

Literary stars call on Modi to restore critic's citizenship

AFP, New Delhi

Top prize winners Margaret Atwood, Orhan Pamuk and JM Coetzee led more than 250 literary and journalist luminaries who called on India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi to revoke an order stripping writer Aatish Taseer of his "overseas citizenship".

The letter said Taseer "appears to have been targeted for an extremely personal form of retaliation" for his criticism of the Indian government.

Taseer, 38, born in Britain but raised in India, lost his Overseas Citizenship of India last week. The home ministry announced on Twitter that the journalist had "concealed" the fact that his father was Pakistani.

Critics have, however, called the move a response to a Taseer cover story on Modi in Time magazine during the Indian election titled "India's Divider in Chief".

The Committee to Protect Journalists said Taseer's fate showed that Modi's conservative ruling party is "intolerant of criticism and freedom of the press".

Gaza ceasefire takes hold

Airstrike kills 8 of a family in the enclave as death toll hits 34

AFP, Gaza City

A ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza took hold yesterday after two days of fighting triggered by an Israeli strike on an Islamic Jihad commander, with 34 Palestinians killed in exchanges of fire.

Both Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad and Israel's military confirmed the ceasefire early yesterday brokered by Egyptian and UN officials -- the usual mediators between Gaza and Israel.

Five rockets were fired at Israel from Gaza after the ceasefire came into effect and air defences intercepted two of them, the army said, but the incident did not appear likely to set off another severe round of fighting.

"#Egypt and the #UN worked hard to prevent the most dangerous escalation in and around #Gaza from leading to #war," tweeted Nickolay Mladenov, UN envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, who travelled to Cairo for the talks.

"The coming hours and days will be critical. ALL must show maximum restraint and do their part to prevent bloodshed."

The agreement, which entered into force at 5:30 am (0330 GMT), came after the death toll from Israeli air strikes rose to 34 since Tuesday.

Palestinian officials said eight



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians check the destruction following an Israeli air strike in Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip, yesterday.

members of the same family had been killed in an Israeli strike overnight, including five children.

Israel's military said the man killed in the strike in Deir al Balah in the central Gaza Strip was an Islamic Jihad rocket unit commander. Relatives, neighbours and an Islamic Jihad spokesman disputed that.

"This is a war crime. You are killing innocent children, sleeping

at home," neighbour Adan Abu Abdallah told AFP.

The escalation began early Tuesday with Israel's targeted killing of a top Islamic Jihad commander, Baha Abu al-Ata, who it accused of being behind rocket fire and other attacks.

Israel's military said some 450 rockets had been fired at its territory since Tuesday morning. No Israelis were killed. Israeli medics said they

had treated some 63 people as of Wednesday night, all with mild injuries and almost half with "stress symptoms."

The flare-up raised fears of a new all-out conflict between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza, who have fought three wars since 2008.

Islamic Jihad is the second-most-powerful militant group in the Gaza Strip after Hamas.

Brexit will make UK 'second-rate player'

Warns EU Council president Tusk

AFP, Brussels

Britain will be a "second-rate player" after Brexit, unable to compete with big powers like the US, China and EU, outgoing EU Council president Donald Tusk warned yesterday.

The former Polish premier said Brexit supporters were deluded if they thought leaving the EU would bring a return to dominance on the world stage, saying the departure marked "the real end of the British Empire".

Tusk's outspoken intervention comes in the midst of a UK election campaign in which Brexit is one of the key issues dividing the parties, and he urged those seeking to keep Britain in the bloc not to lose hope.

Some Brexit backers have argued that leaving the EU, the world's largest trading bloc, will enable Britain to forge closer economic ties with other countries around the world.

"You could hear in these voices a longing for the Empire. But the reality is exactly the opposite -- only as part of a united Europe can the UK play a global role," Tusk said in a speech at the College of Europe in Bruges -- a finishing school for the next generation of EU bureaucrats.

"And the world knows it... after its departure, the UK will become an outsider, a second-rate player, while the main battlefield will be occupied by China, the US and the EU."

Prime Minister Boris Johnson is fighting the December 12 election on a pledge to "get Brexit done" after failing in a pledge to get Britain out on October 31.

The new departure date is January 31, but the main opposition Labour party is pledging to renegotiate the divorce deal and put it to a second referendum, while the Liberal Democrats have vowed to scrap Brexit altogether.

Tusk, who leaves office at the end of the month, has made no secret of his opposition to Brexit.

"The UK election takes place in one month. Can things still be turned around?" Tusk said.



REPORT ON THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON HUMAN HEALTH

An entire generation at risk

AFP, Paris

Climate change will damage the health of an entire generation unless there are immediate cuts to fossil fuel emissions, from a rise in deadly infectious diseases to surging malnutrition, experts warned yesterday.

Children across the world were already suffering the ill effects of air pollution and extreme weather events, said The Lancet Countdown in its annual report on the impact of climate change on human health.

And far worse is to come for future generations, it warned: air-borne diseases, malnutrition due to mass crop failures, and even mental and physical trauma from increased flash flooding and wildfires.

The Lancet Countdown is a coalition of 35 institutions including the World Health Organization and the World Bank.

The report came as climate change is attributed to extreme floods in Venice, fires in Australia and even an outbreak of plague in China this week.

A 7.4 percent year-on-year cut in CO2 emissions needed until 2050 to limit global warming to 1.5C

A warmer world brings risks of food shortages, infectious diseases, floods and extreme heat

Venice floods, Australia bushfires blamed on climate change



Venice declared a state of emergency on Wednesday after "apocalyptic" floods swept through the lagoon city, flooding its historic basilica and inundating squares and centuries-old buildings.

Some of Australia's worst wildfires in living memory continue to burn across its eastern seaboard. 4 people have been killed so far.

If nothing is done, the impacts could burden an entire generation with disease and illness throughout their lives, researchers said.

The report, compiled by 120 experts, said "nothing short" of a 7.4 percent year-on-year cut in CO2 emissions until 2050 would limit global warming to 1.5C.

"A kid born today has an average global life expectancy of 71 years so that brings them to 2090. That means that kid will experience a 4C world," Nick Watts, executive director of The Lancet Countdown, told AFP.

In the last 30 years, the global yield potential of staple crops such as maize, winter wheat and rice, have all declined,

putting infants and small children at heightened risk of malnutrition.

Infant malnutrition impacts every stage of a child's life, stunting growth, weakening the immune system and throwing up long-term developmental problems. More children will also be susceptible to infectious disease outbreaks.

In three just three decades, the number of days worldwide of prime infectiousness for the Vibrio bacteria -- which causes much of child diarrhoeal disease worldwide -- has doubled.

The report found that mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue and malaria were also on the march, putting half of the world's current population at risk.

Reacting to the report, The Lancet's editor-in-chief Richard Horton said climate change was "one of the greatest threats to the health of humanity today".

"But the world has yet to see a response from governments," he added. "We can't afford this level of disengagement."

N Korea rebuffs US offer of December talks

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday said it has been offered a fresh meeting with the United States, but is uninterested in more talks aimed at "appeasing us" ahead of a year-end deadline Pyongyang has set for Washington to show more flexibility in their negotiations.

Kim Myong Gil, the North's nuclear negotiator, said in a report carried by state media that Stephen Biegun, his US counterpart who jointly led last month's failed denuclearisation talks in Stockholm, had offered through a third country to meet again.

Kim and Biegun met last month in the Swedish capital for the first time since US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un agreed in June to re-open negotiations that have been stalled since a failed summit in Vietnam in February.

But the meeting fell apart, with Kim saying the US side failed to present a new approach.

North Korea has been seeking a lifting of punishing sanctions, but the United States has insisted Kim Jong Un must dismantle his nuclear weapons programme first.

DIABETES RISKS: INDONESIANS STRUGGLE TO QUIT 'RICE ADDICTION'

Indonesian Mirnawati once ate rice with every meal, but its link to diabetes convinced her to join a growing movement to quit a staple food in the third biggest rice-consuming nation on Earth.

As World Diabetes Day is held yesterday, the Southeast Asian nation is struggling to tackle a disease that affects as many as 20 million of its 260 million people, and has emerged as one of its deadliest killers behind stroke and heart disease.

But kicking the rice habit isn't easy, with Indonesia's favourite dish nasi goreng (mixed fried rice) sold everywhere, and the grain woven into the culinary fabric of a nation whose late dictator transformed it into a must-have meal.

"In my first week without rice I felt like I was being possessed by ghosts," said Mirnawati, a 34-year-old former construction company employee who goes by one name.

"But now I'll never go back to it," she added, about four months into her new diet.

Complications from diabetes, which affects some 425 million globally, can lead to heart attacks, stroke, blindness and even limb amputation.

Most of the world's sufferers live in low and middle-income countries like Indonesia.

Rice is packed with fibre and key vitamins. But an unbalanced diet that relies too heavily on refined white rice has been linked to an increasing global prevalence of diabetes and insulin resistance as it raises blood sugar levels, according to experts.

That is what led Mirnawati -- along with her mother and cousin -- to drop rice in favour of more vegetables, meat and nuts.

It is a step that an increasing number of Indonesians are taking in an informal 'no rice' movement, although there are no official numbers. The push, partly driven by social media, has been

backed by local governments including cultural capital Yogyakarta which last year rolled out a campaign to convince residents to go without rice at least one day a week.

Indonesia's legacy of rice politics makes the task tougher. Rice -- and rice production -- was the cornerstone of dictator Suharto's ambitious bid for food self-sufficiency. The programme began in the 70s and in a couple of decades had weaned much of the population off corn, sweet potatoes and other staples in favour of rice.

With local governments pushing the message, Suharto's administration even sold rice consumption as a ticket to higher social status.

"People were given this illusion that rice was healthier, gave you a higher social status and

tasted better than other staple foods," said Anhar Gonggong, a historian at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences.

"There was an authoritarian aspect to this rice myth. Not in the sense that guns were pointed at

people to force them to eat rice, but it implanted the myth deeply in the minds of many Indonesians.

"Now we know the impact that rice has had on our society."

Now, Indonesia is now trying to reverse its decades-old policy by convincing citizens to reduce their consumption of rice, but officials acknowledged bringing it down to average global levels could take decades.

Selling millions of Indonesians on a low- or no-rice diet will be a Herculean task, despite the possible health benefits.

"I tried the no-rice lifestyle several times, but I failed," said Bali resident Mentari Rahman.

"My tongue is too Indonesian -- I just couldn't stay away from it."



SOURCE: AFP



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