

INDIAN WOMEN BARRED FROM TEMPLE DESPITE COURT ORDER VOW TO KEEP FIGHTING

MUMBAI: Scores of women who were barred entry to a Hindu temple in western Maharashtra state despite a court order in their favor have vowed to carry on the fight for equal access to places of worship, with the government also backing the court's stand.

A Mumbai court last week said it is the fundamental right of a woman to enter any place of worship that allows men

access, and that the state should protect this right. Yet villagers prevented the women from entering the temple, with police dragging away and detaining the activists briefly.

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis over the weekend reiterated his support for the court order. "There is no place for discrimination in Hindu culture," he said at a public rally. "We will imple-

ment the honorable high court's decision in true spirit."

The Shani Shingnapur temple in Ahmednagar in western India has barred women for centuries from the inner sanctum that is dedicated to Shani, or Saturn. It is one of a handful of Hindu temples in the country that does not allow women entry.

The fight for equal access for women has sparked similar campaigns in other

places of worship and triggered a wider debate on women's rights, with the hashtag #RightoPray trending on Twitter.

The popular Sabarimala Ayyappa temple in southern Kerala state, which denies entry to women of reproductive age, is the subject of a petition in the Supreme Court. A separate group of women is demanding access to a landmark mosque in Mumbai. Trupti Desai, leader of a group

that has led the protest for entry in the Shani Shingnapur temple, said they would file a contempt petition against the state if it failed to do so.

Authorities at the Trimbakeshwar temple in Maharashtra, which is also the subject of protests by women for denying them access, on the weekend said it would not allow men or women to enter the inner sanctum henceforth. —Reuters



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif looks on as he waits for the arrival of President Mamnoon Hussain at the venue of the Pakistan Day military parade on March 23, 2016. —AFP

PAKISTAN PM'S FAMILY HIT BACK AFTER PANAMA PAPERS LEAK

ISLAMABAD: The family of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday defended their ownership of offshore companies after they were named in the Panama Papers, one of the biggest media leaks in history.

Revenue generation is particularly sensitive for Pakistan's government, which is receiving a \$6.6 billion bailout package from the IMF and has a tax-to-GDP ratio of 11 percent, among the lowest in the world. The leak, comprising 11.5 million documents from Panama-based law firm Mossack Fonseca, shows how some of the world's most powerful people have secreted their money offshore.

Among those named are three of Sharif's four children—Maryam, who has been tipped to be his political successor; Hasan and Hussain, with the records showing they owned London real estate through offshore companies administered by the firm.

"Nawaz Sharif does not own any company but having companies in the name of his children also raises questions," Umar Cheema of the Center for Investigative Reporting in Pakistan, told AFP. The center is partnered with the Investigative Consortium of Independent Journalists, which spent months poring over the documents before Sunday's online release.

"There are more than 200 Pakistanis which our report has identified, and they include lawyers, lawmakers and some people from the judiciary," Cheema said. Opposition leader Imran Khan called for action against Sharif.

"Our stance vindicated again as Sharif's wealth stashed abroad exposed," he tweeted, adding the country's accountability watchdog, tax authorities and election commission must take action. But Sharif's son Hussain told the country's largest private broadcaster Geo his family had done "nothing wrong".

"Those apartments are ours and those offshore companies are also ours," he said. "There is nothing wrong with it and I have never concealed them, nor do I need to do that." It is according to British law and laws of other countries that it is a legal way to avoid unnecessary tax via offshore companies.

Hussain said he left Pakistan in 1992 and therefore is not resident, adding Pakistani tax law "says that if you are not staying in Pakistan for more than 138 days, then you are not required to declare your assets". Regarding Khan's call for the National Accountability Bureau to investigate, he said "we voluntarily present ourselves before it or any other judicial and investigative institution in Pakistan". Pakistan's information minister Pervez Rashid also denied Sharif's children had committed any crime.

As prime minister, Sharif has invited investment in Pakistan. But the latest revelations could raise uncomfortable questions about why his family has kept their wealth abroad. A report commissioned by Britain's Department for International Development last year said Pakistan's economy was facing an "existential crisis" stemming from its woe of tax collection rates and inability to finance itself.

Ali Nadir, a financial analyst, said the use of offshore companies was in some cases legitimate. But he added: "I believe political and business leaders will be hard-pressed to take the privacy defense given the worldwide move towards a better track of money, tax evasion, laundering and corruption."

"This may also start more locally focused probes as there are likely to be disclosure issues." The Panama Papers have whipped up a storm of controversy over offshore wealth, ensnaring political leaders, sports figures and underworld members across the globe in the scandal. —AFP

SUU KYI DROPS TWO MINISTERIAL JOBS, TAKES ON SPOKESWOMAN ROLE VOWS TO RULE 'ABOVE' THE PRESIDENT

YANGON: Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi has dropped plans to run two major ministries but will act as spokeswoman for the country's new president, a ruling party official said yesterday. Banned from becoming president by a junta-era constitution, Suu Kyi has cemented control over the country's first civilian-led government in decades by taking on a string of senior roles in the new administration.

She has vowed to rule "above" the president, picking school friend and close aide Htin Kyaw for the role. Lawmakers from her National League for Democracy party are also pressing for a special "state counsellor" position for the Nobel laureate, an appointment that would allow her to liaise between the presidency and parliament.

Last week the NLD said she would take on four cabinet posts—foreign, energy, education and the ministerial position in the president's office. But during a parliamentary session yesterday, the NLD put forward two new names for the energy and education portfolios, according to NLD spokesman Win Htein. "Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will be the spokesperson for the president," he added, without elaborating on the rejig. The move will free up the 70-year-old's already busy day-to-day responsibilities while reinforcing control over her proxy president Htin Kyaw.

Background

Hopes are growing that the newly sworn-in government can accelerate the country's economic and political rejuvenation after nearly half a century of military repression. Suu Kyi's party won a huge mandate at last November's elections. But the constitution effectively bans her from the top post as it rules out anyone with foreign-born children or spouses from becoming president.

Suu Kyi married and had two sons with a British national. The military also retains control of the key home, defence and border affairs ministries, while 25 percent of parliamentary seats are reserved for unelected soldiers.

The military has already balked at the NLD's plans to make Suu Kyi a "state counselor" with army MPs

in parliament last week saying the move bypasses the constitution. The proposal is likely to sail through the NLD-dominated legislature.

Handover of power

Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Myanmar in the fiscal year ending in March grew to nearly \$9 billion, a government official said on yesterday, after a rush of last-minute approvals before the handover of power to Aung San Suu Kyi's administration.

The figure, a record high, rose

million people.

San Myint said FDI rose sharply after a body approving projects signed off on several large deals before Suu Kyi's government took power in April, following an election win last year by her National League for Democracy. "(Projects) pending a long time in the process due to lack of necessary information were expedited before the end of the fiscal year," said San Myint.

Myanmar received \$4.1 billion in FDI in 2013/2014 and that number doubled by the end of last fiscal year as foreign firms won oil

"Foreign direct investment is expected to get a lift from the successful political transition following national elections in November 2015, with investment flowing into newly established special economic zones and rapidly expanding transport, telecommunications, and energy sectors," the bank said.

Growth in Myanmar's investment follows reforms launched in 2012 by former president Thein Sein, a former general who enlisted help from technocrats and global financial institutions to



NAYPYITAW: Aung San Suu Kyi attends the presidential handover ceremony on March 30, 2016. —AP

by about \$1 billion compared with the previous fiscal year, fuelled by investment in the energy, manufacturing and telecoms sectors, San Myint, an official at the Directorate of Investment and Company Administration, told Reuters.

The investment reflects growing, if still cautious, interest in one of Asia's last remaining untapped markets, which has offered tax breaks and export tariff perks to create urgently jobs for its 51.5

and gas concessions and international hotel chains started moving in. Singapore tops the list of foreign investors, the official said, followed by China, Hong Kong and the Netherlands. He said a detailed breakdown was not available as it was still being calculated.

The Asian Development Bank forecast last week Myanmar's economic growth would recover to 8.4 percent in the fiscal year ending March 2017, partly thanks to a pick up in foreign investment.

overhaul an economy that wilted under sanctions and inept policymaking during five decades of military rule.

The lifting of most Western embargoes has allowed foreign access to sectors from banking, property and tourism to factories, infrastructure, airports and agribusiness. The \$9 billion in FDI is some 27 times the \$329.6 million received in 2009/2010, the year before the military ceded power. —Agencies

BANGLADESH POLICE FIND WEAPONS AFTER BLAST KILLS 2

DHAKA: Police seized grenades, pistols and bullets from a house in a northern Bangladeshi village yesterday, a day after an explosion killed two suspected militants.

Authorities believe the house in the Sherpur area of Bogra district was occupied by members of a banned Islamist militant group, Jumatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh, and that the bomb blast Sunday was an accident, local police chief Mohammed Asaduzzaman said. "We suspect that the house was being used as a den for making bombs," he said.

Witnesses told police the explosion occurred inside the one-story building, but could not identify the two dead men, suggesting they were not local people.

Asaduzzaman said the building's owner, who lives elsewhere, said a man who identified himself as an auto-rickshaw driver rented

the home about five months ago. Police said they could not locate the man after Sunday's blast. A 12-member bomb disposal unit searched the house on Monday and recovered 20 grenades, four pistols and 25 bullets, Asaduzzaman said. The grenades were then defused, he said.

A wave of deadly attacks last year on foreigners, secular writers and members of the minority Shiite and Ahmadiya communities has raised concerns about security in Bangladesh. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for some of the attacks, but Bangladesh authorities dismissed those claims and instead blamed local militant groups, including Jumatul Mujahedeen Bangladesh. The government insists it has the security situation under control and has arrested several suspects. —AP

MALDIVES RELEASES JOURNALISTS ARRESTED OVER CRACKDOWN PROTEST

MALE: Maldives police have released 16 journalists arrested during a protest against a perceived government crackdown on press freedom on the politically troubled holiday islands, officials said yesterday. The journalists, which the government said were released late Sunday, have been ordered to report to police for questioning over the demonstration held outside President Abdulla Yameen's office in the capital Male. "We were told that we disobeyed police orders and they want to question us further," Zaheena Rasheed, an editor of the private Maldives Independent website, told AFP after she was released.

Police used pepper spray to break up Sunday's protest against the government's move to criminalize defamation, which media fear will be used to stifle freedom of speech. A draft bill proposes heavy fines and jail terms for offenders.

The government said in a statement the demon-

stration was broken up because journalists were gathered in "a high security zone, where protesting is prohibited", adding that the group was detained for 10 hours in total. Political turmoil in the Maldives has dented its image as a peaceful paradise for well-heeled honeymooners. The Indian Ocean nation adopted multiparty democracy in 2008 after decades of autocratic rule, but has faced international criticism over a recent erosion of rights.

Rasheed said the released media met yesterday with US ambassador Atul Keshap, who was visiting from Sri Lanka where he is based. The journalists raised concerns about press freedom in the nation, gripped by turmoil since the toppling of its first democratically elected leader Mohamed Nasheed in February 2012. "Appreciated the opportunity to meet with Maldives journalists arrested during Sunday's protest," Keshap said on Twitter, posting a photo of himself with them. —AFP



PESHAWAR: Pakistani residents cross a flooded street following heavy rain on the outskirts yesterday. —AFP

AT LEAST 55 KILLED IN FLASH FLOODS IN NORTHERN PAKISTAN

ISLAMABAD: Flash floods triggered by heavy rain in Pakistan have killed at least 55 people and rescuers were trying yesterday to help thousands of survivors including some cut off by a landslide in a mountain valley, officials said.

The weather system that brought the unusually heavy rain was expected to move northeast, towards northern India, although more isolated storms were expected in northern Pakistan, the

Meteorological Department said.

Yousuf Zia, a disaster management official in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, said nearly 150 homes had been destroyed and tents and blankets were being distributed to the homeless. "There are 30 people stranded by a landslide in the Kohistan Valley where we have sent a helicopter to rescue them," Zia said. Forty-seven people were killed and 37 injured in Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa, Zia said, while eight people were killed in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, officials there said. Landslides caused widespread damage to roads and communication infrastructure in the Pakistani side of Kashmir, they said. One of the worst-affected districts was the Swat Valley, northwest of the capital, Islamabad, where 121 mm (4.76 inches) of rain fell on Sunday, the Meteorological Department said. —Reuters