

NIRBHAYA CASE Hanging of 4 Delhi rapists now on Feb 1

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court yesterday ordered that four men convicted of the infamous 2012 gang rape and murder of a student on a New Delhi bus would now be hanged on February 1.

The court had earlier said they would be executed on January 22, a ruling that prompted the convicts to seek last possible legal remedies.

Six people were originally charged with taking part in the brutal attack aboard a city bus that made headlines around the world and triggered massive nationwide protests across India.

One of the six convicted was released after spending three years in a detention centre as a juvenile while another allegedly committed suicide in his prison cell.

The order to hang the four convicts came after the parents of the victim approached the court, saying they were fed up with the delays and appeals.

The Supreme Court had upheld death sentences against the four men in 2017 and since then their execution has been stuck in a legal quagmire.

The victim was dubbed Nirbhaya - the fearless one - by the press, as she could not be named under Indian law.

She was attacked in December 2012 while returning home after visiting the cinema with a male friend.

Her assailants took turns to rape and violate her with a metal rod as the bus drove around the capital, before dumping her and the beaten-up friend on the road.

She died of her injuries nearly a fortnight after the attack -- in Singapore, where she had been flown for specialist treatment.

Tens of thousands of Indians took to the streets in protest, and the case led to a major overhaul of laws surrounding sexual assault.

It also spawned an award-winning documentary as well as a Netflix series.

The victim's family said they were still unsure if the convicts would be hanged on February 1.

"We have struggled for seven years to get justice for our daughter. They (convicts) have been using all sorts of delaying tactics. We won't be satisfied until they are hanged," her mother told reporters outside the court.

Indian media reports say Tihar prison, where the four are incarcerated, recently held a dummy execution to test the gallows.

Thousands join

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Miah, 60, from Narsingdi and Gulzar Hossain, 40, from Gaibandha.

Deputy Police Commissioner of Gazipur Metropolitan Police (GMP) Manzur Rahman said Suruj was run over by a covered van on the Station Road while coming to the Ijtema ground around 11:00 pm on Thursday.

Gulzar died after being hit by a train at Tongi Station on the same night, the policeman said.

A five-tier security system has been installed to ensure security for the devotees.

Police Commissioner of GMP Anwar Hossain said they had taken all measures to avoid any kind of untoward situation.

Some 8,500 members of law enforcing agencies have been deployed in and around the Ijtema ground.

Indian preacher Maulana Saad Kandhalvi, who was supposed to conduct the Akheri Munajat (final prayer) of the Ijtema's second phase, will not attend the congregation this year "considering the overall situation", said Wasiqul Islam, Amir of the second phase who will administer the Akheri Munajat this time.

Foreign devotees from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, Iraq, Turkey, African countries, Europe and the USA have also participated in this phase, Wasiqul added.

Tabligh Jamaat has been organising Biswa Ijtema every year since 1967. In 2011, the organisers split the congregation into two phases.

Another 109

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Between 2015 and September 2019, the KSA received about 13.68 lakh Bangladeshi workers, according to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training.

Saudi authorities have sent back over 40,000 Bangladeshi workers in the last two years for staying there after their documents had expired, changing job without permission and not working for the designated employer in violation of the local law, according to Brac Migration Programme.

The Gulf country announced a crackdown on undocumented workers in November, 2017. Over 2.1 million migrants were arrested in the following year, according to Human Rights Watch's World Report-2019.



Members of the theatre industry along with activists hold placards during a protest against the Indian government's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), in Kolkata yesterday.

PHOTO:
AFP

Khamenei plays down protests

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the United States before mistakenly shooting down the Ukrainian jet with the loss of all 176 people on board.

"The plane crash was a bitter accident, it burned through our heart," Khamenei said in an address punctuated by cries of "Death to America" from the congregation.

"But some tried to... portray it in a way to forget the great martyrdom and sacrifice" of Major General Qasem Soleimani, the assassinated head of the foreign operations arm of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards.

Khamenei said Iran's enemies had seized on the plane tragedy in a bid to undermine the Islamic republic.

"Our enemies were as happy about the plane crash as we were sad... happy that they found something to question the Guards, the armed forces, the system," he said.

The air disaster triggered scattered protests in Tehran and other cities, but they appeared smaller than a nationwide wave of demonstrations prompted by a fuel price hike in November.

At least 300 people died in a crackdown by security forces after those demonstrations, according to Amnesty International.

Yesterday, anti-riot police staged a massive deployment in Tehran, an AFP correspondent said.

THE DECEIVED ONES

Khamenei said the protesters were unrepresentative of the Iranian people as a whole, who had turned out in their hundreds of thousands for Soleimani's funeral.

Praising the slain general, Khamenei said his actions beyond Iran's borders were in the service of the "security" of the nation and that the people are in favour of "firmness" and "resistance" in the face of enemies.

"The few hundred who insulted the picture of General Soleimani, are they the people of Iran, or this million-strong crowd in the streets?" he asked.

Khamenei appeared to be referring to the reported tearing down of a portrait of Soleimani by protesters in Tehran just days after mass funeral processions for the general.

It was the likes of Soleimani, not the protesters, who had devoted their lives to Iran, Khamenei said.

"Not only did the deceived ones... not give their lives for Iran, but they did not sacrifice one of their interests for their country."

Khamenei was speaking opposite a huge portrait of Soleimani hung behind the congregation.

Thousands of worshippers crammed into the mosque and more spilt over onto the streets outside, kneeling in the snow.

Police were out in force as they have been since the protests erupted over the downing of the airliner, AFP correspondents reported.

A commemoration for the victims of the crash held in the city of Isfahan on Thursday turned into a protest, video footage posted on social media showed.

Concentrated in the capital, the protests appeared smaller than the nationwide demonstrations in November.

DIVINE HELP

Khamenei's sermon comes at a tumultuous moment for Iran, which had seemed headed for conflict earlier in January after Soleimani was killed on January 3 outside Baghdad airport, prompting retaliatory strikes against Iraqi bases housing US troops.

Khamenei hailed the strikes as a "sign of divine help".

"It was a strike to their reputation, to America's might. This cannot be compensated by anything... sanctions cannot return the lost prestige of America," he said.

The animosity between Washington and Tehran has soared since Trump unilaterally withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal in 2018 and re-imposed biting sanctions.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday urged a "de-escalation" of the tensions and an end to the "constant threats".

The plane tragedy "is a very serious red flag and signal to start working on de-escalation and not on constant threats and combat aviation flights in this region", Lavrov said.

In June 2019, Iran and the United States had also appeared to be on the brink of direct military confrontation after Tehran shot down a US drone it said had violated its airspace.

Trump said he called off retaliatory strikes at the last minute.

President Hassan Rouhani said Thursday that Iran was "working daily to prevent military confrontation or war", and maintained that a dialogue with the world was still "possible".

Senate opens historic trial

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home state of Oklahoma to be with a family member facing a medical issue, according to his office, but was due to sign next week.

The Senate is expected to acquit Trump, as none of its 53 Republicans has voiced support for removing him, a step that requires a two-thirds majority. Trump has denied wrongdoing and has called the impeachment process a sham.

Opening statements were due to start on Tuesday.

Trump has ridiculed the impeachment process for months, and he responded to the opening of the trial by once more branding it a "hoax."

"I think it should go very quickly," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office. "It's totally partisan," he said. "I've got to go through a hoax, a phony hoax put out by the Democrats so they can try and win an election."

The abuse of power cited in the House articles of impeachment included Trump's withholding of \$391 million in security aid for Ukraine, a move Democrats have said was aimed at pressuring Kiev into investigating political rival Joe Biden, the president's possible Democratic opponent in the November 3 election.

Congress had approved the funds to help Ukraine combat Russia-backed separatists. The money was ultimately provided in September after the controversy spilled into public view.

The GAO said the US Constitution does not grant a president authority to unilaterally withhold funds, as Trump did. Instead, a president can

only withhold spending in limited circumstances spelled out by law, its report said.

"Faithful execution of the law does not permit the President to substitute his own policy priorities for those that Congress has enacted into law," the GAO said on Thursday.

The GAO's findings are not legally binding, but its reports are seen by lawmakers as objective, reliable and generally uncontested. It has no prosecutorial power.

Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen, who sought the GAO investigation, said the findings undercut Republican arguments that there was nothing wrong with Trump's action.

"We now have a clear, lucid finding that the Trump administration violated the law and we know that the president ordered the administration to commit an illegal act," he told Reuters.

Republican Senator John Cornyn said that while there may have been a civil violation of the law, it was not a criminal matter and certainly not an impeachable act.

"The Constitution says you impeach presidents for treason, bribery, and high crimes and misdemeanors. And it's none of those things," said Cornyn, a former judge.

MONITORING AN ENVOY
It is only the third impeachment trial in US history and no president has been removed as a direct result of the process. Richard Nixon resigned in 1974 before the full House could vote to impeach him. The House impeached Andrew Johnson in 1868 and Bill Clinton in

1998, but the Senate did not convict them.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the GAO report bolstered Democrats' argument that the Senate trial should include new evidence and hear from witnesses.

Schiff indicated that the House prosecutors may call Lev Parnas, an associate of Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, if the Senate permits testimony in the trial.

Documents released this week indicated Parnas, a Ukraine-born US citizen, helped Giuliani investigate Biden and his son Hunter, and was also involved in monitoring the movements of former US Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch before Trump removed her in May.

In an interview with Reuters, Giuliani said he pushed Trump to fire Yovanovitch but did not know if Parnas put her under surveillance.

Giuliani said he was disappointed with Parnas' decision to cooperate with impeachment investigators.

"I considered him a friend and I considered him to be a man who had character and now I consider him to be a man who will say whatever his phony lawyer wants him to say," Giuliani said.

Parnas told MSNBC on Wednesday that Trump knew "exactly what was going on," and his lawyer has released several photos of Parnas with the president.

Speaking to reporters at the White House, Trump repeated his assertion that he did not know Parnas. He called the whole thing a "big hoax."

Asean should push

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"Asean should constructively engage China and Myanmar, together with Bangladesh," he said in his Facebook post on the same day when Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived in Myanmar on his first trip to the country since 2009.

Jinping is expected to step up investment in the Southeast Asian nation, including in the conflict-racked state of Rakhine, a key link in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

China has been criticised for opposing resolutions at the UN Security Council that would take concrete actions against Myanmar, whose brutal military campaign has forced some 750,000 Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh since August 2017.

Some 300,000 Rohingyas, who fled earlier waves of persecution in Myanmar, have been living in Cox's Bazar since the 1980s.

In December last year, for the first time in history, The Gambia filed a case against Myanmar, accusing it of carrying out genocide against the Rohingyas, while the International Criminal Court started investigation into allegations of crimes against the Rohingyas, one of the most persecuted minorities in the world.

Two repatriation efforts have failed over the last two years, with the Rohingyas saying that the conditions in Rakhine are not conducive and that there is no guarantee of citizenship and security.

Abdullah said one of the challenges for the Rohingyas to return to Myanmar is the trust deficit against the Myanmar government.

He said a region-wide prioritisation on the Rohingyas' right to a free, decent and dignified life through the creation of conducive conditions for human security, inclusive development for all communities and increasing humanitarian access was essential before repatriation should be pushed further.

"This includes solutions for education, livelihood, economic empowerment and recognition of cultural and religious identity," the Malaysian minister said, assuring that Malaysia will continue providing humanitarian assistance to the Rohingyas in the Rakhine state, Bangladesh, as well as in Malaysia.

Opinions divided on Rohingya resettlement

Opinions within Southeast Asia are highly divided on Myanmar's Rakhine crisis and the country's handling of its Rohingyas, according to a survey, State of South-east Asia: 2020, by the Yusof Ishak Institute.

It found that 54.6 percent of respondents either disapproved or strongly disapproved of the way Asean is dealing with the Rakhine issue, Bangkok daily The Straits Times reported.

With the exception of Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos, the majority of respondents in each Asean member state did not approve of Asean's response to the crisis.

Within the disapproving group, 43 percent argued that "Asean should mediate between the Myanmar government and the Rakhine and Rohingya communities".

The second-most popular option in the survey wanted Asean to "step up diplomatic pressure on Myanmar". The least popular suggestion was that Asean should lead a regional peacekeeping operation in Rakhine state.

Meanwhile, about 61 percent of the respondents were against resettling the Rohingyas in their respective countries. This opposition was found even among respondents from Brunei and Malaysia, predominantly Muslim countries.

The Rohingyas were more welcome in the Philippines and Indonesia, where 61.3 percent and 56.1 percent respectively said yes.

"It is alarming that 66 percent of Myanmar respondents indicate their unwillingness to resettle the Rohingya people in their country, a proposition that -- if shared by the country's leadership and public -- would surely put paid to efforts towards an amicable solution to the crisis," the authors of the survey noted.

FBI arrests 'white extremists' ahead of pro-gun rally

AFP, Washington

The FBI arrested three alleged members of the white extremist group "The Base" Thursday, saying they accumulated ammunition and built a functioning automatic weapon, days before a Virginia rally against gun controls.

Federal prosecutors in Greenbelt, Maryland said that US citizens Brian Lemley, 33, and William Bilbrough, 19, and Canadian Patrik Jordan Mathews, 27, were all charged with felony firearms violations.

Lemley and Bilbrough were also charged in relation to transporting and harboring an illegal alien.

BCL leader

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Mostak Ahmed, officer-in-charge of Mohanpur Police Station, said Hossain had been stalking the girl for four months.

On Thursday, Hossain, along with his accomplices, assaulted her at the playground of Boral High School.

Police arrested the seven after the victim's father filed a case against them in this regard.

Scientists invent

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to reproduce and mineralise - a process similar to the formation of seashells in the ocean.

These microbes absorb carbon dioxide from the air and make calcium carbonate, the main ingredient in cement.

"It's a lot like making rice crispy treats where you toughen the marshmallow by adding little bits of hard particles," said Srubar.

Concrete is the second most-consumed material on earth after water. The production of cement, the powder to make concrete, alone is responsible for six percent of CO2 emissions, and concrete also releases CO2 when it cures.

This method provides a green alternative to modern building materials - and results a lower overall carbon footprint, said Srubar.

He said the hydrogel-sand brick is also capable of reproducing itself, demonstrating the potential for "exponential material manufacturing".

Lanka ex-minister held over phone recording scandal

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan authorities have arrested a former minister who allegedly recorded 100,000 phone calls, the sometimes lewd and compromising contents of which were leaked on social media.

In what has become a major scandal, Ranjan Ramanayake is heard discussing court cases with judges, police, politicians and local celebrities in some of the recordings.

Police, who seized hard drives from Ramanayake's home, said they were investigating whether the recordings had been used for blackmail or other criminal activity.

The opposition lawmaker, 56, who was remanded in custody earlier this week, has said he is being targeted for speaking out against corruption.

In some of the leaked audio tapes, Ramanayake is heard slating the

leadership of his own opposition United National Party, which has since suspended his membership.

Parliamentary speaker Karu Jayasuriya said the scandal demonstrated the moral degradation of the otherwise conservative Buddhist-majority nation of 21 million people.

"Recording private conversations as well as broadcasting them (illegally) shows the moral decay in our country," Jayasuriya said in a statement urging the clergy to encourage higher ethical standards in society.

The leaks have already led to the suspension of a magistrate and disciplinary action against a high court judge, officials said. Both had reportedly discussed ongoing cases with Ramanayake.

A senior police detective who had also had discussions with the politician has been suspended pending an internal inquiry.

WHO warns over lack of new antibiotics

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bacteria, according to EU data, while the US estimates the death toll there is around 35,000.

"We see that this is spreading and we are running actually out of antibiotics that are effective against these resistant bacteria," Peter Beyer, of WHO's essential medicines division, told reporters in Geneva.

"This is one of the biggest health threats that we have identified," he said.

Discovered in the 1920s, antibiotics have saved tens of millions of lives by defeating bacterial diseases such as pneumonia, tuberculosis and meningitis.

But over the decades, bacteria have learned to fight back, building resistance to the same drugs that once reliably vanquished them -- turning into so-called "superbugs".

To counter bacteria's ability to become resistant to known drugs, a steady stream of new antibiotics is needed, but for pharmaceutical companies, developing competitive new products in this field is complicated, costly, and not seen as very profitable.

According to the WHO, the 60 new products currently in development -- 50 antibiotics and 10 biologics -- "bring little benefit over existing treatments and only two target the most critical

resistant bacteria", the so-called Gram-negative bacteria.

A range of other drugs still in pre-clinical testing are more innovative, WHO said, but warned it will take years before they reach the market.

Of the 252 such drugs still in very early-stage testing, the two to five first products could become available in about 10 years, according to an optimistic scenario, WHO said.

"It's important to focus public and private investment on the development of treatments that are effective against the highly resistant bacteria," Hanan Balkhy, WHO Assistant Director-General for Antimicrobial Resistance, said in the statement.