

## GOING ON PATROL WITH UGANDA'S CONTROVERSIAL 'CRIME PREVENTERS'

**KAMPALA:** As night falls in Uganda's capital Kampala, some 240 members of a vast volunteer "crime preventer" force parade outside a police station. "Attention!" shouts an officer as the men stand stiff-backed, before marching off in single file to help guard the city until dawn.

The volunteers are on patrol ahead of presidential polls on February 18, but rights groups have criticised the force, which they see as the enforcer of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) of incumbent President Yoweri Museveni. Museveni, who has led the east African country since 1986, is eyeing a fifth term in the elections.

His government dismisses criticism of the crime preventers, arguing it is part of a community-policing programme in existence since the 1990s. Now, however, police say it boasts some 11 million members, more than a quarter of Uganda's 37-million-strong population. "Look, they got him!" shouts Adam Sankara, 35, the Kampala district crime preventer chief, as a suspected car thief is marched into the

police station by volunteers.

Sankara, who claims to be in charge of about two million recruits, insists they are "responsible Ugandans who want to see peace and stability". A married father of two and a businessman, Sankara has been taking part in night-time patrols since 2013. Recruits learn martial arts and attend "ideological classes". Some are teenagers, others aged over 80.

"We teach them the concept of patriotism," said Sankara. "We are not partisan." He dismisses rights groups' claims that the volunteers beat people, saying the teams are armed only with a whistle and always deploy with regular police. "Sticks are just for foot drills," he said.

### 'Muscle of the ruling party?'

Police chief Kale Kayihura has insisted the force is good for Uganda, with the Daily Monitor newspaper quoting him as telling critics to "go hang" after European Union election observers voiced concerns. "Nobody will stop us as long as we have the responsibility of keeping this country

safe and secure," Kayihura said.

Others say the force is adding to lawlessness and insecurity. Last month, five international and domestic rights bodies accused the reservists of brutally assaulting and extorting cash from scores of suspects and demanded it be suspended. "Crime preventers should not be undisciplined and unaccountable recruits who become the eyes and muscle of the ruling party in every village," warned Maria Burnett from Human Rights Watch (HRW).

"These forces need to be regulated, impartial, effectively trained, and held accountable to the highest standards if they take on policing functions," Government spokesman Ofonto Ofonto on Monday issued a fresh warning over security during the election, accusing opposition parties of raising militias to stage protests if they fear they are losing the vote-claims the opposition has rejected.

Museveni faces his stiffest challenge yet from Kizza Besigye, a three-time failed presidential candidate from the Forum for

Democratic Change (FDC), and Amama Mbabazi, a former prime minister and ruling party stalwart now running as an independent.

However, few expect Museveni to lose. Mbabazi's spokeswoman Josephine Mayanja-Nkangi said his supporters had had "numerous unfavourable encounters" with the crime preventers. Senior FDC official Shawn Mubiru accused the force of openly supporting Museveni, with some members wearing T-shirts bearing his image. "Many were sent to disrupt our campaigns," he accused.

### Crime 'creators' or 'preventers'?

Gabrielle Lynch, from Britain's University of Warwick, has questioned whether the teams are "actually 'crime creators' rather than 'crime preventers'". Lynch warned they could be "used to intimidate opposition voters at the polling stations, and to quell any signs of unrest over opposition claims of electoral malpractice".

Magnus Taylor of the International Crisis Group (ICG) argues the teams are a

"front for a project that is more about keeping the older generation in power than building a society able to gainfully employ their own generation".

"The concern is that they may be inserted in a disorganised fashion into closely-fought local races, causing mayhem, or take the opportunity their new-found status may afford to extort fellow citizens," Taylor added. The force's national coordinator Blaise Kamugisha denied it was on a mission to prop up the ruling clique.

"Saying we are keeping the old generation in power is wrong," said Kamugisha, a former NRM ruling party chairman, who makes no secret of his support for Museveni. "Serving the president is a privilege and honor," he said. Meanwhile, the police say they welcome the force, with spokesman Fred Enanga claiming they are especially popular in rural areas. "We're a soft target for propaganda because we're on the frontline, ensuring that these elections go peacefully," said Enanga, insisting the scheme was "working very well". — AFP



**SUN CITY:** This file photo courtesy of the Gupta family released on May 3, 2013 shows Vela Gupta and her husband Indian-born Aakash Jahajgarhia posing with relatives and guests during ceremonies for their wedding. — AFP

## S AFRICA SCRUTINY OVER ZUMA'S CONNECTIONS TO INDIAN FAMILY

### GUPTA'S ACCUSED OF WIELDING IMMENSE POWER

**JOHANNESBURG:** Political scandals, huge economic deals and even extravagant wedding party controversies—an immigrant family that is one of South Africa's wealthiest is accused by critics of wielding immense power behind the scenes.

The Guptas, an Indian family that moved to the country in the 1990s, are alleged to exert a magnetic pull over President Jacob Zuma, and their influence has increasingly become the target of government's fiercest critics. To outsiders they may seem an industrious immigrant family that has made it big in their adopted country, but now their reputation is a key battleground in opposition efforts to oust Zuma from power.

The family has built a string of South African companies controlled by brothers Ajay, Atul and Rajesh with interests in computers, mining, media and engineering. Zuma ferociously defends his friendship with the Guptas, and many of his ministers have various ties to the family. The president's son Duduzane is a director of the Gupta's Sahara Computers and is a partner in some of their other businesses, while Zuma's third wife Bongki Ngema was also a Gupta employee.

"The Guptas are smart and shrewd business people and this can't be a normal relationship," political analyst Prince Mashele said. "There appears to be a Gupta hand in every business sector." Last week the radical leftist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) opposition party put the Guptas at the centre of its campaign against Zuma ahead of municipal elections later in the year.

### Political target

"We cannot allow a situation where South Africa is colonized by a family," EFF leader Julius Malema raged, as he blamed the Guptas for many of South Africa's problems and demanded that they leave the country.

"We will do to the Guptas what we did to the colonizers and apartheid," he said. "The more we talk, the more they become corrupt and they do not care about South Africa. We can no longer tolerate it. It's a battle, it's a war against the Guptas." Public anger towards the family soared in 2013, when a large private jet carrying foreign guests to a Gupta wedding was granted permission to land at Waterkloof Air Force base, outside Pretoria. The airport is a military facility that is normally used to receive heads of state.

The wedding party did not go through immigration checks, and were given a police escort to the marriage at a casino resort 160 kilometers away. The fact that several ministers attended the week-long lavish ceremonies fuelled further media and public antagonism towards the Guptas.

In another ongoing controversy, the Gupta-owned Tegeta Exploration and Resources company is in the process of acquiring a Glencore coal mine. The minister of mines, Mosebenzi Zwane, joined the firm's delegation that visited Glencore's headquarters in Switzerland last year to negotiate the sale. Zwane's surprise appointment as mines minister in September was widely seen to have been due to the Guptas, with whom he has been close for several years.

In another deal, VR Laser, partly run by a Gupta nephew, has entered into a joint venture with Del,

the state-owned arms manufacturer, to sell its products in Asia. "Such deals smack of the capture of public entities by private individuals," said Mashele. "This is an improper relationship that goes into the heart of our national integrity."

### Web of influence

The Guptas, who hail from Saharanpur, in northern India, developed a friendship with Zuma well before he became president in 2009. And he repays the loyalty by refusing to distance himself from them.

Atul, the middle brother, was the first to arrive in South Africa in 1993 to scout for business opportunities. In 1994 they founded Sahara Computer, named after their hometown. High-profile holdings in their portfolio include the New Age, a pro-government newspaper launched in 2010, and the 24-hour news channel ANN7, broadcasting since 2013.

Now their business ambitions are hatched from a huge residential compound in the upmarket Johannesburg district of Saxonwold. In 2011, Zuma's office issued an official statement rejecting allegations of Gupta interference, following claims that it was the Guptas who first told a minister of his appointment. The presidential office and Gupta spokesman Gary Naidoo did not respond to AFP's request for comment. "There is a feeling that the Guptas are almost running the state," Adriaan Basson, author of the book "Zuma Exposed," said. "Although there hasn't been any formal investigation into the relationship, all probabilities point to an improper alliance. I can't see President Zuma turning his back on the Gupta family." — AFP

## FINLAND'S ANTI-MIGRANT GROUP FACE OFF AGAINST HUGGY LADIES

**KEMI:** Fierce-looking squads calling themselves the Soldiers of Odin have been patrolling Finnish streets in recent months claiming to protect locals from asylum seekers, but lately they've been challenged by an unexpected crew: Smiling women serving up hugs.

In the small town of Kemi, an hour's drive south of the Arctic Circle, a group of stocky men in black bomber jackets brave freezing wintry weather of minus 15 degrees Celsius (five degrees Fahrenheit) to walk the streets, insisting they're needed to protect local women and children from what their website calls "Islamic intruders".

The handful of Odins-led by founder Mika Ranta, a 29-year-old truck driver who named the group after an ancient Norse and Germanic god-keep their eyes peeled for trouble, though no asylum seekers are seen out on the streets when AFP greets the patrol. The group claims volunteer patrols are active in at least 20 Finnish towns, clad in the group's black hats and jackets emblazoned with "S.O.O." for Soldiers of Odin. But it was here in Kemi, a working class town known for its forestry industry, that the Odins first began their patrols in October.

They started after an unprecedented flow of mostly Iraqi migrants arrived via the Swedish-Finnish border, many of them crossing through Kemi on their way to towns further south in Finland. Finland, a country of 5.4 million people, received over 32,000 asylum seekers last year, one of the highest amounts in Europe per capita. The Odins-made up mostly of working class men aged around 20 to 40 — claim the influx has led to a rise in crime. Police disagree, but Ranta is undeterred and insists their presence will prove necessary in a few months when crowds hit the lakeside beaches in summer and "rape attacks will be starting," he said.

### Neo-Nazi links

Finnish media have reported widely on the Odins' links to neo-Nazi movements. Ranta, who was convicted of a 2005 racially-motivated

attack against two immigrants, admits readily to being a neo-Nazi. "Yes, I am" — but insists his ideology and membership in the Finnish Resistance Movement has nothing to do with the patrols.

"Just because I am, as the founder or whatever, it doesn't mean the whole group are (neo-Nazis)... We're just a street patrol group, so why are people making it into something else?" Ranta argued. The Odins claim to have around 600 members in Finland, and support groups emerging in the Nordic countries and the US.

Neither the police nor the patrols have reported any violent incidents so far, but authorities are unhappy about their presence. Finnish police have repeatedly insisted they have no right to intervene. And the government has condemned their existence, with Interior Minister Petteri Orpo denouncing their "extremist features".

### 'Permission to hug'

A group of women are now intent on showing that Finland is a tolerant, safe place. The Sisters of Kyllikki-named after a joyful female character of Finnish mythology who likes to dance—are mothers, pensioners and professionals who met up on Facebook. They're countering the Odin patrols by greeting strangers with a smile and a ticket granting them "permission to hug." In Kemi, some of the passers-by look alarmed when the women approach: Talking to strangers, let alone hugging them, is unusual in taciturn Finland where respecting others' privacy is highly valued. But the women believe fear and insecurity can be overcome with simple acts of kindness. "We're here to show that Kemi is safe and peaceful and people should be nicer to each other," explained Katja Hietala, the head of the Kemi branch. A local woman in her mid-20s said she was supportive of the Sisters of Odin because they themselves are a lot scarier than anyone else who walks about here," she said, refusing to give her name for fear of reprisals on social media. — AFP



**KEMI:** A group of men calling themselves the 'Soldiers of Odin' are pictured on February 5, 2016 in Kemi, northern Finland. Fierce-looking men calling themselves the Soldiers of Odin patrol Finnish streets claiming to protect locals from asylum seekers, but they are now being challenged by a group of smiling women offering hugs and even some clowns. — AFP

## FRENCH MPs TO VOTE ON CONSTITUTION CHANGES

**PARIS:** French lawmakers were to vote yesterday on a controversial package of measures to change the constitution following the terror attacks on Paris in November. One of the measures proposed by President Francois Hollande would strip people convicted of terrorism of their French nationality, a contested move that has led to the resignation of the justice minister.

Another would enshrine in the constitution the state of emergency currently in force, giving security forces greater powers. The lower house of parliament has voted through both measures separately this week, but the collective package of measures still requires the support of lawmakers yesterday before it can pass on to the upper house, the Senate.

For it to be fully adopted, it will then also need the support of three-fifths of the Congress, the body formed when both houses meet at the Palace of Versailles to vote on revisions to the constitution. Prime Minister Manuel Valls said late Tuesday he was confident the reforms would pass, and warned lawmakers from his Socialist Party that voting against them would "put the government in difficulty and leave the president in a minority".

He said France faces a terrorist threat "without doubt more serious than before November 13" when gunmen and suicide bombers killed 130 people in Parisian bars, restaurants, a concert hall and the Stade de France stadium. The

Islamic State jihadist group claimed responsibility for the carnage, saying it was in response to French air strikes against the group in Iraq and Syria.

### Year of attacks

It was the second time in a year that jihadists had struck at the French capital. In January 2015, gunmen attacked the offices of the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo and a Jewish supermarket. The measure to strip convicted terrorists of nationality was passed by 162 votes to 148 with 22 abstentions on Tuesday, following weeks of debate.

The nationality measure has strong public support but has deeply divided Hollande's party. Christiane Taubira resigned as justice minister last month over her opposition to the measure and Hollande's former prime minister Jean-Marc Ayrault has publicly condemned the proposal. Socialist lawmakers, those from former president Nicolas Sarkozy's right-wing Republicans party and the centrist party UDI party, voted in favour of the measure, but far-left MPs and most of the ecologist lawmakers were opposed.

On his Twitter account, veteran right-wing politician Alain Juppe, a former prime minister seen as the frontrunner in next year's presidential election, dismissed the reforms as "pointless" and said they "divide all the parliamentary groups—to be avoided!" — AFP

## GERMANY PROBES CAUSE OF DEADLY TRAIN CRASH

**BERLIN:** German investigators raced yesterday to determine whether human error or technical fault was to blame for a train crash that killed 10 people, as police said all bodies had been recovered from the wreckage. There are "no more missing people," police said in a statement, adding that 17 people were severely injured and 63 others slightly hurt in Tuesday's collision near the southern spa town of Bad Aibling.

Two trains travelling at high speeds crashed head-on on a single track, with one slicing the other apart,

ripping a large gash in its side. Transport Minister Alexander Dobrindt said the line was fitted with an automatic braking system that should have prevented such accidents and investigators were probing whether the mechanism malfunctioned or whether there had been human error.

Newspaper group RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland (RND), citing sources close to the investigation, said a signalling station worker had manually deactivated the automatic signalling system to let the first train—which was running late-go past. That action

would have also shut off the automatic braking system. The second train then forged ahead on the same track in the opposite direction, before the first was able to split off where the line divides into two, according to RND. Police would not confirm the report.

### 'Thrown across the train'

Dobrindt himself had cautioned against any speculation on the causes of the disaster. "At the moment we will have to wait (for the result of the investigation). Everything else is speculation, and would be unhelpful and inappropriate," he had said on Tuesday.

Stefano, 24, a passenger on one of the trains, told Bild newspaper that the horrific accident began with a sudden "screech, like with an emergency brake." Then there was a real crash, it was damn loud. The back of the train was thrust up. The lights went out and I was thrown across half the train.

"I was so scared that I was going to die. Next to me, a man was flung head-on against a window pane, he was around 45 to 50 years old. I saw how he died," recounted Stefano, who was later helped out of the train by fellow passengers. Salvage workers expect to take at least two days to remove the mangled wreckage from the site, national news agency DPA reported.

The accident is Germany's first fatal train crash since 2012, when three people were killed and 13 injured in a collision between two regional trains in the western city of Offenbach. The country's deadliest post-war accident happened in 1998, when a high-speed ICE train linking Munich and Hamburg derailed in the northern town of Eschede, killing 101 people and injuring 88. — AFP



**MUNICH:** Policemen stand at the site of a train accident near Bad Aibling. — AFP