

International

Who let the villains out? Philippines crime-busting president red-faced

Early release of rapists, murderers, drug criminals embarrasses Duterte

MANILA: The early release of hundreds of convicted rapists, murderers and drug criminals has acutely embarrassed Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, with his justice minister saying they were ineligible to be freed because of the severity of their crimes. Some 1,700 felons serving life sentences have quietly walked free under a good behavior program in the three years since Duterte swept to power, promising to wage a national war on corruption, drugs and crime.

Among those freed are 745 convicted rapists, 748 murderers and 156 drug criminals, according to an internal prisons document, obtained by Reuters, that names all of the prisoners guilty of crimes categorized as "heinous". They included Josman Aznar, Ariel Balansag and Alberto Cano, three of six men sentenced to death in 2004 for the 1997 kidnap, rape and murder of two sisters in one of the country's most high-profile cases. Their sentences were later commuted to life imprisonment.

Duterte, a former prosecutor and crime busting mayor counts among his many nicknames "Duterte Harry" and "The Punisher" - references to a Clint Eastwood movie and the title of a Time magazine article that featured him - and he was furious when critics alleged that a corrections bureau run by his appointees was letting dangerous criminals pay their way out of prison. The bureau denies the allegations of graft. One of its former chiefs has said that he did not know the justice minister's approval was needed for the prisoners to be released.

Duterte last week demanded that the 1,700 convicts surrender, offering bounties of 1 million pesos (\$19,200) for each if they failed to comply. As of yesterday, 185 had turned themselves in. House minority leader Edcel Lagman called it a "massive jailbreak" that made a mockery of the administration's key law and order poli-

cy platform. "This is really a serious indictment of any campaign against graft and corruption when people, who are now convicted of heinous crimes, are just being released without the knowledge of the public," Lagman said.

Packed prisons

The Good Conduct Time Allowance Law was passed under Duterte's predecessor in 2013 to encourage rehabilitation, and de-congest some of the world's most crowded jails. More than 21,000 prisoners were released, 2,000 of whom were sentenced for heinous crimes, like rape, drugs, murder, bribery, plunder, kidnapping and arson. Of those, close to 900 were freed by a corrections bureau under Duterte loyalist Nicanor Faeldon, and 130 under Ronald dela Rosa, a senator endorsed by Duterte.

Dela Rosa, a former police chief who led Duterte's war on drugs, said only one of those freed was a drugs offender. Prison documents seen by Reuters, however, show 16 drug criminals were released while he was prisons chief. Dela Rosa has not been accused of any wrongdoing, but said he is open to being investigated. He is advocating reinstating capital punishment, which he said made more sense than a good conduct program. "Why pin the blame on us? We are just implementing the law. We didn't make the law", he told news channel ANC. "To simplify everything, restore the death penalty."

Duterte reluctantly fired Faeldon, relieving him of what was his second high-profile post. He quit as customs chief in 2017 after \$123 million of narcotics passed through the bureau undetected. Faeldon has not been charged with any offence. He told a Senate hearing that he was unaware the Justice Secretary's approval was



MANILA: Residents construct a makeshift bedframe after a fire razed their homes in Manila yesterday. The early morning fire killed at least three people, according to local reports, and displaced some 20 families. —AFP

required before releasing nearly 900 former felons serving life sentences. Faeldon's lawyer, Jose, told Reuters his client took no bribes from inmates, but

accepted that the buck stopped with him. "We are not washing our hands over command responsibility", he said. —Reuters

What would Israel annexing the Jordan Valley mean?

GAZA: On Tuesday Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced he would annex the Jordan Valley in the occupied West Bank if he won upcoming elections. The pledge, a week ahead of a closely fought general election, was controversial but what would it actually mean?

What did Netanyahu say?

In a televised address Tuesday evening, Netanyahu announced he planned to annex the Jordan Valley as soon as victory was secured and his new government took office. "There is one place where we can apply Israeli sovereignty immediately after the elections," Netanyahu said, using a map of the Jordan Valley to illustrate his plans. "If I receive from you, citizens of Israel, a clear mandate to do so ... today I announce my intention to apply with the formation of the next government Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and northern Dead Sea." He specified that the plan would not include Palestinian cities, such as the Jordan Valley's Jericho, though it would effectively be encircled.

Hasn't he said that before?

Kind of. Israel is facing its second election in five months after Netanyahu along with his right-wing and religious allies emerged from polls in April with a majority, but he was unable to form a governing coalition. Before those elections, he pledged to apply Israeli sovereignty, or annex, Israeli settlements in

the West Bank, but without giving a timeframe or details. Tuesday's announcement was the first specific step to implement that decision, which he also re-committed to.

What is the Jordan Valley?

The Jordan Valley accounts for around one-third of the West Bank, located along the eastern side of the territory along the Jordanian border. It is almost all in Area C, the roughly 60 percent of the West Bank Israel fully controls. It is home to only 9,000 or so of the more than 400,000 Israelis living in West Bank settlements, according to Israeli statistics, but is strategically important and hosts many Israeli businesses, largely agricultural.

Some 65,000 Palestinians live in the Jordan Valley, according to Israeli human rights group B'Tselem. Israeli right-wing politicians have long viewed the area as a part of the territory they would never retreat from, seeing it as the country's eastern border. Palestinians believe that Israeli control so deep into the West Bank effectively ends the possibility of an independent Palestinian state. They say it amounts to an apartheid-like arrangement for Palestinian communities there.

What was the reaction?

The Palestinians were furious, saying the move would end faint prospects for a peace deal. "He is not only destroying the two-state solution, he is destroying all chances of peace," senior official Hanan Ashrawi said. A more important reaction from Netanyahu's perspective will be US President Donald Trump, whose strong support has been a major boost to Netanyahu. Trump, who had not yet commented, is due to announce a long-delayed peace proposal after the Israeli election. The European Union warned that if carried out Netanyahu's pledge would "undermine the viability of



JORDAN VALLEY: A Palestinian worker harvests dates in the Jordan Valley village of Jifilik in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday. —AFP

the two-state solution and the prospects for a lasting peace."

Will it happen?

Ofer Zalzberg, senior analyst with the International Crisis Group, said the announcement was Netanyahu's attempt to increase right-wing support at next week's election. Polls in recent days have indicated he may again find it difficult to form a governing coalition, even if his Likud party is the largest. Zalzberg said it was far from certain Netanyahu would win or that his coalition partners would all back such a plan.

What would it mean?

If imposed, the most immediate implications for Palestinians may be more symbolic than practical, Zalzberg said. Israel already controls the area, but formally annexing such a large part of the West Bank would be a clear indication the Jewish state never intends to give it up. "It could lead to a dramatic decrease

in Palestinian support for the two-state solution and lead Palestinian decision makers to dramatic steps," he said. Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said in a statement late Tuesday that if Netanyahu followed through with the threat, all peace agreements between them would no longer be valid.

Ashrawi said it was part of wider Israeli attempts to slowly force Palestinians out of the West Bank. "He (Netanyahu) is trying to take the land without the people and saying you are free to leave." For Israeli settlers living or working in the Jordan Valley, annexation would mean developments in the area would no longer be decided on by the army but the regular Israeli ministries, potentially making getting permits easier. But Zalzberg said that for Palestinians, the most important thing would be the indication that the current, supposedly temporary, situation would be considered permanent. —AFP

Sex assault claims rock Ardern's govt

WELLINGTON: New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern apologized yesterday for her party's handling of an alleged sexual assault, as a top ally was forced to resign. In the most serious scandal Ardern has faced since she took office in late 2017, the centre-left leader admitted "mistakes were made" after a Labor Party volunteer accused a senior party staffer of assault last year. "Raising an allegation of sexual assault is an incredibly difficult thing to do - for additional distress to be caused through the way these allegations are handled is incredibly distressing," Ardern said in a statement.

The 19-year-old woman alleges the staffer sexually assaulted her at his home in February last year and she reported it to Labor Party president Nigel Haworth in October that year. An internal party investigation recommended no action against the man and Haworth argued as recently as Tuesday that the complainant did not inform him about the seriousness of the allegations.

The woman, who has not been publicly named, disputed this, providing media with emails and documents she said supported her version of events. Other volunteers also backed the woman and said their complaints to the party were not taken seriously. Ardern said she discussed the woman's documents with Haworth yesterday morning, as she tried to address the scandal. "Whilst he stands by the statements he made on this matter, I believe mistakes were made," she said.

Ardern added: "On behalf of the Labor Party, I apologize to the complainants for the way this matter has been dealt with." In a separate statement, Labor said that Haworth - who has been credited as an unsung hero of Ardern's electoral victory - had resigned. Ardern said she never knew about the nature of the allegations. "I was informed in the very beginning that the allegations made were not sexual in nature," she said. "That is obviously directly counter to what is now being reported." —AFP

Reports of 'CIA mole' in Kremlin put lives at risk

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has angrily denounced news reports detailing the secret exfiltration of a CIA mole who had operated at the top levels of the Kremlin, saying such reports could put lives at risk. The informant reportedly confirmed to US intelligence that President Vladimir Putin directed Russia's meddling in the 2016 US presidential election, straining superpower relations and casting a cloud over Donald Trump's stunning victory.

According to multiple news reports citing sources in American espionage community, the informant was whisked out of Russia two years ago amid fears he was at risk of exposure, depriving Washington of essential insight into Putin's activities and thinking. Pompeo, who was CIA director in 2017, questioned the reports without being specific, but did not deny their general thrust. "I've seen that reporting.

The reporting is materially inaccurate," he said, speaking in the White House. "As the former CIA director, I don't talk about things like this very often," he said. "It is only the occasions when there is something that I think puts people at risk, or the reporting is so egregious as to create enormous risk to the United States of America, that I even comment in the way I just did."

Russian media identified the suspected insider as Oleg Smolenkov, an aide to Putin's top foreign policy advisor Yuri Ushakov. Smolenkov reportedly once served in Russia's embassy in Washington. His Kremlin position could have given him access to top-level national security information and likely provided US intelligence with essential insights into Putin, intelligence experts said. "If these reports ... are accurate, I think that really speaks to a tremendous intelligence victory on the part of the CIA," former CIA spokesman Ned Price told MSNBC. On the other hand, Price said, the exfiltration would be "a strategic loss for us over time, as we will lose those insights." —AFP

UN investigators link US, Syria and Russian forces to war crimes

GENEVA: Air strikes by US-led coalition forces in Syria have killed or wounded many civilians, indicating that required precautions were ignored and war crimes may have been committed, United Nations investigators said yesterday. Syrian government and allied Russian warplanes are also conducting a deadly campaign that appears to target medical facilities, schools, markets and farmland and which may also amount to war crimes, the report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria said.

The investigators also accused Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist alliance formerly known as Nusra Front that is the dominant armed group in Idlib, of firing rockets indiscriminately and killing civilians. The eight-year-old war has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and forced 13 million people from their homes, half of whom have left their shattered homeland. Backed by US-led coalition air power in a fight to oust

Islamic State, the Syrian Democratic Forces, which include Kurdish fighters, retook the group's last major stronghold of Hajin in eastern Syria in late December.

The coalition's Al-Jazeera Storm operation resulted in a high number of civilian casualties, including in a series of strikes on Jan 3 in Sha'fah, south of Hajin, that killed 16 civilians including 12 children, the U.N. report said. "The Commission finds that there are reasonable grounds to believe that international coalition forces may not have directed their attacks at a specific military objective, or failed to do so with the necessary precaution," it said.

"Launching indiscriminate attacks that result in death or injury to civilians amounts to a war crime in cases in which such attacks are conducted recklessly," it added. Coalition officials could not be reached immediately for comment on the report. Night raids by SDF forces backed by coalition helicopter gunships killed and wounded civilians in Shahil and other parts of Deir al-Zor province, in further apparent violations of international law, the investigators said.

Syrian government forces carried out repeated air strikes in Saraqib, in north-west Idlib province on March 9, damaging Al-Hayat women's and children's hospital, despite pro-government forces



Z?AHR, Syria: Syrian boys look at a destroyed sheep pen following a reported Russian air strike in the village of Al-Daher in Syria's northwest Idlib province yesterday. —AFP

being aware of its coordinates, the report said. In Idlib on May 14, "pro-government forces airdropped between two and four missiles on a fish market and primary school for girls in Jisr Al-Shughur", killing at least 8 civilians, it said.

"Such attacks may amount to the war crime of deliberately attacking protected objects and intentionally attacking med-

ical personnel," it said. The Syrian army denies its strikes target civilians and says its forces only bomb militants associated with hardline Sunni fundamentalist groups linked to Al-Qaeda. The report covers the year to July and is based on nearly 300 interviews and analysis of satellite imagery, photographs and videos. —Reuters