

PAKISTAN UPHOLDS DEATH SENTENCE IN 'BLASPHEMY' REFORMIST KILLING

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Supreme Court yesterday upheld the death sentence for the killer of a politician who sought blasphemy law reform, in a verdict hailed by moderates as a blow against religious extremism. Mumtaz Qadri, a former police bodyguard, was feted as a hero by Islamist supporters after he gunned down the liberal governor of Punjab province, Salmaan Taseer, in 2011.

Qadri shot Taseer 28 times during broad daylight in an upscale market in the capital Islamabad. He later admitted the killing, saying he objected to the politician's calls to reform Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws, which rights groups say are frequently used to carry out vendettas—particularly against religious minorities. Taseer had also been vocal in his support of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who has been on death row since 2010 after being found guilty of insulting the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH).

"The criminal application filed by the convict is dismissed and the criminal appeal filed by the state is allowed, the conviction and sen-

tence allowed by the trial court are restored," Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, head of a three-member Supreme Court bench hearing appeals, said. The court also restored Qadri's terrorism conviction, removed by a lower court in March. Qadri may now file a review petition against the top court's verdict or appeal to the president for mercy, lawyer Muhammad Amir Malik, who was present at the hearing, told AFP.

"This judgment has also closed for him the option of seeking forgiveness from the family of the deceased because the restoration of the terrorism conviction means that the state will itself become a party against the convict," he added. During the hearings, Qadri's lawyers drew on Islamic texts to argue that he was justified in killing Taseer, saying that by criticising the law the politician was himself guilty of blaspheming—an argument rejected by the lead judge.

Breakthrough verdict

Blasphemy is a hugely sensitive issue in Pakistan, an Islamic republic of some 200 mil-

lion, and Qadri has been hailed as a hero by many conservatives eager to drown out any calls to soften the legislation. At his original trial, Qadri was showered with rose petals by some lawyers. His legal team included two judges, including the former chief justice of Lahore High Court.

Critics including European governments say Pakistan's blasphemy laws are largely misused, with hundreds of people languishing in jails under false charges. Even unproven allegations frequently stir mob violence and lynchings, as in the case of a Christian laborer and his wife who were burned alive on a brick kiln stove last November.

Abbas Nasir, the former editor of leading English-daily Dawn, said Wednesday's verdict was a breakthrough for the country's judiciary, who have in the past been accused of allowing their personal religious sentiments to affect their rulings. "It does show the coming of age of the judiciary. The country's highest court has spoken through its verdict rather than via the politics of the judges," he told AFP. — AFP



ISLAMABAD: In this photograph taken on January 5, 2011, arrested Pakistani bodyguard Malik Mumtaz Hussain Qadri wearing a garland is escorted by police personnel as he leaves a court in Islamabad, a day after the assassination of the governor of Punjab province Salman Taseer. — AFP



STRASBOURG: Members of the European Parliament display a banner reading "Merkel, Hollande: You betrayed Europe!" during a joint address by French President and German Chancellor at the European Parliament. — AFP

WARSHIPS START SMUGGLER PATROLS AS LEADERS PLEAD FOR JOINT ACTION

A BID TO PRESENT SOLIDARITY AT A TIME OF DIVISIONS

STRASBOURG: European warships in the Mediterranean launched a new operation yesterday to catch migrant smugglers as the leaders of Germany and France were to push for further EU action to cope with the refugee crisis. Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Francois Hollande will give a joint speech to the European Parliament, the first of its kind since 1989, in a bid to present an image of solidarity at a time of deep divisions in the EU. The military mission dubbed Operation Sophia involves six naval vessels in international waters off Libya with the power to stop, board, seize and destroy traffickers' boats in a bid to curb the worst crisis of its kind since World War II.

Around 3,000 people have died making the perilous crossing over the Mediterranean to Europe this year, while over half a million have made the voyage, mostly landing in Greece and Italy. The first phase of the operation, which involved monitoring trafficker networks and rescuing refugees from rickety boats crossing the Mediterranean, has been running since June. "Assets will conduct boarding, search, seizure and diversion, on the high seas, of vessels suspected of being used for human smuggling or trafficking," the EU mission said in a statement.

'We want to arrest them'

An Italian aircraft carrier, a French frigate and one

British, one Spanish and two German ships are all involved in the mission, which follows in the footsteps of EU anti-piracy operations on the Horn of Africa. "We follow the traffickers and want to arrest them and seize their ships," Captain Stefan Klatt, who commands the Werra, one of the German ships that is taking part in the operation, told AFP.

The EU gave the go-ahead for the operation in international waters in September, but its ships are not, for now, allowed to pursue traffickers into Libyan waters. At least three other vessels supplied by the Belgian, British and Slovenian navies are expected to arrive in the area at the end of October to complete the force, which also include four aircraft and 1,318 personnel. But the operation is a drop in the ocean compared to the huge scale of a problem that has seen 630,000 migrants illegally enter the EU this year as people flee conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Turkey is now the main launching point for migrants trying to enter Europe, and the EU on Tuesday offered Ankara a plan under which it would resettle more refugees if the Turks establish new camps and boosts its coastguard.

Berlin Wall

With the European project creaking under the strain of the huge movement of desperate people,

Merkel and Hollande were to issue a rallying cry in their speech to European lawmakers in Strasbourg. The last time the leaders of France and Germany stood together in parliament was 26 years ago when Francois Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl gave a similar speech just weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

They are expected to highlight a common and multifaceted solution to the crisis that calls for admitting tens of thousands of genuine refugees, tightening EU external borders and cracking down on smugglers. But Europe has been deeply divided over how to respond to the crisis, which in addition to the Mediterranean has seen a new front opening over the summer in Hungary and Croatia as migrants cross the Balkans. Plans to relocate 160,000 refugees to other EU nations from overstretched Greece and Italy were only adopted last month after EU leaders overrode objections from eastern European states.

The crisis has also fuelled the rise of nationalist and euro-skeptic parties, as well as feeding the debate over Britain's membership of the EU, which is set to be put to a vote before the end of 2017. Two Iranians were arrested and remanded in custody after having walked through the Channel Tunnel from France to Britain, police said yesterday, the latest in a series of breaches. — AFP

RELATIVES OF JIHADISTS APPEAR IN ANTI-RADICALIZATION ADS

PARIS: Tales of heartache and confusion at losing children to the jihad in Syria and Iraq are being used by the French government to combat radicalization in new adverts launched yesterday. Baptiste fights back tears as he recounts how his 17-year-old daughter left after meeting a man on a dating site, who would go on to be a spokesman for the Islamic State group (IS).

"She took a backpack, a hat, and disappeared. The world was pulled from under our feet. Our child was stolen from us," Baptiste says in one of the adverts. He is one of several parents sharing their stories in the ads, which are being broadcast on over 20 television stations, websites and newspapers. Hundreds of French citizens have left to fight alongside Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria in recent years.

In the ads, the family members direct the public to a hotline set up in April 2014 to report signs of radicalization. More than 3,000 alerts have since been made to the hotline, 23 percent of which concern minors—most of them girls. Prime Minister Manuel Valls told RTL radio on Wednesday that there were more than 500 French citizens currently in Iraq and Syria.

There are also "hundreds, even thousands of youths affected by radicalization," he said. "It is a considerable challenge for our society that requires us to mobilize families." France has stepped up its efforts to fight radicalization since a series of jihadist attacks by gunmen left 17 dead in January in Paris. The country has been named as a priority target by Islamic State mil-

itants and several other attacks have been foiled. There are fears that battle-hardened jihadists could return from Iraq or Syria primed to launch attacks on home soil.

'It is torture'

The producer of the adverts, Fabienne Servan-Schreiber, said the mothers and fathers expressed the pain of those who "didn't see anything" coming, and did not understand why their children had turned to radical Islam.

Veronique, a chic Frenchwoman with curly blonde hair, tells how her 23-year-old son Quentin converted to Islam and became ever more strict in his religious practice, before eventually leaving to wage jihad to "help people." "We tried to tell him that is not Islam, we thought he would eventually turn toward a more gentle practice," she told AFP.

Imams reached out to him but it was in vain. "It is torture. We don't have an answer, we were caught out," said Veronique. Along with the three parents, Jonathan also appears in the adverts talking about his 17-year-old sister who left for Syria. "We are engaged in a very difficult battle" against terrorism, said Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve. "It brings with it a lot of suffering, separations, tragedies... for families who have seen one of their own turn." The adverts are available on the government's anti-jihadist website www.stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr, which gives advice on how to spot radicalization, and tries to point out the flaws in slick jihadist propaganda. — AFP

POROSHENKO: REAL TRUCE HAS STARTED IN UKRAINE

KIEV: President Petro Poroshenko said yesterday a "real truce" had begun in Ukraine but that a long-lasting peace with pro-Russian insurgents would still take some time. "There has not been a single shot fired. This is still not peace. This is not the end of the war," the pro-Western leader said in a televised address. "The end of war will come when every patch of Ukrainian soil is liberated from the enemy, the occupant, the aggressor. But this is not simply a ceasefire — this is a real truce."

Poroshenko's comments to a group of military training students in Kiev came one day after the separatists delayed until next year local elections they planned for the coming weeks. The conciliatory gesture came in response to strong Western pressure for Russian President Vladimir Putin—a nationalist leader who denies any involvement in Ukraine's affairs—to convince the militias to push back their vote. Poroshenko had called the planned elections "fake" and branded them as another example of the eastern fighters' refusal to commit to a tenuous February truce deal that was often broken but has been far more respected in the past month. Russia and the European Union also welcomed the rebels' Tuesday announcement because it gave time for the elections to be conducted in conformity with Ukrainian and international laws. No firm date for the local votes in Lugansk and Donetsk had yet been set.

'Return of occupied lands'

Ukrainian forces on Tuesday began withdrawing tanks from the demarcation line with Lugansk—one of the two industrial republics resisting Kiev's pro-EU leadership. A spokesman for the Lugansk insurgents told Russia's TASS-agency that his side had also moved smaller weapons 15 kilometers away from a demarcation line separating pro-Russian forces from the rest of the ex-Soviet state.

Both pullbacks conformed to a new deal signed by the warring sides on September 1. Fighters of the larger and more militant Donetsk province are to begin pulling back their tanks and smaller weapons on October 18. Poroshenko said his meeting with Putin and the leaders of Germany and France in Paris on Friday "helped us if not necessarily end, then at least firmly pause the conflict's active phase."

He also repeated that both pro-Russian regions must give up their aspirations of establishing closer diplomatic and trade relations with Moscow. "Thanks to the arms withdrawal agreement and the ceasefire, God willing, this will evolve into a stable cessation of hostilities," said the 50-year-old leader. "And in that case, we will have a chance to achieve peace and-of this, I am certain—the return of the occupied lands." — AFP

REJECTED IN EU, MIGRANTS FACE YEARS OF DEADLOCK

LONDON: Faced with a massive influx of people fleeing troubled countries, Europe's already stretched asylum system is under increasing pressure and tens of thousands of people are faced with legal deadlock. Those whose asylum applications are rejected often become snared in bureaucratic systems that struggle to process vast numbers of cases, leaving them stuck in limbo for months or even years.

The result is stress for failed asylum seekers and an expensive political headache for the European Union countries to which they have travelled. Liaquat Ali Hazara, a Pakistani activist for the persecuted Shiite Muslim Hazara group, applied for asylum in Britain in 2012 after receiving threats from the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi militant groups. His application was turned down in 2013 but he continues to challenge the decision in the courts, after spending six months in detention last year. The activist, who first came to Britain in 2005, told AFP: "I've given 11 years of my life to the UK. My etiquette, my characteristics, my idiosyncrasies — everything has become British. They have wasted my life."

The five EU countries that received the most asylum applications in the second quarter of this year were Germany, Hungary, Austria, Italy and France. The most rejections

were issued in Germany (57 percent of 46,085 initial decisions), France (75 percent of 19,425), Italy (53 percent of 13,760), Britain (60 percent of 8,080) and Sweden (25 percent of 10,065).

Long waits common

In Britain, the asylum system has embarrassed governments for years as they struggle to clear a backlog of cases linked to organizational problems. Prime Minister David Cameron pledged in July to deport more migrants and the government is consulting on legislation to curb financial support for failed asylum seekers. But there are more than 21,000 asylum applications dating back to 2006 that have still not been resolved either way, according to official figures. A study by MPs in July put the cost of holding one person for a year in immigration detention at over £36,000 (48,000 euros, \$55,000). Britain is the only EU country with no limit on the amount of time an asylum seeker can be held in an immigration detention centre.

In Germany, which expects up to a million refugees and migrants to arrive this year after Chancellor Angela Merkel took a welcoming approach, there is growing public debate about the removal of failed asylum seekers which, in practice, is relatively rare.

According to the mass-circulation Bild on August 31, of 190,641 people who were obliged to leave Germany, 138,133 had obtained a temporary residence permit for health reasons or because of the situation in their home country. That left 52,508 people theoretically facing deportation.

In France, a public finance watchdog estimated this year that only one percent of asylum seekers whose cases had been rejected were expelled. The Socialist government, which faces a growing challenge from the far-right National Front party, put the figure at around 20 percent and ministers are trying to speed up processing times. Migrants' representatives argue that the system's failings hinder new arrivals' efforts to integrate, while right-wingers say it prompts migrants to bypass official channels altogether. In Sweden, rejected asylum seekers usually have between two and four weeks to leave the country voluntarily after their application is rejected. The system is considered to work efficiently but questions have arisen over how long it will cope given the large numbers arriving. Charlotte Lindeberg, a spokeswoman for the Swedish Migration Board, called the increase "a challenge" and said tackling it would require "increased and closer cooperation" between different authorities. — AFP



PRESEVO: A migrants girl waits for her parents to register with the police at a refugee center in the southern Serbian town. — AFP