

# Sri Lankan state workers strike, protesting high taxes

Sri Lankan health, railway, port and other state workers were on a day-long strike Wednesday to protest against sharp increases in income taxes and electricity charges, as the island nation awaits approval of an International Monetary Fund package to aid its bankrupt economy. Most government hospitals around the country suspended their outpatient clinics because doctors, nurses and pharmacists were on strike. The railways operated fewer trains and armed soldiers guarded carriages and train stations fearing sabotage, AP reported. Trade unions say the increase in taxes and electricity charges have hit them hard amid difficulties from the country's worst economic crisis. They have threatened to extend the strike indefinitely if the government

fails to address their demands. The government says it was compelled to raise taxes to strengthen state revenue and electricity charges to cover production costs, key prerequisites to unlocking the proposed \$2.9 billion IMF package. Authorities say they managed to operate some trains and most state banks despite the strike. IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said last week the fund's board will meet on March 20 to consider the final approval of Sri Lanka's bailout package after China gave crucial debt restructuring assurances. Sri Lanka announced last year it was suspending repayment of its foreign loans amid a severe foreign currency crisis that resulted in shortages of fuel, food, medicines and cooking gas, along with



long power cuts. The crisis led to street protests that forced then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country and resign.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, since taking over last July, has managed to end the power cuts and reduce shortages.

A patient waits for the treatment in a deserted government hospital in Colombo on March 15, 2023.  
● ISHARA S. KODIKARA/AFP

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Honduras will seek ties with China, spurning Taiwan

AP – Honduras President Xiomara Castro announced Tuesday that her government will seek to establish diplomatic relations with China, which would imply severing relations with Taiwan. The switch would leave Taiwan recognized by only 13 countries. Castro said on her Twitter account that she instructed Honduran Foreign Affairs Minister Eduardo Reina to start negotiations with China and that her intention is to “expand frontiers freely in concert with the nations of the world.”

### Thousands of Senegal opposition supporters begin 3-day protest

AL JAZEERA – About 5,000 supporters of Senegalese opposition leader Ousmane Sonko gathered in the capital, Dakar, on Tuesday for a three-day protest to show support for the aspiring presidential candidate, who faces a libel case set to resume this week. The demonstrations are the latest expression of growing tensions in Senegal in the run-up to a 2024 election that could see President Macky Sall vie for a controversial third term, which the opposition says is unconstitutional. Sall, 61, has neither confirmed nor denied that he plans to run, amid widespread speculation.

## A serious incident in Black Sea

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EXCLUSIVE

In a serious incident, a large US surveillance drone crashed over the Black Sea amid heightened tensions between Moscow and Washington over the war in Ukraine. US and Russian officials have given conflicting accounts of the incident. The US has blamed Rus-

sia for the drone crash while Russia has denied the accusations. Washington has claimed that a Russian fighter jet collided with the drone near Crimea in the Black Sea, causing it to crash in a rare military encounter between the two foes. The US stresses that its drone had been operating over international waters. On the other side, Russian officials say the crash was the result of sharp maneuver by the drone.

The incident is the most serious escalation in the already tense relations between the two countries since the beginning of Russia's military operation in Ukraine last year. But flight of the surveillance drones near a war-hit region raises questions about US goals behind such moves. Since the beginning of war in Ukraine, Washington has been the main supporter of Kyiv and has provided the country

with the military equipment to counter Russia. The US has also provided the Ukrainian military with intelligence. Given such supports, the US has, in fact, indirectly entered the war with its foe and has increased the possibility of further encounters between the two countries. The supports, especially the military ones for Ukraine, indicate that Washington does not seek to help Kyiv and Moscow to re-

solve their differences and end the conflict. As the NATO head, the US is also calling on the European members of the alliance to further ship weapons to Ukraine, a move that has faced fierce criticism from the public opinion in many European countries. In fact, the main reason behind the war in Ukraine has been the NATO's eastward expansionism. Russia had repeatedly warned the West about the issue.

But the alliance, led by the US, turned a deaf ear to the Russian demands and continued its expansionism towards the Russian borders, the issue that triggered the ongoing war in Ukraine. The history has shown that US officials have paid no heed to people's lives and have instead supported and triggered the conflicts to achieve their goals. The Ukrainian people are now the new victims of US policies.

## UN's anti-Islamophobia day 'to stamp out anti-Muslim hatred'

The United Nations observed March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia with the goal of taking “concrete action in the face of rising hatred, discrimination, and violence against Muslims”. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres affirmed that the move is “a call for action to stamp out anti-Muslim hatred”. “Discrimination diminishes us all. We must stand up against it,” he said on Twitter. “Today & every day, we must counter the forces of division by reaffirming our common humanity.” Last year, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a unanimous resolution submitted by Pakistan on behalf of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) deeming this day as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. The UN said that a recent UN special rapporteur report on freedom of religion or belief indicated that “suspicion, discrimination and outright hatred towards Muslims had reached ‘epidemic proportions’”. The UN report indicates that in countries where they

represent a minority, Muslims often face discrimination in accessing goods and services, finding work, and education, adding that in some countries, they are denied citizenship or legal immigration status due to hostile perceptions of foreigners that Muslims represent a threat to national security. Muslim women are disproportionately targeted in Islamophobic hate crimes, the UN added.



## Pakistan police halt bid to arrest ex-PM Khan after clashes

Pakistan police appeared Wednesday to have given up an attempt to arrest former prime minister Imran Khan, ending a siege of his residence after violent clashes with hundreds of his supporters.

AFP correspondents and witnesses near Khan's home in the plush Zaman Park suburb of Lahore said police and paramilitary rangers had retreated after abandoning a series of roadblocks and checkpoints. “The police and rangers sent to harm Imran Khan were pushed back by the people,” his official Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party tweeted, along with video of supporters celebrating outside his house. Police had fought pitched battles with Khan's supporters throughout the night, firing fusillades of teargas and dodging rocks thrown by angry crowds. Groups of police were seen running in disarray from the direction of the house Wednesday afternoon. Khan was ousted from office by a no-confidence vote last year, and has been snarled in dozens of legal cases as he campaigns for early elections and a return to office. Official PTI social media accounts showed video of Khan greeting dozens of people inside his garden, and jubilant supporters celebrating outside. “The reason why this is happening is not because I broke any law. They want me in jail so that I cannot contest elections,” he told AFP in an interview at his home. “This abduction had nothing to do with rule of law. It had everything against rule of law, the law of jungle to grab me and put me in jail and keep me in jail for months, because there was so many cases, they would have just kept me in jail.”



Supporters of former Pakistan's prime minister Imran Khan block a road near his residence to prevent officers from arresting him, in Lahore on March 15, 2023.  
● AAMIR QURESHI/AFP

## Floods kill 11 in Turkish quake-hit provinces

AP – Floods caused by torrential rains hit two Turkish provinces that were devastated by last month's catastrophic earthquake, killing at least 11 people and increasing the misery for thousands who were left homeless, officials and media reports said Wednesday. At least five other people were reported missing. One person died in the town of Tut in southeastern Adiyaman province, where surging waters swept away a container home sheltering a family of earthquake survivors, Gov. Numan Hatipoglu said. The governor of neighboring Sanliurfa province, Salih Ayhan, told HaberTurk television that four people were killed by the floods in his region. Later, rescuers found the bodies of five Syrian nationals inside a flooded basement apartment in Sanliurfa, and retrieved another body inside a van that was trapped at an underpass, the private DHA news agency reported.