

## World News Roundup



Muslim students from Pakistan and abroad take an examination at Jamia Binoria, one of the country's largest Islamic seminary, in Karachi, Pakistan on April 15. Binoria is one of the model seminaries which modified its curriculum and added contemporary subjects like computers, mathematics and science. (AP)

## India

## Case ignites moral outrage, mass demonstrations

## Group accused of rape, murder plead not guilty

NEW DELHI, India, April 16, (Agencies): Eight men accused of raping and murdering an eight-year-old girl pleaded not guilty Monday to the horrific crime that has sparked revulsion and brought thousands to India's streets in protest.

Four police and a Hindu temple custodian are among those accused of gang raping and killing a Muslim girl from a poor tribe in Jammu and Kashmir state where the highly-charged case has stoked long-simmering religious tensions.

The accused men appeared in court in the city of Kathua on Monday for the first time since being arrested in February for the girl's murder.

Ankur Sharma, a lawyer for the accused, said the men had pleaded not guilty were willing to take a lie-detector test. The court adjourned the case for procedural reasons, he added.

"The court has directed that chargesheet copies should be provided to all the accused. The next date of hearing is April 28," Sharma told reporters.

The girl was kidnapped, drugged and raped over five days at the Hindu temple in January before being strangled and bludgeoned with a rock.

The case ignited moral outrage and mass demonstrations across India after details of her gruesome death were made public by police last week.

The temple's custodian, retired public servant Sanji Ram, is accused of conspiring with four police officers, a friend, his son and a juvenile nephew to kill the girl and destroy crucial evidence.

Scenes of lawyers trying to stop police from entering court to file charges against the accused — all Hindus — evoked disgust and a warning from India's highest court against any attempts to obstruct justice.

The case has heightened fears of communal tensions in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state.

The accused allegedly plotted the crime to drive the nomadic Muslim community from a part of Jammu, a southern region that is Hindu dominated.

Muslim activists have condemned what they see as a crime against their community and some Hindu groups have argued that the accused had been unfairly charged.

On Monday, a lawyer representing the victim's family filed a petition in the Supreme Court, requesting the trial be relocated from the restive state.

The lawyer, Deepika Singh Rajawat, said she had been receiving death threats for "daring to pursue the case".

Last week the Supreme Court ruled that the media must not reveal the girl's identity in their reporting of the case.

Two state ministers from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party have resigned after attending a rally in defence of the accused.

The ruling party has also been accused of trying to shield one of its state lawmakers in Uttar Pradesh after a 17-year-old girl accused the powerful politician of raping her last year.

Kuldeep Singh Sengar was only arrested last week, despite the girl's family trying to file charges against him for nearly a year.

The two cases have stirred memories of the mass demonstrations that followed the gang rape and murder of a student in New Delhi in 2012.

The crime attracted international headlines and saw rape laws overhauled but high numbers of assaults persist, with 40,000 rape cases reported every year.

In related news, days after a lawmaker from India's ruling party was arrested in con-

nection with a teenager's rape, a sexual attack on an 11-year-old girl was reported on Sunday in Gujarat, the latest in a string of cases that have sparked protests across the country.

Protests calling for justice were held in several cities, echoing the mass rallies against sexual violence in 2012 and piling pressure on Modi, who must hold elections by May 2019. Modi has promised to take action.

Activists accuse authorities of failing to protect women and of moving too slowly to investigate and arrest perpetrators.

The protests were fuelled in part by the arrest of a lawmaker from the Bharatiya Janata Party last week in connection with the rape of a teenager in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, which the ruling party governs.

In the southern city of Thiruvananthapuram, protesters formed a human chain, while in Mumbai, hundreds, including film celebrities, called for the death penalty for rapists. In New Delhi they called for rape trials to be completed in six months.

In the western Gujarati city of Surat, where the latest case took place, men and women held a silent candlelight march. Gujarat is Modi's home state, where he was the Chief Minister from 2001 until he took national office in 2014.

"The body was recovered on April 6 by the side of a highway and, according to a post mortem report, the girl was sexually assaulted and murdered on April 5," Surat's police commissioner, Satish Sharma, told Reuters.

He said the victim — who was 11 years old, according to the post-mortem — had not yet been identified and that police from neighbouring states have been asked to help find her family.

## Pakistan

## 'Freedom of expression under attack'

## Pakistan is 'failing' on human rights: independent watchdog

ISLAMABAD, April 16, (AP): An independent Pakistani watchdog criticized the country's human rights record over the past year in a new report released Monday, saying the nation has failed to make progress on a myriad of issues, ranging from forced disappearances, to women's rights and protection of religious minorities.

The damning report card issued by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan says people continue to disappear in Pakistan, sometimes because they criticize the country's powerful military or because they advocate better relations with neighboring India.

The controversial blasphemy law continues to be misused, especially against dissidents, with cases in which mere accusations that someone committed blasphemy lead to deadly mob violence, it said.

While deaths directly linked to acts of terrorism declined in 2017, the report says attacks against the country's minorities were on the rise.

The 296-page report was dedicated to one of the commission's founders, Asma Jahangir, whose death in February generated worldwide outpouring of grief and accolades for the 66-year-old activist who was fierce in her commitment to human rights.

"We have lost a human rights giant," UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said following Jahangir's

death. "She was a tireless advocate for inalienable rights of all people and for equality — whether in her capacity as a Pakistani lawyer in the domestic justice system, as a global civil society activist, or as a Special Rapporteur ... Asma will not be forgotten."

Monday's report also took aim at religious bigotry in Pakistan and the government's refusal to push back against religious zealots, fearing a backlash.

"Freedom of expression and freedom of association is under attack, except for those who carry the religious banner," commission spokesman I.A. Rehman said at the release of the report, which accused Pakistani authorities of ignoring "intolerance and extremism."

Religious conservative organizations continue to resist laws aimed at curbing violence against women, laws giving greater rights to women and removing legal restrictions on social exchanges between sexes, which remain segregated in many parts of Pakistani society, it said.

Still, there was legal progress in other areas, it noted, describing as a "landmark development" a new law in the country's largest province, Punjab, which accepts marriage licenses with-in the Sikh community at the local level, giving the unions protection under the law.

## Subcontinent

**2 killed in Afghan, Pak clash:** Afghan troops clashed with Pakistani forces near the disputed border on Sunday, in fighting that killed two Pakistani paramilitaries and wounded five others, officials said.

Pakistan's military said in a statement that the Frontier Corps was carrying out "routine surveillance" along the border when it was "fired upon from the Afghanistan side." It said the paramilitaries showed "maximum restraint" to avoid civilian casualties, and that "military engagement" is underway to defuse the situation. (AP)

**Bangladesh rejects Myanmar's claim:** Bangladesh has rejected a claim by Myanmar that the Buddhist-majority nation has repatriated the first five among some 700,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees who fled to neighboring Bangladesh to escape military-led violence against the minority group.

A Myanmar government statement said Saturday that five members of a family returned to western Rakhine state from the border area. It said that the family was staying temporarily with relatives in Maungdaw town, the administrative center close to the border.

On Monday, Bangladesh's home minister, Asaduzzaman Khan, said Myanmar's claim that the family had been "repatriated" was false, noting that the family had never reached Bangladeshi territory. (AP)

**Woman can be buried with husband:** Bangladesh's highest court has ruled that a woman who took her life four years ago is a Muslim and can be buried alongside her husband, ending a high-profile legal battle over interfaith marriage.

The court ruled last week that Hosne Ara Lazu did convert to Islam after marrying Humayun Farid Lazu in 2013, despite her family's insistence that she returned to Hinduism before her death.

The families opposed the union between a Muslim and a Hindu and pressured them to call off the match. The girl's father went so far as to file allegations with police of kidnapping against the young man. (AFP)

**Lanka arrests ruling party dissident:** Sri Lankan police Monday arrested a leading dissident within President Maithripala Sirisena's party, deepening political tensions on the island after the head of state suspended parliament.

Mahindananda Aluthgamage, a former sports minister, was held over 39 million rupees (\$260,000) that were allegedly misappropriated in 2014, police said in a statement. (AFP)

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