

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Top Thai general faces 13 charges

THE NATION ONLINE/ ANN

Lt-General Manas Khongpaen, a special adviser in the Thai Army, yesterday was hit with a total of 13 charges over his alleged role as the ringleader of a major trafficking operation in southern Thailand of the Rohingya and other migrants, while a court rejected his bail plea.

After more than eight hours of police interrogation in the southern province of Songkhla, Manas, the highest-ranking military officer implicated in this controversy so far, insisted he was innocent. Police have charged him with conspiring to traffick humans, including children aged 15 or younger, allowing illegal migrants to enter the country, detaining other people illegally and being involved in cross-border human-trafficking activities, among other offences.

The police interrogation was led by Maj-General Paween Pongsirin, the deputy chief of region 8 provincial police, who had opposed his bail so that the senior army officer would remain in police custody. A military staff attorney was present during interrogation.

Manas, who continues to wear his military uniform, remained in the Hat Yai Police Station interrogation room instead of being moved to a temporary detention cell like other suspects. Police later transferred him to the provincial court's detention centre. A temporary release sought by the suspect's lawyer was rejected by the court.

A total of 52 suspects are in custody out of the 84 persons for whom arrest warrants have been issued.



Migrants, who were found at sea on a boat, arrive at Mee Tike temporary refugee camp near the Bangladesh border fence outside Maungdaw township, northern Rakhine state, Myanmar, yesterday. Inset, a guard watches over the temporary refugee camp.



NEWS IN brief

China tragedy: Dozens more bodies found

BBC ONLINE

Rescuers have pulled dozens of bodies from a capsized cruise ship in China's Yangtze River, as authorities promised "no cover-up" over the disaster. Hundreds of people are thought to have died, with only 14 of the 456 passengers known to have survived. The cause of the sinking is not yet known, but survivors have spoken of an intense storm which flipped the boat over in minutes.

Al-Qaeda says ISIS caliphate 'illegitimate'

AFP, Beirut

The chief of al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate described the rival Islamic State group's self-proclaimed caliphate as "illegitimate", in an interview to Al-Jazeera news channel. Al-Nusra Front leader Abu Mohamed al-Jolani criticised ISIS at length and said he did not foresee a reconciliation between the two jihadist groups soon. "They announced a caliphate, but the scholars rejected it as illegitimate. It is not based on Islamic law," Jolani said, his face hidden from view by a black scarf.

S Korea reports third death from MERS

AFP, Seoul

South Korea yesterday reported its third death from an outbreak of the MERS virus that has infected dozens of people, seen hundreds of schools closed and caused thousands to cancel travel plans. The latest case brought the total number of people diagnosed with the potentially deadly virus in South Korea to 36, the largest outbreak outside Saudi Arabia. More than 900 schools, from kindergartens to colleges, have now shut their gates and the government's MERS hotline took more than 3,000 calls on Wednesday as public fears have grown.

Israel strikes Gaza after rocket attacks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli warplanes struck militant targets in the Gaza Strip early yesterday after Palestinian rockets hit the Israeli south for the second time in 10 days, sources on both sides said. Palestinian security sources said the strikes targeted three Hamas training bases in Gaza City. The raids came several hours after two rockets struck open areas in southern Israel. The attacks caused no injuries.

Pakistan sees major drop in polio cases

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has seen a major fall in polio cases this year, officials said yesterday, as a military operation has allowed vaccinators to reach areas previously off-limits because of militant attacks. The World Health Organization (WHO) said there had been 24 cases since January 1, a decline of over 70 percent from the same period last year, when there were 84 cases. Pakistan is one of only three countries where polio remains endemic and last year saw 306 cases of the highly infectious, crippling disease—a 14-year record.

Myanmar denies Rohingya guilt

Says they are fleeing country 'seeking jobs', not for persecution

AGENCIES

Myanmar yesterday said that persecution of its Rohingya Muslim population was not the cause of Southeast Asia's migrant crisis, a day after the United States called on the country to give full rights to the minority to help end the exodus.

President Barack Obama said this week that Myanmar needed to end discrimination against the Rohingya if it was to succeed in its transition to a democracy, as Washington upped the pressure on the country to tackle what it sees as one of the root causes of a migration that the region has struggled to cope with.

Myanmar does not recognise its 1.1 million Rohingya as citizens, rendering them effectively stateless. Almost 140,000 were displaced in deadly clashes with Buddhists in the country's western Rakhine state in

2012.

"It has been portrayed that discrimination and persecution are causing people to leave Rakhine state, but that is not true," Myanmar's Minister of Foreign Affairs Win Aung told international agencies in Yangon.

He pointed to the number of Bangladeshis on board a migrant boat that landed in May as proof that the influx of "boat people" was a regional problem linked to human trafficking.

"This incident... has shown to the region as well as the international community this is not the root cause," he said.

It was the latest denial by Myanmar of any blame for the humanitarian crisis involving more than 4,600 people who've arrived by boats in five countries.

The boat he referred to was inter-

cepted by Myanmar's navy last month. Myanmar has said 200 of the 208 people aboard were economic migrants from Bangladesh.

But a Reuters investigation found that 150-200 Rohingya had also been aboard that boat, but were spirited away by people smugglers in the week before the navy brought it to shore.

Tareque Muhammad, deputy chief of mission at the Bangladesh embassy in Yangon, told Reuters that only 150 people from that boat had been identified and documented as Bangladeshis.

The boat is the only one that the Myanmar authorities are trying to highlight amid a flaring crisis that threatens its international commitment to shed its former Pariah status for democracy.

The denial came after the UN Security Council held its first closed-door briefing on human rights in

Myanmar last week. A council diplomat inside that briefing said UN human rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein described the Rohingya as facing institutional discrimination.

The current crisis blew up last month after a Thai crackdown on trafficking camps along its border with Malaysia made it too risky for people smugglers to land their human cargo. Smugglers abandoned boats full of migrants at sea.

Indonesia would repatriate economic migrants from Bangladesh as soon as it could, but how to handle Rohingya migrants was more complex, said Andi Rachmianto, the international security and disarmament director at the foreign ministry.

"We need to differentiate between Rohingya migrants and migrants from Bangladesh because their motivations are different," Rachmianto said.

Migrants dumped at sea

REUTERS, Maungdaw

The ill-fated fortune-seekers of the latest boat brought ashore in Myanmar on Wednesday have revealed the horror tale of their life in the high seas.

They were found drifting in the Andaman Sea on Friday in an overloaded fishing boat that was taking on water.

Several migrants said that smugglers had loaded them from three smaller boats onto the larger vessel.

"The traffickers told us 'we can't go to Thailand, so you have to go alone'," Marmod Toyo, who said he was a Rohingya, told Reuters.

He said he was at sea for two months after being offered 50,000 kyat (\$45.25) by an agent to get on a boat to Malaysia. Marmod, who has a wife and four children, said he knew it was a trick but that his family needed the money.

"There's not enough food back home and no work," he said. "The human trafficker came and gave me money. I knew he might sell me, but I needed it."

Another migrant said his uncle, who was also on the boat, was beaten to death by one of the crew before the body was dumped overboard.

"My uncle was eating rice and asked for some water, so they killed him," said Siszul Islam, from the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka.

There was no way of independently corroborating the migrants' accounts.



People take part in a candlelight vigil in Hong Kong yesterday, to mark the crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989. Tens of thousands marked the 26th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown, that many say killed hundreds of people.

PHOTO: AFP

Egypt to retry Mubarak over protest murders

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's former president Hosni Mubarak must stand trial for a third time over the deaths of hundreds of protesters during the popular uprising that ousted him, a court ordered yesterday.

Mubarak, 87, ruled the country for three decades before he was forced from office in 2011. The following year, he was convicted over the deaths and sentenced to life in prison.

But that verdict was appealed and a new trial ordered. Last November, the judge in the case dropped the charges.

The prosecution appealed that ruling, and the Court of Cassation overturned it yesterday, ordering a new trial.

The official death toll during the 18 days of protest that toppled Mubarak stands at 846.

At least 90 killed in Ghana petrol station inferno

AFP, Accra

At least 90 people were killed in a fire at a petrol station in Ghana's capital, Accra, as they sought shelter from heavy rains that caused widespread flooding, emergency services said yesterday.

The fire broke out at the filling station in the Kwame Nkrumah Circle area of the city late on Wednesday night and is thought to have spread from a nearby residence.

The explosion was heard and seen across the capital.

Ghana's President John Dramani Mahama described the loss of life as "catastrophic and almost unprecedented", as he toured the scene of the disaster on Thursday morning.

"A lot of people have lost their lives and I am lost for words," he told reporters.

"As at now, the confirmed figure is hovering around 90 but I know it will be more than that," national police spokesman Arthur Cephas told AFP.

Rescue officials were working to clear the area and bodies were piled onto flat-

bed trucks, covered with tarpaulin sheets, as police in high-visibility vests stood guard at the scene.

Local hospitals said morgues were full and security officials said the death toll was likely to rise, as fire investigators picked through the charred debris to determine what caused the inferno.

Dozens of motorcycles were seen burnt and the fire is also thought to have engulfed a bus full of passengers that was waiting on the forecourt, an AFP reporter at the scene said.

Local residents said many people had sought refuge under the filling station canopy from days of heavy rains that have engulfed Accra. It was not immediately clear exactly how the victims died, with reports that some had drowned after being knocked unconscious and falling into the flood waters.

At least two days of rains have caused chaos in Accra, leaving many suburbs submerged and people stranded, as roads were blocked and cars were carried away in or upturned by the flood waters.



Rebels kill 20 troops in Manipur

AFP, New Delhi

At least 20 troops were killed in a rebel ambush in a restive part of northeast India yesterday, police said, calling it one of the worst such attacks in years.

Another 12 troops were wounded in the early morning attack in Manipur state which has long been affected by insurgent violence.

"I can confirm that at least 17 were killed and another 18 were injured in this massive ambush between 7.30 and 8.00 am," Shahid Ahmad, Director General of Manipur Police, told AFP by phone.

N Herojit, superintendent of police in Chandel district where the ambush took place, said it was unclear which rebels were responsible.

The remote state of Manipur, which borders Myanmar, is home to dozens of tribal groups and small guerrilla armies fighting New Delhi's rule and has been plagued by separatist violence for decades.

Ukraine warns of Russian invasion

AGENCIES

President Petro Poroshenko yesterday told MPs the military must prepare to defend against a possible "full-scale invasion" from Russia after a surge in violence that left at least 26 people dead.

Fresh clashes erupted near the rebel stronghold of Donetsk on Wednesday, in one of the worst outbreaks of violence since a European-brokered truce was agreed in February.

The upsurge in fighting revived fears in Kiev that the separatists may be gearing up for a new push into government-controlled territory.

In an annual address to parliament, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko warned of the "permanent danger" of Russia unleashing "a full-blown war" against Ukraine.

"There remains a colossal threat of resumption of large-scale fighting on the part of Russian terrorist groups," Poroshenko said, referring to the insurgents.

The Ukrainian president claimed that more than 9,000 Russian soldiers were now in east Ukraine to support the rebellion and that Moscow kept supplying separatist forces with new weapons.

The EU and Germany expressed alarm over the new spiral of violence, with European Commission spokeswoman Maja Kocijancic calling the clashes "the most serious violation" yet of the February ceasefire.

The UN Security Council will hold an emergency meeting today to discuss the escalation, while Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg sounded the alarm over Russia's increasingly aggressive behaviour.



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