

War-weary young Kashmiris grapple with pacifist Gandhi

AFP, Srinagar

In Indian Kashmir, where an Islamist revolt has raged for nearly two decades, tens of thousands of students have been debating the values of the Indian champion of non-violence Mahatma Gandhi.

The students delivered speeches in a government-organised elocution contest that culminated with prizes on Tuesday -- the pacifist's birthday which the UN decided in June to declare the International Day of Non-Violence.

For the winner, espousing the Indian leader's non-violent credo was a necessity.

"If Gandhi's philosophy is not followed, we may soon have law of jungle prevailing everywhere," said 19-year-old college student Taufiq Yusuf, who collected the top cash award of 100,000 rupees (2,500 dollars).

"We in Kashmir will not get anything out of violence," Yusuf added as applause rang out from the audience of thousand of students in Srinagar, urban hub of the separatist revolt that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

IUBAT orientation held

Orientation programme for the fall semester 2007 of International University of Business Agriculture and Technology (IUBAT) was held at IUBAT auditorium on October 2 in the city, says a press release.

The orientation ceremony was held on the bank of the river Turag with participation of the national and international students, members from overseas collaborative organizations, officials, staff and faculties of IUBAT. The ceremony began with a recitation from the Holy Quran followed by singing of national anthems of Bangladesh and Canada.

Professor Alex Berland, visiting professor in Health Sciences from University of British Columbia, Canada attended the ceremony as Chief Guest while Professor Maureen Malone, visiting professor from Langara College, Canada attended as Special Guest.

In his speech professor Berland expressed the hope that IUBAT's commitment of human resources development through quality education will be realised through innovation for skilled human resource development and other educational programs.

Vice Chancellor Professor Dr M Alimullah Miyan in his speech urged everyone to work to fulfill the mission of human resources development of the university. He urged the freshmen to work hard for their own success and to fulfill the IUBAT mission for the benefit of the society.

Later he distributed IUBAT Award of Merit Excellence among fourteen bright students of different semesters.

Detained Iranian an intelligence agent: US general

AFP, Baghdad

An Iranian arrested by US forces in Iraq's Kurdish region had been involved in Tehran's intelligence operations in Iraq for more than a decade, an American general said yesterday.

"Multiple sources" had also implicated him in providing weapons to "Iraqi criminal elements in the service of Iran," US military spokesman Major General Kevin Bergner told a news conference in Baghdad.

On September 20, US troops raided a hotel in Sulaimaniyah in the autonomous northern autonomous region and seized Mahmudi Farhadi, claiming he was a member of the Quds Force, the covert operations arm of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards.

Iran condemned what it called the "unwarranted" arrest of a businessman it said was in Iraq at the invitation of the Kurdish regional government, and lodged a strong protest with the authorities in Baghdad.

Irqi President Jalal Talabani has slammed the arrest as illegal and demanded Farhadi's release.

And on September 24, Iran shut its frontiers with Iraq in protest, causing mayhem on the border and major economic losses to traders in the Kurdish region.

Bergner insisted on Wednesday that the detainee was a Quds Force operative.

"Farhadi was the officer in charge of the Zafar command, one of three subordinates of the Ramazan core of the Quds Force," Bergner said.

"As Zafar commander, he was responsible for Quds Force operations in north-central Iraq, including cross border transfers of weapons, people and money."

"We also know that for more than a decade he was involved in Iranian intelligence operations in Iraq," he added, without elaborating.

Gandhi was the leader of India's freedom movement with his campaign of non-violent civil disobedience that ended in independence of the subcontinent from Britain in 1947.

"Gandhi was a man of peace, who urged people to shun violence. He didn't advocate war but peace," said another student, 23-year-old Tasleema Jan.

The question is not whether Gandhi's philosophy is relevant or irrelevant -- the question is do we have the courage to follow in his footsteps?"

But not all the contestants were so complimentary about Gandhi, known in India as "father of the nation," during the run-up to the prize-giving which took place on a lawn bordering scenic Lake Dal, Srinagar's tourist showpiece.

"Imperialistic powers are using Gandhi's philosophy to strengthen their occupation of weaker nations," said university student Baber Qadri, sparking spontaneous pro-Islamic slogan shouting at a forum on Monday at Kashmir University.

Others said there was no reason to look for inspiration to Gandhi, who was assassinated in 1947 by a Hindu extremist who objected to his message of tolerance and brotherhood between Muslims and Hindus.

"Why should we follow the Gandhian principles when Islam is there for us as a complete way of life?" asked Irfan Lone, to the applause from listeners.

The contest, which involved students at high schools, colleges and universities across the state, was the brainchild of Kashmir's Chief Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad, a pro-India politician.

He said he wanted to stir debate on Gandhi's message of non-violence among students in the state, where unrest has left more than 42,000 people dead by official count since the revolt erupted in 1989.

Human rights groups put the toll at 60,000 dead and 10,000 missing.

"The response is an indication of the popularity of Gandhian philosophy among the younger generation," said Azad.

The chief minister added he believed the marathon debating event set a record, at least in India.

"I'm not talking about 50,000-strong audience but 50,000 participants," he said.

Some school principals, however, said they were summoned by authorities and told to ensure a good student turnout.

Other Kashmiri political leaders saw a sinister agenda in the debate.

"It's a campaign to steer Muslim youth towards the Gandhian philosophy instead of Islam," said Syed Ali Geelani, a separatist hardliner who wants the merger of Indian Kashmir with neighbouring Pakistan, which holds part of Kashmir.

"Gandhi spoke about non-violence but the soldiers of his country have killed countless people in Kashmir," he added.

Still, for some students weary of the bloodshed in which at least two people die daily as a result of insurgency-related violence in Kashmir, Gandhi's non-violent message had appeal.

"Gandhi was remarkable -- out of this world. I wish we had a leader like Gandhi in Kashmir," said 21-year-old student speaker Imtiaz Amin.



PHOTO: STAR

Shoppers busy in choosing sarees at a city market yesterday, with the Eid-ul-Fitr drawing nearer.

Britain launches crackdown on sex slave criminals

AFP, London

Police launched a new campaign yesterday to tackle human traffickers who force people to come to Britain and work in the sex trade.

Home Secretary Jacqui Smith dubbed the black market industry a "modern-day slave trade" and said the Pentameter 2 project aimed to increase knowledge of the extent of the crime as well as helping workers caught up in it.

But she said she could not guarantee that people who had been illegally brought to Britain to work in the sex trade would not be deported.

At any one time, there are approximately 4,000 people in Britain who have been brought here by people traffickers, according to the most recent Home Office figures from 2003.

Lithuania, Albania, Nigeria and Thailand are the top four nations where the victims come from, according to 2003 figures from the Poppy Project, which supports women trafficked into prostitution.

Denise Marshall, chief executive of the Poppy Project, said it supported the new initiative, adding that women and girls who had been trafficked were often forced to have sex with between five and 30 customers per day.

She added that she feared the true number of victims of the trade was far higher than the official figures suggested.

David Davis, home affairs spokesman for the main opposition Conservative Party, said there were "tens of thousands of victims".

"Over the last three years we've had a number of investigations, but only 30 traffickers actually convicted," he added.

"That is just the tip of the iceberg."

The Pentameter 2 project has been launched by the Association of Chief Police Officers of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

6m drug addicts in Egypt: study

AFP, Cairo

At least 8.5 percent of Egypt's population, amounting to six million people, are addicted to drugs, an official survey published yesterday showed.

A recent study published by Egypt's National Council for Fighting and Treating Addiction (NCFTA) reported the majority of drug users are aged between 15 and 25, NCFTA member Suheir Lutfi told the English-language Al-Ahram Weekly.

Bango, a type of marijuana found in the Middle East, is the drug of choice, but cocaine, heroin and chemical drugs like ecstasy and methamphetamine are also widely available on the local market, the study found.

About 439,000 children are regular drug users in Egypt, a major producer, supplier and consumer of narcotics.

Of the 12.2 percent of Egypt's students dependent on drugs, nine percent smoke Bango, three percent prefer hashish and 0.21 percent take heroin or chemical drugs, NCFTA said.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Egypt's location makes it a transit point for drug trafficking from major production areas in South East Asia and Europe.

Bango is widely used in the Sinai peninsula and has also been reported in southern Egypt, according to UNODC.

French Senate debates DNA tests for immigrants

AFP, Paris

The French upper house of parliament, the Senate, yesterday debated a controversial immigration bill which would authorise voluntary DNA testing on foreigners wishing to join their families in France.

The debate, which opened overnight, was to resume in the afternoon after the government made new concessions to win over critics. These

include the left-wing opposition, but also some government supporters, as well as religious leaders and campaigning groups.

On Tuesday, the chief executive of the African Union, Alpha Oumar Konaré, added his voice to the bill's opponents, describing the proposed DNA tests as "unacceptable at an ethical, moral and cultural level."

Supporters say the measure would make it possible for would-be

immigrants to speed up the application process by proving their kinship with family-members in France. They point out that 12 other EU countries carry out similar tests.

However opponents say it would set a dangerous precedent by making genetic affiliation a criterion for citizenship.

The measure -- part of a wider immigration bill -- has been approved by the lower house, the National Assembly, but it was rejected last week when it was examined by the Senate's laws committee. That decision can be overturned by a vote in plenary session.

Immigration Minister Brice Hortefeux has backed a series of concessions in order to convince wavering.

Under the changes, DNA tests will only be permitted in countries where civil status documents -- otherwise the main proof of kinship -- are known to be widely counterfeited. And the measure would only be authorised for two years, ahead of an evaluation by an expert panel.

Overnight Hortefeux gave new ground. Under the latest formulation, the cost of the tests will be borne entirely by the French state -- in order to avert the charge that they discriminate against poor families.

And applicants' DNA will be compared only with their mothers' in order to avoid the danger of intrusive revelations about paternity.

Hortefeux also wrote to Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade, who attacked French plans for DNA testing as a "serious mistake", according to the Senegalese presidency.

The immigration minister told Wade he was determined to ensure foreigners were given the same legal protection as French nationals, by requiring a judge's authorisation for any DNA test.

Defending the test late Tuesday, Hortefeux said the aim of the tests was "to give a new right to foreigners of good faith" and he "refused to allow people to caricature a text which the government wants to be fair and protective."

Ozone hole has shrunk by nearly a third

Says European Space Agency

AFP, Paris

Scientist at Royal Dutch Meteorological Institute (KNMI) said this year's improvement could not be seen as a confirmation that the ozone layer is in recovery.

"This year's ozone hole was less centred on the South Pole as in other years, which allowed it to mix with warmer air, reducing the growth of the hole, because ozone is depleted at temperatures less than -78 degrees Celsius (-108 degrees Fahrenheit)," he said.

Over the last decade, the ozone layer has thinned by about 0.3 percent per year on a global scale.

Last September 22, nearly 200 countries agreed to accelerate the elimination of hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs), a category of ozone-destroying chemicals.

Under the deal reached at a UN-sponsored conference in Montreal, developed countries will phase out the production of HCFCs by 2020 while developing states have until 2030 -- 10 years earlier than previously promised.

The agreement changes the timetable that had been set in 1987 under the Montreal Protocol, which aims to eliminate the use of HCFCs and similar chemicals once commonly found in refrigerators, fire retardants and aerosols sprays.

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