

## MYSTERY INDIAN CULT 'HAD OWN GOVERNMENT, ARMY'

**NEW DELHI:** A mysterious cult at the centre of deadly clashes in India was running its own pseudo-government, army, court and a prison where torture was the norm, a senior police officer told yesterday. Some 3,000 followers of the sect clashed with police in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh during an eviction operation, leaving 24 people dead, including two senior officers. The secretive sect had occupied a 270-acre stretch of parkland since late 2014, with the site almost entirely closed off to the outside world, the top police inspector general of the region said. "They set up a township of sorts with

all kinds of people. Gradually, they started running a self-government," DC Mishra said, after officers seized documents and other evidence from the camp. "They set up a court which pronounced punishments and jail barracks where inmates were tortured." Children as young as eight years old were being given training in arms.

Police in the city of Mathura came under fire overnight Thursday from members of the sect, who were armed with automatic weapons and hurled crude explosive devices during the violence. Mishra said the cult was being run by self-

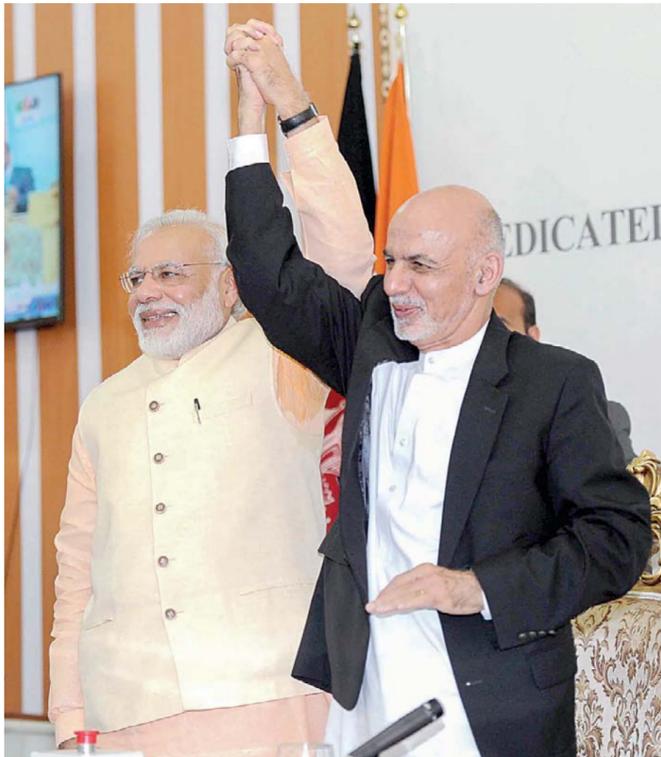
styled Hindu godmen whose aim was to drive followers towards a kind of "religious terrorism". "They were also planning to come out with their own currency soon and they did not believe in the Indian constitution," he said. The Swadhin Bharat Vidhik Satyagrah sect is led by a man called Ram Vrakash Yadav, whom police say was at the park when the violence broke out but has so far eluded arrest.

In postings on social media, the sect's followers describe themselves as political and social revolutionaries. Their demands include the abolition of elections and cheaper fuel for everyone. In several

videos posted on YouTube, Yadav can be seen pledging allegiance to Indian independence hero Subhash Chandra Bose and the Azad Hind Foj (Indian National Army), a rebel movement founded by Bose to combat British colonial rule. "The leaders duped their followers into believing that they will attain nirvana and get to meet an incarnation of Bose," Mishra said. Bose disappeared in mysterious circumstances in 1945.

Police have arrested more than 300 people following the bloody raid, although the sect's four main leaders are still believed to be on the run. The state's

Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav announced compensation of two million rupees (\$30,000) each for the families of the slain policemen. The government will ensure speedy prosecution of all those accused in the violence, his office posted on Twitter. India is home to hundreds of semi-religious sects which are often led by charismatic self-styled "godmen". In 2014, hundreds of armed supporters from another sect clashed with police in the northern state of Haryana during a raid to arrest their leader who faced murder allegations. At least six people died in the violence. —AFP



**HERAT:** Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (left) and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani attend the inauguration of a new dam backed by Indian investment in Herat. —AFP

## INDIAN PM INAUGURATES \$290 MILLION DAM IN AFGHANISTAN

**HERAT:** Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Afghanistan yesterday to inaugurate a \$290 million hydroelectric dam with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the latest Indian investment which highlights strengthening ties between the two countries. The 42 megawatt Salma dam in western Herat province, bordering Iran, is the second major Indian project after a new parliament complex built under New Delhi's robust development partnership with Afghanistan.

Modi and Ghani jointly pressed the button on a remote-controlled console, sending torrents of water gushing down the dam as celebrations erupted with balloons released in the colors of the Indian flag. "I want to give the good news to my people that 'Afghanistan-India Friendship Dam' is the prologue to construction of a series of dams that we have undertaken so that our provinces have access to electricity, water, food and work," Ghani said at the ceremony.

Construction on Salma dam, which will boost Afghanistan's power capacity and help irrigate thousands of hectares of farmland in a parched landscape, had been stalled by decades of conflict. "Afghans and Indians dreamt of this project in the 1970s," Modi said. "Today the brave Afghan people are sending a message that the forces of destruction, death, denial and domination shall not prevail. It is a historic moment of emotion and pride in the relations between Afghanistan and India." India, the fifth largest bilateral donor in Afghanistan, has been a key supporter of Kabul's government and has poured more than \$2 billion into the country since the Taliban was toppled from power in 2001.

### 'Building prosperity'

New Delhi's active engagement has led analysts to point to the threat of a "proxy war" in Afghanistan between India and its nuclear-armed arch-rival Pakistan. Pakistan—the historic backer of the Taliban—has long been accused of supporting the insurgents in Afghanistan, especially with attacks on Indian targets in the country. In December, Modi inaugurated Afghanistan's new parliament complex in Kabul, built by India at an estimated cost of \$90 million.

A few days after his visit militants launched a 25-hour gun and bomb siege near the Indian consulate in Afghanistan's Mazar-i-Sharif city. And in March, Taliban militants fired a barrage of rockets at the parliament complex. "Destroying is easy and building is difficult. Contrary to those whose main art is destroying and sending messages of destruction, we have taken the difficult responsibility of building prosperity," Ghani said in a veiled reference to the Taliban.

"We resolutely believe that... prosperity triumphs over destruction. Hope is right and hopelessness is wrong; seeking peace is right and seeking war is wrong." Diplomatic relations between New Delhi and Kabul have grown despite a series of attacks on Indian installations in Afghanistan. The two countries recently signed a three-way transit agreement with Iran to develop its southern port of Chabahar, as Modi visited Tehran last month. The deal, bypassing Pakistan to connect Iran, India, and Afghanistan to central Asia, would boost economic growth in the region, Modi said at the time. —AFP

## INDIAN PM, ONCE A PARIIAH TO US, SET TO ADDRESS CONGRESS

### MODI FORGING A SURPRISING BOND WITH OBAMA

**WASHINGTON:** After years of being denied entry to the US, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has become a welcome guest in Washington, forging a surprising bond with President Barack Obama and deepening ties with America. A new defense agreement and a possible announcement on US investment in nuclear power in India could be in the cards on his latest visit. He will meet with Obama on Tuesday and have the honor of addressing a joint meeting of Congress on Wednesday.

Modi has shaken off allegations that he was complicit in anti-Muslim violence when he served as a top state official before becoming prime minister two years ago, but he could face pointed questions from lawmakers about India's human rights record. It will be his fourth visit to the US since his Hindu nationalist party swept elections in May 2014. Between 2005 and late 2013, during his tenure as chief minister of Gujarat, the US government avoided official contact with Modi over suspicions about his possible role in communal rioting that killed hundreds.

"He's gone from someone who was basically a pariah to someone who is going to be celebrated by official Washington," said Milan Vaishnav, an expert on South Asia at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Modi will become the fifth Indian prime minister to address both houses of Congress. He'll also have lunch with congressional leaders and attend a reception hosted by the House and Senate foreign relations committees, where there's strong support for closer ties, but also some disappointment over what's been achieved on Modi's watch.

On the plus side of the ledger, defense ties have gotten closer. The US and India share concern about the rise of China, and while New Delhi steers clear of a formal alliance with Washington - in fact, with any country - the two militaries conduct more drills together than with any other nation. The US has become a key supplier of defense equipment to India - with about \$14 billion in sales con-

tracted in the past five years - and the two nations are looking at joint development of technologies for jet engines and aircraft carriers. A defense logistics agreement is likely to be finalized when Modi visits.

Progress has been more elusive on opening the way for the US nuclear industry to invest in India, eight years after the George W. Bush administration reached a landmark civil nuclear agreement with India, rolling back export

restrictions in place since India's first nuclear test explosion in 1974. The prime obstacle has been a 2010 Indian law on liability in case of accidents at nuclear power plants, but a workaround solution involving an Indian-supervised insurance scheme means Westinghouse Electric Co. is closing in on a contract to build reactors in Andhra Pradesh state - a deal potentially worth tens of billions of dollars.

Arun Singh, India's ambassador in Washington, told reporters

Wednesday that negotiations between Westinghouse and the Indian nuclear operator were at a "very detailed and advanced" stage. He said the main issues to be resolved concern cost and financing, not insurance. He did not say if a contract announcement was imminent.

Westinghouse declined to comment Friday. Another US player, GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy, said it is still concerned about the Indian law, which could make nuclear

Corker, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told a hearing last month. Lawmakers of both parties also criticized India's failure to curb growing religious intolerance and human trafficking, and are likely to raise those issues with Modi. An Australia-based activist group estimates that India has around 18 million modern slaves, or 40 percent of the global total.

The world's two largest democracies have a surprisingly acrimo-



**WASHINGTON:** In this file photo, President Barack Obama talks with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a working dinner with heads of delegations of the Nuclear Security Summit in the East Room of the White House, in Washington. —AP

suppliers, not just operators of nuclear plants, liable for accidents. While US lawmakers praise the progress in defense ties, they grumble about continuing restrictions on American investment in India, notwithstanding some liberalization on Modi's watch.

Bilateral trade in goods and services has expanded from \$60 billion in 2009 to \$107 billion in 2015. "In the case of US-India relations, the hopeful rhetoric has far exceeded actual tangible achievements," Republican Sen Bob

nius relationship when it comes to human rights, and what India views as overbearing US scrutiny. India has refused visits by a US commission on religious freedom and by an envoy on LGBT rights. It also objects to a House commission holding a hearing on human rights in India on the same day Modi meets Obama. "Normally in India we would not want to embarrass somebody when they are our guest. But I guess each society is different," Singh, the ambassador, said. —AP

## FIVE INDIAN PERSONNEL SHOT DEAD IN KASHMIR



**KASHMIR:** Kashmir protesters clash with Indian police during a protest against plans to establish separate colonies for displaced Kashmiri Hindu Pandits and Sainik neighborhoods for retired soldiers of the state, in Srinagar. Kashmiri separatists have opposed the establishment of separate townships for the rehabilitation of the Hindu pandits, and allege the efforts are an attempt to alter the demographics of Indian Kashmir. —AFP

**SRINAGAR:** Five Indian security personnel have been shot dead by suspected rebels in restive Indian-administered Kashmir in the past two days, police said yesterday. Two police officers were on a routine patrol Saturday when rebels fired automatic weapons from a moving vehicle in southern Anantnag town, killing them on the spot. "The attackers fled the area after the firing," Javid Gillani, inspector general of police said. On Friday, three paramilitary soldiers from India's Border Security Force were killed when militants fired bullets from automatic assault rifles at their moving convoy.

Friday's attack was claimed by Hizbul Mujahideen, one of the region's several rebel groups who have been fighting Indian forces for decades, seeking independence or a merger with Pakistan. Kashmir has been divided between rivals India and Pakistan since 1947. Both claim the disputed territory in its entirety. Overall violence in the region has declined during the last decade, but armed encounters between rebels and government forces occur regularly. In recent months the region has witnessed an uptick in rebel attacks on security forces with many dying on both sides. Tens of thousands, mostly civilians, have died in the conflict so far. —AFP

## INDIA HOSPITAL DUPED IN KIDNEY SALE RACKET

**NEW DELHI:** One of India's top hospitals unwittingly removed the kidneys of organ-trafficking victims believing they were donating them to relatives, a hospital spokesman said yesterday, after police arrested five over the racket. A criminal gang including two workers at the upscale Apollo Hospital in New Delhi allegedly lured poor people to sell their kidneys for 300,000 rupees (\$4,500) before selling the organs on for huge profits, police said.

The gang used forged documents to pretend the victims were relatives of needy transplant recipients, fooling staff at the hospital, where two of the suspects worked as assistants to a senior nephrologist. "The hospital has been a victim of a well-orchestrated operation to cheat patients and the hospital," an Apollo spokesman said in a statement, adding that the assistants were not on the employee payroll. "We urge the police to take the strictest of

action against all those involved." Commercial trade in organs is illegal in India and transplant donations to non-relatives must be approved by a special committee.

The victims came from across India, including Tamil Nadu state in the south and West Bengal in the east, to have their kidneys removed. "We detected five cases of organ sale (by this criminal ring) this year. We have arrested five men and seized fake ID proofs, CDs, files and documents," a Delhi police officer said on condition of anonymity. Police initially raided the hospital on Thursday, making three arrests, he said. A chronic shortage of organs available for transplant fuels a booming black market trade in the body parts in India. Millions of Indians suffer from kidney disease, mostly because of high rates of diabetes, hiking demand for transplants annually. —AFP