

'If we lose: North Korea' Myanmar poets square off against junta's war on words

AFP, Bangkok

Before he was killed, Khet Thi's poems railed eloquently against Myanmar's sudden coup, joining a deluge of protest verse celebrating democracy demonstrators and defying the military's brutal war on words.

As soldiers unleashed a violent crackdown on resistance to the army takeover, he implored the public to stand firm against what he saw as an existential threat to the country's future.

"We have to fight to win this battle," he wrote. "If we lose: North Korea. If we win: South Korea."

Last month, scores of police and soldiers surrounded the home he shared with his wife and family in the central city of Shwebo.

They accused the poet -- who baked cakes and made ice cream to support his family -- of planning a series of bomb blasts, and demanded he give himself up.

The next day his wife Chaw Su was summoned to a hospital in Monywa around 80 kilometres away.

"I thought I would be able to (bring) him some clothes," she told AFP. But there was no need, according to a police officer, who told Chaw Su her husband was dead.

"I got only the dead body back," she told AFP.

Myanmar has been in uproar since the February coup ended a 10-year experiment with democracy that had loosened the fetters of censorship and allowed for greater self-expression.

As some protesters picked up hunting rifles and slingshots, poets like Khet Thi joined a fight against the coup staged by a population unwilling to surrender hard-won democratic freedoms.

Along with violence in the streets, the junta has tried to stifle dissent with internet blackouts and by rounding up celebrities and civil servants who have called for rebellion.

A video uploaded to Facebook soon in the weeks after the putsch showed a collage of defiant protesters reciting poems against the military.



WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY 2021

Samsudin, a storyteller holds paper cutouts of animals, as he performs fairy tales for the local children to commemorate World Environment Day at a beach in Indramayu, West Java Province, Indonesia, yesterday. The theme for World Environment Day 2021 is 'Ecosystem Restoration'. It will kick off the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), a global mission to revive billions of hectares, from forests to farmlands, from the top of mountains to the depth of the sea.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

US to restore endangered species protections

The administration of President Joe Biden on Friday announced it would restore protections under the Endangered Species Act, a law credited with saving iconic animals like the gray wolf and bald eagle, which were loosened by his predecessor Donald Trump. Conservation groups welcomed the move but said they were concerned about how long the reversal might take. "The US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is committed to working with diverse federal, Tribal, state and industry partners to not only protect and recover America's imperiled wildlife but to ensure cornerstone laws like the Endangered Species Act are helping us meet 21st century challenges," said the agency's Martha Williams. The FWS now proposes to undo those changes, saying it would formulate new rules in the coming months.

Nigeria 'indefinitely' suspends Twitter

Nigeria's government said on Friday it was suspending Twitter's operations indefinitely, two days after the social media giant deleted a tweet from President Muhammadu Buhari's account for violating its rules. Twitter was still working in Africa's most populous country soon after Friday's statement, which triggered immediate criticism from rights groups and analysts about freedom of expression. The information ministry announced the suspension on its own Twitter account though it gave no details on when the decision would take effect or what form the suspension would take. Buhari in his tweet criticised a segment of people for unrest in the country's southeast. The 78-year-old president, a former general, referred to those "misbehaving" in recent violence in the southeast, where officials blame separatists for attacks on police and election offices. Minister of Information Lai Mohammed on Wednesday accused Twitter of ignoring violent messages from a separatist leader and also referred to Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey's support for the #EndSARS protests last year in Nigeria against police brutality.

US judge overturns California assault weapons ban

A US judge overturned California's three-decade-old ban on assault weapons Friday in a move swiftly condemned by the state's governor Gavin Newsom as gun-related homicides surge across America. In a 94-page decision, federal Judge Roger T Benitez described California's assault weapons ban -- in place in 1989 -- as unconstitutional and defended the right of Americans to own semi-automatic rifles. "Like the Swiss Army Knife, the popular AR-15 rifle is a perfect combination of home defense weapon and homeland defense equipment," he wrote. Benitez said he would give the state 30 days to appeal the decision, which Governor Newsom said posed a "direct threat to public safety" and which he vowed to challenge. The decision comes as gun violence surges across the United States. Mass shootings have taken place in Florida, Indiana, California, Colorado and Georgia, in a surge in violence that President Joe Biden has branded an "epidemic."

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

At least 20 killed by Junta forces

Say media reports as clashes with rebels intensify; junta leader meets Asean envoys

REUTERS

At least 20 people were killed by Myanmar's security forces in the Ayeyarwady river delta region yesterday after villagers armed with catapults and crossbows fought back against troops searching for weapons, local media and residents said.

That would make it the heaviest civilian death toll in nearly two months. Some 845 people had previously been killed by the army and police since the Feb. 1 coup, according to an activist group. The junta has disputed that figure.

Reuters was unable to reach a junta spokesman yesterday for comment on the violence at Hlayswe village in Kyonpyaw township in the Ayeyarwady Region. Reuters could not independently verify the reports.

The army has struggled to impose control since it overthrew elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi after a decade of democratic reforms had opened up the once isolated Southeast Asian state.

Clashes broke out before dawn yesterday at Hlayswe, some 150 km northwest of the main city of Yangon, when soldiers said they

had come to search for weapons, at least four local media outlets and a resident said.

"The people in the village only have crossbows and there are a lot of casualties on the people's side," said the resident, who asked not to be identified.

Khit Thit Media and the Delta News Agency said 20 civilians had been killed and more wounded.

POST-COUP MYANMAR

It was some of the worst violence since the coup in the Ayeyarwady region, an important rice growing area that has large populations of both the Bamar majority ethnic group, from which much of the army is drawn, and the Karen minority.

Since the coup, conflicts have flared in the borderlands where some two dozen ethnic armies have been waging insurgencies for decades. The junta has also been faced by daily protests and paralyzing strikes.

The anti-junta Shwegu People's Defence Force said it had attacked a police station in northern Shwegu late on Friday together with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).

In eastern Myanmar, the MBPDF (Moby People's Defence Force) said it had clashed with the army on Friday and four "terrorist soldiers" had been killed.

Despite the turmoil, Myanmar's army has shown little sign of heeding calls from its opponents to restore democracy. This week the junta received its first high-profile foreign visitors -- the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross and envoys from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing met on Friday with the two Asean envoys.

The Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, a group of independent international experts, said it was crucial that the Asean envoys also meet protest leaders, members of a parallel opposition government, elected lawmakers and Suu Kyi's party.

"Failure to meet with all relevant parties risks lending legitimacy to the junta and undermines the enormous effort and sacrifice made by the people of Myanmar to resist the junta's violent and unlawful attempt to seize power," it said.



"With what conscience can you go to work while everyone goes out and protests?" asked one man, referring to a mass strike campaign launched to pressure the junta.

Poetry played a prominent role in Burma's struggle for independence against colonial power Britain and the decades of military rule that followed, when scores of writers were locked up as political prisoners.

UK-based poet Ko Ko Thett believes the medium has struck a chord with ordinary people "overwhelmed with rage, disbelief and grief" at the junta's takeover.

He put his own writing on the back burner in order to concentrate on translating works by fellow poets writing from post-coup Myanmar -- some of whom, like Khet Thi, have since been killed.

Many have mobilised online in their battle against the junta, including an underground collective of 30 bars from across the country spreading their verse on Facebook. "There is so much crime against humanity (in Myanmar). Poets in such situations live with tears in every single breath," one poet, who asked to remain anonymous for security concerns, told AFP.

"Our poems are hordes of screaming children."



AN explosives expert of Hamas lays out unexploded projectiles from the aftermath of the May 2021 conflict with Israel, at a local police precinct in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, yesterday. Eleven days of conflict between Israel and Hamas erupted on May 10. More than 250 Palestinians were killed in hundreds of Israeli air strikes in Gaza. Rockets fired by Gaza militants killed 13 people in Israel.

PHOTO: AFP

Jihadist attack kills dozens in Burkina Faso

AFP, Ouagadougou

Around 100 civilians were killed overnight in the deadliest attack in Burkina Faso since jihadist violence erupted in the country in 2015, security and local sources said Saturday.

The attack occurred during the night of Friday to Saturday when "armed individuals staged an incursion" into the northern town of Solhan, a security source said.

"The toll, which is still provisional, is about 100 dead, men and woman of different ages", the source said.

The government confirmed the attack and the death toll.

Assailants struck around 2:00 am (0200 GMT) against a position of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Motherland (VDP), an anti-jihadist civilian defence force which backs the national army, before attacking homes and carrying out "executions," a local source said.

The VDP was set up in December 2019 to help Burkina's poorly-equipped military fight jihadists but it has suffered more than 200 fatalities, according to an AFP tally.

The volunteers are given two weeks'

military training, and then work alongside the security forces, typically carrying out surveillance, information-gathering or escort duties.

"In addition to the heavy human toll, the worst recorded to date, homes and the market were set on fire," another security source said, voicing concern that the "still temporary toll of a hundred dead may increase."

The authorities have declared three days of national mourning, ending Monday night at 11:59 pm.

The massive attack by suspected jihadists came hours after another attack Friday evening on Tadayat village in the same region, where at least 14 people were killed.

Since 2015 Burkina Faso has struggled to fight back against increasingly frequent and deadly jihadist attacks from groups including the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (EIGS).

The attacks first started in the north near the Mali border, but have since spread to other regions, particularly in the east.

Around 1,300 people have died and more than a million have fled their homes.



Facebook bans Trump for 2 years

Revises rules for politicians

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook on Friday banned former US president Donald Trump for two years, saying he deserved the maximum punishment for violating platform rules over a deadly attack by his supporters on the US Capitol.

The punishment will be effective from January 7, when Trump was booted off the social media giant, and comes after Facebook's independent oversight board said the indefinite ban imposed initially should be reviewed.

"Given the gravity of the circumstances that led to Mr. Trump's suspension, we believe his actions constituted a severe violation of our rules which merit the highest penalty available under the new enforcement protocols," Facebook vice president of global affairs Nick Clegg said in a post.

In updating its policies, Facebook also said it will no longer give politicians blanket immunity for deceptive or abusive content based on their comments being newsworthy.

At the end of Trump's two-year ban, Facebook will enlist experts to assess whether his activity on the platform still threatens public safety.

Trump said in a statement the ban was an "insult" to voters, renewing his false claims that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him.

"They shouldn't be allowed to get away with this censoring and silencing," Trump said.

Bomb-sniffing rat hero retires

AFP, Phnom Penh

A giant African pouched rat called Magawa who spent years sniffing out landmines in the Cambodian countryside has stopped working and will enjoy a well-earned retirement eating bananas and peanuts, his employers told AFP.

Magawa, originally from Tanzania, was trained by the Belgian charity APOPO which says the rodent helped clear mines from 225,000 square metres of land in his five-year career, the equivalent of 42 football pitches.

But after detecting 71 landmines and 38 items of unexploded ordnance "he is getting a bit tired", Michael Heiman, the charity's programme manager in Cambodia, told AFP on Saturday.

"The best thing to do is to retire him." Millions of landmines were laid in Cambodia between 1975 and 1998, causing tens of thousands of casualties.

APOPO trained Magawa in his native Tanzania to detect the chemical compound within explosives by rewarding him with tasty treats -- his favourites being bananas and peanuts.

He alerts de-miners by scratching the earth. Magawa can scurry across an area the size of a tennis court in just 30 minutes,



something that would take four days using a conventional metal detector.

He is big enough to be attached to a leash as he goes about his business but light enough not to set off mines.

In September last year the rodent won the animal equivalent of Britain's highest civilian honour for bravery because of his uncanny knack for uncovering landmines and unexploded ordnance. Magawa was the first rat to receive a PDSA medal in the 77 years of the awards, joining an illustrious band of brave canines and felines -- and even a pigeon.

The group says 20 newly trained rats that recently arrived in Cambodia have just received their accreditation from the authorities to start landmine detection work.

But it will be a tough challenge following in Magawa's footsteps. Magawa is a "very exceptional rat", Heiman said.

Turning trash into treasure

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

At a time when the world is grappling with staggering amounts of plastic waste and its environmental ramifications, a woman in India's northeastern state of Assam has hit upon a novel idea to address the problem while also helping poor women earn a livelihood from it.

Rupiyoti Saikia Gogoi, 47, lives in the vicinity of Kaziranga National Park, a major tourist attraction in Assam and home to the world's largest population of one-horned rhinoceros, besides thousands of elephants, tigers, panthers, bears and exotic bird species.

In 1985, the national park was inscribed in the UNESCO's World Heritage List.

Gogoi and women from her collective, called Village Weaves, gather the waste -- plastic bottles, packets of chips and water bottles -- left behind by the tourists, wash and dry it manually and create handloom products like handbags, doormats, table mats, wall hangings, coasters, table covers, tea cosies, runners and other items from it.

Launched in 2004, the enterprise

has helped empower more than 2,300 women across 35 villages in Assam so far while also whittling down plastic pollution around the national park.

"Kaziranga is visited by millions of tourists each year, many of who leave behind heaps of garbage," says Gogoi.

"Despite a ban on littering, there are plastic bags everywhere which are not



only an eyesore but also hazardous for animals who choke on them."

Gogoi's husband Binod works for a local wildlife conservation non-profit and shares her concern about the threat of plastic waste to the environment and animals. The couple say they discussed the problem and "came up with a solution that was three-pronged -- to tackle the waste, recycle it in an eco-friendly manner

and empower local women."

Gogoi says she experimented for months before she stumbled upon a workable plan to use the waste creatively.

"At first, I tried using just plastic to make different objects from it. But it didn't work. I then experimented with other types of materials. Finally, it was only after I mixed plastic with cotton threads that I was able to create a durable and pliant fabric that was ideal for creating craft products," she says.

Gogoi says she followed simple handloom techniques she had learnt from her mother.

"Handloom weaving is a very common skill among Assamese women, especially in villages. We are trained in this craft from the age of six-seven and most households have a loom made by the ladies," she explains.

Once the technique was perfected, the self-taught artisan started sharing her knowledge with other women in Bocha Gaon village in the Golaghat district. Word spread and soon hundreds of women joined her network, making it a vibrant, statewide operation within a year.