

'Cherry tree from space' mystery baffles Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A cosmic mystery is uniting monks and scientists in Japan after a cherry tree grown from a seed that orbited the Earth for eight months bloomed years earlier than expected -- and with very surprising flowers.

The four-year-old sapling -- grown from a cherry stone that spent time aboard the International Space Station (ISS) -- burst into blossom on April 1, possibly a full six years ahead of Mother Nature's normal schedule.

Its early blooming baffled Buddhist brothers at the ancient temple in central Japan where the tree is growing.

"We are amazed to see how fast it has grown," Masahiro Kajita, chief priest at the Ganjoji temple in Gifu, told AFP by telephone.

"A stone from the original tree had never sprouted before. We are very happy because it will succeed the old tree, which is said to be 1,250 years old."

The wonder pip was among 265 harvested from the celebrated "Chujohime-seigan-zakura" tree, selected as part of a project to gather seeds from different kinds of cherry trees at 14 locations across Japan.

The stones were sent to the ISS in November 2008 and came back to Earth in July the following year with Japanese astronaut Koichi Wakata, after circling the globe 4,100 times.

Some were sent for laboratory tests, but most were ferried back to their places of origin, and a selection were planted at nurseries near the Ganjoji temple.

By April this year, the "space cherry tree" had grown to around four metres (13 feet) tall, and suddenly produced nine flowers -- each with just five petals, compared with about 30 on flowers of the parent tree.

It normally takes about 10 years for a cherry tree of the similar variety to bear its first buds.

The Ganjoji temple sapling is not the only early-flowering space cherry tree.

Of the 14 locations in which the pits were replanted, blossoms have been spotted at four places.

Two years ago, a young tree bore 11 flowers in Hokuto, a mountain region 115 kilometres (70 miles) west of Tokyo, around two years after it was planted.

It was of a variety that normally only comes to flower at the age of eight.

COSMIC RAYS
The seeds were sent to the ISS as part of "an educational and cultural project to let children gather the stones and learn how they grow into trees and live on after returning from space," said Miho Tomioka, a spokeswoman for the project's organiser, Japan Manned Space Systems (JAMSS).

"We had expected the (Ganjoji) tree

to blossom about 10 years after planting, when the children come of age," she added.

Kaori Tomita-Yokotani, a researcher at the University of Tsukuba who took part in the project, told AFP she was stumped by the extra-terrestrial mystery.

"We still cannot rule out the possibility that it has been somewhat influenced by its exposure to the space environment," she said.

Tomita-Yokotani, a plant physiologist, said it was difficult to explain why the temple tree has grown so fast because there was no control group to compare its growth with that of other trees.

She said cross-pollination with another species could not be ruled out, but a lack of data was hampering an explanation.

"Of course, there is the possibility that exposure to stronger cosmic rays accelerated the process of sprouting and overall growth," she said.

"From a scientific point of view, we can only say we don't know why."

Wakata is back aboard the ISS, where he is in command of the station.

The astronaut took part in a video link-up on Thursday with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and US Ambassador to Japan Caroline Kennedy, chatting about his daily life hundreds of kilometres above the Earth.

US announces sanctions in South Sudan conflict

AFP, Washington

The United States, which backed the independence of South Sudan, will take targeted sanctions against those involved in the conflict which has ravaged the young nation for the past four months, the State Department said.

Secretary of State John Kerry met Thursday with the South Sudanese Minister in the Office of the President, Awan Riak, the department said in a statement.

This comes as the country which gained independence in July 2011 is torn by a civil war between the army of President Salva Kiir and rebel forces loyal to former vice president Riek Machar.

President Barack Obama signed a decree April 3 authorizing punitive sanctions, such as seizure of assets and visa bans, against anyone in South Sudan deemed to be threatening peace efforts, targeting UN peace-keeping forces and violating human rights.

It's festival

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They give gift of clothes to the elderly and entertain guests with homemade delicacies.

During the 'Mul Biju' fest, people entertain guests with pachan, a popular mixed vegetable curry. A group of people also like to enjoy drinking locally prepared liquors like do-choani, hanji and jaghora.

On 'Gojya Pojya Din', the ethnic people relax at their homes and perform religious rituals at temples.

However, the Marmas will observe their Sangrain Utsab (Pani Khela) on the third day of the new year this year.

Young boys and girls celebrate it by spraying water on each other.

Tears, anger fill

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open 200-litre paint thinner barrel had ignited and flames whooshed along the narrow alley in front of the shop housed on the ground floor of a residential building.

Several pedestrians were hurt.

Among the injured, three are fighting for their lives with over 30 percent of their bodies burnt.

Zakir with 25 percent of his body burnt and Zahirul with 34 percent burnt are being treated at the intensive care unit alongside shop owner Mahmudul Azam with 35 percent of his body burnt.

"All of them suffered inhalation injuries which occurred when they breathed the fire in and hot gases burnt their breathing tracts," veteran burn injury expert Shamanto Lal Sen had told The Daily Star on Thursday.

A case was filed with Tejgaon Police Station regarding the deaths of the three. It cited them as unnatural deaths, said Officer-in-Charge Mazharul Islam of Tejgaon Police Station.

"We could not file a case against the owner. He is struggling for his life at the burn unit. We understand it [lack of safety measures at the shop] was an oversight on his part," said Mazharul.

Meanwhile, a victim of another fire, fuelled by chemicals, died of his injuries at the burn unit yesterday.

Mofiz, 40, who worked at a chemical store in Chhota Kutra in the capital, had more than half of his body burnt in the fire.

On April 2, his colleagues were pouring chemicals from one barrel to another when Mofiz lit a cigarette. The explosion that followed claimed the lives of Kabir, 30 and Abdul Aziz, 30, too.

Newspapers

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Democratic Voice of Burma video journalist Zaw Pe, 41, is planning to appeal against his conviction, reports say.

According to the Democratic Voice of Burma, he had visited the department of education in Magwe District to do an interview about a Japanese-funded scholarship programme.

The paper ran a black cover with the message: "Journalism is not a crime." The protest was repeated across major daily newspapers yesterday, BBC Monitoring reports.

Several journalists have been arrested or jailed on various charges in the last four months, reports add.

Myanmar has been undergoing a series of democratic reforms since a nominally civilian government came into power in 2011, replacing decades of military rule.

Since then, direct government censorship of the media has been abolished and privately-owned newspapers were allowed to operate for the first time in decades.

But correspondents say that journalists in the country still face some of the harshest restrictions in the world.

Reporters Without Borders ranks Myanmar 145 out of 180 countries in its 2014 press freedom index.

Philippine gunbattle with Abu Sayyaf wounds 20 soldiers

AFP, Zamboanga

Twenty soldiers were wounded yesterday in an hours-long gunbattle between troops and Al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf extremists blamed for beheadings and kidnappings in the southern Philippines, the military said.

The ongoing shoot-out on the island of Basilan began in the morning as part of an operation to capture Abu Sayyaf commander Puruji Indama, national military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Ramon Zagala told AFP.

"There is still sporadic fighting in the area. Operations are still going on," Zagala said.

The gunbattle with Indama's band of about 20 fighters is centred in a rural area of Basilan, around 900 kilometres (560 miles) south of the Philippine capital Manila.

Indama, who has a bounty of 3.3 million pesos (\$74,500) on his head, has been blamed for holding foreigners for ransom in the southern Philippines over the years and is notorious for beheading and mutilating victims.

The military launched the attack in response to the rebel leader's recent extortion demands on workers building a vital road on the strife-torn southern island, Zagala said.

The military spokeswoman for the south, Captain Rowena Muyuela, said

that the number of wounded soldiers had reached 20 with at least two in serious condition.

"Based on ground reports our troops managed to neutralise (an) undetermined number of the Abu Sayyaf members," she added.

Indama is a member of Abu Sayyaf, a self-styled Islamic militant group which was set up in the 1990s with seed money from the late Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network.

It has been blamed for the worst terror attacks in the country's history including bombings.

Abu Sayyaf members are also believed to have been involved in the kidnapping of a Chinese tourist and a Filipino worker from a Malaysian dive resort on April 2.

It is thought that the hostages have been hidden on the southern Philippine island of Jolo.

The islands of Jolo and Basilan, which are about 70 kilometres apart, are both known strongholds of the group.

But Zagala said the Basilan operation was not linked to the kidnapping in Malaysia.

"This is very specific. It is concentrated on Puruji Indama. He has long been targeted. It is separate from the kidnapping incident. There are other groups who are tasked to do that search," he said.

AL our friend

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wrong perception," he said, adding that they never blamed Hasina-led government.

Shafi made the comments while addressing a gathering of thousands of Hefajat activists at Laldighi Maidan in Chittagong city.

He said, "If a person is good then the world will be good for him. If we become good then the government will appear good (to us). But if we become bad then the government will oppress us."

Earlier, Hefajat Secretary General

Junaid Babunagari told the programme that they would not tolerate defamation of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) by anyone.

"Our activists will not take law into their own hands; rather we will stage demonstrations to pass a law so that these people receive death penalty for defaming the Prophet," said Junaid.

Several other Hefajat leaders from Chittagong and Dhaka also addressed the programme titled 'Shane Resalat Conference', a religious discussion session on the life of the Prophet.

No jobs yet touts active

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of these scamsters. However, these correspondents have obtained a copy of an "authorisation letter" purportedly issued to one Nusrat Traders. According to the "authorisation letter," one Nazir Ahmed is its owner.

The letter bears the name of Bangladesh Army and its logo while the recruitment form carries the letterhead of Padma Multipurpose Bridge Project.

A Dhaka-based trader from Gopalganj got a sub-contract from Nusrat Traders to recruit labourers. On condition of anonymity, he told The Daily Star that about 1,000 people were ready to pay but he scrapped the recruitment plan after finding out that the whole thing was a scam.

He said he tried to contact this Nazir Ahmed over the phone after he came to know that it was all fake, but he failed.

"The fraudsters should be arrested before more people can be cheated," he said.

In efforts to cheat as many people as they can, this gang has even published advertisements in national dailies that 40,000 people will be recruited for four years and no one will get the job once the quota is filled.

Several hundred people in Madaripur, Shariatpur, Faridpur, Gopalganj, Munshiganj, Comilla, Magura, Jhenidah and Jessore districts have already been deceived over the last one month, sources told The Daily Star.

One such victim from Kashiani upazila of Gopalganj said he paid an advance of Tk 5,000 to a local "recruiter".

"I filled in a form with my personal details. I will pay Tk 10,000 more before I start working at the Padma bridge project," he said.

He, too, declined to give his name, fearing he would lose the job if his name was published in the media. He would not name his "recruiter" either.

Another man of Gopalganj Sadar also gave a similar account.

Contacted, Gopalganj Deputy Commissioner Khalilur Rahman said he was aware of the recruitment advertisement but he did not know that people were already paying the recruiters.

"I saw advertisements regarding this in newspapers but I haven't received any instruction from the ministry yet," he added.

The fact is neither the communications ministry nor the army has any involvement in the recruitment process. No order or permission has been given to any company or individual in this regard.

"Only a few hundred people may be recruited once the construction begins," said Shafiqul Islam, director of the Padma bridge project.

Man in court over 29 murders in N Ireland Omagh bombing

AFP, Belfast

A man appeared in court on Friday charged with the murders of all 29 people killed in the 1998 Omagh bombing, the worst single atrocity of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Seamus Daly, 43, a prominent supporter of the Irish republican cause who has been found liable for the bombing in a civil case, was remanded in custody by a judge at Dungannon Magistrates' Court as police kept guard outside.

No-one has ever been convicted in a criminal court of carrying out the Omagh bombing, which tore through the market town on a busy Saturday afternoon only months after the signing of peace accords which largely ended the three decades of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.

However, relatives of some of the victims brought a civil action against five men they claimed were responsible, including Daly.

The Belfast High Court ruled in 2009 that Daly and three of the other four men were responsible and they

were later ordered to pay more than £1.6 million (1.9 million euros, \$2.7 million) in damages to the relatives.

Daly has always denied involvement in the bombing.

He has been charged with 29 counts of murder, two additional offences linked to the Omagh explosion and two linked to an attempted explosion in Lisburn in April 1998.

Michael Gallagher, whose son Aiden was killed at Omagh after he had gone to the town to buy a new pair of jeans, was in court for Daly's appearance.

He said earlier that the victims' families had never given up their fight for justice.

"It has been a long, difficult struggle," he told BBC radio.

"We have put the police, and both the British and Irish governments, under tremendous pressure and we continue to do that and we don't apologise for it.

"We think of the people that we lost -- in our case our only son Aiden -- and that gives us the strength to carry on."

Some of the relatives believe that the full truth of the events leading up

to the attack have never been fully revealed.

They were angry when the British government last year ruled out holding a public inquiry into the circumstances of the bombing.

Acting on a series of conflicting bomb warnings, police had moved shoppers and shop owners into a part of Omagh where a car packed with 500 pounds (225 kilogrammes) of explosives was parked, unwittingly putting them directly in the path of the huge blast.

A fireball swept from the epicentre of the explosion and shop fronts were blown back on to shoppers inside. The blast was so powerful that some of the victims' bodies were never found.

The Real IRA -- which sees itself as the successor to the original paramilitary Irish Republican Army -- claimed responsibility for the attack three days later.

Daly appeared in court as Irish President Michael D. Higgins was making a groundbreaking state visit to Britain, the first by an Irish head of state since independence.

Salute to Selima

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(BWCCI), is the second Bangladeshi and first Asian businesswoman to win the award.

In 2012, Latifur Rahman, chairman and chief executive officer of Transcom Group, got the award, the highest form of recognition given to individuals for fostering peace and stability through creating shared value between business and society.

"We congratulate you with the exceptional appreciation you have thus been given by the Award Committee, and are truly proud to have you in the exclusive group of Business for Peace Honourees," the Business for Peace Foundation said in a letter to Selima Ahmad.

Other honourees of the award this year include Ouided Bouchamaoui of Tunisia, Sir Richard Branson of the UK, Keshu Kumari Damini of Nepal, Adnan Kassar of Lebanon and Marilyn Carlson Nelson of the US. They have been selected out of 120 candidates from 50 countries.

The selected honourees are business persons who through their own actions and commitments promote socially responsible and ethical business practices in an outstanding way and stand out as examples to the world.

Directors protest

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Khatun yesterday. On April 6, the government issued a rule that transfers the power to appoint members of the GB board from the microlender itself to Bangladesh Bank, a move that sends the embattled organisation further into the state's grip.

According to the new rule, all the GB branches have been divided into nine constituencies and direct elections will be held in the constituencies under the supervision of the central bank.

The statement said that the directors had been opposing the new system of election from the very beginning.

An independent award committee, consisting of Nobel Prize winners in peace and economics, selected the recipients of the award. They will be presented with the awards in a ceremony on May 15 in Oslo City Hall.

With this recognition, Selima Ahmad is included in the group of exceptional business personalities like Ratan Tata, chairman of Tata Group in India, who got the award in 2010, and Jeffrey R Immelt, CEO of General Electric in the US, who won it in 2009.

"I am deeply honoured by this prestigious award which was selected by Nobel laureates. This award recognises the strength, sincerity, integrity, intelligence, commitment and competence of Bangladeshi women in business," Selima Ahmad said in her instant reaction, according to a statement issued by the BWCCI.

She said she has been working with all her dedication not only to grow her own business with value and ethics but also to see women entrepreneurship and private sector grow.

Congratulating Selima Ahmad, Nitol Niloy Group Chairman Abdul Matlub Ahmad said, "Selima deserves this great award as she relentlessly worked to develop BWCCI as a voice for women in business."

Her passion to excel through ethical

processes has helped Nitol Niloy Group to grow into one of the finest organisations in Bangladesh, he said.

"Her business integrity, commitment and contribution to society are a beacon of pride and joy for all women of Bangladesh," said BWCCI President Sangita Ahmed, congratulating Selima Ahmad.

Selima has been working for the private sector development for the last 28 years and is actively involved in developing more than 7,000 women entrepreneurs.

Nitol Niloy Group is one of the reputed business houses and has 26 companies. Of them, six are joint ventures and three are public companies. It has presence in automobiles, cement, paper, real estate, electronics and financial services.

The Business for Peace Foundation, formed in 2007 to promote relationship between business and peace, has been awarding businesspersons from across the globe every year since 2009.

The partners of the Business for Peace Foundation are The International Chamber of Commerce, the United Nations Development Programme, and the United Nations Global Compact.

backstabbing -- all these will create factions and trigger violence among the GB members surrounding the polls. There will be nothing called discipline in this Nobel Peace Prize-winning organisation," the statement read.

It also goes on to say that a board, elected through the new system, will undoubtedly turn into a weapon of corruption and abuse of power.

They also warned that the 84 lakh members of the GB will unitedly resist "the evil move to destroy the bank" if the government doesn't back off and retain the existing system of electing the board members.

"Infighting, money game,