

INDIA DETAINS 25 FOREIGN SHIP CREW MEMBERS IN ARMS CASE

CHENNAI: An Indian court yesterday sentenced crew members of a private American ship, including 25 foreigners, to five years in prison for illegal possession of arms in Indian waters in a verdict that could spark diplomatic tension.

The crew, which included foreign nationals from Ukraine, Estonia and six British former soldiers, was arrested from the 'Seaman Guard Ohio' in 2013 after they failed to produce papers authorizing them to carry weapons in India's territorial waters. Ten Indians were also arrested. The court in India's southern city of Tuticorin, in Tamil Nadu state, found the crew guilty of violating Indian laws by possessing prohibited arms. It also fined each crew member 3,000 rupees (\$45).

"This judgment is totally unfair and a great injustice to the accused," Arumugaram Ravipandian, a lawyer representing all 35 crew members, told Reuters. Ravipandian said his clients would seek bail and challenge the verdict in a higher court. The crew, that spent nine months in prison after the incident, has been out on bail but not allowed to leave India since 2013.

Paul Towers, a former British soldier among those convicted, said the weapons on board their ship were

properly registered. "We are speaking to our consulate ... this is not justice," said Towers. The British High Commission in New Delhi said it was providing consular assistance but could not interfere in another country's judicial process.

"Our staff in India and the UK have been in close contact with all six men since their arrest to provide support to them and their families, including attending court," it said in a statement. "Ministers have also raised this case at the highest levels, pressing for delays to be resolved." No comment was immediately available from the Ukrainian and Estonian embassies.

The southern tip of India is close to major trade routes and cargo ships often travel with armed guards to deter pirates. The ship was operated by a US maritime security firm and the incident highlighted the loosely regulated practice of placing guards on ships for protection against pirate attacks. Action by the Indian authorities has led to diplomatic rows in similar cases. Relations between India and Italy soured after a 2012 incident in which two Italian marines allegedly killed two Indian fishermen mistakenly believed to be pirates. — Reuters



LAHORE: Pakistani housewife Hina Kazmi rides a motorcycle on a street. — AFP photos

PAKISTAN'S FEMALE MOTORISTS PUSH BOUNDARIES SET BY MEN

FOUR WHEELS GOOD BUT TWO WHEELS BETTER

LAHORE: On the crowded roads of the teeming eastern Pakistani city of Lahore, Tayyaba Tariq zips through the rowdy traffic on her brand new motorcycle. In jeans and a bright jacket, with a white helmet clasped over her hair, the 22-year-old student is part of a new wave of female drivers in Pakistan who are pushing the boundaries set for them by men.

The idea of women straddling motorcycles, clambering into the cabs of Pakistan's iconic heavy trucks, or driving rickshaws for money is still taboo in the deeply conservative Muslim country of some 200 million, where gender discrimination is routine. There have been a slew of recent campaigns by women for greater access to public spaces to which they are often denied, such as roadside eateries and the roads themselves.

The importance of the issue is underscored by the fact that three quarters of Pakistani women do not participate in the labor market, mainly due to a lack of safe transportation, according to a study by the International Labor Organization. "If girls learn to ride a motorcycle, they can move freely, come and go independently," says Tariq, who rides 25 kilometers to the border with India and back every day for her job as a customs officer on her motorbike, a far more affordable mode of transportation than a car.

Sajjad Mehdi, a traffic police official in Lahore, said he had trained nearly 150 women to ride a motorbike recently. "But there are many women who learned to ride a bike on their own," he added. The government of Punjab province has also realized the importance of getting women on to motorcycles, launching an awareness campaign in November titled "Women on Wheels" that highlighted gender-based violence and street harassment.

City in pink

The campaign saw 150 women, who had completed a police-run motorbike training programme, ride through the streets of Lahore on Sunday in a rally attended by diplomats and human rights lawyers, as it was revealed that 1,000 subsidized pink scooters would be given to working women and students under the scheme.

Tariq may be able to avoid men harassing her by nipping through traffic, but women using Lahore's many rickshaws are often not so fortunate: trapped by necessity in a tiny vehicle with a male driver, getting from A to B can often be a hassle.



ISLAMABAD: Pakistani truck driver Shamim Akhter, 53, drives a truck loaded with bricks.

For Zar Aslam, the solution was obvious: women-only rickshaws, driven by women for women, empowering both passengers and enterprising women who need a source of income. Aslam launched her Pink Rickshaws scheme in 2014 beginning with just five rickshaws, and paraded them through the streets of Lahore in October last year.

"What we are doing is we are trying to help women become entrepreneurs and operators and owners of their own rickshaws," she said. "Anyone over 18 and under 102 can drive this rickshaw from any class, from any background," said actress Nadia Jameel, an ambassador for the scheme. "Some women will come out and drive because they have to. They need the money."

Driven by necessity

Money was also the driving force behind Shamim Akhter's decision to become one of the first female drivers of Pakistan's famous heavy trucks, chaotically decorated from top to bottom in merry "truck art". Abandoned by her husband after the birth of their five children, Akhter struggled in odd jobs for years to feed her family before she clambered into the cab of a truck to make history.

Now the 53-year-old works night and day to transport bricks in the capital Islamabad. "My husband doesn't live with me, he lives with his second wife and I have to bear the expenses of my family alone," she says. She learned to drive a car first then heavy vehicles and passed a test for the newly launched metro bus service in the capital-but was denied a job by the government because it was not policy to have female drivers.

So, she contacted a local trucking company. "I get 1,000 rupees (US\$10) for a longer trip outside Islamabad," she said, cleaning one of the cabs as she worked. The amount of trips she gets varies, she says, and her income each month usually falls below average for a worker in Islamabad. "It doesn't meet (all of) my expenses but... one can't sit idle," she said. "If we need 10,000 rupees and get 7,000 rupees, it's better than having nothing."

Learning to drive will hopefully give many women an economic boost but it will still take time for social attitudes to change-even in Lahore, arguably Pakistan's most cosmopolitan city. "Many times boys follow us (on their bikes)," Tariq the motorcyclist admits. "They think that a girl can't ride and will be frightened... But I have a message for boys. They should not consider girls inferior." — AFP



YANGON: This photo taken on January 10, 2016 shows ethnic minority Karen, who have their own calendar and have officially celebrated their New Year since the 1930s, gathered to celebrate their New Year festival. — AFP

HOPES FOR PEACE: MYANMAR'S KAREN CELEBRATE NEW YEAR

YANGON: Myanmar's ethnic minority Karen rung in their New Year with song, dance and traditional kickboxing, in celebrations a day before fresh efforts to reach a ceasefire to end the country's myriad rebel conflicts.

Tens of thousands of people, many in bright traditional clothing, thronged through teeming Yangon streets, in a three-day celebration. The Karen, who are Buddhist and Christian, have their own calendar and have officially celebrated their New Year since the 1930s. "I love my Karen people and value my ethnicity in my heart," Sa Ye Kyaw Oo, an event volunteer said.

New Year events, marked by dance competitions and bouts of the country's lethwei kickboxing, were also held across southeastern Karen state. The guns have largely fallen silent in the state after ethnic minority rebels waged one of the world's longest insurgencies-although recent months have seen sporadic clashes linked to smaller rebel factions.

The conflict saw Myanmar's army accused of widespread rights abuses that prompted tens of thousands of ethnic Karen to flee their homes, many into border camps in neighboring Thailand. "All ethnic groups have to take responsibility for the peace process if it is going to be really successful," Mann Phoe Saw, an organizer of the festivities said.

The celebrations come ahead of political dialogue between the Myanmar government and ethnic minority groups on Tuesday. The

meeting is set to be the last major push to cement the current leadership's peace-building legacy before handing over power to Aung San Suu Kyi's party which won November elections.

Suu Kyi used the New Year to send a message on efforts to end fighting between the army and rebels. She has said ending the violence, which has plagued a horse-shoe of border regions for decades, is her first priority of government. "We will have to build a peace that takes into account the rights of ethnic people and most importantly we must be united. So let us seek out a real peace for our nation," Suu Kyi said in a statement published on her official Facebook page.

The powerful Karen National Union (KNU) battled for greater political autonomy for decades before joining a peace process led by general-turned-reformist President Thein Sein. He has targeted ending the country's myriad ethnic minority rebellions as the final plank of his agenda before handing over power to Suu Kyi's opposition in March.

Thein Sein has sought to hold up war-battered Karen as an example of the development potential for peace in Myanmar's restive borderlands. In quotes published in the state-backed New Light of Myanmar yesterday, Thein Sein acknowledged that the Karen "have had to endure a tough road for a very long time." "But today, the rays of peace have already dawned," he was quoted as saying. — AFP

SYRIA FM VISITS INDIA BEFORE PEACE TALKS

NEW DELHI: Syria's foreign minister arrived in New Delhi yesterday for talks with his Indian counterpart, trying to build international support for President Bashar Al-Assad's government before peace talks in Geneva.

Walid Muallem will meet Sushma Swaraj and "other government functionaries" during a three-day official visit, foreign ministry spokesman Vikas Swarup said. Peace talks between Assad's government and the Syrian opposition are due to begin in January 25 as part of an ambitious 18-month plan endorsed by the UN Security Council.

More than 260,000 people have died since Syria's brutal civil war erupted in March 2011, and previous efforts to find a political solution to the war have failed. The UN-backed plan foresees a rapid ceasefire, and calls for talks that would lead to the "establishment of an inclusive transitional governing body with full executive powers" within six months, although it does not directly address Assad's fate.

Analysts said the Syrian minister's India visit, which follows trips to Russia and China, was an attempt to build international support for the Syrian president, who is backed by Russia. "The fact that the Syrian foreign minister is visiting India is a clear indication that India supports and has given legitimacy to the Assad government," said Ranjit Gupta, an independent analyst and former Indian ambassador.

"India is not expected to give explicit public support, except to say that there should be no regime change through external force... which in itself is a big boost for the Syrian government." The visit comes as Swaraj and Prime Minister Narendra Modi prepare for visits to the Middle East. — AFP



NEW DELHI: Indian Foreign Ministry official Satbir Singh (right) welcomes Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Walid Al-Moualem, upon his arrival at the Indira Gandhi International airport, in New Delhi, India, Monday, Jan. 11, 2016. Al-Moualem is on four day official visit to India. — AP

INDONESIAN FORCES REGROUP AFTER FAILING TO CAPTURE TOP MILITANT

JAKARTA: Indonesian security forces are regrouping to launch a more aggressive campaign to hunt for the country's most-wanted man, police said yesterday, after months of fruitless searching in the jungles of Sulawesi island.

President Joko Widodo has made the arrest of Santoso, Indonesia's most high-profile backer of Islamic State, one of his national security priorities and had given security forces until Jan. 9 to arrest him. But Santoso, who has been on the run for more than three years, has proven to be more difficult to catch than expected.

Security forces plan to bring in 500 more policemen and soldiers to reinforce the 1,600 personnel looking for Santoso, who analysts say could be an inspiration for Indonesian militants returning from fighting with Islamic State in the Middle East.

"There is a new operation called Tinombala that will focus on Poso and the surrounding areas," said Hari Suprpto, spokesman for the Central Sulawesi police, referring to the district where Santoso is believed to be based.

Details of how the military and police would join forces still had to be worked out, he said. Officials at the presidential palace were not available for comment.

Determined to capture Santoso, President Joko Widodo in March approved the first major military counter-terrorism operation since the bombing of two Jakarta hotels in 2009. A blitz by troops, warships and fighter jets weakened Santoso's forces, but he got away and officials believe he still commands up to 40 men.

While security forces increase their focus on Santoso in Central Sulawesi, analysts have raised alarm over a growing network of Islamic State supporters around the capital, Jakarta. Police over the weekend arrested three people after finding bomb-making equipment at a house near Jakarta, said a police spokesman, Sulisty Pudjo Hartono. Police said the three were suspected of having links with a group of men arrested across the island of Java last month, who were believed to be planning attacks over the New Year holiday. — Reuters