



A Protester kicks a tear gas canister shot by police at Place de la Republique yesterday in Paris, on the sidelines of a march called to protest against police violence toward participants of the last three months demonstrations in France. The 'Yellow Vest' (Gilets Jaunes) movement in France originally started as a protest about planned fuel hikes but has morphed into a mass protest against President's policies and top-down style of governing. PHOTO: AFP

Thai forest rangers train to tackle wildlife crime

AFP, Nakhon Nayok

Camo-clad rangers ambush a camp in a lush Thai national park, kicking away a machete and a firearm and pinning two suspected poachers to the ground - part of a training exercise to counter a lucrative wildlife trade.

"Go!" team leader Kritkhajorn Tangon yells as the group tackles the actors, who had near them sambar deer antlers and a blade covered in fake blood.

Thailand's conservationists are struggling to stamp out the multibillion-dollar black market in animal parts, finding themselves outgunned by illegal hunters and outflanked by courts.

The country is a key transit point for smugglers moving on to Vietnam and China, two of the world's biggest markets for parts from endangered and protected species.

But efforts by its 14,000 rangers to take down illegal hunters and loggers are often stymied by a lack of resources and training, with about 15 rangers killed each year in deadly encounters.

Impunity also reigns for traffickers who are well connected politically and financially, dodging jail time when there is little iron-clad physical evidence to keep them behind bars.

Gathering evidence, protecting a crime scene and using forensic analysis were some of the skills developed by more than a dozen rangers who took part in the training week led by anti-trafficking group Freeland.

Among the participants in the event at Khao Yai National Park, which culminated in Friday's mock scenario, were four officials from neighbouring Cambodia and Laos.

"Our investigation skills are still weak... when they (rangers) encounter these situations, they leave loopholes in the collection of evidence," Kritkhajorn told AFP.

"It could result in the suspect walking free."

Freeland has emphasised the need for material evidence as "it cannot be manipulated, whereas an eyewitness can retract his testimony", said country director Petcharat Sangchai, a retired police major-general.

The training, funded by the British embassy in Bangkok, comes the same week a Thai court dismissed charges against a suspected wildlife trafficking kingpin.

He was accused of smuggling \$1 million worth of rhino horns to Thailand but the case unravelled when the sole eyewitness changed his testimony.

A successful conviction has to be handled "correctly from the forests to the courts", said Freeland's program director Tim Redford, adding that widespread wildlife poaching and smuggling involves transnational organised crime rings.

"These criminals are exploiting loopholes in the law, they are exploiting weakness of understanding in judges and prosecutors, and that's why they are winning," he said.

One case which left the Thai public incensed involved construction tycoon Premchai Karnasuta, who was arrested last February after rangers stumbled on his camp in a national park in Kanchanaburi province.

Animal carcasses -- including a rare black leopard -- and guns were found, but Premchai, one of Thailand's wealthiest moguls, denied he was poaching and was released on bail.

Investigation is pending and a court verdict is expected in March.

The tycoon's case was at the forefront of all the participants' minds on Friday as the clearest example of what the rich and powerful could get away with in Thailand.

"If you know who my boss is, you'll get shivers! My boss is Premchai!" shouted one of the "poachers" during the exercise, as the rangers laughed in a moment of levity.

Turkey captures IS suspects on Syria border: ministry

AFP, Istanbul

Troops captured four Islamic State (IS) suspects in a Turkish town on the Syrian border while they were attempting to cross the frontier illegally, the defence ministry announced on Saturday.

Border units from the Turkish armed forces captured the four "Daesh terrorists" on Friday in the Akcakale district of Sanliurfa in southeast Turkey, the ministry said on its official Twitter account, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

One of the suspects, identified as Feride Samur, was being sought with a red notice arrest warrant, the state-run Anadolu news agency reported.

IS jihadists are blamed in Turkey for a spate of terror attacks including a 2015 bombing on a peace rally in the capital Ankara's train station that claimed 100 lives.

Turkey has boosted security at its border crossings to prevent any infiltrations and allowed a US-led international coalition to launch air raids on the group's bases in Syria from its soil.

French priest jailed for sexual abuse

AFP, Colmar

A French priest was Friday sentenced to five years, two without parole, for sexually assaulting four young female parishioners, one of whom was just nine when the offences started, and embezzling 100,000 euros (\$115,000) to pay one of his victims.

The trial was held behind closed doors at Colmar Criminal Court, in northeast France, which publicly announced the sentence late Friday.

The 60-year-old cleric, who will have to spend at least two years behind bars and be under restrictions for the rest of his term, could have faced up to 10 years in prison.

The priest will also have to undergo psychological treatment, which he has already started, according to his lawyers.

Under the judgement, he is forbidden from contacting his victims or any activity involving minors. He is also barred from staying in the Alsace region, where the offences were committed.

His sentence was lighter than that sought by the public prosecutor, who had asked for four years in prison followed by three years under a supervision order.

The trial was held behind closed

doors at the request of three of the four victims, who were minors at the start of the offences, the youngest just nine.

The attacks, which continued after three of the victims were adults, took place between 2001 and 2006 and between 2011 and 2016.

The priest, who was remanded in custody for three months at the start of the case in September 2016, "bitterly regrets the crimes that he has acknowledged (...) and offers his apology to the victims and to people (...) injured by such intolerable acts," his lawyer Thierry Moser said in a statement.

He had admitted to having diverted more than 100,000 euros in money destined for the Church and transferred it to one of the victims, then an adult, in exchange for sexual favours.

In total, he paid her more than 240,000 euros, including a portion of his personal wealth. The victim, now 29, had been charged with "concealment of breach of trust" but was released after the court found there was insufficient evidence to prove she knew the source of the money.

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

Asia Bibi's lawyer seeking European passport

AFP, Paris

The Pakistani lawyer who secured the acquittal of a Christian woman facing the death sentence for blasphemy is himself seeking protection from European governments, his French lawyer told AFP on Friday.

Saif-ul-Mulook has been targeted by death threats since his the spectacular acquittal of his client Asia Bibi, a labourer from central Punjab province on death row since 2010.

"He is hoping that people will take into account his heroic actions in defending Ms Bibi, given the current circumstances in Pakistan, which led him to exchange his freedom for hers," Mulook's lawyer Francois Zimeray told AFP.

"He does not want to seek asylum, but rather to ask for European nationality," Zimeray said.

Mulook fled to the Netherlands last November after violent protests erupted over the Pakistani Supreme Court's decision to overturn Bibi's death sentence from 2010.

He returned to Islamabad on January 26 to defend Bibi as she faced another appeal of the supreme court's decision, which was rejected on Tuesday.

Bibi, who has been detained in protective custody, is expected to leave Pakistan as well to seek asylum in a North American or European country, and unconfirmed reports have said her children are already in Canada.

The country's foreign ministry confirmed Thursday that Bibi was free to leave the country after her years-long legal ordeal, which drew worldwide attention to religious extremism in Pakistan.

Even unproven accusations of blasphemy in Pakistan have caused lynchings and murders.

Religious groups have said "they would kill her despite the judgment of the Supreme Court," Mulook said after the court's decision Tuesday. "Therefore, I think she should leave the country."

Cattle trader

FROM PAGE 16

when BSF men opened fire on a group of six to seven cattle traders from Bangladesh who trespassed into the Indian border for bringing cattle from Kuchlibari area in Cooch Behar district.

Asadul died on the spot while the others managed to escape the scene, they said.

BSF men also took away the body to their Kuchlibari camp under Meghlaniganj sub-division, the officials added.

Commanding Officer of Rangpur 51 BGB Battalion Lt Col Mostafizur Rahman said they had sent a letter to the BSF asking them to hand over the body.

"BSF assured us that they would hand over the body through a flag meeting after the autopsy is done by the Indian authorities," he said.

Earlier in January, three Bangladeshis were killed by BSF men in Thakurgaon and one each in Nilphamari and Rajshahi.

AL leader

FROM PAGE 16

Mujibur was admitted to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital while Nazim received treatment at another local hospital.

The body was sent to MMCH morgue for autopsy.

The reason behind the attack could not be known immediately.

Police detained Nurul Islam, 55, a neighbour of Morshed, for questioning. But, they did not give any further detail.

No case was lodged in this connection till last night.

Meanwhile, a Jubo League activist was stabbed to death over establishing supremacy in Akbar Shah area of Chattogram on Friday night.

The dead was identified as Md Masud alais Pani Masud, 28, an activist of Chattogram City's Ward-9 Jubo League.

Jasim Uddin, officer-in-charge of Akbar Shah Police Station, said a group of seven to eight criminals swooped on Masud with sharp weapons around 7:40pm in Farukher Math area.

Alauddin Talukdar, assistant sub-inspector of CMCH Police Outpost, said Masud was rushed to the hospital where doctors declared him dead around 8:30pm.

The body was sent to Chittagong Medical College morgue for autopsy. Police suspected that followers of one Abdul Jalil attacked Masud and killed him.

A case was lodged yesterday with Akbar Shah Police Station against 14 people. Of them, seven were named including Abdul Jalil.

[Our Mymensingh correspondent contributed to this report.]

Reform local govt system

FROM PAGE 16

possible to do these jobs? ... DCs have 31 functions in LGs [alone]. So where is the chance for others to work?" he said, bringing up the overlapping and numerous functions of different designations in field administration and LGs.

"Could you imagine a thana [police station] holding a 'court' at night?", Tafaal said, describing the illegal powers exercised by different police stations in Chattogram.

There are 110 functions of a zila parishad, 31 functions of an upazila parishad, 248 functions of a city corporation, and 172 functions of a municipality; these are not implementable due to the sheer number of duties, he said.

Tafaal recommended that a commission be formed for reformation of the LG.

He placed a 10-point recommendation for the reformation of the LG system in Bangladesh, including a local government framework law, reorganisation of field administration, electoral reform in LGs, new parliamentary organisation for LGs, ensure functional assignment and expenditure assignment, capacity development for local governance and integration of national and local plans.

Addressing the conference, Zillur Rahman said increasing direct funding to the upazila parishad level was a prerequisite to any reform. He pointed out the 31 percent decrease in budget for LGs between 2013-14 and 2016-17, adding that one third of the budget was being spent by different central organisations of the government.

He also highlighted the need for empowering LGs in order to meet

the sustainable development goals.

Speakers also pointed that the elections to different bodies, from national to local bodies, was a reason for continuous political violence.

Zillur said symbol-based partisan election system had hampered the leadership process in LGs and resulted in a concerning lack of accountability in the root level.

"Now we hear about hybrid leaders; It means leadership without any history of accountability, [which was] gained in an unauthorised way either by using money or connections. In this case, LGs have an important role [to bring about a solution]."

Afterwards, Salauddin M Aminuzzaman said, "The election system should be reformed. It could be as like as India—election to all bodies at a time."

He explained how the LGs in foreign countries function effectively as they have authority to take decisions, are given wider space of autonomy and functional scopes.

The conflict between the members of parliament and other representatives of LG, including upazila chairman, has made the situation worse, he added.

"There is no need to go for further promise; rather just implementation of the pronounced intervention packages in vision 2021, a decentralised local government system, is enough to overcome the current stalemate."

He also stressed on reviving the LG Commission, inter-government fiscal transfer policy, integrated LG act and revisiting the role and space of engagement of MPs in LG affairs.

Norway to build

FROM PAGE 16

rock under the seabed -- measuring 392 meters (1,286 feet) deep and 27 kilometers (17 miles) long.

But the most ambitious aspect is the development of submerged floating tunnels that sit around 30 meters (100 feet) under the surface of the water.

If successful, Norway could win a global race against countries including China, South Korea and Italy, which are researching similar projects.

The Norwegian Public Roads Administration (NPRA), the governmental body responsible for the project, aims to complete construction by 2050.

The journey between Kristiansand and Trondheim is part of the E39, which is a "key route for Norway," explains Kjersti Kvalheim Dunham, a project manager at NPRA.

A combination of motorways, roads and ferry rides, E39 runs along the southwestern Norwegian coast. More than 50% of export goods in Norway originate from this area, she adds -- yet the route "has a very low standard for a European road." Crossing the fjords via ferry, while a popular transport method, can be time-consuming.

Three suspension bridges and five floating bridges will be built. Floating bridges -- structures that are supported by pontoons -- have been built in Norway and the US, among other countries.

When a fjord is deeper than 1 kilometer (0.6 miles) or wider than 5 kilometers (3 miles), however, existing engineering solutions are not going to cut it. The seabed would be too deep to be drilled through for a rock tunnel or for a suspension bridge's foundations to be laid.

Floating bridges do not work in all cases because they are susceptible to harsh weather conditions such as strong waves and currents.

This is where the floating tunnels come in.

The idea for a submerged floating tunnel is not new. In 1882, British naval architect Edward Reed proposed a floating tunnel across the English

Channel -- an idea that was vetoed.

The term "floating" is perhaps misleading. The tunnels are fixed in position with cables -- either anchored to the seabed or tethered to pontoons which are spaced far enough apart to allow boats to pass through. Made of concrete, they would function like conventional tunnels, transporting vehicles from one end of a fjord to another.

Waves and currents at 100 feet below sea level are less powerful than those at the surface, explains NPRA's chief engineer Arianna Minoretta.

In addition, a floating tunnel minimizes the impact on the landscape since most of the infrastructure is out of sight. It also creates less noise than traffic on a bridge would.

The biggest risks in the project are explosions, fire and overloading, says Minoretta -- and so extensive testing is essential.

Age-old craft

FROM PAGE 16

Their pieces make it to shops at Shankhari Bazar, Rampura, Farmgate, Malibagh and Science Laboratory areas in Dhaka, said the 60-year-old man.

"We receive orders from the shop owners and produce accordingly. Wholesale buyers from across the country also come to us to place orders. But the volume of orders is far less than before."

The use of modern instruments has replaced the use of traditional instruments. "If this continues, it will be difficult to survive with our family members," he added.

Artisan Raj Kumar said demand for different types of musical instruments made at Rishipara slightly increases before Puja.

Meanwhile, Kamal Das, 60, of the same area, said he was trained in the trade by his late father Khokaram Chandra Das. He has been in this profession for 40 years. His son Raj Kumar Das, along with his wife and other members of the family, has followed in his footsteps.

But Kamal's family is a rarity. Once, 25 families in Rishipara were involved in making these instruments. Now there are only six, he said.

Artisans are forced to leave this profession for financial losses; some remain in it out of passion, he said.

Another artisan Shankar Das cannot work anymore due to old age, but his son Bital Das has picked up the mantle from Das. However, his two other sons could not be motivated to learn the skills from him and they moved to Khulna and Chattogram in favour of higher paying jobs.

Chairman of Baliachura Union Parishad Abdul Awal Khan said the number of households involved in the craft had reduced substantially.

The government will have to take steps to preserve the art form that was a means of income for a large community, he added.