

News

in brief

India police to soon use chili-loaded slingshots

NEW DELHI: Police in northern India will soon use slingshots loaded with chili powder and marbles to tackle unruly protesters in the world's largest democracy, an inspector said yesterday. Not content with water cannon, tear gas and traditional wooden sticks or lathis, police in Haryana state close to New Delhi will turn to the slingshots as a "non-lethal way" to control violent crowds. "Plus it is much better than firing plastic bullets which can cause pretty bad injuries," police inspector general of Hisar district, Anil Kumar Rao, said. "It will be used only in emergency cases so that we can manage minimum collateral damage," added Rao, who came up with the idea. The locally-made slingshots are the latest in a series of unconventional measures adopted by security forces in India, which sees daily protests on a myriad of issues. Some quickly escalate out of control. In April last year police in the northern city of Lucknow said they were introducing pepper-spraying drones to control "mob crowds". Critics say the marbles could cause serious injury, but Rao said they would be used sparingly and only after the "chili balls" failed. "And it's not like we plan to use marbles on peaceful protesters, it's only meant to control hostile people," said Rao, whose officers have started practicing with the slingshots. "We have to step in and take certain action when people are burning government property, cars. This is a very, very positive step—a civilized, cost-effective weapon."

Hong Kong student held at airport after violent clashes

HONG KONG: A Hong Kong student activist was detained at the city's airport yesterday morning, apparently on suspicion of involvement in a violent Lunar New Year clash between police and protesters, his group said. The group Scholarism said on its Facebook page that 22-year-old Derek Lam Shun-hin had been detained shortly before boarding a flight to Taiwan with his family. Lam sent a voice message to friends in the group saying he was being taken away for an investigation, the group said. A lawyer working for the group has been unable to contact him, Scholarism said. At least 61 people have been held over Monday night's clashes and police have vowed further arrests. Violence broke out when activists angered over authorities' attempts to crack down on food hawkers in the crowded working class neighborhood of Mongkok held running battles with police into the early morning hours of Tuesday. Protesters pelted officers with stones, glass bottles and other pieces of debris and set fires. Police responded with arrests and warning shots. The violence was the worst in Hong Kong since pro-democracy protests rocked the city in 2014, and left a growing mistrust between the public and authorities. In its statement, Scholarism said Lam had been present at the Mongkok hawker stalls but did not participate in the violence. "We are deeply resentful of the police's indiscriminate arrest of the student as means to assault the people's right to assembly and freedom of expression," the statement said. As a participant in the 2014 protests, Lam had been charged with common assault and was due to go on trial on Feb. 18, the Hong Kong newspaper South China Morning Post reported. Yesterday was a public holiday in Hong Kong and there was no immediate comment from police or the government.

Five dead in Myanmar military plane crash

NAYPYIDAW: All five crew died when a Myanmar air force plane crashed in the capital Naypyidaw yesterday, bursting into flames soon after take off and smashing into a nearby field, the military said. One man was pulled alive from the blazing wreckage and taken to hospital but later died of his injuries, according to a rare news statement on the official Myanmar army Facebook page. "Naypyidaw airport authorities, the fire brigade, air force personnel and local residents all worked together to extinguish the fire," the statement said, adding the cause of the crash was under investigation. Hundreds of people gathered in the area as officials sifted through the smoldering wreckage of the propeller plane, according to an AFP reporter at the scene earlier Wednesday. The Beechcraft passenger plane took off from the Naypyidaw airfield in the mid-morning on a routine patrol, but burst into flames soon after leaving the runway, according to an airport official, who asked not to be named because the incident involved a military aircraft. The Ministry of Information earlier published a series of pictures of the remains of the aircraft showing just one wing intact and a thick stream of smoke rising into the air. Myanmar has a busy aviation sector, partly to compensate for the country's poor road and rail infrastructure. While news of military air crashes is relatively rare, there have been several incidents involving commercial planes in recent years. In July, an Air Bagan ATR 72 twin-engine turboprop carrying 49 passengers skidded off the runway after landing during heavy rain at Yangon International Airport. —Agencies

S KOREA TO SHUT DOWN JOINT INDUSTRIAL PARK WITH NORTH

SECOND MAJOR MEASURE TAKEN FROM LAUNCH REACTION

SEOUL: South Korea said yesterday it will shut down a joint industrial park with North Korea in response to the North's recent rocket launch, accusing the North of using hard currency from the park to develop its nuclear and missile programs.

The decision to end operations at the industrial complex in the North Korean border city of Kaesong, the last major cooperation project between the rival countries, comes after North Korea on Sunday launched a long-range rocket considered by other nations to be a banned missile technology test. The move to close the park is the second major measure taken by South Korea in reaction to the launch. Seoul also has begun talks with Washington on toughening South Korea's missile defense system.

South Korean Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo said at a news conference that the suspension of operations at the park in the North Korean border city of Kaesong would stop the North from using hard currency earned there to develop nuclear and missile technology.

Immediate reaction

The park, which started producing goods in 2004, has provided 616 billion won (\$560 million) of cash to impoverished North Korea, Hong said. "It appears that such funds have not been used to pave the way to peace as the international community had hoped, but rather to upgrade its nuclear weapons and long-range missiles," he said at the televised briefing.

The unification ministry said in

a statement that the government had "decided to completely shut down" the park. It notified North Korean authorities of the decision and asked them to help ensure the safe return of South Korean citizens from Kaesong. There was no immediate reaction to the move from North Korea.

appointment and anger. In a statement, the association of South Korean companies in Kaesong denounced the government's decision as "entirely incomprehensible and unjust."

Lee Eun Haeng, chairman of Ilsung Leports, which produces fashion goods at the park, said the

Korean workers and families who rely on the Kaesong park for their living. They have become jobless overnight."

'National security'

Nonetheless, he said, he had no choice but to accept the government's measures because they

Korean companies hired 54,000 North Korean workers to produce socks, wristwatches and other goods worth around \$500 million.

In addition to the business benefits, the park also allowed people from both Koreas to interact with each other and glimpse into lives on the other side of the border. Some South Korean snacks have become popular among North Korean workers. South Korea's government and companies invested more than 1 trillion won (\$852 million) to pave roads and erect buildings in the park zone, which lies in a guarded, gated complex on the outskirts of Kaesong, North Korea's third-largest city.

South Korean companies in Kaesong survived during past periods of tensions that led to the suspension of other inter-Korean projects. A major interruption to the park's operation came in 2013, when North Korea pulled out its workers in protest of South Korea's joint military drills with the United States.

North Korea launched a long-range rocket Sunday carrying what it said was an Earth observation satellite into space. The launch, which came about a month after the country's fourth nuclear test, was quickly condemned by world leaders as a potential threat to regional and global security. Japan announced Wednesday that it will impose new sanctions on North Korea to protest the rocket launch. The US Congress is also considering imposing more stringent sanctions on North Korea. This story has been corrected to show that the park began production in 2004, not 2005. —AP



PAJU: Visitors look at a map of the Korean peninsula at the exhibition hall of the unification observatory. —AP

South Korea's government will provide financial compensation to companies that operate at the park, the finance ministry said in a statement. South Korean businesses that operate factories at the park reacted with a mixture of dis-

companies had become "victims" of a political situation. "For the companies and for their suppliers to survive, the government should give enough compensation," Lee said by phone. "There are hundreds of thousands of South

were for the sake of "national security." Combining South Korean initiative, capital and technology with the North's cheap labor, the industrial park has been seen as a test case for reunification between the Koreans. Last year, 124 South

THAI COPS BUST GANG SENDING FAKE PASSPORTS TO MIGRANTS TO EUROPE

BANGKOK: Thai police have broken up a major fake passport ring led by an Iranian known as "The Doctor" which sent hundreds of passports to Middle Eastern customers trying to enter Europe, authorities said yesterday. The kingdom has long been a hub for a forged document industry serving human traffickers and other criminals.

Five years of investigation culminated in Monday's arrest of



BANGKOK: Fake passports are displayed at the immigration bureau in Bangkok yesterday after Thai police broke up a major fake passport ring led by an Iranian known as "The Doctor" which sent thousands of passports to Middle Eastern customers trying to enter Europe. —AFP

the alleged Iranian mastermind Hamid Reza Jafary who had learnt his skill from his late father, police said. The 48-year-old had for many years been crafting sophisticated forgeries from his home in Chachoengsao province east of Bangkok, they said.

"He (Jafary) produced passports for people from countries including Iran, Syria and Afghanistan who were escaping wars and wanted to enter Europe," according to immigration police commander Lieutenant General Nathathorn Prousoontorn. "The Doctor" confessed to the crime and could face a decade in jail if convicted, he added.

Clients emailed the Iranian forger their photos and specified the country for which they wanted a passport, the commander said, adding that Jafary guaranteed his top-quality counterfeits would not be detected by border officials. The forged documents were then sent via private courier companies or delivered to clients in Thailand by middlemen, who ensured that Jafary never met customers directly. It was not immediately clear if "The Doctor" provided passports to people fleeing to Europe during the current migrant crisis.

Best fakes around

Jafary's fake passports were the "best quality in the market", although he was unable to copy the latest micro chipped travel documents, Natthorn said. "He himself used six different passports—three from Brazil, and one each from Peru, Portugal and New Zealand," the officer added. "The Doctor" was wanted by security agencies in several foreign countries, especially in the EU and Japan, according to a police press release.

Five Pakistani middlemen were also arrested in raids in and around Bangkok for assisting the forgery ring, which sold the passports for up to 80,000 baht (\$2,300). Some of the nearly 200 travel documents found in a Monday raid on Jafary's home were completely forged, while others had been stolen from tourists and doctored, police said.

The raid also uncovered a laser engraving machine, rolls of ribbon, thin leather for passport covers as well as metal plates and stamps from various countries. Thousands of passports are reported missing annually in Thailand, where forged documents of every variety can be purchased on the streets.

The flourishing market has helped establish Thailand as a hub for human traffickers and smugglers. Two Uighur men awaiting trial for planting a deadly bomb in Bangkok last August have also been accused by police of running a crime group that helped illegal migrants obtain counterfeit documents. The pair are currently being held in a military prison.

In 2014, the spotlight also swung onto the Thai-based trade when two mystery passengers boarded the doomed Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 using European passports stolen in Thailand. In 2010, Thai authorities took part in an international police sting that saw two Pakistanis and a Thai woman arrested in Thailand for providing fake passports to groups behind global terror attacks. —AFP

AUSTRALIA STRUGGLING TO BETTER LIVES OF NATIVE ABORIGINES: PM

SYDNEY: Australia is failing to close an "unacceptably wide" gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-indigenous people, officials admitted yesterday, highlighting the devastating impact of drugs and alcohol on the country's original inhabitants.

Aborigines have lived on the vast island continent for at least 40,000 years and number just 470,000 out of a total population of 23 million. They have long had significantly lower education, employment and life expectancy compared to non-indigenous communities. In a bid to tackle the stark differences, the government introduced an annual "Closing the Gap" report in 2009, the latest edition of which was released yesterday.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull hailed progress towards achieving some of its targets, including a goal to halve the gap in child mortality by 2018, improvements in narrowing the divide in reading and numeracy, and an increase in the proportion of students completing high school. But noting that the life expectancy gap remained unacceptable, he admitted there was an enormous task ahead, with "real and difficult challenges... particularly in isolated communities".

"The life expectancy gap is still around 10 years, an unacceptably wide gap, and this target is not on track," he told parliament. Life expectancy for non-indigenous males was 79.7 years compared to 69.1 for Aborigines in 2010-12, according to official data released in 2013.

For women, it was 83.1 for the non-indigenous population, in contrast to 73.7 for Aboriginal people, with a small reduction in the gap of 0.8 years for men and 0.1 years for women between 2005-07 and 2010-12. Turnbull said that while indigenous people made up only three percent of the nation's population, they represented 27 percent of the prison population, with the adult incarceration rate rising.

He said drug and alcohol abuse was a key problem. "We must be honest about the catastrophe and violence created by drug and alcohol misuse and confront and respond to the cries for help, particularly from women and children," he said in an address to parliament in Canberra.

Racism and recognition

Turnbull stressed that working with indigenous communities across the country to develop local policies and solutions was key to bridging the gap, an approach emphasized by both supporters and critics of the yearly report.

"We have heard these words before," said Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda, who is the "Closing the Gap" campaign co-chair. "We take them with good heart but there's got to be a carrying-out of that new relationship so I think we're entitled to be a little bit cynical about it until it starts happening." Indigenous leaders also said steady policy and funding for the health targets was necessary as a revolving door of prime ministers, politicians and bureaucrats was hampering progress.

"It's turmoil not in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities but in this (parliamentary) house here that's got to be resolved so we have a really consistent policy approach and consistent funding," Reconciliation Australia co-chair Tom Calma told reporters. He added that wider issues, including tackling racism and recognizing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the constitution, needed to be addressed. Australia's founding document, which was written more than a century ago, fails to mention the country's first inhabitants.

Both Turnbull and Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten reaffirmed their commitment to holding a national referendum on the matter, with Shorten wanting a date set for the first half of next year. "Recognition cannot be a mere poetic sentence or two, stapled to the front of our constitution," Shorten told parliament. "It must be real, it must be substantive change. It must eliminate racism, and signal a declaration of national intent." —AFP

ELEPHANT RAMPAGES IN EAST INDIAN TOWN

KOLKATA: A wild elephant rampaged through an East Indian town yesterday, smashing cars and homes and sending panicked people running before the animal was tranquilized to be returned to the forest. As the frightened elephant ran amok, trampling parked cars and motorbikes, crowds of people gathered to watch from balconies and

roof tops. Some followed from a distance as the elephant moved through the streets.

"The elephant was scared and was trying to go back to the jungle," said Papaiya Sarkar, a 40-year-old homemaker who watched the elephant amble down a street near her home. The elephant had wandered from the Baikunthapur

forest, crossing roads and a small river before entering the town of Siliguri in West Bengal state.

Divisional Forest Officer Basab Rai said the female elephant appeared to be a loner without a herd, and was likely searching for food when it strayed into the town. He said it did not attack any people, and appeared to be afraid of them. After several hours, it became clear the elephant was unable to find its way back to the forest.

Authorities eventually shot the elephant three times with a tranquilizer gun and used a crane to lift it into a truck once it had calmed down. It was then taken to a park for domesticated pachyderms that is maintained by the forest department. Once the effect of the tranquilizer wore off, authorities planned to return the elephant to the forest, Rai said.

Elephants are increasingly coming into contact with people in India, as the human population of 1.25 billion soars and cities and towns grow at the expense of jungles and other elephant habitats. In India and Sri Lanka, more than 400 elephants and 250 humans are killed each year.

Yesterday, another wild elephant trampled a farmer to death in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. The farmer had been sleeping in his paddy field when the elephant appeared, police told Press Trust of India. India's elephants are also threatened by speeding trains and illegal poachers looking for ivory to sell on the black market. Today, there are about 30,000 elephants across the country, restricted to about 15 percent of their historic habitat, according to the environment ministry. Worldwide, elephants have disappeared from some 95 percent of their historical range, which once stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Yellow River in northern China. —AP



WEST BENGAL: A wild elephant that strayed into the town stands after authorities shot it with a tranquilizer gun at Siliguri in West Bengal state, India, yesterday. The elephant had wandered from the Baikunthapur forest yesterday, crossing roads and a small river before entering the town. The panicked elephant ran amok, trampling parked cars and motorbikes before it was tranquilized. —AP