

ANIMAL ACTIVISTS TARGET CHINA DOG MEAT FESTIVAL

BEIJING: Animal rights activists are seeking to shut down an annual summer dog meat festival in southern China blamed for blackening the country's international reputation as well as fueling extreme cruelty to canines and unhygienic food handling practices.

Activists from a coalition of groups said yesterday that they will continue press for the festival to be banned as well as legislation outlawing the slaughtering of dogs and cats and the consumption of their meat. While an estimated 10-20 million dogs are killed for their meat each year in China, the June 20 event in the city of Yulin has come to symbolize the cruelty and lack of

hygiene associated with the largely unregulated industry.

Why this needs to stop

Yu Hongmei, director of the VShine Animal Protection Association, said China needs to follow the example of the vast majority of developed nations that have banned eating dog and cat. "China needs to progress with the times," Yu said. "Preventing cruelty to animals is the sign of a mature, civilized society."

Restaurant owners say eating dog meat is traditional during the summer, while opponents say the festival that began in 2010 has no cultural value and was merely invented to drum up business.

Since 2014, the local government has sought to disassociate itself from the event, forbidding its employees from attending and limiting its size by shutting down some dog markets and slaughterhouses. Still, as many as 10,000 dogs, many of them stolen pets still wearing their collars, are slaughtered for the festival held deep inside the poor, largely rural Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

Some are trucked in hundreds of kilometers stuffed six or seven to a crate or small metal cage without food or water. Slaughtering takes place in front of the animals, usually with a club to induce the pain and fear that restaurant owners claim makes their adrenaline-rich meat tastier.

"Psychologically and mentally, they have already died many times," said Peter J. Li, Humane Society International's China policy specialist.

Health disadvantages

Dog meat also poses a risk to human health by spreading diseases such as trichinellosis, rabies and cholera, the Humane Society says. Guangxi is already one of China's five worst areas affected by human rabies, and Yulin ranks as one of the top 10 Chinese cities in terms of cases, the organization says.

Activists said rallies held around the country to oppose dog eating, as well as outrage on social media from the growing

ranks of dog lovers, are already having an effect. Dog meat restaurants have been forced to take the festival indoors and large-scale open air dog meat consumption is no longer seen.

However, a draft animal cruelty law remains mired in China's legislature and prosecution of dog thieves and those violating animal transport laws remains lax, activists complain. Yu Dezhi, secretary general of Animal Protection Power, said he was confident that shifting consumption habits will eventually help build the necessary groundswell against the Yulin festival and dog eating in general. "There is simply no market for dog meat among young people," Yu said. — AP



MURRIETA: Chinese students Tony Lu (L), from Anhui and Henry Li (R) from Wuhan, spend their free time connected to China on their internet devices at their host family's home.—AFP

CHINESE 'PARACHUTE KIDS' FLOCKING TO US SCHOOLS

MURRIETA: Growing up in mainland China, Hailun "Helen" Zhou always knew that she would finish her high school education in America, whatever the cost.

"That's what everybody does," said the 17-year-old from Sichuan province who has spent the last two years studying in California and will be graduating this spring. "My father's friends all sent their kids abroad, so that was the trend."

Zhou is among a growing number of Chinese teens who are flocking to US high schools, looking for a western education and a competitive edge in gaining admission to US universities and then finding a job back home. But the pursuit of the American dream can quickly turn into a nightmare, experts warn, as many of these so-called "parachute kids" live in the US with little parental supervision and can end up in trouble—and even in prison. "It's a huge industry," said Joaquin Lim, who runs a company that helps place Chinese students in American schools. "The last figure I read put it at 25 billion dollars."

Of nearly one million international students enrolled in public and private institutions in the United States in 2014-2015, about 304,000 — or 31.2 percent—were from China, according to the Washington-based Institute of International Education.

Some 30,000 of those students attended secondary schools, compared to fewer than 1,000 a decade ago. The majority of these "parachute kids" aged between 14 and 19 land in southern California. For the most part, they attend Catholic or Christian schools because of restrictions by the US government on foreign student enrollment at public schools.

In cities such as Murrieta, a rural community about 130 kilometers southeast of Los Angeles, the number of Chinese students has ballooned in recent years, bringing welcome cash to the school district as well as host families who care for the teens.

It's an investment

"It costs about 50,000 dollars a year for the parents, who are mostly middle class, to send their kids here but they consider it an investment," Lim said. "Three years ago, we had about 40 Chinese students enrolled in high schools in Murrieta and today we have more than 300 and the number keeps growing."

The sleepy town of about 105,000 residents, many of them retirees, is a far cry from China's polluted mega-cities, but most of the teens adjust well to American life, said Renate Jefferson, who oversees the exchange program for the public school district. "What they notice first is the blue sky," she said. "They just

walk around in awe at the blue sky. They think it's beautiful." The students are also baffled by the freedom they enjoy academically and the artistic outlets available to them—a welcome change from the rigorous, numbers-obsessed learning system in China.

"If there is one word to describe life here, it's the word 'free,'" said Junheng "Carl" Li, 19, who is graduating this year from a Catholic school in Murrieta. "You have a lot of choices and much more freedom to study what you're interested in."

Shady intermediaries, no supervision

But many of the "parachute kids" whose parents rely on shady intermediaries to help them through the bewildering application process are in for a hard landing in America, ill-equipped to navigate the cultural transition and their newfound independence.

Last month, three Chinese teens enrolled at a private school in Rowland Heights, a neighborhood east of Los Angeles that has a large Chinese diaspora, were given stiff prison sentences for attacking two other teens.

A judge at the preliminary hearing said the case reminded him of 'Lord of the Flies'—the 1954 novel by William Golding about a group of schoolboys stranded on a desert island who turn feral when forced to fend for themselves, local media reported.

The incident attracted widespread attention in China and prompted soul-searching on the wisdom of sending teenagers to a foreign country with no close parental supervision. "You don't send your child 6,000 miles before verifying the school and who they are staying with," Lim said. "Too often, these kids are thrown into a completely foreign environment and are not prepared to fend for themselves."

Police sergeant Steven Perez, who was involved in the Rowland Heights case, said officers are increasingly finding teens out on their own at night or even living in homes bought by their parents with little or no adult guidance. "You basically have kids who are managing themselves and have no one to answer to," Perez said. "Or you have kids basically renting a room where they are residents and they are not accountable to those people either." Evan Freed, an attorney who represented one of the Rowland Heights teens who was sentenced to 13 years in prison, said the case should serve as a wake-up call to parents that they could be setting their kids up for disaster rather than a bright future.

"As my client told the court—she felt lost, she felt sad that her family wasn't here and that she basically took advantage of the freedom that she had," Freed said. — AFP

VIETNAM SEIZES CHINESE VESSEL FOR INTRUSION

HANOI: Vietnam's coast guard in a rare move has seized a Chinese vessel for allegedly intruding in its waters, state media reported yesterday. The Thanh Nien newspaper said that the vessel has been towed to the northern port city of Hai Phong, and that the ship, its captain and two sailors, all Chinese, are under the supervision of Vietnamese authorities.

The vessel, disguised as a fishing boat, was carrying 100,000 liters of diesel oil and was intercepted by Vietnamese coast guard near Bach Long Vi island in the Gulf of Tonkin on Thursday, it said. The captain told authorities the fuel was to be sold to Chinese fishing boats operating in the area, it said. Hai Phong coast guard officials declined to comment yesterday.

The newspaper said that in the last two weeks of March the coast guard had chased 110 Chinese fishing boats out of Vietnamese waters. Vietnam's coast guard often warns and chases Chinese

fishing boats out of its waters but rarely seizes them.

Vietnamese fishermen complain they are harassed, attacked and have had their catches confiscated by Chinese authorities while they fishing in the South China Sea. Vietnam is locked in a territorial dispute with China in the South China Sea, which is rich in resources and occupies one of the world's busiest sea lanes.

Vietnam, China and Taiwan have competing claims over the Parcel Islands which are occupied by China, while the three along with the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei have claimed parts or all of the Spratly Islands.

Chinese growing territorial assertiveness in the region including recent massive land reclamation of reefs and atolls in the Spratlys and its increased military actions in the two island chains have raised concerns among neighbors and the United States. — AP

N KOREANS FLEE TO END UP ADRIFT IN THE SOUTH

'THERE ARE TIMES WHEN I REGRET IT A LOT'

SEOUL: A middle-aged man is walking through a quiet Seoul neighborhood when he suddenly stops. He lights a cigarette, cupping his hands to shield the flame from the winter wind, and takes a deep draw, remembering how things used to be. He's a former policeman, a broad-shouldered man with a growling voice and a crushing handshake.

Back where he came from, he says, he was someone who mattered. "In North Korea, people were afraid of me," he says. He says it wistfully, almost sadly, like a boy talking about a dog he once had. "They knew I could just drag them away."

That fear meant respect, and bribes, in the North Korean town where he lived, a place where the electricity rarely worked and the Internet was only a rumor. It meant he could buy a TV, and that he had food even as those around him went hungry. It meant that when he grew exhausted by the relentless poverty and oppression around him, and when relatives abroad offered to advance him the money to escape, he had connections to a good smuggler.

Just over a year ago, that smuggler showed him where to slip across a river and into China, on his way to South Korea. His new home is one of the wealthiest and most technologically advanced nations in the world. It has a thriving democracy and a per-capita income at least 12 times larger than the North's. Seoul is a city of infinite shopping choices, glass-fronted office towers and armies of exquisitely dressed businesspeople. He used to dream of the easy life he'd have here. And what does he think now? "Sometimes, when my work is too hard, I think about my job as a policeman," says the man, who spoke on condition his name not be used, fearing for the safety of relatives who still live in the North. "I didn't have problems with money back then. I ate what I wanted to eat." He pauses, thinking about his decision to leave: "There are times when I regret it a lot."

The risks

Every year, thousands of North Koreans risk imprisonment, or worse, to leave their homeland, many hoping to eventually reach the South. Instead, they often find themselves lost in a nation where they thought they'd feel at home, struggling with depression, discrimination, joblessness and their own lingering pride in the repressive nation they left behind. Surveys have shown that up to one-third would return home if they could.

Take the former policeman, an increasingly bitter day laborer who now supports his family hauling bags of cement through the sprawling apartment blocks constantly under construction around Seoul. His hands are rougher than sandpaper now. His fingernails are warped. He sleeps most nights in a dormitory near his latest construction site, just outside the city, only occasionally visiting his wife and the rest of his family, who live in a middle-class Seoul neighborhood.

"I knew that South Korea was a capitalist country, that it was very rich. I thought that if I can just get there, I can work less but earn a lot of money," he says. He grimaces when he thinks of his naïveté.

More than 27,000 North Koreans exiles live in the South, most arriving since a brutal famine tore at the country in the mid-1990s. Government control foundered amid widespread starvation, and security loosened along the border with China. While security has again tightened, nearly 1,300 refugees reached South Korea last year, according to statistics compiled by the Seoul government. For most, the journey required bribing border guards, life underground in China for months or years, and weeks of travel through still more countries.

They left behind one of the most isolated nations in the world, where the ruling family has been worshipped now for three generations, and only a minuscule elite are allowed to make international phone calls. It has no free press or political opposition. While the famine is over, the country remains very poor, with hunger and malnutrition serious problems.

It's a country where jobs are assigned by the government, but where most families now survive by selling everything from rice to car parts in an ever-growing network of markets. Most North Korean refugees come from collective farms or hardscrabble towns near the Chinese border. Few have more than a high school education.

What happens after they escape

Tens of thousands of North Koreans are believed to live underground in China. Some stay permanently, while others slip back into the North after earning extra money. For many, though, the lure of a wealthy, Korean-speaking nation is strong, even if refugees' expectations of the South are often shaped less by reality and more by the bootlegged southern soap operas that are wildly popular in the North.

Those who go find themselves living in one of the most brutally competitive countries in the world, where education is worshipped, toddlers are offered exam-prep classes and a drive for perfection has produced one of the world's highest rates of plastic surgery. "Life in South Korea is competitive," Hong Yongpyo, South Korea's minister of unification, said in a recent speech to a group of defectors. "For you to succeed in this competition, you need to push yourself on your own."

But that can be very difficult. Despite government programs that include an immersive three-month program, along with assistance in getting apartments and jobs, the exiles are immediately marked by their accents and their confusion over everything from checking accounts to job applications. Many are noticeably shorter than southerners because of malnutrition, a serious issue in a country that sees height as a measure of attractiveness and success. When it



SEOUL: Exiled North Korean Gae-yoon Lee poses for a photo at her home.—AP

comes to finding work, they have none of the school or hometown connections that are often key here to getting hired, and many South Koreans dismiss them as lazy and difficult. When they do get jobs, seemingly simple things—such as knowing they need to arrive at work on time—can leave them flummoxed, their pride badly battered. "It has happened so many times: They show up for work for one or two days, then get into a fight with their colleagues and quit," says Ahn Kyung-su, a Seoul-based researcher who has spent years working with exiles.

As a result, they remain far less educated than most South Koreans and have far higher rates of unemployment. Their most common profession is unskilled laborer. Even success doesn't make life easy. Gae-yoon Lee, who was raised on a collective farm, left North Korea in 2010 with only a high school diploma. Six years later, she's a published poet who often writes about her childhood and the famine, and is midway through a degree in Korean literature at one of Seoul's top universities.

A quiet woman with a stylish purse and braces on her teeth, she finds herself intimidated by southerners'

intense focus on success. "Even between friends, people are always competing here," says Lee, 30. "It can be really stressful to live here." With an accent that still gives her away as an outsider, she sometimes resorts to pretending she doesn't belong at all.

"There are times when I'm too afraid to be tagged as a North Korean," she says. "So when I'm talking to South Koreans, sometimes I'll use a few English words that I remember so that people think that I'm a foreigner just learning to speak Korean. At that moment, I really want to be a foreigner."

During the first few months after he got to the South, the former policeman thought he might become a cop again, or maybe join the army. But he's too old to be a police recruit, and he says the army turned him down.

Since then, he's tumbled from one job to the next: He trained to be a welder but quit because he wasn't earning enough. He worked in a food-processing factory for a time but says his bosses refused to give him a raise. "It was because I'm from North Korea," he grumbles. Since then, there have been stints with at least two construction companies. — AP



MANILA: Philippine and US soldiers, along with visiting military attaché members, salute as the national anthems of both the US and Philippines are played during the opening ceremony of the annual joint 11-day Balikatan (Shoulder-to-Shoulder) military exercise yesterday.—AFP

US-PHILIPPINE WAR GAMES BEGIN AS CHINA WARNS 'OUTSIDERS'

MANILA: US and Philippine troops began major exercises on Monday as China's state media warned "outsiders" against interfering in tense South China Sea territorial disputes.

The official Xinhua news agency gave the warning as Manila and Washington launched the 11-day Balikatan (Shoulder-to-Shoulder) exercises with a low-key opening ceremony in Manila. US Defense Secretary Ash Carter is to fly to the Philippines next week to observe live-firing of artillery and visit US Navy ships taking part.

Some 5,000 US troops are taking part along with nearly 4,000 Philippine soldiers and 80 from Australia. "The... exercises caps Manila's recent attempts to involve outsiders in (a) regional row," China's official news agency Xinhua said in a commentary. It cited Japan, which sent a submarine on a visit to the Philippines last weekend, and Australia. "However, a provocation so fear-mongering and untimely as such is likely to boomerang on the initiators," Xinhua added.

"A big country with vital interests in Asia, the United States should first clarify the targets of its Pivot to Asia strategy, which so far has featured no more than unscrupulous inconsistency between fear-mongering deeds and peace-loving words."

China lays claim to almost all of the South China Sea, despite partial counter-claims by Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines. In recent years it has built major structures including radar systems and airstrips over reclaimed reefs and outcrops, sparking international concern it could impose military controls over the entire area.

The US does not take sides in the territorial disputes but has asserted the importance of keeping sea and air routes open. It has sent US bombers and warships on patrol close to the Chinese construction activity in recent months, infuriating Beijing. Lieutenant-General John Toolan, commander of US Marine Corps forces in the Pacific, told reporters in Manila the exercises would help the allies improve maritime security and maintain regional stability. "Our alliance is strong. The United States is committed to this relationship and these are not empty words... peace in Southeast Asia depends on our cooperation," Toolan added.

The exercises come ahead of a decision this year by a United Nations-backed tribunal on a legal challenge by Manila to China's territorial claims. The Philippines is also preparing to host US troops at five bases under a defense pact born