



A fishing boat sinks because of high seas due to tropical storm Pabuk in the southern Thai province of Narathiwat on Friday. Tens of thousands of tourists have fled some of Thailand's most popular islands and resort areas as Pabuk closes in and threatens to batter the southern part of the kingdom with heavy rains, winds and seven-metre waves.

PHOTO: AFP

Russia demands explanation over US snub to space chief

AFP, Moscow

Russia's space agency yesterday demanded an explanation after Nasa put off a planned visit to the United States by Russia's controversial space chief.

Dmitry Rogozin, a firebrand nationalist politician known for his anti-Western rhetoric, was set to visit the US in February but NASA said Friday that it was postponing his visit indefinitely.

Rogozin, appointed by President Vladimir Putin in May last year and previously a deputy prime minister, is blacklisted and under US sanctions over Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Russia's Roscosmos space agency said in a statement that "it expects official explanations of NASA's position" and stressed that Rogozin's visit was planned "in accordance with an invitation received earlier."

It added a veiled warning that preparations for talks on cooperation with the US on the ISS programme and deep space exploration are "so far not suspended."

The row comes as space exploration remains one of the few areas where Washington and Moscow continue active cooperation despite political tensions. The US needs Russia to ferry astronauts to the International Space Station.

NASA said in a statement Friday it had told Roscosmos that Rogozin's visit would "need to be postponed" and a new date "has not been identified," USA Today reported.

Plans for Rogozin to visit NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston had prompted protests from US senators.

Democratic Senator Jeanne Shaheen said in a statement Wednesday that NASA's invitation to Rogozin "undercuts our message and undermines the United States' core national security objectives."

The rescinded invitation came after NASA chief Jim Bridenstine visited Russia in October, his first trip after he took up his post.

Four madrasa

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"None of them are critically injured," said Taposh Kumar Sarker, residential medical officer of the hospital.

The explosion took place at Momtazul Ulum Madrasa in Thanapara area around 9:00pm when Fulbas attempted to light the burner that was connected to the cylinder, said, Principal of the institution Arifuzzaman.

"The students were observing the cooking preparation inside the kitchen," he added.

The fire was extinguished by the residential students and staff within a few minutes before the fire service was informed, he also said.

However, wishing anonymity, a senior teacher of the madrasa told The Daily Star that the cook had long been making use of the students in preparing meals.

The authorities had always turned a blind eye to the matter, despite being well aware of it, he added.

The principal didn't comment when asked about the allegation.

Nasir Uddin, officer-in-charge of Kushtia Model Police Station, said a complaint in this regard was yet to be filed.

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French cardinal to go on trial over child abuse cover-up

AFP, Lyon

The highest-profile Catholic cleric to be caught up in a paedophile scandal in France is to go on trial on Monday charged with failing to report a priest who abused boy scouts in the 1980s and 90s.

Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, the archbishop of Lyon, is to stand trial along with five others from his diocese over allegations that they helped cover up abuse in one of the parishes in the area.

The 68-year-old, an arch-conservative, is one of the most prominent Catholic figures in France who faces up to three years in prison and a fine of 45,000 euros (\$54,000) if convicted of failing to report the abuse.

He denies the allegations.

France's Catholic church has been roiled in recent years by allegations against predator priests which have come to light in the wake of a global move by victims to come forward with evidence.

Clerics have been denounced in countries as far afield as Australia, Brazil, Chile, Ireland, and the United States, leading Pope Francis to promise to rid the church of the scourge that has done enormous damage to its standing.

The scandal in Lyon first came to public attention in 2015 when a former scout went public with allegations that a local priest, Bernard Preynat, had abused him as a child 25 years ago.

The scout, Francois Devaux, who has since formed a victims' group, also filed a complaint against Barbarin, the priest's superior, alleging that he had known about the abuse but had covered it up.

After six months of investigation and 10 hours of interviews with Barbarin, investigators dropped the case in 2016 after concluding that the allegations against him were either too old or impossible to prove.

But a group of victims succeeded in having the probe reopened which led to Barbarin and the others, including the archbishop of Auch and the bishop of Nevers in France, being ordered to stand trial.

"We hope this time to have a ruling that will be clear and obvious for everyone," Devaux said before the start of the trial.

His victims' group, La Parole Liberee (Freed Speech), began with a handful of people, but soon received calls and testimony from a total of 85 people claiming to have been victims of Preynat in Lyon.

The priest was prevented from leading scout groups after he was first denounced in 1991, but was later allowed to teach to children and held positions of authority in parishes until the scandal surfaced in 2015.

A lawyer for Barbarin, Jean-Felix Luciani, said the cardinal was counting on the trial to "re-establish some facts because you don't repair one injustice by creating another one."

The story of Devaux, the victim who brought the scandal to light, is to be told in a film this year called "Grace a Dieu" ("Thanks to God") which has been made by French director Francois Ozon.

The priest at the centre of the scandal, Preynat, has acknowledged abus-

ing boys during interviews with investigators.

He is set to go on trial this year charged with statutory rape.

Two other French religious figures have been convicted of failing to report child abuse in the past: the archbishop of Bayeux-Lisieux, Pierre Rican, in 2001, as well as the former bishop of Orleans, Andre Fort, last year.

The head of the Vatican's powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Spanish Archbishop Luis Francisco Ladaria Ferrer, has also been accused of complicity in the alleged cover-up in Lyon.

In correspondence with Barbarin about the priest, the Vatican's number three had advised the cardinal to take "necessary disciplinary measures while avoiding public scandal" -- seen as a warning to keep the abuse quiet.

The Vatican has cited his immunity from prosecution and he will not go on trial.

Barbarin has retained the support of Pope Francis who met with him at the Vatican in October 2017 shortly after he was ordered to stand trial.

"I have only one judge who is the Lord," the cardinal said recently on a trip to the holy town of Lourdes in southern France.

Walls of hatred

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In a short video released by the Amnesty India against the alleged government "crackdown" on NGOs, Shah said those who demanded rights were being locked up.

"Artists, actors, scholars, poets are all being stifled. Journalists too are being silenced," he said in the short video.

"In the name of religion, walls of hatred are being erected. Innocents are being killed. The country is awash with horrific hatred and cruelty."

He claimed that those who stood against this "injustice" were having their offices raided, licences cancelled and bank accounts frozen so that they were deterred from speaking the truth.

"Is this where our country is headed? Had we dreamt of a country where there was no space for dissent, where only the rich and powerful are heard and where the poorest and most vulnerable are oppressed?

Where there once was law, there is now only darkness," he said, speaking in Urdu.

Naseeruddin Shah had recently created controversy when he said that the death of a cow had more significance than that of a police officer.

He was speaking in the wake of mob violence by cow vigilantes in Uttar Pradesh's Bulandshahr district on December 3 that led to the death of two men, including police inspector Subodh Kumar Singh.

The Amnesty India claimed the country had witnessed a massive crackdown on freedom of expression and human rights defenders.

Akbar Patel, a member of Amnesty India, said it may seem that the odds were against human rights defenders and civil society in India at the moment, but human rights had always won and would this time as well.

Taliban blames US, Afghan forces for most civilian casualties in 2018

AFP, Kabul

The Taliban blamed US and Afghan forces for almost 90 percent of civilian casualties in 2018, in a report released Friday that suggested Afghanistan's largest militant group was not responsible for a single death or injury.

The data -- which NATO's Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan dismissed as "propaganda" -- follows a record year of bloodshed in the Afghan war, which by some estimates overtook Syria as the world's deadliest conflict zone.

The figures, which the Taliban release every year and are based on "witnesses and primary sources", showed a total of 4,170 civilian casualties -- 2,294 deaths and 1,876 wounded -- last year.

US and "stooge" Afghan government forces caused 3,705 casualties, while the Islamic State group and other "unknown" entities were responsible for 465, the Taliban claimed.

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circumstances under which the return has taken place.

A family of Rohingya asylum-seekers from Rakhine State, registered with UNHCR in India, was sent back to Myanmar on Thursday, after being detained in India's Assam, where they had been serving a prison term since 2013 for illegal entry into India.

Despite repeated requests, UNHCR said, they did not receive a response from the authorities in India regarding requests for access to individuals in detention to ascertain their circumstances and assess the voluntariness of their decision to return.

This is the second such incident since October 2018, when India returned seven Rohingyas to Rakhine State in Myanmar, where conditions are not conducive to return, according to UNHCR.

There are an estimated 18,000 Rohingya refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in India, living across different locations, it said.

2 bullet-ridden

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profits," he said.

The police said they were investigating the deaths but did not provide further information on the two men.

Over 720,000 Rohingyas have fled a brutal military crackdown in Myanmar's northern Rakhine state since August 2017. They joined some 300,000 Rohingyas already living in camps in Cox's Bazar.

Bangladeshi authorities say local kingpins use the refugees -- trapped in poverty and unlikely to return home any time soon -- to transport yaba pills which are made in Myanmar meth labs.

Yaba is a methamphetamine-based, caffeine-cut stimulant that translates as "crazy medicine".

The coastal town on the Naf river that divides the two neighbours is a key entry point through which yaba enters Bangladesh.

In May last year, Bangladesh launched a violent anti-drug crackdown which saw deaths of at least 250 drug dealers, including 26 in Teknaf in the last three months.

A village under siege

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-- and barred all types of vehicular movement on the road through the village. Even bicycles and rickshaws are not being allowed to pass through the points, villagers have alleged.

The AL men also captured the deep tube-wells used for irrigation and snapped satellite television connections to households, they added.

"They are not sparing even the Awami League men. They confined us all," said a villager, who spoke on condition of anonymity fearing reprisal.

The villagers, including a senior AL leader, blamed Kolma Union Parishad Chairman Lutfur Haider Rashid and young members of the party for the situation.

Lutfur denied his involvement in the siege, and claimed people were not coming out of their village fearing attacks by BNP men.

"Buses are avoiding the route for the same reason," he claimed.

Things turned a little tense in the village the day before the election, locals said.

On Saturday afternoon, some AL men armed with hockey sticks damaged the tin wall of the house of Union Parishad Member Shafiqul Islam, known as a BNP man.

In retaliation, BNP supporters chased Lutfur Haider, who was sitting at a tea stall, and beat up some of his supporters in the evening.

Locals alleged Lutfur's men were "punishing" them for Saturday's incident and also because most people there voted for the BNP candidate, although he eventually lost.

Because of the siege, locals are not even sending their children to schools, they claimed.

On Wednesday, two brothers from the village -- both school teachers -- were beaten up when they were returning home on a bike.

This correspondent met one of them yesterday afternoon.

"It was our internal matter. I have nothing to complain," he said and quickly left. He requested not to publish his name.

At 5:00pm yesterday, this correspondent saw a passenger bus avoid its route through the village. Instead, it took the road that runs through neighbouring Korchor village.

"The situation is normal," claimed Ataur Rahman, an AL worker.

He said normally returned yesterday morning when the additional superintendent of police and the Tanore UNO visited the village and assured locals of security.

But villagers said they had no confidence in such assurances.

"Road communication has not

restored and irrigation machines still remain captured [by the AL men]," said a businessman, asking not to be named.

Additional SP Motiur Rahman Siddiki told The Daily Star that local AL men were indeed keeping the people confined, but over "Saturday's attack and counter-attack".

"The village is dominated by the BNP and there is a tension between the two groups [AL and BNP]," he said, adding that they asked both groups to show restraint.

Contacted, lawmaker Omor Faruk said the siege had nothing to do with AL and BNP supporters of Kolma village.

"It's an issue between locals in Kolma and its surrounding villages," he claimed.

He also took credit for "avoiding a bloodshed" in the area, but did not explain how.

The lawmaker then went on to blame police for not arresting those who attacked AL men on Saturday evening, but made no mention of the attack by "AL men".

"The situation would not have arisen, had they [police] arrested those responsible for attacking my people that night," he said.

Rajshahi deputy commissioner and the police superintendent are expected to visit the area today.

Tuna sells

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chain, paid 333.6 million yen (\$3.1 million) for the 278-kg (613-lb) fish caught off the coast of northern Japan's Aomori prefecture, or double what he had paid six years ago.

"The tuna looks so tasty and very fresh, but I think I did too much," Kimura told reporters outside the market later.

"I expected it would be between 30 million and 50 million yen, or 60 million yen at the highest, but it ended up five times more."

Yesterday's event was the first New Year auction of the Toyosu market,