

NEWSIN brief

China muzzles group over anti-Trump posts

AFP, Beijing

Chinese authorities have blocked a prolific feminist social media account for allegedly breaking the law with posts critical of US President Donald Trump, its editors said yesterday. Earlier this month, staffers of the Feminist Voices account on China's Twitter-like Weibo translated into Chinese parts of an article by American academics calling for a March 8 "general women's strike", and posted them.

Germany departs migrants to Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Eighteen Afghans deported from Germany arrived in Kabul yesterday after their asylum pleas were rejected, the third batch to be sent back in recent months as Berlin speeds up the expulsions. Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel's cabinet approved new measures on Wednesday to expedite the repatriations even as controversy rages over sending people back to Afghanistan.

Court orders arrest of Duterte's critic

AFP, Manila

An arrest warrant was issued yesterday for the highest-profile opponent of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's brutal war on drugs, outraging her supporters who said the move was aimed at silencing her. Senator Leila de Lima, 57, a lawyer, faces drug trafficking charges that could see her jailed for life.

New Somali prime minister named

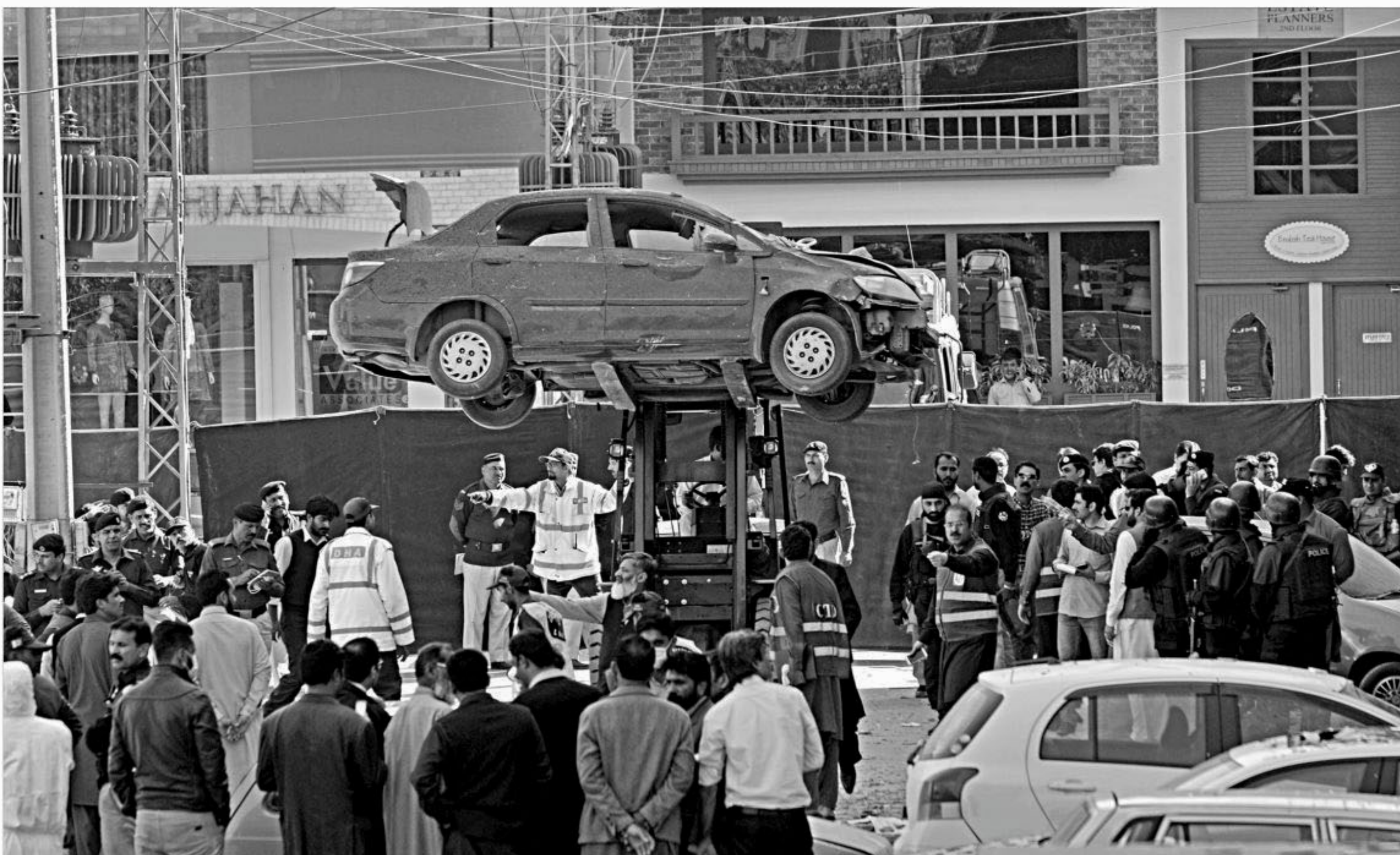
AFP, Mogadishu

Hassan Ali Kheyre, a former aid worker and oil executive, was named prime minister of Somalia yesterday by the country's new President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed. Mohamed, popularly known as Farmajo, made the announcement on Twitter. Kheyre is a political newcomer and holding dual Norwegian and Somali citizenship.

SpaceX cargo ship reaches space station

AFP, Miami

An unmanned cargo ship packed with food and supplies for astronauts arrived safely at the International Space Station yesterday, a day after SpaceX aborted the process due to a GPS problem. This time, the Dragon cargo ship made a "perfect approach to the capture point," a Nasa commentator said, and was grabbed by the station's robotic arm at 5:44 am.



Pakistani officials move a damaged car from the site after a bomb attack in Lahore yesterday. At least eight people were killed and 28 injured in the blast, officials said, the tenth attack in just under a fortnight pointing to a resurgence in Islamist violence. Story on page 20. PHOTO: AFP

Pak on equipment buy spree to fight militancy

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan has expedited efforts to acquire military equipment and weapons to combat militancy as a fresh bout of terror attacks have killed over 100 people.

At least three such deals with the US were reported in American media, which involve helicopters and military vehicles that would enhance the military's capability to pursue militants in difficult terrains, the newspaper Dawn said yesterday.

Earlier this week, Pakistan concluded a deal with an Italian aerospace and defence firm, Leonardo S.p.A. for purchasing an unspecified number of AW139 helicopters. Deliveries are expected to begin in mid-2017.

Despite uncertainty about bilateral relations under the Trump administration, Pakistan is also purchasing weapons from the US.

Last year, the US Congress stopped the sale of eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan but the move did not affect the weapons needed to combat terrorists.

The US media reported on Tuesday that Bell Helicopter would deliver three Bell AH-1Z

Viper attack helicopters to Pakistan this year.

This will be the first of a total shipment of 12 helicopters. The remaining nine will arrive in 2018.

Pakistan ordered the first three helicopters in August 2015 and placed an additional order for nine helicopters in April last year.

A US department of defence notification said nine AH-1Z Viper helicopters would cost Pakistan an estimated \$170.2 million.

Pakistan's original request included the sale of 1,000 AGM-114 R Hellfire II missiles as well. Pakistan will also receive four Russian-made Mi-35M attack helicopters in 2017.

The US media noted that the Mi-35M was the export version of the Mi-24 gunship and was particularly suited for operations in mountainous terrain.

Pakistan Army Aviation could acquire up to 20 Mi-35Ms in the years ahead.

Islamabad is also considering the Turkish Aerospace Industries T-129 attack helicopter or the Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group Z-10 helicopter gunship as an alternative to the Mi-35M.

THREE ARMS DEALS SIGNED WITH
US TO ENHANCE MILITARY'S
CAPABILITY TO PURSUE MILITANTS
IN DIFFICULT TERRAINS

Aware of US carrier in South China Sea Says China's defence ministry

REUTERS, Beijing

China's defence ministry said yesterday it was aware of the presence of a US aircraft carrier strike group in the South China Sea and China respected freedom of navigation for all countries in the waters there.

The US navy said the strike group, including the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier the USS Carl Vinson, began "routine operations" in the South China Sea on Saturday amid growing tension with China over control of the disputed waterway.

Defence ministry spokesman Ren Guoqiang said China had a "grasp" of the situation regarding the carrier group in the South China Sea.

"China hopes the US earnestly respects the sovereignty and security concerns of countries in the region, and earnestly respects the efforts of countries in the region to maintain peace and stability in the South China Sea," Ren told a regular monthly news briefing.

"Of course, we also respect freedom of navigation and overflight for all countries in the South China Sea in accordance with international law," he added.

The situation in the South China Sea was generally stable, Ren said.

"We hope the actions of the US side can contribute positive energy towards this good situation, and not the opposite."

ATM dispenses dummy 'children bank' currency

AFP, New Delhi

An ATM in Delhi spewed dummy 2,000-rupee notes issued by the 'Children Bank of India', prompting an investigation into the embarrassing lapse, police said Wednesday, months after the government's shock cash ban triggered painful shortages.

A customer care executive claimed he had been taken for a ride after the automatic teller machine run by the government-owned State Bank of India spilled out the fake bills on February 6.

Instead of the logo of India's central bank, the bills were marked 'Children Bank of India' and on the other side with a cheeky 'Entertainment Bank of India'.

"The case is under investigation. We have seized the notes and informed the bank about the incident," investigating



officer Upender Singh told AFP.

The dummy pink notes looked similar to the newly minted 2,000-rupee notes introduced in November after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to ban all 500 and 1,000-rupee bills.

A police officer sent to the spot to verify the claims also received a fake 2,000-rupee (\$30) note when he withdrew money from the ATM, Singh said.

"We are trying to find how these notes found their way into the system. The bank has also launched an internal investigation."

The fake bills matched the colour and font of the real notes but read 'Guaranteed by the Children's Government' instead of 'Guaranteed by the Central Government'.

The bills also showcased images of independence hero Mahatma Gandhi similar to the original notes but bore a 'PK' logo instead of the bank seal.

Xenophobic attack South Africa struggles to quell violence

AFP, Johannesburg

The South African government yesterday called for calm after a wave of xenophobic violence in which dozens of shops and houses owned by immigrants have been torched and looted.

Attacks against foreigners and foreign-run businesses have erupted regularly in recent years in South Africa, fuelled by the country's high unemployment levels and dire poverty.

In the last week, more than 20 shops have been targeted in Attteridgeville, outside Pretoria, while residents in Rosettenville attacked at least 12 houses.

Many locals have alleged that their targets were brothels and drug dens being run by migrants from elsewhere in Africa, including Nigeria.

Iran sends team to Saudi Arabia for hajj talks

AFP, Tehran

Iran said Wednesday it has sent a team for talks in Saudi Arabia on the next annual pilgrimage after missing the hajj in 2016 at a time of rising tensions between the two countries.

"A delegation has been sent from the Islamic Republic of Iran to Saudi Arabia to follow up on the hajj," Culture Minister Reza Salehi Amiri told state television.

"Iran's policy is to send pilgrims to the hajj (this year), of course, if Saudi Arabia accepts our conditions," he said.

"In a letter I've written to the Saudi hajj minister I have specified our conditions..."

"If they accept our conditions, we will definitely send pilgrims (this year), otherwise the responsibility" will be on Saudi Arabia, said Amiri.

N Korea lashes Malaysia Claims autopsy of Kim Jong-Nam illegal, immoral

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's state media broke a 10-day silence yesterday on the murder of Kim Jong-Un's half brother, launching a ferocious assault on Malaysia for "immoral" handling of the case and for playing politics with the corpse.

In its first comments on the airport assassination of Kim Jong-Nam, KCNA said Malaysia bore responsibility for the death, and accused it of conspiring with South Korea.

"Malaysia is obliged to hand his body to the DPRK (North Korea) side as it made an autopsy and forensic examination of it in an illegal and immoral manner", the North's Korean Jurists Committee said, in comments carried by the state-run news agency.

Malaysia has not released the corpse "under the absurd pretext" that it needs a DNA sample from the dead man's family, it said.

"This proves that the Malaysian side is going to politicise the transfer of the body in utter disregard of international law and morality and thus attain a sinister purpose," it said.

TENSION IN INDIAN KASHMIR

Four killed as rebels ambush army convoy

AGENCIES

A woman and three soldiers were killed yesterday when militants ambushed an army convoy in Indian Kashmir, police said.

The soldiers were returning from a search operation when the militants attacked their convoy, injuring six, three of whom later died.

The civilian woman was hit by a stray bullet and died, police said.

"Three army soldiers succumbed to their injuries at the army hospital in Srinagar," said a police spokesman who asked not to be named, referring to the main city in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Area superintendent of police Tahir Saleem told AFP the woman, who lived near where the ambush occurred in south Kashmir's Shopian district, was hit by crossfire.

Video on social media showed windows of parked cars that were smashed as well as windows of homes, reported AP.

The area was one of the main centres of violent protests last year against the killing of a popular militant leader in a gun battle with Indian troops.

More than 90 civilians were killed and thousands more injured in clashes between protesters and government forces.

Clashes occur frequently in Kashmir between rebel groups and the roughly 500,000 Indian troops deployed in the region since 1989.

More than 68,000 people have been killed in the armed uprising and ensuing Indian military crackdown.

The groups want independence or a merger with Pakistan for the majority Muslim region, which has been divided between India and Pakistan since the end of British colonial rule in 1947.

Throughout its lengthy dispatch, KCNA avoided any reference to the dead man's identity, calling him only "a citizen of the DPRK bearing a diplomatic passport".

North Korea has never acknowledged him as the estranged brother of its leader.

Leaked CCTV footage from the brazen attack last Monday shows the portly Kim being approached by two women who appear to put something in his face.

Moments later he is seen asking for help from airport staff, who direct him to a clinic. Malaysian police said he suffered a seizure and died before he reached hospital.

Malaysian detectives are holding three people -- women from Indonesia and Vietnam, and a North Korean man -- but want to speak to seven others, including diplomat Hyon Kwang Song.

But Malaysia's top policeman yesterday acknowledged that unless Hyon, second secretary at the North Korean mission, volunteers himself, they will be unable to speak to him.

"We will adhere to the rules of immunity," Khalid Abu Bakar said. "We cannot go inside the embassy."



Pro-Palestinian protesters demonstrate against the visit to Australia by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in Sydney yesterday. Netanyahu is in Sydney for a four-day official visit and will hold talks with Australian officials on bilateral and international issues. PHOTO: AFP

DEFAMATION CASE BBC journalist faces five yrs jail in Thailand

AFP, Bangkok

A British journalist with the BBC faces up to five years in a Thai jail after a lawyer brought a criminal defamation case against him over an investigation into fraud on a popular tourist island.

The prosecution was sparked by a 2015 report by Jonathan Head, the BBC's Southeast Asia correspondent, looking at how two foreign retirees were scammed out of their properties in Phuket.

Head appeared in a Phuket court yesterday alongside one of the victims, British national Ian Rance who is a joint defendant in the prosecution. Both pleaded not guilty.

The man bringing the prosecution is Pratuwan Thanarak, a Phuket lawyer who featured in the BBC's report looking at how Rance lost lucrative properties.

Rance retired to Phuket in 2001, married a local woman with whom he had three children and bought some \$1.2 million worth of properties.

Under Thai law foreigners cannot own land. But many get around that by placing properties in the name of a company they own or with locals they trust.

In 2010 Rance discovered his wife forged his signature to remove him as director and sell the properties with the help of a network of money lenders and property agents on the island.

She was jailed for four years over the scam and he has fought through the courts for years to get the properties back.

The BBC's Head reported that Pratuwan, the lawyer, admitted to notarising Rance's signature without him being present.

Pratuwan filed a defamation case alleging the reports caused him to be "defamed, insulted or hated", according to a copy of the complaint seen by AFP.

Japan crown prince vows to follow father's footsteps

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Crown Prince Naruhito has suggested he is ready to take on the duties of emperor from his father as the country prepares for its expected first imperial abdication in two centuries.

Emperor Akihito, now 83, said in August that his advancing age and weakening health mean he may no longer be able to carry out his duties.

While abdications are far from unknown in Japanese history, the last one was in 1817 and there is no mechanism under current law for an emperor to give up the ancient Chrysanthemum Throne.

The subject is also highly sensitive issue in light of Japan's modern history of war waged in the name of Akihito's father Emperor Hirohito, who died in 1989.

Naruhito, who turned 57 yesterday, held an annual press conference two days before, telling reporters that while he had been "shaken" by his father's announcement, he was prepared to rise to the occasion.

In carefully crafted language, he hinted he is increasingly aware of the responsibility that awaits him.

"I would like to take it into my heart seriously and work on my duties, bearing it constantly in mind," he said.

Akihito's eldest son added that he wants to "pursue a role for the imperial house that matches the needs of each era".

He added that such a role "changes from one era to another as a fresh wind blows in each".

Some scholars and politicians worry the issue could open a can of worms and risk Japan's monarchs becoming subject to political manipulation.

Under the constitution they have only a symbolic role.

Last month, a government panel said Japan could pass a one-off bill allowing Akihito to step down.

The option was one of several presented by the group of experts charged with sorting out the thorny issue.

They are reportedly expected to make a final recommendation in March.

