

# India police ‘harassing’ students over sedition probe: rights groups

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police are “harassing” primary school students by repeatedly questioning them after their school was charged with sedition over a play allegedly criticising the government’s contentious citizenship law, rights groups said Wednesday.

India has been gripped by widespread street demonstrations against the law that grants citizenship to religious groups from three neighbouring countries, but excludes Muslims.

Police questioned nearly a dozen young student actors after a member of the youth wing of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party filed a complaint against the school in Bidar district in southern Karnataka state.

A teacher and a mother of an 11-year-old participant were arrested under the British colonial-era law for helping the children with the performance, which was part of the school’s foundation day programme.

“They have been asked to explain the reasons over repeated questioning of children,” the head of the Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights, Anthony Sebastian, told AFP.

CCTV footage released by the school showed one policeman questioning students as another officer recorded the interviews on a camera.

Other videos showed children in uniform being led by plain-clothes policemen to a room, where they were

quizzed.

The play depicted a worried family talking about how they feared the government would ask millions of Muslims to prove their nationality or be expelled from India.

The citizenship law, combined with a mooted national register of citizens, has stoked fears that India’s 200 million Muslims will be marginalised.

The play ended with a poem written by a Bollywood lyricist that has become a rallying point for hundreds of thousands of protesters across India.

Amnesty International India urged the government to drop the sedition charges.

“It is shameful that the Bidar police have been harassing and intimidating the school children by repeatedly interrogating them over their involvement in the school play,” executive director Avinash Kumar said in a statement.

Bidar police chief T. Sreedhara told AFP his men were “following the rules while questioning the students”.

“The investigation is still on,” he added.

The British-era sedition law enacted in 1860 carries a maximum penalty of life in prison. Prosecutions are rare but it has frequently been used against critics of the government of the day.

Activists say the authorities often misuse the law to stifle dissent.

India’s junior home minister on Wednesday told the parliament that more than 230 people were charged with sedition between 2014 and 2018.

# Scotland’s FM quits over messages to boy

AFP, London

Scotland’s finance secretary Derek Mackay quit just hours before he was due to present the budget yesterday, saying he had “behaved foolishly” in a string of messages to a 16-year-old schoolboy.

The 42-year-old apologised to the teenager and First Minister Nicola Sturgeon accepted his resignation.

Mackay suddenly stepped down shortly before he was set to unveil the Scottish government’s budget for the next financial year, after a newspaper exposed his messages.

The Scottish Sun reported that he had befriended the schoolboy on Facebook and Instagram and sent him 270 social media messages over a six-month period.

In one message he is alleged to have asked: “And our chats are between us?” and when the boy agreed, told him: “Cool, then to be honest I think you are really cute.”

The tabloid said Mackay offered to take him out to dinner and a rugby game.

“I take full responsibility for my actions. I have behaved foolishly and I am truly sorry,” Mackay said in a statement.

“I apologise unreservedly to the individual involved and his family.

“I spoke last night with the first

minister and tendered my resignation with immediate effect.

“Serving in government has been a huge privilege and I am sorry to have let colleagues and supporters down.”

Mackay had been the finance minister since 2016. He was seen as a rising star of Scottish politics.

The father-of-two announced in 2013 that he had separated from his wife, adding that it was “important for me to be clear publicly that I am gay”.

The Scottish budget will now be presented by junior public finance minister Kate Forbes, 29.

Within the United Kingdom, Scotland has its own devolved parliament, with its government deciding policy and spending on areas such as health and education.

The left-wing, secessionist Scottish National Party runs a minority administration in Edinburgh, and is pushing for a second referendum on Scottish independence.

In accepting his resignation, SNP leader Sturgeon said Mackay “recognises that his behaviour has failed to meet the standards required”.

The Scottish Sun published full threads of messages dating from August 2 last year until February 1.

Mackay contacted the boy out of the blue and asked what age he was, saying “oh right” after being told he was 16.

# Abbas to push UN resolution on Trump peace plan: officials

AFP, Ramallah

President Mahmud Abbas will travel to the United Nations next week to push for a Security Council resolution condemning US President Donald Trump’s peace proposals, Palestinian officials said Wednesday.

The resolution will almost certainly be vetoed by the United States.

“The draft resolution that will be voted on in the Security Council will include the rejection of the Trump-Netanyahu deal,” Saleh Rafat, a member of the executive committee of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, told AFP, referring to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

He called Trump’s plan, which Netanyahu enthusiastically supports, “the opposite of the UN Security Council resolutions on the Palestinian conflict.”

If vetoed at the Security Council, the issue will be taken to the UN General Assembly, Rafat added.

The Permanent Representative of Palestine to the UN, Riyad Mansour, told the official Voice of Palestine radio that Abbas will arrive in New York on Monday and address the

Security Council on Tuesday.

Trump released his long-delayed peace proposals last week but they were immediately rejected by the Palestinians, who have boycotted his administration over its pro-Israel stance.

The proposals included giving Israel the green light to annex settlements in the occupied West Bank, the largest part of the territories the Palestinians see as their future state.

## Onion, garlic

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Wholesaler Muhammad Shaheen of the same market alleged the importers created an artificial shortage of the goods by forming a cartel.

“They did it to make some extra profit,” he added.

Meanwhile, Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi yesterday said the government would control the prices by finding new sources of the goods.

“Use of garlic and ginger is limited. However, if the situation of China doesn’t improve soon and the prices keep rising, we will find an alternative source,” he told reporters at his office.

About onion price, he said, “China is meeting only 10 to 15 percent of our onion demands.”

According to government data, the country produces around 4.5 lakh tonnes of garlic every year against a demand for 6 lakh tonnes. The rest is imported mostly from China.

## Steps to be taken

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She also sought help from the local administrations and law enforcers to take steps to prevent the use of guide books.



An Iraqi anti-government protester lifts a banner depicting the new Prime Minister-designate Mohammad Allawi with the inscription “rejected”, during a student demonstration in the southern city of Nasiriyah, yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

# No toll for ambulances from March 1

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Quader, the RTHD on October 10 last year wrote to the finance ministry seeking its consent to keep ambulance outside the purview of toll collection.

The finance ministry approved the proposal in November last year.

In December, the road transport ministry sent a letter to the health ministry asking to take necessary measures to implement the decision.

Copies of yesterday’s circular were sent, among others, to the cabinet secretary, principal secretary to the prime minister, secretaries of public administration, health, finance and home and the chief engineer of RHD.

But there is still uncertainty over whether people would get the expected benefits from the initiative as there is no fare chart or guideline for private ambulance operations.

The question also remains about how the private ambulance operators would adjust this waiver.

Directorate General of Health

Services (DGHS) has already written to all directors of medical colleges and specialised hospitals, superintendents of all district hospitals, and civil surgeons to take necessary measures in this regard.

“We have instructed all civil surgeons to inform all private medical facilities, including clinics, about the initiative,” Aminul Hasan, director (hospital) of DGHS, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked how they would ensure the deduction of toll by private ambulances, he said, “Most of the private ambulances are affiliated with private medical facilities, and our civil surgeons would instruct them in this regard.”

According to Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), total 6424 ambulances were registered with it until December last year.

However, Dhaka Mohanagar Ambulance Malik Somobay Samity Ltd, a Dhaka-based organisation of

ambulance owners, says over 8,500 private ambulances are now in operation, meaning many ambulances are operating without registration.

“We are happy that the government finally took the decision. We have been demanding it for long,” Sariful Alam Mehdi, adviser of the Samity, told this newspaper after learning about the development.

He, however, demanded the government immediately fix the fares for each type of ambulance under a guideline so that people get the full benefit of the initiative.

He also demanded the government would make the bridges under Bangladesh Bridge Authority (BBA) and ferries run by Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) toll-free.

Currently, there are 62 bridges and 39 ferry terminals under the supervision of the RHD. The BIWTC runs five ferry terminals while the BBA administers two bridges.

# 4 held in Barguna

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Police Station.

When the driver stopped the car after finding a van parked on the road and some bamboos lying on the road around 5:00pm Wednesday, some 10 to 12 men on motorcycles ambushed the microbus and vandalised it, said Abul Bashar, OC of the police station.

The muggers then beat up the officials and hacked two -- Jhunu and Tanveen -- as they tried to resist.

The muggers fled the scene with the money meant for paying salaries of 500 workers at the power plant project.

On information, police went to the spot, detained microbus driver Abu Bakar and seized the vehicle, said OC Manoranjan, adding that they found Tk 33.90 lakh inside the microbus later.

The driver was held for his alleged involvement in the mugging, OC

Bashar said.

The injured were moved to Dhaka yesterday from Barishal Sher-E-Bangla Medical College Hospital as their condition was critical.

OC Manoranjan said police were trying to nab the other muggers and interrogating all the detainees.

This correspondent could not contact any officials of the three companies for comments.

# Not guilty

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Democrat voted to acquit.

“Two thirds of the senators present not having found him guilty of the charges contained therein, it is therefore ordered and adjudged that the said Donald John Trump be, and he is hereby, acquitted,” said Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, who presided over the trial.

Trump immediately claimed “victory” while the White House declared it a full “exoneration” -- and Democrats rejected the acquittal as the “valueless” outcome of an unfair trial, reports AFP.

Trump said yesterday that he suffered a “terrible ordeal” during his impeachment.

In his first public comments since being acquitted by the Senate of abuse of office, he said he had been “put through a terrible ordeal by some very dishonest and corrupt people.”

The president watched the Senate vote with top aides in a White House dining room that he uses as a private study, a senior administration official said. Trump said he would deliver a public statement “to discuss our Country’s VICTORY on the Impeachment Hoax!”

On Twitter, the president posted a video showing Trump campaign signs for future elections from 2024 onward

ending with “Trump 4EVA.” The US Constitution limits a president to two elected four-year terms in office.

“President Trump has been totally vindicated and it’s now time to get back to the business of the American people,” Trump’s campaign manager, Brad Parscale, said in a statement.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and other Republicans engineered a stripped-down trial with no witnesses or new evidence. Democrats called it a sham and a cover-up. Trump called the impeachment an attempted coup and a Democratic attempt to annul his 2016 election win.

The acquittal handed Trump his biggest victory yet over his Democratic adversaries in Congress. Democrats vowed to press ahead with investigations - they are fighting in court for access to his financial records - and voiced hope the facts unearthed during the impeachment process about his conduct would help persuade voters to make him a one-term president.

“No doubt, the president will boast he received total exoneration. But we know better. We know this wasn’t a trial by any stretch of the definition,” said Chuck Schumer, the top Senate Democrat.

Democrats expressed concern an

acquittal would encourage a president who already challenges political norms, painting him as a threat to US democracy and a demagogue who has acted lawlessly and exhibited a contempt for the powers of Congress and other institutions. They said the vision of nearly unlimited presidential power offered by Trump’s legal team placed any president above the law.

Trump’s job approval ratings have remained fairly consistent throughout his presidency and the impeachment process as his core conservative supporters - especially white men, rural Americans, evangelical Christians and conservative Catholics - stick with him.

The latest Reuters/Ipsos poll, conducted on Monday and Tuesday, showed 42% of American adults approved of his performance, while 54% disapproved. That was nearly the same as when the House launched its impeachment inquiry in September, when his approval stood at 43% and disapproval at 53%.

Trump faces no serious challengers for his party’s presidential nomination. He is poised to claim the nomination at the party’s convention in August and previewed in the State of the Union address on Tuesday his campaign themes such as American renewal, economic vitality and hardline immigration policies.

# Bangabandhu’s nation-building challenges

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rehabilitation of the refugees. A joint communique will be issued tomorrow. Indira Gandhi hands over to Bangabandhu five motor vehicles as a token of aid.

## MUJIB REJECTS BHUTTO’S ALLEGATION

Bangabandhu rejects outright Pakistani President ZA Bhutto’s allegation that non-Bengalis in Bangladesh are passing their days in distress. “It is false, malicious and motivated,” he adds. When asked about the reported allegation of Bhutto at a tea with intellectuals of Kolkata at Rajbhawan, Bangabandhu declares that not a single non-Bengali has been killed in retaliation after the liberation of Bangladesh.

## BANGABANDHU’S TRIBUTE TO INDIAN PRESS

Speaking at a reception given in his honour by the Kolkata Press Club, Bangabandhu pays tribute to the Indian press for projecting the truth

about Bangladesh at a time when it was difficult to get it from within the country as the Pakistani occupation army gagged the press and sealed all the means of communication with the outside world. “If you had not told the truth it would have been difficult for the people of Bangladesh to get any assistance from abroad,” adds Bangabandhu.

## EVERY VILLAGE WAS BUT A JALLIANWALA BAGH

Every village in Bangladesh was but a Jallianwala Bagh during Pakistan Army occupation, Bangabandhu says while speaking at a civic reception in Kolkata. Bangabandhu also pays tribute to the Indian Army and praises its conduct in Bangladesh. He says, “You wouldn’t believe how they are loved by the people there. They are allied forces. They are in Bangladesh at the request of my government and would leave when asked to do so.”

## EX PARTE JUDGMENTS DECLARED

## VOID

The president of Bangladesh through an order declares null and void all judgments, decrees and orders passed ex parte by any court or tribunal, or orders disposing of matters due to default in any legal proceedings at any time after March 1, 1971, and before the commencement of this order.

## TK 10CR BARTER DEAL WITH USSR

A barter agreement of import and export worth Tk 10 crore has been finalised today between Bangladesh and the USSR. The short-term agreement is for a duration of nine months.

## C’WEALTH MEMBERSHIP SOUGHT

Bangladesh has formally applied for membership in the 31-nation Commonwealth, and soundings are being taken to determine whether its application should be granted.

Sources: February 8, 1972 issues of Dainik Bangla, The Daily Ittefaq, Azad, Morning News, The Bangladesh Observer and Purbodesh.

# Pope says poverty can be beaten if rich play their part

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Francis insisted Wednesday poverty could be beaten if the world’s rich play a full part in ending inequality as he attended a conference on financial inclusion.

“We are neither condemned to inequality nor to paralysis in the face of injustice. The rich world and a prosperous economy can and must end poverty,” the Argentinian pontiff told participants as he made an unscheduled appearance.

“We must be conscious of all being responsible. If extreme poverty exists amid riches which are also extreme it is because we have allowed a gap to grow to become the largest in history,” said Francis, who has made inequality a central theme of his papacy.

Listening to his address were notably IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire and Argentine counterpart Martin Guzman.

“People who are poor in indebted countries suffer from strong fiscal pressure and the cutting of social services,” Francis added.

Calling for the “globalisation of hope,” Georgieva responded that “the first task is to put the economy at the service of the people,” highlighting the need to address the issue of “inequality of opportunity.”

The International Monetary Fund head also urged investment in people and education. But she also stressed the need to prioritise the environment as “none of the economic challenges we face today will be important in 20 years if we do not today confront the challenge of climate change.”

## 23 pro-regime

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the capital, while five Syrian members of pro-Iran group were killed in the southern province of Daraa, it said.

Israel did not comment, but it has acknowledged carrying out hundreds of strikes in Syria in recent years to stop Iranian “military entrenchment”.

Iran and its proxies, including the Lebanon’s Hezbollah movement, are supporting forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad in the country’s civil war.

Last month, Damascus accused the Israeli air force of carrying out an attack on the T4 airbase in central Syria, which the Observatory said killed at least three Iran-backed militiamen.

In December, the Observatory said Israeli air strikes killed three foreigners fighting alongside government forces south of the capital.

The previous month, the Israeli army claimed responsibility for a wave of air strikes against Syrian military sites and Iranian forces that killed 23 people including 16 foreigners.

The war in Syria has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with the brutal repression of pro-democracy protests.

The reported Israeli strikes come as government forces press a blistering offensive against Syria’s last major rebel bastion, in the Idlib region in the northwest.

The Syrian army source said the strikes would not deter government forces from retaking the region, which is dominated by jihadists of Syria’s former al-Qaeda affiliate.

## AI helps

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finished version, which depicts the Madonna with an infant Jesus and an infant John the Baptist in a cavern.

The sketches showed wings, which suggested that da Vinci might have originally planned for an angel to be in the painting, as well as a different position for the Madonna.

Higgitt contacted Dragotti’s team at the Imperial College of London, and they used a new technique called Macro-X-ray fluorescence scanning (MA-XRF) to record the full chemical composition of the painting.

The team noticed the sketches had traces of zinc in them and considered the thought that da Vinci might have originally used a zinc-based pigment to outline the image.

The team assigned an AI program to isolate all the traces of zinc that had been recorded during the MA-XRF scan, and doing so revealed a near-complete version of the sketch that had previously been hidden beneath the full painting.

“Before, we were getting very weak signals from the zinc within the painting due to its overlap with other elements, but the algorithm has given us more confidence in the signals that relate to the underdrawing,” Higgitt told Phys.org.

Dragotti described the process as akin to finding a needle in a haystack, something labour intensive that became much less daunting when an AI could manage crunching the large amounts of data necessary to search for the so-called needle.

“It is really a little bit like looking for a needle in a haystack,” Dragotti said. “And we can find this needle automatically and effectively exactly because we know we are looking for a needle and not something else.”