then taken to her nearby hometown of Kodungallur and put on display - her mother Razia and brother Asif Ali weeping over the coffin - before a funeral. "She hails from a poor family and her whole family counted on her. She was a girl who took up the challenge to succeed in life in all adverse circumstances," said K I Noushad, Alibava's uncle. She was praying at the Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch with her husband, Abdul Nazer, when the Australian gunman opened fire on worshippers, killing 43. Another seven were murdered at a separate mosque when the shooter

later turned his weapon on Muslims there in the worst violence of its kind ever seen in New Zealand.

Some families have opted for burials in Christchurch itself, where a national remembrance service for the victims will be held on Friday, two weeks after the tragedy that shocked the world. Alibava started supporting her family after her father died five years ago in Saudi Arabia where he had been working. She took out thousands of dollars in loans to fund her studies in business agriculture at Christchurch's Lincoln University. Alibava's cousin, P H Niyas, told AFP the dedicated student was soon to finish her studies. "She had gone there last year, the course was due to finish by April. There was to be a six-month training (course) after which she was to return home by December," said Niyas.

Alibava also worked part-time at a supermarket with Nazer, who she married two years ago. On March 15, they went to the Al Noor Mosque and sat separately in the men and women's sections. When gunfire broke out, Nazer managed to flee through an emergency exit but his wife did not make it. When he returned to look for her, Nazer found his young wife motionless and face

down, according to Indian media reports. He was officially informed of her death 24 hours after the massacre.

Another Indian family who lost relatives in the attack opted for burial in Christchurch. Father and son Asif Vora and Rameez Vora hailed from Gujarat, in western India, and were visiting family in New Zealand when they were killed. The body of another victim also from Gujarat, Maheboob Khokhar, was expected to arrive late yesterday at Ahmedabad airport. The body was due to be taken to a mosque for prayers and then to a burial ground.

Meanwhile, hundreds gathered to pay their final respects in Karachi yesterday as the remains of one of the Pakistani victims of the Christchurch mosque attacks were laid to rest back home. Syed Areeb Ahmad was one of nine Pakistani nationals murdered in the attack. Ahmad's body was flown into the southern port city of Karachi and transported to a relative's house where family and friends gathered before heading to the cemetery for the burial. "It was very painful for the parents and all of us to wait. His funeral is taking place now that is a bit of relief for us," said Ahmad's uncle Aleemullah

Khan. "But his father is in so much agony as Areeb was his only son and the provider for the family," he added.

The other eight Pakistani victims were buried in New Zealand, according to the Pakistan foreign ministry spokesman. Islamic custom dictates that the dead should be buried within 24 hours, but strained authorities were forced to move carefully with their investigation, delaying funerals by several days in some cases. Ahmad's burial comes days after Pakistani officials posthumously awarded Naeem Rashid - who tried to tackle the gunman before being shot dead - with the order of bravery during Pakistan Day celebrations over the weekend.

During a visit to Islamabad Monday, the EU's diplomatic chief Federica Mogherini offered her condolences to the victim's families, while warning against the growing threat of Islamophobia. "It's a threat not only for Muslims but also for our societies because the strength of our societies lies in their diversity and who-ever attacks the diversity of our societies, attacks the entire society, not just one segment of it," Mogherini told a press conference. — AFP

## Erdogan moots renaming Hagia Sophia a mosque

**ANKARA:** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Sunday mooted the possibility of renaming Istanbul's Hagia Sofia museum as a mosque, in comments during a television interview. Asked whether the entrance fee to the city landmark might be waived, he said: "It's not impossible... but we would not do it under the name 'museum' but 'Hagia Sophia mosque'." He added: "Tourists come and go at the Blue Mosque. Do they pay anything? ... Well, we will do the same with the Hagia Sofia."

Erdogan, who is a former mayor of Istanbul, is campaigning for votes for his Justice and Development Party (AKP) ahead of municipal elections on March 31. The former church and mosque, now a museum, often sparks tensions between Christians and Muslims over Islamic activities held there including the reading of verses from the Koran or collective prayers. Its secular status allows believers of all faiths to meditate, reflect or simply enjoy its astonishing architecture.

But calls for it to serve again as a mosque have caused anger among Christians and raised tensions between historic foes Turkey and Greece, both NATO members. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras visited the Hagia Sophia in February. "You can feel the burden of history here," he told AFP. Greece has repeatedly expressed concern over efforts to change the museum's status. But Erdogan raised the issue again after the March 15 shootings in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, that killed 50 people.

In speeches he has denounced a passage in the gunman's "manifesto" in which he said the Hagia Sophia would be "liberated" of its minarets. The Hagia Sophia was first built as a church in the sixth century under the Christian Byzantine Empire as the centerpiece of its capital Constantinople, today's Istanbul. Almost immediately after the conquest of Constantinople by the Muslim Ottomans in 1453, it was converted into a mosque before becoming a secular museum in a key reform of the new post-Ottoman Turkish authorities under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in the 1930s. Ataturk was the founder of the Turkish republic.

Since Erdogan's AKP came to power, critics and advocates of secularism fear the government harbours a hidden agenda to reconvert the Hagia Sophia into a mosque. But Turkey's top court in September last year rejected an association's demand that the Hagia Sophia be opened for Muslim prayers. — AFP

## Trump jubilant after Mueller...

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Adding to suggestions that the White House would like to retaliate now that the damaging investigation is over, Trump said "there are people out there who have done very bad things, I would say treasonous things against our country." "We've gone through a period of really bad things happening - those people will certainly be looked at," he said.

"It was a complete and total exoneration," Trump said Sunday in brief comments from Florida, where he'd spent the weekend at his golf resort. "It's a shame that the country had to go through this." That note of anger boosted expectations that Trump and his allies may be seeking retaliation. "Hopefully somebody's going to be looking at the other side," Trump said, referring to investigating the origins of the probe against him.

Conway went further, calling on Democratic congressman Adam Schiff, head of the House Intelligence Committee and one of Trump's most dogged opponents, to resign. And Trump's son Eric echoed a growing outcry on the right of the Republican party by taking aim at the media, demanding a "simple apology" from seven major news organizations, including The New York Times and CNN. On Thursday, Trump will be back on the campaign trail, addressing a rally of his most faithful fans in Michigan - and energy levels will likely go through the roof. "Expect him to come 'off the chain,'" Trump's controversial former strategist Steve

Bannon wrote to The Washington Post.

Despite the relief at the White House, the Mueller probe painted a deeply unflattering picture of the divisive and populist real-estate-tycoon turned politician. The probe established that Russians did try to influence the 2016 election by hacking Democratic party computers and flooding social media with disinformation to harm Trump's rival Hillary Clinton. It also brought new focus on Trump's hidden business dealings with Russians, including a long-running push to build a Trump tower in Moscow, with negotiations continuing right into his election year - despite claims that he had no such links.

And although no collusion was proven, the probe uncovered other crimes, leaving a heavy taint on Trump's inner circle. Mueller issued criminal charges ranging from conspiracy to lying to investigators against 34 individuals. Six of those were former insiders in Trump's circle, and five have been convicted, including Trump's former personal attorney Michael Cohen, his national security advisor Michael Flynn and his campaign chairman Paul Manafort.

Cohen was sentenced to three years in prison for crimes including, at Trump's alleged instruction, using campaign funds for hush payments to an adult film star who allegedly had an affair with Trump. And Manafort was imprisoned for 7.5 years, though mostly for crimes unrelated to the campaign. With only a short summary made public by Barr, pressure is growing from Democrats for the entire probe to be released. However, Barr may declare parts of the report off limits for legal reasons. Senator Lindsey Graham, the Republican head of the judiciary committee, said he would be talking to Barr and "I hope soon to have as much of the report released as possible." — Agencies

## Trump signs US recognition of...

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He harked back to two previous Middle Eastern wars as the reason why Israel needs to hang on to the Golan. "Just as Israel stood tall in 1967, just as it stood tall in 1973, Israel stands tall today. We hold the high ground and we should never give it up," he said.

The rocket attack near Tel Aviv in central Israel, blamed on Hamas, came as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a pro-Israel group, held its annual meeting in Washington with speaker after speaker expressing US support for strong ties with the country. "We stand with Israel because her cause is our cause, her values are our values, and her fight is our fight," Vice President Mike Pence said. Pence also talked tough against Iran, saying that under Trump, "America will never allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon."

Netanyahu's strongest election challenger, Benny Gantz, appeared before the gathering yesterday, and vowed to protect his country against threats from Iran and Syria. He called for unity in Israel. "We must remember if that we want hope, we must have unity," he said. With election day approaching, opinion polls put Netanyahu's right-wing Likud and Gantz's centrist Blue and White party neck and neck.

A security source in Gaza said there had so far been at least six strikes, including five in and around Gaza City and one in southern Gaza between Rafah and Khan Younis. There were so far no reports of any casualties in Gaza. Earlier yesterday, a rocket from Gaza hit a house in Israel in a rare long-distance strike. Israel's army said

the rocket was fired by Hamas, the Islamist movement that runs the Gaza Strip, from the Rafah area.

A Hamas official, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, denied the group was behind the rocket, evoking the possibility it was caused by "bad weather". The official said the same message had been passed to Egypt, which has acted as mediator between Israel and Hamas. But Israel warned of a firm response and announced it was sending two additional brigades to reinforce the Gaza area and carrying out a limited call up of reservists.

Israeli roads near the Gaza Strip were closed and farming activities in the area were halted. Israel also closed its people and goods crossings with the blockaded Gaza Strip and reduced the zone in the Mediterranean it allows for Palestinian fishermen off the enclave, a statement said. The house hit was located in the community of Mishmeret, around 20 km north of Tel Aviv, police said. The rocket would have had to travel some 120 km from Rafah to reach the area. Rocket fire from Gaza at that distance is rare.

The hospital treating the wounded said seven Israelis were injured lightly by burns and shrapnel, including three children. One of the wounded was a six-month-old child and six of them were members of the same British-Israeli family. The house was destroyed in the wake of the rocket and subsequent fire, with burnt wood, a children's toy and other debris piled at the site.

Police spokesman Ami Ben David said air raid sirens wailed at around 5:15 am and the home's residents made their way to a safe room, possibly saving their lives. The rocket crashed through the roof and then exploded when it hit the floor, he said. "I woke up hearing the sound of the explosion," said neighbor Yuval Katz Lass, 18. "People were shocked and panicked." Both Hamas and its ally in Gaza, Islamic Jihad, threatened to respond to Israeli "aggression". — Agencies

## Qatar's desert rose museum...

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carpet embroidered with 1.5 million Gulf pearls and the oldest Quran yet discovered in Qatar, also dating back to the 1800s. "This is a museum that narrates the story of the people of Qatar," Sheikha Amna bint Abdulaziz bin Jassim Al-Thani, the museum's director, has stated.

The National Museum of Qatar also stands on the site of the former palace of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al-Thani - son of the founder of modern Qatar. The palace has been restored as part of the massive project. The museum, which officials say celebrates Qatar's bedouin past and energy-rich present, also reflects the country's massive wealth and ambition.

And as well as an architectural and cultural statement, the new museum is also a political one by the Qataris. It is among a growing list of spectacular buildings in Qatar, including the recently opened national library and Museum of Islamic Art further along the corniche. The national museum is also the latest in the cultural "arms race" and soft power course among Gulf

nations, which includes Nouvel's Louvre in Abu Dhabi opened to huge fanfare in 2017, designed to show-off the progressive aspects of the various competing emirate states.

And for Qatar, the museum's delayed opening - originally scheduled for 2016 - has given it a chance to reinforce its national identity from other Gulf states, say experts. Since June 2017, Qatar has been diplomatically and economically blockaded by neighboring former allies, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, accused among other things of supporting terrorism. Qatar rejects all charges and says the blockade is an attack on its sovereignty.

The bitter dispute has fractured long-standing Gulf alliances and the new museum will allow Qatar to reinforce its separatism from its rivals, says Sigurd Neubauer, a Middle East analyst based in Washington. "On the basic level the museum represents Qatari identity which has really accelerated in the post-blockade environment," he said. At the same time as the reputation of Doha's rivals appear "inward-looking and regressive", because of incidents like the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Qatar's standing is the "opposite", adds Neubauer. "It's really not about the building, Qatar is trying to create an environment and national identity that provides a space towards independent thinking. "It is doubling down on its own progressive reforms." — AFP