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US returns bells to Philippines

● Giving back the three so-called Balangiga bells meets a decades-old demand

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Manila, Philippines

Church bells seized from the Philippines by US troops as war trophies over a century ago were returned on Tuesday, in a bid to turn the page on a difficult chapter between the historical allies. Giving back the three so-called Balangiga bells meets a decades-old demand from the former US colony at a time when the two nations' ties have been rattled by President Rodrigo Duterte's pivot to China.

"Returning these bells is the right thing to do," US Ambassador Sung Kim said at a sober handover ceremony on a Manila airfield, where a cheer went up



Philippine military personnel unload one of the three Balangiga church bells after it arrived from the US at a military airbase in Manila

when the bells were pulled from wooden crates.

"It is my great honour to be here at the closing of a painful chapter in our history," he told the crowd that included people

who had lobbied for years to bring the bells home.

The bells will be sent back later this week to the church in the central town of Balangiga where they were looted by US soldiers

avenging a surprise attack that killed 48 of their comrades on September 28, 1901.

In reprisal, the US commander Jacob Smith ordered the surrounding island of Samar be

turned into a "howling wilderness", resulting in the slaughter of thousands of Filipinos and Balangiga's razing.

The return of the bronze bells has been divisive with some US veterans and lawmakers, who see them as a tribute to fallen American troops, while the Philippines hails them as a symbol of its struggle for independence.

Two of the bells had been on display in the US state of Wyoming and the other in South Korea until being restored and flown to a Manila air base Tuesday aboard an American military cargo plane.

"Ring again after 117 years"

"It is time for healing. It is time for closure. It is a time to look ahead as two nations should with shared history and as allies," Philippine secretary of defence Delfin Lorenzana said.

"After 117 years the sound of the bells will once again ring," he added.

Manila's push for the bells' repatriation began in the 1990s and has had backing from Philippine presidents as well as from the Catholic Church and historians, but also supporters in the US.

India ruling party stares at biggest election losses

Reuters | New Delhi

The Bharatiya Janata Party looked set to lose power in the three key states of Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, official vote counts showed yesterday.

In Chhattisgarh, Congress was ahead in 67 of the 90 seats at stake, with the BJP on 17.

In Rajasthan, the Congress was leading in 98 of the 199 seats contested, against 74 for the BJP, according to data from the Election Commission.

In Madhya Pradesh, the most important of the five states that have held assembly elections in recent weeks, Congress was leading with 113 seats while the BJP had 108 out of 230.

Regional parties were leading in two smaller states that also voted, Telangana in the south and Mizoram in the northeast.

Investors said the BJP had not fared as badly as feared, and nationally would still likely have an edge over an opposition coalition in the general election.

US adds Pakistan to blacklist for religious freedom violations

AFP | Washington, United States

The United States said yesterday it has added Pakistan to its blacklist of countries that violate religious freedom, ramping up pressure over its treatment of minorities.

The United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, in a statement, he had designated Pakistan among "countries of particular concern" in a congressionally mandated annual report, a year after the State Department put Pakistan on a watchlist without legal consequences.

Indonesians wrestle with giant python



A sequence of pictures taken from a video grab showing villagers trying to capture a large python in Padang Pariaman, in West Sumatra

Pariaman, Indonesia

A viral video showing a gigantic python wrapping itself around an Indonesian villager has secured more than a million views, after locals wrestled with the serpent before successfully

caging it. The villagers initially thought the giant snake, which was resting by the river, was just an old log before one of them touched the serpent, triggering

it into action. The November 22 video, shot by villager Ronal Efendi Coto, shows the man fighting as others try to pry him loose from the python's notorious death grip.

After calling for help and

managing to subdue the serpent, the men put it into a cage in Pucuang Anam village in Sumatra and asked a local zoo for assistance.

But the zoo declined to take in the python, citing overcapacity.

Man detained outside British parliament



London, United Kingdom

Armed police detained a man on the grounds of the British parliament yesterday, at almost exactly the same spot where an attack occurred last year, an AFP photographer saw. London's Metropolitan Police did not immediately respond to a request for information about the incident, while parliamentary authorities said police were handling it.

100 marathons in 100 days: A punishing run for water

AFP | Hong Kong, China

From ankle-deep mud in Central Asia to the scorching heat of Australia, Mina Guli is running 100 marathons in 100 days to highlight a looming global water shortage.

The 48-year-old Australian is galloping across the planet, 42 kilometres (26 miles) at a time, with barely a moment to adjust her watch before it's on to the next stop. Her unorthodox world tour began in New York on November 4 and has so far taken in France, the Vatican, India and Hong Kong.

Guli, a former lawyer, will race through dozens more places -- including in Jordan, Kenya and Mexico -- before she gets back



Australian marathon runner Mina Guli runs on the track at the Peak in Hong Kong

to New York on February 11 for a triumphant final marathon.

"Running is not my favourite thing in the world to do by any stretch of the imagination," Guli said. But it has opened her a path to adventure -- like in Uzbekistan where city streets were closed for her, she had a police escort and the mayor joined her for a jog.

"When you see all the traffic banked up at the traffic lights for you, you just think 'wow I need to be running faster or something'," she said.

Despite an itinerary that would be the envy of many a seasoned traveller, Guli and her six-strong support team have no time for tourism.

Guli is chief executive of Hong Kong-based not-for-profit organisation Thirst, which works to highlight the pressures on the global water supply.

"We forget that water goes into everything we buy and consume every day," she says, including the clothes we wear.

And, say experts, as the planet's population increases, this precious resource will become ever-more scarce.

The UN estimates that, by 2030, demand for water will outstrip supply by 40 percent.

That thought, says Guli, is what keeps her going through the longest -- and most difficult -- slog of her life.