

Kabul control slips in Afghanistan

US watchdog says only 53.8 pc districts in govt hands as strength of troops continues to dwindle

AGENCIES

The Kabul government is steadily losing its grip over parts of Afghanistan even as American forces intensify their air campaign against insurgent groups, a US government watchdog said yesterday.

The latest grim assessment of Afghanistan's security situation comes as the US pursues talks with the Taliban and urgently seeks a way out of the 17-year war.

Numbers provided by Resolute Support, the US-led Nato mission in Afghanistan, show that as of October 31, only 63.5 percent of Afghans are living in areas controlled or influenced by the Kabul government -- down from 65.2 percent the previous quarter.

According to the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which compiled the data, the decrease came as Kabul's control or influence over Afghan districts dropped.

SIGAR said just 53.8 percent of Afghanistan's 407 districts are in government hands, and experts on Afghanistan say the number is lower still.

Instead of looking at population metrics, the Pentagon in a response to SIGAR said it is more important to "focus on the principal goal of the strategy of concluding the war in Afghanistan on terms favorable to Afghanistan and the United States."

Officials pointed to ongoing talks between the Taliban and US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, who this week said



The incoming 16th King of Malaysia Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah salutes beside Queen Tunku Azizah Aminah Maimunah, while Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (C) observes during the welcoming ceremony at the Parliament House in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

KASHMIR DISPUTE

India summons Pak envoy over phone call to separatist

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's Foreign Secretary Vijay K Gokhale summoned Pakistan High Commissioner to India Sohail Mahmood late on Wednesday night and lodged a strong protest against Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi's phone call to a moderate Kashmir separatist leader saying such action tantamount to a "direct interference" in India's internal affairs.

The High Commissioner of Pakistan was summoned by the Indian Foreign Secretary at 10:30pm in connection with the telephone conversation initiated by Qureshi with separatist leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq in Jammu and Kashmir state on Tuesday.

Gokhale conveyed to Sohail Mahmood "India's condemnation in the strongest terms of this latest brazen attempt by Pakistan to subvert India's unity and to violate our sovereignty and territorial integrity by none other than the Pakistan Foreign Minister," India's External Affairs Ministry said in a statement.

"The Indian Foreign Secretary conveyed that this deplorable act has violated all norms for the conduct of international relations even by Pakistan's own standards. The Pakistan Foreign Minister's actions are tantamount to direct interference in the internal affairs of its neighbour," it said.

According to the statement, the foreign secretary "underscored that by this action Pakistan has confirmed yet again that it officially abets and encourages individuals associated with terrorism and anti-India activities."

The Pakistani Foreign Minister's telephonic conversation with Mirwaiz Umar Farooq was viewed by New Delhi as an extremely unusual act.

Media reports from Pakistan quoted Shah Mehmood Qureshi as telling the Mirwaiz about Pakistan's efforts to internationalize the Kashmir issue.

DENUCLEARISATION OF KOREAN PENINSULA

Trump-Kim summit to be held somewhere in Asia

Says Pompeo, sends team to make preparations

REUTERS, Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday he was dispatching a team to make preparations for the next summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to be held somewhere in Asia late in February.

In an interview with Fox News Channel, Pompeo said the North Koreans had agreed the second summit between the two leaders would be held at the end of February.

"We'll do it some place in Asia," he said.

"I am dispatching a team there. They're headed that way now to lay the foundations for what I hope will be a substantial additional step towards the path for not only denuclearization of the peninsula but a brighter future for the North Korean people," Pompeo said.

Pompeo did not name the summit venue. Vietnam said last week it had not been informed about any time or venue for a possi-

ble Trump-Kim summit, but that it was confident in its ability to host such a meeting.

Officials and diplomats said two weeks ago that Vietnam was keen to host the summit and two sources told Reuters that Hanoi was preparing to receive Kim on a state visit in Singapore, where Trump and Kim met in June, and Bangkok have also been talked about as possibilities for a summit.

Last June's summit - the first between a sitting U.S. president and a North Korean leader - produced a vague commitment by Kim to work toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, but he has yet to take what Washington sees as concrete steps in that direction.

South Korea's Yonhap News Agency cited a South Korean foreign ministry official as saying the two sides would focus on how the United States might respond if the North dismantled its Yongbyon nuclear complex, in preparatory talks for a second summit.



BLASPHEMY ACQUITTAL

Asia Bibi free to go abroad: Pak

AFP, Islamabad

Asia Bibi, the Christian woman whose acquittal was upheld this week in a blasphemy saga which has made her a prime target for vigilantes, is still in Pakistan, the foreign ministry said yesterday.

As Islamist extremists announced fresh protests demanding her execution, officials said she was free to go abroad, with speculation rampant that she will seek asylum in Europe or North America.

Bibi, a labourer from central Punjab province, was convicted of blasphemy in 2010 and was on death row until her acquittal last year.

Her case swiftly became the most infamous in Pakistan, drawing worldwide attention to religious extremism in the country where blasphemy is an incendiary issue.

Since her acquittal she has been in protective custody, with authorities refusing to reveal her whereabouts out of fear for her safety.

On Tuesday the Supreme Court cleared the final legal hurdle in her case, throwing out a petition seeking an appeal against her acquittal.

The decision spurred calls for protests from extremists who have demanded Bibi's hanging, and set the stage for her to leave the country. Her daughters are believed to have already fled to Canada.

"To the best of my knowledge, Asia Bibi is still in Pakistan," foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Faisal told reporters in Islamabad during a weekly press briefing.

Rahul slams 'Fuhrer' Modi

Says India's unemployment rate at 45-yr-high in 2017-18; BJP hits back with 'Mussolini' barb

NDTV ONLINE

Rahul Gandhi yesterday used the term "Fuhrer" to attack Prime Minister Narendra Modi over a report that says that the country's unemployment rate was at a 45-year-high in 2017-18.

The National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO's) periodic labour force survey (PLFS), which has been accessed by the Business Standard newspaper, says unemployment was at 6.1 percent in 2017-18, the highest since 1972-73.

The report was not released despite being vetted by the National Statistical Commission in December, allege its two non-independent members who quit on Tuesday.

"NoMo Jobs! The Fuhrer promised us 2 Cr jobs a year. 5 years later, his leaked job creation report card reveals a National Disaster. Unemployment is at its highest in 45 yrs. 6.5 Cr youth are jobless in 2017-18

alone. Time for NoMo2Go," tweeted the Congress president, referencing the nickname for Adolf Hitler and also using the hashtag #How'sTheJobs, a twist on the popular catchphrase "How's The Josh" from the blockbuster film "Uri: The Surgical Strike".

The report, revealed a day before the government's interim Budget or Vote on Account, says in 2011-12, the unemployment rate stood at 2.2 percent and youth unemployment is at "astronomically high" levels of 13 to 27 percent.

It said unemployment was higher in urban areas (7.8 percent) than in the rural areas (5.3 percent). Also, more people are withdrawing from the workforce as the labour force participation rate is lower than in the previous years.

Reacting to Gandhi's comment, the BJP's official handle tweeted: "It's clear that he has inherited Mussolini's shortsightedness and has myopic understanding of issues."



An 18-year-old Indonesian woman is caned in public in Banda Aceh yesterday, as punishment for being caught cuddling with her boyfriend. Aceh is the only province in the world's biggest Muslim majority country that imposes Islamic law. PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Saudi Arabia executes Filipino domestic help

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

A Filipina maid was executed in Saudi Arabia after being found guilty of murder. The 39-year-old was put to death on Tuesday and her family was notified the following day, said Elmer Cato from the Philippines department of foreign affairs. Saudi Arabia is ranked among the top five executioners in the world.

Death toll at 52 after boats sink off Djibouti

AFP, Obock

The death toll from the sinking of two boats carrying migrants to Yemen from Djibouti rose to 52 yesterday, the UN migration agency said. Rescuers working in Djibouti's Obock region continued to recover bodies on the nation's coast following the capsizing of the two boats earlier this week.

Japan probes 'uranium' on online auction site

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese authorities are investigating how a substance that appears to be uranium came to be offered for sale on an online auction site, a nuclear official said yesterday. Police are trying to confirm whether the product is radioactive, he said.

BITS OF HISTORY (JANUARY 31)

1943: German Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus surrendered to the Russians at Stalingrad in World War Two.

1996: Suicide truck bombers attacked Sri Lanka's central bank in the heart of the capital, Colombo. At least 80 people were killed.

2000: An Alaska Airlines MD-83 carrying 88 people plunged 17,000 feet (5,180 metres) into the Pacific off southern California. All aboard were killed.

Lunar nights colder than expected

Finds Chinese moon lander

AFP, Beijing

China's lunar lander has woken from a freezing fortnight-long hibernation to find night-time temperatures on the moon's dark side are colder than previously thought, the national space agency said yesterday.

The Chang'e-4 probe -- named after a Chinese moon goddess -- made the first ever soft landing on the far side of the moon on January 3, a major step in China's ambitions to become a space superpower.

Temperatures on the moon's surface plummeted to minus 190 degrees celsius (-310 degrees Fahrenheit) during the probe's first lunar night, which "was colder than scientists expected," the China National Space Administration (CNSA) said.

The night-time temperatures were recorded by the Chinese probe after it became active on Wednesday, following a slumber that lasted for about two earth weeks.

They were lower than those recorded by previous US missions to the near side of the moon, Zhang He, executive director of the Chang'e-4 mission, told Xinhua news agency.

'No political prisoners' but dozens still behind bars

Rights activists decry Myanmar govt's repression

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

U Zaw Moe stands in a windowless white-walled prison cell on the outskirts of Yangon. "This is similar to the one I was in," he says, scoping the rectangular room, pointing to a few old blankets and a bucket in the corner that's meant to be used as a toilet.

The cell, part of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) museum, aims to give visitors a sense of the conditions in which Zaw Moe and thousands of others in Myanmar were held for protesting against the country's decades-long military rule.

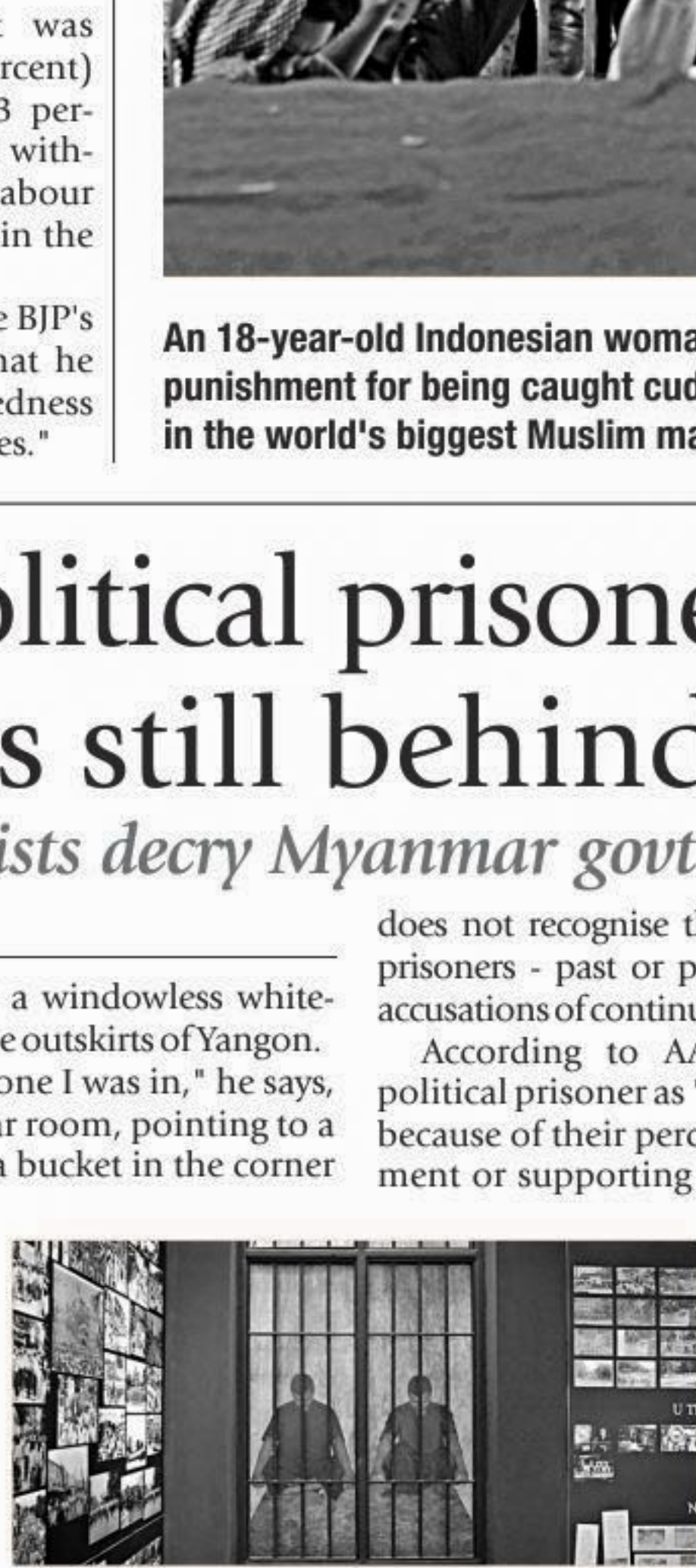
But since his release in 2013, Zaw Moe, who now works with the AAPP, is not officially considered a former political prisoner. In fact, no one is because Myanmar's government

does not recognise the existence of political prisoners - past or present - even as it faces accusations of continuing to create them.

According to AAPP, which defines a political prisoner as "anyone who is arrested because of their perceived or active involvement or supporting role in political movements with peaceful or resistant means", at least 35 political prisoners have been convicted since Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won landmark elections in 2015.

Another 56 await trial in prison, while 235 are on bail awaiting trial.

While Myanmar's parliament has repealed or amended several laws that authorities once used to arrest and prosecute civilians for their political views, activists say freedom of expression is still under attack.



'Love Commandos' chief arrested

Indian couples allege blackmail

AFP, New Delhi

The head of Love Commandos, an organisation which offers shelter to runaway lovers, has been arrested in Delhi for extortion and abuse of desperate couples, officials said yesterday.

The group became well-known for providing safe houses and legal advice to couples who defied family, religious and caste pressures to get married in the conservative country.

Love Commandos founder Sanjoy Sachdev was arrested on Tuesday night after police raided one of the shelter homes with members from the Delhi Commission of Women (DCW) and freed four couples.

"It was observed that (Sachdev) was indulging in illegal confinement and extortion of the couples behind the facade of providing a safe home to the victims," the DCW, an official body, said in a statement.

The four couples found during the raid said they were forced to pay arbitrary sums as fees and threatened if they tried to leave, the statement added.

Former journalist Sachdev launched 'Love Commandos' in 2010 after coming to the aid of a young man falsely accused of rape by the family of the woman he wanted to marry.

The vast majority of marriages in India are arranged by families and couples who defy the tradition to marry outside caste and religion face a severe backlash.