

INDIAN ELECTION



BJP fields candidate accused in bomb blast

The ruling party of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced Wednesday it will field a candidate accused of involvement in a deadly 2008 bomb blast in the country's ongoing national election. Pragya Singh Thakur, a 48-year-old female monk, is out on bail while she faces charges related to the attack that killed six people. She announced Wednesday that she will run for a seat in the city of Bhopal on the ticket of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Thakur, a rebrand speaker, made national headlines after the blast close to a mosque in western Maharashtra state's Malegaon city that also injured around 100 people.

Modi jabs Congress-JDS over IAF strike at Balakot

Prime Minister Narendra Modi upped the ante against the Congress and the Janata Dal-Secular alliance in Karnataka yesterday saying national security is not a priority for the Opposition parties. He cited recent Balakot strike and the surgical strike of 2016 across the Line of Control (LoC) to target the Opposition in his public rally. "I remember that when air strike was conducted Pakistan was sleeping. Pakistan told the whole world that there was a strike by India and they started crying. There were some people in our country who got hurt when the attack was launched across the border," the prime minister said at an election rally in Bagalkot Lok Sabha constituency in Karnataka.



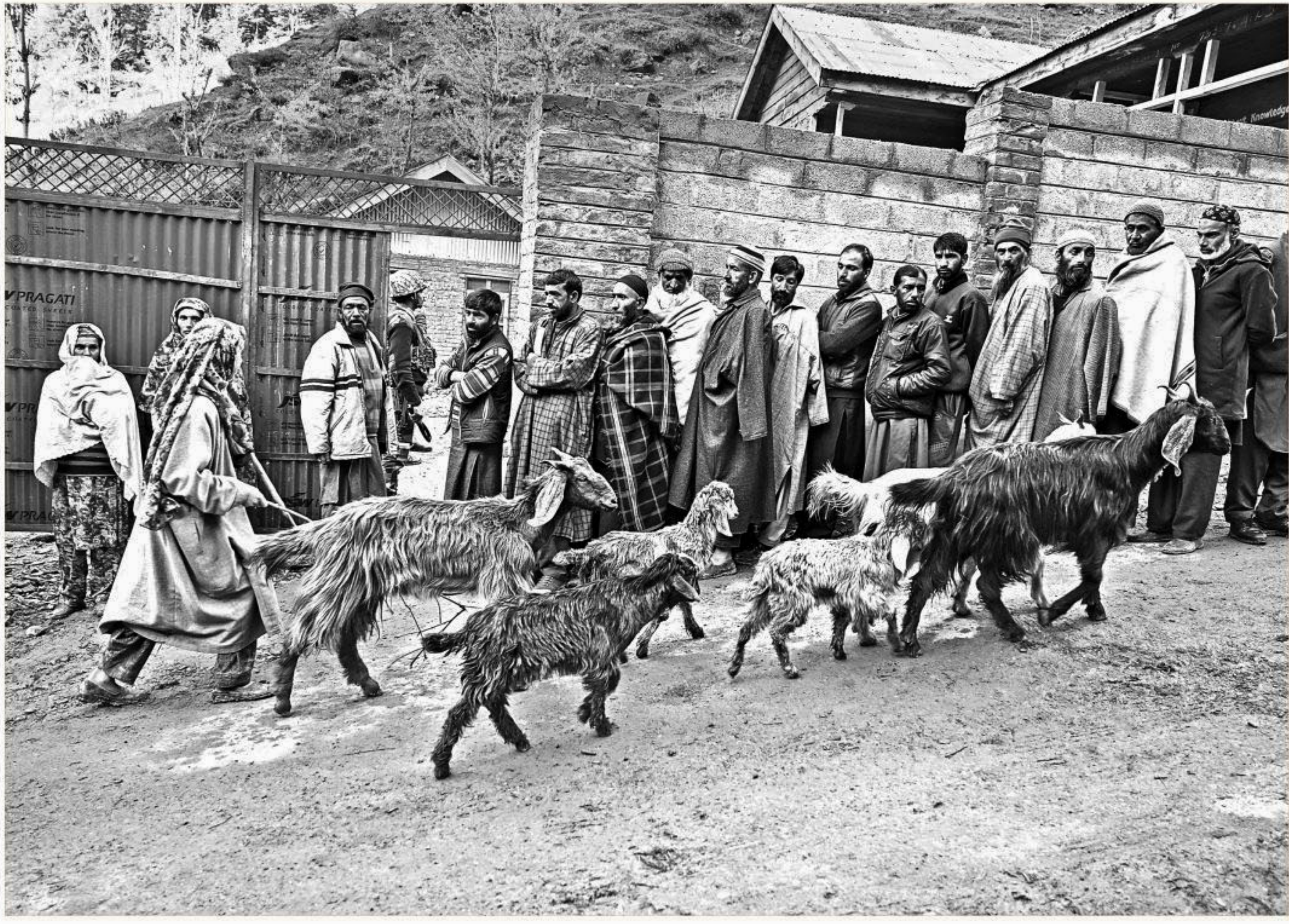
EC suspends IAS officer for checking Modi's chopper

The Election Commission on Wednesday suspended an officer posted as General Observer in Odisha for allegedly checking Prime Minister Narendra Modi's chopper in Sambalpur in violation of the laid down norms. The 1996 batch Karnataka cadre IAS officer, Mohammed Mohsin, has not acted in conformity with the EC's instructions concerning SPG protectees, an order issued by the commission said. On the basis of a report from the district collector and the DIG of police, the EC has taken action against the General Observer of Sambalpur came a day after the Prime Minister's visit there on Tuesday.

Man hurls shoe at BJP leaders during press conference

A man hurling a shoe at BJP leaders addressing a press conference at the party's headquarters in New Delhi yesterday. The incident took place when GVL Narasimha Rao, national spokesman and Rajya Sabha MP was starting to brief the media. An unidentified man in pink shirt came near the stage where Rao was sitting and hurled the shoe at the MP which rammed into the mic. It was not immediately clear why the person, who identified himself as a doctor by profession, threw the shoe. Rao, momentarily startled, continued with the briefing as the party workers dragged the man out of the conference hall. At the time of the incident, other than Rao, BJP leader Bhupendra Yadav was also present at the media address.

SOURCE: TNN, AFP, HINDUSTAN TIMES



(Clockwise from left) Kashmiri villagers queue to cast their vote at Kangan, some 35 km from Srinagar yesterday; Indian Border Security Force (BSF) soldiers stand guard on the top of a polling station during a second phase of elections at Kangan; voters take a selfie in the queue to cast their vote at a polling station in Rohini village some 27km from Siliguri in West Bengal.



PHOTO: AFP

Big parties field few women

Candidate lists show women make up 11.8pc and 12.8pc of total candidates nominated by BJP and Congress respectively

Reute Rs, New Delhi

Women running for India's parliament are barely a blip in the world's biggest democratic exercise, which began last week and will play out in seven rounds, with results expected on May 23.

Women now make up just 11.8 percent and 12.8 percent of the total candidates nominated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the main opposition Congress respectively, candidate lists show.

In a country led for years by a woman, the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, both major parties have long pledged backing for laws to reserve a third of parliamentary seats for women, but the numbers of women they have nominated this year roughly match those in the 2014 election.

"Very few women are asked (to stand for elections)," said Santosh Ahlawat, the only woman MP from the western state of Rajasthan, and a member of Modi's Hindu nationalist BJP.

"I don't know why women are punished. Are they punished for being women?" said Ahlawat, who was not nominated this year.

Just 209 women are contesting the first two phases of the election, or about 7 percent of 2,856 candidates, an analysis by the non-profit Associa-



tions for Democratic Reforms showed.

That low figure has prompted criticism that the major parties have once again missed a chance to redress the gender imbalance.

"Patriarchal systems have been in place for ages, it is not going to be easy to dismantle them without institutional support," said Lalitha Kumaramangalam, a BJP leader and former chief of a national panel that

fighters for women's rights.

Congress representatives have also said a law would be required to boost the numbers of women MPs.

Women make up 430 million of India's 900 million eligible voters. In some northern states, such as Himachal Pradesh, with a population of nearly 7 million, neither Congress nor the BJP has nominated a woman candidate.

Voters in Rajasthan and the central state of Madhya Pradesh, together home to a population double that of France, will choose from just six women candidates from the BJP and eight from the Congress.

By contrast, more than 80 men from both parties are running in the two states.

Women are often nominated only from constituencies they are likely to lose, said Shahida Kamal of the communist party that rules the southern state of Kerala, a tactic that suggests parties only run them for the sake of appearance.

Afghan peace talks abruptly postponed

Taliban objects to size of delegation

Reute Rs, Kabul

A meeting between the Taliban and Afghan politicians and civil society aimed at ending more than 17 years of war in Afghanistan has been postponed, officials and diplomats said yesterday, citing Taliban objections to the size of the Afghan delegation.

The talks were set to begin today in Doha, but a senior government official in Kabul said "the gathering has been called off for now and details were being reworked."

Afghan delegates scheduled to fly to the Qatari capital yesterday were told the trip was postponed and new dates were being discussed, a western diplomat in Kabul said.

"The government will have to change the composition of the delegation to make this meeting happen," the diplomat said on condition of anonymity.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said leaders of the headline Islamist group were uncomfortable with the size of the Afghan delegation and its composition.

"Presence of some participants was completely against the list of what was agreed upon," Mujahid told Reuters over phone, adding that the delegation included Afghans working for the government.

The Taliban have repeatedly refused to meet President Ashraf Ghani's government, which they call a puppet regime, but have held several rounds of peace talks with U.S. officials.

Ghani said Wednesday the 250-member Afghan delegation included some government officials attending in a personal capacity. But the group did not include some of the most powerful figures in Afghan politics, who are reluctant to join forces with Ghani ahead of presidential elections due in September.

Indonesia warns against unrest after election

Afp, Jakarta

Indonesian authorities yesterday warned against unrest as a firebrand ex-general rejected unofficial election results that appeared to hand President Joko Widodo another term as leader of the world's third-biggest democracy.

National Police Chief Tito Karnavian said Wednesday's "smooth and safe" polls would not be disrupted by demonstrations, and warned of arrests.

"If there are any illegal or unconstitutional actions that threaten public stability and security, (authorities) will take firm action," he said. "We won't tolerate it."

"I urge everyone against mass demonstrations, whether it's to celebrate or to express dissatisfaction" at the results, Karnavian added.

This year's campaign was punctuated by bitter mudslinging and a slew of fake news

online -- much of it directed at the presidential contenders.

Authorities said yesterday they had seen a spike in false reports and hoaxes, with some calling for chaos in the streets and for Indonesians to commit violence in response to the results.

However, the capital Jakarta was quiet yesterday after as many as 190 million voters in the Muslim-majority country cast ballots in the one-day poll -- which featured a record 245,000 candidates -- to elect a new president, parliamentarians and local legislators.

While official results are not due until next month, a series of so-called "quick counts" by pollsters, which are based on samples, showed Widodo as much as 11 percentage points ahead. Widodo said yesterday that he had received phone calls from several world leaders to congratulate him on his country's election.



A vehicle surrounded by fallen trees is seen after an earthquake in Taipei, Taiwan yesterday. A 6.1 magnitude earthquake struck Taiwan's coastal city of Hualien, shaking buildings and temporarily halting subway services in the capital Taipei, but there were no immediate reports of serious damage or casualties.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWSIN brief

Army shelling kills 10 in Syria's Idlib

Afp, Beirut

Regime shelling killed 10 civilians in Syria's jihadist-controlled Idlib region yesterday, in the latest violence to threaten a seven-month-old truce, a war monitor said. Rocket fire targeted a village and an adjacent camp for the internally displaced in Idlib's southeastern countryside, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

NZ official guilty over embassy toilet camera

Afp, Wellington

One of New Zealand's highest ranking military officers was yesterday found guilty of trying to secretly film people in the toilet at the country's embassy in Washington DC. Alfred Keating, 59, was New Zealand's top defence official when a hidden camera was found in the embassy bathroom in July 2017. He had denied a charge of attempting to make an intimate visual recording but a High Court jury returned a unanimous guilty verdict at the end of a two-week trial, local media reported.

50 Boko Haram fighters killed in Nigeria

Afp, N'djamena

More than fifty Boko Haram fighters have been killed in an attack on a multi-national force in northeastern Nigeria, a military spokesperson said Wednesday. Two Chadian soldiers belonging to the Multinational Joint Task Force (MMF), an anti-Boko Haram force combining soldiers from Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria, died in the assault at Cross Kauwa on Tuesday.

'No peace by prayer'

Say defiant Rakhine rebels in battle with Myanmar army

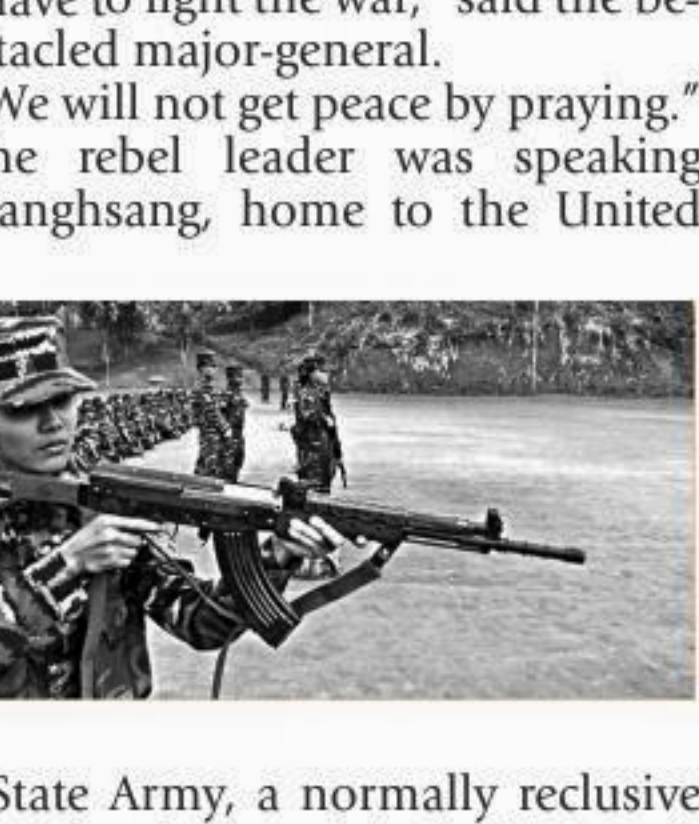
Afp, Panghsang

Rakhine rebels locked in a vicious fight with Myanmar's army will not "get peace by praying", its commander said as he vowed his forces will fight on despite being outnumbered and under aerial assault.

The increasingly bloody battle in western Rakhine state is between the Myanmar military and the Arakan Army (AA), which claims to be fighting for more autonomy for ethnic Rakhine Buddhists in one of the country's poorest states.

With the region under strict lockdown, it is difficult to get a precise death toll, though the military has confirmed over 20 of its security forces have been killed by the AA since January.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday from the safety of the Wa region of northeastern Shan State, which borders China, AA chief Tun Myat Naing said his forces have no intention of giving



Wa State Army, a normally reclusive group who this week invited journalists and other ethnic leaders to commemorate 30 years of autonomy.

The China-backed Wa have a long-standing ceasefire with Myanmar, which has so far allowed them to operate from a semi-autonomous zone.

Experts allege the well-armed Wa, who have a 25,000-strong standing army, offer training and equipment to several other rebel groups as leverage against Myanmar's central state.

The presence of the AA leader in Panghsang will do little to dilute that perception -- despite vociferous denials by the Wa.

A brutal military campaign in 2017 forced out some 740,000 Rohingya Muslims into Bangladesh.

Myanmar's army said the mass expulsion was justified in a campaign to stamp out Rohingya militants known as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

With many Rohingya gone, the AA has ramped up its own campaign of ambushes and assassinations.

Earlier this month a military helicopter attack killed at least six Rohingya, who the army claimed was working with the AA. Tun Myat Naing rejected the accusation as "groundless."

Gunmen kill 14 bus passengers in Pakistan

Afp, Quetta

Gunmen killed at least 14 people after forcing them to disembark from buses in Pakistan's Balochistan, officials said yesterday, in the latest attack claimed by separatists in the restive southwestern province.

The attackers, who numbered around two dozen, were wearing uniforms of the paramilitary Frontier Corps, provincial home secretary Haider Ali told AFP.

They "stopped buses on the Makran Coastal Highway and gunned down 14 people", he said, adding that the four vehicles were travelling to the port megacity of Karachi from the coastal town of Ormara.

The gunmen identified non-Baloch passengers by their identity cards and shot them, he said.

OPPRESSION IN KSA

Saudi sisters plead for int'l protection

Afp, Tbilisi

Georgian immigration officers have visited two Saudi sisters who pleaded for international help after fleeing the ultra-conservative kingdom and will help them apply for asylum, an official told AFP yesterday.

The two women had issued pleas for international protection on a Twitter account called @GeorgiaSisters, saying they were "trapped in Georgia" after Saudi authorities cancelled their passports.

They posted photographs of their passports identifying themselves as 28-year-old Maha Alsubaie and 25-year-old Wafa Alsubaie.

"We are in danger," Maha Alsubaie said in one video posted on Twitter. "Please help us."

"We want to apply for asylum in any safe country," one of the women said in another video that does not show her face.

"If we go back to Saudi we will be killed."

Georgia's interior ministry spokeswoman Sopho Mdinardze told AFP that representatives of the ministry's migration department "visited the women yesterday and invited them to start asylum procedures."

"They can feel safe, the protection of their rights is guaranteed in Georgia," Mdinardze said.