

World News Roundup



Indian classical dancers perform in front of the ancient Surya Mandir or Sun Temple on the first day of a two-day Uttaradh Mahotsav at Modhera, some 100 kms from Ahmedabad on Jan 28. Surya Mandir at Modhera was built in 1026-27 AD during the reign of Bhima I of the Chalukya dynasty and today, is a protected monument maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India. (AFP)

India

Justice eludes thousands

X-rays, patrols check trafficking in Kolkata

KOLKATA, India, Jan 29, (RTRS): A workers' committee meeting is underway on the first floor of a shabby building at the entrance of Sonagachi, South Asia's largest red light district in the Indian city of Kolkata.

"The proceedings are brisk. A detailed form, complete with family history, address, educational qualifications and previous employment, is completed and the 'new girl in town' is escorted to a nearby clinic for an X-ray to analyse her bones and establish her age."

"She has to be over 18 to even think of working here," said Gita Ghosh, a member of the workers' self regulatory board, reading from the rule book.

"And we have to be certain there was no coercion or force. If any of these are suspected, we will send her right back home."

Ghosh is a new member of this self-help board, the first to be set up a decade ago in Sonagachi to stop the trafficking of girls from Nepal, Bangladesh and rural pockets of the east Indian state of West Bengal.

Started in 2007 by non-profit group Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, there are now 33 such boards across the state today.

Their efforts to screen girls new to work has led to the detection of thousands of trafficked girls and women.

Between 1992 and 2011 the proportion of minors in sex work in Sonagachi declined from 25 to two percent, campaigners say.

"It will be very difficult to find a minor or an unwilling worker in Sonagachi or any other red light area in the state today," said police officer Sarbari Bhattacharya, head of the anti-trafficking unit in Kolkata.

"Girls are being trafficked but not to the brothels under the watch of sex workers. Our operations have now moved to residential areas and hotels."

Fear

Campaigners estimate there are between three and nine million victims of sex trafficking in India, adding that many do not come forward for fear of being ostracised by society, abused by their traffickers or not taken seriously by the police.

Many victims, often from poor backgrounds, are duped with the promise of a job before being sold into the sex trade.

"I was brought here as a teenager with the promise of a housemaid's job," board member Mamta Nandi told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Meanwhile, Dayalu Nial's suffering finally ended in December last year when an Indian court gave life sentences to eight men who trafficked him, tortured him, chopped off his hand and left him to die.

It took three years and knocking on many doors — from police and lawyers to doctors and activists — but it was worth the peace he now feels, said the 20-year-old former bonded labourer.

Nial's success in gaining justice is the exception rather than the rule in India, where thousands of people freed from slavery on construction sites, in brick kilns and farms among other places struggle for official recognition.

Thousands of bonded labourers are freed every year, activists say, but their cases are unregistered, or remain uninvestigated — making it impossible for them to get financial aid, justice or help rebuilding their lives.

"We rescue around 500 people every year, and only in about 10 percent of cases do they get compensation. There is not single prosecution," said Chandan Kumar from ActionAid India.

On a cold winter morning outside a run-down conference hall in the heart of the Indian capital, half a dozen or so former bonded labourers in wool hats and jackets with collars turned up huddle around, swapping tales of abuse and confinement.



In this Oct 3, 2001 file photo, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Afghanistan's Hezb-i-Islami speaks at the Tehran University in Iran. The only insurgent leader to sign a peace pact with Afghanistan's government will return to the country within weeks, his chief negotiator says, in a move that could shake up Afghan politics and complicate the much wider war against the Taliban. (AP)

Subcontinent

Pak court acquits 155 suspects: A defense lawyer says a court has acquitted all 155 of his clients who were accused of torching homes in a Christian neighborhood.

Ghulam Murtaza said Sunday that anti-terrorism court judge Chaudhry Azam acquitted his clients due to a lack of eyewitness testimony against them.

An enraged mob torched dozens of houses in the Joseph Colony neighborhood in Lahore in March 2013. Prosecutor Waqar Bhatti said the government will appeal the verdict.

The mob torched the houses following allegations of blasphemy against a Christian man who was accused of insulting Islam's prophet at a barber shop.

No one was hurt in the attack as Christian residents had already left their homes in fear. The government quickly rebuilt the homes and compensated the residents. (AP)

Blogger found, leaves country:

Pakistani blogger Aasim Saeed who went missing earlier this month has been found but has quickly left the country fearing for his life, his family said on Sunday.

Saeed's father said his son was detained by "state agencies" while visiting Pakistan from Singapore, though he did not name which one.

Pakistan's government and Federal Investigation Agency have denied holding any of five liberal activists who went missing this month.

The military and other state agencies have declined to officially comment. The army's media wing did not reply to questions and phone calls on Sunday.

Saeed's recovery comes a day after poet and activist Salman Haider, who disappeared from the capital Islamabad on Jan 6, was recovered, according to his family.

Five liberal activists, some of whom have posted blogs criticising the political influence of the military and speaking for the rights of religious minorities, had each gone missing separately since Jan 4.

Saeed, who is Singapore-based and works in the IT department of the German Merck Group, disappeared on Jan. 4 while visiting the eastern city of Lahore.

"It was no one other than the state agencies who took him," Aasim Saeed's father, Ghulam Haider, told Reuters, referring to Pakistan's intelligence agencies.

He said Saeed was picked up over a social media post intelligence agencies deemed "objectionable."

"My son is not against any agency, he is not against the military or government and

Afghanistan

'Refugee influx a concern'

Ex-warlord is Ghani's rival

KABUL, Afghanistan, Jan 29, (Agencies): The only insurgent leader to sign a peace pact with Afghanistan's government will return to the country within weeks, his chief negotiator says, in a move that could shake up Afghan politics and complicate the much wider war against the Taliban.

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a former warlord who battled US forces after the 2001 invasion and nursed a bitter rivalry with other Afghan factions, agreed to lay down arms last year. Amin Karim, his chief negotiator, told The Associated Press earlier this week that he would return to the capital in "a matter of weeks, not months."

Hekmatyar is seen as a potential rival to President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, who have governed the country through a shaky, US-brokered power-sharing agreement since the disputed elections of 2014. His return could inject new political uncertainty as the government struggles to confront a reinvigorated Taliban that has been advancing on several fronts.

The former warlord battled the Soviets in the 1980s and then took part in the civil war that erupted after their withdrawal, clashing with the so-called Northern Alliance, in which Abdullah was a leading figure. Hekmatyar was driven out when the Taliban seized power in 1996, but returned after the American invasion, vowing to resist the foreign "occupation."

Confined

His forces were largely confined to just two provinces, however, and have carried out few attacks in recent years.

Last year he became the only insurgent leader to sign a peace agreement with the Afghan government, in what many hoped would provide a model for a wider reconciliation with the Taliban. But he has yet to return to the fold.

His Hezb-e-Islami party wants his name taken off the UN and the US Treasury lists of wanted terrorists. Karim declined to say whether Hekmatyar would return to Afghanistan without first being removed from the lists, and there has been no indication that the UN or Washington is considering his removal. Both Canada and Britain consider Hezb-i-Islami to be a terrorist group.

Hekmatyar, like Ghani, hails from Afghanistan's ethnic Pashtun majority, and a revitalized Hezb-e-Islami could

become a powerful player in the 2019 parliamentary elections, says Andrew Wilder, vice president of the Asia Program at the US Institute of Peace.

"Hekmatyar's return to Kabul would certainly be significant," he said. "But the significance of his return, if it happens, will have a lot more to do with the impact of an influential Pashtun political figure who had been sidelined re-entering the political fray, and much less to do with moving the peace process forward."

The prospect of his return has already caused Abdullah's fractured Jamiat-e-Islami Party to try to unify its ranks in order to better compete, Wilder said in an email interview. Abdullah and Ghani are also political rivals, and traded accusations of fraud after the hard-fought election three years ago.

No one expects Hekmatyar's return to end the 15-year-old war with the Taliban, who control large swaths of rural territory in the south and east, and rule eight districts outright. A three-way struggle for power among Ghani, Abdullah and Hekmatyar could further divide the government at a critical time.

The International Monetary Fund has expressed concern over Afghanistan's ability to cope with the massive number of refugees returning home to the war-torn country, an influx only expected to increase.

More than 700,000 Afghans returned home in 2016, the second largest refugee group after Syrians, the Washington-based organisation said in a report on Friday.

An additional 2.5 million refugees and internally displaced people are expected to follow over the next year and a half, which would increase the country's population by 10 percent, according to the report.

"This is seriously aggravating the government's capacity to absorb refugees in an already difficult environment of high unemployment and internally displaced people after decades of conflict," it said.

With daily battles between government forces and Taliban insurgents, the number of people who have fled their homes for safer parts of Afghanistan has hit a record high.

According to a recent UN report, more than half a million Afghans were internally displaced by fighting last year.

The military's media wing did not return calls or text messages seeking comment. Haider said Aasim returned to his house briefly on Saturday but then left quickly, and messaged the family on Sunday morning to inform them that he was safe and would call soon.

Haider said Saeed had either returned to Singapore or was in Germany. It is not known how the five activists went missing, but some rights groups and newspapers have asked whether state or military agencies were in any way involved.

The Interior Ministry has repeatedly said it was doing all it could to recover the missing men.

Shortly after the activists' disappearances, blasphemy allegations against them appeared on social media and in a complaint to police. (RTRS)



Saeed



Haider

Africa

'Trump ban unfortunate': Sudan called President Donald Trump's decision to ban entry of its citizens "very unfortunate" in light of "historic steps" taken just weeks earlier to lift sanctions for cooperation on combating terrorism, its foreign ministry said on Saturday.

Trump on Friday put a four-month hold on allowing refugees into the United States and temporarily barred travellers from Syria and six other Muslim-majority countries including Sudan, saying the moves would help protect Americans from terrorist attacks.

That move comes only two weeks after the departing Obama administration said it would lift a 20-year-old trade embargo against Sudan, unfreeze assets and remove financial sanctions as a response to Khartoum's cooperation in fighting Islamic State and other groups.

Sudan's foreign ministry said previously that the sanctions decision had come with Trump's approval. (RTRS)



Trump

Gambia prez plans overhaul:

Gambian President Adama Barrow said Saturday that every aspect of his tiny west African state would need an overhaul after ex-leader Yahya Jammeh's 22-year rule, but that its dreaded secret police would remain.

Barrow faces an uphill task after taking over from Jammeh, who left behind a dysfunctional economy and allegedly emptied state coffers ahead of his departure.

Rights group blame the notorious National Intelligence Agency (NIA) under his longtime control for forced disappearances and torture.

Barrow said the NIA was "an institution that has to continue", but that its name would be changed and training would be given to its operatives.

"The rule of the law, that will be the order of the day," he said.

Barrow also addressed one of Jammeh's most controversial declarations, from 2015, that The Gambia was an "Islamic republic".

Meanwhile, police in Senegal say the Gambia official accused of overseeing the torture of prisoners under former leader Yahya Jammeh has been arrested.

A police statement says Borra Colley was arrested Wednesday while trying to make his way to Guinea Bissau. (Agencies)

Boko Haram kill 3 soldiers: At least three Nigerian soldiers were killed when Boko Haram jihadists raided a military post near the country home of Nigeria's army chief in northern Borno state, military and civilian sources said Saturday.

The Islamist group however claimed to have killed five troops in the attack.

Armed jihadists from the Islamic State-supported Al-Barnawi faction of Boko Haram launched a midnight attack Thursday on Nigerian troops in the village of Kamuya, around five kilometres (three miles) from Buratai, the native home of army chief of staff General Tukur Yusuf Buratai, a military source told AFP.

"The terrorists who rode on camels attacked our checkpoint at Kamuya, killing three soldiers after a gun battle," said the military source who asked not to be identified.

"The troops retreated to Buratai where they teamed up with another detachment and went after the terrorists in the bush," the military officer said. (AFP)

'Soldiers violate ceasefire':

Mozambique's rebel leader Afonso Dhlakama has accused government forces of violating a ceasefire his armed group Renamo had declared following a surge in deadly violence last year.

Dhlakama, who only gives rare interviews by phone from the central Gorongosa mountains where he has been holed-up since October 2015, claimed the government was not taking its ceasefire overtures seriously.

The army "ambushes, kidnaps and detains" rebels and Renamo supporters, he told AFP in an interview on Friday.

"There have been deaths," he claimed but gave no details.

On January 3, Dhlakama announced a two-month ceasefire, extending a week-long truce he had declared in late December — a move welcomed by Mozambique's President Filipe Nyusi.

Worsening clashes between the ruling Frelimo party government and rebel group Renamo last year had revived the spectre of Mozambique's civil war that ended more than 20 years ago. (AFP)

Ethiopia faces new drought:

The carcasses of goats and sheep litter the ground near the airstrip in this remote eastern region of Ethiopia, which is struggling to counter a new drought that authorities say has left 5.6 million people in urgent need of assistance.

UN humanitarian chief Stephen O'Brien visited a local camp for displaced persons on Saturday, saying that "these people are really struggling to survive." He cautioned, however, against "dramatizing by saying this may degenerate into famine."

Last year's drought, exacerbated by the El Nino climate phenomenon that affected seasonal rains, left 10.2 million people hungry and killed several hundred thousand of the animals that the local pastoralists depend on for their livelihood. (AP)

Starvation looms for 6 mln: Hunger, malnutrition and death threaten 6.5 million children in the impoverished drylands of Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya due to back-to-back droughts, a charity said on Friday, with spring rains also predicted to be poor.

Repeated rain failures have pushed 15 million people across the three countries into crisis, and in need of aid, as their animals are dying and water is in short supply. Save the Children said in a statement.

"The situation for already desperate children and families in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya will only get worse — leaving millions at risk of hunger, and even death," the charity's Ethiopia country director, John Graham, said. (RTRS)