

Asia Watch raps Pakistan for "blasphemy laws"

ISLAMABAD, Sept 19: Religious minorities in Pakistan are harassed and persecuted under "blasphemy laws" that ban remarks against Islam, a human rights group charged Sunday, reports AP.

Asia Watch, based in New York, cited 10 cases in 1992 in which people were charged with making derogatory comments against Islam. In separate cases, a Muslim and a Catholic were sentenced to death. Both men have appealed.

The 22-page report did not cite any human rights violations under the current caretaker government of Prime Minister Moen Qureshi, which was appointed in July and plans to step down after elections October 6.

The document also failed to mention recent improvements

In human rights in Pakistan. Democracy and many civil rights were restored following the 1988 death of military strongman General Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, who ruled for 11 years.

Benazir Bhutto, who served as Prime Minister from 1988 to 1990, is credited with most of the reforms, which included the release of political prisoners who were jailed under Zia.

Asia Watch said more than 100 people have been charged with blasphemy offenses since 1987, most of them from the Ahmadis religious sect, which follows most, but not all, Muslim customs.

Pakistan's government declared in 1974 that the Ahmadis were "non-Muslims" and they have been persecuted regularly, Asia Watch said.

PLO, Hamas officials likely to meet in Yemen soon

LONDON, Sept 19: Officials from the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Palestinian Islamic Movement Hamas are likely to meet soon in Yemen, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat disclosed in an interview appearing here today, reports AFP.

"Our executive committee appealed for reconciliation," Arafat told The Observer newspaper.

"Hamas replied they are ready to attend a meeting very soon in Yemen."

Hamas has condemned and rejected a PLO decision to recognize Israel's right to exist and to sign a declaration of principles with Israel on limited self-rule for Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The PLO leader meanwhile

arrived Saturday in Cairo to attend a meeting of Arab League foreign ministers, where he was expected to defend the Israel-PLO deal in the face of objections from hardline Arab states such as Iraq and Libya.

From Cairo Arafat is to travel to Jordan and, on Wednesday, to Beijing.

After a three-day mission to China, he will go on to Indonesia and Turkey, according to sources at PLO headquarters in Tunis.

Reuter from Tunis adds: PLO-Israeli peace agreement said on Saturday it was too early for Arab states to open normal relations with Israel.

Hassan Asfour, one of the three Palestine Liberation Organisation members who negotiated the agreement in secret

in Norway, said Arab states should wait until Israel pulls its forces out of the West Bank and Gaza.

"Normalisation is a big price, too big to be the price for this agreement, especially when it is still a piece of paper," he told Reuters in an interview.

"It must be linked with Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories and recognition of the Palestinian people's political and legal rights," he added.

"This does not mean hostility (towards normalisation) but the timing of it requires coordination and a commitment from Israel to put the agreement into effect," he said.

Israel had hoped the agreement would be enough to persuade some Arab states to es-

tablish diplomatic relations and end their economic boycott of Israel.

The United States, which has long campaigned for an end to the boycott, takes a similar view.

But the official Syrian media have since made oblique criticisms of the agreement and have given publicity to Palestinian radicals opposed to Arafat.

"We consider the Syrian position is that which is expressed officially," Asfour said. "The rest is speculation."

"I don't think it's in Syria's interest to wreck the agreement, perhaps the opposite is the case. Supporting the agreement could help Syria reach an agreement with Israel on the Golan Heights," he added.

Thai minister defends ties with Myanmar

BANGKOK, Sept 19: Returning from a conference with the Myanmar military junta, Foreign Minister Prasong Soonsiri has rejected criticism of Thailand's policy of "constructive engagement" toward Myanmar, reports AP.

"I doubt whether (critics) have ever done anything to resolve problems we have with Myanmar" Prasong was quoted by Bangkok newspapers Sunday as saying after he came home Saturday from a three-day trip to Yangon.

Unlike other prominent figures who have gone to Myanmar recently, Prasong did not call for the release of pro-democracy leader and Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. He described her house arrest as "a domestic matter".

And he said the junta was in the process of drafting "a democratic constitution and introducing a market-oriented economy."

Foreign human rights groups and some Thai organisations say Thailand is reluctant to press Myanmar on human rights because it wants to exploit Myanmar natural resources.

"It's true we need gas, electricity and water but we also need more deals with (the junta) until it makes concrete moves toward democracy," editorialised the independent daily The Nation on the eve of Prasong's departure.

While in Yangon, Prasong co-chaired the first ministerial level meeting of the Myanmar-Thailand Joint Commission, formed in January to oversee ties between the two nations.

Meeting sources in Yangon said the Thai said asked the Myanmar to reconsider their decision to terminate logging concessions to Thai companies inside Burma by the end of 1993. The Yangon government announced in June that foreign logging concessions would be halted to conserve forests and halt illegal logging.

Prasong said in the closing speech that process had been made on potential conflict areas such as logging and fishing rights, "although there is no cure-all solution."

Myanmar's military junta took power in 1988, brutally putting down a nationwide pro-democracy uprising.



Palestine Liberation Organization President, Yasser Arafat (L) accompanied by the General Secretary of Arab League Esmat Abdelmagid (R) as they arrive at the opening of the 100th Arab Foreign Ministers meeting in Cairo Sept 19. — AFP photo

Arab League may prevent fresh UN sanctions on Libya

CAIRO, Sept 19: The Arab League backed Libya's latest position in a row over two airliner bombings and hinted on Saturday it might form a caucus at the United Nations to try and prevent further sanctions against Tripoli, says Reuter.

League Secretary-General Esmat Abdel-Maguid said foreign ministers and officials from seven Arab states meeting on the crisis praised Libya for a "constructive" memorandum it gave to UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali on Wednesday.

"The committee expressed its concern and rejection of a policy of escalation, threats and warnings that the three western states have directed at Libya and called for a response and a close study of Libya's memorandum," Abdel-Maguid told reporters. The western states referred to are Britain, the United States and France, all permanent members of the Security

Council. In April 1992, the UN imposed limited sanctions on Libya for failing to hand the men over for trial to the United States or Britain and for failure to cooperate with a French enquiry into a second airliner bombing over Niger which killed 171 people.

The three states have now drafted tougher sanctions, including a freeze on Libyan financial assets and a ban on oil drilling equipment, which they plan to introduce in the UN Security Council at the start of October if Tripoli does not meet their demands.

Abdel-Maguid said the seven Arab states of the committee — Egypt, Syria, Mauritania, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya itself — might meet on the fringes of the UN General Assembly in New York if the three western powers continued with their plan. He gave no details.

UN blames Liberian govt for massacre of 400 refugees

NEW YORK, Sept 19: A United Nations investigation has blamed Liberian government troops for a June massacre of more than 400 refugees, reports AP.

Many survivors of the massacre in Harbel, 40 miles (64 kilometers) from Monrovia, the Liberian capital, initially blamed guerrillas loyal to rebel leader Charles Taylor, who denied any role in the incident.

But some began suspecting government troops after it was learned that two government soldiers escaped the killings unharmed.

According to a copy of the investigation's findings obtained on Saturday by The Associated Press, the massacre "was planned and executed by units of the armed forces of Liberia." The report has not yet been made public.

The September 10 report said that Taylor's National Patriotic Front, the rebel United Liberation Movement for Liberia, and the six-nation West African force backing interim President Amos Sawyer's government had no direct role in the massacre.

But it said that the United Liberation Movement for Liberia, which has also fought Taylor's troops, "may have on their individual initiative participated with the (government) soldiers in the massacre operation."

The report recommends that three soldiers, including the commander of government troops in Harbel, be prosecuted for their role in the June 6 massacre. Others could be implicated as additional information is discovered, it said.

The UN Security Council passed a resolution in June saying those responsible should be brought to justice. The investigation showed that many survivors of the massacre do not know if their relatives are still alive. Conditions in the camp remain poor, and many residents are starving, it said.

Ninety per cent of the victims were children and women who were shot, hacked and bludgeoned to death. Estimates of the death toll ranged from 461 to 547 of the camp's nearly 3,000 refugees.

The report was compiled by a three-member panel appointed on August 4 by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to investigate the incident.

The investigators interviewed 38 survivors and witnesses

Turkish-Kurdish clash leaves 18 dead

ANKARA, Sept 19: Violence left 18 dead in southeastern Turkey, where Kurdish separatists are fighting a guerrilla war for independence, Turkish media reported Saturday, reports AP.

More than 100 people have died this past week in the region, where the government has launched an offensive against the insurgents. The conflict has claimed more than 7,000 lives since it began nine years ago.

Peres threatened to resign before signing accord

WASHINGTON, Sept 19: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres threatened to resign shortly before signing the agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), US News and World Report magazine reported on Saturday, reports Reuter.

The magazine said in its latest issue that, according to ranking Israelis, the threat came when Peres, who negotiated the agreement, learned Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, a long-time political rival, had decided to come to Washington for the signing ceremony at the White House.

Peres and Rabin reconciled when they came to Washington, the magazine said.

It also said that when former President George Bush met PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat the night before the ceremony, Bush asked him what Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein thought about the agreement.



Rigoberta Menchu, 1992 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and the United Nations goodwill ambassador for 1993, receives an honourable doctorate degree by the President of Meiji-gakuin University Kanichi Fukuda in Japan Sept 19. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Turkish student found dead in US: A 17-year-old exchange student from Turkey was found dead Saturday in bushes near the home where he was staying. His belongings were scattered nearby, AP reports from Tampa.

Homicide detectives were investigating the death of Mehmet Bahar, who was discovered by his roommate and an early-morning jogger in an affluent, residential neighbourhood, police said.

Police believe Bahar, of Antalya, Turkey, died late Friday or early Saturday and that a struggle was involved. Neighbours who saw the body told The St. Petersburg Times that the teenager appeared to have been beaten.

Results from an autopsy were not available late Saturday.

China for ties with France: China hopes for speedy normalisation of strained relations with France, according to Vice Premier Qian Qichen, AFP reports from Beijing.

Qian, also Foreign Minister, was speaking to visiting French parliamentarian Alain Peyrefitte, Chairman of the France-China Committee at the National Assembly, Xinhua news agency said Saturday.

Bilateral ties soured last year when France announced the sale of 60 Mirage-2000 jet fighters to nationalist Taiwan, which Beijing views as a breakaway province.

13 executed in China: Thirteen people were executed in the eastern Chinese city of Nanjing for murder, rape and robbery, the Hong Kong China News Service reported Sunday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

The 13 men were the first batch to be executed on Saturday in an anti-crime campaign begun in June, while another 16 were given various jail terms, the report said.

The youngest of these executed was 20 years of age and the oldest 45, it said.

Between June and August, 879 people were arrested, with a further 322 being sought by police.

Yangon frees 62 more prisoners: The Military government in Myanmar on Saturday released 62 more political prisoners, official Radio Yangon reported, AFP says from Bangkok.

It said in a broadcast monitored here that the 59 men and three women were released from jails in southern Myanmar Mya Province. It gave no other details.

More than 2,000 political prisoners have been freed in Myanmar since the junta declared a gradual amnesty in April 1992.

4 cops shot dead in Manipur

NEW DELHI, Sept 19: Gunmen shot dead four policemen and seven arrested insurgents in an ambush in the north-eastern Indian state of Manipur, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported today, says AFP.

The policemen were attacked overnight Saturday some 10 kilometres (6.25 miles) north of the state capital Imphal, the news agency said, also slain were seven insurgents in their custody.

The attackers fled with the weapons of the dead policemen. Naga insurgents had on September 14 massacred nearly 90 members of the rival Kuki tribe in Manipur, provoking retaliatory violence.

Violence casts shadow over Pak preparations for polls

ISLAMABAD, Sept 19: Two attacks on mosques and other instances of violence, which have claimed more than 50 lives, have cast a disturbing shadow over Pakistan's preparations for general elections early next month, reports AFP.

Although major political rallies have been free of violence, amid a reportedly unenthusiastic overall public sentiment, a law and order threat appears to be building following recent attacks and clashes at different places throughout the country, analysts said.

In August, a dozen people were killed in sectarian trouble in Gilgit and 30 died later in a tribal-cum-political clash in

Baluchistan. Seven others were killed in a shooting attack on a mosque in Lahore.

A grenade attack on a mosque in Faisalabad on Monday left one worshipper dead and more than two dozen injured, while snipers killed two more Friday in Karachi after five others were killed in similar acts of violence in the city.

Reports said the two mosques targeted by unidentified assailants belonged to Anjum Sipah Sahaba (ASS), a militant anti-Shi'ite group from the majority Sunni community. The two who died in Karachi were also ASS members.

Some ASS leaders have blamed Shi'ite rivals, but no

arrests have so far been reported and police have linked the acts to unidentified terrorists trying to ignite sectarian passions.

Caretaker Prime Minister

Candidate held for keeping heroin

ISLAMABAD, Sept 19: A candidate in the forthcoming Pakistan elections has been arrested for allegedly possessing 500 grams of heroin, the official Associated Press of Pakistan said Saturday, reports AFP.

Munir Ahmad, an independent candidate for the Punjab provincial assembly, was detained Friday in the town of Chichawatni, APP said.

Moen Qureshi has said the "terrorist" activities were aimed at creating trouble ahead of the October 6-9 polls, but vowed that under no circumstances would the elections be put off.

Former Premier Benazir Bhutto, condemning the Faisalabad incident, said "acts of terrorism are being perpetrated to cow down people from exercising their vote and sabotage the elections."

Bhutto, currently on a whirlwind campaigning tour, did not point a finger at who was behind the terrorist acts, but said "such ruthless people would have to account for every drop of blood they spill". In Karachi, the largest

Pakistani city and capital of Sindh Province, the ethnic-based Mahajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) is locked in a tussle with authorities and at odds with a splinter party group.

MQM, whose founder Altaf Hussain went into self-exile in London before an army-led crackdown in June last year against militants in his organisation, has put up candidates for a dozen national assembly seats.

Bitter over what was officially billed as an anti-crime cleanup operation, which threw the MQM into disarray, the party complains that it is not being allowed due freedom to campaign ahead of the polls.

Off the Record



Miss South Carolina Kimberly Clarice Aiken, 18, (R) is shown on the runway in New Jersey after being crowned Miss America by last year's Miss America Leanza Cornett Sept 18. — AFP photo

Computers operate financial matters of dead woman 3 yrs

STOCKHOLM: The body of an elderly woman who died in 1990 lay undiscovered in her flat for more than three years while computers received her pension and automatically paid her bills, Swedish police said on Saturday, reports Reuter.

"It's very unusual for someone to be dead so long without anyone else reacting," a police duty officer in the Stockholm suburb of Farsta told the national news agency ITT.

The woman's last opened post was dated May 11, 1990, police said, indicating she had died at the age of 72. Her name has not been made public.

Police were called to break into the flat by its landlord after he had made repeated efforts to gain the occupant's permission to renovate it.

Smoking set as condition for inheriting husband's property

BUCHAREST: A husband who was heckled by his wife to stop smoking left everything to her on condition she take up the habit as punishment for 40 years of "hell" newspapers reported Saturday, says AP.

Marin Cemenescu, who died last week in his hometown of Timisoara at age 76, reportedly stipulated in his will that in order to inherit his house and 30,000 dollar estate, his 63-year-old wife Aneta would have to smoke five cigarettes a day for the rest of her life.

Mrs. Cemenescu's major transgression appears to have been waging war on his smoking, the Romania Libera daily reported. "She could not stand to see me with a cigarette in my mouth (and) I ended up smoking in the bathroom like a schoolboy," Cemenescu reportedly wrote in his will. "My life was hell."

The report said Mrs. Cemenescu planned to contest the conditions of the will and quoted her as saying, "I'd rather lose everything than touch a cigarette."

The report did not specify the cause of Cemenescu's death or say whether it was related to his smoking.

Five held in Pakistan for drug smuggling

PESHAWAR, Sept 19: A family of four and their driver were arrested Saturday while trying to smuggle 56 kilograms (123 pounds) of heroin across Pakistan, drug agents said, reports AP.

The arrests near this western frontier town were noteworthy because they showed how ordinary citizens have become involved in Pakistan's flourishing drug trade, officials said.

The refined heroin, in powder form, would be worth an estimated 7 million dollars by the time it reached the streets of Europe or the United States, said Ahsan Mukhtar Shah, head of the Narcotics Control Board in Peshawar.

After a tip off drug agents stopped a Toyota land cruiser and found the heroin stuffed inside the cavities of the vehicle, Shah said.

Police detained the driver, who is suspected of being a professional drug courier, and a family of four, including two

boys, ages 9 and 4.

The head of the family, Zahir Ali, said he was a school teacher who had been tempted to transport the drugs to supplement his meager salary, which is the equivalent of 60 dollars a month.

As he spoke, his wife and children cried hysterically. "I will die if you don't release my mother," said one of the boys.

Shah said the family was offered less than 200 dollars to ride in the vehicle. Drug smugglers are increasingly employing families to accompany drug shipments in hopes that their presence will lessen suspicions, he added.

The shipment appeared headed toward central Pakistan, away from Afghanistan, where most of the opium is grown. The 14-year Afghan war has devastated the country and opium is grown freely and exported easily across the porous border with Pakistan.

Mother Teresa leaves hospital

CALCUTTA, Sept 19: Mother Teresa was released from hospital Sunday after a life-saving operation, and returned home for a two-week rest ordered by her doctors, reports AP.

"We have allowed Mother to go home as her condition is stable," said Dr. Patricia Aubanel, the 83-year-old nun's personal cardiologist.

On Thursday, Dr. Aubanel unclogged a blood vessel in Mother Teresa's heart during a two-hour procedure called "balloon angioplasty."

Soon after the operation, Mother Teresa insisted on being discharged immediately to prepare for a planned visit to China, her first to that country.